The Bacchae as Satyr-Play?

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One of the most influential books on Euripides in perhaps the last thirty years has been A. P. Burnett’s *Catastrophe Survived.* One of the most interesting features of Burnett’s treatment is the demonstration of the presence of satyr-play “motifs” or “elements” in certain of Euripides’ tragedies, most notably the *IT, Helen, Ion* and *Alcestis.* This treatment conforms to a recent tendency among students of Euripides to regard these plays as strongly “satyric” in character. What seems to have been overlooked is that these elements appear also in another of Euripides’ tragedies, the *Bacchae.* In fact, when one considers only those elements which Burnett mentions in the course of her book, one finds that the *Bacchae* turns out to be the most “satyric” of all Euripides’ surviving plays, *Cyclops* not excluded. Of twenty-eight satyr-play elements referred to by Burnett, the *Bacchae* can be seen to exhibit no fewer than twenty-three.3


3 A note as to method: I consider only those features which are noted in Burnett’s Index as “satyr-play elements” or “satyr-play motifs.” It should be noted that there is some overlap of these two categories, nor can I discern the distinction Mrs. Burnett intends between “elements” and “motifs.” My own powers of discrimination are not, however,
It is readily acknowledged that the *Alcestis* contains several features in common with satyr-play. "The disguise, the trick, the girl won at the games as a prize, the imputations of lustfulness to Admetus all come from satyr-play" (Burnett, p. 45). Apart from the girl, these motifs are found also in the *Bacchae*. In fact, we find not one but two disguises in the *Bacchae*. Dionysus is himself disguised when he enters the stage; in line 4 he tells us that he has arrived in Thebes "having exchanged my divine form for that of a human." Later in the play Pentheus disguises himself as a woman to spy on the bacchae. Trickery and deception also are to be found in the *Bacchae*. Pentheus is tricked into thinking he has imprisoned Dionysus (616) and deceived with the impression that his palace is aflame (624, note the ὀκονωυ which ends both lines). Pentheus also smites the air with his sword, thinking he is striking Dionysus (631), is tricked into donning women's clothing and, finally, is tricked into using a tree as vantage point for watching the maenads. And it is Pentheus who constantly imputes lustfulness to the bacchae and to Dionysus himself (225, 236–238, 686–688).

Other satyr-play elements which Burnett finds in the *Alcestis* are a pre-occupation with food and wine, the motif of hospitality and the appearance on stage of the "monster" of the piece. A preoccupation with food and drink is certainly to be found in the *Bacchae*: Dionysus is of course himself the god of wine and he is conspicuously paired (274–277) with Demeter, who is the patron of the dry aspect of nutrition. Near the end

yet at issue. Our only concern is that these are the features which Mrs. Burnett points to as giving evidence of the "satyric" nature of certain tragedies. In what follows I shall occasionally cite, in addition to the relevant references in *Catastrophe Survived*, the works mentioned in note 2 above, to indicate that, in some cases, Mrs. Burnett is not alone in regarding certain features as "satyric." I concern myself primarily with Burnett, however, simply because hers is the longest list of "satyric elements" in Euripides' tragedies.

4 A feature to be found referred to occasionally in plays dealing with members of the house of Pelops, e.g., *Helen* 386 f. and *IT* 1 f. See also Burnett, p. 32 n. 9.

5 For these as features of satyr-play see also Sutton, *RSC* 20 (1972) 326 and 21 (1973) 388–389.

6 Wine: Burnett 31–32, 72 n. 23. (Drunkenness: Sutton *RSC* 21 [1973] 390.) Banqueting: Burnett 45. Food and drink: Knox "Euripidean Comedy" 72–74. (It should be noted that Knox makes no distinction between "satyric" and "comic.")

7 Burnett 31, Sutton *RSC* 21 (1973) 387–388.

8 Burnett 31. Another motif in the *Alcestis* is the appearance on stage of Heracles (see Burnett 38 and 232, Guggisberg 45, Sutton *RSC* 21 [1973] 389–390). This is not a feature of the *Bacchae*, but neither is it a feature of the *Cyclops*. It is, of course, a prominent feature of Sophocles' *Trachiniae* and of Euripides' *HF*, from which play, according to Burnett (180–181, 232), satyr-play elements are missing.
of the play Agave invites the Chorus (1184) to partake of a glorious banquet in celebration of the successful hunt.9 Hospitality too is a motif of the Bacchae. Indeed the action of the plot is given its impetus by the fact of Dionysus’ inhospitable reception in the very city of his birth and by his own relatives. Finally Pentheus, like Thanatos, in the Alcestis, certainly appears on stage. But in what respect is Pentheus portrayed as a “monster”? To quote E. R. Dodds (on lines 537–541): “References to P.’s curious ancestry are strikingly frequent in the play (cf. 265, 507, 995 f., 1025 f., 1155, 1274 ff.). . . . The Chorus . . . draw here and at 995 the . . . conclusion that like the earthborn giants who fought against the gods he comes of a monstrous, inhuman stock and is therefore the natural enemy of what is divine.” Indeed, considering his rôle and his ancestry, Pentheus’ nearest literary kin is the δράκων, or διάβολος, of Revelation 12.

Mrs. Burnett mentions (31–33) two more features which the Alcestis shares with satyr-play: an “overt physical conflict” (comparing Phrynichus’ Alcestis, which is not, to my knowledge, a satyr-play) with the result that “the monster is not killed but maimed” (comparing the Cyclops). The Bacchae certainly contains an overt physical conflict, somewhat frustrated by the divinity and mutability of the protagonist, as reported in Dionysus’ trochaic speech 616–637. But this is surely as much a characteristic of tragedy (or comedy) as it is of satyr-play. As to the next feature, I am sure Mrs. Burnett does not mean that it is necessarily a feature of satyr-play that the monster is not killed (but only maimed). It happens, as Mrs. Burnett points out, that the monsters in the Cyclops and in the Alcestis are not killed. In the former Euripides was constrained to follow his Homeric model, in the latter the death of the monster would provoke in the audience the utmost incredulity. We must, then, for once modify Mrs. Burnett’s formulation. For convenience we may adopt Sutton’s more comprehensive phrase, “the discomfiture and defeat of an ogre, monster or villain.”10 Pentheus is first maimed, then killed. The villain in the Alcestis is neither maimed nor killed.

According to Burnett, the Iphigenia in Tauris also can be regarded as in some sense a satyr-play. Elements in that play which provoke such an identification include: reference to the infancy of a god or hero, mention of the gifts and inventions of a god, the release of the entire Chorus from servitude, the pastoral setting of the messenger speech and the indecisive-


10 RSC 20 (1972) 323. Sutton’s references show that the killing of the monster is a frequent feature of satyr-play. In addition, some of the villains whom Sutton cites are, like Pentheus, contemptores dicum: Salmoineus, Erysichthon.
ness of the cowherds as reported in that messenger speech.\(^\text{11}\) The infancy of Dionysus is prominently mentioned, in the *Bacchae*, in the Chorus’ parodos (the “second birth” of Dionysus: 88–98; see also 288–297) as is the infancy of Zeus (in the cave of the Curetes: 120–134). The factions of Dionysus are even more prominently referred to: Teiresias informs Pentheus that Dionysus discovered wine (279) and that he also, like Apollo in the *IT*, is one who grants prophecy to mortals (298–301). In the course of the play the Chorus of bacchants are miraculously released from the prison in which Pentheus attempted to keep them (443–448). One of the glorious features of the poetry of the *Bacchae* is the pastoral setting of not one but two brilliant messenger speeches.\(^\text{12}\) And in the first messenger speech there is an incident exactly analogous to that in the *IT*: the herdsmen are at first indecisive, but finally one man persuades them (compare *Ba.* 721 ἔδ᾿ ἡμῶν λέγειν | ἔδοξε with *IT* 279 ἔδοξε δ᾿ ἡμῶν ἐξ ἐλέοισι) to capture the bacchants (compare *Ba.* 719 θηροσόμεθα with *IT* 280 θηρῶν) and bring them to the king. Apparently also satyric, according to Burnett (citing *Dictyulci*), is the call for help which the herdsmen set up in the *IT*. In the *Bacchae* it is not the herdsmen but Agave who calls out for help (731). The final satyric characteristic of the *IT*, the deception of the monster (Burnett 72 n. 23, comparing *Cyclops*), has been dealt with above and shown to be characteristic of the *Bacchae* as well. If the *Iphigenia in Tauris* is satyric, the *Bacchae* most certainly is.

The *Helen*, according to Burnett, exhibits the following satyric characteristics: representation of cowardice, inappropriate dress, “consciousness of genre,” a gatekeeper scene and an adventurer-hero. In addition, the salvation of Helen and Menelaus, “like that of a satyr-play, has been granted to creatures at once excessively flawed and excessively fortunate, to mortals who are plainly the darlings of the gods.”\(^\text{13}\) As in the *Helen*, we

\(^\text{11}\) Burnett 71–72 with notes 21 and 22. For gifts and inventions see also Guggisberg 74. For release from bondage see also Burnett 31 (*Cyclops*), Guggisberg 60–63 and Sutton *RSC* 20 (1972) 324–326 and *RSC* 21 (1973) 386–387 (Eurystheus, Omphale, Inachus and others). In this connection Burnett does, in fact, refer to *Bacchae* and *Philoctetes*.

\(^\text{12}\) See especially 677–686 and 1051–1057. It is interesting to note the similarity between line 1051 and a line from an unknown satyr-play quoted in the scholia to Hephaestion (p. 183 Gaisford). Indeed Porson thought the anonymous line to be a variant of *Ba.* 1051.

No cave is mentioned in these messenger speeches. If a cave is the satyric element Mrs. Burnett thinks it is (it is a feature of the *Cyclops*) we will have to make do with the aforementioned cave of the Curetes. A cave features also in the *Ion* and the *Philoctetes*.

\(^\text{13}\) Cowardice: Burnett 81–82 (Menelaus in *Helen*, Phrygian in *Orestes*), 72 n. 22 (cowherds in *IT*), 142 and 232 (Menelaus in *Andromache*), 222 (Orestes in *Orestes*). Dress: Burnett 82 (“If the champion won’t dress the part, the poet seems to say, anything can happen.”). Knox also (“Euripidean Comedy” 71–74) remarks on the preoccupation with
find cowardice exhibited in the *Bacchae* by men in the face of women. The herdsmen are put to flight by mere women *(734, 763 ἀπενώτιζον φυγῇ | γυναῖκες ἄνδρας)* and Pentheus relents from his blustering intention of a frontal attack *(781–786)*, recognizes the prudence of Dionysus’ suggestion of infiltration *(838)* and finally decides, king though he is, to slink unseen through the streets of Thebes in fear of being seen and ridiculed *(840–843)*. And the ridicule Pentheus fears is on account of his proposed dress which is, on any account, inappropriate. Surely men dressing in women’s clothing is an element of comedy *(e.g., Thesmophorizusae)* and satyr-play 14 rather than of tragedy. As to Mrs. Burnett’s “consciousness of genre,” I do not think the *Bacchae* shares this feature, unless the subject of the play itself be regarded as a retort to the proverbial ὀδὴν πρὸς τὸν Διόνυσον. 15 We may not, however, be constrained to regard this feature as a characteristic of satyr-play merely on the basis of Mrs. Burnett’s reference to the *Cyclops*. A gatekeeper-scene also is not found in the *Bacchae*, although the entrance of Cadmus is prepared by a brief speech *(170–177)* in which Teiresias calls to the servants inside and asks them to inform Cadmus of his presence. In fact, this should qualify, as it is the same kind of scene as A. Choe. 652–667, which Mrs. Burnett does cite, the only difference being the presence in the latter of a reference to knocking—apparently a comic element. 16 Dionysus is, to a certain extent, an “adventurer-hero,” although perhaps more so in Nonnus than in Euripides. At any rate, he has come, like the Odysseus of *Cyclops*, to whom Burnett compares Menelaus, from afar in search of hospitality. Indeed the arrival of Dionysus corresponds to the “action of return” which Mrs. Burnett sees as the “praxis” of the Ion, and for which she compares, among others, the satyr-play *Sphinx* *(102 n. 2)*. Finally, we see in the *Bacchae* that salvation of flawed and fortunate darlings of the gods which Mrs. Burnett regards as a satyric element in the Helen and Orestes. At the

14 Perhaps the Omphale-plays of Achaeus and Ion? See Guggisberg 134–136. It is not recorded that the Scyrioi of either Sophocles or Euripides is a satyr-play, nor is it certain what the subject-matter of either was. For a transvestite satyr see Fig. 69 in F. Brommer, *Satyrspiele* 2 *(Berlin, 1959)*. I owe this last reference to Dana Sutton.

15 For which, see the *Suda s.v. oδδέν*.

16 See G. W. Bond (ed.), *Euripides’ Hypsipyle* *(Oxford, 1963)* 59: “The details of door-knocking occur frequently in comedy. They are mostly passed over in tragedy, doubtless as οἶκεία πράγματα more suited to comic scenes. . . . W. W. Mooney, *The House-Door on the Ancient Stage*, pp. 19 f. quotes only two instances from tragedy, A. Cho. 653 . . . and IT 1304 . . . . Even *Hel.* 435 ff., a comic scene, has none.”

**Note:** The text seems to be a fragment of a larger passage, possibly from a book or article, discussing the use of satyr-play and satyr-scene in comedy and tragedy, with specific references to *Bacchae* and *Cyclops* by Euripides. It critiques Mrs. Burnett’s interpretation of satyr-play and considers various instances where the satyr-play genre is not found in the *Bacchae*. The text also references other works by Euripides and G. W. Bond's *Euripides’ Hypsipyle*. The final note references W. W. Mooney's *The House-Door on the Ancient Stage* and G. W. Bond’s *Euripides’ Hypsipyle*.
end of the play Dionysus predicts that Cadmus (his own grandfather) and Harmonia (daughter of Ares) will be translated, after some difficulties, to the "land of the blessed" (1338–1339). Cadmus is nothing if not flawed, and his lasting fate is perhaps better than the character who spoke lines 333–336 deserves:

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\begin{align*}
\text{κεὶ μὴ γὰρ ἔστιν ὁ θεὸς οὕτως, ὡς σὺ φής,} \\
\text{παρὰ σοὶ λεγέαθω· καὶ καταψεύδου καλῶς} \\
\text{ὡς ἔστι Σεμέλης, ἵνα δοκῇ θεὸν τεκεῖν,} \\
\text{ἡμῶν τε τιμῆ παντὶ τῷ γένει προσῆ.}
\end{align*}
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Four final satyr-play elements or motifs (according to Burnett) remain: the marriage-motif, the Chorus "carried off to Dionysus," dancing and an apotheosis.\(^{17}\) I can find no hint of the "marriage-motif" in the Bacchae, but at the end of the play the Chorus, whether represented as the collective spouse of Dionysus or not, surely go off with their patron deity. The Chorus are Asiatic women who have come out of Lydia with Dionysus (55–57) and Thebes is the first Greek city they have visited (23). Therefore, although they are nearly silent in the final scene and although Dionysus does not mention their fate (perhaps some reference was made in the long lacuna after 1329), we can only assume that they continue their journey in company with Dionysus. Dancing is naturally mentioned frequently in the Bacchae. We even see the beginnings of the pas-de-deux (184–185, 195: Cadmus and Teiresias) which Burnett finds in the Orestes. The final element, an apotheosis, I include not because it is necessarily a satyr-play motif but, for completeness, because of a comment of Mrs. Burnett's. She correctly points out that satyr-play elements are absent from Euripides' very serious and very tragic Heracles and she characterizes that play as "a tetralogy that has lost its satyr play" (180). At the end, however, with the expected apotheosis of the hero, "the heavenly satyr play begins at last, though only on the inner stage of [the spectator's] imagination" (182). Dionysus does, in the Bacchae, undergo an apotheosis of sorts. He arrives on stage at the start of the play in human form (4) and expresses his intention that he will be recognized as a god: θεὸς γέγον ἐνδείξουμε 47. This purpose is fulfilled in the final scene when, for the first time in the play,\(^{18}\) Dionysus appears on the roof of the scene-building.

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\(^{18}\) The prologue is spoken from the stage; see N. C. Hourmouziades, Production and Imagination in Euripides (Athens, 1965) 163. The lines of Dionysus in the "earthquake scene" (576–595) were spoken by the protagonist off stage (so Dodds, p. 147). For a different view see J. Roux, REG 74 (1961) 41 and also her edition of the Bacchae (Paris, 1970) I, 97.
In closing, then, this contrast between the *Bacchae* and the *HF* is especially instructive. In these two dramas we have two works which have never been suspected of being "satyric," and yet the one contains (perhaps) the fewest "satyric elements" and the other surely the largest number. Either, therefore, the *Bacchae*, this most tragic of plays, has been consistently and grossly misunderstood, or the practice of discovering satyr-play elements in the "non-tragic" tragedies of Euripides should be replaced with a more fruitful one.

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