

Sparagmos of a Speech  
Tiresias' Apology as an Interpretive Key to Euripides' *Bacchae*

Euripides' *Bacchae* was first performed in 405 BCE, earning first prize at the Athenian Dionysia festival. Premiering within a year of the author's death, it serves as a symbolic bookend for literary production of the three great Athenian tragedians not only as Euripides' last play, but also as a dramatic piece that addresses the fundamental themes of tragedy itself by treating Dionysus, the founding god of theater, and by posing questions concerning the meaning of prudence (φρόνησις) in the context of fifth-century Athenian philosophy and traditional religious practice. Scholars have noted the paradoxical character of the *Bacchae* (Garvie 2016) but there is a lack of consensus for interpreting its philosophical and religious implications. This paper provides a novel interpretation of Tiresias' role in the *Bacchae* which in turn reconciles the apparently contradictory interpretations. Drawing from the insights of Damen and Richards' article on the *Bacchae* as "dramatic hymn" (2012), Tiresias' puzzling lines become an interpretive key to the whole tragedy and offer a new vision of Euripides' final word on the relationship between the divine and humankind's capacity to reason about it.

Scholarly opinion of the *Bacchae* remains divided. Late 19th century scholarship, in contrast, reads it as a socratic denial of the Olympian gods' excessive violence and irrational behavior as well as the sophists' explanations (Verral 1895, Murray 1913, Wilamowitz as reported by Damen and Richards 2012). Other scholarship reject this and declare it to be Euripides' palinode, a death-bed rejection of socratic rationalism, which in turn implies his return to traditional religious piety (Billings 2020, Hall 2016, Schironi 2016). Still others interpret it as an affront to the limits of traditional Greek piety (Caspers 2012). Lastly, Dodds (1929) proposes a pessimistic Euripides who sees socratic methodology at play throughout his

works, but which is ultimately unsatisfactory to solve the riddles of human life, concluding that Euripides is an “irrationalist”. Many other scholars do not take a strict position, but simply note the “paradoxical” nature of the tragedy, highlighting the sophistical, socratic, and religious elements side by side (Allan and Swift 2024).

The plot of the play centers around the “new god” Dionysus. His mother Semele was a daughter of Cadmus, the Theban king, and pregnant with Zeus’ child she was consumed in a fiery theophany of the Olympian king. Although the cult of Dionysus thrives among some Thebans, under the patronage of Cadmus Semele’s sisters, Dionysus’ aunts, deny this account along with his cousin Pentheus, who now holds the kingship. In the opening lines, Dionysus disguised as a human stranger describes to the audience the motives of his homecoming: to spread his cult and to punish the city. This is accomplished when the Pentheus is killed and the unbelievers are exiled.

Tiresias, the blind, gender-fluid prophet, only appears toward the beginning of the play, arriving with Cadmus and instructing him in right-thinking and the proper worship of the god: they do not “scorn” the gods nor “apply sophisms” to the divine (καταφρονῶ 199, and οὐδὲν σοφίζομεσθα 200). When Pentheus comes on the scene cursing Dionysus, Tiresias makes an apology of the god, using naturalistic and etymological arguments like a fifth-century Athenian sophist rather than an epic prophet. Although his rationalizing account of the god’s birth differs from the traditional one described by the worshippers, his apology is praised by them, and in fact, contains a series of prophecies fulfilled in the course of the drama. His attempts at unconvincing logic are therefore justified, and it results in a metatheatrical surprise that jars the audience into following his example.

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