Dionysus and Pentheus: Binding Imagery in the “Bacchae”

One of the most important dualities in the Bacchae by Euripides is the relationship between the two main characters, the god Dionysus and the king of Thebes, Pentheus. As cousins (both grandsons of Kadmos) these two characters are intricately linked, both physically and emotionally. While they are physically related, and are both young leaders trying to assert their dominance over the land of Thebes, their antagonistic relationship is extremely complicated. It is tempting to oversimplify not only what these characters represent, but the extent to which they function as “opposites.” For example, it is easy to characterize Dionysus as embodying the irrational on the one hand, and Pentheus as the hyper-rational on the other. However, this reduction of the characters’ complexities neglects to address important nuances which are crucial to the understanding of the play. While Pentheus and Dionysus are opposites in many ways, they are not polar opposites—rather, using a term from the fifteenth century philosopher Nicholas of Cusa, they function as a “coincidence of opposites” and are not merely contradictory but also coincide with each other.¹ Although both characters transform over the course of the narrative, it is ultimately Pentheus, the weaker character, that changes most dramatically. Through examining the repetition of the physical and symbolic binding imagery used to represent Pentheus’ repression (both literally and figuratively),

one can begin to see more clearly how Pentheus transforms from a character who wholeheartedly suppresses his Dionysian urges to ultimately (albeit, too late) embrace of them.

The tracing of binding imagery is particularly useful as it is not only complex in its subtleties, its metaphoric connection to Pentheus’ sexual repression highlights important tenets of his relationship with Dionysus. We can ultimately see by tracing different instances where binding imagery is used that Pentheus and Dionysus, rather than function on opposite ends of a spectrum, collapse the spectrum completely and are one and the same. Although at first Pentheus is obsessed with instilling social order and repressing his carnal desires, he is not perfectly rational – he is arrogant, morbidly obsessed with his sexuality, and oblivious to who he really is. Through his urges to control any embrace of Dionysian rituals or symbols around him, Pentheus’ weaknesses are exposed one-by-one and exploited by Dionysus until ultimately Pentheus’ character becomes completely “unbound” both literally and metaphorically and fuses with Dionysus’ character through his ritual death. This paper will examine this relationship across the entire narrative of the Bacchae focusing on how through binding imagery Pentheus’ repression is exposed and leads to his destruction.

The first time we are introduced to Pentheus, he has just rushed back to Thebes because of news that “evildoers” have invaded his land. These criminals are accused by Pentheus of performing Bacchic rites and honoring the god Dionysus, a god Pentheus does not acknowledge exists. Pentheus is scared of the values espoused by the Dionysian cult: irrationality, sexual promiscuity, and chaos. Although Pentheus is unaware of the true identity of the leader of the cult, the audience is informed that it is Dionysus disguised as a foreigner. Assuming his earthly authority will suffice at repressing these
insurgencies, Pentheus’ immediate reaction is to order his servants to find and bind all of the criminals performing the Bacchic rites. “Servants keep as many of them as I have caught in the public buildings with their hands chained…and having bound them in iron fetters, I will soon make them stop this criminal Bacchic activity” (Bacchae, 226-232) Of course, Pentheus is blind to the magnitude of the situation he is in, and his reliance on superficial authority only highlights his ignorance. Just as Pentheus cannot simply stop the Bacchic movement by binding them in chains, he cannot simply repress his own feelings by trying to repress others more.

Pentheus’ ignorance only becomes more pronounced as he tries even harder to crush the threatening Bacchants. In his second attempt to hunt and bind the Bacchants his unnatural sexual repression is ironically exposed through his morbid fascination with sex. The language Pentheus uses to confront the leader of the Bacchants (Dionysus in disguise) is focused on Dionysus’ ability to arouse sexual desires in the women of Thebes. Speaking to his servants he orders, “And some of you [his servants] hunt throughout the city for this effeminate xenos, who introduces a new disease to the woman and pollutes our beds. If you catch him, bring him here bound…” (Bacchae, 351-355) He is so obsessed with the intense sexuality Dionysus is exciting in his followers that Pentheus likens the problem to a disease, or plague. By remarking on the “effeminate” nature of Dionysus’ appearance, Pentheus appears not only awed by Dionysus’ beauty, but entranced by the sexuality the god exudes. Again, however, Pentheus’ attempts to bind Dionysus and the Maenads prove futile just the way his repression of his own sexuality is futile. It is here that Dionysus’ begins to actively exploit Pentheus’ character flaws through mockery. In a mystical passage, Dionysus’ powers magically remove the
chains from the Maenads and mock Pentheus’ inability to understand the magnitude of the god’s power and authority.\(^2\) The importance of this passage is threefold. First, Dionysus in his willingness to remain bound mocks Pentheus’ superficial authority over him and over Thebes. In addition, Dionysus’ docile demeanor demonstrates the control he has over his body and over his arrogance—both things Pentheus lacks. Finally, through magically removing the chains from the Maenads and allowing them to resume their rituals, Dionysus is demonstrating the magnitude of his supernatural powers—powers that Pentheus still cannot recognize as signs that the god is real and should be worshipped.

However, the most flagrant example of Pentheus’ arrogance towards Dionysus comes when Dionysus confronts Pentheus and cautions, “I warn you not to bind me, since I am balanced and you are not.” To this Pentheus replies, “And I, more powerful than you, bid them [Pentheus’ servants] to bind you.” (Bacchae, 504-505) It is here that the complexities of Dionysus’ character are revealed as well as the nuanced relationship between the protagonists. At first in the narrative, Dionysus appears as an embodiment of pure *irrationality*, which is formally contrasted with Pentheus’ *hyper-rationality*. However, through Dionysus’ claim that he is “balanced” while Pentheus’ is not, it is not the case that pure irrationality equates to balance. The balance Dionysus embodies results from his *acceptance* of irrationality and sexuality as parts of human nature and his

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\(^2\) Attendant speaking to Pentheus: “Pentheus, we have come here, having caught the prey for which you sent us, nor has our work been in vain. This beast was docile to us and did not withdraw in flight, but yielded willingly...he laughed and allowed us to bind him and lead him away...The Bacchae whom you shut up, carrying them off and binding them in chains in the public prison, have gone off, freed from their bonds, and are gamboling in the meadows, calling to the god Bromios. The chains fell off their feet by themselves, and keys opened the doors without the aid of a human hand.” (Bacchae, 434-448).
understanding that ignoring and repressing them fundamentally implies a misunderstanding and denial of self. Only through understanding the “balance” that Dionysus refers to can we more clearly understand the weaknesses of Pentheus’ character. Pentheus’ ignorant and arrogant response to Dionysus exposes his lack of self-awareness more by thinking that he is more powerful than either the god or than Pentheus’ own human nature.

This arrogance and superficiality in Pentheus’ self-concept continues to contribute to the breakdown of his character. Much the way that a Chinese finger trap becomes tighter and tighter the more one struggles to get out of it, Pentheus’ repression and self-denial becomes so distorting that any essence of “rationality” he may have once had is gone. Dionysian influence begins to take over Pentheus’ mind and body to the point of complete delusion. In the height of his delusional state, Pentheus is tricked by Dionysus into thinking he is chaining and binding him when really he is chaining a bull (a doubly clever illusion by the god, as the bull is the symbol of Dionysus). As Dionysus relays the story to a choral member, “In this too I mocked him, since thinking that he was chaining me he neither touched nor handled me, but fed on hopes. He found a bull by the stable where he shut me up, and threw shackles around its legs and hooves, breathing out thumos, dripping sweat from his body, biting his lips. And I, present nearby, sat serenely and looked on.” (Bacchae, 616-623)

The notion that the more Pentheus resists his Dionysian urges the more literal and symbolic destruction occurs is demonstrated when Dionysus lashes out at Pentheus and begins to destroy Pentheus’ whole world---and with it, his false sense of reality. In recounting the story to his loyal band of followers, Dionysus relays the awesome
destruction he caused to Pentheus, “Besides this, Bacchus inflicted other damage on him. He knocked his house to the ground, and everything shattered into pieces, while Pentheus saw how bitter for him were the chains meant for me.” (Bacchae, 632-635) The last line of this passage, uses the imagery of chains and binding to describe how Pentheus and Dionysus are really one in the same. Everything that Pentheus thinks he is doing to crush Dionysus really ends up crushing himself. And in this passage we see how the two characters are symbolically and figuratively bound together.

A crucial point in the plot comes after Pentheus has become so unglued that he is willing to compromise his rationality even further. At Dionysus’ crafty suggestion, Pentheus is convinced to spy on the forbidden rituals of the Maenad woman. Unlike the Pentheus we saw at the beginning, now he cannot resist his temptations and succumbs to his sexual curiosity. It is in this scene that Pentheus starts to exchange roles with Dionysus. Pentheus begins to embody the disorder that he tried so hard to fight against earlier. Here, the nature of the interaction between Pentheus and Dionysus illuminates Dionysus’ role as the keeper of order and Pentheus’ inability to maintain order both literally and figuratively. As Dionysus helps Pentheus dress and prepare to disguise himself as a Maenad woman, Pentheus’ hair comes out of place and his waistband comes loose. Dionysus comments, “…Oh, but look…this strand of hair here is out of place. It stands out, not the way I had secured it underneath the headband.” (Bacchae, 926-930) Pentheus: “While I was inside, I was shaking it [the strand of hair] forward and backward, and, in the Bacchic spirit, I displaced it [the strand of hair, moving it out of place.” (Bacchae, 930-931) Dionysus: “And your waistband has come loose. It’s not in the right order…” (Bacchae, 935-936) Metaphorically, the Dionysian influence on
Pentheus causes him to start to look to Dionysus (in disguise, of course) as an authority figure who is taking care of him. Also, after Pentheus is dressed in the ritual garb of the Bacchants he is also for the first time on stage wearing the same thing as Dionysus, connecting the men even further. This interaction between Dionysus and Pentheus in the above dialogue is a critical indication that Pentheus is compromising his rigidity, “rational”, and beginning the transformation that will simultaneously enlighten and destroy the young king.

Pentheus’ unraveling culminates at the end of the tragedy when he is led by Dionysus (still in disguise) to the top of the mountain where the Maenad women are performing their forbidden Bacchic rituals. Here Pentheus for the first time in the play sees his mother and his aunts in their full embrace of Dionysus. Even though Pentheus tries to remain hidden and secretive, he is easily exposed as a foreigner, although he is not recognized as Pentheus. The women, led by his mother, Agaue, under their Dionysian spell mistake Pentheus (their kin) for a wild beast and ritually dismember him with the aid of Dionysus’ strength. The dismemberment is not only a horrific example of savagery and cruelty on the part of the Maenad women, it is worsened by the plea Pentheus makes to his mother before she kills. Only facing death does Pentheus finally realize the power of Dionysus---for a god must be extremely powerful to break the sacred bond between mother and son. All of Pentheus’ self-inflicted repression implodes and his body literally becomes unbound.

There are two instances in this scene that are worth discussing in relation to their use of binding imagery. When Pentheus is first discovered by the women and is summoned to reveal himself, the chorus, rages, “Reveal yourself [directed toward
Pentheus] as a bull or many-headed serpent or raging lion in appearance. Go, Bacchus, with smiling face throw a deadly noose around the neck of this hunter of the Bacchae as he falls beneath the flock of Maenads.” (Bacchae, 1019-1021) This passage is important for several reasons. First, the women mistake Pentheus for a wild animal, and one of the animals they call him out to be is a bull, the symbol of Dionysus. It is in this moment where the ultimate role reversal between Dionysus and Penthesus occurs. Pentheus, who started out as the hunter, is now literally the hunted, and the way the chorus calls out to Dionysus to kill Pentheus is with a noose, the same way that Pentheus had threatened to kill Dionysus.

The second important passage occurs after Pentheus’ death but before Agaue has realized what she has done to her son. In her excitement, Agaue comes down from the mountain and announces to the people of Thebes, “You who dwell in this fair-towered city of the Theban land, come to see this catch which we the daughters of Kadmos hunted down, not with thronged Thessalian javelins, or with nets, but with the white-armed edges of our hands…We caught and tore apart the limbs of this beast with our very own hands.” (Bacchae, 1203-1212) The significance of this passage resides in understanding the power of “human hands” to destroy. The metaphorical unbinding that occurs to Pentheus is a result of his neglect of his humanity, the same way that his physical unbinding comes at the expense of human hands—of his familial lineage, so in essence he did this to himself.

The ultimate irony is, of course, that the more Pentheus is true to himself and embraces his carnal instincts, the more he self-destructs. This simultaneous destruction and enlightenment is central to understanding the complex relationship between Dionysus
and Pentheus. In a way, Dionysus lives inside Pentheus, and over the course of the narrative Pentheus begins to see that and understand his identity. Through the imagery of binding and repression discussed throughout this paper, the relationship between Dionysus and Pentheus is exposed as a “coincidence of opposites,” whereby even though they are antagonistic in some ways, they are parts of the same thing. In other words, rather than existing on two sides of a spectrum, the two characters shatter the spectrum completely and the notion that opposites must only repel each other and cannot coincide.