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**BODIES THAT MATTER; RE- (AD)DRESSING THE CANON IN  
EURIPIDES' *THE BACCHAE***

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**ABSTRACT:** A queer reading of Euripides' *the Bacchae*, a tragedy of the fifth century BC. This paper addresses the ways in which female bodies escape the confines of their oikos, of the polis, of reproductive futurism and ultimately of an essentialized identity, while attaining an alternative identification. Narratives of violence, commodification and objectification of the body are exposed through the dialectic of the gaze. The notion of performativity of the body comes to the forefront as it is directly connected to the exposition of a queer identity. The definitional boundaries of the body are explored through queer studies, feminism, psychoanalysis and phenomenology. The possibility for same-sex desire emerges, exposing the complexity of female sexuality. The transformation of Agave to a radical subject through subversive acts of agency is revealed. This paper signals at the creation of a space for the recognition of queer kinship challenging reproductive futurism. I propose a number of avenues for further research, particularly in developing linkages between the various strands of the sparagmos and queer futurity.

**KEY WORDS:** ancient theater, queer, gender, sparagmos, cross-dressing, reproductive futurism, agency

“Our body is not a space like things; it inhabits or haunts space. It applies itself to space like a hand to an instrument. [...] Even our most secret affective movements, those most deeply tied to the humoral infrastructure, help to shape our perception of things.”<sup>1</sup>

This paper performs an innovative queer reading of Euripides' *the Bacchae* utilizing gender theory in an innovative way. *The Bacchae* is set in Thebes, a setting that disrupts the

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<sup>1</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1964) 5.

division among men and women, mortals and immortals, the personal and civic order. It is important to delineate the spatial dimension of the play through a phenomenological approach to expose role reversal. Another critical lens to his queer reading is deconstruction. *The Bacchae* is inherently a play that unravels through inversion

“what is presented on stage is the resistance to the introduction of the cult of Dionysus to the city of Thebes and its final, violent establishment through the same forces that were unleashed during the Dionysiac festivals; the “normal,” useful queerness of the festivals is (mis) placed outside the Athenian ritual context and becomes the very mechanism which brings about the tragic fall.”<sup>2</sup>

The interplay among normativity and queerness is brought to the forefront. When Dionysus' cult was introduced in Thebes, it imparted the sensation of something strange, out of the ordinary and encompassed an aspect of danger to it as a threat, as it provoked trepidation to the social order of the polis and to its status quo.

Dionysus was a god whose identity was “oscillating between extremes: he was both Theban and Asian, both Greek and barbarian, raised as a girl, dismembered by the Titans and transformed into a bull”; hence his identity is related to the “exaggeration of reality.”<sup>3</sup> He is “foreign and local: a member of Thebes' ruling family, nevertheless he is presented as an outsider, and he and his followers (the Bacchantes of the chorus) are explicitly treated as non-Greeks”.<sup>4</sup> He is both human and divine and encompasses both male and female characteristics, capable to reach women en masse. The symbols of Dionysus are “the phallic, ivy-covered thyrsus coupled with around wine cup symbolize the fusion of male and female, intoxication and sexuality, in a single divine personage”.<sup>5</sup> Dionysus is the figure that encompasses all kinds of dialectics as he is a subject laden with features of both sides of the gender spectrum.

In the prologue, it is denoted that Dionysus has come to Thebes to inflict a punishment on Pentheus' mother and her sisters due to Agave's transgression. He tries to achieve that by getting dressed as a human “ὦν οὔνεκ' εἶδος θνητὸν ἀλλάξας ἔχω μορφήν τ' ἐμὴν μετέβαλον εἰς ἀνδρὸς φύσιν” (Euripides *Bacchae* 53-54). The punishment of these women is madness “τοιγάρ νιν αὐτὰς ἐκ δόμων ᾧστρησ' ἐγὼ μανίαις, ὄρος δ' οἰκοῦσι παράκοποι φρενῶν, σκευὴν τ' ἔχειν ἠνάγκασ' ὀργίων ἐμῶν” (Euripides *Bacchae* 32-34). Pentheus does not believe in Dionysus' words as he believes that he is the responsible one for the social

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<sup>2</sup> Theodoridou (2008) 76.

<sup>3</sup> Theodoridou (2008) 76.

<sup>4</sup> Schotten (2008) 8.

<sup>5</sup> Schotten (2008) 8.

upheaval caused by these women.

All women married or unmarried have escaped all male companionship and supervision and have gone to the mountains. They have committed a transgression as they have escaped the confines of the oikos. They constitute queer subjects whose identification is delimited by the spatiality of the mountain. The fact that “all the women had abandoned their homes and transgressed the boundaries of the *polis* is a phenomenon contrary to all notions of order and stability.”<sup>6</sup> The women turn violent once Pentheus tries to re-establish the disrupted order and assert his authority because they wish to subvert the existing order of things and modify existing structures. Pentheus wishes to infer punishment upon the women who<sup>7</sup> wished to overturn his authority and have transgressed the boundaries set by their gender and the 5<sup>th</sup> century society. It should be noted that the “same exclusion which relegates them to the inside as mistresses of the interior space equips them for deviousness and duplicity, gives them a talent, or at least a reputation, for weaving wiles and fabricating plots, marks of their double consciousness with regard to the world of men.”<sup>7</sup>

The representation of space in antiquity requires a center; in order for direction to be established. The Maenads disrupt this fixed point and expose the possibility for the existence of an alternative direction. They have spatial access to a set of powers beyond men’s control. The Maenads cross every boundary of the body and of identity as a dissident community. They are linked through a queer collectivity. Pentheus believes that these women threaten his authority as they attempt to overturn the ruling of men. Pentheus views their transgressions “as violations [of] the city’s order and [of] sanity.”<sup>8</sup> He believes that these women are themselves responsible for leaving their homes. Cithaeron “stands for the opposite of the city; the opposite of organized political society, with the established laws that preserve and define it.”<sup>9</sup> The degree of abnormality of these women’s movement is evident. Dionysus set the conditions that allowed women to transgress certain boundaries and cross the line, rendering them as queer subjects. The abnormality of the situation is further enforced by the speech of the messenger (Euripides *Bacchae* 677-777). Pentheus imagines that these women have sexual orgies in the mountains. In his speech lines (Euripides *Bacchae* 215- 241), Pentheus denotes that the women of Thebes “imposed a kind of ‘strike’ on sexual relations with their men; a strike that is aggravated by the fact that, up here on the mountain, a seductive- looking

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<sup>6</sup> Syropoulos (2003) 45.

<sup>7</sup> Zeitlin (1985) 75.

<sup>8</sup> Schotten (2008) 8.

<sup>9</sup> Syropoulos (2003) 47.

Lydian is with the woman day or night.”<sup>10</sup> The Theban males felt upset because their wives would not satisfy their sexual needs (Euripides *Bacchae* 215-241). They were even more astonished by the fact that a Lydian was with these women in the mountain, as he could have seduced them (Euripides *Bacchae* 233-238). It is interesting though that the power of the Lydian over the women is his effeminate look. Therefore, the power Dionysus has over the feminine is queer.

The issue of role reversal is central to the play. It is interesting how women acquire characteristics of warriors and embrace more masculine traits while Pentheus acquires feminine characteristics. The fact that the women abandoned their houses due to the Dionysiac cult was in contrast to the social norms of that era as they were confined in their oikos. Gould denotes that “there is an apparent masculinisation of women in Greek tragedies” in contrast to their role in the Greek society.<sup>11</sup> The conflict extends to the level of the polis, as these women challenge not only Pentheus’ masculinity but also his authority on a political level. The movement of the women towards the mountain is rendered as a highly political issue, as it implicates a queer dialectic.

The *Bacchae* could be viewed as a marginal group and thus in the minds of the fifth century audience they could never be considered as a viable role model because they did not consist the norm. These women “were no more than ‘women’, in the eyes of the audience”.<sup>12</sup> Even though they were turned into bacchantes by an exterior agent and run almost naked in the mountains, they were still considered as falling into the category of the female, however they expose a queer identification. The clothing of these women illuminates the possibility of an alternative identification. Women’s clothing is illustrated as a means of disruption of the social order. It is not used purposely in order to ignite sexual desire but at the same time it is overly sexualized. It is interesting to consider that male actors “put on women’s clothing and threaten” men.<sup>13</sup> The choice of Euripides to portray married and unmarried women together as an ensemble is interesting. These women consist a closely knit group and Agave has taken up their leadership “μήτηρ Ἀγανῆ σύγγονοί θ’ ὁμόσποροι πᾶσαι τε βᾶκχαι” (Euripides *Bacchae* 1092-1093).

Another aspect of the *Bacchae*’s identity that needs to be further explored, is their relationship to motherhood. I gesture towards the recognition of the maenads as a sum of women that live outside the norms of reproductive labor as they place emphasis to sensual

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<sup>10</sup> Syropoulos (2003) 46.

<sup>11</sup> Syropoulos (2000) 94.

<sup>12</sup> Syropoulos (2003) 46.

<sup>13</sup> Bassi (1988) 108.

pleasure. They are self-sufficient subjects who “are able to draw sustenance from the earth [...] and are procreatively independent from men in their species-violating maternity”.<sup>14</sup> The experience of not functioning “as mothers, subordinates, or sexual objects” to men was something unheard of, for a woman of the 5<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>15</sup> That places her in the center of gender politics from which she has been excluded. The female body operates from the outside, within. It belongs to the economy of the oikos and the polis and is yet excluded from them. The Maenads go beyond the portrayal of the chaste mother, as they are wandering entities opt to the consumption of the body.

Zeitlin draws a connection among women and their association with madness, she states that “the limits of the female body are perceived as permeable, [...] as there is the possibility for [its] intrusion from the outside, and [it is] less easily controllable from [...] logic.”<sup>16</sup> The women not only renounce their femininity but also acquire a queer identification. “Madness, the irrational, and the emotional aspects of life are associated in the culture more with women than with men.”<sup>17</sup> “The boundaries of women's bodies are perceived as more fluid, more permeable, more open to affect and entry from the outside, less easily controlled by intellectual and rational means”.<sup>18</sup> The female body is rendered as culturally more frail than its male counterpart. The female agent disrupts the stability of orientation, as it disrupts the power of the male over it. “In Greek theater [...] the self that is really at stake is to be identified with the male, while the woman is assigned the role of the radical other”.<sup>19</sup>

Pentheus desires to go to the mountain to spy on the maenads. He believes that the “violations of the sexual order are violations of the political order, and vice versa”.<sup>20</sup> Agave could be viewed as the leader of the women. She seems “befuddled by latent masculine traits”.<sup>21</sup> She rejects the divine nature of Dionysus, therefore denying the very own fabric of her identity, her femininity as she came into being by the very performance of the characteristics that Dionysus embodies. She does not come to terms with her sexual identity. She is incapable of accepting herself as a woman, as she rejects the very life that was created

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<sup>14</sup> Schotten (2008) 13.

<sup>15</sup> Schotten (2008) 13.

<sup>16</sup> Syropoulos (2000) 94. See also: Zeitlin, F. 1990. “Playing the Other; theater, theatricality and the feminine in Greek drama”, in *Nothing to do with Dionysus?* 63-96.

<sup>17</sup> Zeitlin (1985) 65.

<sup>18</sup> Zeitlin (1985) 65.

<sup>19</sup> Zeitlin (1985) 66. See: Bamber, L.1982. *Comic Women, Tragic Men: A Study of Gender and Genre in Shakespeare*.

<sup>20</sup> Schotten (2008) 8.

<sup>21</sup> Dunbar (2017) 49.

in her womb which ultimately leads to Pentheus' atrocious death. Her assumption of a queer identification brings upon her demise, her downfall, as she commits the most atrocious act by becoming aggressive, a predominantly male trait and in the end she collapses as her identity dissolves. Agave has had a great impact on Pentheus' psyche, as she induced him to experience an alternative reality where the bacchae practice rituals in order to satisfy Dionysus' longings.

Pentheus experiences an oedipal longing. He is aroused by the thought of returning to town cradled in his mother's arms"<sup>22</sup>; “φερόμενος ἤξεις ... ἀβρότητ' ἐμὴν λέγεις, ἐν χερσὶ μητρός. καὶ τρυφᾶν μ' ἀναγκάσεις” (Euripides *Bacchae* 968-969). He has an unhealthy fixation on his mother. He “is afraid of sex, but loses all psychic stability with the idea of watching his mother involved in sexual acts”.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, Pentheus' oedipal longings which seem to have contributed to his queer identification are reinforced by the disappearance of Echion, his father from his mother side as Dionysus seems now to have a central role in Agave's life. Pentheus views Dionysus as a father-figure. He is fixated on his oedipal anxieties due to this change of his perception of Dionysus.

Pentheus is taking up a disguise in order to see what these women are doing in the space of the mountain. Being visible is problematic, as visibility “provokes voyeurism [and] fetishism.”<sup>24</sup> Dionysus suggests to Pentheus that he needs to dress as a woman to perform this action. The transgression of vestimentary codes of the Athenian society of the 5<sup>th</sup> century in the context of theater was a common practice. The practice of cross-dressing is the most obvious performative action in which Pentheus engages. “References to ritual cross-dressing- although scattered in the sources- point to the significance of gender-specific clothing, as opposed to some other cultural artifact, for distinguishing and establishing social norms.”<sup>25</sup> Cross-dressing enables the display of the body to a viewing audience, thus the notion of the gaze is essential in this dialectic. It could be viewed as a performative act that undoes, deconstructs gender and has a social function. Even though in the beginning, he seems to get outraged, later he accepts Dionysus' proposition because he accepts his reasoning that if he does not get dressed as a woman, he will lose his life. Pentheus provides an example of crossing the heavily policed boundaries of normative sexuality.

It is interesting to examine sexual morphing through the change of clothes into the other's sex clothes in the context of the Greek tragedy<sup>26</sup> because the audience was familiar

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<sup>22</sup> Dunbar (2017) 48.

<sup>23</sup> Dunbar (2017) 48.

<sup>24</sup> Phelan (1993) 6.

<sup>25</sup> Bassi (1988) 106.

<sup>26</sup> Lateiner (2009) 126. See also: Forbes (1990) 149.

with the practice of putting into scrutiny the non-hyperbolic constituent of cross-dressing. However, there were no exact definitions for the settled changes of sex or clothes. “This unpredicted absence reflects something about their perception of homosexuality, transsexuality and bisexuality (as Euro- Americans understand those essential terms)”.<sup>27</sup> Even though it existed, they thought that they did not need to castigate it in a separate category. Dionysus’ stratagem opens up the locus for the existence of a potential alternative sexual identification. Pentheus wants to protect his so called “unequivocal masculine identity” but clearly fails to.<sup>28</sup> He does not want to be seen therefore he needs to conceal his identity and adopt Dionysus’ stratagem. Winnington- Ingram denotes that Pentheus “is obsessed with the aestheticization of the God” and “a desire of the power that is similar to the source of the Dionysian frenzy.”<sup>29</sup> The aestheticization of the God seems to derive from an attraction to his stylistic excess which drives him to acquire a queer identification. His aestheticization is a self-contained act which spawns in the domain of queerness. Agency needs to be conceived in terms of the notion of performance. Pentheus adopts those characteristics towards which he exposes contempt, thus the notion of inversion is central to the adoption of a queer identification. He becomes more emotional instead of logical, he exposes illusiveness instead of having discipline. Doubling and reversal function as forces that reinforce the ambiguity of Pentheus’ identity.

Pentheus allows Dionysus to dress him “in an elaborate toilette and in a flowing wig and headdress, a long pleated robe and belt, to which he adds the typical insignia of the maenads-the dappled fawn skin and ritual thyrsus”.<sup>30</sup> Pentheus wants Dionysus to lead him as he is dressed as a woman to “the mountainside through the main streets of the city, highlighting not simply his pleasure in feminine attire, but also the development of a new desire: to be seen by others (as taking pleasure) in this attire”.<sup>31</sup> He undergoes the gaze as he parades around the city exposing a forbidden desire. The gaze demarcates the space, as the subject enters this entity and performs his desire. The gaze is dependent on the spatial and temporal dimension; it is linked therefore to the dialectic of phenomenology. Once he arrives in the mountain with Dionysus, Pentheus “makes the first discovery of his corporeal self”

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<sup>27</sup> Lateiner (2009) 126.

<sup>28</sup> Zeitlin (1985) 63.

It should be noted that: “The men’s sanctioned man-dressed- as-woman cross-dressing at unofficial (and non-religious) social events found on some Attic vases (500-450 B.C.) stresses, for both ideological and artistic reasons”, “their absolute failure, as transvestites, to hide their masculinity”. Miller (1999) 247.

<sup>29</sup> Winnington – Ingram (1969) 54.

<sup>30</sup> Zeitlin (1985) 63.

<sup>31</sup> Schotten (2008) 10.

while being dressed as a woman. Prior to this discovery, he is obstinate to any kind of touch of the other.<sup>32</sup> Pentheus' body is grotesquely feminine. Once Pentheus adapts a constructed image of a female figure, he becomes extremely aware of his appearance and outwards characteristics<sup>33</sup>. He suddenly becomes aware of the gaze. He starts employing willingly the behavior of women, as becomes cunning and adapts hiding and spying, which are overtly feminine practices. Segal notes that Pentheus:

“takes on the alter ego that he most scorns... and acts out of the opposite of the values of his male peer group: effeminacy instead of masculinity; emotionality instead of rationality; illusion, magic, and trickery instead of realistic clarity, forthrightness, and martial discipline”.<sup>34</sup>

This image of his is contrasted to his previous attachment to the military code. He is presented “εμφανώς” and not “λάθρα” as a woman “ἀλλ’ ἐξιχνεύσουσίν σε, κἂν ἔλθῃς λάθρα. ἀλλ’ ἐμφανῶς· καλῶς γὰρ ἐξεῖπας τάδε” (Euripides *Bacchae* 817-818). His behavior is overtly performative. He turns into a spectator, viewing the women's physical contacts with the others. The dialectic of the gaze of the body is highly performative. This body is continuously at odds with itself, subject to a congenital dissonance between inside and outside.<sup>35</sup> The exhibition of the body in the genre of tragedy is constant, as the body and especially corpses are exposed to public view all the time. Pentheus' former reluctance to be seen in drag “καὶ μὴν δοκῶ σφας ἐν λόχμαῖς ὄρνιθας ὡς λέκτρων ἔχουσαι φιλάτοις ἐν ἔρκεσιν” (Euripides *Bacchae* 957 – 958) turns into some kind of exhibitionism “κόμιζε διὰ μέσης με Θηβαίας χθονός· μόνος γὰρ αὐτῶν εἰμ’ ἀνὴρ τολμῶν τόδε” (Euripides *Bacchae* 961- 962). He turns into a figure that wants to be seen by others, thus fully encapsulates his voyeuristic tendencies. He comes into being through the gaze.

The uncanny brings forward Pentheus' forbidden impulse to be merged with his mother. His Oedipal longings are apparent; as he will “become” his mother when he will trade “his mask for that of Agave”.<sup>36</sup> The fluidity of his position is obvious, as he wavers from one side of the spectrum to the other. His mother, the leader of women encapsulates an underlying menace and thus is rendered grotesque.<sup>37</sup> Watching the women points to the unheimlich as it imparts a strangely familiar sensation.

Pentheus desires to learn about everything that the maenads are involved in, so

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<sup>32</sup> Zeitlin (1985) 7.1

<sup>33</sup> See: Eur. *Bacch.* 932-944

<sup>34</sup> Dunbar (2017) 49.

<sup>35</sup> See: Belaval, Y. 1965. “Ouverture sur le spectacle,” in *Histoire des spectacles*, ed. R.Queneau 3–16.

<sup>36</sup> Ringer (2016) 333.

<sup>37</sup> Dionysus tells Pentheus that his mother “ἡ τεκοῦσά γε” will bring him back Eur. *Bacch.* 966 This prolific statement seems to function as a premonition of Pentheus' demise and tragic death.



Dionysus bends the upper tip of a fig tree in order to help him see everything. However, once he releases the tree he is brought to sight. This could be viewed as a “coming-out maneuver”, which underscores his desire to be seen.<sup>38</sup> This underwrites his troubled connection with desire; the fig tree could be viewed as a phallic symbol exposes his troubled relationship with desire. He is vulnerable to be manipulated due to his desire; as much as he tries to keep it hidden, the more he is subjected to everyone’s gaze. Trying to “pass” as being a member of the opposite sex and not being noticed, sheds light to the aspect of the social construction of gender. It breaks down essentialized notions of identity. He experiences anxiety and therefore attempts to pass as a member of the opposite sex. The “presence of the transvestite interrupts and reconfigures the established definition of and relationship between genders”.<sup>39</sup> This configuration is perceived as stable but is rather fluid. The situated self enters the dialectic of exhibitionism. His desire for access leads him to an exploration. Access and openness are notions essential for the queer self.

Pentheus will die by getting dismembered by his mother Agave. He begs his mother to forgive him and entices her to recognize him as her son. However, she fails to recognize her own son because she was under Dionysus’ spell. He plants her foot against his ribs and tears his arm apart by holding his wrists in her hands. The other women participated in Pentheus’ sparagmos and continued dismembering him. This could be viewed as “the orgy of which Pentheus dreamed, though he never imagined he would participate in it in this way.”<sup>40</sup> I do not stand with the view that his dismemberment occurs from the transgressive nature of his desires. Pentheus is “undone by his attempt to maintain a decaying sexual-political order”.<sup>41</sup> He becomes dismembered because he disrupts the existing structures.

Pentheus’ cross-dressing could be viewed as the beginning of his sparagmos. His body seems “to loosen its structures so that it will easily become “unbound,” undone and fragmented”<sup>42</sup>. Through his body he has acquired the fluidity that renders his body as the other. Pentheus falls into a third identitarian space, as he “becomes this third gender inside the performance, thus unconcealed by the theatrical illusion.”<sup>43</sup> Therefore, in this context, manliness and womanliness could be “exposed as a masquerade, a garb.”<sup>44</sup> It metaphorically constitutes a prop. Agave’s identity as a member of the chorus has gone awry. Agave decides

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<sup>38</sup> Schotten (2008) 10.

<sup>39</sup> Theodoridou (2008) 75.

<sup>40</sup> Schotten (2008) 12.

<sup>41</sup> Schotten (2008) 12.

<sup>42</sup> Zeitlin (1996) 352.

<sup>43</sup> Theodoridou (2008) 83.

<sup>44</sup> Theodoridou (2008) 83.

to leave the other members of the chorus – her sisters and operate as an individual. She “represents the kind of troublesome event [...] in orderly, civilized life”.<sup>45</sup> The sparagmos of Pentheus by the women of the chorus “is a perverted version of choral experience”.<sup>46</sup> Thus, the community that these women experience is turned into something grotesque.

The dismemberment of Pentheus' body points from a gender perspective toward the undoing of the male body by the female. The sparagmos signifies the fragmentation of essence of one's core identity. Therefore, the male is “determinedly opposed [...] to the feminine [and] the masculine finds itself torn apart in a ritual dismemberment”.<sup>47</sup> What is interesting is that “the Greek idea of mythical sparagmos is particularly pertinent to postcolonial receptions of classical literature, with all the violence [and] dislocation the sparagmos entails”.<sup>48</sup> The branch of postcolonial studies is intricately connected to the notion of dismembering and uprooting. The cannibalism imputed to the Maenads therefore has postcolonial nuances and could be therefore linked to queer diasporic subjects.

Castigating the Maenads as the “cannibals” equals their labeling as “the other” and signals towards the superiority of their male counterparts. Devouring Pentheus is depicted as “a bestial [act], or worse-than-bestial; a peculiar homology in which [the Maenads] can [...] be accepted as savingly *non-* human.”<sup>49</sup> The kinship between the other and us imparts anxiety in our psyche, as there is no clear delineation of the notion of humanity. Performing such a rite, places into question the Athenian civilization. The scene of the sparagmos is characterized by circumvention and ambiguity as it points towards a hidden desire and the attainment of an unspeakable pleasure.

Cannibalism seems to always exist in the antiquity as a practice. There have been many allusion of dismembered animals and people such as Pentheus, however on one consumed human flesh. A sole “seemingly unambiguous evidence from the classical period that *ὀμοφαγία* means the eating of raw meat occurs in [...] the *Kretes* of Euripides”.<sup>50</sup> Myths of actual cannibalism of the flesh of people describe the condition of humanity at a later point than the fifth century. The dismembered body of Pentheus points to a profound identity crisis. On the one hand, the body is reduced to its mere members and on the other hand, it constitutes an entity that is greatly desired. The body turns into a subject of consuming desire. Attention is drawn to the flesh that consists a material strand of one's sexual identity. From a

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<sup>45</sup> Murnaghan (2006) 104.

<sup>46</sup> Murnaghan (2006) 104.

<sup>47</sup> Zeitlin (1990) 75.

<sup>48</sup> McConnell (2016) 2.

<sup>49</sup> Rawson (1999) 185.

<sup>50</sup> Leinieks (1996) 160.

psychoanalytical point of view, the sparagmos is linked to the notions of introjections, of oral pleasure and of homosexuality. The act of sparagmos “depends upon and enforces an absolute division between inside and outside”; yet, at the same time, the act “dissolv[es] the structure it appears to produce”.<sup>51</sup> The image of the dismembered body functions as a trope that signifies the transgression from simplistic divisions. To mark Pentheus’ body away from the audiences’ normative expectations, entails violence- therefore he is dismembered. His body gestures towards the existence of alternative possibilities and signifies otherness.

Agave is the one that begins to slaughter her son as “priestess (hierea) of the sacrifice”.<sup>52</sup> Her action is turned into a mystical experience as she dishevels the unity of the body of Pentheus. The sparagmos that Agave undertakes as the representative of women leads her to a complete reversal of gender. Her action though represents more than a barbaric rite, as it signifies way more than the exposure of violence. The scene of the sparagmos is the “moment when a precise dramaturgical moment and its associated visual image [...] become, by a visual equivalent of what the ancient rhetoricians called *synecdoche*, iconic”.<sup>53</sup> The gruesome image of the disheveled head is ingrained in the audience’s memory and planted in its psyche.<sup>54</sup> What is vital in this scene is that the performative act of cutting Pentheus’ head, is “dislocate[d] from the temporal framework of the play, allowing it to transcend the moment of performance and acquire[s] the status of an iconic representation” of a profound identity crisis.<sup>55</sup>

Each scene of the sparagmos “is announced by grammatical subjects, each referencing a daughter, of increasing length.”<sup>56</sup> At first Agave pulls Pentheus arm, then with the help of her sister Ino, she extends the assault and finally, Autonoe and the rest of the women join in the sparagmos. Pentheus does not die instantly but lives for a little while, “ὁ μὲν στενάζων ὄσον ἐτύγγαν’ ἐμπνέων” (Euripides *Bacchae* 1132). This shows that the agony and the stress he undergoes is prolonged. His body is cut in two parts. His arms and legs are sparse while the women carry around his torso. The scene ends by the tossing of scraps of Pentheus’ skin, not his whole limbs.

The body could be viewed as an unfragmented whole. His body was “searched [...]

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<sup>51</sup> Kilgour (1990) 4.

<sup>52</sup> Murnaghan (2006) 104.

<sup>53</sup> Wyles (2007) 15.

<sup>54</sup> See Hall 2004, 68-71 for the exploration of imprints on the psyche of an individual by the particular choice of a prop.

<sup>55</sup> Wyles (2007) 15.

<sup>56</sup> Weaver (2009) 38.

out with difficulty”<sup>57</sup>. His dismembered body was brought back on stage. The irony of it all is that Pentheus wished to dismember Dionysos but instead he got dismembered. Through the sparagmos, he “return[s] to the immaterial state of death, incorporated again by his mother” as “her body is now a burial place instead of a cradle of life, her womb now a tomb”.<sup>58</sup> Pentheus has an unsuccessful rite of passage as he gets “separated from the community, reaches a liminal condition when dressed as a woman but he is not re-incorporated in the end—or he is, in a very perverted and grotesque way”.<sup>59</sup> He is an insider of a community in which he does not belong. The murder of Pentheus could be viewed as the “destruction of a source”.<sup>60</sup>

Horror is played out on the body of Pentheus, as his dismembered body is exposed on stage. After his death, Pentheus' corpse is brought back on stage which is considered his home. In order for him to attain a queer identification, it is essential for him to occupy this familiar space. The violence in the scene of the sparagmos is central in this dialectic. Through the reversal of gender roles “the maenad is often endowed with this power, especially against the male body.”<sup>61</sup> Role reversal is obvious, as Agave has masculine traits, she exposes violent traits. She is “endowed with [...] power, especially over the masculine body, and is the model herself for the male.”<sup>62</sup> The murder of Pentheus disrupts the order of the polis. Once she kills Pentheus, she holds in her hands his head and thinks that she has killed a lion. Pentheus is viewed “as a man, and most probably as a male, too (as the gender of the word for the ‘climber’, τὸν ἀναβάτην, indicates); [hence] he dies as a man.”<sup>63</sup> He reverts to his original identity as he pleads for his life. He exclaims: “Ἐγὼ τοι, μήτηρ, εἰμί, παῖς σέθεν Πενθεύς, ὃν ἔτεκες ἐν δόμοις Ἐχίονος” (Euripides *Bacchae* 1118-1119). He only regained consciousness right before his death however Agave was not aware “κόρας ἐλίσσουσ’, οὐ φρονοῦσ’ ἄ χρῆ φρονεῖν”; on the one hand, the blame for the murder of Pentheus cannot be imparted on these women but on the other hand these women are killers of a human being (Euripides *Bacchae* 1123). They were induced to do such a thing by god but at the same time they carry part of the responsibility, so their action is not justifiable. There is an interplay between the actual and the figurative. In a state of “primitive regression, women undo the body; its structures cannot hold, its limbs are unbound, and the masculine self, originally so intent on opposing himself to anything feminine, is fragmented and flies apart”.<sup>64</sup> The maenads are endowed with power

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<sup>57</sup> Theodoridou (2008) 83.

<sup>58</sup> Theodoridou (2008) 83.

<sup>59</sup> Theodoridou (2008) 83.

<sup>60</sup> Schotten (2008) 13.

<sup>61</sup> Syropoulos (2000) 97.

<sup>62</sup> Syropoulos (2000) 97.

<sup>63</sup> Syropoulos (2003) 50.

<sup>64</sup> Zeitlin (1985) 71.

over the masculine body. The violence that they exhibit is directly associated to madness, as they are in a state of frenzy.

The passage when Agave comes to the realization that she has actually killed her own son consists a peculiar scene of recognition. Agave who is “in a state of denial, of trauma, of crisis, of blurry vision — of δύσγνοια, perhaps painted with touches of ἀλογία, ἀφροσύνη, ἔκπληξις, τάραγμα φρενῶν some other nuanced state confused with, or subsumed under the unmarked term μανία” as she is holding her son’s head in her hands realizes her horrible action.<sup>65</sup> After completing the sparagmos, she has an altered state of mind. She cannot process “external sensory or emotional stimuli” rationally.<sup>66</sup> Her cognitive state seems to be impaired. The lion is perceived as “a figure of Pentheus or as a symbol of fierceness and violence; a tamed version of this figure, reversed in its helplessness (a lion cub, slaughtered, and held like a baby in a mother’s arms) is present in her derangement.”<sup>67</sup> She cannot think clearly and is forced to produced an essential identity. Agave has decided to kill Pentheus because he has entered her space and tried to reinforce the previous order. She is in a state of insanity when she commits the action. By deciding to kill her son, she consciously resists victimization from the oppressive patriarchal system she exists in. Subjectivity and agency are intricately connected, as one’s identity is one of the sites that operate as a way for others to construct his subjecthood. The personal is turned into the political as the trauma of the individual is turned into collective trauma. At this point, it would be useful to think about Agave in relation to the space she occupies while applying a phenomenological critique on her action, which depends on the spatiality and temporality of the locus in which it takes place. This space she occupies is marked by the specificity of its history and it is branded by its gender specificity. By killing Pentheus, she unsettles the prevailing power dynamics by performing counter to them. Foucault argues that “to make visible the unseen can also mean a change of level, addressing oneself to a layer of material which had hitherto had no pertinence for history”.<sup>68</sup> By addressing the invisible, she brings it into existence. Thus, in this context the concept of the mountain can be viewed as a perilous zone which operates as a site of resistance. This act of hers is “the source of a counter-politics, a counter-imagining, a counter-metaphysics [originating] from the outside space she possesses as the ‘other’”.<sup>69</sup> Agave has the status of the other, as her identity is riven with tension and conflict. The gendered body of Pentheus, in

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<sup>65</sup> Shalev (2012) 163.

<sup>66</sup> Shalev (2012) 163.

<sup>67</sup> Thumiger (2006) 203.

<sup>68</sup> Spivak (2003) 81.

<sup>69</sup> Anim-Addo (2013) 9.

and out of the locus of the mountain is a body at risk. Agave challenges the legacy of the gendered body as she moves from silence to discourse.<sup>70</sup> By taking action, she projects her voice and gets inscribed in history. She reshaped “the socio-political atmospheres in the geographies within which” she assumes this identification.<sup>71</sup> This gendered individual goes through an internal act of transforming her identity that is nevertheless informed by her societal surroundings.

Agave attains a new sense of selfhood through her final act of dismembering Pentheus. She is an agent who enacts a violent act of resistance to oppression. Her action could be viewed as an act of resistance to her gendered conditions. Agave tries to redefine herself through violence. She is a body that is able to think beyond the ravages of her confinement. Pentheus' dismemberment is a life-changing act which empowers her. Thus, control over the body is central to this discourse. Agave had to proceed towards completing this action in order to attain radical subjectivity. Her action to kill her son is an act of radical resistance to victimization. Through her action she moves towards the attainment of subjectivity and agency. Even though she was placed in a liminal position and having limited agency, she manages to assert herself. She moves beyond the churning network of the constraints of the patriarchal society and emerges as a radical subject.

In conclusion, the *Bacchae* is a play about boundaries and the transgression of limitations in relation to the construction of identity. As Segal suggests “the limits between the self and the world, between the rational and the irrational, between imagination and the reality” are explored.<sup>72</sup> I undertook the exploration of the signification of the construction of an alternative identification, a queer one of the Bacchae and Pentheus as not only they overturn the normative bounds of an essentialised identity, but emerge as queer figures with an independent standing. The scene of the sparagmos is central to the queer reading I have employed. Desire is central to this dialectic. Pentheus seems to have lost his place in the political life of the polis but at the same time he is placed at the very center of it. The same applies to the Bacchae and especially to the leader of their group Agave. They deconstruct the bounds of their feminine identification and move beyond their subliminal positioning. The fine line between male and female, desire and self-restrain, sanity and madness reinforces the queer identity of the Bacchae and Pentheus.

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<sup>70</sup> It should be noted that “one of the major scenes involving Agave has been lost in the manuscript transmission, so she can hardly qualify as one of the central characters of the surviving script.” Syropoulos (2003) 51.

<sup>71</sup> Gairola (2002) 308.

<sup>72</sup> Zeitlin (1985) 63.

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