

No Meaning Whatsoever: Woody Allen's *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* and Euripides' *Bacchae*

When Woody Allen's *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* was released in the summer of 2008 it garnered the typically solid reviews his films often get. Most critics seem to have found the film well-written, well-acted, and beautifully shot, but many were also at odds as to what the film was trying to be or say. Was it tragic? Was it comic? Was it a serious film with nothing really to be serious about? Riveting performances and sharp dialogue made the film eminently watchable but what the film was actually *about* seems to have eluded a good deal of the audience. In this paper I submit that the film is, at its core, a modern retelling of Euripides' *Bacchae*, mingling the tragic with the comic, confronting irresistible passions, and treading the thin line between the creative and destructive. We have to go back to ancient Athens to fully appreciate the scope, arc, and thrust of this contemporary film.

Watching the film with one eye on the 5th century BCE drama, the parallels are immediately apparent: Allen gives us a modern-day, amoral Dionysus in the beautiful, mysterious artist Juan Antonio (Javier Bardem) who early in the film shocks and intrigues two young American women—Vicky (Rebecca Hall) and Cristina (Scarlett Johansson)—on holiday in Barcelona by inviting them for a weekend getaway and a *ménage à trois* within the first moments of meeting them. The reaction of the two girls is strikingly Euripidean. Cristina is immediately taken in by the seductive stranger, she a bacchant-to-be, immediately attracted, ready to follow him out of town. Vicky is the headstrong Pentheus, scoffing at the outrageous offer and rooting her rejection in the fact that she is engaged to be married and the traditional values that fact represents. As the film progresses each woman is lured into the seductive (and destructive) web of the stranger. The rootless Cristina becomes even more at sea as she subsumes her identity to the whims of Juan Antonio and quickly sees the dark side of her new lover in the violent return of his Maenadic ex-wife, Maria Elena (Penelope Cruz). Vicky is more difficult to wear down, but just as Dionysus with Pentheus, Juan Antonio knows her protestations are largely a façade and he breaks her down not by brute force but by coolly drawing out her true desires. By the end of Euripides' play we see ultimately that it does not matter how one responds to the god. Both resisting and embracing him results in destruction. So, too, in the film Juan Antonio is a force which cannot be ignored—his ability to draw self-destruction out of those ill-fortuned enough to cross his path leaves himself (apparently) unchanged, but his victims foundationless and undone.

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Atkinson, J. "Euripides' *Bacchae* in its Historical Context" *Akroterion* 47 (2002), 5-15.
Barrett, James. "Pentheus and the Spectator in Euripides' *Bacchae*" *AJP* 119, 3 (1998), 337-360.
Dodds, E.R. *The Greeks and the Irrational*. University of California Press, 1968.
Ebert, Roger. "Review: *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*" *Chicago Sun-Times*, August 14, 2008.
Gold, Barbara. "Eukosmia in Euripides' *Bacchae*" *AJP* 98,1 (1977), 3-15.
Hartigan, Karelisa. "Greek Drama in a Field of Dreams" *CJ* 89, 4 (1994), 373-387.
Roncace, Mark. "*The Bacchae* and *Lord of the Flies*: a few observations with the help of

- E.R. Dodds" CML 18.1 (1997), 37-51.
- Schechner, Richard. "The Bacchae: a City Sacrificed to a Jealous God" *The Tulane Drama Review* 5,4 (1961), 124-134.
- Siegel, Janice. "Tennessee Williams' *Suddenly Last Summer* and Euripides' *Bacchae*" *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 11,4 (2005), 538-570.