

## For Women's Tastes: Suggestions of Transgender Identity in the *Bacchae's* Pentheus

While gender fluidity is a popular topic in the contemporary West, it was not commonly addressed in ancient Greece. There are some mythological models: Tiresias lived for a time as both a man and as a woman (Apollod. 3.6.7), and Dionysus is widely portrayed as effeminate in his face and clothing (Dodds 1960). Certain rites of passage in Greece, too, included temporary transvestism (Zeitlin 1996). However, in those cases, and in nearly all other records of deviations from gender expectations, the break from those norms typically serves to reinforce them. There is little evidence to be adduced from the ancient world of someone struggling to come to terms with an *identity* that puts her or him outside of standard gender expectations.

Pentheus in Euripides' *Bacchae*, though, presents a potentially compelling case for latent transgender impulses in classical Greece. The *Bacchae* is full of plays on the idea of essential identity, on the levels of mortal vs. god, man vs. woman, human vs. non-human animal, and existence vs. nonexistence (Segal 1997). But even in a play full of such ambiguities, the case of Pentheus presents a set of gender circumstances that can be difficult to reconcile. He responds virulently upon seeing his grandfather and Tiresias wearing Bacchic outfits (*Bacch.* 248-256) that Pentheus later identifies as women's clothes (835-36). And he seems fixated on the gender nonconformity in the appearance of the Stranger, noting feminine details of his hair, face, and eyes the first time he speaks of the Stranger (235-36), then referring to him as "womanish" (θηλύμορφον, 353) the second time. Yet when he speaks with the Stranger for the first time, his first string of comments is all in admiration of the Stranger's appearance, suggesting (to some) homosexual attraction (Ormand 2003): Pentheus first says that the Stranger is "not ugly" (οὐκ ἄμορφος, 453), and praises his long hair that flows to his cheeks, "full of desire" (πόθου πλέως, 456). Pentheus checks himself twice in the midst of his comments, though; after his praise of the

Stranger's hair, Pentheus claims it is that way because the Stranger does not wrestle (455), critiquing him according to stereotypical male norms. His other correction, however, gives a potentially more specific hint as to Pentheus' internal identity issues. He follows up his comments on the attractiveness of the Stranger's hair with ὡς ἐς γυναικας, "for women's tastes," or "to appeal to women." Outwardly, this comment serves to explain Dionysus' appearance as serving the purpose of attracting to him the women with whom he has come to Thebes (Leinieks 1996).

However, in light of Pentheus' later obsessions and actions, they may reveal something about him that he did not outwardly intend to communicate. Pentheus repeatedly dwells on what sordid things the women who have gone to the woods at Dionysus' behest must be doing (222-23; 237-38; 260-61; 353-54; 487; 957), then expresses great enthusiasm to spy on them, suggesting to some the voyeurism of an inexperienced youth (Mills 2006). That voyeurism is not necessarily rooted in a desire for sexual titillation, though, nor are Pentheus' observations about Dionysus' feminine appearance necessarily a function of homosexual attraction. While Pentheus only reluctantly dons women's livery in order to watch the women in the woods, and does so only under Dionysus' spell (822-46), his earlier actions and words suggest that Dionysus was not imposing on him a false identity in convincing him to dress as a woman, but rather drawing from him a genuine one.

The combined profile of Pentheus seems to be one of a man who feels some identity with women, but who is violently afraid of acknowledging as much. While he initially criticizes the transvestism of his grandfather and the Stranger, his grudging appreciation of the Stranger's appearance may not be sexual, but rather a revelation of an impulse that he too shares, but feels restricted from expressing himself, and feels a reflexive need to condemn. And his obsession

with the women's hidden behavior may reflect not prurience, but a wish to know more thoroughly a group with which he identifies, but from whom social norms have separated him.

Dressing as a woman, then, may be Pentheus' expression of a forbidden impulse, with which Euripides likely had some familiarity.

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