

Face the Music: Mousikē Therapy in Euripides' *Bacchae*

In her book, *The Music of Tragedy: Performance and Imagination in Euripidean Theater*, Naomi Weiss discusses the role of mousikē – music, song, and dance – in Euripidean tragedy, the ways in which mousikē and *choreia* function, and how both are integral to the plots and themes. Noticeably, however, Weiss declines to investigate *Bacchae* because she argues that mousikē can intensify, challenge, and expand the mythos of tragedy, and concludes that *Bacchae* complicates her argument slightly because the mousikē fundamentally is the mythos (Weiss 2018). Weiss demonstrates the difficulty of analyzing the role mousikē plays within the plot because it is the plot itself. To me, this heightens the need to understand how it functions in the play, especially since *Bacchae*, arguably, is one of the most musically-ridden tragedies.

There is much scholarship surrounding the musical elements of this play, especially regarding the chorus (Damen and Richards 2012; Segal 1999). Yet, these works have not adequately addressed the interpretation of the characters within this play through a musical lens. If the music of *Bacchae* is so distinct that it warrants a separate discussion entirely within a book dedicated to the role of mousikē, one must give attention to viewing *Bacchae* and its characters in this way. My paper addresses this issue by examining Pentheus and his subsequent downfall through a lens of what I deem “mousikē therapy:” the combination of dance therapy and music therapy, utilized to elicit a catharsis and to affect the morality of one’s character. I explore how the mousikē in *Bacchae* induces pathos, and, specifically, why it does not seem to invoke a pathos from Pentheus. To do so, I will be looking at both modern studies of music therapy and ancient philosophies concerning music. Music therapy is an interdisciplinary field of research and practice that uses music – and often dance – to treat both physical and emotional ailments,

such as Parkinson's, cardiac disease, depression, and trauma, and despite its novelty as a therapy in modern healthcare, has been shown to be effective in healing when employed properly (Dahms 2021; Knight 2001). Music therapy, however, is not a new concept, as Pythagoras, Plato, and Aristotle each establish precedence for the idea of music as a medicine, as a therapy, and as a form of catharsis. Between an established ancient foundation, modern studies, and the psychological function of how the brain processes music, viewing Pentheus and his downfall through these means could lead to a fuller and more well-rounded understanding of his character and, more broadly, of the entire tragedy.

In *Bacchae*, singing, dancing, and thinking rightly characterize the worship of Dionysus repeatedly. The chorus sings about the relief that one experiences as a result of these rites throughout the tragedy in their odes, such as relief from pain, a wise heart and mind, and general fortune (417-432). Moreover, Tiresias and Cadmus emphasize the importance of participation as it breeds wisdom, and even Dionysus himself gives warnings to Pentheus to obey the gods and not disrupt the rites (278-285, 787-791). Despite all the advice and admonitions given by surrounding characters, Pentheus, as I argue, refuses to adhere to the counsel given, and his lack of participation and misunderstanding of Bacchic rites leads to his lack of morality, which ultimately leads to his downfall. As he continues to refuse participation in the Bacchic rites and to ridicule them, dismissing their significance, Pentheus does not benefit from the cathartic properties that the *mousikē* in *Bacchae* possesses. As a result, I propose that Pentheus' refusal to participate in Dionysiac worship perpetuates his suffering. I do not suggest that his refusal is the sole reason he is destroyed in the end, or that if he did participate, he would have been spared; instead, I will contend that Pentheus' suffering lies with and is perpetuated by his refusal to undergo this *mousikē* therapy as a willing participant, ultimately leading to his destruction.

Bibliography

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