

**The Passion of Pentheus:
Other Possible Sources Reflecting the End of Euripides' *Bacchae***

In an appendix to the recent Oxford translation of Euripides' *Bacchae* by Reginald Gibbons (2001), Charles Segal attacks the problem that vexes scholars and directors alike: how should we handle the (fittingly) fragmentary pieces of the end of this play? And how can we make the *Compositio Membrorum* work dramatically when reconstructing the text from scraps? In his evaluation and interpretation of the evidence available, Segal lays out the testimony from the rhetorician Apsines ("...the mother holding each of the limbs in her hands laments over each of them"), the ending of Seneca's *Phaedra*, the lines from *Christus Patiens*, and *P. Ant.* 24. John Whitehorne (*Hermes* 1986, 66) has asked: "When Agave raised the shroud and lamented over each limb in turn, did the limbs held up before the spectators include a foot with a boot still laced on it (l. 1134), and so on?" John Heath (*Actaeon*, 23, n. 28) replies, "This would correspond neatly to Autonoe's similar efforts over Actaeon in Nonnus' tale (see Chapter V). All of this strikes me as a bit too grotesque, even for Euripides." I suggest that we should consider other possible sources for understanding how the scene involving Agave, the dismembered Pentheus, and Cadmus might have played out in the ancient theater: Josephus' *Bellum Judaicum* and Pseudo-Hegesippus' *De Excidio*.

In *B.J.* 6.199-219, Josephus describes an episode during the Roman siege of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. in which a mother, driven mad by famine, kills her own baby and then even eats part of it—an act so horrible that Jerusalem must suffer destruction and the Jewish people diaspora (just as Dionysus punishes the people of Thebes, as reconstructed from *Christus Patiens*; see Dodds 1960, 58-59). Josephus deliberately echoes Euripides' *Bacchae* (and other Euripidean plays) in writing this scene; though he never has the mother address her baby's body parts, he does use the motif of covering and uncovering the baby's half-eaten body.

Christian readers understood the dramatic inspiration for this passage in Josephus. Approximately a century later, Melito of Sardis plays off this Josephan scene to create his own condensed tale of cannibalistic horror as part of his Easter homily (*Peri Pascha*) on the passion of Christ and the destruction of Jerusalem as a result of this "deicide"—a connection which has had a sad afterlife in Holy Week passion plays performed publicly up into the modern era. When the later church fathers Basil and John Chrysostom, who were both readers and spectators of Greek drama, use the Josephan passage on the mother's cannibalism in their homilies, they explicitly refer to the historian having crafted a scene from "dra=ma" and "tragw|di/a" (H. Schreckenberg in L. Feldman and G. Hata, *Josephus, Judaism, and Christianity*, 1987, 324); they are acute observers of Josephus' debt to drama as a genre, yet they never explicitly mention the *Bacchae*.

If we accept that Josephus constructs his scene of a mother's cannibalism as a play upon Agave's mistreatment of Pentheus, we may find explicit evidence for an interactive scene between Agave and Pentheus' limbs in Pseudo-Hegesippus' expansion upon the Josephan scene of cannibalism. When Pseudo-Hegesippus in the fourth century adapted the scene for his loose Latin rendition of the *B.J.*, *De Excidio*, he seems to have read it at least in part as an allusion to the *Bacchae*, and then to have done Josephus one better by returning to and using more literally the end of the *Bacchae* as it once might have played on stage. In *De Excidio* 5.40.2, Pseudo-Hegesippus goes so far as to have the mother address the hand and foot of her dead baby. In doing so, the author makes his mother even more like Agave than Josephus' mother, since we have the lines from the *Christus Patiens*, as well as the report of Apsines, that point to Agave speaking to Pentheus' individual body parts the way the cannibal mother does in Pseudo-Hegesippus. Pseudo-Hegesippus' *De Excidio*, therefore, may give us further insight into how Agave addressed her dead son Pentheus towards the end of Euripides' *Bacchae*.