

Sophistry of Teiresias

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After Dionysos declares his intent for the fate of the Kadmians and the Theban people, Teiresias opens the first scene of *Bacchae* knocking on Kadmos' gate, calling him out to join him in the Bacchic revels. As they delay, deciding whether to go by chariot—since they seem to be too old and feeble to make the journey, after all!—or on foot, Pentheus appears, and he makes a brazen mockery of the Bacchic rites, the Lydian stranger that Dionysos disguises himself ^{as}, and even Dionysos himself, until the Bacchae cry out in outrage. There, Teiresias steps in with a lengthy speech in defense of the god. With regard to this defense speech, however, traditional scholarship has characterized him ^{as} a sophist, especially in his rationalization of the birth of Dionysos from Zeus that Pentheus mocks, and by implication, a hypocrite, since just before, he declared, “*οὐδὲν σοφίζομεσθα τοῖσι δαίμοσιν.*”¹ However, the morals that he attempts to get across, as well as the textual evidence from elsewhere in the play, supports the opposite conclusion, that Teiresias is not a sophist who advocates

¹“We do not use sophistry against the gods.” (line 200)—the translations that follow are mine, with help from Dodds' commentary and a faint memory of how we translated the passages in class 2 months ago. Line references follow Murray's text as printed ~~in~~ Dodds' commentary.

God

the weaker argument but in fact a prophet and messenger, mouthpiece for the god and his followers.

The first evidence that Teiresias is not, as Pentheus accuses, "θέλεις τὸν δαίμον' ἀνθρώποισιν ἔσφέρων νέον σκοπέειν πτερωτοὺς κάμπύρων μισθοὺς φέρειν,"² is in the conclusion of the

play. In what fragment of the conclusion ^s ~~has~~ ^{have} been handed down to us, we see a rather re-

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markable, wide-ranging hand of judgment of Dionysos. Not only are Pentheus and Semele's sisters—who openly mocked the god's birth, disbelieved in him and slandered his mother—

punished, but also Kadmos, who not only joined the Bacchic worship of his ^{own} free will, not

compelled as the sisters were, but also encouraged Pentheus to "οἶκει μεθ' ἡμῶν,"³ suffering his mockery of the "σκευὴν θεοῦ".⁴ That is, Kadmos, who Dionysos praised in the prologue

for his honoring of Semele after her death, was also punished. While there are many external explanations and conjectures⁵ for the surprising turn of events, we can find one explanation

more likely than others from within the text itself: "ἀσέβειαν ἀσκοῦντ' ὄργι' ἐχθαίρει θεοῦ."⁶ To the best evidence within the text, Kadmos did not sincerely believe in the god

until the death of Pentheus. Even when he is trying to persuade Pentheus, his reasoning,

"... τὸν θεὸν ἴδοντα καὶ τὸν θεοῦ ἔργα ἰδόντα..."

worldly ways. To Dionysos, this Kadmos is no different from Pentheus who asks, "ἔχει δ' ὕνησιν τοῖσι θύουσιν τίνα;"⁸ Teiresias is contrasted to Kadmos from the beginning—to Kadmos' question, "οὐκοῦν ὄχοισιν εἰς ὄρος περάσομεν;"⁹ he immediately replies "ἀλλ' οὐχ ὁμοίως ἂν ὁ θεὸς τιμὴν ἔχοι."¹⁰ Teiresias understands the "Βρομίωι πόνον ἤδ' ὄν"¹¹ that the Bacchae sing. Because of this difference, because he is "βάκχευτος"¹² he emerges from the play unscathed—and this is Dionysos' recognition of his true heart.

nice point!

Teiresias is also contrasted ^{with} ~~from~~ other characters in his interaction with the Bacchae—that is, the chorus. All the other characters in the play, that is, save for the messengers¹³, can only evoke outrage and forced pity from the Bacchae, who keep the unbelievers at arm's length: At the living Pentheus, they can speak nothing better than "τῆς δυσσεβείας"¹⁴ of him and his conduct, and at his death, their immediate reaction is rather, "ὦνάξ Βρόμιε, θεὸς φαίνη μέγας,"¹⁵ than that of grief and sympathy for the unfortunate man. With the wretched Agaue after her ^{rending} ~~rending~~ of Pentheus, they first feign acceptance, saying, "ὄρω καί σε δέξομαι σύγκωμον,"¹⁶ only to be repelled by the invitation to share the spoils: "τί; μετέχω, τλάμων;"¹⁷ Finally, even as Kadmos and Agaue suffer the worst punishment they could have imagined, expression of sympathy by the Bacchae is limited by their repeated

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what benefit

⁸"Does it have ~~any benefit~~ for those who sacrifice?" (line 473)

⁹"Then shall go into the mountain by chariots?" (line 191)

¹⁰"But the god would not have the honor the same way." (line 192)

¹¹"sweet toil for Bromios" (line 66)

¹²Contrast to "βάκχευτος" in line 472.

¹³The guard and the two messengers, although they start out as not ^sbelievers of the new god, by the end of their non-fatal encounter with the Bacchic elements they have become believers, as their speech and the morals they preach clearly show.

¹⁴"What impiety!" (line 263)

¹⁵"Lord Bromios, you are revealed as a great god" (line 1031)

¹⁶"I see and accept you as a fellow reveler." (line 1172)

¹⁷"What? I partake, oh wretched woman?" (line 1184)

assertion that the punishment of Pentheus was just: "τὸ μὲν σὸν ἀλγῶ, Κάδμε· σὸς δ' ἔχει δίκην παῖς παιδὸς ἀξίαν μὲν, ἀλγεινὴν δὲ σοί."¹⁸ However, in response to that

Good
point

one speech Teiresias gives to Pentheus, the Bacchae gives unbridled praises, "Φοῖβον τ' οὐ καταισχύνεις λόγους."¹⁹ This is the Bacchae, τὸ φαυλότερον's recognition of Teiresias' character.

Not only is Teiresias' character in line with the god and his followers, but so are his arguments. Nearly every point that he makes is echoed by the god, the Bacchae, and the messengers, the god's converts. First his arguments regarding what is σοφός ^{are} in agreement:

Nice
parallel!

Teiresias answers, "μόνοι γὰρ εὖ φρονούμεν, οἱ δ' ἄλλοι κακῶς,"²⁰ to Kadmos asking whether they would be the only ones joining the Bacchic revels. The god notes similarly of the non-Greeks worshipping him: "τάδ' εὖ γε μάλλον."²¹ And as we have seen before,

Teiresias places no stock in sophistry since "οὐδ' εἰ δι' ἀκρων τὸ σοφὸν ἠύρηται φρενῶν"²² (ρε.)

can it overpower the gods, and the Bacchae echo the same sentiments in: "τὸ σοφὸν δ' οὐ σοφία τό τε μὴ θνητὰ φρονεῖν. βραχὺς αἰὼν· ἐπὶ τούτῳ δέ τις ἂν μεγάλα διώκων τὰ παρόντ' οὐχὶ φέροι."²³ And furthermore, his grasp of the nature of the god is confirmed:

Teiresias humbly speaks, "οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην μέγεθος ἔξειπέν ὅσος καθ' Ἑλλάδ' ἔσται,"²⁴ (ρε.)

and the Bacchae likewise defend Bromios, "Διόνυσος ἥσσω οὐδενὸς θεῶν ἔφυ."²⁵ And

Nice!

¹⁸"I feel your pain, Kadmos; but your grandson has deserving punishment, although it is grievous to you." (line 1327-1328)

¹⁹"You do not shame Phoebus with your words." (line 328)

²⁰"For only we think well, but the others badly." (line 196)

²¹"With respect to these things, they rather think well at least." (line 484)

²²"not even if subtlety has been invented through utmost wits" (line 203)

²³"But cleverness and to think of the not mortal things is not wisdom. Life is short; he who on ^{its} tenure pursues great things would miss the things present." (line 395-399)

²⁴"I would not be able to explain however ~~much~~ great he will be throughout Greece." (line 273-274)

²⁵"Dionysos is by nature less than none of the gods." (line 777)

where he asserts, "οὐ γὰρ διήριχ' ὁ θεός... ἀλλ' ἐξ ἅπαντων βούλεται τιμὰς ἔχειν κοινὰς, διαριθμῶν δ' οὐδέν' αὖξασθαι θέλει,"²⁶ the Bacchae resounds with, "ἴσαν δ' ἐς τε τὸν ὄλβιον τὸν τε χεῖρονα δῶκ' ἔχειν οἴνου τέρψιν ἄλυπον."²⁷ And just as he counters Pentheus' charge of immorality with, "οὐχ ὁ Διόνυσος σωφρονεῖν ἀναγκάσει γυναῖκας ἐς τὴν Κύπριν, ἀλλ' ἐν τῇ φύσει τοῦτο σκοπεῖν χρῆ,"²⁸ Dionysos answers Pentheus' accusation of corruption of the women with "κὰν ἡμέραι τό γ' αἰσχρὸν ἐξεύροι τις ἄν,"²⁹ that it is up to each one to uphold ~~the~~ morality. Even with regard to Dionysos' gift to men, they are in complete agreement: Teiresias characterizes wine as a benign gift "ὁ παύει τοὺς ταλαιπῶρους βροτοὺς λύπης,"³⁰ and the first messenger from Kithairon calls ~~the~~ wine not only "πανσίλυπον" but also, "οἴνου δὲ μηκέτ' ὄντος οὐκ ἔστιν Κύπρις οὐδ' ἄλλο τερπνὸν οὐδέν' ἀνθρώποις ἔτι."³¹

Even with so many evidences to defend Teiresias—character witnesses, to borrow a modern legal term—perhaps he cannot avoid being found guilty of sophistry and hypocrisy in his revision of the old myth. After all, the Bacchae, who sing the hymn of Dithyrambos disagree with him in their belief of Dionysos' birth from Zeus' male womb. Dodds makes good points in his commentary ~~[in the text]~~ against the old charges³² and perhaps I can add

²⁶ "For the god does not discriminate... but he desires to have the common honor from all, drawing distinction in no way he wishes to be magnified." (line 206-209)

²⁷ "He gave the painless joy of wine equally to the happy and to the unlucky to have." (line 420-423)

²⁸ "Dionysos will not force the women to be moderate regard to sex, but this must be observed in their nature." (line 314-317)

²⁹ "Even during the day someone may find indeed a shameful thing." (line 488)

³⁰ "which stops the miserable mortals from pain" (line 280)

³¹ "grief-stopping,"... "If wine were no longer, neither would be Aphrodite, nor would there still be another pleasure for men." (line 772-774)

³² In his commentary on lines 286-297, Dodds brings up four points, among which is that this has a close parallel in the *Helena*, where Helen does not accept her own myth of birth from an egg while her attendants persist in the belief.

one more point to absolve Teiresias of at least the charge of hypocrisy—he is, if at all, using sophistry *for* the god, not *against* the god.³³ He is espousing the stronger argument, not the weaker. We can find yet another close parallel in the prose tradition as well: Socrates the philosopher, in his reasonings and arguments with sophists, Gorgias for example, shows himself a master sophist. The only thing that sets him apart is that he does not play devil's advocate and rather defends the stronger argument against sophistry. In like manner, Teiresias the prophet is set apart in that he speaks for the god and not against him. Furthermore, if we imagine Dionysos as representing the stagemaster side of Euripides the tragedian, then Teiresias represents the storyteller side, for tragedy was traditionally based on old myth.³⁴ Since the picture holds as such, would Euripides wish to represent the part of Teiresias that, in fact, represents himself, as being blasphemous and dishonoring the gods?

Good

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Good -
I'm glad
you
included
this point

(if only in
conclusion)!

(A)

Andrew -

Very nice job - I like all the attention you pay to particular details of the Greek text (and your careful translations). And your argument is very clearly and well laid-out; also, in general, very well written (except for issues of subject - vb. agreement in English...)

³³For this reason, I have translated the "τοῖσι δαίμοσι" with the dative of hostile action, although Dodds has doubts with the sense on the account that "σοφίζω" does not have the hostile sense in usual usage.

³⁴Until Agathon—as ~~one~~ comments, one thing new about Agathon was that "he invented his own plots."

Aristotle
(in the Poetics)⁶

"Bacchae" is plural
"Chorus" would be singular

} Good!