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Queer Representation in Euripides' *Bacchae* and *Orestes*

Over the past several decades, the representation of queer identities in all forms of media – art, music, television, and stage plays, among others – has rapidly become more and more prevalent due to the spread of both acceptance and heated debate in all parts of the world. Although this appears to be a somewhat recent development, there is a great deal of contemporary – and even *ancient* – media that portrays similar subjects, albeit in a different manner. Amidst the cultural and political development of LGBTQ+ issues, it is essential to look to the past and realize exactly how the presence of queer identities – particularly homosexuality – in the modern world compares to its presence in the ancient world, as well as how the representation of queer identities and behavior in the media has changed over time. The Ancient Greeks, for one, had an interesting perspective on same-sex relationships. As James Davidson puts it, the Romans were "amazed to read what [the ancient Greeks] has written centuries earlier, drooling in public over the thighs of boys, or putting words into the mouth of Achilles in a tragic drama, as he remembered the 'kisses thick and fast' he had enjoyed with his beloved Patroclus" ("Mad About the Boy") – the latter point being a reference to the pederastic same-sex relationship portrayed in works by numerous Greek writers, including Aeschylus and Plato. The Greeks certainly were not shy about their expressions of affection, regardless of the sex of their partner.

More telling than anything, however, was the way that same-sex relationships were portrayed in Greek theatre and literature. In particular, the works of Euripides, from a modern perspective, appear to address numerous queer behaviors, especially same-sex intimacy between two men. One of Euripides' most notable works, *Bacchae* delves into King Pentheus' struggle with femininity and what appears to be a strong attraction towards Dionysus, while another of Euripides' works, *Orestes*, contains one of the most intimate male friendships in all of Greek theatre. By portraying the intimate nature of the relationship between Dionysus and Pentheus in *Bacchae*, and of that between Orestes and Pylades in *Orestes*, and by portraying Pentheus's and Dionysus's unique experimentations with femininity, Euripides' work creates an accurate reflection of Ancient Greek cultural norms as they pertain to what 21st century Westerners now refer to as queer identities.

Before delving into the history of queer identities in Ancient Greece, it is essential to realize that applying terms such as "gay" and "queer" to Greek history and literature without providing any context or giving any thought to the implications of doing so is a very ignorant form of analysis, or at least a very confusing one. In fact, the word "homosexual" was not officially recognized by the *Oxford English Dictionary* until 1892 (Halperin 34). Merely stating that Orestes and Pylades were gay is a very listless way of looking at things, and it assumes that our societal norms in regards to what constitutes a queer relationship are the same as they were in ancient Greece. Rather than attempting to fit the behaviors of ancient Greek characters into the theoretical box of modern queer theory, once must view these identities and relationships in the context of Ancient Greek cultural norms, during a time when there likely was not a word to describe being gay or any other queer sexuality.

Keeping all of this in mind, we shall establish a few crucial terms in order to provide a foundation for discussion and to avoid confusion. One of the more important subjects to cover in this regard is the term 'sexuality.' The concept of 'sexuality' varies widely between cultures and time periods – everyone has different definitions and concepts of gender and sex, which then influence their concept of sexuality, and different norms in regards to what is platonic and what is romantic or sexual. For example, consider the kiss. Kissing and the meaning behind it varies widely across cultures: in the United States, it is seen as a show of affection that is usually reserved for people with a romantic interest in each other; in France, on the other hand, people often kiss each other in greeting, regardless of the gender of either party; meanwhile, many cultures in parts of Africa and South America do not partake in "romantic-sexual kissing" at all. In fact, in a study of 168 cultures around the world, William R. Jankowiak and colleagues found "no evidence that the romantic-sexual kiss is a human universal or even a near universal" (Jankowiak et al. 538). Because of this high variability in cultural norms, one cannot simply look at two people from another culture and gauge their romantic or sexual interest in each other based on behaviors such as kissing or verbal interactions, because doing so would involve forcing the norms of one culture onto a situation in another culture.

In a similar vein, one must distinguish between identifying with a particular sexual orientation and merely performing intimate acts that are often associated with a particular sexual orientation. Throughout history, people have certainly *practiced* same-sex intimacy – for example, women of high status in early modern England occasionally formed "homoerotic relationships with ladies-in-waiting or servants in their households" (Zarrilli et al. 228) – but the concept of *identifying* with a particular 'sexual orientation' is a very recent development. In other

words, ‘homosexuality’ and what we consider queer sexuality – for lack of a more historically accurate term – was initially something one *did,* whereas now it is something that one *is*.

In essence, modern queer theory is precisely that: modern, and therefore applying it to ancient Greek texts would be highly inappropriate and anachronistic. Therefore, this analysis will attempt to remain objective and explicit in its descriptions of the various relationships and gender expressions being portrayed and discussed.

Turning the focus to the relationships between the Greek characters in question, the first step to determining the significance of the behaviors between Dionysus and Pentheus, as well as between Orestes and Pylades, is to determine exactly how the ancient Greeks expressed themselves regarding sexual behavior and interpersonal relationships with people of either sex.

One of the more relevant aspects of ancient Greek relationships is the concept of pederasty. According to Nicole Holmen, pederasty was a “form of interaction in which members of the same sex would partake in the pleasures of an intellectual and/or sexual relationship.” However, when most people hear the term, they are often thinking about the ‘ideal pederastic relationship,’ which was a power-based pederastic relationship that specifically involved two men: the older *erastes* and the younger *eromenos*. (Holmen) Because of this, pederasty is often misunderstood as paedophilia. According to Oliver Taplin in his review of James Davidson’s *The Greeks and Greek Love: A Bold New Exploration of the Ancient World*, this misunderstanding comes from a misinterpretation of the word “paida” as a word for a young boy. However, in ancient Greece, age was “measured not by mere years, but by ‘age-classes’ [and] a word like ‘boy’ [may have included] the whole life stage between late teens and early 20s” (Taplin). While one could argue that there are aspects of pederastic relationships that involve taking advantage of the younger man, paedophilia as we understand it today would have been

considered to be just as morally wrong and unlawful as it is in the modern day. (Taplin) Generally, these relationships placed a heavy emphasis on the relationship as that between a mentor and student more so than that between two lovers, (Holmen) and it was expected that the dominant *erastes* "showed that he had nobler interests in the [eromenos], rather than a purely sexual concern" (Pickett).

Additionally, pederasty and other same-sex relations were often seen as something one did before eventually marrying someone of the opposite sex, suggesting that same-sex relations were rather common, but taken to be something more recreational than serious. Alternatively, perhaps the only reason for this prioritization of heterosexual marriage was the need for a relationship that could produce children – the exact reason is hard to discern.

Amongst this culture of unbridled affection towards the same-sex, it is no surprise that some of these affections bleed into Euripides' works, most notably in the relationship between Dionysus and Pentheus in Euripides' *Bacchae*. In *Bacchae*, which is based on the myth of King Pentheus of Thebes, focuses on Dionysus, the Greek god of wine and ritual madness, among other things. According to Dionysus' introductory speech, he has come to Thebes to prove to King Pentheus and the people of Thebes that he truly is the son of Zeus and, therefore, a God. Pentheus, angered that his people have begun to praise and worship Dionysus, seeks to have him captured and stoned to death. When Dionysus is captured – all the while disguised as an ordinary worshipper – Pentheus interrogates him, and Dionysus eventually convinces Pentheus to disguise himself as a woman and take part in the rituals himself, so as to spy on the maenads. As is expected from a Greek tragedy, Pentheus follows through with the plan and is later attacked and physically torn apart by the maenads.

From their first conversation, it is clear that the relationship between Dionysus and Pentheus is a unique one. As Pentheus interrogates Dionysus and Dionysus attempts to defend himself without giving away his identity, the pair start a sort of verbal dance, beginning with a series of praises from Pentheus:

PENTHEUS. Well, stranger, I can see you are attractive,
To women anyway – that's why you came here.
Your hair is long, unsuitable for wrestling:
It ripples down your cheek so alluringly.
Your skin is white: you must take care of it,
Avoiding sunlight, staying in the shade,
Hunting Aphrodite with your beauty (*Bacchae* 452-459).

Later, during their third encounter, after Dionysus has convinced Pentheus to spy on the maenads rather than attack them outright, this dance continues:

DIONYSUS. When I look at you, it's them I see.
But this curl of yours is out of place.
Slipped from where I fixed it in your headband.
PENTHEUS. I dislodged it when I tossed my hair back,
Dancing in the palace, maenad-style.
DIONYSUS. Then let me fix it. I'll take care of you.
I'll put your hair in place. Lift up your head.
PENTHEUS. I'm all yours now: go on, you can arrange it.
DIONYSUS. Your belt needs tightening; your pleats are crooked;
So let me straighten them, down to your ankles.

PENTHEUS. I think it's rumpled here, by my right foot;

But on the other side, my skirt hangs smooth (*Bacchae* 927-938).

From the perspective of a modern American audience, this exchange appears almost flirtatious, filled with sly compliments, physical touch, and Pentheus' relinquishment of power to Dionysus as he allows the other man to rearrange his costume and essentially admits that he now belongs to Dionysus (*Bacchae* 935). This moment even demonstrates a sort of hesitation from Pentheus – in particular, his initial compliment of Dionysus' appearance and immediate back-tracking to insist that Dionysus is only attractive to women – something that a modern audience may interpret as an attempt to disguise Pentheus's own attraction. However, even when looking at the text in its proper context, the relationship between the two men suggests something more than rivalry. For one, their relationship contains elements of a pederastic relationship; neither man is much younger than the other, as would be the case in an ideal pederastic relationship, but they do hold a similar power dynamic, being that Dionysus, as a God, has a great deal of power over Pentheus, whether Pentheus realizes this or not. Similarly, their relationship appears to follow a greatly truncated version of the mentor/student relationship that is seen in many pederastic relationships: Dionysus, with his knowledge of the freedom he and the women have experienced, aims to show Pentheus what life could be like, and helps Pentheus explore his feminine side. Of course, this mentorship is short-lived and has nefarious intentions, as Dionysus' ultimate goal is to have Pentheus killed by the Bacchae. Still, it is entirely possible that some hint of romantic or sexual magnetism existed between the two during their initial interactions.

Of course, this interpretation does not necessarily prove that Pentheus and Dionysus are explicitly attracted to each other. However, one must admit that the text reflects the normalcy of

intimate – though not necessarily sexual – same-sex relations in ancient Greece in that Pentheus and Dionysus are so comfortable speaking to each other in this way.

Whereas *Bacchae* is more overt in the way that it addresses gender and homoerotic behavior, *Orestes* is far subtler. This particular analysis will focus on Anne Carson's translation of Euripides' work, and, within it, the relationship between Orestes and Pylades.

Euripides' *Orestes* narrates the aftermath of Orestes killing his mother, Clytemnestra. As a result of this crime, Orestes and his accomplices – that is, his sister Elektra and his close friend Pylades – are sentenced to death. They devise a plan to kill the wife of Menelaus – their uncle – and kidnap his daughter after Menelaus' refusal to defend the trio, but Apollo eventually arrives to restore peace, rescuing Menelaus family and assuring Orestes that he will be acquitted.

Throughout the play, Orestes and Pylades are established as being very close friends – so close that Pylades helps Orestes murder Clytemnestra. Their interactions are never explicitly romantic or sexual, but they serve as a prime example of the way Greek men expressed affection to one another. One of the more memorable examples of this occurs while Orestes and Pylades are formulating their plan to save Elektra and Orestes himself from execution:

ORESTES. One last worry –

PYLADES. What?

ORESTES. The ghastly goddesses – they'll send my wits astray.

PYLADES. I'll take care of you.

ORESTES. It's rotten work.

PYLADES. Not to me. Not if it's you.

ORESTES. Beware the contagion of madness.

PYLADES. Come now.

ORESTES. You won't shrink back?

PYLADES. A friend does not shrink back ("*Orestes*" 636-645).

Upon initial reading, this scene is already a very emotionally charged one, as Pylades assures Orestes that he will not leave his side, no matter how ill he may be. However, a closer reading reveals that more is at stake than a simple friendship. In the original Greek text, Pylades uses the word *Φίλος* to refer to Orestes – this word is widely accepted to mean some variation of "my love," "beloved," or "dear." While this is a phrase that was commonly used among friends and did not necessarily hold romantic connotations, Pylades' use of this word demonstrates the close bond between him and Orestes and furthermore demonstrates the way Greek men interacted with those whom they considered to be their closest friends.

Another powerful demonstration of Orestes and Pylades' relationship occurs during their conversation with Elektra soon afterward, when Orestes and Elektra have accepted their deaths and chosen not to fight their fates:

ORESTES. Now come,

Let's make a death worthy of Agamemnon.

I'll show this city I'm noble – I'll stab right through my liver.

…

Pylades, be our referee.

Lay us out after death

And bury us in our father's tomb.

Farewell. I go to it.

PYLADES. Hold on, hold on, I have to protest.

Do you think I would choose to live without you?

ORESTES. Oh but you can't die too!

…

Our connection is ended. Beloved comrade, farewell.

…

PYLADES. …I would never desert you. –

…

And what would I have to say for myself in later life

If I stopped being your friend the minute you got into trouble? ("*Orestes*" 824-852)

Once again, Pylades demonstrates his emotional investment in Orestes, and their powerful bond – he would rather die with Orestes than have to live without him. He assures Orestes that he would never abandon him, and Orestes, too, demonstrates his immense distress at the thought of Pylades dying. From these brief exchanges, it is clear that the two share a relationship that is – while not necessarily the ancient Greek's equivalent of romantic – incredibly strong and unlike any other portrayed in the text.

After a thorough analysis of two contrasting relationships in ancient Greek literature, it becomes evident that analyzing a work within the context of its culture and time is very important, because attempting to apply the norms of another culture, or attempting to apply modern knowledge and beliefs to a work can drastically alter how its meaning is interpreted and understood. Although it is unlikely that the queer relationships and identities portrayed in the Greek plays were directly equivalent to modern queer relationships, these particular relationships and identities clearly drew inspiration from real life, and they were still accurate depictions of Ancient Greek cultural norms.

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