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The psychoanalysis of Pentheus in the *Bacchae* of Euripides*

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I. INTRODUCTION

MY PURPOSE here is to analyze Pentheus, not to discuss the *Bacchae* as a whole. But the psychoanalytic critic suffers from a questionable reputation, and should welcome the chance to show that his credentials as a man of taste, if not as a scholar, are reasonably well in order. Necessity offers that chance, for a few preliminary remarks on the nature of Dionysus are vital to any analysis of Pentheus, psychoanalytic or otherwise; perhaps while making them I shall be able to give some reassurance as to my own literary sanity. After that I want to go through each of the Pentheus scenes as if it were a session on the couch; then a look at one of the case-histories in the psychoanalytical journals may enable us to reconstruct a life-history of Pentheus' illness. I am not threatening to present a completely unfamiliar play: the reader will have to decide whether I have used the facts of another man's life and another man's illness to illuminate or to strait-jacket the life and illness of Pentheus. But the hard evidence I use will all be taken from the play. If there is disagreement – and I have yet to encounter the psychological interpretation that won much initial favor – it will be over how to interpret what is in the play, not over my dragging in hypotheses from outside that have the approval of famous names in psychiatry. To take an example from elsewhere – I do not think it rash to say that Hippolytus despises sex because an illicit sexual act made him into a social anomaly, a bastard; and I think I can therefore understand better why he withdraws from normal society. But though his bastardy and withdrawal are in the play, to put them together requires our hypo-

* This article was originally given as a lecture to the Yale Classical Club on 6 November 1969, and has been only slightly altered. Protracted discussion of sources and the opinions of others has therefore been eschewed, and the style remains somewhat informal. My best thanks for the criticisms of Adam Parry.

thesizing scenes in Hippolytus' formative life to which we are not privy. In Pentheus' case such formative events can be extracted from what we see, if only we may take certain natural interpretative liberties. After I have finished taking those liberties, I shall say a few words to urge again that there is more to the play than Pentheus' neurosis and madness, that he is but one instance of how not to come to terms with Dionysus.

For there is no doubt that Dionysus is a living reality. As Otto puts it: 'The elemental depths gape open, and out of them a monstrous creature raises its head... the god himself. All earthly powers are united in him: the generating, nourishing, intoxicating rapture; and the searing pain, the deathly pallor, the speechless night of having been.'[1] That seems to me a pretty good description, except that Otto adds that when we see the monster we necessarily go mad; I don't believe this of the Euripidean Dionysus. The latter is no *mainomenos*, no mad god, nor are his true worshipers, the Lydian chorus, *mainomenai*. Madness does not arise from *seeing* Dionysus, but from rejecting that vision: from saying, I do not want to die, I do not want to live. Sanity results from confrontation: from saying, I see that life and death are a single terrible joyous thing, and I am willing to live. A little less metaphysically: we need to know that we are animals who belong to the animal world, and we need to know this, not as a biological and abstract fact but as an experiential and emotional fact. We must meet our animality face-to-face, as a kind of Thou, and talk to it and give it a name – Dionysus. Of course there are many people in the world who never do this, and yet survive. They are the Cadmuses, who admit that they are animals but who do not know it; they go through the motions of life, but when they gaze at the wilderness or talk to each other or make love, they are never wholly *there*. Cadmus in our play was fortunate – Dionysus made him learn his animality in the most violent way, by turning him into a serpent. Most Cadmuses, like most Jasons, go on as they are, getting away with their puny lives, never falling, never feeling, waiting for something or striving for it, not knowing that the ultimate something is death, never opening their eyes to life – never seeing in the depths of the bestiality we all share the sole possibility of being alive.

1. W. F. Otto, *Dionysus* (Bloomington 1965), pp. 140–1.

But the *Bacchae* is not mainly about Cadmus, about the drifters and equivocators. Rather it is about a man who fights Dionysus with all his being, conscious and unconscious – except that portion of his being which is Dionysus. It is Pentheus whom we must come to understand. First, one precaution: if we are to believe in Pentheus and his fate, we must of course discount the possibility that anything that happens to him is miraculous, just as we discount the miraculous in the *Hippolytus*. We see or hear of bulls that arise from the sea, palaces that collapse and giant fir-trees that bend; I don't think these happenings command literal belief, nor does our incredulity ruin the plays. Dionysus is the Thou of life and death – he *is* the natural, not the supernatural. Pentheus is a real man, real in all his parts; if we believe in the play, we must believe that what happens to him is natural. The central fact about Pentheus is illness and madness. He is sick from the moment we first see him: as Tiresias says: ἡ δὲ δόξα νοσῇ, 'your thoughts are sick' (311). And again: μαίνῃ γὰρ ὡς ἄλγιστα νοσεῖς, 'you are desperately sick, sick unto madness' (326–7). This makes him a logical candidate for psychoanalysis.

II. PENTHEUS ON THE COUCH

When Pentheus comes to his first session he immediately offers us a fantasy to explore; speaking of the Bacchae on the mountains, he says:

> And in the midst of their reveling bands, bowls stand
> Filled with wine, and one after another they
> Creep to lonely places, serve the lusts of men...
> Aphrodite they put ahead of the Bacchic god (221–5).

We are right to call this fantasy, since we know that it is not merely untrue, but groundless. We have just been assured by Dionysus and Tiresias that the women are alone on Cithaeron; Pentheus himself has just stressed that the women, specifically, have gone away; what men are available to satisfy those female lusts, at least in the abundance which Pentheus' morbidity imagines? The fantasy reflects unconscious desire, as Wilamowitz, Zieliński and Dodds all agree;[2] but while these gentlemen suggest that the wish is libidinal, I prefer greater caution and perhaps greater subtlety.

2. See E. R. Dodds, ed., *Bacchae*, 2 ed. (Oxford 1960), pp. 97–8.

By asserting that the women put Aphrodite ahead of Dionysus, Pentheus is saying, in a confused way, that they are up to no good. I use the word 'confused' because, according to the strict logic of his anti-Bacchic stance, he ought perhaps to be applauding them for putting the familiar Greek goddess Aphrodite ahead of this dirty foreigner. But it is just such confusions that psychiatrists legitimately pounce upon. If Aphrodite is the real culprit, then what upsets Pentheus about Dionysus is Dionysus' sexual side.

Similarly in lines 260–2:

> When the gleam of the grape appears at the feasts of *women*,
> I say there's nothing healthy any longer in their *orgia*.

Why? Pentheus is no temperance crusader; he takes no stand against wine as such. Clearly it is what wine will do to this disgusting female sex that troubles him: it will encourage their nastiness, and off they will slink, the readier to serve the lusts of men.

But Pentheus is not a man to deplore passively whatever he finds disgusting and nasty; if the *orgia* are unhealthy, Pentheus will heal them. The cure, of course, is violence, arms, imprisonment:

> All the ones I caught, my servants bound their hands
> And keep them inside common prison walls.
> Those that escaped, I'll hunt them on the mountains (226–8).

Now he can't indulge his taste for violence, clearly, unless he can persuade himself that the women are misbehaving: his prurient fantasy, therefore, is framed as an excuse, an excuse for hunting and catching and binding. He is not saying: 'Let those women be making love up there so that I can join them and make love too' – not even unconsciously. He does say later, 'Let them be making love so that I can *watch*', but right now the motive is, 'so that I can punish'. He wants to attack women. It follows that he is angry with women as well as disturbed by sex, and seeks this justification for assaulting them because they are engaged in it. But – it may be objected – but perhaps all he wants to do is punish an improper indulgence; to which the reply is, 'Who, besides Pentheus, thinks that anyone is improperly indulging?'

These vigorous and inappropriately savage feelings, though chiefly directed towards sex and women, are not confined to them. Pentheus has heard that a Lydian stranger has come to town and is enticing young women with his promises of Bacchic joys. Perhaps

we should not attempt to weigh this charge; Pentheus says that this is what he heard, and he may have. But the charge is false, at least in its sexual implications; and it is false in precisely the same way as the charge he has neurotically hurled at the Theban women on Cithaeron. The only way to deal with such a sexual criminal, says Pentheus, is to behead him – or rather, to cut his neck away from his body (241). 'Neck' is an odd word to use – *trachelos*, used also of neck-like objects – and I think the psychiatrist may be forgiven for analyzing Pentheus' accusation as, 'He has committed sexual crimes – castrate him!' This Lydian stranger, whether a candidate for castration or for decapitation, must now face other charges: he has been going about calling Dionysus a god and saying that he was stitched into Zeus' thigh. 'Don't', asks Pentheus, 'don't these things deserve hanging?' Do they? Are all religious fanatics to be hanged? I doubt whether anyone will be eager to defend Pentheus with the analogy of the accusers of Socrates. Then, shocked at seeing Cadmus and Tiresias dressed as Bacchants, he storms at and threatens the seer and strikes the thyrsus from his grandfather's hand. We shall see this sort of irrational brutality again; it has run through Pentheus' life since early boyhood, when he would stroke his grandfather's beard and say:

> Who has done you wrong, who dishonored you?
> Tell me – I'll punish the criminal (1320–2).

Pentheus' first session has been rich in information, information from which the natural psychiatric inferences would be that he hates sex because he fears it, that he hates women because he fears them, that the rage which searches for opportunity to explode is closely associated with a deep-seated fear of sex within himself. But these are hypotheses only; we don't know enough yet.

Pentheus' second session – his first dialogue with Dionysus – gives us material we have seen before: the tendency to see the Stranger as a sexual being exclusively, and to derogate him for it (455–9); the indulgence in various forms of violence (493–514); the search for excuse for punishment (489). He says that Dionysus' hair is a token of lewdness, and therefore he cuts it off; he strikes the thyrsus from his hand, just as he had struck it from Cadmus'; he sends him off to prison: 'Dance there, in the shadows of the dark!' New is Dionysus' charge:

> You do not yet know what you are saying, nor what you are doing, nor who you are (506, as emended by Dodds).

To which Pentheus replies with external credentials: I am Pentheus (that is my label), child of Agave and Echion. Of course a Greek would find it quite natural to identify himself by his family, but not in response to such a charge as Dionysus has just leveled. I take the god's words in their simplest meaning: you don't know what your own inner nature is, nor what your words and actions mean. When Pentheus replies, 'My name is Pentheus', he only makes Dionysus seem all the more justified. I don't mean merely that there are certain deeply hidden desires that Pentheus is not conscious of; I mean that he has no sense of his identity, of the meaning of his actions, of the purport of his words.

When next we see Pentheus, much has happened, and since he himself does not describe it for us we must take it as Dionysus presents it. There is lightning, there is earthquake; part of the palace falls; Pentheus tries to tie up a bull and slash to death a phantom Dionysus; and yet when he comes back on stage, the only thing he says is that his prisoner has escaped. 'How do you come to be outside,' he asks, 'having broken my fetters' – as if he had made no attempt to stab Dionysus *after* he had broken away and *before* he emerged from the house. I do not infer with Verrall[3] and the young Norwood[4] that none of these things actually happened: they are as realistic, and as unrealistic, as anything else in the play. They are not imitations of the probable; they are not the mirror held up to nature. They are thus to be understood symbolically. The question is, Symbolic of what? And the answer to that question is likely to arouse antagonism, no matter what the answer is – no two people can be counted on to agree on the meaning of any symbol save the most simple and trivial. I would not expect to outrage anyone if I were to suggest timidly that the earthquake and the lightning symbolize the very real power of unleashed animal nature. Nor is it likely to be alarming to hear that such power is all the greater after it has been repressed: if we co-operate with Dionysus, he will be kindly and gentle, or at least not savage; if we try to subdue him, he will recoil vehemently. But to assert that these remarks about Dionysus correspond to *psycho-*

3. A. W. Verrall, *The Bacchants of Euripides* (Cambridge 1910), pp. 64–81.
4. Gilbert Norwood, *The Riddle of the Bacchae* (Manchester 1908), pp. 47–48.

logical reality may awaken some discomfort. And to go on to say that in this scene 'Pentheus is performing the futile task of constraining the animal Dionysus within himself' invites the accusation that I have found words to suit my own psychoanalytic theories – unless, of course, the words are recognized as belonging not to myself but to Winnington-Ingram.[5] I know that these words do not command instant acceptance, because Dodds has dismissed them as 'oversubtle';[6] but I still think them persuasive. When Pentheus tells Dionysus to dance in the shadowy darkness of his stable-prison, I interpret this as a relegation of the Dionysian within Pentheus to Pentheus' own unconscious. When Dionysus says that Pentheus 'fed upon his hopes' (617) I take that to mean that what he hopes to do is bind and assault his own animality. When Dionysus bursts forth, and the palace is cracked, I take this to mean that the prison of Pentheus' mind is torn asunder by this impossible attempt. And when Pentheus shows no awareness of what has happened, I take this to mean that all has occurred in the dark regions of the unconscious, in those deeper elements of the self that emerge, as Plato says, chiefly in dreams.[7]

Such an interpretation should not appear very startling. No one would deny that Pentheus wants to curb animality in other people – that has been his chief activity on stage so far. Would such a man not also want to curb it in himself? Perhaps not, if he were a sexual megalomaniac, who wants to reserve all sex for himself, to hoard it. But whatever else may be wrong with him, Pentheus seems to have not the slightest trace of *this* symptom. At one point Dodds himself refers to the palace as a fantasy-castle.[8] And where do fantasies occur, if not in one's own mind?

We can all agree, I think, that the bull that Pentheus tries to tie up is a symbol for masculinity – *somebody's* masculinity. Does this mean that it stands for aggression, force, power? A bull would certainly work as such a symbol. But it has not been characteristic of Pentheus to try to curb anyone's aggressiveness – it is sexuality and the folly of old men that he hopes to restrain. If Winnington-Ingram is right, and this bull is Pentheus' own animality, then it is his own sexuality; certainly not his aggressiveness, which has

5. R. P. Winnington-Ingram, *Euripides and Dionysus* (Cambridge 1935), p. 84.
6. Dodds, p. 154.
7. Plato, *Republic* IX 571c.
8. Dodds, p. 156, lines 638–9.

been allowed to run rampant from the start. Similarly, when Pentheus slashes away at the phantom Dionysus, I see this as an effort to kill his own libido, to castrate himself psychically. Both here and earlier, he is so vehement, so bull-like, in what he undertakes; he seems to want to say, 'I am a man'. Yet in choosing his sexuality as his target, he seems to want to say, 'I am not a man'. Surely this is why Dionysus tells him that he doesn't know who he is: can you know who you are, if you don't know what sex you belong to?

No good psychoanalyst will allow his symbolic interpretations to go unverified, just as no polite literary critic ought to force them down his audience's throat. Is there any other evidence that Pentheus wants to repudiate his own masculinity? We may note that at the end of the first session we conjectured that Pentheus was deeply afraid of sex within himself. His morbid anxiety over what he imagines women to do when they let themselves go suggests that he is really anxious over what he himself might do, if he were to let himself go. But that was a conjecture, and we shall not use one conjecture to verify another. We shall wait, and if we see Pentheus vigorously asserting his maleness in a healthy way, we shall revise our views.

Pentheus begins what we might somewhat arbitrarily call his fourth session – the prison scene was the third – by listening to a long account of how arms cannot prevail against the Bacchae and immediately issuing a call to arms. Women are powerful: armies must be mustered. Now women *are* powerful – that is an objective fact which our play goes to some lengths to emphasize. But it also emphasizes that physical force is no way to meet that power, and that proposition too, I think, is entirely reasonable. But Pentheus is not reasonable. His infantile fantasies propose savagery, soldiers, swords. In such a spirit he rejects all of Dionysus' pleas. 'Bring me my arms, and *you* stop talking.' Suddenly Dionysus offers the challenge: would you like to *see* them? And against the surge of this temptation Pentheus yields at once – nothing would please him better. All critics of the play agree that Dionysus is now beginning to take over Pentheus' soul. But some seem to regard the god as imposing from outside a madness that has nothing to do with what Pentheus has been all along. This, I submit, is altogether un-Greek and impossible. Dodds himself says that 'the poet shows

us the supernatural...working upon and through nature...the persecutor is betrayed by what he would persecute – the Dionysiac longing *in himself*'.[9] I would put it a little differently; I would say that the Dionysiac longing is sexual, and that it is bursting forth in the form of *voyeurism*. Dionysus is not to be resisted forever. He will emerge. But Pentheus cannot let him emerge as normal sex. We are watching a phenomenon that has all the signs of *dementia praecox*: the crumbling away of the personality and its defenses through a violent assault of libidinal feeling in the face of a situation, a temptation with which the individual simply cannot cope. The madness, the breakdown, has already begun when Pentheus cried out, bring me my armor! This is an impossible solution, and is immediately relinquished in favor of the voyeuristic wish, which is a compromise. It allows him to join the company of the Bacchae, not as a friendly fellow reveler, but as a hostile spy. At the same time it gives some scope, not dangerous, to his sexuality. Those lewd acts in which the women are engaged – he cannot participate, that would be too threatening. But he can watch it happen, and get his satisfaction vicariously.

But to look, he must first dress as a woman. This he resists at first: *aidos* restrains me (828). A most suggestive remark! Only *aidos* is holding him back; otherwise... He wavers – 'I cannot' – but the alternative is bloodshed, and his resistance gives way at once. Either fight with women, then, or dress like one. He cannot fight – women are too powerful for that; so he becomes a transvestite, a compromise female. The obvious alternative is not available to him – behave towards them as a grown man behaves towards women, with strength and tenderness.

After Pentheus has left the fourth session, Dionysus tells the chorus that if he were sane, he would not be willing to put on women's clothes (851–2). This remark has, I think, been more responsible than any other in the play for throwing readers off the track. It is almost invariably taken to mean that Pentheus' transvestism can be discounted as a manifestation of his character – it is the imposition of an external Dionysus, who wants him to be the laughing-stock of Thebes. But although Dionysus says that this is what he wants, I quite agree with Dodds in feeling that as a motive it is very weak.[10] Certainly if Dionysus hoped that this

9. Dodds, p. 172.

10. Dodds, p. 181.

would happen, he was disappointed; we hear not a word of any laughter, any mockery, any shame. Nor can the true motive be disguise – Pentheus is willing to go openly, which would fit Dionysus' destructive designs perfectly well. It is not as if Pentheus were planning to join the Bacchants.

In fact Dionysus warns us away from looking on the female clothing as disguise by *saying* that it is part of Pentheus' madness. In his former state, which was sick but not psychotic, Pentheus would never have done this. Transvestism, therefore, is not pragmatism, but pathology. And we have no right to say that it has nothing to do with Pentheus' previous character. You might as well say that Ajax' slaughtering of the sheep had nothing to do with Ajax – *he*, at least, didn't think that. No, madness may be excited from outside, but it is the expression of ourselves – and let us remember that Dionysus is inside as well as outside, that he is the totality of animal nature wherever it is found. Let us also remember that Euripides knew transvestites, that the phenomenon was no doubt far more familiar to him that to editors of the *Bacchae*. We need only think of the *Thesmophoriazusae*. All this is borne out in the next, the fifth session. Pentheus has entered his role with enthusiasm: he asks coyly whether he looks like Ino or Agave; he worries about his dress as any lady might – 'Is my blouse buttoned? Is my slip showing?' (934–8). Now we were seeking, a few moments ago, to see whether there would be any more signs of Pentheus' repudiating his masculinity. Surely he has done this, and in a most spectacular fashion.

But having seen our hypotheses confirmed, we must now tread warily; for Pentheus has not entirely assimilated himself to the female. He has not actually castrated himself. He continues to use the masculine form of the participles (e.g. 930–1): in his fancy he is both male and female. In fact he walks on stage seeing double: there are two suns in the sky, two cities of Thebes, and he himself is double (918–21). He says, 'I am not a man', but does not go all the way – or as far as he might – towards becoming a woman; he says, 'I am a woman', but keeps his grammar masculine. He sees a bull – the male is projected safely outside himself, an external being (922); but of course there is no real bull there, and the male is still really inside. He has joined the hated, powerful sex in order

to neutralize it, but he keeps his penis. There is a special pathos in line 962:

> I am the only *man* of them who dares to do this.

We can conclude that Pentheus has powerful urges towards castration, that such urges must lie near the root of his constantly expressed hostility towards sex; but in the very depths of his being he still keeps his penis, and still hopes to use it.

At the end of the session he yearns to come home from the mountains carried in his mother's arms – in a half-line dialogue with Dionysus, the god half-supplying his thoughts, he comes closer and closer to his heart's desire, to be a little boy again in his mother's arms – to be one with the mother, not a separate thing, and therefore female; but to be still a little boy, and therefore male (966–70).

The sixth session takes place on the mountain, and we are invited to play once more the uncomfortable game of symbolic analysis. As in the prison scene, here too we are confronted with the miraculous, the unrealistic: the fir-tree bends down, Pentheus climbs aboard, and the tree grows erect again without displacing its passenger. Surely we have a right to ask a few questions:

1. Why does the poet set Pentheus on top of a fir-tree, only to have him come tumbling down again? There are any number of more straightforward ways of putting Pentheus into the harsh clutches of the Bacchae.

2. If he must be on a fir-tree, why not have him climb it? He himself has complained that he cannot see. Why not tell him to go climb a tree? Why have Dionysus bend it down? Why have him re-erect it? For the sake of the supernatural? But that is precisely what we neither expect nor want: Dionysus is animal nature; is not, fundamentally, and in everyday reality, a supernatural being. Wilamowitz, in despair, says that all this happens to give Dionysus something to do.[11] Dodds says, No, it is a traditional element of the story, very likely a reflex of primitive ritual.[12] I would like to have been present at that ritual, in which great untouched fir-trees were made to bend down and rise up gently, without shaking off their riders, and then were torn up by the roots.

3. Why are the women unsuccessful in pelting Pentheus, or in

11. Wilamowitz, *Textgeschichte der griechischen Bukoliker* (Berlin 1906), p. 214.
12. Dodds, p. 209, on 1058–75.

prising up the tree with makeshift crowbars? Why must they pluck up the tree – at Agave's instigation?

It is my guess that the supernatural aspects of this scene are symbolic, and I am sure the reader has already guessed at what I think they symbolize. The rising fir-tree is an erection, a display of the penis that Pentheus would not relinquish; the uprooting is his mother's emblematic castration of that penis. We see in this scene very much what we have been seeing all through the play: a man who in the deepest recesses of his soul wants to be a male – that is the erecting fir-tree – but who is constantly repressing, constantly suffering castration – that is the tree uprooted. But we are also seeing something else: it is not Pentheus who is ultimately responsible for his emasculation – it is his mother. She is a castrating woman; Pentheus' self-emasculation, indeed his whole anti-sexual stance, can all be understood in the light of this one fact. Pentheus displays himself sexually, Agave turns on him savagely. Naturally he will be terrified of sex; naturally he will be terrified of women. Mother has taught him that sex is dirty; mother has taught him to reject his penis, to be like her. Yet at the same time he will be bitterly angry with her for turning on him, for castrating him, and angry with all women, since they threaten to cause him to expose himself and be humiliated.

This means that our psychoanalytic approach does nothing to alter the emotions everyone has always felt during the course of the play: we begin by disliking Pentheus and end with powerful sympathy. His last words are:

> Look, mother, I am your child,
> Pentheus; you gave me birth in Echion's house.
> Pity me, mother; don't kill your child
> Just because of the bad things I did (1118–21).

The cry of a frightened little boy. Think of those earlier, fatuous threats to take arms against women, women who are so powerful; then think of these very words I have just quoted, shouted out to the huge, terrifying mother: pathos and horror are what we feel now, horror over the savagery of Agave, pathos over the helplessness of the little boy caught in her grip. The dramatic breakdown of Pentheus' psyche has brought us back close to the beginning of Pentheus' life – and to the very beginning of the illness which in this scene is costing him his life.

III. PENTHEUS AND MR P.

We have failed as doctors – we have allowed our patient to die. But perhaps we can make partial restitution by reconstructing the course of his disease. To do that, it is sensible to go to the psychoanalytic literature, not in the hopes of finding another Pentheus, because each patient is unique, but in the hopes of finding analogies. If a number of Pentheus' symptoms occur in conjunction elsewhere, we shall feel happier about claiming that they cohere naturally in his personality. If some of these symptoms seem to develop one from another – if as a whole they can be traced back to certain crucial events – then perhaps we can reconstruct the life history of Pentheus' disease along parallel lines. I don't know how close we could get were we to scour the journals from beginning to end, but a quite cursory search gives us the useful Mr P.[13] I have no idea whether that initial is indeed his; I have chosen it in such a way as to forestall any psychoanalytic guesswork on the reader's part – Mr P. gets his initial from Pentheus.

Mr P. had spent his childhood in a world of women, an elder sister and a powerful mother. His father, a truckdriver, was peripheral, either shouting ineffectually, or simply not there at all. His mother and sister he felt to be masculine, and in his fantasies he supplied them both with penises. They in turn were overtly hostile, or at least threatening, to his own masculinity: he has one vivid memory from the age of 4 of their dressing him in one of his sister's slips; his mother shared her bath with him until he was 12; his sister and he slept in the same bed and played with each other, but if he got an erection she would slap him and say, 'You're a girl, you're a girl.' Like almost every boy he had castration anxieties: these come naturally when the boy discovers that women don't have penises, and he wonders if he must give up his own; such anxieties are strengthened when he finds in his father a rival for his mother's love. In the course of normal development these feelings are overcome through the reassurance that both his parents love him, and through the boy's gradually developing capacity to be like his father, to identify with him and thus come to feel that he

13. Murray Lewis, 'A Case of Transvestism', *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* (1964), 345–51.

too may keep his penis. But Mr P.'s father wasn't there, and his mother and sister seemed to be saying, 'Don't be like father, be like us.' Hence he had to cope with his castration anxieties in less healthy ways.

In the face of all this, one side of Mr P. developed a powerful yearning for maternal symbiosis – to be *with* mother and sister, to be like mother, and even, it appears, to be his mother's missing penis. As the years went by, he turned increasingly to secret transvestism, a symptom which allowed him to handle no fewer than three different problems:

First, it pleased his mother, at least in his fantasy, because she seemed to want him to be like her. In fact she would no doubt have been overtly disturbed had she seen Mr P., as an adolescent or an adult, actually dressed as a woman; but if she could have been honest with herself, she would have had to admit that this was precisely the sort of behavior that she had been encouraging in her son all along.

Second, it alleviated castration anxiety. Just how this worked is not entirely clear from the article, because the doctor wants to juggle two theories, and his patient apparently didn't turn up enough material to permit him to make a decisive choice between them.

The first theory is that transvestism anticipates castration. Mr P. had seemingly wanted to shout – either to mother or to father – 'Don't castrate me, I'm only a girl.' Dressed as a girl, he could, in imagination, protest that he had already castrated himself, that there was no need for anyone else to bother.

The second theory starts from Mr P.'s fantasies, shared with many transvestites, which endowed his mother with a phallus. Such daydreams deny the possibility of castration, by a simple enough process of reasoning: 'If women have no phalluses, then they have been castrated. But that's too frightening for me, I won't have it that way. Therefore, women have phalluses.' Having worked this out, Mr P. was able to say, 'I can do what mother and sister want, and become a woman, without giving up my penis.'

Whichever of these theories is right, transvestism is a way of coping with castration feelings.

Finally, as a woman with a penis, he was now permitted to use it. Had he merely tried to display it as a part of a male body, even

to himself, he would have been inviting castration, but if he dresses as a woman, he has either already castrated himself – on one of our theories – or has denied the possibility of castration – on the other – and can go ahead and masturbate. Thus through his transvestism he has rejected his masculinity but allowed himself sexuality.

Mr P. learned further, during the course of his treatment, that his own identity was very much involved with his penis, so that a threat to one was a threat to the other. This caused him to proceed to an entirely different symptom, to what for him were extravagant assertions of masculinity. He wore a crewcut and a leather jacket, bought a motorcycle, told the doctor, 'I am taller than you and my car is bigger'. He was aware that the crew cut, the jacket and the motorcycle were exceedingly irritating to his mother – no doubt they ran exactly counter to her covert wishes that he be feminine – and he came to see just how angry he was with his mother for forcing him to be a girl. He would go out with women, but only so long as he could regard them as objects, wherewith to flaunt his masculinity. As soon as they revealed personalities, he would abandon them.

Now let's see if this material can help us trace the psychological history of Pentheus. First off we notice that his childhood, like Mr P.'s, was spent in a world of women. At least we see no trace whatever of his father Echion – I defy any reader of the play to say a word about Echion except that he spawned Pentheus and then, so far as we know, vanished. The throne of Thebes was never his portion, but passed directly from Cadmus to Pentheus. Granted that Cadmus was around during Pentheus' childhood, it is never asserted that he functioned *in loco patris*.

Next, we note that Agave is masculine. In her madness she conceives of herself as a great hunter; she wants to please father – Cadmus – not through her femininity, but by being *like father*.

> Father, you can make the greatest boast: you sowed
> The most heroic daughters of them all (1233–4).

She makes it perfectly clear that her exploits as a hunter stand in contrast to her feminine pursuits:

> I left my shuttles by the looms, and came
> To greater things – the hunt of beast with hand (1236–7).

She must surely have been fiercely jealous of boys, for they could go off and hunt and do great exploits, and thereby please their fathers. Let us recall too why she is among the Bacchae on the mountains – she had repudiated Dionysus, animal nature (26–7), and with it doubtless her female being.

If she was jealous of men, and if she was hostile to sex, her feelings about her son's penis can be easily imagined: off with it! And if we have interpreted the death scene of Pentheus aright, that is just what she does: she goes through a symbolic castration of her son's erect penis. And now I must make a leap, and assume that what happened on the mountain had happened before, that Pentheus had once – shall we say – displayed his erect penis to his mother, as most little boys, after all, do do, and that she reacted to this gesture in anger and disgust. This would have left the boy Pentheus just as it leaves the man Pentheus in the moment before his death: terrified, desperately trying to shout his identity, faced with psychic death, the death of his willingness to be an animal, the death that he in fact suffers. Just so Mr P. was encouraged by his sister and mother to think that his penis made them angry or disgusted them; just so Mr P. cannot hold on to his sense of who he is in the face of the pressure applied by these powerful, frightening women.

One reaction, perhaps the most basic, to his terror, is to say, 'If only I were a baby again, safe in mother's arms!' This, of course, is what psychoanalysis calls regression: if there is trauma at one stage of development, it is obviously natural to try to go back to an earlier and safer stage. Mr P. wanted to be with his mother, to be part of her, as he confusedly imagines he was once. Similarly Pentheus hopes to be carried back to Thebes in his mother's arms, as if he were a little baby. I am aware that these hopes are expressed *before* the castration scene in our play; immediately before it, in fact. But just as I have taken the liberty of assuming that the castration scene, last in Pentheus' life, was the first in his illness, so now I take the liberty of assuming that the penultimate scene in Pentheus' life was the second in his illness, 'Mommy is angry with me now; I wish I were a little child in her arms again.'

But the boy Pentheus soon came to see that such hopes were not to be, and was driven to find other solutions. If we move one step further backwards in the play, we encounter transvestism; can we

assume that transvestism was the next step forward in Pentheus' illness? It was that in the case of Mr P., though for Mr P. it remained the primary symptom, while in Pentheus' case we have to assume that his transvestism, if it was ever acted out, was so no longer as he grew up. That is no real drawback – it was waiting there, so to speak, lurking in a corner of his psyche, to be acted out when Dionysus called it forth. When it *is* acted out, it reveals itself as the solution to three childhood problems – the same three that poor Mr P. also confronted:

First, Pentheus can please his angry mother by being like mother; let us recall lines 925–6:

> How then do I look? Don't I have the carriage
> Of Ino, or Agave, of my mother (μητρός γ' ἐμῆς)?

Second, Pentheus can alleviate the terrors of castration by anticipating it, by looking like a woman, by pretending to be a woman, as in 937–8:

> My pleats do seem askew, by the right foot, anyway.
> But on the other side the robe is straight along the ankle.

In doing this he attempts to thrust the masculine outside himself, remember: καὶ ταῦρος ἡμῖν πρόσθεν: and you are a bull in front of me (920).

Finally, Pentheus can allow some scope to the masculine, paradoxically. He can go to the mountains and indulge his voyeurism – compromise intercourse – and have his symbolic erection; he can continue to use the masculine participles while acting like a female; he can be μόνος ἀνὴρ τολμῶν, the only man who dares (962).

It therefore makes sense to argue that the antepenultimate stage in Pentheus' life is the third stage in the growth of his illness, that transvestism is for him the natural efflorescence of the seeds of disease which we have already assumed to have been sown. The next step backwards in the play is unfortunately not echoed in Mr P.'s life; we have no knowledge that he was a voyeur. Well, we can't have everything. But what is important is that voyeurism fits *Pentheus*. It gives him sexual gratification – that is to say, some scope for the irresistible Dionysus – without compelling him to expose his penis. And it gains him entry into the coveted world of women, from which he has felt excluded ever since his mother

expressed horror at his exposed phallus. Just before experiencing that surge of voyeuristic feeling, Pentheus had been threatening to take arms against the Bacchae. His underlying reason for wanting to strike out at the women is his savage anger with Agave; but the fact that he should choose to use weapons expresses his neurotic fear of his mother's terrible strength.

The next scene in the play, moving backwards, is the prison scene. This corresponds to no particular stage of Pentheus' life. It expresses rather the condition Pentheus is in at any time after his initial crisis. He is always restraining the bull within himself, always slashing at his Dionysus image – constantly denying his masculinity, constantly trying to kill his animality. The same is true of Pentheus' uncertainty over his identity; it is not a stage, but a permanent resulting state. We should recall that Mr P. also repressed his masculinity, and that this also left him confused as to who he was.

We are now back at the beginning of the play, where Pentheus' behavior, like so much of Mr P.'s, is superficially hypermasculine. Pentheus does not wear a leather jacket nor sport a crewcut. Rather he blusters, pushes people around, and especially wants to make war on women. Obviously he does this because he is angry with them, just as Mr P. rode his motorcycle and cut his hair in order to irritate his mother. No sort of normal male attitude towards women exists for either man: if they are not trying to be like women, they are trying to behave in inappropriately masculine ways.

Let us be fair, and note another difference between our two patients. Mr P. is not reported to have thought sex a bad, a dirty thing, though he certainly never found it a satisfying one. Nor did Mr P. fantasize pruriently in order to act out his hatred of women. But that does not create difficulties for our understanding of Pentheus. We do not expect two people to be exactly alike; and where Pentheus differs the difference is easy to explain. Pentheus was naturally angry at his mother for her turning on him; he was probably also angry because he envied her her sex. But he wanted, deeply and passionately, to please mother and be like her. Anger with parents is generative of guilt in the best of us. Therefore if he is to let himself be angry, he must have an excuse, and this he gives himself by imagining that she is up to no good, that she is doing

dirty things on the mountains. The beginning of the play gives us the last stage in the development of Pentheus' illness.

That is the history of our patient. When we first saw him, he was the finished, or at least the end, product of a pathological progression. As we go forward through the course of the play, three things happen:

First – Pentheus' defenses break down, in an orderly fashion, as he regresses further and further towards the initial traumatic scene with Agave. The range of symptoms displayed can all be traced back to that one scene, the last of his life, the first in his sickness. Surely such a pattern is dramatic enough, the climax being a fusion of the end and the beginning. Just so the climax of *King Oedipus* brings on stage precisely those three people who were present at the great crisis of Oedipus' babyhood, when he was handed over by one shepherd from Thebes to another shepherd from Corinth: in the end is the beginning. Similarly, but along more psychological lines, in *Ghosts* the hero's last outcry is his first, the plaintive demand for joy that his mother had dedicated herself to denying him: 'Mother, give me the sun!'

Next as Pentheus' defenses break down, he reveals more and more of himself to us; we get to know him better, in a real and intimate way.

Finally – as so often happens, when we get to know someone better – not in the sense of getting more familiar with his masks, but going into the deepest layers of his character – we get to like him better. We started out, I think, by detesting the *man*; we pass to pity for a grotesque invalid; we end by weeping for a little boy.

IV. CONCLUSION

All of this makes us want to get mad at someone, and most people want to get mad at Dionysus. That, of course, is silly – you might as well get mad at the stars in their courses. It is much more sophisticated to get mad at Agave, although I defy anyone to do that after the scene in which she is brought back to her senses and stands before us with her son's bloody head in her hands (1282). And anyway her father Cadmus takes responsibility upon himself – he was faking when he worshiped Dionysus, he was just as culpable as anyone (1344). And then maybe we should stop and

wonder whether this anger, this blaming of ours, makes any sense. The culprit, if there is one, is humanity's urge to transcend the bestial, an unfortunate urge that is forever with us. 'Torpedo the Ark', as Ibsen said referring to Noah's misguided providence. Or, since that is no longer possible for you and me (though it seems increasingly possible for our leaders) perhaps what we must do is listen to the chorus' advice. I can't rehearse it all here, but I can call attention to two symbols. One is the dance itself: on the one hand orderly, controlled, expressing the side of humanity that is aware, that knows what it is and that it is; on the other hand body in wild motion, animal. The other symbol is confrontation, occurring most poignantly at the beginning of the second episode. The chorus is cowering with fear over the imprisonment of their leader. Suddenly the divine voice descends, overwhelming, yet regular and orderly, not merely in its quantitative rhythm, but even in its pitch: *iá – klúei' emâs, klúei' audâs – iὼ Bácchai, iὼ Bácchai.* The chorus does not quite know at first who this is; but notice the same regularity of meter and pitch in their answer:

τίς ὅδε, τίς ὅδε, πόθεν ὁ κέλαδος
ἀνὰ μ' ἐκάλεσεν Εὐίου;

How utterly wild; how totally controlled! The god calls again:

Ἰὼ Ἰώ, πάλιν αὐδῶ
ὁ Σεμέλας, ὁ Διὸς παῖς.

And now the chorus knows whom it is answering. But such knowledge, though conveying the wildest excitement, still shows that supreme orderliness and precision. This is the cry of aware recognition of the god of the beast, their master, the thunderer; this is the voice of sanity:

Ἰὼ ἰώ, δέσποτα, δέσποτα,
μόλε νῦν ἡμέτερον ἐς
θίασον ὦ Βρόμιε, Βρόμιε.