

# Challenging Traditional Ways of Thinking: an Examination of the Role of Dichotomous Social Boundaries in a Greek Tragedy

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## Abstract

Greek Tragedies are uniquely suited to serve as stimuli for intellectual thought and cultural reflection. This essay examines THE BACCHAE in an effort to understand how traditional ways of thinking are challenged. Dichotomous social boundaries are explored in an effort to shed light on the challenges and benefits associated with progressive social change. Ultimately, reflecting on THE BACCHAE allows us to improve the understanding of ourselves and humanity.

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## *Index terms—*

## 1 Introduction

The tragedy begins as Dionysus returns to Thebes. He is disguised as a human and accompanied by an entourage of followers. Theban law forbids the worship of Dionysus. However, his arrival causes women to fall into a trance and flee to a mountain where they begin worshiping him. Pentheus, the ruler of Thebes, feels threatened by the women's behavior. He "is enraged at the worship of Dionysus and forbids it, but he cannot stop the women, including his mother Agave, or even the elder statesmen of the kingdom from swarming to the wilds to join the Maenads (a term given to women under the ecstatic spell of Dionysus) in worship." ??Gross and Grote 1) Still in disguise, Dionysus allows himself to be arrested. Pentheus confronts Dionysus, attempts to torture him, and threatens to cut off his "girlish curls." ??Euripides 214) However, Dionysus used his divine powers to evade torture by transforming himself into a bull and causing an earthquake. Pentheus is shaken by the experience and says "this is mortifying. That stranger, that man I clapped in irons, has escaped." ??Euripides 222) He becomes interested in what Dionysus has to say. Dionysus wants Pentheus to allow the people of Thebes to worship him, but Pentheus refuses to allow such worship. A farmer arrives and describes seeing the women on the mountain. The farmer described seeing erotic encounters, euphoric dancing, and feasting. He described a "mythical union with nature, as they suckle wild young animals and streams of various liquids flow forth." (MacLeod 1) The farmer said when the women noticed him, they became violent, chased him away, and tore his farm animals apart with their bare hands. Pentheus becomes interested in the farmer's story and Dionysus offers Pentheus an opportunity to see the women noting "You will find all the ambush you deserve, creeping up to spy on the Maenads." (Euripides 237) Pentheus agreed and dressed as a woman to disguise his masculinity. Dionysus escorts Pentheus to the mountain and calls for the women to kill him. They swarm around Pentheus in a state of frenzy. "One tore off an arm, another a foot and still warm in its shoe. His ribs were clawed clean of flesh and every hand was smeared with blood as they played ball with the scraps of Pentheus's body." ??Euripides 244) The tragedy makes numerous references to dichotomies. For example, actions occur in the city and in the wild. Conflict occurs between man and God. Tension escalates between the male and female characters. Dionysus has been described as being "man's benefactor and he was man's destroyer." ??Hamilton 72) Dionysus uses his disguise to penetrate the social order of mankind without first exposing himself as a god. He diffused the dichotomy between man and god by behaving as a man. His peculiar nature and appearance puts him in a class of his own. He had "long yellow curls smelling of perfumes, with flushed cheeks and the spells of Aphrodite in his eyes." (Euripides 204) He cannot be described as being totally masculine or feminine. His character blurs the traditional dichotomies

of god/man and masculine/feminine. The play exposes these dichotomies in an effort to show how conventional ways of thinking are challenged.

The Bacchae is a Greek Tragedy written more than two thousand years ago by Euripides. The story describes the appearance of a new god known as Dionysus. He "was the god of wine, agriculture, and fertility." (Gross and Grote 2007) His actions and appearance were controversial. "He was the center of profuse and contradictory legends; he became one of the most important of the Greek gods and was associated with various religious cults." (Liberman 45) The actions of Dionysus and other characters challenge social conventions. Their actions reveal how humanity can make progress by exposing and overcoming dichotomous social boundaries. "Human/divine, male/ female, adult/child, free/slave, citizen/non-citizen, Athenian Greek /non-Athenian Greek, and Greek/ barbarian are the most significant boundaries negotiated by tragedy." (Hall 96) Pentheus, the king of Thebes, was compelled to restore order to his city when the women became involved in Dionysian activities which took place in the wild. Civil society and the women's wild actions were dichotomous types of social behavior. Pentheus felt threatened by the wild Dionysian actions and resolved to "stop this obscene disorder." (Euripides 204) His staunch resistance to the Dionysian world leads to his death. The perceived threat stemmed from the wives' promiscuous and erotic sexual behavior in the wild. The women were sexually active with multiple male partners. The potential for impregnation from a source other than their husbands was a source of social conflict. Such an event would devastate the Greek family because it was critical, within their culture, to preserve the pure family lineage and the husband's name. (Parada 1) Thus, another dichotomy is observed in this story. The notion of civilized behavior and social stability is challenged by the opposite notion of animal behavior and social degeneration. Dichotomous social behavior was manifested through the actions of wild behavior, in the case of the women, and civic duty, in the case of Pentheus. This is a conflict of social boundaries. These boundaries demonstrate that humanity is plagued by an inner psychological conflict. Dionysus asked Pentheus if he would like to see the women. Pentheus replied "I would pay a great sum to see that sight." (Euripides 230) This reply is of particular interest considering the women's activities were strictly unacceptable given their social expectations. Moreover, it would have been inappropriate for Pentheus to view such activity. However, he still wanted to see the forbidden actions. His traditional way of thinking was challenged and his behavior changed. Socially, Pentheus was expected to behave with restraint. Naturally, he wanted to view the sexual acts. Thus, a conflict existed between what was natural and what was socially acceptable. The Dionysian antagonism served to challenge the traditional ways of thinking by exposing the conflict between dichotomous social behaviors.

Friedrich Nietzsche, a prominent philosopher and classical philologist, is regarded as one of the foremost writers who addressed the social implications of Dionysian activities. "Since Nietzsche published *The Birth of Tragedy* in 1872 Dionysus has been the dominant Greek deity in the imaginations of scholars." (Easterling 36) Nietzsche believed the dichotomy between "state and society, indeed all divisions between one human being and another, give way to an overwhelming feeling of unity which leads men back to the heart of nature." (39) Pentheus rejected the Dionysian actions because of his strict adherence to civic life. He thought his kingdom was "disgraced, humiliated in the eyes of Hellas." (Euripides 228) He was wrapped up in a dichotomous view to the extent that he failed to compromise. He failed to accept a natural form of behavior and he did not allow his subjects to worship Dionysus because the actions stood in contrast to his rational ideals. Philosophers have argued that engaging in the irrational Dionysian action can "enrich man's apprehension of life by expanding it beyond the rational to its fuller dimensions." (Irrationalism 1) Costea, Crump, and Holm maintain the Dionysian acts were "a triumph of emancipation and self-assertion. In this sense, it no longer seems to mark a split between the purely 'rational' and the 'irrational': it is both in an original fusion." (150) The play seeks this type of fusion in an effort to unify social boundaries. For example, Dionysus sought unity between what was civil and what was wild because he wanted the Theban citizens to freely worship him. Dionysus wanted a state "which destroys the usual barriers and limits of existence" (Nietzsche 129) Humanity has become accustomed to dichotomous social relationships. Confusion and intolerance can be created when these relationships are challenged. This confusion was intentionally brokered by Dionysus when he was disguised as a man with a feminine appearance. Intolerance was manifested when Pentheus refused to allow his citizens to worship Dionysus. These types of situations can be beneficial to humanity because they force us to reconsider and redefine our social boundaries. Costea, Crump, and Holm describe the Dionysian experience as a "destruction of boundaries." (1) Sometimes this type of destruction is necessary for humanity to make progress. Stated differently, people grow when they break free from dichotomous social boundaries.

Greek tragedy says something about the nature and scope of humanity, tragedy is a reflection of the challenges in life. Mankind's psychological struggle to contain natural impulse is presented via the notions of sexual activity and wild behavior presented within the play. Religious dichotomies are also addressed via the conflict between God and Man. The issues presented within the text address ideas regarding the way mankind deals with social behaviors related to gender, nature, and religion. These issues, and the dichotomous they create, form social boundaries. The play seeks to shatter such dichotomies in an effort to challenge conventional ways of thinking.

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Figure 1:



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