"Like Birds in the Bush": A Bacchic Reading of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*

When one thinks of stage or film adaptations of Euripides' *Bacchae*, Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (*PHR*, 1975) is unlikely to come to mind. But, as this paper argues, the now classic film adapts and recontextualizes core aspects from the tragedy within the setting of a Victorian-era Australia. In the film, during a picnic in the Australian bush, several schoolgirls go missing while exploring an outcrop colloquially known as "Hanging Rock." Their disappearance ultimately proves fatal for the school's headmistress and the school itself. While scholars have briefly noted elements of Greek myth in *PHR*, most notably those of Dionysus, Artemis, and Pan (Hartigan 1990; Haltof 1996), none has examined the thematic engagement of the film with *Bacchae* or the implications of that engagement. This paper uses Critical Classical Reception theory (Hanink 2017) to analyze the ways in which the film addresses issues of colonization and sexuality in its treatment of the Greek tragedy. I argue that through appropriation of the general scheme and imagery of *Bacchae*, *PHR* investigates how Victorian culture in Australia effaced aboriginal peoples from its narratives yet represented its own women, who themselves are fetishized, as susceptible to indigenous forces.

The first part of my paper focuses on the parallels between Dionysus and the presence of "Hanging Rock," a real-life outcrop near Mount Macedon in Australia. Dionysus and the Rock, native entities to their lands, are respectively pitted in opposition to the "civilizing" πόλις of Thebes and Appleyard College, an all-female boarding school. Just as Dionysus breaks down barriers between city and wilderness by compelling the Theban women to desert their homes for Mount Cithaeron (*Bacch.* 32-33), so are a group of three schoolgirls and a teacher mysteriously drawn to the Rock. Hanging Rock, a place of deep ceremonial significance to Australian

Aboriginals, stands in as a remnant of the displaced natives, who are absent both visually and within the narrative itself. Yet, their absence, as well as the "sinister" forces of the Australian bush, are consistently contrasted with the missing schoolgirls and the artificially cultivated, Eurocentric setting of the school. Ironically, Dionysus is just as out of place in a Victorian context, which attempted to rationalize Greco-Roman elements, as he is in his native Thebes (Walton 2008). The film thus reframes the myth of Dionysus as represented in *Bacchae* to illustrate the tensions of cultural conflict and assimilation in colonial Australia.

The second part of my paper examines the film's bacchic representation of its female characters as a commentary on anxieties about displacement and unrestrained female sexuality in ancient Greek and Victorian societies. Both works illustrate the female experience through bird imagery to express the liminality, sexuality, and unity within female groups. The maenads are compared to birds hidden in thickets as a metaphor for women partaking in sexually illicit acts (καὶ μὴν δοκῶ σφᾶς ἐν λόχμαις ὄρνιθας ὡς / λέκτρων ἔχεσθαι φιλτάτοις ἐν ἔρκεσιν, 957-8; cf. 223). In *PHR*, the bird theme expresses preoccupations with sexual conduct and women's positions within their cultural and physical landscapes. When the schoolgirls are in the bush, both indigenous and nonnative birds frequent the screen, which creates an association with the girls as a collective "flock" with the potential to integrate with their environment. Most compellingly, the familial love (στοργή) associated with swans is invoked when Cadmus compares his daughter Agave to a swan (κύκνος) protecting its parent, ironically after Agave has killed her own son (1364-5). Miranda, the leader of the missing girls, similarly manifests as a swan in the minds of men, resulting in her paradoxical depiction as both a virginal beauty and a tender motherly figure. By readapting the visual language of *Bacchae*, *PHR* calls to question the contradictory demands placed upon girls and women in these settings.

Bacchae's representations of gender and sexuality as well as alternative landscapes of self-performance continue to be fruitful avenues of engagement for modern interpretations. But thus far, *PHR* has not been recognized as an adaptation of *Bacchae*, despite continuing to entrance audiences and scholars (Rogers 2022). This paper thus builds on ongoing interest in the reception of *Bacchae*, particularly its depictions of gender dynamics, and contributes to the emerging field of Critical Classical Reception studies with a focus on colonial displacement.

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