

## Tiresias in the *Bacchae*

In the first episode of Euripides' *Bacchae*, the scene between Tiresias and Cadmus and Pentheus has clear comic features. At the beginning of the episode, references to costume (180) and gestures (193) mark the scene as comic. When Tiresias calls out Cadmus and states that they are going to join the bacchants, he explicitly describes their age “an old man and an older man,” (πρέσβυς ὄν γεραιτέρω, 175) and Cadmus pointedly repeats him (γέρον γέροντι, 186). When Pentheus enters and sees the two old men, he finds it ridiculous (πολὺν γέλων, 250). He accuses Tiresias of being motivated by profit (257).

However, when Tiresias and Cadmus answer the accusations of Pentheus, their arguments are not comic, I would argue. Both Cadmus and Tiresias claim to be “wise,” and this is what we expect from Tiresias, who is the deliverer of the awful truth, in *Oedipus Tyrannus* and elsewhere. This is commonly observed, but how this wisdom of theirs relates to the play as a whole—how the Dionysus Tiresias describes relates to the Dionysus that we see in this play—is anything but clear. However, I would argue that the logic of drama itself suggests that we must consider all the facets of Dionysus that are revealed here.

Tiresias answers Pentheus' criticisms of this new god, but they are not the main points in his speech. The theme of sexual misconduct (215-232) is dismissed briefly, and his argument itself sounds philosophical: if a person possesses true virtue, then drunken revelry is not going to shake them (314-28). Tiresias ignores Pentheus' remarks about the stranger (233-41) except for the claim that this stranger makes: that Dionysus is a god, that he was sewn into to the thigh of Zeus. . . (242-7).

This rebuttal (286-297) is of particular interest here, when it is compared with similar arguments in the Derveni papyrus. Tiresias' argument is a discussion of the meaning of “thigh”

(μηρός): Zeus tore off a piece (μέρος) of aether and he made this a hostage (ὄμηρος) that he gave to Hera (286-297). Dodds lists the main objections to these lines: “(1) the absurdity of the explanation (μηρός a mistake for ὄμηρος); (2) the feebleness and obscurity of the ὄμηρος story; (3) the inconsistency of that story with the Chorus’s acceptance of the doctrine of the double birth (94ff) and subsequent reiteration of it (523 ff.); (4) the inappropriateness of this ‘sophistry’ in the mouth of Tiresias.” (note ad loc.)

These objections are all answered, if allegorical verbal argument is acceptable. Kotwick describes the allegorical approach in the Derveni papyrus: “words or phrases are <then> decoded according to a resemblance or likeness that the author detects between the literal meaning of a word or phrase and an entity of the physical world. This resemblance or likeness can have two basic forms. It can be a *linguistic* resemblance between words (such as in a pun, paronomasia, or polysemy) or it can be a resemblance in the *function* or *quality* of two things.” (9-10). An example that seems relevant here is the way *Κρονος* is treated: . . . “the Deveni author allegorizes the god Kronos as a pun as Kro-*Nous*, that is, as *Nous* in his capacity to make the particles of existing things (*τὰ ἐόντα*) strike against each other (*κροβείν*).” (Krotwick, 10)

This kind of allegorizing can be used to support a godless universe, driven by mechanical forces, as in this example, but it can also be used to illustrate the existence of the gods. In the case of Tiresias’ argument, it is possible to take it either way, but in the context of his entire speech, it appears he is using it to give a myth a rational basis.

Similar allegorizing involving verbal play lies behind Tiresias’ argument that the connection of *μανία*, *μαντική*, and *φόβος* shows that Dionysus is involved in prophesy and in military action. (298-305). Tiresias uses another pun when he warns Cadmus about Pentheus: “But Pentheus. . . beware lest he is a *penthos* (suffering) to your house, /Cadmus.” (367-8) This

pun on Pentheus' name will be repeated by Dionysus himself (508). Dodds comments, "the Greek felt that it (punning) pointed to something deeply relevant." (note on 367). The Derveni manuscript is a major example of serious punning.

It is difficult to say whether this scene of the two old men is comedic or something else. This uncertainty of tone that is of interest here. Despite the appearance and action of Tiresias and Cadmus, their arguments are a mix of the artful, the valid and the prophetic—as the audience is aware.

#### Bibliography

Euripides. *Bacchae*. Edited by E. R. Dodds. Oxford, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1960

Kotwick, M. "Allegorical Interpretation in Homer: Penelope's Dream and Early Greek Allegoresis." *AJP* 141.1 (Spring 2020), 1-26.