

μηδὲν νέον? The Paradox of Old Religion/New God in Euripides' *Bacchae*

In the first scene (170-369) of the *Bacchae*, Teiresias and Cadmus appear onstage in Bacchic dress, and soon after Pentheus initiates a debate with them. Two interpretive problems emerge: how are we supposed to understand the figures of Teiresias and Cadmus)? And secondly, in Teiresias' monologue against Pentheus, the seer acknowledges the newness of Dionysus by implying his future greatness in Greece, before paradoxically presenting the new god as integral to already ancient practices and beliefs. How are we to interpret this paradox, which equally affirms two contradictory propositions: that Dionysus is new, and will be great; and that Dionysus embodies the old, and is already great? Previous scholars, such as Seidensticker (1978) and Verdenius (1988), have argued that Teiresias and Cadmus are a comic or parodic pair and should therefore not be taken seriously. Other scholars, such as Dodds (1960), Roth (1984), Segal (1982), and Seaford (1996), have argued against this thesis to various effects. Still other scholars, such as Papadopoulou (2001) have found both readings plausible. I will argue that Teiresias is an essential figure who presents the paradox of Dionysus, and affirms both sides of the contradiction equally in a way which informs the rest of the *Bacchae*.

In this paper I seek to first recognize, then reconsider the paradox of Teiresias' argument. I argue that Teiresias' speech should not be dismissed as comedy because of the approval his speech gains from the chorus, and for the same reason I argue that Teiresias and Cadmus' appearance in Bacchic dress should not be viewed as primarily humorous. In order to reframe this paradox, I turn first to Teiresias' affirmations to Cadmus. Teiresias claims that he and Cadmus alone think rightly, and states that their actions are informed by ancient tradition (195-209). Teiresias denies that he will bring sophistry to bear on divine matters, before engaging

Pentheus in a rationalizing defense of the new god's worship (266-327). I argue that both the paradox and the inconsistency given here—that he claims to be against sophistry but uses it against Pentheus—illuminate several major themes of the play. Firstly, I understand their debate in terms of thinking rightly, but also in terms of acting rightly. I find that this argument informs a significant facet of paradox explored in the play, and points specifically to Dionysus' status as the "god who comes" (Otto 1965: 79) but who is nonetheless known only by his effects in the course of the play. I argue that, rather than being an example of Teiresias' weak capability for debate, this paradox of new god/old religion speaks to an understanding of Dionysus in terms of the agreement of past traditions with new Bacchic religion: in the *Bacchae*, Dionysus is known by his effects, which precede him but nonetheless derive from his agency and being; in this sense, Dionysus as the god who comes is a figure who embodies ancient practices, but is nonetheless entirely new and renews them.

This paper seeks to recover paradox in and of itself as a major theme of the play, understanding the paradox which Teiresias points to—of the god who embodies practice and belief that has always-already been known, and who suddenly manifests although he has been in front of our eyes the entire time—not as questions to be answered, but as self-sufficient elements of Euripides' play. Likewise, I understand ignorance and right thinking not as opposites but as entangled in the *Bacchae*, in a way that is best exemplified by the figure of Teiresias. This also entails a reevaluation of the character of Teiresias which appreciates both the comic value of the character appearing as a bacchant, while still following the judgment of the chorus in taking seriously Teiresias' arguments for Dionysiac religion.

Works Cited

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