

WILLIAM ALLAN

Belief, Action, and Suffering in Euripides' *Bacchae*

The study of Greek religion has in recent years seen the welcome return of belief as a fundamental category, and with it a questioning of the assumption that in Greek (and Roman) religion ritual always came first and belief second. Thus, just over twenty years ago, Simon Price, in a standard study of ancient Greek religion, could write «Practice not belief is the key, and to start from questions about faith or personal piety is to impose alien values on ancient Greece»¹. Since then, however, the scholarly consensus has been challenged, and there is now a renewed focus on the importance of religious belief². Ironically, the insistence on ritual and social practice that dominated study of Greek and Roman religion for most of the 20th century was in itself partly a reaction against earlier scholars' assumption of the primacy of beliefs over acts, as seen, for example, in the title of Wilamowitz's influential study, *Der Glaube der Hellenen* (1931). Having swung from belief to ritual and now back again to belief, one may hope that the scholarly pendulum won't swing back too far again in the future, and it shouldn't, if it's accepted that (as will be emphasized here) beliefs and acts are inseparable and equally important.

Though our focus here is on belief, ritual of course remains important, and many discussions of the *Bacchae* have illuminated the role played by Dionysiac rituals – and their perversion – in the play, especially in the so-called 'initiation' and sacrificial death of Pentheus, as when Pentheus' mother Agave, about to

¹ PRICE 1999, 3.

² PARKER 2011, 31-4; VERSNEL 2011, 539-59; KINDT 2012; HARRISON 2015a, 170-4; HARRISON 2015b, 21-8.

tear her son limb from limb, is compared to a priestess beginning a sacrificial rite:

πρώτη δὲ μήτηρ ἤρξεν ἰερέα φόνου
καὶ προσπίτνει νιν.

SECOND MESSENGER His mother was the priestess and began the killing, hurling herself upon him. (*Bacch.* 1114-15, trans. D. Kovacs)

But for all the importance of ritual *per se*, religious acts also involve beliefs, and the renewed interest in belief helps us perceive its importance to the shaping and impact of the *Bacchae* too. Pentheus, after all, will not allow Dionysus' rites because – as we'll explore later – he does not believe in him as a god, yet the scholarly focus thus far has been on the consequences of Pentheus' resistance rather than on the importance of his lack of belief. However, the various ways in which the characters and the chorus express or deny their belief in Dionysus are central to the drama's development; and these differing approaches to belief, from pious faith through to intellectual rationalism or outright denial, are (I would argue) a reflection of the variety of levels of belief to be found in the ancient Greek world itself.

An unfortunate consequence of prioritizing ritual acts such as sacrifice over beliefs is that it risks reducing the relationship between god and worshipper to that of a contractual *do ut des* ("I give so that you may give"), as if all that mattered was mutual expectation of future gain. But the Greek gods were viewed not as merely impersonal potential benefactors, but as beings who cared for individual humans or entire communities (for example, the Athenians) and took a personal interest in their well-being. Greek religion was certainly grounded in public *polis* life and ceremony, but it was also experienced on a personal level, and each person will have experienced the gods differently depending on their character, situation, and needs. As Julia Kindt has said,

It is important that we do not postulate a simple binary division between *polis* and personal religion. The most fruitful questions

pertaining to ancient Greek personal religion promise to lie exactly in the realm where the structures of official Greek religion fade into those of personal religion and vice versa³.

This personal aspect is lost if we frame religion as a series of calculated ritual acts, and this is particularly true of Dionysus, given the intensity of the relationship he had with the humans who experienced him. As Eric Csapo has observed,

When ancients (and moderns) speak of Dionysus they use a different vocabulary from that applied to other gods. One does not 'know' Zeus and better not try to 'know' Athena. But Euripides presents a Dionysus who speaks ... of worshippers who "know him" [cf. *Bacch.* 859-61, 1345]. One does not speak of "the Hermetic" or "Artemisian experience", but Dionysus is spoken of as an experience as much as a god. The knowing and the experiencing are linked⁴.

And for all his (to us at least) bewildering diversity, Dionysus was experienced by his ancient worshippers as a particularly present and compelling deity. This closeness is repeatedly celebrated by the chorus of *Bacchae*, as when (for example) they describe the god leading his worshippers to the mountains in person:

αὐτίκα γὰρ πᾶσα χορεύσει,
 Βρόμιος εὐτ' ἂν ἄγηι θιάσους
 εἰς ὄρος εἰς ὄρος, ἔνθα μένει
 θηλυγενῆς ὄχλος
 ἀφ' ἰστών παρὰ κερκίδων τ'
 οἰστορηθεὶς Διονύσῳι.

CHORUS Forthwith the whole land shall dance, when Bromios leads the worshipful bands to the mountain, to the mountain, where there rests the throng of women, driven by Dionysus in madness from their looms and shuttles. (114-9)

³ KINDT 2015, 47.

⁴ CSAPO 2016, 150-1.

Or when the god himself is presented as participating in their rites:

ἡδὺς ἐν ὄρεσσιν ὅταν
 ἐκ θιάσων δρομαίων
 πέσῃ πεδόσε, νεβρίδος ἔχων
 ἱερὸν ἐνδυτόν, ἀγρεύων
 αἷμα τραγοκτόνον, ὠμοφάγον χάριν,
 ἰέμενος εἰς ὄρεα Φρύγια, Λύδι,
 ὁ δ' ἔξαρχος Βρόμιος
 εὐοί.

CHORUS Welcome is the god when on the mountains he leaves the coursing covens and falls to the ground, his holy garment of fawn-skin about him, in pursuit of the shed blood of the slain goat, the glad meal of raw flesh, rushing to the mountains of Phrygia, of Lydia, and the leader is Bromios: *euhoi!* (135-41)

The diversity of Dionysus *qua* god is matched by the fluidity of religious belief itself, and the *Bacchae* reflects the nature of Greek religion as – in the words of Robert Parker – «a jostling mass of competing beliefs and values and interpretations and uncertainties (of which the images of the divine presented in tragedy are themselves a part)»⁵. Thus, Teiresias' arguments in favour of accepting the divinity of Dionysus make use of contemporary sophistic speculation:

οὗτος δ' ὁ δαίμων ὁ νέος, ὃν σὺ διαγελαῖς,
 οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην μέγεθος ἐξεῖπείν ὅσος
 καθ' Ἑλλάδ' ἔσται. δύο γάρ, ὦ νεανία,
 τὰ πρῶτ' ἐν ἀνθρώποισι· Δημήτηρ θεά— 275
 Γῆ δ' ἔστιν, ὄνομα δ' ὀπότερον βούλημι κάλει·
 αὕτη μὲν ἐν ξηροῖσιν ἐκτρέφει βροτούς·
 ὃς δ' ἦλθ' ἔπειτ', ἀντίπαλον ὁ Σεμέλης γόνος
 βότρουος ὑγρὸν πᾶμ' ἠῦρε κασσηνέγκατο
 θνητοῖς, ...
 οὗτος θεοῖσι σπένδεται θεὸς γεγώς,
 ὥστε διὰ τοῦτον τὰ γὰθ' ἀνθρώπους ἔχειν. 285

⁵ PARKER 1997, 148.

TEIRESIAS This new divinity you are laughing to scorn – I could not fully express how great he will be in Greece. Two things are chief among mortals, young man: the goddess Demeter – she is Earth but call her either name you like – nourishes mortals with dry food. But he who came next, the son of Semele, discovered as its counterpart the drink that flows from the grape cluster and introduced it to mortals ... Himself a god, he is poured out in libations to the gods, and so it is because of him that men win blessings from them. (272-85)

Teiresias' opening argument deploys two distinct ideas: the first, that Dionysus embodies the wet principle which balances Demeter's dry (275-9), draws on Presocratic theories in which the world was built from opposing elements; the second, that Demeter and Dionysus *are* corn and wine, not merely givers of them, echoes a contemporary theory of the sophist Prodicus which located the origins of religion in humans coming to see the essentials of life, and their discoverers, as divine:

Πρόδικος δὲ ὁ Κεῖος “ἥλιον,” φησί, “καὶ σελήνην καὶ ποταμοὺς καὶ κρήνας καὶ καθόλου πάντα τὰ ὠφελοῦντα τὸν βίον ἡμῶν οἱ παλαιοὶ θεοὺς ἐνόμισαν διὰ τὴν ἀπ’ αὐτῶν ὠφέλειαν, καθάπερ Αἰγύπτιοι τὸν Νεῖλον” καὶ διὰ τοῦτο τὸν μὲν ἄρτον Δήμητραν νομισθῆναι, τὸν δὲ οἶνον Διόνυσον, τὸ δὲ ὕδωρ Ποσειδῶνα, τὸ δὲ πῦρ Ἥφαιστον καὶ ἤδη τῶν εὐχρηστούντων ἕκαστον.

Prodicus of Ceos says, “The ancients considered that the sun, the moon, rivers, fountains, and in general everything that is helpful for our life were gods because of the help they provided, like the Egyptians regarding the Nile”, and [he says that] for this reason they considered that bread was Demeter, wine Dionysus, water Poseidon, fire Hephaestus, and in this way for each of the things that benefited them. (Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Natural Philosophers*, 9.18)

Prodicus adsumptos in deos loquitur, qui errando inventis novis frugibus utilitati hominum profuerunt.

Prodicus says that those men were received among the gods who contributed to human utility by means of new crops that they had discovered during their travels. (Min. Fel. *Oct.* 21.2)

But whereas Prodicus and other sophists used naturalizing accounts of the divine to question traditional religious belief, Teiresias uses the technique to justify the worship of Dionysus.

There is a lot of paradoxical humour here, as Teiresias the venerable prophet, a figure of traditional wisdom (and deployed as such in tragedy: Soph. *OT*, *Ant.*, Eur. *Phoen.*), not only knows the latest new-fangled ideas, but can take what is potentially atheistic (and certainly unconventional) reasoning and use it to justify religious worship. The paradoxical and parodic deployment of current sophistic thought continues in his use of etymology, language-play, and rationalizing myth-revision, as the potentially ludicrous story of Dionysus being sewn in Zeus' thigh is explained through the confusion of two similar-sounding words -μηρός, "thigh", and ὄμηρος, "hostage":

καὶ διαγελαῖς νιν ὡς ἐνεργράφη Διὸς
μηρῶι; διδάξω σ' ὡς καλῶς ἔχει τόδε.
ἐπεὶ νιν ἤρπασ' ἐκ πυρὸς κεραυνίου
Ζεὺς, ἐς δ' Ὀλυμπον βρέφος ἀνήγαγεν νέον,
Ἥρα νιν ἤθελ' ἐκβαλεῖν ἀπ' οὐρανοῦ, 290
Ζεὺς δ' ἀντεμηχανήσαθ' οἷα δὴ θεός·
ρήξας μέρος τι τοῦ χθόν' ἐγκυκλουμένου
αἰθέρος, ἔδωκε τόνδ' ὄμηρον, ἐκτιθεὶς
Διόνυσον Ἥρας νεικέων· χρόνῳ δέ νιν
βροτοὶ ῥαφήναί φασιν ἐν μηρῶι Διός, 295
ὄνομα μεταστήσαντες, ὅτι θεᾶι θεός
Ἥραι ποθ' ὠμήρευσε, συνθέντες λόγον.

TEIRESIAS And do you ridicule him because he was sewn in the thigh of Zeus? I will show you that this story too makes sense. When Zeus had snatched him from the lightning-bolt's blaze and had brought him as a young babe to Olympus, Hera wanted to hurl him out of heaven. But Zeus, god that he is, made a scheme to answer Hera's: breaking off a part [μέρος] of the sky that surrounds the earth, he gave her this as a hostage [ὄμηρος] and thereby rescued Dionysus from Hera's contentiousness. As time passed, mortals said that he was sewn up into the thigh [μηρός] of Zeus, altering the word because they failed to understand that as god to goddess he had served as Hera's hostage. (286-97)

Here Teiresias seeks to rationalize the story of Dionysus' birth from Zeus' thigh (μηρός), which has just been celebrated by the chorus in their entry-song (88-104), but his own alternative version, involving a piece (μέρος) of sky given as a "hostage" (ὄμηρος) to Hera, is no less fantastic. The rationalistic interpretation of myth was a familiar technique (especially among historians), and it could easily be parodied, as it is here, as over-ingenuous sophistry. In Plato's *Phaedrus* Socrates pokes fun at "the experts" (οἱ σοφοί) who would rationalize the myth of Boreas and Oreithyia, and describes their technique as "bringing [such stories] into accord with likelihood" (προσβιβάζειν κατὰ τὸ εἰκός, *Phaedrus* 229E). Though less polemical, Euripides uses a similarly ironic humour to highlight the limits of rationalization and to satirize the emotionless, technical, and futile intellectualism of Teiresias' approach to the god.

The chorus' claim, in the song that immediately follows Teiresias' failed attempt to persuade Pentheus, that "cleverness is not wisdom" (τὸ σοφὸν δ' οὐ σοφία, 395) serves primarily to condemn Pentheus' arrogant certainty in his refusal to believe, but it also encourages the audience to wonder whether Teiresias' analytical response does the god justice; after all, as Dionysus shows more than any other deity, and especially in the *Bacchae*, there is more to life than the logical powers of the human mind, and religious experience is not purely rational. Teiresias speaks as a quasi-philosopher, who believes that god is something one can theorize about abstractly; but as Dionysiac worship shows, god is perceived with one's whole being, and much of the humour of the scene comes at the expense of his 'philosophical religion', which treats Dionysus as a god whose existence and powers are grasped in primarily intellectual terms⁶.

The importance of belief as well as practice is well illustrated by the fate of Cadmus. At the very start of the play Dionysus

⁶ In actual philosophical religion the role of reason and the mind is even more pronounced, as when, for example, the greatest god is a disembodied mind (Xenoph. 21 B23-6 DK = D16-19 LAKS-MOST) or is identified with the creator of a rationally ordered cosmos (Pl. *Tim.*).

praises him for setting up a shrine to his daughter Semele, Dionysus' mother:

αἰνῶ δὲ Κάδμον, ἄβατον ὃς πέδον τόδε
τίθησι, θυγατρὸς σηκόν· ἀμπέλου δέ νιν
πέριξ ἐγὼ 'κάλυψα βοτρυνώδει χλόη.

DIONYSUS I praise Cadmus, who made this ground sacred and untrodden, a holy spot for his daughter. And I have covered it all around with the clustering growth of grapevines. (10-12)

And Cadmus is eager to honour Dionysus too – as he says to Teiresias,

ποιῖ δεῖ χορεύειν, ποιῖ καθιστάναι πόδα
καὶ κραῖτα σείσαι πολιόν; ἐξηγοῦ σύ μοι
γέρον γέροντι, Τειρεσία· σύ γὰρ σοφός.
ὡς οὐ κάμοιμ' ἂν οὔτε νύκτ' οὔθ' ἡμέραν
θύρσωι κροτῶν γῆν· ἐπιλελήσμεθ' ἠδέως
γέροντες ὄντες.

CADMUS Where shall our dance steps take us, where shall we set our feet and shake our aged heads? You must give me guidance, Teiresias, greyhead to greyhead: you are wise. I will not grow weary day or night of beating the ground with my Bacchic wand. How delightful it is that we forget our age! (184-9)

And yet at the end of the play Dionysus as *deus ex machina* still punishes Cadmus with exile to a barbarian land and transformation into a snake:

δράκων γενήσῃ μεταβαλῶν, δάμαρ τε σὴ
ἐκθηριωθεῖς ὄφεος ἀλλάξει τύπον,
ἦν Ἄρεος ἔσχεσ Ἄρμονίαν θνητὸς γεγώς.

DIONYSUS You will change your form and become a snake, and your wife, Ares' daughter Harmonia, whom you married though a mere mortal, will also take on the form of a serpent. (1330-2)

The problem lies in Cadmus' attitude to Dionysus himself: he focuses on the fact that Dionysus is his grandson rather than that he is a god as a reason to exalt him:

δεῖ γὰρ νῦν ὄντα παῖδα θυγατρὸς ἐξ ἐμῆς
 [Διόνυσον ὃς πέφηνεν ἀνθρώποις θεός]
 ὅσον καθ' ἡμᾶς δυνατὸν αὐξέσθαι μέγαν.

CADMUS He is the son of my daughter ... and as far as in us lies he must be magnified. (181-3)

And Cadmus is even prepared to tell a “useful lie” about the god if it brings honour to his family: as he says to Pentheus,

κεῖ μὴ γὰρ ἔστιν ὁ θεὸς οὗτος, ὡς σὺ φήεις,
 παρὰ σοὶ λεγέσθω· καὶ καταψεύδου καλῶς
 ὡς ἔστι Σεμέλης, ἵνα δοκῆι θεὸν τεκεῖν
 ἡμῖν τε τιμὴ παντὶ τῶι γένει προσῆι.

CADMUS Even if this god does not exist, as you maintain, you should say that he does and tell a wholesome lie: thus Semele will be thought to have given birth to a god and your whole family will win honour. (333-6)

Indeed, it is crucially only *after* the destruction of his family line that Cadmus, in the final scene, acknowledges the importance of the fact that Dionysus is a god at all. Moreover, Dionysus' insistence that Cadmus' (and his daughters') realization of his divinity came too late:

ὄψ' ἐμάθεθ' ἡμᾶς, ὅτε δ' ἐχρῆν οὐκ ἤιδετε.

DIONYSUS Late is your knowledge of me: you did not have it when you needed it. (1345)

and that

καὶ γὰρ πρὸς ὑμῶν θεὸς γεγώς ὑβριζόμεν.

DIONYSUS I was treated with contempt though a god. (1347)

strongly suggests that Cadmus is being punished because of his lack of belief – in this way the play exposes the deficiencies of a faith that is based primarily on self-interest. Thus, although it is still often said in studies of Greek religion that acts count more

than beliefs, the fate of Cadmus shows otherwise, and mere practice without belief is not enough to save you from divine anger. As with Teiresias, there is a significant and critical contrast between Cadmus and the chorus, whose spontaneously professed belief highlights his selfishness and pragmatism.

The *Bacchae*, then, attests to the possibility of differing approaches to belief (rationalism, pragmatism, pious devotion), but is of course premised on the idea that there are limits to religious thinking beyond which it is dangerous to go. Although there was a general tolerance of unconventional religious views in fifth-century Athens – the agnosticism of Protagoras, for example, did not prevent him from enjoying an excellent reputation as a thinker and teacher throughout Greece (Pl. *Meno* 91D-E) – non-traditional views could arouse suspicion, especially among people (no doubt the majority) who were unfamiliar with the finer details of religious and cosmological speculation⁷. But it was one thing to suggest an account of natural phenomena without the gods, and quite another to reject belief in the gods themselves⁸. The risks involved in being labelled ἄθεος – that is, not acknowledging the gods of traditional religious worship – are well illustrated by the charges brought against Socrates:

Σωκράτη φησὶν ἀδικεῖν τοὺς τε νέους διαφθείροντα καὶ θεοὺς οὐκ ἢ πόλις νομίζει οὐ νομίζοντα, ἕτερα δὲ δαιμόνια καινά.

Socrates is guilty of corrupting the minds of the young, and of believing in deities of his own invention instead of the gods recognized by the state. (Pl. *Apol.* 24b, trans. H. Tredennick)

⁷ The Diopiteithes' decree of the 430s, which allowed state prosecution of "those who do not believe in the gods or who teach about heavenly objects" (said to be aimed at Anaxagoras, a friend of Pericles, whom Diopiteithes sought to discredit: Plut. *Pericles* 32.2), is probably a later fiction (DOVER 1988, 146-7), but its picture of popular unease with radical religious views is accurate. On the limits to free speech about the gods, see PARKER 2011, 36-9.

⁸ Nonetheless, Aristophanes' caricatures of natural philosophers in the *Clouds* (first staged in 423 BC) rested on, and reinforced, the popular misconception that intellectuals (including Socrates) did not believe in the traditional gods (they worship things like Clouds, Chaos, and Tongue, not Zeus: 365-7, 423-4), and Plato has Socrates complain that this misleading portrayal influenced popular opinion about him (*Apol.* 19C).

Though his prosecution was politically motivated, it is significant that his opponents added to the charge of corrupting the minds of the young that of not believing in the gods recognized by the state and introducing new gods of his own⁹.

Pentheus is, of course, ἄθεος only regarding Dionysus, but failure to honour a single deity is no less dangerous than atheism *tout court*. As Hippolytus' rejection of Aphrodite shows, all gods enjoy worship and resent neglect:

ἔνεστι γὰρ δὴ κὰν θεῶν γένει τόδε
τιμώμενοι χαίρουσιν ἀνθρώπων ὕπο.

APHRODITE For in the gods as well one finds this trait: they enjoy receiving honour from mortals. (*Hipp.* 7-8)

Moreover, while Hippolytus shuns Aphrodite's domain and calls her "the worst of deities" (13), he does not deny her actual divinity or seek to wipe out her cult, as the θεομάχος or "god-fighter" Pentheus does. From Dionysus' perspective, then, Pentheus is anathema: he refuses to accept that there could be any benefits in worshipping him, casts his rites as positively harmful, and denies that Dionysus the god even exists. For according to Pentheus, who naturally follows the version of Semele's death propagated by his mother and aunts, the mortal child Dionysus was burnt up when Zeus' lightning struck Semele, because she had lied about her son's parentage (*Bacch.* 26-31). Because there is no god Dionysus, his rites are fake. This is an interesting point psychologically, because it means that from Pentheus' perspective, the bogus rites are founded on a family tragedy and deny the death of his mortal cousin, Dionysus, which further helps explain his extreme hostility to the new cult.

Not surprisingly, outright atheists in tragedy – for example, Euripides' Bellerophon, who asks,

⁹ Long before Plato, Xenophanes (c. 570-478 BC) had strongly objected to the notion that the gods are fundamentally like humans (21 B 10-16, 23-6 DK = D8-14, 16-19 LAKS-MOST; cf. ALLAN 2019, 193-4). But full-blown atheism was extremely rare in real life, even among philosophers (cf. WINIARCZYK 1984; VERSNEL 2011, 292).

φησὶν τις εἶναι δῆτ' ἐν οὐρανῷ θεούς;
οὐκ εἰσὶν, οὐκ εἴσ', εἴ τις ἀνθρώπων θέλει
μὴ τῷ παλαιῷ μῶρος ὧν χρῆσθαι λόγῳ.

BELLEROPHON Does anyone claim there are actually gods in heaven? There are not, there are not, if any mortal is willing not to believe the old story like a fool. (Eur. fr. 286.1-3)

– come to a sticky end. As always, genre is important here: tragedy is a genre of human mistakes and suffering, set in the time of divine and heroic myth, and inevitably shows people being punished if they deny the gods. Many modern critics have followed the ancient comic and biographical tradition in taking Euripides' 'atheistic' characters as a sign of his own rejection of traditional religion. But this takes the characters' words out of their dramatic context and misses an essential point: Euripides is not a philosopher trying to prove a particular religious system, but a playwright adapting contemporary (and at times radical) ideas for tragic ends, as when the θεομάχος Bellerophon is destroyed by Zeus, or Heracles (in his name play) defends a purer conception of divinity (free of lust, violence, and the urge to dominate: *Her.* 1340-6) that is contradicted by the context of the entire tragedy, where Hera has made him kill his wife and three sons in madness.

Returning to the *Bacchae*, Pentheus' objections to the cult include its novelty (216, 219, 467) and its foreign provenance (233-4, 453-4, 483). Pentheus perceives the god as "new" in wholly negative terms, scorning the divine *arriviste* as a charlatan, and he describes the god's representative as "a wizard, an enchanter":

λέγουσι δ' ὡς τις εἰσελήλυθε ξένος,
γόης ἐπωιδός Λυδίας ἀπὸ χθονός

PENTHEUS They say that a foreigner has arrived from Lydia, a wizard, an enchanter. (233-4)

Precisely this type of language (γόης ἐπωιδός) was used to criticize the practitioners of foreign cults in fifth-century Athens (e.g. Adonis, Bendis, Cotys, Cybele, Isodaites, Sabazius). So, al-

though contemporary Athenian anxieties about new cults and their ecstatic worship will have helped the audience understand Pentheus' resistance, their knowledge that these cults had been *successfully* integrated in Athens and that Dionysus himself was neither new nor foreign, but a long-established Greek god, marks Pentheus' hostility as both mistaken and futile.

Moreover, Pentheus views Bacchism, mistakenly, as inherently sexualized, and is both disgusted and fascinated by it. His primary and enduring belief about the new cult is that it both encourages, and acts as a cover for, female sexual immorality:

πλήρεις δὲ θιάσοις ἐν μέσοισιν ἰστάναι
 κρατῆρας, ἄλλην δ' ἄλλοσ' εἰς ἐρημίαν
 πτώσσουσαν εὐναῖς ἀρσένων ὑπηρετεῖν,
 πρόφασιν μὲν ὡς δὴ μαινάδας θυοσκόους,
 τὴν δ' Ἀφροδίτην πρόσθ' ἄγειν τοῦ Βακχίου.

PENTHEUS They set up full wine bowls in the middle of their assemblies and sneak off, one here, one there, to tryst in private with men. The pretext for all this is that they are maenads performing their rites, but they hold Aphrodite in higher regard than the Bacchic god. (221-5)

Pentheus' anger and disgust at the thought of female lustfulness – fantasies of maenadic behaviour that are shown to be mistaken – are soon followed by a desire to spy on the Theban women:

Δι. ἄ·
 βούλημι σφ' ἐν ὄρεσι συγκαθημένας ἰδεῖν;
 Πε. μάλιστα, μυρίον γε δούς χρυσοῦ σταθμόν.
 Δι. τί δ' εἰς ἔρωτα τοῦδε πέπτωκας μέγαν;
 Πε. λυπρῶς νιν εἰσίδοιμ' ἂν ἐξωινωμένας.

DIONYSUS Stop! Do you want to see them sitting together on the mountains?

PENTHEUS Yes indeed: I'd give much gold to do so.

DIONYSUS What? Have you conceived such a strong desire for this?

PENTHEUS It would, of course, distress me to see them drunk.
 (810-4)

Both his revulsion and his curiosity have been interpreted by some modern scholars (influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis) as a sign of repressed desire¹⁰. However, it is important to distinguish here between two separate ideas: Pentheus as a figure who is repressing his own sexual desires (for which there is no evidence in the text); and Pentheus as a voyeur (for which there is). As regards repression, seeing an act vividly before you, as Pentheus does with his imaginary Bacchic orgies, is not the same thing as wanting it to happen or to do it yourself – it is not, *pace* Freud, a wish – and Pentheus' sexual paranoia is better explained as part of his hypermasculine response to the threat of maenadic freedom and its disruption of gendered social order¹¹.

By contrast, Pentheus' prurient desire to spy on lewd (or so he imagines) maenadic revels is sexually voyeuristic, and such prurience follows on plausibly from his obsession with the women's sexual wrong-doing. Having been repeatedly censorious about women's lustfulness, he now wants to see the maenads drunk and out of control, and his hypocrisy is damning. To see such a sight would of course confirm his prejudices about the maenads, but his attempts to cover up his voyeuristic fascination mark it as shameful (compare line 814 above). In other words, Dionysus lures Pentheus to his death by exploiting his sexual fantasies, but he does not destroy him because he has repressed his sexual desires¹² – refusing to honour him as a god is more than enough cause.

¹⁰ WINNINGTON-INGRAM 1948 (e.g. 159 "the sexual impulse is repressed, and therefore the more dangerous, like a stream imperfectly damned") and especially DODDS 1960 (e.g. xiv, xlv, 114, 166, 172) emphasize the dangers of repressing desire, a perennially influential approach.

¹¹ Pentheus' fears build on the Greek audience's patriarchal stereotypes of women as prone to drunkenness and illicit sex (221-5), of maenads as dangerously erotic (402-16, 862-76, 1048-57), and of barbarians as effeminately sensual (235-6, 453-9), but he is shown to be wrong about the corrupting nature of the new cult. One might compare Jason in *Medea*, who abuses patriarchal and anti-barbarian rhetoric for his own ends (cf. 534-75 on Medea's alleged enjoyment of Greek justice and her typically female obsession with sex) and is punished accordingly.

¹² Unlike Hippolytus, Pentheus expresses no distaste for sex *per se*.

Of course, the chorus of Lydian Bacchants present their own distinct response to the divinity of Dionysus, and their zealous worship, while primarily opposed to Pentheus' contemptuous atheism, is also contrasted with Teiresias' rationalism and Cadmus' pragmatic self-interest; thus the audience are encouraged to compare competing approaches to the god and to ask which (if any) offers an adequate or appropriate response to his power. As enthusiastic worshippers, the chorus naturally come closest to capturing the joys of Dionysiac religion and its many benefits to mortals, but their bloodthirsty support for child-killing

καλὸς ἀγὼν ἐν αἵματι στάζουσιν
χέρα βαλεῖν τέκνου.

CHORUS A fine endeavour it is to drench one's hand in the blood of a child! (1163-4)

and their pitiless response to Pentheus' gruesome death are also used to highlight the dangers of extreme devotion. Every tragic chorus possesses a particular character, and none presents an objective viewpoint, and this is especially true of the *Bacchae*, whose chorus is anything but impartial. Crucially, moreover, the audience's awareness of this bias informs their response to the action; after all, if they simply followed the chorus in thinking that Pentheus was a wicked man who deserved everything he got, the play would be little more than a dull morality tale.

In conclusion, non-observance of any god's cult – especially in tragedy, but also in everyday religion – was a risky way to act, and the *Bacchae* shows, perhaps more powerfully than any other surviving tragedy, that an essential part of that observance was belief, in all its varied forms.

WILLIAM ALLAN
Oxford University
william.allan@univ.ox.ac.uk

ENGLISH TITLE

Belief, Action, and Suffering in Euripides' *Bacchae*

ABSTRACT

This article takes as its starting point the fact that the study of Greek religion has in recent years seen the return of belief as a fundamental category, and with it a questioning of the assumption that in Greek (and Roman) religion ritual always came first and belief second. It examines the varied approaches to religious belief taken by the characters and chorus of Euripides' *Bacchae*, and seeks to show that beliefs and acts are inseparable and equally important in divine-human relations in ancient Greek culture.

KEYWORDS

Tragedy — Religion — Belief — Ritual — Dionysus

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