Sparagmos: The Reimagination of Euripides' *Bacchae* under the Roman Empire as Ethno-Religious and Political Commentary

This study argues that Roman, Greek, and Christian authors under the Roman Empire utilized the *Bacchae*, which stages a struggle with Agave's identity and tension between Dionysus and Thebes, to negotiate broader issues of ethno-religious identity and political power during a time of transition: the Roman Empire, a matrix within which the blend of different religious groups pressured individuals to define their place in society and the shifting power structures invited scrutiny and commentary (Bhabha 1994). The *Bacchae*, then, a meditation on identity as well as the clash between different types of power, provided a tool to voice contemporary concerns to target audiences about the evolving cultural, geographical, and political milieu, revealing the ideologies of those who referenced it to encompass both accommodation or assimilation and resistance. Thus, this paper acknowledges two levels of audiences that interacted with the *Bacchae*: the authors who referenced the tragedy in their works for personal agendas, and the authors' audiences who received those messages.

This study explores three receptions of the *Bacchae* by authors of Greek oration, Imperial Latin literature, and early Christian studies, representing the literary genres of rhetoric, philosophy, and religious defense speech. Section I argues that Dio Chrysostom invokes the *Bacchae's* description of the maenads, in order to issue a political warning to Alexandria's frenzied populace in his *Alexandrian Oration* and demonstrate their ultimate subjugation to the Roman Empire, intending his speech to contain unruly mob behavior. On the one hand, Dio makes public unruliness, a central cause of political conflict with Rome, a metaphorical maenadic madness. On the other hand, the political subjugation and economic dependency of

Alexandria on Rome (Goldhill 2001) means the Alexandrians are not like the maenads, who were freed from the tyrant Pentheus by Dionysiac religion and whom Dionysus lavished with overflowing riches.

Section II demonstrates how Horace in *Epistles* 1.16 modifies a passage from the *Bacchae*, providing a philosophically-informed reading of the *Bacchae*, transforming the stranger's recourse to Dionysiac *lusis* into a statement of Stoic valorization of a virtuous death in the face of tyranny, to express the challenges of maintaining moral freedom within Augustan Rome. The myth of Pentheus no longer expresses imperial triumph but rather the ways in which the "good man," like the ideal Stoic sage, is forced to give up his livelihood or even his life in order to maintain his virtue in the face of tyranny, offering a brief window into Horace's underlying unease about Augustus and absolute power in Rome (Lowrie 2007).

Section III analyzes how Luke's *Acts of the Apostles* 26:14 alludes to the *Bacchae* in order to legitimize Christianity to the royal court, in a world in which Christians lived under Roman political hegemony inundated with Greek literary and cultural influences (Moore 2006). Luke's inclusion of the "kick against the goads" proverb popularized by the *Bacchae* and insistence that Jesus spoke these words not in Greek but in Hebrew comprises a linguistic inversion that deprivileges Greek in favor of the "barbarian" dialect of Hebrew, just as the *Bacchae* deflates Hellenism and promotes the assimilation to the "barbarian." This section describes Luke's ploy as an attempt to acculturate and legitimize Christianity to the Gentile world but simultaneously assert Christianity as unique.

This study on the reception of the *Bacchae* reinforces the debt that the Imperial era pays to Classical Athens, as highlighted first by the Second Sophistic (Whitmarsh 2005), but adds two original points. It highlights the importance of tragedy in this reuse of Greek classical literature,

and it shows that this genre not only was used by Greek authors of the Imperial era to reinforce the memory of the fifth century, but also illustrated the existence of interactions between Latin, Greek, and Christian culture, all of which were using the *Bacchae* as a shared reference. Lastly, this paper contributes to the development of an aspect of reception studies which has been growing in recent years, the study of "reception within antiquity," which "is an important mediating factor between classical and modern cultures" (Hardwick 2006). As this paper seeks to demonstrate, Euripides' *Bacchae* serves precisely this function, and its reception in the Imperial era anticipates the variety of responses that this play will stimulate in its modern and contemporary readers (Versnel 1990).

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