

DAY AND NIGHT, LIGHT AND DARKNESS IN THE *BACCHAE* OF EURIPIDES

DÍA Y NOCHE, LUZ Y OSCURIDAD EN LAS *BACANTES* DE EURÍPIDES

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ABSTRACT

In my paper, I am following the theme of light and darkness in the *Bacchae* of Euripides. Light and darkness is one of many threads of meaning in the *Bacchae*. It runs alongside the overall interpretation of the play. Light and darkness are present in the characterisations of Dionysus and Pentheus. More than that, the characterisations through light and darkness change in accordance with the story of the play. A close reading of *Bacchae* along the lines of light and

RESUMEN

En mi artículo sigo el tema de la luz y la oscuridad en las *Bacantes* de Eurípides. La luz y la oscuridad son uno de los muchos hilos de significado de las *Bacantes*. Va de la mano de la interpretación general de la obra. La luz y la oscuridad están presentes en las caracterizaciones de Dioniso y Penteo. Más que eso, las caracterizaciones a través de la luz y la oscuridad cambian de acuerdo con la historia de la obra. Una lectura atenta de las *Bacantes* en términos de luz y oscuridad puede, por

darkness can, thus, help to determine which evaluations of Pentheus and Dionysus are inscribed in the play. The drama of light and darkness suggests an interpretation of the *sparagmos* as an expiating sacrifice and the restoration of harmony at the end of the play.

tanto, ayudar a determinar qué evaluaciones de Penteo y Dioniso están inscritas en la obra. El drama de la luz y la oscuridad sugiere una interpretación del *sparagmos* como sacrificio expiatorio y de la restauración de la armonía al final de la obra.

KEYWORDS

Bacchae; Darkness; Day; Dionysus; Euripides; Harmony; Interpretation; Light; Night; Pentheus; Sacrifice.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Armonía; Bacantes; Día; Dioniso; Eurípides; Interpretación; Luz; Noche; Oscuridad; Penteo; Sacrificio.

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Δι: κὰν ἡμέρα τό γ' αἰσχρὸν ἐξεύροι τις ἄν
 “Di: Even in the daytime one might discover the shameful”
 Eur., *Bacch.* 488

“La raison est le soleil avec lequel je chasse les poussières de mes
 mille erreurs sur mes ailes”
 Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Terre des Hommes*

READING THROUGH OR WATCHING a performance of Euripides’ *Bacchae*, the attentive reader or spectator will notice a large number of scenes that deal, in words or in fact, with day and night or with light and darkness. In words, Pentheus is always eager to condemn the festivities of Dionysus, because they happen at night.¹ On the verge of the metaphorical, Dionysus’ youthful beauty is described with his blond, “light-coloured locks”, on the one hand, and with his dark, “wine-coloured” face, on the other.² Later in the action of the play, we find the king chasing after the god “having seized a dark sword”³ while the choir is praising their divine champion and destroyer of palaces as the “greatest light”⁴ At the turning point of the play, Pentheus’ apparent

1. Eur., *Bacch.* 487.

2. Eur., *Bacch.* 235-236.

3. Eur., *Bacch.* 628.

4. Eur., *Bacch.* 608.

madness makes him see “two suns”⁵. When all is over, Pentheus’ body parts are scattered partly in the sun and partly in the shades,⁶ restoring a kind-of equilibrium. The tragedy of the *Bacchae*, it seems, plays out as a drama of light and darkness.⁷

In this paper, I would like to direct the gaze of my readers on this drama. The guiding question of this undertaking must be 1) specifically how and when light and darkness appear in the play, and 2) in which way this appearance relates to the development of and lines of meaning in the play. Some of the scenes I briefly alluded to above have been explained singularly as references to, for instance, Dionysiac initiation rites, which alone would render them understandable;⁸ in my paper, I will look at these scenes with a view to the coherency of the play as a whole. How do they fit in and how does a reading of those scenes affirm or reshape our understanding of the play?

To do this, I will, first of all, take a detour around current interpretations of the *Bacchae*, that take part in the contest for the play’s meaning and reveal my own position. In a second step, I will take a look at Pentheus’ use of light and darkness in his characterisation of Dionysus, providing a first example for the way light and darkness are employed in the meaning making process of the play. With this in mind, I will start the journey through the play with a close reading of the first scene of Teiresias and Cadmus in the first *epeisodion* (170-214), which I believe is a key to the entire play and an important first stop on our road to an understanding of light and darkness within it. Well-equipped with those directions, I will proceed to compare Pentheus’ apparent darkness and Dionysus’ apparent brightness in the play’s conflict-laden middle part. As we give up all hope for Pentheus and his Cadmeians, we explore the relationship of light and madness in the characterisations of Pentheus and Agave. Turning on the home stretch, I will sketch two versions of balance of light and darkness in the description of the good life by the bacchants, on the one hand, and in Pentheus’ *sparagmos*, on the other. Having completed the journey through the *Bacchae*, I will formulate a conclusion that will shine the brightest possible light on my initial questions. To begin, an obligatory inspection of current interpretations will now lay the groundwork for further investigations.

5. Eur., *Bacch.* 918.

6. Eur., *Bacch.* 1137-1138.

7. Cf. Scott, 1975, p. 346 on depictions of animals, architecture, light and darkness: “they relate directly to and inform the vital issues of the drama”.

8. Seaford, 2010, p. 202.

1. INTERPRETATIONS OF THE *BACCHAE*

Before I can even begin to scrutinize day and night and light and darkness, I have to lay open how I understand the play as a whole, and how it has been understood over the course of the last century. The *Bacchae* have a reputation that, more than other (Euripidean) tragedies, they defy interpretation, a fact which Gilbert Norwood captured aptly in his title *The Riddle of the Bacchae* as early as 1908.⁹ This view lives on even in the latest handbooks under the guise of a willy-nilly approach to interpretation as in the play being so mysterious, “modern”, or polyphonic that it can mean basically anything.¹⁰ Luckily, there have been not too few actual interpretations that can inform our judgement. In the first half of the 20th century, the play has primarily been interpreted with a view to the conflict between the rational character Pentheus and the irrational character Dionysus.¹¹ Early historical–biographical interpretations ascribed this rational – irrational dichotomy in the *Bacchae* – and the fact that Dionysus wins in the end – to Euripides’ supposed conversion in old age.¹² While most interpretations focus on the aforementioned conflict, not all agree that the winning side is shown to be clearly the one favoured by the text. There has thus been ongoing conflict between the supporters of Dionysus and the supporters of Pentheus in the scholarship of the *Bacchae*.¹³ The supporters of Pentheus, though, usually need to resort to sophisticated devices to be able to make a case for Pentheus in the text, the most extravagant being Arthur Verrall’s enlightened interpretation of the foreigner/Dionysus as an actual fraud.¹⁴ Eric R. Dodds, George M.A. Grube and Reginald P. Winnington-Ingram eventually took the discussion to another level, when they established that Euripides’ tragedies do not usually favour a modern, rationalist

9. Norwood, 1908.

10. E.g., Reitzammer, 2017, p. 299: “we recognize that Euripides tends to create characters that make statements frequently in conflict with the statements of other characters, and he tends to leave his audience with more questions than answers”; cf. Seaford, 2021, p. 18.

11. Oranje, 1984, p. 7; my overview, here and later, is greatly indebted to Hans Oranje’s succinct state of the art up to his time, which includes but is not limited to the older scholarship 1900-1950.

12. André Rivier is the most influential voice of this direction and a supporter of the so-called palinodie theory that sees Dionysus as seriously trying to convert Pentheus in the first half of the play: Rivier, 1975 (1st edition: 1944), p. 192; cf. Oranje, 1984, pp. 7-10.

13. Oranje, 1984, p. 10: “These are the most opposed views about the *Bacchae*: on the one hand that the play portrays maenadism as the manifestation of religious fanaticism, by which reason is destroyed, a fanaticism against which the poet protests; on the other, that the play portrays it as the manifestation of a divine power, which defines the dimensions of human existence, a power which the poet accepts with deep piety”.

14. Verrall, 1910, pp. 1-163; cf. Oranje, 1984, p. 8.

perspective, and added psychology and religion to the equation.¹⁵ As they view Dionysus (at least also) as the divine representation of a common principle, the question of whether or not the audience (or the author in author-centric approaches) is in favour of Dionysus' power, becomes obsolete.¹⁶ At the same time, they identify a conflict in the characterisation of Pentheus not so much with the external foreigner/god but with the principle he represents. Pentheus cannot integrate the principle of what Dionysus stands for neither in his life nor in his kingdom. He is stressed, unjust, everybody is afraid of him, and his judgements are shown to be mostly false.¹⁷ On top of this, Pentheus seems to be sexually unbalanced and has a very sexualised view of Dionysus and his rites, which is again and again contradicted by everybody else.¹⁸ Dodds has poignantly put in words the kind of person we find Pentheus to be in the text: "the dark puritan whose passion is compounded of horror and unconscious desire, and it is this which leads him to his ruin".¹⁹ The plot of the *Bacchae*, like that of other tragedies of the time, is about the fate of a household and a community depending on the virtuosity of one of its members.²⁰

Later scholars have expanded this view and added further arguments. Helene P. Foley added the insight, that *Bacchae* is not mainly a play about an individual conflict between Pentheus and Dionysus, but rather about a social struggle between the ruled and their ruler, that "reflects the precariousness of social and political life in late fifth-century Athens".²¹ Richard Seaford's commentary adds the element of foreign cults and their impact especially on the populace, as he identifies Dionysus as "a foreign deity [...] universally acknowledge[d] to embody the communality of the polis".²² Luigi Barzini's recent monograph ultimately contextualizes *Bacchae* (and *Frogs*) within the discourse on tyranny and democracy in the Athens of its most likely

15. Dodds, 1929; Grube, 1935; Dodds, 1944; Winnington-Ingram, 1948; cf. Oranje, 1984, pp. 10-11.

16. This consequence has never been drawn more eloquently than by Humphrey Kitto (1939): "Did Euripides approve or disapprove of Dionysus? The question is silly, as silly as to ask whether he approved or disapproved of Aphrodite. Dionysus, or what he typifies – for we need not tie Euripides to a literal belief in his mythology – exists, and that is enough". Oranje disagrees on this point (1984, p. 4): I cannot follow his thought and agree with Kitto to the fullest; cf. Seaford, 2003, p. 106; Mills, 2006, p. 58. Interpretations of *Bacchae* that focus on the alleged personal cruelty of the deity exist up until the most recent scholarship: see, for example, Hall, 2016, p. 27.

17. The earlier scholarship says partly the contrary, e.g., Pohlenz, 1954 (1st edition 1930), p. 455.

18. Cf. Kirk, 1979, pp. 251-255.

19. Dodds, 1944, pp. 222-223; cf. also Segal, 1986, pp. 282-283.

20. Cf. Karamanou, 2016, p. 55.

21. Foley, 1985, pp. 206, 255.

22. Seaford, 1996, p. 52.

first performance,²³ and identifies Pentheus as an evil tyrant,²⁴ whose violent death is a ritual sacrifice that restores peace and order to the society.²⁵

I share the interpretation of Dodds, Kitto and their more recent followers and thus tend to understand the *Bacchae* as the story of the necessary fall of a psychologically imbalanced man and king, confronted with the order of the world.

This is important for my thoughts on light and darkness, because I believe viewing the play through the lens of light and darkness can actually add further argumentative weight to the line of understanding of the *Bacchae* laid out above. I am not the first to look at light and darkness in the *Bacchae*. In 2010 an entire volume was dedicated to *Light and Darkness in Ancient Greek Myth and Religion*,²⁶ featuring a chapter by Richard Seaford on the mystic light in the *Bacchae*.²⁷ While Seaford is using the *Bacchae* to make an argument about light in (Dionysiac) mystery religion in general,²⁸ I am more interested in the role of light and darkness internal to the text in *Bacchae*.²⁹ My endeavour is, thus, more akin to William Scott's earlier study of "imagery and stage effects in the *Bacchae*" and their relationship to the themes of the play, which features a brief chapter on light and darkness.³⁰ Scott, who seems to take Pentheus' accounts of Dionysus and of himself at their face value, comes to different conclusions from my own when he describes Pentheus as consistently "light" and Dionysus as consistently "dark".³¹ I will suggest a different interpretation and compare my conclusions with those of Scott, as I proceed.

So now to day and night, light and darkness.

23. Cf. Hall, 2016, pp. 14-15.

24. Barzini, 2021, pp. 145-149.

25. Barzini, 2021, p. 127, with reference to Girard, 1988, pp. 139-141.

26. Christopoulos, Karakantza & Levaniouk, 2010.

27. Seaford, 2010.

28. Seaford, 2010, pp. 203-204.

29. The two approaches are in no way exclusive of each other. Of course, I consider Eurpidean drama to be a part of the culture of its time wherefore Seaford's cultural approach is legitimate and useful. Nonetheless, every dramatic text must be considered as an organism that is permeable to cultural influences to a certain degree but also has an inner logic that is, first of all, pertinent to itself; cf. Diller, 1971, p. 335; Leinieks, 1996, p. 5.

30. Scott, 1975, pp. 343-345.

31. Scott, 1975, pp. 343-346.

2. DAY AND NIGHT, LIGHT AND DARKNESS, I. DISTRUST OF A STRANGER

Even a superficial reading of *Bacchae* soon produces the impression that Pentheus' initial attitude towards Dionysus, which is an important source of dramatic conflict in the play, is distrust. This distrust seems to be rooted in Pentheus' conception of the rites of Dionysus and this, in his own words, has to do with the time of day when they are performed. We see this clearly in the second *epeisodion* in lines 485 to 488:

Πε: τὰ δ' ἱερὰ νύκτωρ ἢ μεθ' ἡμέραν τελεῖς;
 Δι: νύκτωρ τὰ πολλά: σεμνότητ' ἔχει σκότος.
 Πε: τοῦτ' ἐς γυναικας δόλιόν ἐστι καὶ σαθρόν.
 Δι: κὰν ἡμέρα τό γ' αἰσχρὸν ἐξεύροι τις ἄν.

“Pe: Do you perform the rites at night or by day?
 Di: At night for the most part: darkness possesses solemnity.
 Pe: It is devious and corrupt where women are concerned.
 Di: Even in the daytime one might discover the shameful”.³²

Here, Pentheus asks Dionysus, whether his rites are performed at night or by day and adds that he believes that the night is dangerous for women. The same suspicion appears already before, in line 469, when Pentheus asks the god, whom he believes to be only a follower of Dionysus, when he was possessed by the god, at night or during the day:

Πε: πότερα δὲ νύκτωρ σ' ἢ κατ' ὄμμ' ἠνάγκασεν;

“Pe: Was it by night or face to face that he compelled you?”

For Pentheus, it seems, the question of night and day concerns the trustworthiness of the cult of Dionysus. If it is happening at night, it must be all orgies.³³

Day and night have a counterpart in light and darkness: Whatever connects to the day is usually itself light, and whatever connects to the night is usually itself dark.³⁴ While this equation is as valid as it is intuitive, some scholars sustain the difference

32. Translations of Eur., *Bacch.* throughout after Seaford, 1996. I follow the edition of Diggle, 1994.

33. Cf. Seaford, 1996, p. 487: “P. returns to his obsession”.

34. See for example Mercedes Aguirre's characterisation of the Erinyes as creatures of the night and of darkness: Aguirre, 2010, pp. 133-136.

between the pairs: torches, for instance, though being bearers of light, or because of that property, often identify as markers of the night, even though they are a light attribute.³⁵ In such cases the torchbearers, the fire in the night, etc. appear particularly light because of the darkness that surrounds them. Do they therefore represent (varieties of) the night, or is theirs a little day in contrast to the surrounding night? The answer to the question would be as arbitrary to an ancient Greek person as it is to us.³⁶

Light and darkness are concepts that, as metaphors, are open to semantic ascriptions from various fields in Greek antiquity. Walter Burkert and Nanno Marinatos highlight the spheres of knowledge, the psyche and life and death as usual topics.³⁷ The variety of the topics, though, points to the futility to limit the meaning of light-darkness-metaphors to any particular area without the consideration of specific contexts. In the context of Dionysiac mysticism, which is the cultural background of *Bacchae*, a strong dichotomy between light and darkness including day, being sunlight, and night, being its absence, meets the needs of the initiate best. Everything that is light, especially sunlight, is “the mystic light” that is Dionysus.³⁸ In my study, I, therefore, insist on the parallelism of day and light, and of night and darkness and take “light” to refer to the same concept of sun-induced daylight and “darkness” to the same concept as “night” as the absence of the sun.

Day and night in the rites, thus, have a counterpart in the characterisation of Dionysus or “the foreigner” by Pentheus in terms of light and darkness. Already in the first epeisodion, Pentheus describes the foreigner to Cadmus and Teiresias as a man who is both light and dark,³⁹ with blond hair and a dark complexion, who feigns the rites of Dionysus by night and day to seduce young women (235-238):

35. Scott, 1975, p. 344; Aguirre, 2010, p. 137.

36. The example of torchlight is illuminating, as it is contested whether torches in the cult of Dionysus refer to a nightly setting, or whether they are simply an attribute of the cult at any time of day (cf. Paleothodoros, 2010, p. 251). Thus, it is by no means self-evident that ancient Greeks would have associated torchlight with the night any more than any other person would.

37. “Darkness may stand for ignorance, evil and the ominous, violence and barbarism, and the world beyond; light may denote vision, clairvoyance, the Olympian order, the salvation of the psyche, and the world we inhabit”: Burkert & Marinatos, 2010, p. XV.

38. Cf. Seaford, 2010, pp. 203-204.

39. William Scott seems to understand all characterisations of Dionysus, even those explicitly associating him with light, as pointing towards darkness (1975, p. 344). I think this interpretation is marred by interference from a cultural preconception of Dionysus as a deity of the night. The point of interest is that, against our expectations, Dionysus is described through darkness and light in the text.

[Πε:]

ξανθοῖσι βοστρύχοισιν εὐοσμῶν κόμην,
οἰνώπας ὄσσοις χάριτας Ἀφροδίτης ἔχων,
ὄς ἡμέρας τε κεῦφρόνας συγγίγνεται
τελετὰς προτείνων εὐίους νεάνισιν.

“with fragrant hair and light-coloured locks,
wine-coloured in face, having the graces of Aphrodite in his eyes,
who through days and nights mingles with young girls,
holding out to them joyful initiations”.

In this scene, Dionysus’ light and dark appearance is connected with rites that take place at day and night, and the omnipresence of the god in both realms that makes him appear untrustworthy in the eyes of Pentheus. Tellingly, this characterisation of Dionysus is given by Pentheus before he has had the chance to see him.

The characterisation stays more or less the same, when Pentheus meets Dionysus in the second Epeisodion, even though what he sees changes completely. In lines 457-459, in the second epeisodion, Pentheus describes Dionysus’ face as white, and takes his light colour as proof that he spends his time awake at night “hunting the pleasures of Aphrodite”:

[Πε:]

λευκὴν δὲ χροιάν ἐκ παρασκευῆς ἔχεις,
οὐχ ἡλίου βολαῖσιν, ἀλλ’ ὑπὸ σκιᾶς,
τὴν Ἀφροδίτην καλλονῇ θηρώμενος.

“You have a skin white by contrivance, not by the rays of the sun but under shade hunting Aphrodite with beauty”.

Especially, the chosen contrast between “wine-coloured” (*οἰνώπας*, 236) and “white” (*λευκὴν*, 457) shows that Pentheus already knows in advance the meaning of everything he sees or imagines, no matter what it is. We, thus, find the same moral judgement passed on, allegedly, nightly paleness as before on, allegedly, passionate darkness in the same face.

Two results can be gathered from this first glimpse on light and darkness. First of all, we receive different characteristics of Dionysus; he is also light and also darkness and a creature of day and night, at least as far as we can tell. The second result is connected exactly with this restriction: we cannot really tell, because most of all we

learn that Pentheus' judgements are no to be trusted blindly. Pentheus sense of sight, or more likely his ability to see truly, is impaired.

Having gone so far, we move on to the play's key scene on sight, truth and knowledge.

3. AN ELDERLY *POLITES* AND A BLIND MAN ON THE WAY TO MT. CITHAERON

Going back to the first set of questions, the questions of day and night in relationship to the rites of Dionysus, we find them to be present already in the first *episodesion*, in the meeting of Teiresias and Cadmus, that serves as an opening to the play and can be understood as a key to its interpretation.⁴⁰ In this first *episodesion*, Cadmus, the founder of Thebes and the family head of the Cadmeians, Pentheus' family, and his seer Teiresias are willing to go to Mt. Cithaeron to worship Dionysus. Pentheus later ridicules them, threatens Teiresias, and sends men to catch Dionysus, who he thinks is an impostor. The scene is not only important for the understanding of the entire play, but it holds an important key on light and darkness in the guise of the faculty of vision: the blindness of Teiresias and the untrustworthiness of the truth that Pentheus professes to have seen. The scene begins with Teiresias' and Cadmus' meeting.

Τε:

τίς ἐν πύλαισι; Κάδμον ἐκκάλει δόμων,
Ἄγηνορος παῖδ', ὃς πόλιν Σιδωνίαν
λιπὼν ἐπύργωσ' ἄστρῳ Θηβαίων τόδε.

"Who is at the gate? Call out Kadmos from the house, Agenor's son, who left the city of Sidon and fortified this town of Thebes" (170-172).

[...]

Κα:

ὦ φίλταθ', ὡς σὴν γῆρυν ἤσθόμην κλύων
σοφὴν σοφοῦ παρ' ἀνδρός, ἐν δόμοισιν ὦν:

"O dearest friend - for I recognised your voice when I heard it, a wise voice of a wise man, as I was in the house" (178-179).

40. Cf. Seidensticker, 2016, pp. 275-282.

Teiresias and Cadmus, more than any other characters in the play, represent archetypes: Teiresias the wiseman and Cadmus the city builder. This becomes very clear in verses 170 to 172, when Teiresias introduces Cadmus⁴¹ and in verses 178 to 179 when Cadmus salutes Teiresias. Cadmus is particularly important, as he is the healthy version of what has become extreme and unhealthy in Pentheus: the rationality of Greek polis culture and the striving for control that comes with it. These two men are presented in a scene, which has comic elements: two old men from the city, dressed as maenads,⁴² who are on their way to submit themselves to the principle of Dionysus, the principle of voluntary loss of control in a rural setting.⁴³ In this special context, Cadmus says something meaningful:

[Κα:]

ποι δεῖ χορεύειν, ποῖ καθιστάναι πόδα
καὶ κρᾶτα σείσαι πολίων; ἐξηγοῦ σύ μοι
γέρων γέροντι, Τειρεσία: σὺ γὰρ σοφός.

“Where must we go to dance, where to set our feet and shake our grey heads? You expound this to me, one old man to another, Teiresias. For you are wise” (184-186).

In verses 184 to 186, he addresses Teiresias, the wiseman, saying that he does not know where to go and how to dance, when he is going to be a maenad. Just after this, he adds that he is willing to stomp the earth with his thyrsus – so dance the maenad dance – all day and all night:

[Κα:]

ὡς οὐ κάμοιμ' ἄν οὔτε νύκτ' οὔθ' ἡμέραν
θύρσῳ κροτῶν γῆν.

“Because I would not tire, neither all night nor all day, striking the earth with my thyrsus” (187-188).

41. Cf. Scott, 1975, p. 340.

42. Richard Buxton has made it a strong point that dressing up as a maenad need not be understood as gender cross-dressing (Buxton, 2009, pp. 237-240; *contra* Goldhill, 1986, p. 262). Either way, the frail elderly men appear ridiculous in their maenadic outfit.

43. Cf. Goldhill, 1986, pp. 262-263; Seidensticker, 2016, pp. 281-282.

So, Cadmus, on the one hand, proclaims that he does not know anything about the cult of Dionysus, on the other hand he suggests to do something that is meaningful in the play all the time – to be a maenad by day and by night. So, we are already here in the very beginning of the play left with the question: is this what maenads do? Celebrate by day and by night? Or is Cadmus just wrong? Because of the farce-like character of the scene,⁴⁴ Teiresias, who usually knows things, is not helpful. Turning the cultural concept of the seeing blindness of the prophet⁴⁵ on its head, Cadmus says in verses 210 to 211 that he, the old king, will tell his blind prophet what he sees.

[Κα:]

ἐπεὶ σὺ φέγγος, Τειρεσία, τόδ' οὐχ ὄρας,
ἐγὼ προφήτης σοι λόγων γενήσομαι.

“Since you cannot see this light, Teiresias, I will become interpreter to you with words” (210-211).

In this first scene, the question is asked and not answered how to celebrate Dionysus. Thus, the ground is prepared for this question in the entire play. The two figures, who ask the question, are particularly unfit to answer it because they wear their comic dress and they represent the city: Cadmus as the mythical founder of the city and Teiresias as his prophet and, uniquely in the *Bacchae*, as a sophist.⁴⁶

As Bernd Seidensticker has shown in extenso,⁴⁷ Teiresias is trying to persuade Pentheus of the virtues of Dionysus with a speech in the style of a (city-dwelling) sophist with arguments that are “so absurd that neither Pentheus takes [them] seriously nor can the audience”.⁴⁸ Teiresias’ apparent insensitivity to the nature of the god is one of several instances of (metaphorical) blindness that is explored in this scene.

Teiresias’ blindness, his insensibility to the difference between light and darkness, which Cadmus refers to explicitly in the scene, apart from making him an unfit guide on the road to Cithaeron, starts a motive in the play that will come up again later.

44. Cf. Seidensticker, 2016, p. 276, with a discussion of the possibility to determine the comic in Greek tragedy and an overview of the older literature; see also Verdenius, 1988, pp. 241-242; Garvie, 2016, pp. 111-112.

45. Létoublon, 2010, p. 175.

46. Cf. Foley, 1985, pp. 225-226, on humour and irony in this scene.

47. Seidensticker, 2016, pp. 278-282, with the older literature.

48. Seidensticker, 2016, p. 281.

What the “respected seer”⁴⁹ fails to see is that Dionysus’ power will bring the end of the dynasty of his masters in Thebes. His blindness is a blindness on various levels: the actual one of the old man that may have added to the comic effect of his entrance in contrast to the dancing choir and with a view to his intention to dance the maenad dance on Mt Cithaeron; the blindness of the groping rationalist, who fails to make a convincing point about a deity – even though his insights may be right;⁵⁰ the (metaphorical) blindness of a seer (!) vis-à-vis the (metaphorical) light of divinity. Teiresias’ different kinds of blindness focus the attention of the recipients on the subject of vision and truth that reappear immediately afterwards in the characterisation of Pentheus. Teiresias’ inability to see, thus, sets the stage for the scrutiny of Pentheus’ own inability to see truly, which I have pointed out above. Furthermore, it will be taken up below, when impaired vision becomes a marker of Pentheus’ and Agave’s madness.⁵¹

4. DAY AND NIGHT, LIGHT AND DARKNESS, II. DIVINE LIGHT VS. AN ATHEIST’S DRAB DARKNESS

Different players play the game of ascribing light and darkness and day and night to Dionysus in the tragedy with different results. The choir usually associates the god with light. Most conspicuously in the third epeisodion, after the destruction of Pentheus palace when they celebrate Dionysus as their liberator, they call him “great light”:

[Xo:]

ὦ φάος μέγιστον ἡμῖν εὖθις βακχεύματος,
ὡς ἐσείδον ἀσμένη σε, μονάδ’ ἔχουσ’ ἔρημίαν.

“O greatest light for us of the joyful-crying bacchanal, how gladly I looked on you in my lonely desolation” (608-609).

Similarly, the working of the god is connected to light here: The destruction of the palace is shown to be effected by fire and lightning. Here it is not only the choir who gives a perspective on the god, but on the level of the play’s performance we are shown that Dionysus works (and destroys) through fire and light:

49. Seidensticker, 2016, p. 283.

50. Seidensticker, 2016, pp. 281-282.

51. See *infra*.

Δι: ἄπτε κεραύνιον αἶθοπα λαμπάδα:
 σύμφλεγε σύμφλεγε δώματα Πενθέος.
 Χο: ἅ ἅ,
 πῦρ οὐ λεύσσεις, οὐδ' ἀυγάζη,
 Σεμέλας ἱερὸν ἀμφὶ τάφον, ἄν
 ποτε κεραυνόβολος ἔλιπε φλόγα
 Δίου βροντᾶς;

“Di: Ignite the gleaming lightning torch, burn up, burn up the house of Pentheus.
 Cho: Ah, Ah! Do you not see fire, do you not behold, around the sacred tomb of Semele, the flame which once Zeus’s thunderbolt-hurled thunder left?” (594-599).

In the perspective of the choir and from what we see (or must imagine) on stage, Dionysus is a God of lightning and fire, not only “of the light that flickers in the darkness”.⁵²

The counterpart to these descriptions of Dionysus are the descriptions of Pentheus. His actions are usually related to darkness, sometimes in contrast to light. In verses 627-631, still in the third episodion, Dionysus describes how the enraged and already delusional king hunted a spectre of himself, and created by the god, through his destroyed palace. The focus lies on a contrast here: Pentheus grabs a “dark sword”, the spectre created by Dionysus is a ‘spectre from light air’⁵³:

[Δι:]
 διαμεθείς δὲ τόνδε μόχθον, ὡς ἐμοῦ πεφευγόςτος,
 ἴεται ξίφος κελαινὸν ἀρπάσας δόμων ἔσω.
 κᾶθ' ὁ Βρόμιος, ὡς ἔμοιγε φαίνεται, δόξαν λέγω,
 φάσμι' ἐποίησεν κατ' αὐλήν: ὁ δ' ἐπὶ τοῦθ' ὠρμημένος
 ἦσσε κἀκέντει φαεννὸν αἰθέρ', ὡς σφάζων ἐμέ.

“And having abandoned this toil, on the assumption that I had fled, he rushes, having seized a dark sword, inside the house. And then Bromios, as it seems to me at least – I say my opinion only – made a light in the courtyard. And he (Pentheus) charging against it rushed and stabbed at the shining <image> as if slaughtering me”.

52. Scott, 1975, p. 344.

53. Richard Seaford has argued to read *φῶς* for *φάσμι'* in line 630 in accordance with the manuscripts (2010, p. 202); if Dionysus created a light, which Pentheus attacks with a “dark sword”, the contrast would be even greater.

Also in less conspicuous passages, Pentheus actions usually have “dark” results: Pentheus threatens Dionysus with “the darkness of the night” when he has him locked away in the second *episodesion*.

[Πε:]
καθεῖρξαιτ' αὐτὸν ἰππικαῖς πέλας
φάτναισιν, ὡς ἂν σκότιον εἰσορᾷ κνέφας.

“Confine him next to the horses’ mangers, so that he may look on gloomy darkness” (509-510).

Consequently, Dionysus asks the Bacchae after their liberation in the third *episodesion* if they suffered great fear whether he would re-emerge from the darkness of the prison where Pentheus had thrown him:

[Δι:]
εἰς ἀθυμίαν ἀφίκεσθ', ἥνικ' εἰσεπεμπόμην,
Πενθέως ὡς ἐς σκοτεινὰς ὀρκάνας πεσοῦμενος;

“Did you come into faintheartedness, when I was being sent in, thinking that I would fall into the dark enclosures of Pentheus” (610-611).

This characterisation of the king in terms of light and darkness goes parallel to his general characterisation especially in terms of sexuality that Dodds had seen when he called the king “a dark puritan”. Pentheus proclaims to hate sex and everything that lacks control, while he is at the same time overwhelmed by his own sexual urges that drive him to his death. Similarly, he who uses night and darkness as points of suspicion towards Dionysus is constantly shown to be dark in his actions in the play. The metaphor of the dark puritan, aptly chosen by Dodds, expresses exactly what is already inscribed in the text of the play.⁵⁴

With a view to William Scott’s earlier interpretation along the lines of light and darkness, Scott seems to rest with the expectation a recipient might have from the self-characterisation of Pentheus in the beginning of the play, but overlooks that a

54. It goes without saying that Dodds’ “dark puritan” is a figure that has its specific place in (early) modern English Protestantism and that the fantasy of ancient Athenians cannot have been populated with English Protestant dark puritans. Nonetheless, Dodds captures the psychological state of Pentheus perfectly by comparing it to that of a dark puritan: the state of soul that is typical of people who try to exert complete control over their urges and are therefore driven to madness by the same.

close reading of these scenes actually gives a different result. Pentheus is dark against his claims and our expectations, while Dionysus is light in opposition to Pentheus' initial accusations. There seems to be a remarkable congruence between the economy of light and darkness in the text, on the one hand, and the division of metaphorical light and darkness, purity and filth, between the characters. Pentheus claims to be pure and rational but appears to be corrupted, while Dionysus is accused of corruption and proves himself to be a powerful deity over the course of the play. We see the same cross-movement in the development of the play both in terms of metaphorical light and darkness and in terms of light and darkness in the text.

If this level of congruence between the overall meaning of the play and grammar of light and darkness seems remarkable, we can turn to the development of Pentheus after the third episodion and the reflection of his fundamental transformation⁵⁵ in the grammar of light and darkness. Before, a word on the cultural implications of talking about light and darkness in an ancient Greek context is due.

Light and darkness have a wide range of possible applications as metaphors in ancient Greek culture like in most other cultures. Nothing specific in ancient Greek culture forbids us to understand “dark”, like Dodds does, in a more or less universal sense as “sinister” or “corrupted”.⁵⁶ If one wanted to ascribe a more specific interpretation – something that the text does not call for – one could try to find this in the context of the Dionysiac mysteries following the insightful suggestions of Richard Seaford.⁵⁷ The drama of light and darkness that accompanies Pentheus' destruction could plausibly be read as reference to some specific experiences of the initiate. Such attempts must be speculative, though, and, if maintained with a claim to exclusiveness, would misjudge Euripidean tragedy solely as a reflex of culture and religion. This is not the aim of this paper.

5. SUNLIGHT OF REASON, SUNLIGHT OF MADNESS

In the second half of the play, we see an abrupt change in the character of Pentheus. He who at first fought against Dionysus seems to be now completely under his spell. After the report from the messenger about the wondrous deeds of the bacchants on Mt. Cithaeron (677-774), Pentheus does not accept his defeat, but sends his army after the bacchants. At this point, it seems to be decided that Pentheus cannot be

55. Cf. Scott, 1975, p. 333; Oranje, 1984, pp. 89-94, with the older literature; Mills, 2006, p. 45.

56. Cf. Burkert & Marinatos, 2010, p. XV.

57. Seaford, 2010.

convinced and has to die. In the following exchange (787-861), Dionysus seems to put him under some kind of spell and convinces him to go to Mt. Cithaeron dressed as a maenad to see the bacchant himself. The moment, when this becomes final, at the beginning of the fourth Stasimon when Pentheus steps out of his palace dressed as a maenad, is marked with an odd reference to light. Pentheus says:

[Πε:]

καὶ μὴν ὄρα̃ν μοι δύο μὲν ἡλίους δοκῶ,

“And indeed I seem to myself to see two suns” (918).

Richard Seaford has shown that this scene in the play may be a reference to the use of mirrors in the Dionysiac initiation – right afterwards Pentheus also claims that he sees two Thebes.⁵⁸ This might well be the case. I would still like to make a suggestion concerning the connection of light, vision and madness internal to the play. It has become a common understanding that Pentheus’ impaired sight is an outward marker of his madness and the mind control that Dionysus now exerts over him.⁵⁹ In the realm of light and darkness this goes parallel with the development of the play. The dark one who fought against Dionysus, the light one, is now under his spell. He who was dark before is now seeing two Suns, thus too much light.

An important point of reference for further thoughts on light and darkness is a scene at the end of the play starring Agave and Cadmus, the prelude to the famous scene of recognition. When, back in Thebes, Cadmus confronts Agave, delusional and with her son’s ripped-off head still in her hand, Cadmus asks her to look at the sky. Agave does so and agrees with Cadmus that to her the sky seems much lighter than usual. Once she realizes this, her spell is broken, and she awakes from her delusion:

Κα: πρῶτον μὲν ἐς τόνδ’ αἰθέρ’ ὄμμα σὸν μέθεσ.

Αγ: ἰδοῦ: τί μοι τόνδ’ ἐξυπέϊπας εἰσορᾶν;

Κα: ἔθ’ αὐτὸς ἢ σοι μεταβολὰς ἔχειν δοκεῖ;

Αγ: λαμπρότερος ἢ πρὶν καὶ διειπετέστερος.

Κα: τὸ δὲ πτοηθὲν τόδ’ ἔτι σῆ ψυχῆ πάρα;

Αγ: οὐκ οἶδα τοῦπος τοῦτο. γίγνομαι δέ πως ἔννουσ, μετασταθεῖσα τῶν πάρος φρενῶν.

58. Seaford, 1996, p. 223.

59. Scott, 1975, pp. 345-346; Oranje, 1984, p. 90; Mills, 2006, p. 45.

“Ka: First turn your eye to this upper air.

Ag: There. Why did you suggest I look on this?

Ka: Is it the same or does it seem to you to have changed?

Ag: It is brighter than before and more translucent.

Ka: And is this fluttering still with your psyche?

Ag: I don’t understand what you say; but I am somehow coming to my senses, I am altered from my previous mind” (1264-1270).

The delusion of Agave, and I would claim also of Pentheus, is imagined in the *Bacchae* as connected with too much light or with a changed perception of light. One could say that Agave and Pentheus have been overexposed.

In both cases, an impaired vision, through which the affected seems to perceive rather too much than too little light, is the outward appearance of Dionysus direct intervention in the minds of his victims – Agave and Pentheus are mad because Dionysus has made them mad. This shows in their perception a surplus of light. Dionysus has blown their minds with light like he earlier destroyed Pentheus’ palace with the force of light. The connection between correct vision and the perception of the truth had been introduced, and thus prepared in the play, in the characterisation of Teiresias as a blind man both in the literal sense and metaphorically.⁶⁰

While Dionysus in his unlimited power can light up minds against the will of their owners, this is not a balanced or healthy state, but, as is clear from the two scenes, a state of madness reserved for those who are beyond hope. In the last chapter I will focus briefly on the alternative to this extreme state in the play: an equilibrium of light and darkness.

6. DAY AND NIGHT, LIGHT AND DARKNESS, III. BALANCE AND RESOLUTION

While Pentheus’ states of either very light or very dark are extreme – it is only one at a time – the positive other to Pentheus’ extremity is depicted as partakers of both night and day in the play. We have seen before that Cadmus, the healthy version of Pentheus, is preparing to dance the maenad dance all night and all day.⁶¹ So also the bacchantes talk about the time of day in a more general description of their life as followers of Dionysus:

60. See *supra*.

61. Eur., *Bacch.* 187-188.

[Χο:]
κατὰ φάος νύκτας τε φίλας

“by day and dear nights” (425).

[Χο:]
χαίρω θηρεύουσα: τὰ δ' ἕτερα μεγάλα
φανερά τ': ὦ, νάειν
ἐπὶ τὰ καλὰ βίον,
ἡμαρ ἐς νύκτα τ' εὐ-
αγοῦντ' εὐσεβεῖν, τὰ δ' ἕξω νόμιμα
δίκας ἐκβαλόντα τιμᾶν θεούς.

“I rejoice in hunting these other things that are great and manifest - they lead life towards the fine things - by day and into the night to be holy and reverent, and, casting out customs that are outside justice, to honour the gods” (1005-1010).

In the first stasimon (425), they say that a pious person will lead a good life “at the light of day and during the much-loved nights”. In the enraged fourth stasimon (1005-1010), they say more or less the same thing again. The explicit mention of night and day can be understood as a hint to a pious economy of night and day that is itself important for the good life. The two stasima, thus, explicate the idea that underlies the economy of light and darkness, and night and day in the *Bacchae*. M. Hose remarks that those two stasima (and the third stasimon) have in common that they do not only react to Pentheus’ outrage but each present a positive alternative.⁶²

In a different context, this equilibrium of light and darkness seems to reappear. The death of Pentheus reconciles the society of Thebes with the principle of Dionysus.⁶³ His death is told in the fifth epeisodion in a messenger report (1043-1152). The scene itself (1061-1147) is diligently crafted and retells the event step by step.⁶⁴ This holds true for the development of the theme of light and darkness. The reconciliation takes place on the level of light and darkness, where it is realized as an equilibrium between the two extremes. We find instances of this development in the key scenes of Pentheus’ *sparagmos*. The first scene is the bowing down of the fir-tree:

62. Hose, 1991, p. 383: “cantus firmus”.

63. Dodds, 1944, p. 196; Roux, 1972, p. 539; cf. Oranje, 1984, pp. 91-92, in disagreement; see also Wole Soyinka’s brilliant adaptation *The Bacchae of Euripides. A Communion Rite*, based on this interpretation (Soyinka, 1973). Cf. Friedrich, 2022, pp. 89-94.

64. Cf. Buxton, 1989, with a detailed analysis of the messenger’s speech.

[Ag:]

λαβῶν γὰρ ἐλάτης οὐράνιον ἄκρον κλάδον
κατήγεν, ἦγεν, ἦγεν ἐς μέλαν πέδον:

“for taking the top of a sky-high branch of a fir-tree, he brought it down, down, down to the dark ground” (1064-1065).

The messenger in the fifth epeisodion reports how Dionysus bowed down a pine tree, on which Pentheus sat down, and let it slip back “from the dark Earth to the Heavens”. The event that ultimately leads to Pentheus discovery and death, is described as an unnaturally quick journey from darkness to light. This scene of being transported recalls the extreme character of Pentheus. Coming from the extremes of Pentheus’ darkness and light, it is also the first instance of an equilibrium, or at least a combination, of light and darkness in the depiction of Pentheus’ *sparagmos*.

The second such scene is about the moment when Dionysus’ voice sounds forth and calls the Bacchae to kill Pentheus:

[Ag:]

καὶ ταῦθ’ ἄμ’ ἠγόρευε καὶ πρὸς οὐρανὸν
καὶ γαῖαν ἐστήριξε φῶς σεμνοῦ πυρός.

“And as it was proclaiming these things a light of holy fire towered between heaven and earth” (1082-1083).

Like before through the tree, now again heaven and earth, light and darkness, are brought together in one picture. Between them towers what has become the signature of Dionysus over the course of the play: a light of holy fire (φῶς σεμνοῦ πυρός), that is the deity. This picture is meaningful in the action that follows as the maenads receive their call to do the *sparagmos* from Dionysus in this shape and position. Thus, again, in ordering the *sparagmos*, the deity stands at a position of equilibrium between light and darkness that prepares the realization of equilibrium in the following scenes.

The third, most gruesome picture of equilibrium can be found after the *sparagmos*. As the *sparagmos* is the result of reconciliation, it comes with a picture of equilibrium realised in the realm of light and darkness:

[Ag:]

κεῖται δὲ χωρὶς σῶμα, τὸ μὲν ὑπὸ στύφλοις

πέτραις, τὸ δ' ὕλης ἐν βαθυξύλω φόβῃ

“The body lies scattered, part among the harsh rocks, part in the deep-wooded foliage of the forest” (1137-1138).

The Messenger reports that afterwards the different body parts of Pentheus were lying around, some among the rocks and some in the bushes. There is a philological point to be made here: I differ from Seaford’s translation of ὑπὸ στυφλοῖς πέτραις as “under the harsh rocks”⁶⁵ – ὑπὸ with dative usually means under, but it can also mean “in the area of” or “at the bottom of”. Important for my argument is, that it does not need to mean physically under – and one would have to ask, how would the parts of Pentheus have gotten there?

The rocks and the bushes in this picture have a meaning in terms of light and darkness (for which the philological point is of importance). Two characteristic elements form the landscape on Mt. Cithaeron: open patches of rubble and rocks, and shrubs or little trees that stand in between. The *sparagmos* scatters parts of Pentheus’ body on both so that afterwards they lie among the rocks, meaning in the open, and in the bushes, meaning in the shade. The attribute of ὕλη, βαθύξύλος that evokes a thick undergrowth, prompt the recipients to understand the wood and therefore also the rocks, in this way. In this gruesome last picture, after the death of Pentheus, the equilibrium of light and darkness is ultimately realised. Some parts of him now lie in the dark shades, some under the light sun of Greece. This equilibrium of light and darkness mirrors the reconciliation that the community has achieved through the *sparagmos* of the ungodly king. I will give a summary of the results in the conclusion.

7. CONCLUSION

In the *Bacchae*, the story of the play is mirrored on the level of day and night, and light and darkness. By following light and darkness closely in the play, we can gain assurances or new impulses for our interpretation of the story. With a view to light and darkness, it appears that Pentheus, who wants to be only in touch with light things and things of the day, is actually revealed to be a dark character through his connection with actual and metaphorical darkness in key scenes of the play. In a second step, the same can be done with a view to Pentheus’ often alleged imbalances. Also these are clearly mirrored on the level of light and darkness. Lastly, we can

65. Seaford, 1996, p. 129.

even gain some hints on the inscribed evaluation of the plays gruesome ending, the *sparagmos* and the expulsion of the Cadmeians: on the level of light and darkness, we find that through Dionysus' divine intervention order and equilibrium are restored, light and darkness, day and night, heaven and earth are in harmony.⁶⁶ This suggests that according to the inscribed audience of the play, the evaluations that are prepared in the play's own structure, the *sparagmos* is the kind of reconciliatory and expiating sacrifice that some modern critics have proposed it was.⁶⁷

As it is difficult to differentiate between interpretations that might have arisen in antiquity and ones that make sense mainly for modern (individualistic, secular, ...) minds, it can be a help to find additional lines of meaning in the text that allow to validate or falsify interpretations. The drama of light and darkness in the *Bacchae* is such a line of meaning.

66. The seemingly extreme cruelty of Dionysus, the destruction of the entire ruling family, the exile of the remaining members, their lack of hope and the seemingly devastating violence do not undermine this outcome. They may appear problematic only to modern minds who sympathize with Pentheus, whom they mistakenly understand as a secular statesman in conflict with religion – a constitutive narrative of modernity. These minds also fail to understand Dionysus as an impersonal force that is beyond morality. The deity is a rule that performs itself. Pentheus' failure to live his life according to this rule is absolute and so is the destruction that he brings on himself and on his family. The restoration of order is not directed at the Cadmeians – they have to be expelled to achieve it – but at the community that is represented in the play by the choir and by the audience. Both are liberated from a mad tyrant (cf. Barzini, 2021, p. 127).

67. This does not mean, that on the way to this result Athenian audiences would not be touched by Pentheus' individual suffering; cf. Seaford, 2021, p. 25, with a thoughtful resolution for this seeming contradiction.

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