

PENTHEUS' VISION: *BACCHAE* 918–22

In an earlier contribution to this journal¹ I argued that many details in the experience of Pentheus in the *Bacchae* derive from the ritual of mystic initiation. One of these details was his vision of two suns, two cities of Thebes, and Dionysos as a bull. I would like to add here a further point of the same kind about this vision.

In antiquity some believed that Pentheus here is mentally disturbed, others that he is drunk.² Both explanations are found also in the modern interpretation.³ But Dodds in his commentary aptly remarks, on the second part of the vision (920–2), that 'the vision is no drunken fancy, but a sinister epiphany of the god in his bestial incarnation... The chorus understand what it means, and recall it later (1159)'. What Pentheus sees is appropriate for an initiand, it is even in some sense *actually there*. And that is why Dionysos replies (924) that Pentheus is now seeing what he ought to see (cf. 502).

So far so good. But on the 'seeing double' Dodds turns out to be less persuasive. He notes two possibilities of explanation, firstly that a symptom of intoxication might perhaps be appropriately inflicted by the god of wine even on someone who is not in fact drunk, and secondly that double vision sometimes occurs in cases of hysteria. But this means that he interprets the two parts of the vision very differently: when Pentheus sees two suns and two cities he is, according to Dodds, merely imagining it, but when he sees the bull he is seeing an epiphany. This difficulty is increased by the fact that, as we shall see, the two parts of the vision may cohere even more closely than may at first appear.

Why, after all, is Pentheus given 'double vision' here? If it is *merely* to indicate 'hysteria', extreme drunkenness or frenzy, then it jars not only with the rest of the vision but also with the rest of this episode, in which Pentheus is calmer and more docile than at any previous point in the play (cf. e.g. 214, 316, 616–37).

This point is illuminated by comparing other cases of double vision in ancient literature. I give as examples the only ones (apart from Pentheus) known to me in which there occurs no externally induced physical change (by drink, poison, etc.).⁴ Laocoön (Q.S. 12.411) *μαινομένῳ δ' ἦικτο καὶ ἔδρακε διπλόα πάντα*. Cassandra says (Sen. *Ag.* 728–9): 'Sed ecce, gemino sole praefulget dies, geminumque duplices Argos attollit domus.' And Lactantius remarks (*De Opif. Dei* 9.1): 'quod furiosus et ebrius omnia duplicia videantur.'

These cases are very different from that of Pentheus. Laocoön is suffering a series of violent symptoms: terror, collapse, trembling, sharp pain, eyes which throb, roll and change colour, and finally complete blindness. The frenzy of Cassandra is even more violent (710–24, 775–7); and, as R. J. Tarrant points out in his commentary,

¹ CQ 31 (1981), 252–75.

² Clem. Alex. *Paed.* 2. 2 (p. 417; cf. *Protr.* 12, p. 240); Sext. Emp. *Adv. Log.* 1.192; Plut. *Mor.* 1083f.; V. *Aen.* 4.468. Clement clearly knows about the mysteries, but is concerned to denigrate them. He also calls P. *βακχεύων... εἰδώλοισ* (cf. *εἶδωλα* in the mirror of Dionysos at Plotin. *Enn.* 4.3.12; Olympiod. *Phaedon* B, p. 111, 14 Norvin).

³ Drunkenness: A. W. Verrall, *The Bacchantes of Euripides* (1910), p. 108, who adds 'an intoxicating drug' (p. 115); cf. the interesting case made for *στυγνός* by G. Thomson (with B. Barnett) in *EETThess* 18 (1979), 424–46.

⁴ As at Arist. *Probl.* 3.10; Nicand. *Alex.* 28–9; Nonn. *D.* 15.20–1, etc.; Lucret. 4.447–52; Petron. 64.2 with M. S. Smith *ad loc.*; etc.

Seneca is influenced here by Virgil's Dido (*Aen.* 4.469–70, 'Eumenidum veluti demens videt agmina Pentheus | et solem geminum et duplices se ostendere Thebas'), who is herself in a frenzy (465, 474). As for Pentheus, Euripides could have chosen to present him as *furiousus*, whether directly – frenzied by the Furies perhaps, as in the version referred to by Virgil, or performing a wild song and dance like Cassandra's in the *Troades* (see esp. 342–3) – or indirectly in a messenger speech (cf. e.g. *HF* 922ff.). But he did not. The *λύσσα* promised at the end of the previous episode by Dionysos is sharply qualified as *ἐλαφρά*,⁵ and explicitly and specifically designed to make him willing to don female garb (851–3).

Certainly Pentheus' state of mind throughout this episode is highly abnormal. It may be justified to speak of the loss of personality associated with transvestism or the abnormal docility and exotic perception associated with initiation. I do not think there is frenzy;⁶ but even if there is, it is certainly not *mere* frenzy. All his abnormality is related to his new role as a Dionysiac initiand. The only apparent exception (apart from 918–19) is the grotesque (though not necessarily frenzied) delusion of immense strength at 945–51; but even this is in fact (as Dodds observes) an extreme variation on the magical strength given by Dionysos to the old men (187–90, 194) and to the maenads (704–11, 732–64).

All this suggests that, at the very least, we should ask whether the 'double vision' has a religious significance,⁷ as does his vision of Dionysos as a bull here and, earlier in the play, of a bull as Dionysos and of Dionysos as a 'light'.⁸ In the absence of internal damage, intoxication or hysteria,⁹ the most obvious way of seeing two of a single thing, whether simultaneously or by moving the line of vision, is with a mirror. My suggestion that we have to do here with a mirror is tentative, but much less fantastic than it may appear.

A mirror plays an important part in the story of the killing and dismemberment of the young Dionysos by the Titans. In various versions it is used to entice him to his death.¹⁰ This importance certainly derives from the Orphic and Dionysiac mysteries, in which it seems that an (obscure) mirror might be used to stimulate and confuse the initiand.¹¹ Until recently it might have been claimed that this use did not predate the Hellenistic era. But a mirror of the late sixth century B.C. found at Olbia

⁵ 'oxymoron... "rage adoucie"... non pas une attaque de folie furieuse', J. Roux *ad loc.*; Dodds *ad loc.* compares *ἐλαφρόνοος* and *ἐλαφρός* of the female sex (Philemon, fr. 171 Kock).

⁶ Interpretation here tends to confuse loss of self-control with frenzy, as e.g. in Dodds's curious remark (on 920–2) that 'now the bull nature, the Dionysiac nature, has broken loose in his own breast'. Cf. also *V. Aen.* 4.469–70 (quoted above).

⁷ For W. C. Scott (*TAPA* 105 [1975], 343, 345) the 'blurring' contrasts with P.'s earlier 'trust in architecture' and with the sun as a 'symbol for a clear and distinct view'. But there is no mention of 'blurring'. W. Sale (*YCS* 22 [1972], 72) implies that it is because P. here is both man and woman: 'he himself is double'. Otherwise the question has not, so far as I know, been asked.

⁸ 618–19, 630 (cf. art. cit., n. 1, 256–7).

⁹ I am grateful for advice on this point to colleagues in the Department of Psychology at this University.

¹⁰ E.g. Firm. Mat. Err. Prof. Rel. 6.2 (= *Orph. Fr.* 214 Kern) 'crepundiis ac speculo adfabre facto animos ita pueriles inlexit, ut desertis regiis sedibus ad insidiarum locum puerilis animo desiderio duceretur. illic interceptus trucidatur', etc.: similar are the versions collected under *Orph. Fr.* 209.

¹¹ John Lydus, *De Mensibus* 4.51; Clem. Alex. *Protr.* 2.18 (= *Orph. Fr.* 34); Gurôb papyrus (*Orph. Fr.* 31); Ps. Arignote ap. Harpocr. s.v. *εὐοῖ* (at the newly *invented* mirror), etc.; Seaford in *JTS* 35 (1984), 117–20; M. L. West (*The Orphic Poems*, pp. 156–7, 163, 172), combining the notices with visual representations, suggests that the initiand had to follow the mirror away from his throne.

is shown with near-certainty by its inscription to have been for use in Dionysiac ritual.¹²

It is tempting therefore to imagine that at the words *πρέπει δὲ Κάδμου θυγατέρων μορφήν μιᾷ* (917) Pentheus looks in a mirror (held by himself or by Dionysos), which intrigues him, disorients him, and, as a female instrument, completes his humiliation. We should compare the dressing of the bride Glauke in the *Medea*. The *κόσμος* 'Αιδου (*Ba.* 857, *Med.* 980), in which both victims delight, is given macabre attention: the hair must be arranged within the headband (*Ba.* 928–34, *Med.* 1161–2); the *πέπλοι* must fall correctly by the *τένων* (*Ba.* 937–8, *Med.* 1165–6). And Glauke laughs at her significantly 'lifeless' image in a mirror (1162).

Dodds interprets 920–2 to mean that Pentheus 'still sees the stranger at his side in his wonted shape, but sees also another figure, the stranger's exact double save for his horns, which becks him onward'. This second figure is explained by his companion in the words *ὁ θεὸς ὁμαρτεῖ*. If this is correct, it fits nicely into my theory. Ancient mirrors lacked the clarity of modern ones.¹³ Just as Dionysos, as an initiand, was enticed and led to his death by a mirror, so the initiand Pentheus sees before him, in the mirror, an obscure but significant image of his companion, before being led off to his death.¹⁴ Though obscure, the mystic mirror indicates to the initiand something (about the deity) quite unknown to the uninitiated.¹⁵

It is naturally difficult, in the apparent absence of parallels in tragedy, to suppose the use of an important stage-property of which no direct mention is made in the text.¹⁶ This objection may be insuperable, but it does not mean that we must dismiss the mirror altogether. I argued in my earlier article that the play dramatises, in an archaic and highly traditional manner, a *ἱερὸς λόγος* of the Dionysiac mysteries, and that numerous details of the experience of Pentheus (some of them in this very episode) reflect the experiences of the initiand. These details were no doubt already part of the myth dramatised by Euripides. And Pentheus is not of course simply an initiand: the secrets of the mysteries (the transition to joy, the sacred objects) cannot be revealed; and the experiences of the initiand are combined, in the myth, with the fascinated hostility and final yielding of the king. The result is puzzling behaviour by Pentheus, notably in his undoubtedly initiatory experiences in the palace (616–37). To these odd experiences I would now add his 'double vision' as originating in the use of the mirror in initiation, even if the mirror itself, as a sacred and perhaps secret object, may not have survived into Euripides' dramatisation.

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¹² West, op. cit. (n. 11), pp. 156–7.

¹³ Seaford, art. cit. (n. 11).

¹⁴ Cf. Isis reflected in mirrors in her procession (Apul. *Met.* 11.9): 'aliae quae nitentibus speculis pone tergum reversis venienti deae obvium commonstrarent obsequium.' Cf. the 'clearer mirrors' (of the divine) in Plutarch's essay on Isis and Osiris (*Mor.* 382b), an image certainly derived from the mysteries (Seaford, art. cit. n. 11).

¹⁵ Certain much later texts seem based on this idea: e.g. Plut. *Mor.* 382b, 417c; 1 *Cor.* 13.12; Tertull. *Acta Andreae*, 15; Greg. Naz. *Or.* 7 (*PG* 35.776c); Ps. Dionys. Areop. *Eccl.* 2.3.1; (all quoted in art. cit. n. 11); add 2 *Cor.* 3. 18 *ἀνακεκαλυμμένῳ προσώπῳ* (initiands were sometimes veiled) *τὴν δόξαν Κυρίου κατοπτριζόμενοι... μεταμορφούμεθα...* On the magically revealing mirror of Hellenistic mysticism see N. Hugedé, *La Métaphore du miroir dans les Épîtres de saint Paul aux Corinthiens* (1957), pp. 45–75.

¹⁶ If Dionysos carried a mirror in Aeschylus' *Lykourgeia*, this would give point to the parody at Ar. *Thesm.* 140.