Fabula de Bacchanalibus: the Bacchanalian Cult of the Second Century BC and Roman Drama

Plautus, *Bacch.* 93: ... *Bacchas metuo et Bacchanal tuum* ...
(... I fear the Bacchic women and your Bacchic meeting place ...)

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The subject of this paper is the cult of Bacchus and its portrayal in the Roman theatre of the late third and second centuries BC.[1] Although this topic has already been treated by many scholars, no truly synthetic analysis, an analysis which considers the various different genres of Roman drama, has been attempted before.[2] Meanwhile, the growth of the Bacchanalian cult and its violent suppression by the Romans in 186 BC, have been the subject of renewed and extensive discussion focused on historical, epigraphical, and archaeological evidence.[3] In the following brief discussion, I would like to reexamine the way in which Bacchus' followers appeared in Roman drama: in comedies, in tragedies, and in the *fabula praetexta.*

In all three dramatic genres the Bacchants are shown as essentially "other", both within the economy of the drama itself and in the wider setting of Roman life. Consequently, the treatment of the Bacchants allows us to explore a point of contact between literature and life. At the same time, Roman drama itself emerges as a cultural tool for negotiating and for representing the interaction between Rome and the outside world, especially the foreign world of the Greek East. Drama created a dynamic dialogue between conceptions of self and of other in the second century BC, at the time of a decisive transformation of Roman society.

For the study of Roman drama in its original context, it is always important to keep in mind that the plays represent a public and officially sanc-

1 The following is a slightly revised version of my paper of 19th November 1999. I would like to thank the following for their help and suggestions: Michael Flower, Robert Palmer, Markus Sehlmeyer, and Niall Slater.

2 For previous discussions, see especially Pastorino 1955, Stockert 1972, MacCary 1975, Massa-Pairault 1986, Rousselle 1987, Paillier 1988, 229–245, Arcellaschi 1990, Walsh 1996, Wiseman 1998.

3 See especially Scheid 1986 and Paillier 1988 with full references to epigraphical and archaeological evidence.

tioned version of Roman élite culture.[4] The plays were purchased and produced by elected magistrates of the senatorial élite at the public festivals which included *ludi scaenici*. A few dramas can also be attributed to more private contexts, such as aristocratic funerals. However, the majority of plays seen at Rome were commissioned and paid for with public money.[5] Consequently, it seems unlikely that anything radically challenging to the *status quo* would have been encouraged.[6]

Since the introduction of Greek style drama in 240 BC, the senatorial order had moved rapidly to expand the occasions on which plays could be viewed and to ensure their own ultimate control of most aspects of production.[7] The decision not to build a permanent theatre in the second century BC also kept responsibility for production and staging firmly in the hands of the annual magistrates.[8] In addition, the arrangements for separate seating for senators, which were introduced in 194 BC, helped to make the theatre audience itself a more faithful reflection of power relationships in Roman political and cultural life.[9] At the same time, the new seating arrangement created a new kind of space, in which Roman spectators could view themselves and their reactions to the dramas according to their respective social position. This separate seating scheme in itself suggests both a desire to control audience reactions, as well as the perhaps unwitting creation of a forum for the subsequent evolution of popular political expression. The Bacchants on stage must be pictured in the political space created by the Roman theatre audience itself, an audience accustomed to frequent dramatic performances, to strong cultural leadership from the élites, but also perhaps to reacting, sometimes in very independent ways, to the messages presented on stage.

Cicero clearly reveals that in his day the crowd of spectators often expressed reactions to plays, as well as to contemporary political issues and to prominent individuals who entered the theatre. Such reactions could be lengthy and pointed.[10] Some scholars have hesitated to apply the evidence for audience reactions of the Ciceronian age to an earlier period.[11] However, Sander Goldberg has recently demonstrated how small the theatrical seating area on the steps of the Temple of the Magna Mater on the Palatine really was.[12] It offered a personal and almost intimate space within which spectators and performers at the *ludi Megalenses* could interact with each other during plays, such as those of Plautus.

4 See Gruen 1992, and now Bernstein 1998.

5 See the contribution of W.D. Lebek in this volume.

6 Gruen 1992, 222: "The theatre provided a channel through which the ruling class could propagate aristocratic values by shaping the direction of popular culture."

7 Bernstein 1998.

8 For the debate about building a theatre, see Gruen 1992 and esp. Bernstein 1998, 294–298 for full references and earlier bibliography.

9 Liv. 34.44.4–5, cf. 54.4; Cic. *har. resp.* 24; Val. Max. 2.4.3; Ascon., p. 55 Stangl with von Ungern-Sternberg 1975, Moore 1994, and Bernstein 1998, 193–195 and 245.

10 See Nicolet 1980, 361–373 and Bartsch 1994, 63–82.

11 E.g. Gruen 1992, 185.

I shall now proceed to discuss Bacchants in the three genres of Roman drama starting with comedy. Plautus provides invaluable evidence for the Bacchants because he alludes to them with some frequency in plays which were evidently popular and influential.[13] Plautus himself died in 184 BC which means that his works are clearly contemporary with the spread of the Bacchic cult and with its suppression in Rome and in Italy near the end of his life. His many jokes about the Bacchants also seem significant as there is nothing at all about the cult in Terence.

Unlike the tragedies which I will go on to discuss, Plautus' plays do seem to provide an accurate reflection of at least some aspects of contemporary Bacchic practices in Rome. Obviously the Bacchants were easily recognizable figures for his audience, since they frequently appear in brief and incidental mentions. It seems unlikely that these references simply translate something in Plautus' Greek models.[14] The mentions of Bacchants are widely scattered in plays that were probably written and performed over a period of about twenty years before Plautus' death in 184 BC.[15] They attest to continuous perception of and attitudes towards Bacchic cult over a generation before its suppression.

The rich surviving *œuvre* of Plautus reveals him as an upholder of traditional Roman values and as a social critic who used the Greek settings of his plays to comment on current Roman issues, such as war booty, or the luxurious lifestyle of women, or the fierce competition between military leaders over triumphs.[16] His commentary is subtle and complex as it contains a variety of humorous strategies, as well as exaggeration and parody of Latin tragedies.

12 Goldberg 1998.

13 Plautus, *Men.* 835, *Cas.* 978–982, *Amph.* 703–704, *Cist.* 156–159, *Mil.* 856–858, 1016ff., *Merc.* 469, *Bacch.* 93, 371–372, *Aul.* 408, 413, *Vid.* fr. 1. For Plautus and the Bacchic cult, see Rousselle 1987, Paillier 1988, 232–238, and Gruen 1990, 150–153.

14 See, however, Slater 1990 for the possible influence of Greek theatre in Southern Italy on Plautus. Goldberg 1978 and Stärk 1989 have argued that some of Plautus' plays had no Greek original.

15 Plautine chronology is notoriously difficult and there is no space to go into details here. Nevertheless, it seems evident that the nine plays listed in n. 13 cannot all date to immediately before 186 BC and some are traditionally regarded as early pieces.

16 For the character of Plautus' drama, see Schuhmann 1977, Slater 1985, Segal 1987, 178ff., and Gruen 1990.

Plautus reveals that the Bacchic cult had a bad reputation for many years.[17] It is strongly associated with madness and with excessive drinking. It is a secret society which has its own cult places, referred to by the word Bacchanal, the same term used in the contemporary *Senatus Consultum de Bacchanalibus.*[18] These cult places may be hidden, with the result that a character may enter one unawares. Congrio, the cook in *Aulularia* who claims he has entered one by mistake, calls on all classes of people to help him in a way also reminiscent of the *Senatus Consultum de Bacchanalibus.*[19] Ordinary citizens are said to be afraid of such dark places.[20] Initiates sometimes also have secret signals or objects (such as a ring) to identify themselves to each other.[21] The use of such ordinary items in a symbolic way also seems frightening. The cult is often referred to by slaves and foreigners.

Plautus also portrays *Bacchae* as a special category of wild and dangerous women who may belong to any social class, whether *matronae* or prostitutes.[22] Are these women simply parodies of the Bacchants who figure in literature and in art? To some extent and on some occasions they probably are, but Plautus also clearly indicates men as possible initiates into the cult.[23] Some humour seems to hinge specifically on men entering traditional female spheres. According to Livy, this was a characteristic and controversial feature of the Roman cult of the 180s BC.[24]

In the *Casina* Plautus also refers in a rather explicit and perhaps surprising way to the suppression of the cult.[25] Lysidamus claims that Bacchants have stolen his cloak. His wife's friend Myrrhina dismisses this as a joke on the grounds that they are no longer up to their old tricks now.[26] This reference can be taken to exemplify Plautus' approach. He does not narrate or satirize any specific historical person or event. However, he openly evokes his audience's knowledge of what recently happened, of the kinds of charges brought against the Bacchants, and of the harsh penalties imposed by the senate. There is both ambiguity and irony in the assertion that the Bacchants are no longer playing their old games. The audience needs to infer what games are referred to and whether the assertion is true or not. The

17 See esp. Stockert 1972.
18 *Aul.* 408, 413, *Mil.* 857–858, *Bacch.* 93 with *SCBacch.* 2,3,4,28 and Robin 1979.
19 *Aul.* 408ff.
20 *Bacch.* 96: *locus lucubrosus.*
21 *Mil.* 1016ff.
22 *Amph.* 703–704, *Bacch.* 371–372, *Aul.* 408.
23 *Men.* 835, *Bacch.* 52ff., 368ff., *Mil.* 1016, *Cist.* 156–159. In *Amph.* Alcmena is mocked as the caricature of a Bacchic woman.
24 Livy 39.13.8–14.
25 *Cas.* 978–982 with MacCary 1975.
26 *Cas.* 978–979: *nugatur sciens / nam ecastor nunc Bacchae nullae ludunt.* See Moore 1998, 177–178.

references to the Bacchants in comedy stop with the *Casina* which may reveal that the subject had become too sensitive for such direct allusions.

By contrast, we know of a number of tragedies on Bacchic subjects by the most prominent Roman tragedians.[27] Although the exact chronology of individual plays is unclear, there is no observable interruption in the successive use of such themes by Naevius, Ennius, Pacuvius, and Accius. These plays are heavily based on Greek originals by Aeschylus and especially on Euripides' famous *Bacchae.* The fragments we have are scanty, the dates of performance elusive, and the details of the plots are usually unclear. As far as we can tell, these plays contained no specific references to contemporary Bacchic cult practices. The Bacchants they portray are exclusively women.[28] They are the maenad women of myth who, like Agave, leave their homes to follow the god to the mountains. These are the heroic and noble women of Greek myth, not the prostitutes and housewives of Plautus. Their cult is not associated with secret meeting places in the city, but with a setting in nature completely outside the *polis.*

The myths retold in Roman drama portray the arrival of Dionysus and his followers either in a Greek *polis* or in the Thracian kingdom of king Lycurgus. After various trials and the opposition of the political leader (Pentheus / Lycurgus) the god demonstrates his divine power and fearful wrath towards those who do not accept him. Despite the terrible punishment he inflicts on his opponents, and the suffering of some of his followers, Dionysus emerges in a positive light at the end of the story and is accepted into the community as a bringer of civilization and of blessings.

A later Christian writer, Firmicus Maternus, assimilated Postumius, the consul of 186 BC, to Lycurgus the Thracian king who opposed the new cult.[29] However, it seems highly dubious that such a view would have been publicly enunciated or even intimated on the Roman stage of the second century BC. Rather, the very fact that plays about Dionysus remained perennial favourites of all the leading playwrights throughout the Middle Republic indicates that they were not linked in a direct or simple way with the events of 186 BC. These plays were staged in Rome for their intrinsic value as drama and because they reinterpreted Greek originals which were very famous in Rome by then. Their setting is a completely mythical realm

27 Livius Andronicus, *Ino*?; Naevius, *Lycurgus;* Ennius, *Athamas;* Pacuvius, *Pentheus, Antiopa, Periboea;* Accius, *Stasiastae / Tropaeum Liberi, Bacchae, Athamas.*
28 My interpretation here differs from that of Jocelyn 1967, 267–270 who sees a reference to male initiates in Ennius' *Athamas.* I would translate *ignotus iuvenum coetus* (110 R.^{3}) as "a gathering having no knowledge of young men". So also Warmington 1936 and Massa-Pairault 1986, 216.
29 *err. prof. rel.* 6.9.

which gives them a far greater "distance" from the world inhabited by the Roman audience than Plautus' hellenized urban landscapes.

Nevertheless, these observations do not mean that Roman tragedies might never convey political or social messages about contemporary society. Such messages could appear in a more allegorical or metaphorical guise and would depend heavily on individual acting styles and on the sensibilities of a particular audience. A good example is Naevius' *Lycurgus,* which seems to date to the last few years of the third century BC, some fifteen years before 186 BC.[30]

Archaeological evidence shows that by 186 BC a variety of Bacchic cults had existed for many years already, especially in Southern Italy and in Etruria.[31] We do not know how many Bacchic followers there were in Rome by 200 BC. Plautus' *Miles* has been dated to this same period and it has references to contemporary cult in it, including the secret token / password. In Naevius' play the Greek god Bacchus is addressed as Liber while his followers are called *thyrsigerae Bacchae* (32 R.[3]). Naevius equates the Bacchus of Greek myth with the Roman god Liber, a member of the Aventine triad.[32]

Naevius himself may not be trying to comment on contemporary Bacchants but on society in general and on the reception of influences from Greece and from the East. He is perhaps the first to have introduced Bacchic themes and characters on the Roman stage. If he did wish to allude to a new exotic cult, which was arousing some misgivings in high places, it seems much more likely that he had in mind the cult of the Anatolian Magna Mater Cybele which was officially brought to Rome in 204 BC but kept carefully under control by the senate.[33] Like Plautus' *Pseudolus* and four later plays by Terence, Naevius' *Lycurgus* may have been staged at the *ludi Megalenses,* perhaps even the first such games in 204 BC. It could have addressed itself to those who had doubts about receiving such an exotic foreign deity in the last years of the Second Punic War. Naevius' death is traditionally dated to around 200 BC, which would establish a third century context for his play.

30 See also the contribution of W. Suerbaum in this volume.

31 See Paillier 1988 for discussion, illustrations, and bibliography.

32 The original temple on the Aventine had been founded under Greek influence in 496 BC. See Beard / Price / North 1998, 64–66 for references and bibliography. Iconographically Dionysus was identified as Liber, e.g. on a cista from Praeneste (ILLRP 1198). For the extensive Dionysiac imagery on Praenestine ciste, see now Menichetti 1995. See Smith 1998, 842: "At the same time, the ciste give us an insight into the significance of the Dionysiac rites to an élite upper class: not just an excuse to drink and go wild, but a key to a whole complex of ideas that embrace both the entry of men and women into their rightful civic place, and also the ordering of that civic body within the divine ordering. When Rome attacked the Bacchanalia in 186 BC, it struck at more than just a few conspiratorial matrons."

33 Liv. 29.10.4–11.8,14.5–14; Ovid, *fast.* 4.247–348 with Pensabene in Steinby 1996 and Roller 1999, 263–292. By contrast, Massa-Pairault 1986, 208–213 interprets Naevius' play as a commentary on the frustrated aspirations of Campanians after the Roman reconquest of Capua.

It was Pacuvius who was in his prime at the time when the Bacchic cult was suppressed in Rome and in Italy. Of his play *Pentheus* we only have a brief plot summary by an augmenter of Servius.[34] The play was largely based on Euripides' *Bacchae* although there are some variations he has introduced. The most noticeable feature is that the god himself is not captured by Pentheus, rather it is Acoetes, his follower. In this way, it is a follower of Bacchus who is subjected to imprisonment but who is then miraculously freed when the doors of the prison swing open and his bonds fall off. Clearly this did not happen for most of those imprisoned in 186 BC.[35] It would be interesting to know if Pacuvius also referred to the god as *"Liber pater"* as the summary suggests. In this play Pacuvius seems both to be following a famous original fairly closely, but also to have introduced some significant changes which must reflect a specific purpose at the time he was writing.[36] If he was writing after 186 BC, then it may have seemed striking that he openly presented Bacchus as Liber and that he went out of his way to portray the miraculous release of one of his followers, paired with the violent death of his principal opponent.

The tragedy which shows the most unusual and apparently political use of Bacchic myth is Accius' *Stasiastae* or *Tropaeum Liberi.* This play had a chorus composed of the followers of Lycurgus, the *Stasiastae* of the title, rather than the usual followers of Dionysus.[37] It should be dated to the late second century BC and has been interpreted as a commentary on the fall of Gaius Gracchus and his followers.[38] At one time Accius' patron was D. Iunius Brutus Callaicus who sided with the consul Opimius against the Gracchi.[39] Again the fragments are so few that firm and detailed conclusions are impossible. He also wrote a *Bacchae,* in which the lyric sections seem to have deviated widely from Euripides.

By 120 BC or later the events of 186 BC must have seemed a distant memory. Few witnesses would have remained alive: Accius himself was not born until 170 BC. However, it is possible that Accius aimed to use the traditional myth about the Thracian king Lycurgus to comment on the

34 Serv. auct. *Aen.* 4.469 with Massa-Pairault 1986, 215–221 and Paillier 1988, 239–245.

35 Livy 39.18.3–7.

36 For Pacuvius as an original writer, see esp. Conte 1994, 104–109 and the contributions of Th. Baier and G. Manuwald in this volume.

37 See now Hose 1999 for a reevaluation of the chorus in Roman tragedy which suggests that it tended to be treated as a protagonist in the drama.

38 Accius' first play is usually dated to 140 BC (Cic. *Brut.* 229). See Massa-Pairault 1986, 213–215.

39 Cos. 138 BC; on this Iunius, see Münzer 1917, 1021–1025.

events of 122 BC and perhaps also to compare them with the severe civil discord or *stasis* of 186 BC. The failure of the Gracchi was the result of a type of internal strife which had not been usual in the second century BC. The Bacchic myths could be used either to censor opposition to new influences or to explore the terrible consequences within a community which had suffered a deep internal division over the reception of a new idea or policy. In this way, myth could reflect on the issues raised by contemporary events without necessarily advocating a particular political point of view or course of action.

I now come to my last question, which is whether there was indeed an historical drama based on the events of 186 BC. Can we picture for ourselves what such a play would have been like and when it would have been performed? Is such a drama the source for the story of Aebutius and Hispala Faecennia in Livy Book 39?

In Livy's narrative the consul Postumius plays a striking leading role.[40] If we are to imagine an historical drama it should then perhaps be a play called *"Postumius"* which featured the valiant achievements of the consul who saved Rome from a savage and corrupt foreign cult. Such a drama, it could be argued, would mirror plays like Naevius' *Clastidium,* Ennius' *Ambracia,* and Pacuvius' *Paullus.*[41] However, these plays which we do know about celebrated external victories over foreign enemies. Should we infer, without any ancient evidence, that drama also portrayed contemporary episodes of internal strife including scenes of deadly conflict between Roman citizens?[42] To my way of thinking this would never have been acceptable on the Roman stage. It would have been especially out of place, for example, at Postumius' funeral in 180 BC, where his achievements would have been celebrated in a *laudatio* delivered from the *rostra* in the forum by a male relative.[43]

If we seek an explanation for Postumius' exceptional role in Livy we will find it in the family traditions which were recorded by his cousin the annalist A. Postumius Albinus (cos. 151 BC).[44] The annalist Postumius followed traditional Roman practice in giving his relative a special starring role which eclipsed that of his plebeian fellow consul, Q. Marcius Phillipus, whose name actually appears first in the *Senatus Consultum de Bacchanalibus* from

40 Livy 39.8–19.
41 See Flower 1995 for a discussion of these plays in their original contexts.
42 So Wiseman 1998b, who argues for an historical drama which directly portrayed the death of Gaius Gracchus.
43 Livy 40.42.13.
44 For the fragments of his work, see Peter I², pp. 53–54, and FGrHist 812.

Tiriolo. At the same time, he followed traditional Hellenistic practice in embellishing his narrative with dramatic descriptions and dialogues.[45]

Both Walsh and Wiseman have recently suggested that there was indeed a drama about the Bacchanalia of 186 BC, a play in five acts which underlies Livy 39.8–14.3.[46] According to their reconstruction, it is a love story about Aebutius, a promising young Roman who is exploited by his mother and stepfather, and about Hispala Faecennia, a freedwoman prostitute who deserved a better life. Wiseman proposes that such a play would have been performed at the *Liberalia* in a plebeian context, with a view to justifying the general role of the inhabitants of the Aventine in 186. I am unconvinced by this hypothesis. There is simply no evidence for erotic comedy on contemporary political subjects.

Livy's narrative, and a number of *senatus consulta* which he paraphrases in it, reveal that Aebutius and Hispala were indeed historical characters.[47] It seems highly implausible that details of their private relations, whether accurate or fictional, would have been portrayed on stage at a public festival in Rome. Moreover, since they had received handsome official rewards from the senate, they hardly needed any further justification for their role.

The *Liberalia,* like any other Roman state festival, was overseen by elected magistrates who were members of the senate.[48] No doubt it was a popular festival, perhaps one characterized by an atmosphere of carnival, but one that was controlled by the *aediles* who were members of the office-holding political élite. Again, I would like to argue that the dramatic, and even sometimes melodramatic, quality of Livy's narrative reflects and imitates a style favoured by Hellenistic historiography, rather than providing evidence for any actual drama.[49] I do not think the Romans had a *fabula praetexta* about the love life of a prostitute. Nor do I think they had comedy peopled by historical characters who presented episodes from recent history on stage.

I would like to end by giving a summary of some conclusions of my discussion. Bacchants of both sexes appeared with some frequency as characters on stage in the Middle Republic, in both tragedy and in comedy, but not in historical drama. Given the extreme nature of the crisis of 186 BC, the portrayal of Bacchants was bound to carry some contemporary resonances. However, their use by Roman dramatists was subtle and complex. The Roman politicians who organized the *ludi scaenici* did not choose to

45 See Montanari 1988, 127 and Paillier 1988, 597–612.
46 Walsh 1996 and Wiseman 1998a.
47 Livy 39.14.5–6 and 19.3–7.
48 For the *Liberalia,* see Bernstein 1998, 169–170.
49 See Fornara 1983, 126–137, Gray 1987, and Walker 1993.

reenact controversial recent events on stage. Rather, plays provided a more general commentary on the cultural concerns and interests of Romans in the second century BC. Consequently, the portrayal of the Bacchants also reveals the distinctive character of the different genres of Latin drama.

Tragedy provided subtle, often allegorical, reflections on myths which could sometimes be seen as relevant to contemporary situations by an informed audience. Plautus' comedy was much more specific, but it both relied on and made fun of audience knowledge and attitudes to the cult. In all the plays the Bacchants themselves are depicted as embodying "otherness", both in relation to each mythical setting (whether the Thracian kingdom or a Greek *polis* like Thebes) and in relation to the contemporary Roman audience. However, this "otherness" could be presented by playwrights and interpreted by audiences in a wide variety of ways. These plays do not furnish us with much new evidence about the cult of Bacchus in Rome beyond what we know from other sources. Nevertheless, the representations of Bacchants in Roman theatrical spaces do reveal aspects of Roman drama and of its interaction with Roman life.

Plautine comedy directly reflected and surely also helped to shape popular antipathy to the cult before 186 BC.[50] Tragedy provided an acceptable context for poets to continue exploring the representation of self and other in the stories of Pentheus and of Lycurgus even after a form of contemporary Bacchic cult had been violently suppressed. Meanwhile, the *fabula praetexta* dealing with recent events remained a *rara avis*. It celebrated the military achievements of an individual *nobilis* in a rather specific context, such as special votive games for Iuppiter Optimus Maximus, or the privately funded celebrations at the dedication of a temple built from *manubiae*.[51]

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50 So Rousselle 1982, 101 and Paillier 1988, 244–245. Hänninen 1998, 120–121 sees Plautus as less threatening to the cult: "Though Plautus represents Bacchants in a way far from positive, his Bacchants are amusing and ridiculous rather than dangerous."

51 For the *fabula praetexta* on contemporary subjects, see Flower 1995.

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BAND 3

ALTERTUMSWISSENSCHAFTLICHE REIHE

BAND 1

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