"The Near and Distant Dispossessed": Helots, Vestals, and the Specter of Crucifixion in Wole Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite*

Wole Soyinka's 1969 adaptation of Euripides' *Bacchae* has been understood as a postcolonial tragedy that employs the myth of Pentheus and Dionysus (informed by Ogun, the Yoruban god of transformation) to negotiate the outsider status of African drama, literature, and culture (Bada, Rankine). While scholars have examined Soyinka's reception of Euripides (McConnel, Van Weyenberg), the playwright's prolonged engagement with ancient historical (as opposed to literary) systems of oppression in the same play has received relatively little treatment. My talk fills that gap by exploring three details of the opening scene that are striking because of their blatant anachronisms: 1) The recollection of the helots by the Theban slaves; 2) the syncretic blending of Eleusinian initiates, Dionysian bacchants, and Vestal virgins; and 3) the grotesque scene of crucifixion that provides the backdrop for the action of the play.

After a prologue in which Soyinka's Dionysus denounces his native city for persecuting the participants of his cult, he appears to Theban slaves and demands allegiance. The Leader is ready to acquiesce, but his enthusiasm is dampened by his fellow slaves who beg him to "remember the helots" (p. 238), the slaves of the historical Spartans, widely regarded in antiquity as the most ill-treated of all the ancient oppressed (Ath. 647d, Plut. *Lyc*. 28.1-4). My talk explores the poetic implicationsof having a slave living in mythological Thebes "remember" the helot uprising of 464 BCE that likely gave rise to the Spartan policy of declaring war annually upon the helot population. When the Leader goes on to appeal to "the near and distant dispossessed," he positions his own enslavement within a long tradition of oppression and asks us to consider the social barriers an ancient slave would have to overcome in order to revolt.

Soyinka's female devotees of Dionysus are part Eleusinian initiates, part vestal virgins turned ecstatic Bacchae. These "vestals of Eleusis," as they are called, are heading up the annual procession of

ritual beating when Dionysus appears in Thebes. After the slaves fail to acknowledge the new divinity in front of the Theban masters (because of the "memory" of what happened to the helots), Dionysus turns to this group of women who hesitate, at first, but eventually welcome him as a god and leave the stage in his entourage. Like in Euripides' play, they become the focus of Pentheus' misogynistic outrage ("They leave their home, desert their children / Follow the new fashion and join the Bacchae," p. 256).

Soyinka appears to trace this merging of the bacchants with the Eleusinian initiates to Tiresias' account of the two divine gifts: Demeter's grain and Dionysus' wine (*Bacch*. 274-85), and also, perhaps, to the overlapping of the cults of Demeter and Dionysus in antiquity (e.g. Aristophanes' *Frogs* and the Orphic Gold Tablets). Throughout the play, Soyinka also stresses the connection between the Thebans (sprung from the dragon teeth) to earth, underscoring Demeter's primacy in this world.

The connection to the vestal virgins is less clearly articulated in the play. One attractive possibility is that the traditional punishment of a vestal who engages in sex— being buried beneath the earth alive— informs the initial hesitation of Soyinka's bacchants. If so, the gruesome threat that hangs over the women followers of Dionysus corresponds nicely to the specter of crucification that menaces the male slaves, whose (in)action must be considered against the rotting bodies of slaves which is the literal background of the play.

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