

## (Re)making *The Bacchae* : Euripides and Charles Mee

Elena Delliou, Christos Tsarouchidis

Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece

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### Abstract

This paper will co-examine Euripides' ancient tragedy *The Bacchae* and Charles Mee's modern (re)making, *The Bacchae 2.1*. Mee – who is constantly inspired by the Greeks and repeatedly states that “there is no such thing as an original play” – keeps the myth and characters of the classic drama virtually unchanged, leaving their words to express the differences. Although the lines of Euripides are often repeated verbatim, they are uttered in a different context and setting, with pieces of the modern world invading the ancient text, in an attempt to show the individual's pain and suffering. In both plays, the different boundaries with which people attempt to gain control of the world around them are challenged and eventually shattered. In contrast to Euripides' world, however, where harmony is – even briefly – a possibility, Mee's is vulgar and bizarre, explicitly violent and sexually obscene; shaped by the prevalent culture rather than the deities to whom the ancients believed, the modern playwright's heroes stand alone in their effort to survive and find meaning. It is the aim of this paper to show how both playwrights place the question of social and personal identity – through the contrast between private and public realms – at the heart of their works, how they repeatedly point out the dangers of state politics interfering with the freedom and beliefs of its citizens and create plays about the challenge of authority. Common themes to be examined include violence, abuse of power, denial of responsibility, self-delusion and awareness, subconscious drives and suppressed behavior, miscommunication.

*Keywords:* The Bacchae, ancient Greek myths, Charles Mee, violence

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*The Bacchae*, Euripides' last play, has enjoyed a great deal of attention in the last fifty years. Since the 1960s—a time of severe tensions between the US government and opponents of the Vietnam War—it has been analyzed in detail and staged frequently.<sup>1</sup> Often employed as an example of social and political protest, it has proven a source of inspiration for theatre artists, like the contemporary American playwright Charles Mee. Remaining true to Euripides' fundamental questions regarding freedom of expression, personal choice and responsibility, and women's rights—among others—but also expressing his own concerns, Mee has re-created this 5<sup>th</sup>-century tragedy in a way that enables him to draw a picture and describe problems of the modern world.

While one of the most inspiring tragic poets in modern times, Euripides was not particularly popular in his time. His unpopularity is evident from the rarity of his victories at the Dionysian Rites, the frequency of jibes at his tragedies, the travesties of his person on the comic stage and his eventual withdraw from Athens to Macedonia (Knox 317). Some of the most frequent accusations against the poet were those associated with cases of impiety and atheism, and he was repeatedly accused of misogyny—the main subject of Aristophanes' comedy, *Thesmophoriazousae*.

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<sup>1</sup> Analysis of different productions can be found in McDonald's *Ancient Sun, Modern Light, The Living Art of Greek Tragedy* and Zeitlin's *Dionysus Since 69*.

Although politics lies at the core of his plays, Euripides refrained from taking any public office, and distanced himself from the official state (Fragoulis 10). Unable to endure what he perceived as the decline of the institution of the “polis,”<sup>2</sup> enraged by Athens and its citizens, he saw self-exile as the only solution and fled to the court of the Macedonian king Archelaus, where he eventually died in 406 BC.<sup>3</sup> Despite his own flight, however, he constantly presents in his plays people who are forced to confront moral, religious or political crises (Thumiger 213). Though both Euripides’ and Mee’s plays are not overtly political statements, they are inherently political; as they merge the personal and the political in their exploration of human interactions. In Mee’s own words:

those who don’t understand that the present moment is shaped by the larger forces of history—by the forces of politics and economics and gender, by all constituents of culture—are doomed to stumble forever in darkness, never to understand how their lives are shaped in the most intimate and thoroughgoing ways by these larger forces of society that creates them as social beings.<sup>4</sup> (“Forces” 25)

Because of the innovative ideas they expressed, Euripides’ plays were rendered universal and timeless.<sup>5</sup> His intellectual and political radicalism was also accompanied by aesthetic innovation, and he was often accused of and parodied for bringing “low” characters on stage (Sorkin 13), presenting them as unstable both in their intentions and their decisions. Moreover, Euripides “attributes to his heroes hatred and selfishness, pettiness and tawdry motivations, repeatedly surrounding them with questionable heroism and disputable generosity” (Fragoulis 19)—a fact also recognized by his peers.<sup>6</sup> These weaknesses and flaws make the characters much more believable, sympathetic and relatable for a modern audience, while their plight to survive and find their place in the world have made them a source of inspiration not only for Euripides’ contemporaries but for modern creators as well. Mee appears to stand in the same tradition when he states that “the dispossessed aren’t being truly represented [...] history is created from the bottom up, not from the top down” (“The Theatre of History” 72).

*The Bacchae* is a tragedy that—while dramatizing the Dionysian wrath—explores and exposes the dark and absurd side of human psychology.<sup>7</sup> Euripides’ choice to write a play dominated by a deity invites multiple interpretations, but probably relates to the playwright’s desire to rationally contemplate the introduction of new ideas that have the potential to significantly change the established social and political order. A pupil of leading sophists

<sup>2</sup> It was towards the end of the Peloponnesian war (431-404 BC) which Athens eventually lost. Immediately afterwards, the Thirty Tyrants – an oligarchy – were appointed in Athens by Sparta.

<sup>3</sup> *The Bacchae* and *Iphigenia in Aulis* were performed a year after the poet’s death and won him two posthumous awards.

<sup>4</sup> Mee also adds that “exploitative and brutal public behavior can’t just be shut off inside some realm that doesn’t touch people in their personal lives” (qt. in Blumenthal).

<sup>5</sup> According to Leinieck, Euripides struggled to extend concepts basic to Athenian political thought – like freedom and unity – to everyone, including those the Greeks regarded as barbarians (348-49). Leinieck also identifies in Euripides three principles of the Dionysiac religion which are important political concepts: liberation, universality and unity. See also Thumiger 155-57.

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle in his *Poetics* quotes Sophocles stating that “while Euripides portrayed men as they actually are, he himself portrayed them as they ought to be” (51).

<sup>7</sup> More on Euripides’ knowledge of psychology in Knox and in Lesky.

such as Protagoras and Prodicus – whose famous dictum was that “man is the measure of all things”—the poet continuously attacks the gods and the traditional faith and endorses the sophists’ view that anything that concerns human existence should become the subject of rational debate (Lesky 134).

The play opens with a monologue delivered by Dionysus. It is not the first time that a god is chosen for such a role; in *Hippolytus*, for example, Aphrodite resumes a similar role, underlining the divine nature of the speaker. The difference between *The Bacchae* and other ancient tragedies lies in the fact that the god does not disappear from the on stage action; Dionysus continues to have an active role in the development of the play, resuming a human form. Enraged gods who wreak havoc and seek revenge from those who disrespect them is a frequent theme in the tragedies of Euripides,<sup>8</sup> and in the preface of the ancient *Bacchae*, Dionysus announces the humiliations he has suffered from the Thebans and presents his vengeful plan. In the classical play, however, he stresses the fact that he is a god, because it is something that the audience should never forget: “Here I stand, a god incognito, disguised as man,” and later “I have laid my deity aside and go disguised as man” (*Bacchae* 4, 53-54).<sup>9</sup>

Mee, on the other hand, does not focus on the divine nature of Dionysus or the introduction of a new religion—both major themes in Euripides. In the modern remaking, the god is the bearer of change and innovation, since his nature enables him to become the playwrights’ vehicle to challenge dominant beliefs and practices, and transcend boundaries.

Dionysus is a union of seemingly uncompromising oppositions: he is both male and female, he is gentle and cruel, he brings life and death. His status is “luminal,” writes Segal, “his place is between—between truth and delusion, sanity and madness, divinity and bestiality, civilization and the wild, order and chaos” (156). Defying and surpassing fixed categories, Dionysus is simultaneously familiar and foreign; only a partial partaker of any individual’s experience, he represents both the Self and the Other.

Mee’s world is man-made and his work is based on his belief that human beings are defined by history and the culture they find themselves in; hence, “there is no such thing as an original play” (“Remaking Project”); the distinction between original and appropriated work is problematic:

Sometimes some of us write about our innermost lives, believing that, then, we have written something truly original and unique. But, of course, the culture writes us first, and then we write our stories [...] whether we mean to or not, the work we do is both received and created, both an adaptation and an original, at the same time. We re-make things as we go. (“The Remaking Project”)

Freely available to the public through his website,<sup>10</sup> Charles Mee’s plays are a “collision of cultural references” (Blankership), often described as collages.<sup>11</sup> Disparate, pre-existing

<sup>8</sup> In the same tradition as Dionysus in *Bacchae*, stand Aphrodite in *Hippolytus* and Athena in *Troades*. See, Knox (318-25) for a detailed analysis on the gods in Euripides, their human characteristics and their resemblance to the Homeric gods.

<sup>9</sup> For extracts taken from the ancient play, the numbers refer to lines in the text.

<sup>10</sup> In his website, dubbed “the (re)making project,” Mee also encourages other creators to take his plays and re-create them/re-make them again and make it their own: “Pillage the plays as I have pillaged the plays of Euripides and Brecht and stuff out of the Soap Opera Digest and the evening news and the internet, and build your own, entirely new piece— and then please, put your own name to the work that results.”

texts are appropriated and integrated with a variety of other influences and sources, transformed into new creations that enable the playwright to describe and define the world. Mee starts with a story that the audience already knows, and makes the familiar *new* and *relevant*, recasting the same elements in a different light (“Shattered” 83) so that they reflect modern-day concerns. Constantly inspired by the Greek classics<sup>12</sup> and especially Euripides, it is in these plays where his method is more evident. Every modern work is different in fidelity and proximity to the ancient one, but Mee’s main concern is not to pay any special attention to the myth itself, as to give the connections between the ancient plot and current social and political issues; to comment on what is happening today:

I like to take a Greek play, smash it to ruins, and then, atop its ruined structure of plot and character, write a new play, with all—new language, characters of today speaking like people of today, set in the America of my time—so that America today lies, as it were, in a bed of ancient ruins. (*Normal Life* 214)

The storyline of *Bacchae* 2.1<sup>13</sup> closely follows that of the classic play, with myth and heroes remaining—for the most part—unchanged. Euripides’ verses are in many cases transferred verbatim, but are also mixed with a variety of sources<sup>14</sup> and uttered in a completely different context and setting. Within the play’s basic structure, Mee adds layers of emotion and complexity that go beyond the original tale (Bacalzo), while his play contains far more violence and sexual references than even suggested in the ancient text. Mee’s play premiered in 1993, with the American playwright railing against war and violence—identified as agents that have distorted human nature—pointing out how political practices and governmental policies compromise personal moral values and the citizens’ freedom. Much more than Euripides did before him, Mee urges towards commitment to plurality and explores issues of social and personal identity, focusing on gender relations, natural drives and suppressed behavior, as well as the animalistic qualities in humans.

In the modern play, Dionysus appears onstage as “a transvestite in a white pleated linen skirt, combat boots, a cut-off woman’s nylon stocking on his head” (*Bacchae* 2.1)<sup>15</sup> and, thus, is immediately identified as different; he is here to bring change and, to attain his goal, he is prepared to challenge established norms. Constantly on stage, his *Bacchae* are a chorus of “3<sup>rd</sup> world” exotic women that emphasize their cultural contribution and uniqueness.

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<sup>11</sup> As Mee himself explains, “Max Ernst is the originator of the modern collage. What Ernst did, in effect, is what I’m saying I’d like to do: he took scissors and he cut texts out of daily newspapers and catalogues of other things, and then he rearranged them on a page and glued them down and did a little drawing and painting around them to make them into his view of something. So, in effect, he took the unedited material of the real world and rendered it as hallucination. And that’s what I think I’m doing all the time. I think Max Ernst is my dramaturg” (“Shattered” 87).

<sup>12</sup> There are seven complete plays and two fragmentary, written between 1992 and 2008. Complete plays: *Orestes* 2.0, *Bacchae* 2.1, *Agamemnon* 2.0, *Trojan Women: A Love Story*, *Big Love*, *True Love*, *Iphigenia* 2.0. Fragments: *Requiem for the Dead*, *Gone*.

<sup>13</sup> “2.1” appears like an improved version of computer or mobile software and Mee has numbered many of the plays drawn from tragedies likewise.

<sup>14</sup> In his notes on the text, Mee names some of his sources: “It is been based on, or taken in part from, among others, Euripides, Georges Bataille, Klaus Theweleit, Wilhelm Stekel, “insane”; texts from the Prinzhorn Collection in Heidelberg, Valerie Solanas’s SCUM Manifesto, Joan Nestle’s *Femme-Butch* texts, Pat Califia, Jeanne Cordova, Barbara Duden, Mary Maclane, Aimable Jayet, Sei Shonagon” *Bacchae* 2.1.

<sup>15</sup> Quotes from the play are taken from Charles Mee’s website, and there are no page numbers available.

Identified as “Dionysian artists,” they “bring something profoundly different, alien into the world of this piece—deep passions from origins unknown to the world of the play” (*Bacchae* 2.1).

In direct contrast to Dionysus and his followers, in both appearance and convictions, stand Pentheus—the king—and his aides. Although at the beginning of the play, Pentheus appears as the one who exercises absolute power even over the god himself, the power gradually changes hands in both the ancient and the modern play; it is constantly shifting, and its total reversal – the prevalence of the god over the king – is complete in the end. Analyzing the character of Pentheus in Euripides, Dodds endorses the view that the poet

has invested him with the traits of a typical tragedy-tyrant: absence of self-control; willingness to believe the worst on hearsay evidence, or on none; brutality towards the helpless; and a stupid reliance on physical force as a means of settling spiritual problems. In addition, he has given him [...] the sexual curiosity of a Peeping Tom. (xliii)

Mee elaborates further on Pentheus’ sexuality, perceiving the king’s sexual repression as one of the causes of his eventual downfall.

When the modern version of Pentheus appears onstage in a suit, the difference between the king and the chorus is immediately striking. “The poster boy for moral majority and masculine authority” rejects and hunts the god and the women, terrified that their aim is to subvert established norms and alter power relations (Soloski). He does not trust his instincts and constantly represses his feelings, fearing the prospect of losing control. Apparently, for those in power, to show emotion is to reveal weakness, and the real nature of one’s self—identified as sinister—is best to remain hidden, maintained under an impenetrable façade:

Only occasionally is his dark side revealed—and then quickly covered by a smile [...] only later, when he is more seriously threatened, does the dark nature come out truly as dark. (*Bacchae* 2.1)

For the modern Pentheus and his followers, the choice they face is between civilization and anarchy, while acknowledging uniformity<sup>16</sup> and submission as the ideal state, as the ultimate means of societal control—reminiscent of totalitarian regimes. This is another one of the main reasons why the modern king opposes Dionysus; he endorses spontaneity and passion that go against the norm and rules, of which he is the bearer and keeper.

The voices of reason and experience in the play, the characters closest to being Mee’s own voice, are Kadmos—former king and Pentheus’ grandfather—and Tiresias—a blind seer. These are the only men who accept Dionysus as a superior power and it is no coincidence that they are both elderly, with a lot of experience. To embrace something new, they say, does not automatically result in a dismissal or denial of past or present; on the contrary, change and progression in both personal and collective level are not only inevitable but also desirable. In an interview with Jonathal Mandell, Mee explained:

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<sup>16</sup> Pentheus utters the need “of taking care to remove the suckers, water sprouts, crossed limbs, dead limbs, any growth that appears to be crowding out a healthy plant or departing from a plant’s normal shape” (*Bacchae* 2.1).

I was born into a world of psychological and social norms handed down to me by my parents [...] That world was not designed for us to feel comfortable in and we don't" (*Bacchae* 2.1).

Determined to maintain a status quo that gives them control over underprivileged and victimized groups such as women and minorities, those in power have adopted a dialectic that reinforces people's fear of the unknown and their decisiveness to eliminate or subdue those with which they cannot empathize or relate. The result is a society steeped in violence, where the aspiration to self-determination becomes a threat that has to be eradicated through force, either at a personal level—like domestic violence—or a collective one—war. Through Kadmos' words Mee—as Euripides did before him—condemns war for having made life unbearable and, since the modern creator believes in the inescapability of the past, he expresses a pessimistic view of life:

KADMOS. We gave up so much of life when we went to war. I pray the god may save us from the life we've made on earth.

TIRESIAS. Yes. Well. In the end, we don't come through life as we come through each experience along the way—enriched or changed, wounded or restored; in the end we are all, each one of us no matter who we are completely consumed by life. (*Bacchae* 2.1)

Throughout the play, however, there appears to be a breakdown in communication (*Ancient Sun* 59),<sup>17</sup> and the collapse of personal communication—between men and women, god and mortals, older and younger generation—leads to the collapse of political responsibility. Whereas Kadmos and Tiresias utter the need for equality and acceptance of difference, identifying communal spirit as the only means of surviving and evolving—"let the other fellow in [...] place your life in the hands of others where it rests in any case, and learn to trust" (*Bacchae* 2.1)—, Pentheus expresses the view that new ideas should be met by force; any advice the elders offer is completely ignored.

Pentheus and his aides become increasingly cruder, employing a vulgar language to describe what they see as the collapse of civilization, a subversion of the natural order after the women run off to the mountains. Anything that appears physical and natural is turned into something sexually grotesque and vulgar by the king and his followers, who can only rely on reason, refusing to act spontaneously or follow emotions while forcefully declaring: "Cursed you with your senses—for your senses cannot perceive in any other way but falsely" (*Bacchae* 2.1). The dark thoughts, the subconscious drives that a "civilized" person has learned not to act upon through cultural conditioning and fear of punishment, gradually surface. Pentheus, echoing the earlier crude descriptions mainly uttered by his aides,<sup>18</sup> admits to getting satisfaction from causing pain and submission, mixed with sexual violence. Mee describes a world where sexual lust is paralleled with death:<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Analyzing Suzuki Tadashi's adaptation of *The Bacchae*, McDonald describes it as "a drama of miscommunication and opposition to the 'other'," and this description is also relevant in Mee.

<sup>18</sup> As Karelisa Hartigan points, while Pentheus' aides are silent in Euripides, in Mee they speak and introduce the first words of vulgarity, with king and god following their example and speaking the language of the "commons" (78).

<sup>19</sup> "The coitus is the parody of crime," Pentheus states in *Bacchae* 2.1

If I get a sensual feeling about a man, the man I have that feeling about, must become extremely submissive... I'd like to punch these men or strangle their genitals... and enjoy the pain I'd caused. (*Bacchae* 2.1)

As the story evolves, the audience learns details about the women that have followed and worshipped Dionysus in the mountains, thus underlining a fundamental difference between the two plays; in the ancient play, the god explicitly and repeatedly states that he has deranged the Theban women to flee because they refused to worship him and acknowledge his divinity.<sup>20</sup> In Mee's, their flight is a personal choice, as women from different backgrounds, races and cultures unite in their decision to rebel against men and the treatment they receive in a male-dominated society, refusing to reassume their former submissive and subservient positions; hence, their leader is arrested.

Brought in front of Pentheus, the god mocks his mortal cousin before delivering a long speech that encompasses his teachings about the essence of living. Like the king did before him, Dionysus makes the distinction between nature and culture, but in contrast to the former he insists that it is imperative to explore life and not accept it as given, to fully participate in it and embrace subconscious drives and desires by freeing the self from any restraints and remorse and civility; one need reconnect with their animalistic nature:

My soul goes blindly seeking. I cry out after some unknown Thing [...] I shall be filled with pleasure so deep and pleasure so intense, I will go drunk with the fullness of Life [...] When it comes to me to face the unspeakable vision of the Happy Life I shall be rendered dumb. But the rains of my feeling will come in torrents. (*Bacchae* 2.1)

Tricked by the god and dressed in drag, Pentheus assumes the role of a woman to spy on the Bacchae. In contrast to Euripides' mount Cithairon—where the Bacchae live in harmony with one another and with the natural world—Mee's land of Cockaigne is bizarre, explicitly violent and sexually obscene. "It is not a utopia," Mee assures, "an idyllic, cooperative, communal female world. It is a strange world" (*Bacchae* 2.1) where each woman projects her uniqueness; there is no uniformity that would facilitate stereotyping and the forceful imposition of social standards of propriety:

A naked woman with a huge, bright red dildo and a horse's tail [...] One woman hangs suspended in midair. She is naked, pierced in various places, and hanging by wires attached by fishhooks to her piercings [...] A woman at center stage stands with a meat cleaver at a large chopping block table. From her belt hangs a string of severed heads [...] Another woman, naked, her body painted entirely orange. (*Bacchae* 2.1)

The modern Bacchae who live without the presence of men have rejected the culture and civilization which Pentheus glorifies and got in touch with their repressed sexuality, the natural instincts that the king constantly degrades when he talks about "the pleasure of a well-ordered society that guarantees us peace in our homes... the pleasures of civility" (*Bacchae* 2.1).

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<sup>20</sup> "DIONYSUS. Because of that offence I have stung them with frenzy, hounded them from home up to the mountains where they wander, crazed of mind, and compelled to wear my orgies' livery" (*Bacchae* 32-35).



Through these rebellious women, who resist generalizations and limitations, Mee talks about sexual repression, gender relations and stereotyping. Disguised as one of the women, Pentheus observes his own mother, Agave, contemplating over culture and nature, reaching the conclusion that nature is not ideal but violent, where instincts rule and survival is the primary goal. The women's problem with civilized society, however, is that men have attributed certain characteristics to them that they—in turn—felt obliged to follow, even if such qualities do not adhere to reality. “Women are communal. Women are cooperative [...] I'm a little sick of this Bambi mentality” (*Bacchae* 2.1) one of them states, expressing her frustration. Having for so long remained trapped in fixed roles imposed by patriarchal society and culture, and a façade that was created for them, the Theban women are now eager to get in touch with their primitive side. In the mountains, they let their true selves come out without any fear of judgment. Empowered by sexual liberation, the *Bacchae* are reimagined by the modern playwright as “contemporary female-separatist sex radicals” (Wilder 43) who put complete faith in their senses, and exhibit aggressive, unapologetic behavior which is usually expected from men.

Agave takes the stand to comment on the difficulty of being a woman and preach kindness, empathy and compassion; alas, the moment Pentheus' true identity as a man is revealed, Agave, detached from the roles of mother and caregiver, blinded by the deceit, and confused by Dionysus, kills her own son by “slamming his head repeatedly into the ground” (*Bacchae* 2.1).<sup>21</sup> On another level, she is also a woman who commits violence not only against a man, but a king nonetheless. Releasing herself from the clichés and specific behavior that is expected from women, Agave feels she has embraced her manly nature which endows her with violence, aggression, and a tendency to act. Echoing her son, she admits to a hidden pleasure that derives from exercising power and violence over someone, “some deep pleasure in killing” (*Bacchae* 2.1).

The personal—albeit limited—choice and awareness present in Mee's heroes cannot be traced in those of Euripides, where the action is pushed forward by the god. *Dionysus* is the one who maddens the Theban women and leads one of them to murder; it is *he* who makes the constantly irritable and pretentiously masculine king lose his mind, gradually transforming a powerful king into a crazed victim. After he ridicules and lures him into wearing women's clothes, the god reserves for the king a disgraceful death in the hands of his own mother, using her only as an execution tool. Despite his fate, Euripides does not appear to be making an effort to make Pentheus likeable to the audience; the ancient Agave is a much more tragic figure than her dead, dismembered son. When she brags about the loot referring to the body of Pentheus, she is not conscious of her actions and the spectators are aware of that. In Mee, however, where Agave is—at least partially—responsible for her actions, sympathy can be raised for Pentheus.

In both plays, it is Agave's father who forces her to acknowledge the killing and brings her back to her senses, but the Euripidean former king is much more subtle in his revelation, and Agave is presented far more detached from reality than in Mee:

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<sup>21</sup> It is worth noting that in Euripides' play, the actions of the *Bacchae* are only described and not presented on stage; spectators in ancient times were not supposed to witness any violent scenes, which were announced by messengers.



CADMUS. And whose head do you hold in your heads?  
 AGAVE. A lion's head or so the hunters told me.  
 CADMUS. Look directly at it, just a quick glance.  
 AGAVE. What is it? What am I holding in my hands?  
 CADMUS. Look more closely still. Study it carefully.  
 AGAVE. No! O gods, I see the greatest grief there is.  
 CADMUS. Does it look like a lion now?  
 AGAVE. No, no. It is Pentheus' head I hold.  
 CADMUS. And mourned by me before you ever knew. (*Bacchae* 1278-1285)

The revelation scene is much more straightforward and shocking in Mee's play:

AGAVE. Now, father, you may be entitled to boast you have a daughter like a man, bringing home a carcass killed by her own two hands.  
 KADMOS. Agave. Look what you hold. A child torn as one would tear a rag by the hands of his own mother. (*Bacchae* 2.1)

For all the similarities between the two plays, the endings differentiate them. Dionysus has managed to establish his cult and in the final scene resumes his godly nature and appearance; in all his majesty, he announces the punishment of disbelievers and perpetrators: exile, banishment from their land. As Kadmos begs for mercy and expresses the view that "Gods should be exempt from human passions" (*Bacchae* 1348)—ironic, since from the beginning of the tragedy the god has been torn by the same passions as mortals<sup>22</sup>—Agave leaves the stage fully conscious, acknowledging the divine status of Dionysus but renouncing him and his teachings.<sup>23</sup>

Mee treats his heroes, and especially Agave, somewhat more leniently; there is no further punishment to be announced, no resolution offered by any god. Instead, Agave is eventually allowed to enter an illusory, dreamlike state where she can escape the nightmarish truth that she has killed her own son, and find comfort. Kadmos is left reassuring his daughter—as well as himself—that "surely, all this is a dream—only a dream" (*Bacchae* 2.1) and Dionysus neither saves nor punishes anyone; still remaining among humans, he now closes the play only commenting on the human situation:

These human beings: what unfathomable creatures. In the end, when they feel themselves suffocating [...] swallowed up by the earth, the thought rushes up unbidden: it's only a dream—this is the last hope we have within us. (*Bacchae* 2.1)

In contrast to Euripides, Mee's approach to *The Bacchae* is anthropocentric. Dionysus in Euripides is, as most gods in his tragedies, a large-scale projection of the passions that torment human beings. Merciless, vindictive and, of course, all-powerful, he has total control over his mortal servants. It is also he who moves the strings and decides about the fate of mankind, whereas humans find themselves amongst incomprehensible forces and a world

<sup>22</sup> "[P]ride and the vindictiveness of pride insulted, revengeful anger, jealousy and desire, they are huge and awesome images of everything that is violent and uncontrollable in man, and they order the universe according to their conflicting and changing wills, bargaining with the fates of human beings" (Easterling 325).

<sup>23</sup> "Let me go where I shall never see Cithaeron more, where that accused hill may not see me, where I shall find no trace of thyrsus! That I leave to other Bacchae" (*Bacchae* 1384-1387).

they cannot control. In Mee's play, the god is present not as a controlling power but a largely uninvolved observer; although he represents the potential for change, he suggests rather than acts, and the modern playwright's heroes stand alone in their effort to survive, find meaning and make sense of their world. His aim is to show the pain, agony and suffering of the individual in a world he has created. Man defines his own fate, and without complete change, without attempts to understand and—if possible—transcend a past tainted by war, violence, and intolerance there can be no prospect on the horizon. The god that maddens and crushes those who disobey him is, for Mee, man-made and humans are—above all—creations of the culture they live in. As he explains: "Whatever I do, will be inescapably informed by the history and culture that I have inherited" ("I Like" 361).

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