

Losing control: sexuality and tyranny in Euripides' *Bacchae*

In this paper, I argue that Pentheus in the *Bacchae* reflects a typical pattern of tragic tyrants, where the lack of sexual control goes hand in hand with the lack of control over the city. Pentheus' inability to restrain his sexual desires is a characteristic often associated with tyrants, both in the realm of tragedy and beyond (as seen especially in Herodotus). In Pentheus' narrative, as in that of other tyrants, eroticism intersects with the political domain, with the act of controlling women representing control over the city itself. Pentheus' fixation on the maenads reflects his obsession with power, as losing control over the former signifies a loss of control over the latter.

From the moment of his entrance, Pentheus vocally rejects sexuality (Segal 1978). However, his repeated fixation on the sexual activities of the maenads and the Stranger (222-225, 236-238, 258-262, 353-354, 453-456) reveals his concealed desire to partake in these activities, at least as an observer (Zeitlin 1990). This contrasts with the way other characters assess the Bacchic phenomenon. The first messenger even explicitly contradicts Pentheus' interpretation of the situation: "They were not - as you continue to assert - pursuing Aphrodite in the woods, each one secluded from the rest" (686-688).

Pentheus' inability to restrain his sexual urges casts him as feminine in the eyes of a 5th-century Athenian audience (Ormand 2003). This perception imbues the famous cross-dressing scene with a new layer of significance. In this context, Pentheus is not becoming feminine; he is simply revealing the inherent femininity that was present from the beginning. This femininity suggests passivity, which, in turn, symbolizes a lack of political control (Ormand 2003).

Indeed, Pentheus exemplifies the typical scenario where a tyrant engages in sexual transgressions (Vernant 1982) while attempting (and failing) to assert authority over the female element, which symbolizes power. Indeed, his obsession with reuniting with his mother, where Pentheus tries – and fails – to reassert authority and control over her, is imbued with unmistakable erotic undertones (Zeitlin 1990). This is a common pattern. In *Antigone*, Creon transgresses as he perverts Antigone’s marriage ritual when he entombs her alive (Seaford 1990). He therefore loses control over himself as he is desperately trying to maintain it over Antigone. Like Pentheus, he becomes feminized as he tries to avoid that scenario: indeed, Antigone’s political threat even forces him to admit the possibility for a gender reversal, where he would take on the role of the woman (*Ant.* 484 is a notable example).

The perception of the tyrant as a dangerous deviation from the political norms of 5th-century Athenians explains why authors often attribute heterosexual *eros* to the tyrant. This portrayal of a weak, feminine, and uncontrolled tyrant serves as a counterbalance to the virtuous, masculine homosexual love of figures like Harmodius and Aristogeiton (Ludwig 2002).

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