



Migrant Refusals: The Inoperativity of the Asian Bacchae in Euripides

1. INTRODUCTION: INOPERATIVITY IN HONIG'S INTERPRETATION

The *Bacchae* has often been read for its ethical and political implications: as a moralistic tale, as a critique of religious fanaticism or of totalitarian regimes, as a liberatory ritual, or as a subversion of normative categories of society and gender.¹ Honig's book presents a powerful new counternarrative, reading the abandonment of the polis as an agonistic feminist refusal and "inoperativity."² The bacchantes create a "heterotopia" (a concept developed by Foucault and Cavarero, among others), that is, an alternative time and space where they refuse normative roles such as maternalism.³ In the play, Agave kills her son the king unknowingly. In Honig's reading, this unintentional regicide is also the culmination of the political regicide initiated when Agave and the women refused to be part of the polis.

Honig focuses her counternarrative on the women of Thebes who left their polis, and the polis's patriarchal organization, to go to the mountains. Honig's perspective can be expanded by analyzing the narrative of the Asian bacchantes of the chorus, who are only marginally present in her book. The chorus of migrant Bacchae consciously offers their perspective on inoperativity, and creates a series of heterotopias, materializing them onstage, via their song, and offstage, via their imagined future migrations.

1. Punishment of the wicked atheist: e.g., Carmeli 1743–1764; critique of religious fanaticism: Verrall 1894; critique of totalitarian regimes: Auden et al. 1993; liberatory ritual: Schechner 1970; subversion of normative categories of society: Segal 1997; of normative categories of gender: Wohl 2005.

2. See Agamben 1999.

3. See Honig 2021: 22.

2. THE ASIAN BACCHAE: MIGRATION AS REFUSAL

The Asian Bacchae are the embodiment of political inoperativity and of the creation of a (missionary) heterotopia. They are, intrinsically, migrants. Calling them “migrants” (as opposed to a negative term such as “barbarians,” or a term such as “foreigners,” both of which leave unspecified where they intend to stay and live) helps interpreters to focus on the specific quality of their gaze: they are non-Greek, and their identity in Greece is defined by the fact that they left their homeland for an indefinite time. They are, moreover, pilgrims: they left their homeland specifically in order to convert other people to a new cult, which in turn creates further inoperativity. Their inoperativity is double: not only did they abandon their homes when the god “set things there [= in Asia] dancing and established his rituals” (Eur. *Bacch.* 21), but they encouraged the women of other Asian and Greek cities to do the same. Dionysus first goes to Lydia (13), then to Phrygia, Bactria, and other cities (14–19): the women of the chorus are consistently presented as coming from Lydia and Mount Tmolus (55, 65). The implication is that these women left Lydia as followers of Dionysus, and helped him to convert other lands to his cult, just as they are doing now in Thebes.

The Asian Bacchae are the opposite of the women of Thebes, who refused to follow Dionysus. He “forced” them to worship him (34 ἠνάγκασ’) and “drove them [= the women of Thebes] away from their homes in madness” (36 ἐξέμηνα δωμάτων). The migrant Bacchae explicitly take up the anti-patriarchal, revolutionary agenda that the Theban Bacchae unwillingly enact. Dionysus does not use the language of coercion when he describes the adherence of the Asian Bacchae to his cult (21–22). The audience sees the freedom of these Asian Bacchae as they arrive onstage. Dionysus simply tells them to come and sing. He calls them “my sacred *thiasos* [religious association]” (θείσος ἐμός) (56); note that his first address to them stresses the fact that their identity is tied to their migrant status: “you women who have left Mount Tmolus, which defends Lydia” (55). Just like the chorus of the *Phoenician Women* (202–203 “Having left the Tyrian sea | I arrived as firstfruits for Loxias”), they are migrants/pilgrims who leave their land for a religious mission. And the religious mission, in Thebes, is regicide.

3. REGICIDE: THE AWARENESS OF THE ASIAN BACCHAE, THE UNWARENESS (?) OF THE THEBAN BACCHAE

3.1 AGAVE, REGICIDE, AND METAPHORS

Agave does not openly state that she killed the king. She claims that she killed a lion. Honig rightly notes that the inoperativity of the Bacchae, including Agave, in the earlier part of the play is already a form of regicide.⁴ Honig also suggests that Agave may be not completely unaware of having killed the king, even if we

4. Honig 2021: 11: “[T]he bacchantes commit regicide long before they kill the king and only commit murderous violence against him when he forces their hand. It is regicide when the women

do not have textual elements to affirm that positively: “When Agave mistakenly believes she holds in her hands a lion’s head, she may know, without knowing, indeed she may say without saying, that the women have killed the king.”⁵

If we look at Agave’s statements, we see that her language is rather nuanced, and revealingly metaphorical. Agave claims she killed a “young offspring” (Eur. *Bacch.* 1174 νέον ἴνιν: the species of the offspring is lost in a lacuna—scholars normally supply “of a lion”), a “prey having the nature of a lion” (1196 ἄγρην . . . λεοντοφυᾶ), a “beast” (1188 θήρ, 1204, 1210, 1237), and finally, and more explicitly, a “lion” (1215 λέοντος, 1278).⁶ The term “lion” suggests a genealogical connection with Agave, who, in the imagination of the chorus, calls Pentheus the offspring “of some lioness” (990 λαιάνας . . . τινος): this insult ironically identifies Agave as the human/animal mother of the metaphorical “lion” she will indeed kill in her hallucination. Moreover, Agave also claims that she killed a “calf” (1185–87):

νέος ὁ μόσχος ἄρ-
τι γένυν ὑπὸ κόρυθ’ ἀπαλότριχα
κατάκομον θάλλει.⁷

The calf is young;
under the crest of soft hair,
he blooms:
his cheek is covered in hair that flows down.

“Calf” is ambiguous: has Agave’s hallucination “shifted,” as Dodds claims? Or is this a metaphor as well as a hallucination, as Roux suggests? In fact, “calf,” μόσχος, in the feminine, is used regularly in Euripides as a metaphor designating young women.⁸ We have no other instances of “calf,” in the masculine, used in reference to a young man, except in a spurious passage of *Iphigenia at Aulis* (1623),⁹ but the metaphor is an easy one to understand, especially since here the term unambiguously refers to a bearded human being, who is in turn imagined to be a “bearded” lion.¹⁰ Moreover, “calf” suggests “bull,” a frequent metaphor for (or

refuse the king’s orders to work (inoperativity) and when they set up a parapolis outside the city in which they rehearse new compartments and inaugurate new temporalities (inclination).”

5. Honig 2021: 82.

6. Honig 2021: 79–81 persuasively reads the dialogue between Cadmus and Agave at 1271–1284 as one in which Cadmus “robs Agave of *who* she is and returns her to *what* she is” and “returns” her “to the patriarchal fold” (80).

7. All translations from the text of the *Bacchae* are my own.

8. See Eur. *Andr.* 206; *Hec.* 206, 526; *IT* 359 (in a comparison); *IA* 1083; “heifer” is a frequent translation.

9. See Stockert 1992; Collard and Morwood 2017 ad loc. Achaeus 20 F 48 (in *TrGF*) uses “calf” as a metaphor referring to a young bird: “with his mouth gaping because of hunger, like the calf of a swallow” (χάσκοντα λιμῶ μόσχον ὡς χελιδόνος).

10. Other terms for young animals, such as πῶλος (“filly” or “colt,” depending on the gender of articles/adjectives), are used as metaphors for both sexes. See Collard and Morwood 2017 on *IA* 1623

avatar of) Dionysus (see *Bacch.* 618, 920, 1017, 1159). Agave uses “calf” to designate a human(?)/animal(?) with male characteristics (beard). Pentheus as a calf is thus a younger, weaker version of his antagonist, Dionysus the bull (who is also imagined to be a “lion”: 1019).¹¹ The blending of different animal metaphors, and the reciprocal entanglement with animal imagery used to describe Dionysus, suggests the identification of the “calf”/“lion” with Pentheus.¹² This is the passage where Agave allows her linguistic consciousness to express, in an oblique metaphor, the possibility that the “beast” is in fact a young man with a “beard” and “hair”; she does not designate “him” (or it) with his/its social title (king), but the metaphor suggests that (without realizing it?) Agave knows she has not simply killed “a lion,” but a “beast” that can be metaphorically read as a human that is both male (beard) and female (“calf”/“heifer”). The ambiguity of the language tricks Agave into expressing metaphorically what she enacted in real life (killing a human being, not an animal), just as it echoes the gender ambiguity that Pentheus has so eagerly embraced in order to observe the Theban Bacchae.¹³

Agave’s shock at the realization of the identity of her victim (1284) and her ignorance of the circumstances of his death (1286) suggest that her on-stage consciousness knows less about the real state of affairs in the world than her language (or her Freudian lapsus) does. But the metaphorical slippage remains.

3.2 THE ASIAN BACCHAE, REGICIDE, AND METAPHORS

We do not have access to the consciousness of Agave, which, since it belongs to a fictional theatrical character, is only manifest to us in the words she speaks. It is difficult to demonstrate that she was consciously aware of her regicide/filicide. On the other hand, the Asian Bacchae are explicitly aware of the regicide and filicide. Not only that: they urge the Theban Bacchae to kill the king (977–1007), who is also the son of Agave, clearly identified by his genealogy (995–96 Ἐχίονος | γόνον, “the offspring of Echion”) and by his acts (the persecution of Dionysus: 980–81, 997–1001). The Asian Bacchae even praise the regicide/filicide, stressing again the genealogy of Pentheus (1154–55):

ἀναβοάσωμεν ξυμφορὰν
τὰν τοῦ δράκοντος Πενθέος ἐκγενέτα

(colt: Aesch. *Cho.* 794; Eur. *Phoen.* 947). See also Aesch. *Ag.* 1125–26 “keep the bull [Agamemnon] away from the cow [Clytemnestra],” with Fraenkel 1950 and Medda 2017 ad loc.

11. Dionysus is also described as a “snake”/“dragon” at Eur. *Bacch.* 1018; for Pentheus as a descendant of the dragon/snake cf. 1155, quoted below in section 3.2.

12. Note that Euripides could have clarified the metaphor by saying “the calf of a lion,” just as Achaëus 20 F 48 (above, n.9) speaks of the “calf of a swallow.” He preferred to leave the ambiguity open, so that “calf” can be interpreted as a metaphor for a human being.

13. This expands on Honig 2021: 81–82, on the accumulation of metaphors: she concludes, “the queer corpse is a screen for all sorts of projections.”

Let us celebrate with shouts the great misfortune
of the dragon's offspring, Pentheus. . . .

If Agave's language possibly hints at the killing of the king (post factum, and without fully comprehending what she did), the Asian Bacchae urge the regicide before the deed, and praise it after the deed.

The Asian Bacchae thus completely disrupt the existing ritual and normative patterns of their home city, by abandoning them, and of Thebes, by urging and praising regicide. However, they are paradoxically strict in following the rules of the highly codified Dionysiac form of tragedy. They only communicate in the songs and in the brief recited sections traditionally allotted to them.¹⁴ Their combination of conservative, even archaic, formal features with an approach that is subversive of established gender and power hierarchies makes them the embodiment of this entire paradoxical play.¹⁵

4. THE SONGS OF THE ASIAN BACCHAE

In the parodos, the Asian Bacchae import the Dionysiac heterotopia to the heart of the city. Their first word is "Asia": they take up Dionysus' cue at 55 ("you women who have left Mount Tmolus") and state, in their own voice, that they arrived "from the land of Asia, | having left behind the sacred Tmolus" (64–65). The geography distinguishes them sharply from the Theban Bacchae. The words and song of the Asian Bacchae evoke the non-urban cultic setting of Dionysiac happiness, the mountain (135–39, 165); they evoke the presence of Asian (Phrygian, Lydian) places (140, 154): they "bring" the god into Greece (85). They stress that their "pleasurable toil" (66) is obtained by "dissolving the psyche into the religious community [*thiasos*]" (75). They predict that the women will abandon the entire city, and in particular their customary duties of weaving (114–19):

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

Soon the entire land will dance,
whenever Bromius leads the *thiasos*
to the mountain, to the mountain, where

14. For the rules governing such sections see, e.g., Popp 1971; Rode 1971; Seidensticker 1971. The chorus of Aeschylus' *Suppliant Women*, for instance, is far more present in the action than that of the *Bacchae*. The *Orestes* is formally more innovative, in its lyric sections, than the *Bacchae*. In other words, Euripides did not necessarily follow the conventional rules; but he chooses to do so here.

15. For the archaizing formal aspects of the *Bacchae*, see, e.g., Dodds 1960: xxxvi–xxxviii.

the crowd of the female race waits:
 Dionysus drove them mad,
 away from looms and shuttles.

The Asian Bacchae stress that their non-political pleasure is created by violence: they refer to “violent thyrsi” (113), which are connected with “making oneself pure” (114). The Bacchae singing for Dionysus are said to be the “rich ornament of Mount Tmolus” (154): the Asian experience is brought to all the places where Dionysiac cult is practiced. They conclude their song by ventriloquizing Dionysus who is urging all Bacchae (from Asia and from Thebes) to go “to the mountain, to the mountain” (163, cf. 116, 135).

In the first stasimon, the chorus of Asian Bacchae stresses the contrast between Thebes and non-Theban spaces: spaces other than Thebes are the locus of Dionysiac pleasure. They present other Greek places, such as Cyprus, Pieria, and Olympus, as locations of both erotic and aesthetic pleasure, linked with other gods and goddesses that are connected to Dionysus (Aphrodite, Pothos, the Muses, and Charis) (402–416):

ἰκοίμαν ποτὶ Κύπρον,
 νᾶσον τᾶς Ἀφροδίτας,

 οὔθ' ἄκαλλιστευομένα
 Πιερία, μούσειος ἔδρα, 410
 σεμνὰ κλειτὺς Ὀλύμπου·
 ἐκεῖσ' ἄγε με, Βρόμιε Βρόμιε,
 πρόβακχ' εὖτε δαῖμον.
 ἐκεῖ Χάριτες, ἐκεῖ δὲ Πόθος, ἐκεῖ δὲ βᾶκ- 414–15
 χαις θέμις ὀργιάζειν.

I wish I could go to Cyprus,
 the island of Aphrodite

 and to where Pieria is, the very beautiful
 place, seat of the Muses,
 hallowed slope of Olympus:
 o Bromius, Bromius, take me there,
 you, God of the *euoē* cry, you who lead the Bacchic rituals.
 There are the Graces, there Desire, there
 it is right for the Bacchae to celebrate their rituals.

The Bacchae use a traditional type of expression, “I wish I could go to . . . ,” which often introduces escape fantasies in choral passages of Euripides. This new community has something in common with the community of the Theban Bacchae (the absence of men, the space), but the chorus is much more explicit in presenting sexual Desire (Pothos) and Aphrodite as part of a legitimate Bacchic cult, something that the

Theban Bacchae avoid—a distinction that is particularly interesting in the light of Honig’s emphasis on the *sororal* posture of the Theban Bacchae’s “inclination.”¹⁶ Swift reads this passage of the *Bacchae* as an eroticized fantasy, confirming Pentheus’ intuition about the disruptive sexual power of Dionysus in general and of the Bacchae in particular. She argues that

far from presenting the two groups of Bacchantes as fundamentally separate, the *locus amoenus* imagery instead encourages us to connect them, and to recognize in the Chorus’s vision of Dionysiac worship the underlying reasons for Pentheus’ distrust of the new cult.¹⁷

On the other hand, one can stress that only the Asian Bacchae, in their stasima, articulate eroticized language and desire, whereas the Theban Bacchae fail to express sexual desires and do not perform sexual acts: these are simply Pentheus’ accusations. This is another area where the two groups of Bacchae are different: the Theban Bacchae fail to imagine and express the diffused eroticism that the Asian Bacchae consciously voice. The Theban Bacchae, in the language of the second Messenger, are “like fillies who left their versicolored yokes” (1056); they return to the stage of unmarried girls, in the eyes of the male messenger, who sees them as possible targets of sexual attacks because they abandoned their husbands.¹⁸ Unlike the “fawn” imagined by the chorus of Asian Bacchae (866) in the third stasimon (discussed below), the Theban Bacchae are the objects of male gaze, not the subjects of a successful and exhilarating escape from male violence.

In the first stasimon, the Asian Bacchae even imagine a new community, a heterotopia where they can worship freely and differences of social status are erased: a place where Dionysus “gives the same pleasure, the pleasure of wine that erases pain, to the rich and the social inferior” (421–23: ἴσαν δ’ ἔς τε τὸν ὄλβιον | τὸν τε χείρονα δῶκ’ ἔχειν | οἴνου τέρψιν ἄλυτον). These locations are however geographically at the margins of Greece: a distant island, far away mountains. This social heterotopia is not attainable for the chorus (at least not now) nor for the Theban Bacchae. The heterotopia is syntactically presented as an escape fantasy, never to be attained, but still real, under the protection of Dionysus.

In the second stasimon, the Asian Bacchae continue to imagine the creation of a Dionysiac heterotopia on the sacred sites of Greece, again in religiously central, but geographically marginal, mountainous locations: Delphi, Olympus, Pieria, and liminal Thrace (554–75). The god Dionysus is away, at one of these locations. Thebes, at the center of Greece, on the other hand, is described as being ruled by a non-human leader, “a mad monster, not a mortal man” (542–43) who is comparable to a Giant, an enemy of the gods (544).

16. Swift 2009, with further references.

17. Swift 2009: 380.

18. See Swift 2009: 380.

In the third stasimon, the Asian Bacchae compare themselves to wild animals that escape organized male violence (i.e., hunting) and find pleasure in woods, that is, in spaces that are explicitly described as void of human presence: the bacchant is compared to a “fawn” (866) who runs away from the hunters (873-76):

μόχθοις δ' ὠκυδρόμοις ἀελ-	
λὰς θρώσκηι πεδίον	874a
παραποτάμιον, ἠδομένα	874b
βροτῶν ἔρημίαις σκιαρο-	875
κόμοιό τ' ἔρνεσιν ὕλας	

and like a whirlwind, rushes
across the plain that stretches along the river,
in her swift-running efforts, taking joy in the places
where humans are absent, and in the young shoots
of the forest that gives shade with its leaves. . . .

The Asian Bacchae express a sense of identification with non-human species, ruling out completely the possibility of “operativity.” Hunters are presented by the chorus as city dwellers who invade the space of Dionysiac (and non-human) heterotopia (869–72). Moreover, the chorus clearly implies that the female migration of the Bacchae to Thebes is divinely sanctioned, and that the gods, not simply Dionysus, will punish the folly of Pentheus (877–96). The Bacchae will share the pleasure at the violent defeat of Pentheus (877–81 = 897–901).

In the fourth stasimon, the chorus explicitly legitimizes regicide. The Asian Bacchae identify the king with *negatively* portrayed non-human beings. The king is not a real human being: the chorus claims (through the imagined voice of Agave as a “deluded” Bacchant) that he is not really the son of a woman but the son of a beast or of an African monster (989–90):

οὐ γὰρ ἐξ αἵματος
γυναικῶν ἔφθ, λεαίνας δέ τινος
ᾧδ' ἢ Γοργόνων Λιβυσσᾶν γένος.

He was not born from the blood
of women: this man is the offspring of a lioness
or of the Libyan Gorgons.

The migrant Bacchae thus expel the king from his city, from a location at the heart of Greece, and present him as an African barbarian monster. They use against him the chauvinistic scorn he poured on the barbarians earlier in the play, when talking to Dionysus (483: the barbarians “have much less sense than the Greeks” because they worship Dionysus). In the stasimon, the chorus explains that the king himself went “to the mountain, to the mountain” (986), making the same journey as the Theban Bacchae. However, the non-Greek, non-human, earth-born king does not have the right to access the heterotopia

of the Bacchae. He will die, and the regicide is religiously sanctioned by Dike (992–96 [= 1011–16]):

ἴτω Δίκα φανερός, ἴτω
 ξιφηφόρος φονεύου-
 σα λαϊμῶν διαμπᾶξ
 τὸν ἄθεον ἄνομον ἄδικον Ἐχίονος
 γόνον γηγενῆ·

Let Justice come openly, let her come
 carrying a sword, slaying, by cutting through his throat,
 the godless, lawless, unjust
 earthborn son of Echion.

In the final choral song, the Asian Bacchae celebrate with song and dance the violence against the king, whose non-human origin is highlighted again (1155 “the dragon’s offspring, Pentheus”).¹⁹ The imagery used by them in this song mixes violence (1157 “Hades”; 1154 and 1159 “great misfortune”) and joy (1154 “Let us celebrate with shouts”),²⁰ the two constitutive characteristics of Dionysus himself, who is “the most terrible” and “the mildest” god (860–61). They thematize both their distance from and their similarity to the Theban Bacchae (1160–64):

βάκχαι Καδμεΐαι,
 τὸν καλλίνικον κλεινὸν ἐξεπράξατε
 ἐς στόνον, ἐς δάκρυα.
 καλὸς ἀγών, χέρ’ αἵματι στάζουσας
 περιβαλεῖν τέκνου.

Cadmean Bacchae,
 you brought to completion your fame-bringing song of victory,
 turning it into lamentation, into tears.
 It is a fine struggle to plunge one’s hand
 in the blood of a son so that it drips with it.

Theban and Asian women are both cult followers of Dionysus; they are “Bacchae.” But their ethnic identity distinguishes them: “Cadmean,” as opposed to “Asian.” The adjective “Cadmean” is often used in tragedy simply as a synonym for “Theban”;²¹ here it draws attention both to the city of Thebes (in opposition to

19. See above, section 3.2.

20. See above, section 3.2.

21. See, e.g., Eur. *Bacch.* 35–38: καὶ πᾶν τὸ θῆλυ σπέρμα Καδμεΐων, ὅσαι | γυναῖκες ἦσαν, ἐξέμνηγα δωμάτων | ὁμοῦ δὲ Κάδμου παισὶν ἀναμειγμένα | χλωραῖς ὑπ’ ἐλάταις ἀνορόφους ἦνται πέτρας, “and the entire female race of the Cadmeans, as many women as there were, I drove them away from their homes in madness. Mixed together with the daughters of Cadmus, they sit on roofless rocks, under the green fir trees.” When Dionysus speaks of “the entire female race of the Cadmeans,” in fact he means “women of the city of Thebes [who are not daughters of Cadmus],” in opposition to the “daughters of Cadmus” proper (Agave, Autonoe, and Ino).

Asia) and to the lineage of Cadmus, since it includes a reference both to Agave and her sisters, descendants of Cadmus, and to the other Bacchae who contributed to the killing of Pentheus. The distinction is thus not simply geographical. The Theban Bacchae have no access to true Dionysiac joy. Qua descendants of Cadmus, their regicide consists in the killing of a nephew or of a son. Qua Bacchae, their regicide is, however, a positive achievement—at least in the eyes of the Asian Bacchae. The final statement of the chorus in the passage quoted above (“It is a fine struggle to plunge one’s hand in the blood of a son”) is usually read as bitterly ironical.²² However, from the point of view of the Asian Bacchae, it is not ironical at all: this is indeed a fine struggle, and a fitting ending. After all, they are the same chorus that, in the third stasimon, stated that there is nothing finer “than to hold one’s hand above the head of one’s enemies.”²³ Here, the hand is drenched in blood. And rightly so. Only the migrant Bacchae can consciously and willingly plot and celebrate the death of Pentheus. As one of the readers for this journal notes, “Euripides here is pushing *to the limit* the authority of a chorus, and the potential difference between two choruses.” The chorus of Asian Bacchae choose the most shocking version of the killing: they stress that it is a “fine struggle” to kill one’s *son*. They focus on what the murder of Pentheus is to their addressee, Agave: filicide, before regicide.

Honig writes, “in the *Bacchae*, when the bacchantes kill the king, it seems they do so unknowingly. But I am not so sure.”²⁴ The Asian Bacchae give voice to this repressed desire. Only the perspective of the migrants can illuminate what is happening in the polis. They do so because they are in communion with the god. However, the repressed desire is a desire for violence. This, for any reader who thinks that non-violence is the ethically justified response to conflict, is a disturbing revelation. But in Greek tragedy the reality principle is sovereign, and we must accept that, in the real world as in tragedy, violence prevails.

5. CONCLUSION

The distinction between “Asian” and “Theban” Bacchae was soon elided in antiquity. In the ritual practices of Hellenistic and Imperial antiquity, Dionysiac cults by women included going to the mountain (ὄρειβασία) and abandonment

22. See, e.g., Dodds 1960; Seaford 1996.

23. Eur. *Bacch.* 897–901 τί τὸ σοφόν; ἢ τι {τὸ} κάλλιον | παρὰ θεῶν γέρας ἐν βροτοῖς | ἢ χεῖρ’ ὑπὲρ κορυφᾶς | τῶν ἐχθρῶν κρείσσω κατέχειν; | ὅτι καλὸν φίλον αἰεὶ, “What is ‘the wise’? Is there a finer honor-conferring gift from the gods among human beings than to hold one’s hand above the head of one’s enemies? What is fine is always pleasing.” Text and interpretation of this passage are debated. It is not possible to discuss the linguistic, metrical, and philological problems of the passage here. I accept Willink’s deletion of τὸ in 887 (see Willink 1966: 229–31). For other discussions see the main commentaries ad loc. (Dodds 1960; Roux 1970; Seaford 1996; Di Benedetto 2004) and Cropp 1981; Rijksbaron 1991: 109–113; Kovacs 2003: 130–32, with further references.

24. Honig 2021: 4.

of the polis.²⁵ We have no evidence that such cults existed in classical Athens. All the evidence is later.²⁶ Real-life Hellenistic Bacchae imitated in particular the Theban Bacchae: for instance, by naming the chorus leaders after Agave and her sisters and by making real-life Bacchae come from Thebes to establish cults.²⁷ None of these Hellenistic Bacchic groups was composed of non-citizens: it is the Theban Bacchae who are the focus of attention and ritual imitation. The *Bacchae* of Euripides was thus reinterpreted as a model for the subversion of subversion: they were used as a model of the integration of the disruptive potential of the immigrant Bacchae into the political establishment and normative gender hierarchy.²⁸

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25. Women did even cross polis boundaries and elicit female solidarity and protection outside their own polis. See the famous episode narrated by Plutarch, *De mul. vir.* 13, 249e–f, with the discussion in Henrichs 1978: 136; Hedreen 1994, with further references.

26. These extraordinary ritual gestures and acts were rigidly codified and had clear temporal limitations. On Dionysiac cult in Hellenistic and Roman times see Henrichs 1978; Jaccottet 2003.

27. See the inscription from Magnesia (Kern 1900: 139–40, no. 215) discussed by Henrichs 1978 123–37; Jaccottet 2003: 2:244–47. For the imitation of the Asian Bacchae see, e.g., Tac. *Ann.* 11.31.2–3 with Henrichs 1978: 157n.13.

28. I would like to thank Catherine Conybeare for organizing the panel where the ideas discussed in this paper were originally presented. I would also like to thank all the participants for their helpful comments and suggestions. Bonnie Honig was gracious in accepting our discussions of her work and generous in providing suggestions and comments. The main substance of the paper has been left as originally presented in the panel, with some additional references and quotations.

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