

Balance



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The dynamic personalities of Euripides's *Bacchae* all serve allegorical purposes within the play's lines: to represent social orders within ancient Greek culture. The interactions between these characters send a clear message to the audience regarding the practices of healthy society, and the harsh repercussions that result from straying too far from these practices. Pentheus and Dionysus are figureheads for the two main schools of thought represented in the text, respectively order (or constraint) and disorder (or freedom). The two figureheads differ in the rigidity of their ideologies; Pentheus stands for far stricter ideals, believing that there is no place within society for anything other than absolute order, while Dionysus understands the need for both order and disorder in society. The fierce opposition between Pentheus and Dionysus thus represents both a struggle between order and disorder and a struggle of flexibility within the social regime. Dionysus's clear defeat of Pentheus and his stifling system of order suggests that a society completely devoid of a semblance of disorder and freedom will inevitably tear itself apart. Euripides uses the character of Dionysus, superior in his wisdom because of his divinity, to reveal the necessity for coexistence between the social regimes of order and disorder within society, demonstrating the unsavory consequences of tipping the balance in favor of either extreme. Euripides uses Dionysus to reveal the necessity of this coexistence, to correct an imbalance between the two social orders, and to show the consequences of upsetting this balance. Dionysus, as a deity possessing knowledge that a mortal could not, recognizes that society need not fall into the black and white extremes of tyrannical order or frenzied disarray, but that each has its place within a healthy society. Dionysus condescendingly enters the play with the intent of making justice with the

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house of Cadmus, for they have not “ acknowledged him as a god”, and therefore “ Thebes must fully learn – despite itself, if need be, what neglect of [his] Bacchic rituals means” (1458, 53-55). Thebes has chosen to accept neither Dionysus’s divine status nor his rites into its society, so Dionysus intends to show it, through punishment, the necessity of such rites in society’s inner workings. Dionysus, while representative of humanity’s wilder tendencies, does not condemn order, but simply advocates that within the community’s tight system of controlled lawfulness there exists a time and place for disorderly and riotous practices. Dionysus ordains himself and his rites as grounds for the community’s collective cathartic outlet. Dionysus thus does not punish them for having order, but for failing to honor the importance of “ release from pain and sorrow” so that it is possible to “ forget the evils of the day” (328, 30). Knowing that a society cannot thrive with no outlet for natural human rowdiness, Dionysus appoints himself head disciplinarian of the Theban transgressors. With society’s best interest in mind, Dionysus describes this disciplinarian role as “ most terrible to mortals and most gentle” (980). Dionysus, seeing that the balance of order and disorder among the Thebans falls heavily on Pentheus’s tyrannical side, acts as a counterbalance to level the scale, “ set [the house of Cadmus] to rights” and thus set society to rights (66). Just as a scale which has been upset over-corrects itself by plummeting on the other side, Dionysus sets complete hysteria loose in Thebes in order to over-correct Pentheus’s unyielding orderly strictness. He begins when, “ like a gadfly stung these sisters to a frenzy, out of their very homes, to live crazed in the mountains” (45-47). By maddening the women of the family, he pulls the emotionally grounding force of Theban culture, the women who “ take care of [them] and lift [them]

to [their] breast[s]”, out of Pentheus’s orderly picture, thus turning half of the city into a state of anarchy (1470). Next, Dionysus sets the physical aspect of Pentheus’s ordered life into disarray by quite literally “ burn[ing] down the whole house of Pentheus” (691). At this point, the only thing Pentheus has control over is himself. Dionysus finally takes this away too, “[derange[ing] his mind and put[ting] him in a giddy frenzy” (968). In turning Pentheus’s emotional, physical, and personal world to mayhem, Dionysus upsets the social scale of order and disorder in the opposite direction, so that society may slowly bounce back and forth between these extremes to correct itself. Just as the chorus of Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* preaches that “ Justice will tip the scales to bring learning through suffering” (Agamemnon, 250), Dionysus indirectly murders Pentheus to bring learning to the community through heart-wrenching tragedy. Dionysus shows that in the absence of the social catharsis of Bacchic rites, a society will inevitably rip itself apart. The first ingredient in Dionysus’s stew of self-destruction is Pentheus’s demise at the crazed hands of his own mother. By literally ripping her son to shreds, she begins the process of ripping both her family and her society apart as well. Because she “ was so eager for killing”, she “ must leave [Thebes]” and “ live the punishment that [she] deserve[s]” (1513). She is therefore responsible for the “ ruin” of her son, the “ sorrow” of her family, the “ pity” of herself and the “ whole clan ruined” (1506). Cadmos and his wife are to “ lead barbarians and ravage many cities with numberless troops”, thus living the rest of their lives in mayhem (1550). Only when they have been influenced enough by the disorderly ways of these barbarians may they be “ give[n] new life in the land of the blessed” (1556), signifying the leveling of the scales and the harmonizing of society. The idea of a god

like Dionysus was thus used in ancient Greek society to both maintain and enforce social norms. Specifically, the worship of Dionysus gave society an outlet for their wild human tendencies so that in all other aspects of life, order could be maintained. Euripides's *Bacchae* thus served as a reminder to society of the threat to them should they choose to oppose this school of thought.]