6. The Bacchanalia and Roman Culture

The story of Pentheus and Bacchus comes out of Greek myth and is situated in a Greek milieu. But we have already seen (above, §3a) that Ovid's treatment of these tales is often refracted through Roman cultural experience. In the case of the set text, one such influence, which does not register explicitly in the narrative but is judged to be of some importance by commentators, is a senatorial intervention against the cult of Bacchus in 186 BCE (i.e. nearly two centuries before Ovid composed the *Metamorphoses*), as well as its repercussions in literary texts — dramatic plays initially (tragedies and comedies that have unfortunately only survived in fragments) and then also in Livy's monumental history of Rome, which Ovid would have known. The distinction between the (religious) politics of 2nd century BCE Rome, specifically the measures taken against followers of the Bacchic cult in 186 BCE and the literary account of Livy, written in the Augustan period, is, of course, important to keep in mind.

Mid-Republican Rome experienced something quite similar to Ovid's Thebes: the arrival of a cult of Bacchus, which merged with Italy's cult of Liber, most likely sometime towards the end of the 3rd century BCE.[95] Not much is known about the so-called Bacchanalia: as with all mystery religions, the doings of the worshippers have remained mysterious. But it is clear that, after an initial period of toleration, which allowed the rites to spread throughout Italy, the Roman senate

95 For the native Italian deity Liber, see also Comm. on 520.

concluded that certain boundaries of law and order had been breached by cult members and issued a decree against the Bacchic associations responsible for organizing the worship. A copy of this decree has survived, and offers precious insight into the affair.[96] To begin with, it is clear that the senatorial intervention was not directed against Bacchus as a foreign divinity. Rather, the senate seems to have been 'acting in particular against the behaviour of cult members in relation to each other, and not in relation to the god: Rome wished, therefore, to preclude the possibility that cults could serve as vehicles for achieving local solidarity'.[97] The prohibitions of the decree suggest that the target was less the religious practice as such than the possibility of political fraternization afforded by a cult community.[98] Indeed, 'the decree makes no effort to ban the worship of Bacchus entirely, only to specify the conditions of worship'.[99] What Roman officials seem to have feared was the possibility that, unless brought under senatorial control, the cult might serve as a vehicle for anti-Roman political associations and activities. Arguably, the shift from Euripides' emphasis on illicit sex to Ovid's focus on power politics (mirrored in the way their respective figures of Pentheus react to the arrival of Bacchus) reflects this concern.

The account of the historian Livy is also extant (Liv. 39.8–19), offering the modern reader a vivid and salacious chronicle of the affair, in which sex, intrigue, and xenophobia register insistently. It is, in fact, shot through with Augustan anachronisms; whether consciously or not, Livy has inflected his treatment with contemporary concerns (such as Augustus' moral legislation). The idiom in which he describes the activities of those involved in the worship of Bacchus has interesting

96 The *senatus consultum de Bacchanalibus* ('senatorial decree concerning the Bacchanalia'), *CIL* 12.581.

97 Ando (2007) 437.

98 The pertinent section of the senatorial decree stipulates: 'None of them shall seek to have money in common. No one shall seek to appoint either man or woman as master or acting master, or seek henceforth to exchange mutual oaths, vows, pledges or promises, nor shall anyone seek to create mutual guarantees. No one shall seek to perform rites in secret, nor shall anyone seek to perform rites in public or private or outside the city, unless he has approached the urban *praetor* and is given permission with a senatorial decree … No one shall seek to perform rites when more than five men and women are gathered together, nor shall more than two men or more than three women seek to be present there, except by permission of the urban *praetor* and the senate …' (trans. Beard, North and Price).

99 Orlin (2010) 64.

parallels with Pentheus' characterization of Bacchants and their rites in Ovid's account. The theme of sexual license registers with particular emphasis:

> When wine had inflamed their minds, and night and the mingling of males with females and young with old, had destroyed all sense of modesty, every variety of debauchery began to be practiced, since each one had to hand the form of pleasure to which his nature was most inclined. (Liv. 39.8)

Later in the account, Livy has one of the consuls inveigh against the veneration of 'those gods who would drive our minds, enthralled by vile and alien rites (*pravis et externis religionibus*), to every crime and every lust' (39.15). The denigration continues with accusations of trickery and fraud (cf. Pentheus' imputation of *magicae fraudes* at *Met*. 3.534), political conspiracy and even ritual murder (followed by the sacrilegious disposal of the victims' bodies). Livy's rhetoric against this 'evil' finds an analogy in Pentheus' outrage against Bacchus and his followers in Ovid; both conceive of the cult's propagation in terms of territorial encroachment, though Pentheus' metaphor of choice is military conquest, whereas Livy's is a spreading pestilence: 'the destructive force of this wickedness spread from Etruria to Rome like a contagion' (*huius mali labes ex Etruria Romam veluti contagione morbi penetravit*, Liv. 39.9).