

An Aphrodisian *Bacchae* for our era; David Ives' "Venus in Fur"

Recent decades have offered many adaptations of Euripides' *Bacchae*, set everywhere from Africa, to Nashville, to US occupied Iraq (Fischer-Lichte, Sampatakakis). 2010 saw David Ives' play *Venus in Fur*, inspired by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus im Pelz* (1870), which had an outstanding Broadway production. Current reviews, produced by non-classicists, focus more on themes of female domination and sadomasochism (McQuinn), and consider superficially its interpretive relations to receptions of Euripides' *Bacchae*. Here I (1) further analyze elements the play shares the *Bacchae*, and (2) suggest how this play illustrates ways moderns can (use classical texts to work through contemporary concerns, and how the play speaks to the tempting, dangers of engaging the classical past.

In Ives' play, the protagonist Thomas Novachek has adapted Sacher-Masoch's *Venus im Pelz*, and has spent a frustrating day auditioning potential Vandas. His fiancée waits for him. Thunder crashing outside, a brash woman named Vanda (also the name of the female protagonist in Thomas' play, wearing the signature fur coat evoking those non-human passions the Maenads' animal skins suggest) arrives late, demanding an audition. Thomas consents, even agreeing to play Severin, Sacher-Masoch's masochist to Vanda's sadist. During the audition reality and fiction blur, gender and power roles change. The unmoored Thomas is compelled like Pentheus into revealing perverse depths of personality, betraying his fiancée at Vanda's command, the actress finally as an angered Venus ('Did you think you could insult *me* through *me*?'), who invokes the *Bacchae* (We dance to the glory of the gods!.../Hail the Bacchae!) whose identity and domination Thomas confesses.

The medieval tale of Venus and the Ring, works by Mérimée and James furnish intertexts for *Venus im Pelz*, (Ziokowski) and for Ives' play. In James' story "Last of the Valerii," an Italian count becomes so obsessed with a marble Juno unearthed at his estate that he neglects his American (and conventional) wife; the statue must be reburied. James implies we moderns dig up (in archaeology and humanistic production) and use the Classical past and its passions at our peril. Vanda reveals Thomas' dramatic production as his displaced working through of ambiguous feelings about his upcoming marriage, anger at his own submission and desire for domination, anger now directed toward women and the female erotic . Issues of the male constructions of women/Woman thus are also critical.

Pentheus life and mind is shredded by Dionysos, a metonymy for inner psychological elements (Dodds, Winnington-Ingram, Segal, Goldhill), including transgressive forms of gender-eliding desire, which Vanda/Venus unearths. For example, Vanda makes Thomas improvise a scene from the novel which Thomas claims to be unable to 'work into' his play, Severin's dream where he opposes Venus 'his old enemy' whose domination Severin resents and desires.

Dionysos is a god of assumed and transgressive identities, and Pentheus ostensibly fears Dionysos' worship brings alcoholic and sexual transgressions undermining social structures like marriage, but his excessive, sadistic reaction suggests fear of the instability of his masculine identity which Dionysos exposes – as does Vanda. Drama's performance space can destabilize (then and now) the audience's understanding of themselves and their surroundings (Carlson). Thus Dionysos and Vanda, in these unsettling dramatic contexts, function as sublime 'Effects of the Real' through which the implied audience intuit shadow selves, polymorphous perversity and fluidity of personality. Productions such as *Venus in Fur*, inspired by the *Bacchae* and the

holy-horrible Dionysos and Aphrodite, shows an uncanny and powerful stream of the classical reception.

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