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Reimagining the Prophet: Teiresias as Comedian and Sophist in Euripides' *Bacchae*

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This article analyses the role of the prophet Teiresias in the *Bacchae* of Euripides in the particular context of sophistic influence. It views the originality of the prophet's depiction as reflective of Euripides' creative self-consciousness within an agonistic genre that relied on the malleability of ancient myth, particularly towards the end of tragedy's "golden era". Our particular aim is to present the prophet independently of the Sophoclean background against which Teiresias is often viewed, and as a more complex figure than a (not especially satisfactory) radicalization of his earlier incarnations. The prophet in *Bacchae* is a liminal figure poised between tragedy and comedy, man and god, male and female, tradition and innovation. As such he parallels many of the "doublings" characteristic of Dionysus himself. The analysis re-examines the extent and nature of the comedy in the early Teiresias–Cadmus–Pentheus scene (170–369) in the context of the most recent scholarship. It then offers a close examination of the so-called sophistic speech by the prophet (266–327) within the framework of contemporary attitudes to sophism and how this has unfairly influenced scholarly perception of Teiresias's authority as a dramatic character. The argument aims to establish Teiresias's incarnation as both fifth-century intellectual and representative of traditional values. He thus reflects the tension between old and new in the integration of Dionysiac religion in mythical Thebes.

Keywords: Teiresias, prophet, comedy, *Bacchae*, sophism.

1. Introduction

Prophets and prophecy play a prominent role in early Greek poetry. From Calchas¹ in the *Iliad* to Halitherses and Theoclymenus in the *Odyssey* and the Hesiodic association

¹ Calchas had also played a central role in the earlier *Cypria*, part of the lost epic cycle: see arg. 6–8 on the *Cypria* in West 2003.

between poet and prophet,² archaic literary culture set the prophet-figure firmly within the ethical and religious framework of the era. Later poetic genres, by default heavily influenced by the Homeric epics, developed the general theme.³ One early prophet, already with a well-established reputation in epic,⁴ emerges as a popular character in archaic and post-archaic literary tradition: Teiresias, who features regularly in the extant fragments of the epic cycle.⁵ This was inherited by the lyric tradition: the prophet plays a major role in the *Thebaid* of Stesichorus, whose works were key intertexts for the Greek tragedians; and Pindar refers to him in the first *Nemean* as the “outstanding prophet of highest Zeus” (Διὸς ὑψίστου προφήτης ἔξοχος, *N.* 1, 60).

Teiresias in the role of a prophet is developed most fully in classical tragedy, where he appears in the extant plays associated with the city of Thebes,⁶ itself a tragic setting most famously linked with the myth of Oedipus. Thebes has been an illuminating scholarly topic in recent decades,⁷ attracting attention for its distinctive topography, mythical associations, and dramatic functions,⁸ but there is comparatively little interest specifically in the development of this important figure of Theban tragic myth, who in each of the extant dramas in which he makes an appearance (Sophocles’ *Antigone* and *Oedipus Tyrannus*; Euripides’ *Phoenissae* and *Bacchae*)⁹ is engaged in direct confrontation with the city’s leader (or, in the case of *Phoenissae*, with Creon, who will shortly assume leadership following the deaths of Oedipus’s sons). The tragic Teiresias was no doubt inspired by his namesake in the *Thebaid* of Stesichorus.¹⁰ The extant fragments of that poem, which show the prophet in the role of mediator between the warring sons of Oedipus, explicitly and consistently associate him with the salvation of Thebes. Tragedy adopts this motif in presenting Teiresias as variously attempting to avert disaster from the city, as contrasted with the interests and actions of his opponents, which threaten it. Accident of survival prevents us from knowing the outcome of the prophet’s intervention in Stesichorus, but in tragedy the prophet has only very limited success: in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the chronology and development of events is based on the gradual, torturous revelation of Oedipus’s past; the calamity has already occurred and had been inevitable. But in *Antigone* the emphasis is slightly different, since Creon is advised by Teiresias to release Antigone and avoid divine displeasure and civic disaster; but the leader, jealous of his own authority, chooses to

² On the development of this idea see Nagy 1990.

³ A full-scale study of the role of the seer in archaic and classical Greek society and literature is found in Flower 2008.

⁴ μάντις ἀμύμων, *Od.* 11, 99. For a discussion of Teiresias in the *Od.* and the epic cycle see Torres 2014.

⁵ For refs. see Fantuzzi, Tsagalis 2015 Index s.v. ‘Teiresias’; and for discussion of the prophet’s role in the epic cycle cf. Ugolini 1995, 92–99.

⁶ No doubt inspired by Homer, who refers on a number of occasions to Teiresias’s Theban connections (cf. *Od.* 10, 492, 10, 565, 11, 90 etc.). The first extant reference to the prophet’s blindness, maintained in Attic tragedy, is found in Homer as well (*Od.* 10, 493).

⁷ See most recently the book-length study of Cartledge 2020 for a survey of the city’s character in antiquity and a useful bibliography.

⁸ The seminal work on Theban topography is probably still Demand 1982. The thesis that the city functions in tragedy as a type of ‘anti-Athens’ was first posited by Zeitlin 1990; see also Vidal-Naquet 1986. Discussion of the limitations of this thesis is found in Croally 1994: 39–40; Easterling 1989, 2005; and Hilton 2015.

⁹ Eteocles in Aeschylus’s *Septem* also alludes to the prophet’s prediction of the Argive assault (cf. 24-9), although he is not mentioned by name.

¹⁰ For discussion see e. g. Swift 2015 or Finglass 2018a.

ignore the warning and rudely dismisses the prophet.¹¹ By the time the Chorus have persuaded Creon to reconsider, it is too late. Both Creon and Oedipus recognise their errors only at the end as the Aeschylean principle of *πάθει μάθος*, “learning through suffering”,¹² underscores both plays’ conclusions. Sophocles supplements the traditional (i. e. epic) role of prophet as counsellor and seer with the rejection, with catastrophic consequences, of his advice.

Euripides develops this idea of the ignored prophet. In both *Phoenissae* and *Bacchae* Teiresias’s interventions have the power to change the course of events. In the earlier play the Theban leader Creon, torn between the conflicting demands of public and private, rejects outright the prophet’s report of the necessity of the sacrifice of Creon’s son Menoeceus in order to save the city.¹³ Yet the prophet’s authority is acknowledged and upheld by Menoeceus himself, who effects his own self-sacrifice.¹⁴ However, the discrete nature of the Menoeceus episode in a drama whose main subject is the assault of Polynices on Thebes means that the city’s salvation is also conditional upon the resolution of the fraternal quarrel, in which Teiresias plays no active role.¹⁵ The efficacy of the prophetic intervention is by default limited by the highly episodic plot construction, within which the Menoeceus scene is a self-contained section (albeit one thematically connected with the rest of the play).¹⁶ However, in *Bacchae* the prophet appears early in the play but his advice is vehemently rejected by Pentheus in true Sophoclean fashion. As in *Antigone*, had the prophet’s counsel been followed, disaster could have been averted.

The Euripidean Teiresias is often viewed from the intertextual perspective of his relationship with his Sophoclean predecessors. Sophocles is, of course, the ‘elephant in the room’ in the study of later dramas set in Thebes, but his reputation as creator of tragedy in its purest or most conventional form can result in a prejudiced and arguably unfair outlook on the plays of his successor. Euripides has long been exposed to various criticisms regarding his intellectual adventurousness and his exploitation — even subversion — of generic boundaries.¹⁷ More recent scholarship has largely debunked this idea and re-established his rightful position as equal to Sophocles and Aeschylus as a master of high tragedy¹⁸ — and this is perhaps no better exemplified than in his late *Bacchae*. Active research into tragic fragments¹⁹ over the last two decades in particular has also given us a fresh perspective on the sheer breadth of theme in the works no longer extant, which reminds us again of the limitations of judging the plays on the basis of the extant corpus. The comparison of Euripides to his tragic forebears is almost inevitable, but it is not the only method of ‘reading’ his plays. And though he was heavily influenced by earlier works, by the end of the fifth century and working with what would by then have been well-

¹¹ *Ant.* 1033–1063.

¹² *Aesch. Ag.* 177.

¹³ οὐκ ἔκλυον, οὐκ ἤκουσα: χαίρέτω πόλις (*Ph.* 919).

¹⁴ *Ph.* 991–1012.

¹⁵ Instead the role of mediator is transferred to Iokaste.

¹⁶ And despite the innovativeness so characteristic of the play, it was well established in the mythical tradition that the sons of Oedipus die in battle over Thebes; Eur. could not have adopted a radically different outcome in tragedy.

¹⁷ The influential discussion of Winnington — Ingram 1969 was a catalyst for this trend.

¹⁸ Mastronarde 1999/2000 has an excellent discussion on this topic. See also Rutherford 2012 on the more specific issue in tragedy of linguistic style.

¹⁹ See e. g. McHardy, Robson, Harvey 2005 and more recently Wright (2 vols) 2016, 2018. The first vol. focuses on less well-known authors; the second on the three masters.

mined mythical resources, there would have been a certain requirement for and attraction in some degree of modernisation and innovation in the agonistic performative context. This disparity need not equate to inferiority; rather, it reminds us of the necessity of studying each play on its own merit.

It is in this spirit that we consider the Euripidean Teiresias in the specific context of *Bacchae*, whose presentation of the prophet is more atypical than his role in *Phoenissae*.²⁰ The later play, though maintaining the tragic motif of the ignored sage, also depicts the character as central to the thematic fabric of the drama. This point is frequently overlooked in scholarly discussion, which has tended to marginalise Teiresias on the basis of his lack of effectiveness within the plot.²¹ The repudiation by Pentheus of Teiresias's advice in the early scene in which the prophet appears (170–369) is a technical necessity in the unfolding of events, paralleling and preparing for the king's confrontation with Dionysus and his eventual recognition of the god's true identity. This in turn, though coming (as so often in tragedy) too late, does ultimately affirm Teiresias's intellectual and moral authority. The early scene with the prophet also offers us significant insight into Pentheus's personality and character, both of which are inextricable from how we perceive his ultimate downfall: his refusal to follow Teiresias's counsel says more about him than it does about the prophet, who is himself presented as both seer and sophist within a complex network of opposites — male/female, man/god, old/new — that are reflected in Dionysus himself.²² Euripides updates and modernises this cornerstone of Theban religion to reflect socio-cultural developments and progress against the pan-Hellenic background of Dionysus's integration within Greek religion. Although Teiresias has inspired two full-scale general studies²³ and a number of scholarly articles, there exists little discussion which focuses on the nature and implications of Euripides' exploitation through the figure of the prophet of contemporary intellectual ideas. Our discussion offers a close examination of Teiresias's role with specific emphasis on its sophistic influence, with the aim of establishing the prophet's centrality to the topical interest of the play and offering a more nuanced view of Euripides' relationship with the sophists he represents. It is hoped that this will stimulate further study on the Euripidean Teiresias independently of the Sophoclean legacy.

2. Teiresias and Comedy

Let us first briefly recapitulate the controversial topic of whether, and to what extent, the episode is to be read as comic in the conventional sense.²⁴ That there is no comic influence here whatsoever is a difficult case to argue. Comedy or humour is neither unprecedented in Euripides²⁵ nor is it a serious threat to the generic integrity of his trage-

²⁰ Ugolini 1995, Note the allusions to Dionysus's ability to inspire madness (298–301) and fear (304); his "share of Ares" (302); this is consistent with Teiresias's final foreshadowing of disaster for Pentheus (367–8), which supports Cadmus's reference to Aktaion (337–41). 142–8 has a useful section on the differences and parallels between the T. of *Bacch.* and that of *Ph.*, *OT* and *Ant.*

²¹ E. g. Bushnell 1988: esp. 111–6; Lamari 2007, 19. For similar views, see also Segal 1997, 295–6 and Roth 1984.

²² On 'doublings' in Dionysus see ch. 2 in Segal.

²³ Ugolini 1995; Brisson 1976.

²⁴ Seidensticker 2016, 276 usefully summarises the main proponents of the comic (n. 5) versus non-comic (n. 6) interpretations.

²⁵ Featuring as far back as *Alcestis* (438) and especially prominent in his later works (*IA*, *IT*, *Helen*), which though less generically conventional still attain the level of tragedy; see e. g. Wright 2005.

dies²⁶ — *Bacchae* perhaps especially. It is true that perception of the comic is personal and subjective, and that caution must be applied to any assessment of audience response, which is both individual and collective.²⁷ Further, that response will vary widely across different cultures and eras — so-called ‘perceptual filters’,²⁸ which are manifold and diverse, will shape the reaction of any audience. Comic elements²⁹ also require more specific definition: comedy taken as a blanket term is often conflated with the slapstick or farcical, as in Aristophanic drama — whose own comic register does not preclude, nor undermine, the exploration of serious contemporary socio-political themes. The Teiresias — Cadmus scene includes elements of pantomime and parody, but there is also an affecting quality to its comic nature, to differing extents and at various points throughout the episode. Humour recurs elsewhere in the play as well, in the famous transvestitism scene between Pentheus and Dionysus, but here it is black, macabre, presaging disaster.³⁰ So *Bacchae* — perhaps more than any other extant Euripidean drama — exploits different types of humour,³¹ which elicits likewise a varied reception from the audience.³²

Certainly an audience familiar with *Phoenissae* and *Oedipus Tyrannus* — some members may also have been able to recall *Antigone* — would have been surprised and amused at the entrance of Teiresias, clad in Dionysiac regalia (176–7) and full of energy, despite his advanced age.³³ The humour at this point is light, focusing on the unexpected vitality of the prophet and his equally aged companion Cadmus.³⁴ It is also heightened by the two men’s by now long-standing reputations as venerable figures in Theban myth, as they appear here in female garb³⁵ as an elderly ‘double act’.³⁶ This re-affirms the dualism inherent in their part as eager worshippers of the ‘other’ religion, and the comedy here is inextricably connected with the theatrical and in particular the visual impact of physical rep-

²⁶ This is the basic position of Seidensticker 1978 and 1982; the opposing view, rather too monolithic and purist, is held by e. g. Micheli 1987: 66–7, who comments on the almost complete ‘annihilation’ by comic or ridiculous elements of the tragic form in Eur. See further the excellent discussion of Seidensticker 2016, which consolidates and refines his position in relation to *Bacch.* Here he views the Teiresias — Cadmus episode as more satirical rather than straightforwardly comic, yet still incorporating important and serious themes.

²⁷ See the judicious discussion of Gregory 1999/2000.

²⁸ To borrow from the influential work of Sourvinou — Inwood 1989: n.1 there has useful refs. to the topic.

²⁹ Following here Seidensticker’s 1978 distinction between ‘comedy elements’ (i. e. elements derived from or associated with Old Comedy) and ‘comic elements’, i. e. that which is generally humorous and provokes laughter (see 305).

³⁰ See Seidensticker 1982, 123–7 on this passage as ‘tragicomic’.

³¹ See also Morwood 2016 on ‘horrid laughter’ in the play.

³² See further Goldhill 2006, 95–9 on the subjectivity of individual response to humour.

³³ πρέσβυς ὦν, 175. The sense of rejuvenation he experiences (κάγῳ γὰρ ἦβῶ, 190) is a feature of Dionysiac religion: see Dodds 1960, 90. Cf. also Plato, *Laws* 666b.

³⁴ An appropriate choice: Cadmus’s role in the foundation of Thebes, picking up on his role in *Ph.* and immediately emphasised here (172), complements what would under different circumstances have been an august pairing with the venerable prophet Teiresias. More specifically to the context, Cadmus’s ancient association with Dionysus at Thebes has already been emphasised by the god himself in reference to the cult of the former’s daughter Semele, Dionysus’s mother (6–12). On this last see further Dodds and Seaford 1996 *ad loc.*

³⁵ Cf. Cadmus’s comment at 180; so too Pentheus’s mocking one at 248–51.

³⁶ πρέσβυς ὦν γερατέρῳι, 175; γέρων γέροντι, 186; ἐπιλελήσμεθ’ ἠδέως γέροντες ὄντες, 188–9; γέρων γέροντα παιδαγωγῆσω σ’ ἐγῶ, 193. Cf. also *πολιὰ ξυνωρίς*, 324.

resentation onstage.³⁷ The comic effect of the two late converts' preparation for departure to Cithaeron is heightened by their earnest efforts to overcome the infirmities associated with their age: Teiresias instead becomes child-like³⁸ as he and Cadmus clasp hands (198), although he retains some of his old authority when he advises Cadmus that an arrival by chariot, though physically less arduous and probably the latter's preferred option, would not befit the gravity of the occasion.³⁹ Yet he reassures his old friend that Dionysus will ease their path (194), just as he convinces him that their old age does not exclude them from the festivities generally reserved for the younger, female members of the Theban πόλις (204–9). There is, of course, an added frisson of amusement in the fact that Teiresias lapses into his erstwhile advisory role here while being completely unaware of how he (or indeed Cadmus) appears to any passers-by — or, by extension, to the audience: his blindness renders him physically dependent on a Cadmus who in turn relies on and defers to his judgement (σὺ γὰρ σοφός, “for you are wise”, 186).

But there is a certain amount of poignancy in all this, too, which emerges later in the scene in the old men's assiduous concern with decorum; they are painfully aware of their age,⁴⁰ and aware that their appearance is unusual.⁴¹ They must support each other as they walk, for it would be “shameful” for both of them to fall over (365). Then, perhaps a little deflated by Pentheus's outburst (in which the latter reminds him of his age and accuses him both of leading Cadmus astray and of mercenary intent, 255–7),⁴² Teiresias appears to recall his physical limitations⁴³ but is yet determined to make the journey: ἴτω δ' ὄμωκ , “let's go anyway” (365). It is somewhat moving to see these two struggling valiantly with the inevitable infirmities of old age and their dogged commitment to Dionysus in spite of them. And as the comedy assumes shades of the pathetic in the strictest sense of the word, so too does the humour begin to diminish; indeed, the shift in tone is more or less contemporaneous with the entry and long invective of Pentheus (215–265), to whom the entire scene is preposterous (πολὺν γέλωκ, 250).⁴⁴ From this point onwards the mood shifts as Cadmus and Teiresias both attempt to warn the king of the magnitude of the new god's power and his own folly in rejecting it. Ultimately the episode concludes on the grave prediction of catastrophe, which is of course borne out by subsequent events. Its overall humour is therefore varied, both in nature and degree; and as it fades the drama resumes its tragic course.

³⁷ The effect of this here is arguably stronger than but does not exclude (nor is it meant to downplay) the importance of language, particularly later in the scene (to which we turn shortly): that the two men constitute a Bacchic χορός is heavily emphasised throughout the scene, as pointed out by Goldhill 1988: 144–5.

³⁸ Cadmus offers to lead: παιδαγωγῆσω' ἐγώ, 193. The comic effect of this is of course tempered by the conventional detail of the prophet's blindness: he is indeed vulnerable and in need of assistance (210).

³⁹ ἀλλ' οὐχ ὁμοίωκ ἀν ὁ θεὸς τιμὴν ἔχοι, “But the god would not have the same honour thus”, 192.

⁴⁰ Cf. n. 36 above.

⁴¹ Cf. Cadmus's need for reassurance that nobody will remark on his actions as inappropriate given his age (204–5).

⁴² On which last cf. nn. 73–4 below.

⁴³ There is no reason why these limitations should negate any element of the comic or even the ridiculous (as argued by e. g. Donzelli 2006, 114); rather, they modify the tone of the humour, rendering it affecting rather than straightforwardly risible.

⁴⁴ Most influential critics now view Pentheus's tone here as ironic and contemptuous rather than purely amused: see e. g. Seidensticker 2016, 276–7; Gregory 66. However, it would be incautious to assume (as Seidensticker does) that Pentheus laughs while making the comment; even more so that his words function as a type of stage direction which encourages laughter from the audience (Seidensticker 1978, 314–5). We noted earlier the serious difficulty in presupposing audience response.

Furthermore, the episode is more than comic in all the permutations of the term: it also includes the intellectual (Teiresias as sophist); the mythical (Theban autochthony and associated problems: Pentheus, the hostile un-believer, is a descendant of the ‘earth-born’,⁴⁵ and reveals an associated tendency to violence and lawlessness);⁴⁶ the aetiological (Dionysiac religion will be established throughout Greece);⁴⁷ and the tragic (Pentheus’s ill judgement will cost him his life).⁴⁸ So the question of comedy is only one aspect of a multi-faceted and complex episode which incorporates all the major themes of the play.

3. Teiresias the Sophist

The prophet’s speech at 266–327 has long been noted as bearing the hallmarks of formal rhetoric and sophistic argumentation.⁴⁹ Much important work has been done on this by linguistic commentators, but a synopsis of the rhetorical form and language used would be helpful before we turn to the content in more detail. It is a formal piece of oratory, in marked and probably deliberate contrast to the chaotic harangue by Pentheus immediately preceding it, with a proem (266–71), encomium to Dionysus (272–309), appeal to Teiresias’s adversary, the king (309–313) and response to the latter’s earlier criticisms of the god as encouraging sexual impropriety in the Theban women (314–18; see 260–2); and a conclusion (319–27) which responds to another of Pentheus’s complaints (248–60) regarding the new god’s introduction to Thebes (319–27).⁵⁰

The language is sophisticated, too: the opening warning against the dangers of specious rhetoric⁵¹ — Pentheus’s use of *καλαὶ ἀφορμαί*⁵² (“fine-sounding pretexts”, 267) — is somewhat ironic considering Teiresias’s own oratorical aptitude,⁵³ exemplified in the use of ‘new’ language: Pentheus in his boldness⁵⁴ is a *κακὸς πολίτης* (“a base citizen”, 271).⁵⁵ So too the use of *τὰ πρῶτ’* (275) in the sense of “elements”⁵⁶ in relation to Dionysus’s and Demeter’s representation of wine and grain respectively.⁵⁷ We note in addition the word

⁴⁵ The ‘sown men’ who were born from the teeth of Ares’ dragon, sown by Cadmus on the spot of Thebes’ foundation. The men of this first autochthonous generation promptly destroyed each other (*Ph.* 657–75).

⁴⁶ See e. g. his threats at 246–7 and 347–50. The connection between Pentheus’s origins and his behaviour is made explicit at e. g. 537–55 and 992–6.

⁴⁷ As Teiresias predicts at 273–4: the god’s future greatness cannot even be expressed in words.

⁴⁸ Cf. 848–50; 992–6.

⁴⁹ Roth n.1 provides useful refs. to scholarly research on these topics. Roth himself considers the Teiresias of *Bacch.* as a reflection of the Athenian *mantis* Euthyphro; both men are thus ‘theological sophists’; see his section II.

⁵⁰ These balancing patterns and the speech’s organised structure have led scholars such as Collard 1975: 68 and Lloyd 1992: 10 to characterise the scene as one of the formal *agōnes* common in late Eur.

⁵¹ Itself a rhetorical trope: e. g. *Med.* 580–5; *Ph.* 469–72.

⁵² The noun is a technical term: see the n. of Roux 1972 ad loc.

⁵³ See Egli 2003, 139–40.

⁵⁴ *θράσει*, 270. See Dodds ad loc. on the problems of the line in the MS. Roux ad loc. offers some interesting observations on the concept of boldness in a rhetorical context.

⁵⁵ Roux is probably right to view the use of *πολίτης* here as anachronistic. Teiresias in this criticism of the king is being somewhat bold himself here!

⁵⁶ See Roth 60 n.8. This sense was originally suggested by Nestle 1901: 55, 81.

⁵⁷ Although Seidensticker 2016, 280 n.32 questions whether the *τὰ πρῶτ’* does actually mean “elements”; he suggests it means ‘the best, most important things’. This is a perfectly reasonable proposition, but the idea of “elements” is appropriate in the context, which is rooted in natural philosophy and cosmology (see Dodds on 274–85).

play⁵⁸ on μηρῶι / μέρος / ὄμηρον⁵⁹ in the notorious ‘explanation’ of Dionysus’s birth;⁶⁰ and in μανιώδες μαντικήν (299), two words which are also linked in Platonic philosophy.⁶¹

Modern philosophical ideas are most evident in the sections regarding Dionysus’s and Demeter’s respective positions in the cosmos,⁶² and then in the account of the former’s birth. The first passage in its juxtaposition of dry and wet (274–85) recalls the sophist Prodicus in particular,⁶³ while Teiresias’s ‘explanation’ of Dionysus’s birth (286–97)⁶⁴ attempts at a sophistic rationalisation of ancient myth which is ineffective and unconvincing at best and farcical at worst.⁶⁵ Further shades of sophistic thought are found in Teiresias’s assertion that it is the Maenads’ ‘nature’, not the compulsion from Dionysus, which ensures the women’s chastity (214–8), reflecting the sophistic νόμος / φύσις dichotomy⁶⁶ which debated the respective powers of social structures and natural inclination as guiding moral or ethical principles in human behaviour.

So, quite the modern prophet, then. What is intended by such an unconventional characterisation? The easy answer would be that Teiresias is a parodic representation of his traditional mantic role and of the modern intellectual trends which he reflects. This would be a comprehensible conclusion, considering the oft-derided passage on Dionysus’s birth, the prophet’s somewhat ridiculous physical appearance as gender-bending Maenad complete with all the paraphernalia, and his symbiotic relationship with Cadmus. Against the background of late fifth-century literary culture which both unashamedly mocked sophistic teaching⁶⁷ and explored the moral implications of its influence on contemporary ideology and rhetoric,⁶⁸ the idea that Teiresias is simply a victim of merciless lampoonery on Euripides’ part — and invites a similar assessment from the audience — is a compelling proposition.

But things are scarcely so simple. Firstly, as already noted, the comic (which is not really perceptible at this stage in the episode in any case) is not incompatible with the serious or with the genuinely tragic. Further, the language of parody may not be the most useful in this instance or in the analysis of Euripides’ relationship with the sophists in

⁵⁸ Di Benedetto 2004 on 288–97 compares Socrates at Plato’s *Kratylos* 407b.

⁵⁹ See the n. of Verdenius 1988 on 292.

⁶⁰ There is an interesting parallel involving the confusion of words at *Her.* 153–4, where Lycus recounts Heracles’ killing of the Nemean lion by strangling it in a noose (βρόχος), although this was misinterpreted as him using his arm (βραχίων). Bond 1981 ad loc. comments on Eur.’s characteristic interest in etymology and the correct naming of things. This is also characteristic of Protagoras in Plato (e. g. *Krat.* 391b–c; *Phdr.* 267c). See also Bond’s n. on 56 for the modern implications of ὀρθῶς.

⁶¹ Roux on 298–301 notes the connection between madness and prophecy at Plato, *Phdr.* 244c.

⁶² See Egli 140–1 for discussion.

⁶³ Egli 143. See also the n. of Di Benedetto on 274–85.

⁶⁴ These lines are now generally accepted as authentic; see further Dodds ad loc.

⁶⁵ This much-maligned passage elicits strong reactions from e. g. a clearly unimpressed Winnington — Ingram 1948: 50, who termed it ‘a futile attempt at reason and refinement’. Verdenius on 292 is more forgiving in accepting the comic element while rightly rejecting the idea that the lines merely represent Eur.’s satirical view of the sophists. More recently Seidensticker 2016: 381 n. 39 points out the weakness of Dodds’ defence on the basis that myth correction is common elsewhere in Greek poetry, and that Teiresias’s explanation is inconsistent with the ‘official version’ elsewhere in the play. See also Papadopoulou 2001, 27 n. 23

⁶⁶ Cf. Plato, *Prot.* 337c–d.

⁶⁷ The best-known example being the *Clouds* of Aristophanes (423).

⁶⁸ Euripides himself had shown interest in this theme in the *agôn* between Polynices and Eteocles in the recently performed (approx. 410) *Phoenissae*; the role of Eteocles (and to some extent Polynices) there is consistently associated with the abuse of sophistic rhetoric and modern philosophical ideas to further immoral (or even amoral) ends. See Mastronarde 1994 *passim* on the *agôn* for discussion and refs.

general; or if parody is present, an unequivocal equation of parody with mockery is not always adequate. That is not to deny any element of criticism. Euripides can exploit, to comic effect, elements of sophistic thought and rhetoric without wholly dismissing them. Our perception of the Greeks' views on sophism is irrevocably distorted by the accident of survival, which in any context threatens to impose a reductive neatness on a set of phenomena which were no doubt more complex than the extant sources suggest. What we read in Plato or Aristotle or Thucydides is not necessarily representative, especially if we consider the inevitable factor of authorial bias, and full-scale studies on sophism⁶⁹ have revealed that sophistic influence in ancient Greece was in reality far more nuanced and multi-faceted than is suggested by many of the extant texts. Furthermore, Euripides' own relationship with sophism was complex.⁷⁰ It went beyond criticism or endorsement and is presented differently across the passages in the extant corpus which incorporate sophistic philosophy or rhetoric.⁷¹ In *Bacchae*, the poet uses Teiresias to explore new ideas to reflect the rapidly developing intellectual culture of his time. This should be assessed entirely independently of the comic elements in the prophet's portrayal.⁷² The idea of Euripides' alleged irreligious inclinations is hardly borne out by his late plays, which cast the gods in prominent roles that confirm their ultimate authority. Nor is the motif of the mockery of the prophet exclusively Euripidean,⁷³ or even uniquely tragic.⁷⁴ Teiresias's innovative role as sophist reflects the flexibility of his character in myth and validates his continuing importance, as Euripides updates and exploits this archaic prophet-figure who promotes the necessary inclusion of new ideas and the new religion. In this way he becomes a character if not equal to then at least aligned with Dionysus himself. In *Bacchae*, there could be no greater affirmation of his authority.

And how radical a character is Teiresias really? That he is meant to articulate sophistic ideas in a sophistic rhetorical manner is indubitable. But there is a strong argument for not overstating the case. Much of what he says also reflects and endorses highly traditional Greek thought. The basic themes in his 'sophistic speech' — of knowledge versus ignorance, of good counsel versus δυσβουλία and the concomitant danger of ὕβρις, resulting in νέμεσις — are conventionally tragic and conventionally associated with Teiresias, whose traditional affiliation with Apollo, retained by Euripides,⁷⁵ strengthens his long-established mythical association with the gods and by proxy his own socio-political standing.⁷⁶

⁶⁹ E. g. de Romilly 1992.

⁷⁰ For discussion see e. g. Allan 1999/2000.

⁷¹ For a brief discussion of the general themes see Conacher 1998.

⁷² Which have already faded away by this point anyway, as was noted above.

⁷³ In fact, Pentheus's allegation that Teiresias accepts payment for his (μισθοὺς φέρειν, 257) is much milder than the invective directed at the prophet by Oedipus in *OT* (380–389) and Creon in *Ant.* (1033–47). And the perception is Oedipus's, Creon's, Pentheus's — not necessarily, nor even likely, that of Soph. or Eur. Suspicion of conspiracy and abusive condemnation of challenges to authority are common traits in the autocrat.

⁷⁴ Accusations of charlatanry and especially avarice in relation to prophets in general were a common theme in Greek literature, going right back to the *Odyssey* (see 2, 184–6). See also *CH Morb. sacr.* 1.4, which refers to "excessively religious" individuals who sell their knowledge as μάγοι and ἀγύρται. On the significance of these terms elsewhere in a similar context, see the n. of Finglass 2018b on *OT* 387–9 (where both occur). The specific theme of the acceptance of payment by sophists in particular is well discussed by Tell 2009.

⁷⁵ *Bakkh.* 328–9; these lines also imply the unproblematic co-existence of Teiresias's devotion to his old divine ally and the newcomer Dionysus.

⁷⁶ The Chorus of *OT* describe the prophet as "most like Phoebus" (285) and "godlike" (298).

Similarly conventional is the concept of reciprocity between man and god to which he alludes in attempting to correct Pentheus's attitude: humans enjoy praise, but the gods' honour must be respected as well (κακείνος, οἶμαι, τέρπεται τιμώμενος, "And he [sc. Dionysus] too, I believe, enjoys being honoured", 321).⁷⁷ That the neglect by humans of the gods' τιμή is associated with folly is made explicit by Teiresias when he admits defeat at the end of the scene: μῶρα γὰρ μῶρος λέγει ("for being a fool he [sc. Pentheus] says foolish things", 369). The consequences of such folly are foreshadowed by both Teiresias (367)⁷⁸ and Cadmus in the allusion to the fate of Actaeon (337–40), who boasted of hunting skills superior to those of Artemis.⁷⁹ The pattern is confirmed shortly afterwards by the Chorus: ἀφροσύνη, lack of sense, will only lead to misfortune, δυστυχία (386–8).⁸⁰

The support of Cadmus strengthens the prophet's position; so does the Chorus of Bacchant women.⁸¹ Teiresias represents the traditional lauded Greek principles of wisdom (in its conventional sense) and (less explicitly) moderation⁸² — both of which are conspicuously lacking in his adversary Pentheus.⁸³ As Cadmus says, Teiresias is wise, σοφός (186).⁸⁴ This question of wisdom, σοφία, and thinking 'well' or 'correctly', is important. Direct and indirect references to the theme, a central one in the play as a whole, recur throughout the episode, mostly in the words of Teiresias.⁸⁵ There also emerges a duality in the concept of σοφία — a tension between 'cleverness' and true knowledge or understanding.⁸⁶ This duality⁸⁷ becomes clearer a little later in the Chorus's observation that "cleverness is not [true] wisdom" (τὸ σοφὸν δ' οὐ σοφία, 395). It seems obvious enough from the context here (τό τε μὴ θνατὰ φρονεῖν, "to think non-mortal thoughts", 396) that the Chorus are alluding disapprovingly to Pentheus's egotism in rejecting the new god. In the Teiresias episode, the modern (negative? — or at least controversial) sense of the word implies skill, adeptness, even cunning; here, in the specific context of specious rhetoric

⁷⁷ Cf. Aphrodite at Eur. *Hipp.* 7–8: ἔνεστι γὰρ δὴ κὰν θεῶν γένει τόδε: / τιμώμενοι χαίρουσιν ἀνθρώπων ὕπο.

⁷⁸ The prophet's play here on Πενθεύς... πένθος is, *contra* Seaford ('[it] expresses not a pun but anxiety'), definitely a pun, and perfectly consistent with Teiresias's linguistic aptitude — although punning is relatively common in tragedy and so is not a 'sophistic' feature here. Furthermore, it can and probably does here express anxiety, but this is not inconsistent with punning, which could and did appear in serious contexts in Greek, as contrasted with its generally humorous / unimportant context when used in modern English (see Dodds ad loc.).

⁷⁹ On the parallels between Pentheus and Actaeon see Dodds ad loc.

⁸⁰ Cf. again Aphrodite at *Hipp.* 6: σφάλλω δ' ὅσοι φρονοῦσιν εἰς ἡμᾶς μέγα ("I thwart those who have arrogant thoughts about me"). Athene in Soph. *Aias* has a similar warning (127–33); cf. also 770–77).

⁸¹ Who refer to Pentheus as "godless" (263) and explicitly define his behaviour as hubristic (ὑβριν ἐς τὸν Βρόμιον, 375), a theme developed in the subsequent Choral ode (370–432).

⁸² Full-scale studies of *sōphrosunē* can be found in Rademaker 2005 and North 1966.

⁸³ The overlap between these two concepts is implied at Dionysus's comment at 641, anticipating his own easy repression of Pentheus's blustering: πρὸς σοφοῦ γὰρ ἀνδρὸς ἀσκεῖν σῶφρον' εὐοργησίαν ("It is a wise man's part to exercise moderate gentleness of temper"). See also the Messenger's words at 1150–2, and Dodds' n. ad loc.

⁸⁴ Cf. 179 (also Cadmus).

⁸⁵ See also 200; 203 (bracketed by Diggle); 266–7; 311–2 (Teiresias); 332 (Cadmus again).

⁸⁶ This tension is also found in Eur.'s *IA*, performed at the same festival as *Bacch.* in 405. At 744–5 Agamemnon observes that despite devising all sorts of plans to effect the sacrifice of Iphigeneia (σοφίζομαι δὲ κὰπ τῶσι φιλάτοις / τέχνας πορίζω), he cannot achieve his aims. At 444–5 he had similarly lamented that a much cleverer god had thwarted his plans (ὑπῆλθε δαίμων, ὥστε τῶν σοφισμάτων / πολλῶι γενέσθαι τῶν ἐμῶν σοφώτερος). Even the most considered cleverness of men is no match for the true wisdom of the gods.

⁸⁷ Conacher 1967: 73–7 makes some useful observations on the ambiguity in the terminology of wisdom in the play.

(Teiresias's criticism of Pentheus's linguistic aptitude, 266–9).⁸⁸ But it also, and with no less authority, retains its traditional sense of (moral) wisdom, understanding, cognition of truth; in this episode in particular, the acceptance of the new religion which the prophet aims to promote. This may appear contradictory, given that Teiresias is no mean speaker himself. But actually, these dual aspects of σοφία co-exist in his character without any real conflict. The prophet can speak cleverly, but his fundamental recognition of Dionysus's greatness is wise as well. Teiresias is σοφός in both the modern (sophistic) sense, and in the traditional or conventional sense of 'wisdom', which in the specifically religious context here is associated with belief in the new god. Pentheus, on the other hand, is also a clever speaker, but he is not wise⁸⁹ — and that will prove his downfall. Teiresias and Pentheus both speak like sophists — but only Teiresias can apply his wisdom to his knowledge of sophistic rhetoric and ideas. From this it may reasonably be inferred that sophism *per se* is not dangerous; what can be dangerous is the context and method of its application. The play recognises the necessary incorporation of new philosophical trends into the intellectual culture of the time; but not at the expense of traditional values. It is this tension — conflict even — that is dramatised through the character of Teiresias, who stands for and between both old and new.

But Teiresias's own σοφία in both the traditional and the modern senses of the word is limited. He knows this himself — he has some conception of Dionysus's future pan-Hellenic greatness, but even this sophistic speaker cannot articulate that greatness in words.⁹⁰ And, looking ahead a little, his rhetoric is of course not enough to convince Pentheus; the disaster that ensues illustrates the lamentable failure of λόγος, even in the speech of one so skilled in utilising it, in the face of human δυσβουλία. Teiresias is clever, but only up to a point; he is wise, but only to the extent that *any* human character can understand the greatness of the god(s).⁹¹ So when he comments: οὐδὲν σοφιζόμεσθα τοῖσι δαίμοσιν ("We do not exercise cleverness in relation to the gods", 200)⁹² the apparent inconsistency with the indisputable 'cleverness' of later speech at 266–327 need not trouble us as much as we might think. What he appears to allude to here is even his own inability to understand or explain everything in relation to the divine world in general and the influence of Dionysus in particular. This is borne out by his less than successful attempt⁹³ to rationalise the birth of that god — which is likely less characteristic of modern intellectualism than we might

⁸⁸ Bearing in mind that sophistic philosophy, not only rhetoric, can also be defined as 'clever'; but here of course the focus is on speech-making.

⁸⁹ He can use καλαὶ ἀφορμαί, so is σοφός in that sense; but he lacks real insight or understanding (ἐν τοῖς λόγοισι δ' οὐκ ἔνεισί σοι φρένες, 269). Cf. 311–2, 332 and 359.

⁹⁰ οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην μέγεθος ἐξεῖπεν ὅσος / καθ' Ἑλλάδ' ἔσται ("I am unable to say how great he will be throughout Greece", 273–4).

⁹¹ This concept of humans' lack of complete knowledge in relation to the gods is observed by the Chorus at Eur. *Hel.* 1137–50.

⁹² This is the standard printing of the line (Dodds, Seaford, Di Benedetto, Murray 1913), although Diggle 1994 deletes 199–203. The present writer follows the majority view, although not Seaford's proposed emendation (following Musgrave 1778) to οὐδ' ἔνσοφιζόμεσθα (also printed by Roux), which he believes solves the problem of inconsistency with T.'s later clever speech on Dionysus; nor Seaford's suggestion of οὐδ' εἰ σοφιζόμεσθα, for which his argument seems a little strained. His objection to the dative of interest in τοῖσι δαίμοσιν also appears unfounded. Dodds agrees with Musgrave on οὐδ' ἔνσοφιζόμεσθα, but he also suggests giving the entire line to Cadmus, which seems incautious. The issue with οὐδὲν σοφιζόμεσθα τοῖσι δαίμοσιν appears to be an interpretative, rather than a textual problem.

⁹³ Which is, as already noted, inconsistent with what we hear from the Chorus elsewhere (cf. 94–8; 521–7).

assume.⁹⁴ But Teiresias understands as much as any human character is capable of understanding — including, even at this early stage, the terrifying violence of which Dionysus is capable, and which contrasts so powerfully with the image of peace and fertility presented in the first Stasimon and indeed with Teiresias's own celebration⁹⁵ of Dionysus's curative powers through wine (285–90).⁹⁶ The play's illustration of this 'other side' of the god in the brutal revenge he inflicts on the non-believer Pentheus vindicates the level of understanding that Teiresias does possess.⁹⁷ But this limitation of Teiresias's comprehension is not a personal failure on the part of the prophet — who himself abdicates that role when he says that he speaks not as a seer, but judging from the facts (μαντικῆ μὲν οὐ λέγω, / τοῖς πράγμασιν δέ: 368–9).⁹⁸ It is rather symptomatic of a broader reflection on the fragility and uncertainty of the human condition, τὸ ἀνθρωπίνον. If there is any failure on Teiresias's part, then it is not as a prophet, nor as a sophist, but as a human character struggling to make sense of a world even a seer could not fully understand.

4. New Prophet — New God?

We mentioned a little earlier that Teiresias in his sophistic representation of new and old represents a tension between the modern and the traditional, and the difficulty of accommodating novel ideas and beliefs within an ancient framework. This is mirrored on a majestic scale by the destabilising effects of Dionysus's arrival at and necessary integration within Thebes. We refer to Dionysus as the new god, the strange being from the exotic East who disrupts the structure and order of the Greek πόλις. But Teiresias also hints at the idea that Dionysus is essentially and thoroughly a part of Greek religious tradition. The god *was* new — but new to the Thebes of *Bacchae* rather than to the broader framework of the ancient Olympian pantheon, of which he was already a long-established member. Archaeological evidence indicates that Dionysus was worshipped as a god as far back as the Mycenaean period, and perhaps also the god's association with wine is equally ancient.⁹⁹ His popularity long before the fifth century is confirmed by the iconographic tradition.¹⁰⁰ With this in mind, let us return to Teiresias's speech, of which some of the traditional fea-

⁹⁴ Bond on *Her.* 23 comments that this type of rationalisation of myth dates back to Hekataios at least.

⁹⁵ One or two modern scholars appear too quick in reading T.'s speech as merely celebratory, without any sinister or warning undertone: so Mastronarde 1986: 206 on T.'s 'encomiastic purpose'; and Seidensticker 2016, 280, who writes of T.'s 'prose hymn — complete with aretology and birth legend...'

⁹⁶ Note the allusions to Dionysus's ability to inspire madness (298–301) and fear (304); his "share of Ares" (302); this is consistent with Teiresias's final foreshadowing of disaster for Pentheus (367–8), which supports Cadmus's reference to Aktaion (337–41).

⁹⁷ It seems a little hasty to state that T. 'severely misconceives the nature' of Dionysus (Segal, 295). A similar line is taken by Seidensticker 2016, 282, who comments that T. is 'incapable' of understanding 'the threatening dark and destructive side of the god'. T. understands insofar as any human can — and he understands better than probably anyone else in the play.

⁹⁸ There is no real value in viewing this as Teiresias's renunciation of his traditional Apolline role (thus Karsal 1991: 199–208, esp. 207–8). Cf. again 328–9; D. and Apollo's longstanding association (see below) is upheld.

⁹⁹ See Bernabé 2013 for a survey of the archaeological evidence. Bernabé concludes that some, though not all, of the features associated with D. by the classical period (wine, women, madness, bulls) can be traced back to the Mycenaean period.

¹⁰⁰ On which see Isler-Kerényi 2001 (Italian) and 2007 (English trans.). The analysis starts from the 7th century; the original 2001 volume contains the relevant images, which are not printed in the later English transl.

tures have already been noted. The long-established wet / dry opposition¹⁰¹ is symbolised here by Dionysus and Demeter (274–85).¹⁰² An explicit connection between these two gods is already present in lyric — which also connects them both to Thebes¹⁰³ — and elsewhere (more elliptically perhaps) in tragedy: here in *Bacchae*,¹⁰⁴ Dionysus is later referred to as Iakkhos by the Maenad women,¹⁰⁵ which connects him to Eleusis, where Iakkhos's role in the Mysteries is well-attested,¹⁰⁶ and by association to Demeter, whose mysteries at that location were established at least by the archaic period.¹⁰⁷ The connection had already appeared in *Antigone*, performed some forty years before *Bacchae*, when the Chorus refer to Dionysus as a “god of many names”¹⁰⁸ who presides over the valleys of “Eleusinian Deo”.¹⁰⁹ A little later, they refer to him as Iacchus.¹¹⁰ We cannot be absolutely certain that Iacchus and Bacchus¹¹¹ / Dionysus are one and the same individual; the question continues to generate debate.¹¹² We can state with reasonable safety, however, that based on these passages in tragedy, and on evidence from Aristophanes' *Frogs*,¹¹³ Iacchus and Dionysus were mutually identifiable by the second half of the fifth century at the latest. Furthermore, the syncretic nature of Greek religion in general — especially evident in a genre such as tragedy¹¹⁴ — means that such an identification would be culturally consistent.

Several other aspects of *Bacchae* uphold Dionysus's long-established position within the Greek pantheon. The god introduces himself at the outset as the son of Semele, and the relationship is reiterated throughout the play.¹¹⁵ To be sure, Dionysus's parentage was

¹⁰¹ Lloyd 1964.

¹⁰² To be sure the concept here of wine and bread as beneficial to mankind can be linked to the sophist Prodicus (see Dodds on 274–85), but he is possibly not the best example of a radical sophist anyway. Certainly, he is presented with less disapproval than many of his fellow sophists in Plato, for example. Generally, we may speak of certain ‘older’ sophists (of whom Prodicus is one), whose attitude to ancient tradition is modernist but not revolutionary.

¹⁰³ Pind. *Isth.* 7, 3–5; and see the useful n. of Farnell 1932 ad loc., especially on the close historical association of both D. and Demeter with Thebes. On D.'s names and associations in lyric more generally see Caballero 2013.

¹⁰⁴ Reguero 2013 has an interesting essay on the use (and non-use) of different names for D. in *Bakkh.*

¹⁰⁵ As reported by the Messenger at 723–6 (αἱ δὲ τὴν τεταγμένην / ὥραν ἐκίνουν θύρσον ἐς βακχεύματα, Ἰακχὸν ἀθρόωι στόματι τὸν Διὸς γόνον / Βρόμιον καλοῦσαι). Dodds comments that the use of D.'s Eleusinian title here is inappropriate in the mouths of the Theban women, but D. himself mentioned at the outset that he had come to Thebes accompanied by Maenads gathered from elsewhere (cf. 55–7), and in the general confusion of the scene on Kithairon as related by the Messenger we cannot be certain that all the women were local.

¹⁰⁶ See Graf 1974: 46–69.

¹⁰⁷ See *Hom. Hymn Dem.* 473–82.

¹⁰⁸ πολώνυμε, 1115. Certainly D.'s multiple names are reflected elsewhere in Soph.; for discussion see e. g. San Cristóbal 2013, especially section 2.

¹⁰⁹ *Ant.* 1115–25. Brown 1987 on 1120–1 notes that “Eleusinian Deo” is a name of Demeter.

¹¹⁰ 1154.

¹¹¹ On the history of the name Bakkhos and its cognates from the archaic period onwards see Santamaría 2013.

¹¹² See San Cristóbal 2012: 125 nn.2–3 for useful refs. to discussion on the topic.

¹¹³ The Chorus repeatedly call D. Iakkhos: 316–7, 323–5, 399, 403. The play (performed in the same year as *Bakkh.* in 405) in general and especially the Parodos is widely viewed as heavily alluding to the Eleusinian Mysteries, which strengthens the connection between D. and Demeter. On *Frogs* and the Eleusinian Mysteries, see e. g. Griffith 2013: 175–99, and Lada-Richards 1999: ch. 2. Ford: 2011 has a useful discussion of D.'s ‘many names’ in *Frogs*.

¹¹⁴ See the discussion of Allan 2004.

¹¹⁵ 3, 41, 278, 375–6, 468, 581.

elsewhere in myth connected with other maternal candidates,¹¹⁶ but his relationship to Semele is well-established in the early Greek tradition.¹¹⁷ So too is his association with Apollo, whose best-known connection is to Delphi, and who in *Bacchae* (as well as in the earlier *Oedipus Tyrannus*) is also in turn connected with Teiresias.¹¹⁸ Teiresias himself, who as noted earlier gains the Chorus's approval in accepting the power of both Apollo and Dionysus (328–9), alludes to the future establishment of the latter's rites at Delphi (306–8). Other fifth-century texts support the idea of Dionysiac cult at Delphi;¹¹⁹ and archaeological evidence also indicates that Apollo was worshipped at Thebes long before the classical period.¹²⁰ The Dionysus in *Bacchae* is therefore presented in a manner consistent with his associations in the mythical tradition. So when Teiresias comments that no argument can overthrow ancestral traditions (πατρίους παραδοχάς, 201), and then proceeds to a most definitively and sophisticatedly clever defence of the newcomer Dionysus (366–327), it is again not quite as inconsistent as it may appear. For Dionysus is part of Hellenic ancestral traditions, but his cult is new to the mythical Thebes of the play, which dramatises the difficulties of accommodating it — of updating, rather than completely subverting, the established order of things. In *Bacchae*, the wise sophist Teiresias sees that change is necessary — but not at the expense of, rather in co-existence with, long-held tradition. The play dramatises the tragic consequences of such change when that change is challenged because it is not understood, which brings us back to the limitations of human knowledge and the old adage of learning through suffering.

Dramatisation: this is an important word. When we speak of change or progress or modernisation in the context of *Bacchae* (or any other tragedy) we are reminded of the inherent difficulty in reading these texts as historical evidence. The plays may, to a greater or lesser extent across the extant corpus and in varying ways, reflect contemporary events and concerns — but only within the generic limitations imposed by their status as creative literature.¹²¹ Ritual, religion and tragic myth have a complex interrelationship which resists monolithic definition.¹²² Likewise, the arrival in *Bacchae* of Dionysus is above all a problem of mythical Thebes in the heroic age. To be sure, the play — perhaps to a greater extent than any other surviving tragedy — can be said to be 'about' Dionysus, cult and

¹¹⁶ Funnily enough, in the light of our earlier discussion, he is sometimes presented as the son of Demeter or even of her daughter Persephone (although Zeus as his father is a constant in all the versions). This probably originated in the Orphic tradition; see West 1983: 74. Diodorus records that an earlier Dionysus was said to have been born to Zeus and Persephone on Krete, which he also connects to the Orphic tradition (Bibl. 5, 75, 4), although Diodorus's tone (μυθολογοῦσιν) and use of indirect statement suggests a certain scepticism. See also 4.4.1 on D. as son of Persephone and Zeus. However, Diodorus firmly claims Dionysus as a Greek god and son of Semele, and devotes far more space to explaining these origins and his religious power in Greece (most of book 4.2–4).

¹¹⁷ Cf. *Il.* 14, 325; *Hes. Th.* 940–1; *Hom. Hymn Dion.* 1.

¹¹⁸ Cf. n.75 above.

¹¹⁹ See *Ant.* 1126–30; *Eur. Ion* 714–7; *IT* 1239–44; *Ar. Clouds* 603–5. On the cult of Dionysus at Delphi see Fontenrose 1959: 373–94, and Burkert 1985: 224–5.

¹²⁰ The temple of Apollo Ismenios at Thebes dates back at least to the seventh century and probably earlier; see Schachter 1967: 3–5; and further Schachter 1981–94: 1: 77–87.

¹²¹ See Easterling's 1997 cogent argument on the 'heroic vagueness' of tragic material and the conclusion of Pelling 1997 in the same volume, which presents some illuminating discussions of the problems of viewing tragedy as historical evidence. A similarly useful collection of papers on the topic is found in Goff 1995.

¹²² See e. g. the nuanced discussion of Easterling 1988; her general view is of ritual in drama, rather than drama as ritual.

ritual in a civic context.¹²³ But it also ‘about’ many other things in a specifically Theban and mythical context.¹²⁴ We are reminded of the risk of reductivism — perhaps especially with a play such as *Bacchae*, which is undoubtedly imbued with the spirit of the god at every turn. Likewise, great caution must be applied to any attempt at deducing the views or aims of the poet.¹²⁵ This is especially relevant in a genre such as tragedy, which generally resists the type of self-referentiality we find in, for instance, Aristophanic comedy. Tragic drama is also, in the broadest terms, educative rather than didactic in any straightforward sense. We can never be entirely sure what was intended or felt or thought by Euripides, who was at once across a diverse corpus of extant texts a historian, a philosopher, a psychologist, but above all a literary creator. In his Teiresias we find a character who, like the god he promotes, defies convention; who is ‘different’ and ‘new’ while yet retaining his tragic integrity: as such, he bridges the gap between the heroic age and contemporary Athens, reflecting through the essential flexibility of myth the progress of a rapidly developing city-state against the background of pan-Hellenic society.

5. Conclusion

Our argument has sought to establish the authority of Teiresias in *Bacchae* within a scholarly discourse which has tended to focus on his character from an intertextual perspective in relation to Sophocles rather than as an independent figure. We have evaluated the comic nature of the scene in which he appears and the impact of this comedy on our perception of the prophet. The humour of the scene is varied in nature and degree, but it is separable from Teiresias’s eloquent presentation of sophistic ideas. We also saw how contemporary attitudes to sophistic philosophy and rhetoric are not to be viewed in monolithic terms, and that Teiresias’s association with sophism does not negate or even seriously undermine his dramatic authority. The ineffectiveness of his speech is necessary from a purely dramatic perspective in driving the tragedy inexorably to its end; it need not reflect on the overall effectiveness of Teiresias as a dramatic character. It also need not suggest a negative view of sophism and sophistic rhetoric, since Pentheus’s downfall relies above all on his own *δυσβουλία* — the imperfect nature of human knowledge and understanding and the wilful arrogance which brings about his end. Furthermore, we saw that Teiresias is not the wholesale radical that first impressions might suggest. He also stands for and with Greek tradition in a social, religious, political as well as literary context. In his sophistic representation of conventional Greek thought, in his defence of the old/new god Dionysus, he reflects on a human level just as the god does on a divine one the tensions inherent in the collision between archaic myth and fifth-century experience.

¹²³ So Seaford 1981. His 1996 commentary and general view of tragedy are determinedly focused on ritual and the πόλις, to the exclusion of almost any other interpretation. But the problem with such a strictly historicist approach (and as a historian, Seaford’s calibre is not in question) is not only its reductivism but also its reliance on the inherently vulnerable concept that creative literature can be seen as being ‘about’ real life.

¹²⁴ Friedrich’s 2000 outlook on Seaford’s ‘new ritualism’ is generally much more balanced and judicious. An unimpressed Seaford 2000 is quick to respond.

¹²⁵ A trap many excellent scholars seem to fall into; Winnington-Ingram 1948 for one, who concludes his study with a coda on Eur.’s desires and intentions that can only ever be speculative. See more recently Versnel 1990: 131–205, who views the play as reflecting contemporary unease concerning new cults. However, much of his discussion is illuminating and considered, and a valuable addition to scholarship on the play.

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