# *Preface*

Euripides' *Bacchae* continues to be one of the most read, produced, and discussed of the ancient Greek plays. As it also continues to be one of the most puzzling and disturbing, a detailed reexamination of its meaning needs no apology. Its implications, reverberating from Nietzsche to Marcuse, are still very much with us.

In a stimulating passage of *Violence and the Sacred*, René Girard suggests, "To resolve the problem of the *Bacchae*, we would need to establish a system of differentiation that did not dissolve under scrutiny and that permitted us to affirm the play's literary, psychological, and moral coherence. Such a system would be based, once again, on recourse to *arbitrary* violence" (p. 138). In the *Bacchae*, I would argue, Euripides inscribes that arbitrary violence figuratively into the civic, ritual, and aesthetic forms designed to contain it. This play brings into the Apollonian limits of the tragic form and literary conventions the god who dissolves limits. My interpretation, then, seeks to define a "Dionysiac poetics" not so much of arbitrary violence as of a world-view and an art-form that can admit logical contradictions and hold them in suspension. By choosing as his central figure the god in whom opposites coalesce and differences collapse, Euripides explores what in tragedy is able to reach beyond the social, ritual, and historical context from which tragedy itself arises. The *Bacchae* is not only about the god of ecstatic religion, wine, and madness; it is also about the god of tragedy and about the "Dionysiac" in its relation to artistic illusion and artistic truth. To reach this point, however, it is necessary first to traverse the ritual, social, and psychological domains of the play. The argument, therefore, forms a progression, as logical as Dionysus permits, which culminates in the long Chapters 7 and 8 and the generalizations of Chapter 9.

I wish to thank Jean-Pierre Vernant, Marcel Detienne, Nicole Loraux, and Pierre Vidal-Naquet for making possible a term at the École des Hautes Études, VI[e] Section, Paris, in 1975-76, when the first stages of this work were begun. Their stimulating company and warm hospitality made a good beginning. Thanks to a Summer Stipend

for Research from the National Endowment on the Humanities in 1977, I was able to devote several months of uninterrupted study to the play. A term at the University of Melbourne in the summer of 1978 under the auspices of the Fulbright program and the Australian-American Educational Exchange Foundation furthered my work. I owe special thanks to Graeme Clarke, George Gellie, Robin Jackson, and Harriet Edquist of Melbourne and to A. J. Boyle and Gerald Fitzgerald of Monash University. Last but not least, a Fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation in 1981-82 provided the leisure for the final polishing and rethinking. To all of these individuals and institutions I am deeply grateful.

Albert Cook and William Wyatt of Brown University and Eva Stigers of Wheaton College generously read through the entire manuscript and made numerous suggestions and improvements. I thank them all with great appreciation for a very considerable sacrifice of time and effort. Froma Zeitlin of Princeton University read portions of an earlier draft and offered much useful advice. I also thank Kenneth J. Reckford and Peter Burian, who read the manuscript for Princeton University Press, for careful criticism. Brown University, through the good offices of Provost Maurice Glicksman and Associate Provost Frank Durand, supported this project with a leave of absence in 1975 and various forms of clerical assistance. Mrs. Frances Eisenhauer of Brown University once more typed the entire work with a devotion, concern, and critical sense of style and logic that weeded out many an infelicity. My thanks go also to Joanna Hitchcock, Executive Editor of Princeton University Press, for her patience, interest, and sound advice on numerous details. For whatever errors or defects remain I alone am responsible.

I have tried to make the book accessible to the Greekless reader. I have therefore consigned most of the technical details to the notes and translated or closely paraphrased all quotations from the Greek. Unless otherwise indicated, these translations are my own. Their aim is reasonable fidelity to the original rather than literary elegance. I have transliterated individual words and short phrases when the result was not hopelessly exotic or annoyingly obscure; I have left Greek font if transliteration seemed confusing. The apparent lack of consistency has behind it the criteria of clarity and intelligibility for both the general reader and the classicist. Some books and articles published

in late 1980 and in 1981—particularly those of Coche de la Ferté, Foley, Loraux, and Seaford—arrived too late for me to consider them as fully as they deserve.

In a few places I have incorporated in revised form material that I have published in *Ramus* 6 (1977) 103-120, *Arethusa* 11 (1978) 185-202, and *Classical World* 72 (1978/79) 129-148 (see Bibliography). I wish to thank the editors of these journals for kind permission to make use of material from these publications. I presented the kernel of Chapter 7 at the Duke University Conference, "New Directions in Euripidean Criticism," in March 1977. I am indebted to the organizer of the conference, Peter Burian, and to the participants for helpful responses and comments.

Dionysus is truly, as Sophocles says, a god "of many names," inspiring his interpreters with visions almost as ecstatic as those of his worshipers of old. This book is an interpretation of the play and not of the god or his cult. Like all interpreters of the *Bacchae*, however, I have had to draw on the labors of historians of religion and make up my mind about Dionysus. Sorting out the probable from the possible in the heady pages of Otto and Kerényi or in the darker visions of Green and Slater has not always been easy. Apollo, I hope, has at least sometimes been my guide and enabled me, as "Longinus" advises, "to keep sobriety amid the Bacchic revels."

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