

DIONYSUS: STRANGER, GOD, MONSTER

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1. INTRODUCTION: “I HAVE ARRIVED. I AM DIONYSUS ... ” (*Bacchae*, line 1)¹

This essay attempts to accomplish what will initially appear peculiar, if not paradoxical. The theme of *ambivalence* is identified and stressed in an ancient Greek tragedy, Euripides’ *Bacchae*.² That is to say, audiences who engage the drama seeking to locate a straightforward or univocal message will be confounded and frustrated. It will be argued that there is no single moral to the story, but, rather, two or more incompatible or opposed messages. This tragic drama is confusing and unnerving—and intentionally so. Moreover, the opposing messages make audiences feel uncomfortable. I will consider critically a number of competing interpretations and possible morals derived from the *Bacchae* that quickly—yet insufficiently—present themselves.³ However, my suggestion is that the tale of Dionysus’ mission of revenge on Thebes, his hometown, presents no singular, clear lesson, or takeaway message. Rather, it is a play about double meanings, about ambivalences. Here ambivalence refers to a situation where one feels torn between two conflicting options for action, belief, or attitude. There is a definite sense of discomfort in a situation of ambivalence. We are unsettled, challenged, put into question. And *this* is precisely what makes for good reading and rereading.

What we as contemporary audiences bring with us to this or any story directly impacts how we understand it. Euripides (480-406 BCE) and his main character Dionysus are master psychoanalysts *avant-la-lettre*. As much as audiences are engaging and trying to make sense of the characters and events in *Bacchae*, these characters are also reading and analyzing us as we read them. And humans, not unlike Dionysus and the *Bacchae* itself, are indeed complicated creatures. This idea supports Friedrich Nietzsche’s meta-perspective on perspectives:

There is *only* a perspectival seeing, *only* a perspectival “knowing”; and the *more* affects we are able to put into words about a thing, the *more* eyes, various eyes, we are able to use for the same thing, the more complete will be our “concept” of the thing, our “objectivity.”⁴

If we bring our necessarily limited and partial human perspectives to reading *Bacchae*, and, since there is no such thing as a point of view *sub specie aeternitatis*, then we need to discover a number of ways and methods that allow us to attempt to approach this tragic drama from several available angles. To accomplish this, we need temporarily to remove the prejudices that blind us from seeing the story—and ourselves—as multilayered, multifaceted, ambivalent and, therefore, ambiguous drama.

2. METHODS OF GOOD READING: DIONYSUS AND THE *BACCHAE*

The *Bacchae* is both an ambivalent drama and a drama about ambivalence itself. The play tears apart Pentheus and Thebes as much as it rends the audience’s interpretations and expectations. In short, we need to acknowledge our partiality and expand our scope of vision, and these tasks include practicing epistemological and ethical humility. Humans are perhaps unique in our ability to maintain multiple and logically contradictory ideas simultaneously, and to maintain our existence nevertheless. Most of the Theban characters in this drama showcase themselves as human, all-too-human, yet reach for a soothing interpretation that eludes their grasp. They are much like us in familiar, yet uncomfortable ways.

Euripides’ *Bacchae* identifies and underscores ambivalence in a variety of dichotomous relationships: human-and-animal, human-and-divine, individual-and-collective, masculine-and-feminine, culture-and-nature, reason-and-religion, monster-and-citizen, and city-and-country. These dichotomies are introduced and deeply troubled, rendering each side of the dichotomy, as well as the dichotomy itself, ambivalent, arbitrary, or ambiguous. Along with many scholars of *Bacchae*, I identify Dionysus as the primary character of the drama, yet he manages to resist—or better, absorbs—the antagonism between protagonist and antagonist, between hero and villain. He is a god, yet also a human. He is called by a number of names, each bearing a different significance or aspect.⁵ He is joyous and carefree, yet is also capable of masterminding the most heinous acts. He exhibits both traditional masculine and traditional feminine dimensions. He cuts across the divide between human and non-human animal. His mother and he hail from the city-state Thebes, yet he revels with his Bacchantes on the mountainside of Kithairôn. He is a stranger, a god, and a monster. More than any character, Dionysus is able to see through and embody multiple, incompatible perspectives.

Translator Paul Woodruff writes, “Dionysus expresses tension simply by being the sort of god he is, a compound of opposites and a crusher of boundaries.”⁶ Dionysus not only expresses tension or ambivalence, but also exists as *ambivalence*. Woodruff continues, “[Dionysus] does not merely cross boundaries, he blurs and confounds them, makes nonsense of the lines between Greek and foreign, between female and male, between powerful and weak, between savage and civilized.”⁷ The other characters, and we the audience members, need to continue to struggle with these bifurcating elements that compose our human reality. Euripides asks us: How could or should we exist amid such tension?

The *Bacchae* creates a situation of multi-layered ambivalence, a sense of *being torn* between two (or more) competing alternatives. Readers and audiences are torn between characters with whom they identify and sympathize. Thebes is torn apart by its own impiety and incredulity demonstrated in the face of the strange new god in their midst. The body of the young and inexperienced king Pentheus is savagely torn apart (*sparagmos*, σπαραγμός) by his own mother Agavê and her sisters Inô and Autonoë. On multiple levels, and from a number of points of view, this is a tragedy of and about ambivalence.⁸ I further articulate Dionysus’ multifaceted positions on becoming accustomed to our ambivalence, our existential metastability with ourselves. I suggest that we hear his overall message of encouraging humility, rather than struggling against these all-too-human phenomena.

Here I draw from Richard Kearney’s 2001 volume *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* for the subtitle of this contribution.⁹ I understand Dionysus’s tragedy as a story about our strangeness to ourselves, in which we can recognize ourselves and our struggle over acknowledging divinity within our midst. Throughout, the overarching theme of monstrosity pervades this story. Establishing Dionysus as both stranger and god may not appear to be a difficult task; however, following Kearney, each of the first two terms—stranger, god—will themselves be turned over and problematized, shown to be ambivalent. Third, following the theoretical framework supplied by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and anticipated by René Girard, I conclude with the recommendation that we include and embrace *Bacchae* within the canon of monster studies.

3. STRANGER: THE OUTSIDER-WITHIN, THE INSIDER-WITHOUT

As the *Bacchae* opens, audiences are immediately introduced to Dionysus. However, we do not see the new god in his full divine glory. Instead, he is disguised as a young male celebrant of the new religion of Dionysus, returning to his homeland (*Bacchae* lines 1-64). He is portraying himself as a devotee of his own cult. This peculiar situation may cause the audience some confusion, or even evoke nervous laughter. While his mortal mother Semélê was a Theban, daughter of Cadmus, Dionysus chose not to reveal himself as her son, fathered

by Zeus, straightaway. His decision to disguise himself provides the Thebans with an opportunity for a gesture of hospitality, one which they tragically fail to heed. One could conclude, then, that Euripides chose to portray Dionysus not only as a Stranger, but also as a stranger-within, attempting to draw out the Thebans' own inner strangeness, or alienation from themselves. Theologian Timothy K. Beal writes, "[Monsters] are paradoxical personifications of *otherness within sameness*."¹⁰ Dionysus is thus addressing the Thebans' alienation from themselves. This claim requires a careful explanation.

The exercise of identifying something or someone as strange, psychoanalytically understood, is by no means the end of the story. This appellation is often accompanied by a tacit sense that what is deemed strange in the other self or culture is also found deep within the psyche of the person who is making the identification. For example, the things that most irritate me about the behaviors of my five-year old daughter are the same behaviors with which I personally struggle to overcome. That which is strange, if it is understood at all, is also what is strangely, or uncomfortably familiar. Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical concept of the uncanny (*Das Unheimlich*) is helpful in this regard.¹¹ The experience of something unsettling, liminal, or marginal exposes secrets that we would rather keep under wraps. Of course, the unconscious harbors any number of uncomfortable secrets. The individual human, for Simon Critchley, is also a "dividual," a divided self.¹² The Thebans' gestures of un-hospitality, impiety, and hostility toward the Stranger expose their own inner division, turmoil, disorder, and crisis, yet which they fail or refuse to acknowledge and address. The saga of Dionysus that is recounted in *Bacchae* revolves around the identification, excavation, and consequence of Thebes' internal flaws, divisions, and blind-spots. That which is familiar is made strange, and that which is strange is made familiar. Ambivalences abound. Kearney writes, "[B]y sounding out certain borderlands separating Us from Others we may become more ready to acknowledge strangers in ourselves and ourselves in strangers."¹³ Thebans, particularly Pentheus, fail to heed the warning about the need for careful and critical self-introspection. There is more than a little bit of wild Bacchic energy in Pentheus.

Young king Pentheus, the most recent occupant of the Theban throne, is immediately—and perhaps rightfully—put on guard when he learns of a disturbance in his kingdom. Apparently, all of the women of Thebes have left town for nearby Mt. Kithairôn, outside his jurisdiction. They were reportedly entranced by the new god Dionysus, and are worshipping him on the mountain. This outrages Pentheus; however, the manner in which he purports to investigate and adjudicate this alleged crime reveals key aspects of his character. His anger and frustration are not befitting a civic leader, as his ambition and passion for reestablishing order overshoot the mark. Rather than speak of the women as fellow citizens, mothers, aunts, and sisters, he maintains the personal pronouns "my" or "mine" when referring to them, connoting that he claims

sole possession of the women of Thebes. This disregards and devalues their freedom and agency, and as audiences will soon see, this proves to be a fatal flaw in Pentheus' personality and leadership. The women, whom he disrespects, end up sacrificing him to the god Dionysus, but not before numerous prophetic warnings.

French-American literary theorist René Girard offers the following interpretation of Pentheus's inner conflict, which is identified and stirred up by Dionysus. Girard writes, "The subject watches the monstrosity that takes shape within him and outside him simultaneously. In his efforts to explain what is happening to him, he attributes the origin of the apparition to some exterior cause."¹⁴ Pentheus, a new and young king, seemingly blames everything on someone else. He is either too young or too immature to take stock of, and deal with, these inappropriate desires for both the women of Thebes and the Stranger. He mistakenly blames the outsider, the Stranger, for starting the commotion and civil unrest. Thus, Girard continues, "The whole interpretation of the experience is dominated by the sense that the monster is alien to himself."¹⁵ Both Dionysus and Pentheus are monsters and strangers; however, only Dionysus is fully aware of and comfortable with this reality; Pentheus is painfully, ignorantly unaware. Dionysus continues to seduce Pentheus into giving his desire an avenue of expression, enticing him to view voyeuristically the Maenads on Mt. Kithairôn. Of course, this reconnaissance mission is a trap set by Dionysus, perhaps from the very beginning of the *Bacchae*. And everyone, except for Pentheus, seems to know it. Dionysus is both stranger and citizen, outsider and insider, and forces Pentheus—and Euripides' audiences—to come to grips with that difficult and uncomfortable reality.

4. GOD: THE MORTAL IMMORTAL

In addition to inhabiting the bifurcation of stranger-within, Dionysus occupies and troubles the opposed categories of god and human. His parents are Zeus, immortal and supreme god of the polytheistic ancient Greeks, and Semélê, mortal princess of Thebes. The women of Thebes, especially Semélê's sisters, deny her story of having had a sexual relationship with a god. This offends Dionysus' human side. His mother is being cast out as a liar and a harlot. And Pentheus, among others, rejects, or is at least deeply suspicious of, the Stranger's new religious cult of Maenadism. After all, what good is a god without worshippers? Of all city-states, the citizens of Thebes pose a serious challenge to Dionysus' divinity. This constitutes a double-offense to Dionysus, a new god-man who simultaneously exhibits aspects of the divine alongside very human emotions. Dionysus gives audiences the impression of being emotionally hurt. As a god, Dionysus' powers are fascinating and befuddling. At any moment, he has the ability to reveal himself in full divinity, yet he withholds this epiphany from the characters until the end of the tragic drama. As a human,

Dionysus seems to be an enigma inside a paradox. He feels hurt, and yet he is quite capable of emotional manipulation. He knows Pentheus better than Pentheus knows himself. As a god-man, Dionysus thus blurs the boundaries or distinctions that divide the domains of the divine and the human. Quite unlike the god-man of Christianity, Dionysus does not spread the radical message of unconditional love of neighbor and enemy. His request seems to be little more than: Acknowledge my existence. Beyond this, it is not exactly clear what his overall message or purpose is.

Near the end of *Bacchae*, Cadmus, former king of Thebes and grandfather of Pentheus, reproaches his other grandson for this act of injustice, suggesting that his violent behavior and revenge plot are not befitting a god. Cadmus declares, “Anger does not become a god. You should not be like a human being.”¹⁶ In similar fashion to God’s response to Job, Dionysus answers the challenge by (rather immaturely) reasserting his divinity, reminding us of our status in the order of nature. It is not the human’s role to question the meaning of a god’s decisions and actions. To illuminate this point, allow me to direct your attention to the fantasy novel *Trickster’s Queen* (2005), where the character Boulaj offers the following observation to spy-master Aly:

“That’s the problem with luarin,” Boulaj observed softly. “They think gods have rules and follow them. They should dedicate their lives to the Trickster, as we do. They would not be comfortable, but they would not have this illusion that life is supposed to make sense, either.”¹⁷

No one claimed that life needs to present itself with a cohesive, safe, comforting narrative of progress or easily discovered meaning. Whoever wishes to have made such a claim would be sorely, and tragically, mistaken. Living a lie can indeed be quite comforting. Dionysus appears to be performing the role of a trickster-god, exposing the existential “illusion that life is supposed to make sense” at all. The human desire to occupy a hermeneutical position outside space and time—experiencing and dictating the story of humankind, like a god—is, in Jean-Paul Sartre’s words, “a useless passion.” The Chorus of Asian Bacchae end Euripides’ play with the song:

Many are the shapes the gods will take,
many the surprises they perform.
What was thought likely did not transpire,
and what was unlikely the god made easy.
That is how this matter ended.¹⁸

Thebans, and Euripides’ audience, need to be reminded that Dionysus is, among other things, a god of surprises, a trickster, keeping us on edge and on guard against complacency in our ways of thought, attitudes, and behaviors.

The flatness of the ending, I propose, seems intended to frustrate the audience seeking a justification or reason for Dionysus' senseless violence against Thebes and Pentheus.

Among Pentheus' numerous tragic flaws is the misguided notion that order and sanity were indeed already established in Thebes prior to his reign, that it is his task to restore these two elements, and that these two phenomena are diametrically opposed to chaos and madness. Dionysus, as the Greek god of wine and revelry, reveals to humanity how the line that separates reason from madness is blurred and thinner than we allow ourselves to admit. Wine, the same gift that allows humans a few moments of release from our otherwise difficult lives, also intoxicates and provides tantalizing avenues for the diminution of inhibitions and poor decisions. Imbibing "one too many" impairs one's judgment, making a bad idea seem like a good one. Meaning acquisition is undoubtedly a worthwhile pursuit; however, it is difficult and often surprises us with things that we would rather not admit or allow. Reality is hard to face, especially when sober.

Another tragic flaw in the king of Thebes is his struggle with his budding sexual identity. Pentheus exhibits numerous conflicting emotions, including same-sex desire toward the Stranger. This sensation deeply offends his self-imposed heterosexual, macho persona as king of Thebes. Throughout the *Bacchae*, Euripides positions Dionysus as attempting to seduce Pentheus, from Pentheus initial introduction as an attractive, effeminate male celebrant of the new god Dionysus. This god exhibits unusual behavior, dressing up as a celebrant in his own religion, enticing the Theban king to explore his sexual desire for "his" women by cross-dressing, and ultimately commanding regicide by filicide.

5. MONSTER: "THE MONSTER IS OFTEN BOTH DEMONIZED AND DEIFIED"¹⁹

Timothy K. Beal writes, "[Monsters] invite us to discover our monsters in ourselves and ourselves in our monsters."²⁰ Monsters blur the line between human and monster, highlighting the ambivalence of the human condition. Albert Henrichs reminds us that *Bacchae* is not the only drama or myth that includes Dionysus. His characterization of Dionysus is as follows: "For the Greeks and Romans, Dionysus was essentially the god of wine and vitality; of ritual madness; of the mask and the theater; and of a happy afterlife."²¹ Henrichs indicates that Dionysus embodied and wandered freely through all four rather incompatible and discontinuous domains. He exemplifies the first three of these characteristics most clearly in the *Bacchae*. Here I would like to add a fifth facet to Henrichs' typology of Dionysus' already multifaceted identity and role: monster.

Monster studies, a burgeoning field of interdisciplinary academic study, endeavors to elicit cultural and symbolic significance from a variety of monster stories and characters, from *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* to *Alien* and *The*

Walking Dead. Suspending our claims to the ontological reality of monsters, monster studies attempts to decipher the cultural *meaning* of our literary, religious, mythological, and historical monsters. Most scholars and practitioners in this field agree on a provisional definition of a monster, the etymological one. A monster is commonly understood as a warning sign, a portent, an omen—in short, a particular form of communication. Dionysus fits all of these descriptions, and then some. The *Bacchae* abounds in prophetic speech and ominous warnings, usually addressed to Pentheus in particular or Thebes in general. If they continue this course of action, then a particularly unpleasant consequence awaits them. A groundbreaking contribution to the field of monster studies is “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)” by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen.²² Here Cohen enumerates seven claims about monsters. I will briefly identify each of these assertions, and demonstrate a case for *Bacchae*’s inclusion in the canon of classical monster studies.

Thesis 1: The Monster’s Body is a Cultural Body. The monster exists as a sign needing to be read, interpreted, understood, and heeded. Cohen writes, “The monster’s body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy, giving them life and an uncanny independence.”²³ As a *monstrum*, Dionysus both is a warning—and declares a number of warnings to the people of Thebes. These warnings, or prophecies, can be interpreted in various ways, and then adhered to or rejected; however, positive or negative consequences would attend these respective decisions.

Continuing with the idea of a monster as a warning sign, a number of characters issue prophecies to Pentheus, warning him against his current course of action. He ignorantly and arrogantly neglects or misses each of them. Like many tragic figures in ancient Greek drama, Pentheus’s major flaw is *hubris*. Audiences are invited critically to consider our own personal and communal hubris. An element of the human condition that connects hubris to ambivalence is our susceptibility to pain, to being hurt. In this regard, philosopher Stephen T. Asma writes, “The monster concept is ... extremely useful, and it’s a permanent player in the moral imagination because human vulnerability is permanent.”²⁴ Monsters such as Dionysus remind us of our mortality and finitude; moreover, they also bring us back to our sense of our essential vulnerability and precariousness. On the one hand, monsters thus serve a conservative role, warning us of the dangers of trying to be more than human. On the other hand, monsters also warn the powers-that-be that they are creating and fomenting resistance to the status quo. Inhumane systems create monsters that then fight back and resist complete domination. Monsters thus serve a double warning, both to the powerless and to the powerful.

Thesis 2: The Monster Always Escapes. It is quite likely that the reader of this essay is already able to recall a famous monster from film or from a novel who always evades capture, questioning, imprisonment, or death. Many mon-

sters have supernatural abilities that allow them easy maneuverability through space and time. They are often encountered in this world, but they are not necessarily of it. The myth of Dionysus, prior to the events that transpire in *Bacchae*, already includes an intriguing tale of escape. After he impregnated Semélê, Zeus' wife Hera was understandably upset. In an act of vengeance, she had Zeus kill Semélê with a thunderbolt; however, before she died, Zeus saved his unborn son and stitched him into his thigh. Thus Dionysus was twice born, having escaped death before birth. In *Bacchae*, when Pentheus has jailed the Stranger, and thinks that he has been immobilized, Dionysus easily escapes. It is quiet likely the case that Dionysus allowed himself to be captured simply for the sake of engaging in conversation with the new king Pentheus. The adversaries needed an opportunity to size one another up.

Thesis 3: The Monster is the Harbinger of Category Crisis. Following up on his third thesis, Cohen adds, "The monster always escapes because it refuses easy categorization."²⁵ Dionysus refuses to participate in the classificatory 'order of things.' One of the principal reasons why monsters like Dionysus are so frightening is because they cause us epistemological and metaphysical confusion, demanding "a radical rethinking of boundary and normality."²⁶ In addition, as a warning sign, Dionysus' appearance in Thebes announces a crisis that is already underway.

Thesis 4: The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference. As observed above, Dionysus is a master of disguise and champion of boundary blurring. He exists at the intersections of human and divine, human and animal, masculine and feminine, comic and tragic, urban and rural, mild and wild, and so on. Philosopher and film theorist Noël Carroll coined the term "category-jamming" to describe the experience of being unable to situate one's experience with one's conceptual schema.²⁷ These conceptual schemata present us with diametrically opposed, yet coexisting, realities. This produces an unusual effect in their observers. In other words, monsters both excite and frighten us, sometimes in equal proportion and at the very same moment, because they force us out of ourselves and into uncharted territories.

Thesis 5: The Monster Polices the Borders of the Possible. As can be seen in the discussion above of Dionysus as Stranger-within, the monster signals the alterity-within-sameness that is not only confusing, but produces a sensation of ambivalence, of feelings rent asunder. Dionysus is the monster who identifies and excavates the inner monstrosity of Thebes, in particular its young king Pentheus. He turns Pentheus' weaknesses against him. Cohen writes:

The monster prevents mobility (intellectual, geographic, or sexual), delimiting the social spaces through which private bodies may move. To step outside this official geography is to risk attack by some monstrous border patrol or (worse) to become monstrous oneself.²⁸

Within a relatively short time span, Dionysus is able to turn the women of Thebes insane, drive Pentheus into madness, and orchestrate the ritual sacrifice of Pentheus. The monster is able to turn others into monsters, usually without much effort expended. Dionysus has the Theban Bacchae do his dirty business for him, making the tragic scapegoating and murder of Pentheus even more horrifying. The monster as such is able to identify and expose our vulnerable undersides, showing us things that we would rather not see. Thus, they are a double of ourselves. Cohen continues, "The monster is transgressive, too sexual, perversely erotic, a lawbreaker; and so the monster and all that it embodies must be exiled or destroyed. The repressed, however, like Freud himself, always seems to return."²⁹ Euripides' main character in *Bacchae* fits all of these descriptions. However, as a god, Dionysus only departs Thebes on his terms, after his plan is seen through to its tragic conclusion.

Thesis 6: Fear of the Monster is Really a Kind of Desire. "The monster also attracts," adds Cohen.³⁰ Joyce Carol Oates concurs: "Something in us wants to be seduced, violated, transformed. ... Do Bluebeard's wives - do Dracula's victims *want* to be violated? ... No—but yes."³¹ Much of the story of Dionysus is similar to the folktale of the Pied Piper of Hamelin, who famously draws away the town's children after the townspeople refused to compensate his labor for drawing away the town's rat population. The tune that solicits the vermin is also able to entice the innocent. Monsters are notorious for being simultaneously able to disgust and attract; they are both forbidden and desirable. We don't want to watch, so we cover our faces, yet we cannot resist peeking through our fingers. Near the end of Pentheus' life, Dionysus capitalizes on the young king's double-curiosity (1) about the exploits of the women on Mt. Kithairôn, as well as (2) his unacknowledged sexual attraction to Dionysus himself.

Thesis 7: The Monster Stands at the Threshold ... of Becoming. Cohen argues, "Monsters are our children."³² Dionysus appeared in his homeland, Thebes, at a particular moment, and his divine intervention signals a prophetic warning against religious impiety and a certain kind of tyrannical social order. On one hand, Dionysus is the son of Semélê and Zeus. On the other hand, the city-state Thebes created Dionysus, and he came home to set the record straight. Semélê's sisters' incredulity, coupled with Pentheus' religious resistance, provoked Dionysus' destructive and monstrous capabilities. As a stranger, god, and monster, Dionysus, amongst other monsters, forces audiences to reassess "our cultural assumptions about ... our perception of difference, our tolerance toward its expression. They ask us why we have created them."³³

One further comment about monsters is in order. In *Of Divine Warning*, Jane Anna Gordon and Lewis R. Gordon remind readers that monsters such as Victor Frankenstein's creature and modern Hollywood zombies give audiences the opportunity critically to reassess their own perspectives on normality. What we perceive as normal or acceptable are inextricably bound to our

spatial and temporal—and personal—circumstances. Texts such as *Bacchae* insist that we identify these limitations and expand our scope of vision. Gordon and Gordon write, “One response to the relegation of entire categories of people ... to the realm of the monstrous is to criticize the very idea and maintenance of a particular set of features and qualities that constitute both what is normative and normal.”³⁴ As a monster, Dionysus offers Thebans and contemporary audiences the unique opportunity to allow us to reflect on our own conceptual schemata and prejudices about morality, divinity, natural and social law, and what sort of society we want. How did Thebans—from Cadmus and Agavê to Actaeon and Pentheus—create Dionysus, refuse to heed his numerous warnings, and unleash this divine monstrosity upon themselves?

6. CONCLUSION: “ ... THAT IS HOW THIS MATTER ENDED” (*BACCHAE* 1392)³⁵

In the words of Albert Henrichs, “No other [ancient] Greek god [than Dionysus] has created more confusion in the modern mind, nor produced a wider spectrum of different and often contradictory interpretations.”³⁶ Creating this situation of scholarly ambivalence and contestation was, it seems to me, quite intentional on the part of the playwright Euripides, and indeed speaks to a deeper sense of our existential ambiguity, our monstrous strangeness to ourselves. When I teach *Bacchae* in literature, college writing, or philosophy courses, students often report experiencing palpable feelings of discomfort with the narrative. It’s not that the story was intellectually confusing or frustrating. The impact is of the affective sort. The vivid description of the violent murder of Pentheus often makes audiences feel ill. With Nietzsche and Freud, we can see that *Bacchae* is able to undercut the level of rationality to which we have become accustomed, and forces us to face our deepest and oft-neglected desires and fears.

I take issue with Henrichs’s Nietzschean interpretation that Dionysus is the ancient Greek god-man “who has experienced the suffering of the human condition and who overcomes it by embracing it.”³⁷ On my view, Dionysus does not overcome the human condition and its attendant suffering; rather, he maintains a contested, ambivalent relationship with it. Here I am in agreement with René Girard, who writes, “In the collective experience of the monstrous double the differences are not eliminated, but muddied and confused.”³⁸ It is not simply a matter of overcoming suffering; it is a matter of embracing and dealing with the messiness and vagaries of life.

Ambivalence indeed produces feelings of discomfort, ones that we would prefer to transcend. However, this is not possible in reality. Dionysus confronts and absorbs the traditionally understood oppositions and bifurcations that would otherwise tear us apart, and he lives with them. Keeping these tensions intact and allowing the suspense to remain make the tragic drama exciting and rewarding upon numerous reinterpretations.³⁹ Dionysus is simultaneously—and

ambivalently—stranger, god, and monster. Like Pentheus, he is “wonderful and terrible.”⁴⁰ And so are we. The *Bacchae*, following Woodruff’s commentary, presents tragic truths and ambivalent realities that represent, provoke, and elicit unresolved tensions in the drama of human life.⁴¹

What makes *Bacchae* good reading is that it is able to rend our prejudices wide open, such that we are forced to critically reassess our perspectives, our prejudices, our attitudes, and our behaviors. My insistence on *Bacchae*’s ambivalence suggests that Dionysus, as the character who cuts across the divide that opposes protagonist to antagonist, shows Thebans and us who we really are. And we often are made uncomfortable with this picture of ourselves. But this discomfort need not have the last word. Unlike Pentheus and the impious citizens of Thebes, we are able to change, to grow, to mature. *Bacchae* is ambivalent to the core, and so are we.

NOTES

¹ For readers perhaps neither acquainted nor recently familiar with this brilliant work for the stage from ancient Greece, there are several excellent on-line plot summaries: YouTube.com has a few professors speaking briefly and insightfully about the play’s interpretation (“Euripides: The Bacchae—Summary and Analysis” and “Euripides’ Bacchae” are recommended.) There are also several performances of the entire drama that are worth watching. Additionally, and of course, a Google search will yield hundreds of pages of interpretation, commentary, analysis, and assessment of the work’s literary and cultural significance. (Ed.)

² The primary version of *Bacchae* to which I will refer is: Euripides, *Bacchae*, trans. Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett), 1998. I indicate direct quotations from Woodruff’s translation with the line number. For comparative purposes, I will also occasionally make reference to Stephen Esposito, ed., *Euripides: Medea, Hippolytus, Heracles, Bacchae* (Newburyport, MA: Focus Classical Library, 2004).

³ The interpretation to which my argument is most close is that of Albert Henrichs, “Loss of Self, Suffering, Violence: The Modern View of Dionysus from Nietzsche to Girard,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 88 (1984): 205-240. I am in agreement with Henrichs’ observation: “Virtually everybody who has an informed opinion on the subject [of Dionysus] seems to concede that a balanced and unified view of Dionysus and his place in history is not only difficult to achieve but is essentially incompatible with the complexity of the god and with his disparate manifestations. Dionysus invites controversy because he lacks a clear-cut identity. ... In short, Dionysus defies definition” (209). While many interpreters seek to think their way through these “disparate manifestations,” seeking to locate a ‘true’ identity or singular moral of *Bacchae*, it takes a certain level of self-awareness to become acclimated with, and make room for, uncomfortable ambivalence and ambiguity. Not-knowing, while producing feelings of uneasiness and discomfort, need not be destructive or debilitating. Like the character of the Joker from *The Dark Knight* (2008) brilliantly performed by Heath Ledger, Dionysus’ lack of a singular or identifiable purpose (*telos*) or identity does not bother him, yet they aggravate and confound their adversaries. While certainly tragic and tormented figures, the Joker and Dionysus seem to have found comfort in that ambivalent dimension of reality.

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Carol Diethe, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 87.

⁵ Throughout the *Bacchae*, Dionysus is called the Stranger or foreigner (441, 800, 1059, 1063, 1077), Bacchus (68, 77, 145, 195, 225, 357, 366, 606, 608, 623, 633, 727, 864, 998, 1020, 1089, 1124, 1144, 1153, 1189), Iacchus (725), Evius, Bromius (88, 141), Dithyrambus (526), a bull (100, 618, 920), and the Thunderer (66, 85, 115, 375, 412, 536, 546, 584, 593, 629, 1249).

⁶ Paul Woodruff, trans., *Bacchae* (Indianapolis: Hackett), 1998, xxxiv.

⁷ Woodruff, *Bacchae*, xl-xli.

⁸ In this essay, I am deploying the concept ambivalence in its etymological sense of one experiencing simultaneous conflicting, yet equally strong feelings.

⁹ Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (New York: Routledge, 2003). I am particularly interested in the way that Kearney appropriates the work of Julia Kristeva, particularly *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

- ¹⁰ Timothy K. Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 4; cf. 194.
- ¹¹ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin, 2003). See also Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2003).
- ¹² On the notion of a self as “dividual,” see Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (New York: Verso, 2008): 38-68. In *The Faith of the Faithless*, Critchley expounds, “[T]he self which shapes itself in relation to the experience of an overwhelming, infinite demand that divides it from itself” (New York: Verso, 2012: 6-7).
- ¹³ Kearney, 20. Kearney continues, “In [a] sense we may say that monsters are our Others par excellence. Without them we know not what we are. With them we are not what we know” (117).
- ¹⁴ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 165.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ Euripides, *Bacchae*, 1347-1348.
- ¹⁷ Tamora Pierce, *Trickster’s Queen* (New York: Random House, 2005), 349.
- ¹⁸ Euripides, *Bacchae*, 1388-1392.
- ¹⁹ Beal, 6. Beal continues, “The monster is often both demonized and deified, revealing a deep sense of ambivalence about the relation between the monstrous and the divine, and intensifying the sense of paradox” (2002: 6).
- ²⁰ Timothy K. Beal, “Our Monsters, Ourselves,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 9, 2001, accessed 02 January 2016, <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v48/i11/11b01801.htm>. See also Jane Anna Gordon and Lewis R. Gordon, *Of Divine Warning: Reading Disaster in the Modern Age* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2009): “In our aversion to addressing disasters as signs and our mythopoetic understanding of them as falling stars or monsters as divine warnings, we actively create monsters and enemies and thereby maintain moments of hysteria, refusing actually to interpret and take responsibility for the kinds of collective response that may be needed to alleviate human misery” (19).
- ²¹ Albert Henrichs, “Loss of Self, Suffering, Violence: The Modern View of Dionysus from Nietzsche to Girard,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 88 (1984): 205-240, 205.
- ²² Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 3-25. Cohen’s seminal chapter is by no means the only attempt at a programmatic statement on monster studies. See also Allen Weiss, “Ten Theses on Monsters and Monstrosity,” *The Drama Review* 48:1 (Spring 2014): 124-125; and China Miéville, “Theses on Monsters,” *Conjunctions* 59 (Fall 2012), accessed 02 January 2016, <http://www.conjunctions.com/archives/c59-cm.htm>.
- ²³ Cohen, 4. See also Timothy K. Beal: “... the monster often appears as an index of all that a particular culture projects as beyond the pale” (2002: 103).
- ²⁴ Stephen T. Asma, “Monsters and the Moral Imagination,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 25, 2009, accessed 02 January 2016 <http://chronicle.com/article/Monstersthe-Moral/48886/>.
- ²⁵ Cohen, “Monster Culture,” 6.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*
- ²⁷ See Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror; Or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
- ²⁸ Cohen, “Monster Culture,” 12.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*
- ³¹ Joyce Carol Oates, “The Aesthetics of Fear,” *Salmagundi* 120 (Fall 1998): 179-180.
- ³² Cohen, “Monster Culture,” 20.
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ Gordon and Gordon, *Of Divine Warning*, 70.
- ³⁵ Stephen Esposito translates the final line of *Bacchae* in this way: “Such was the outcome of this story” (1392). Whichever translation is preferred, the lack of a clear moral or satisfactory conclusion, or sense of closure, is painfully present in these non-ominous words.
- ³⁶ Henrichs, “Loss of Self,” 240.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 220.
- ³⁸ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 161. Girard continues, “All the doubles are interchangeable, although their basic similarity is never formally acknowledged. They thus occupy the equivocal middle ground between difference and unity that is indispensable [sic] to the process of sacrificial substitution – to the polarization of violence onto a single victim who substitutes for all the others. The monstrous double gives the antagonists, incapable of perceiving that nothing actually stands between them (or their reconciliation), precisely what they need to arrive at the compromise that involves unanimity minus the victim of the generative expulsion” (161). I have deployed Girard’s concept of the monstrous double as a methodological and explanatory tool in “‘All of This ... Has Got Something to Do with a Girl Named Marla Singer’: *Fight Club* as a Romantic Tragedy,” *Listening: Journal of Religion and Culture* 44:3 (Fall 2009): 180-197, and consider the present essay as a continuation of that one. The points of intersection between Dionysus / Tyler Durden (*Fight Club*), and Pentheus / unnamed Narrator are both numerous and instructive.

³⁹ In this light, Henrichs writes, “Greek tragedy is ... an artistic representation of the true reality of existence” (223).

⁴⁰ Euripides, *Bacchae*, 971.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, xxxiv.