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What is a Greek Source on the Early English Stage? Fifteen New Essays

Edited by Silvia Bigliazzi and Tania Demetriou

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Part 5
Pastiche

15

"Is All Well Put Together In Every Part?": Assembling a Renaissance *Bacchae*

William N. West

Abstract

Euripides' *Bacchae* has often been identified as a representative exception among Greek tragedies – for the intensity of its pathos or its humour, the directness of its engagement with the cult of Dionysus or its destruction of it, for its metatheatricality or its influences on later examples of tragedy. But aside from its sometimes occulted presence in contemporary thought, *Bacchae* shows a particularly concrete and motivating absence: much of the play's climactic scene, in which his mother recognises the body of Pentheus by piecing it together, is missing from extant texts. In early printed editions, these lacunae (fail to) appear among lines "Is all well put together in every part?" and "You see how changed I am", which seem to comment on the philological and performative labour of reconstructing a body, a text, or a play. Twentieth-century editions of *Bacchae* supplement the received text with passages from *Christus Patiens*, a Byzantine cento of Euripidean and other passages patched into an account of the crucifixion, and so another way of actualising the play's thematics of fragmentation. Making *Bacchae* exemplary once again, I will explore both early modern toleration for incompleteness and the impulse to reconstruct what is missing in performance.

Keywords: *Bacchae*; *Christus Patiens*; Euripides; Classical receptions

The Greek tragedies one chooses to think with in part reflect, and perhaps also in part determine, what one expects, and what one gets, from both tragedy and literary history.[1] Different cultural moments have had different concepts of both, and have chosen

1 I wish to thank the generous first audience of these thoughts, at the 2022 conference on "Classical Receptions in Early Modern English Drama", hosted by the University of Verona and attended remotely from all over. I'm especially grateful to Silvia Bigliazzi, Tom Bishop, and Carla Suthren for their conversation.

It is no less emblematic that we look so consistently to Greek tragedies at all, but that is another question. Two books that both ground and explore this question, are Leonard 2015 and Halpern 2017.

different tragedies to explore their ideas – Aristotle's *Oedipus the King*; Hegel's *Antigone*, returning transformed in Judith Butler's or Bonnie Honig's *Antigones*; the Elizabethan *Hecuba*, as recent work by Tanya Pollard and others is showing us.[2] For much of the twentieth century, following in various ways Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), E.R. Dodds' *The Greeks and the Irrational* (1951), and The Performance Group's *Dionysus in '69* (1969), that exemplary tragedy was *Bacchae*.[3]

Much in keeping with the twentieth century's investments in both norms and violent extremes, Euripides' *Bacchae* has stood handily among Greek tragedies as a representative exception, often being called as witness for both sides of the question of what tragedy is. Depending on its reader, *Bacchae* is a benchmark for the intensity of its pathos or its offputting irony, for the overtness of its engagement with the cult of Dionysus or its undermining of it, for its unreadable but eminently performable ambivalence, perhaps above all for the searching way it seems to examine its own constitution, its often-cited metatheatricality.[4] Stephen Orgel has argued that although it "seems to have been practically unknown

2 Whether Oedipus the King was Aristotle's "favourite" tragedy, or conforms most closely to what he calls the "best kind of tragedy" (*Poetics* 13-14), is open to question, but Aristotle cites it more than any other tragedy and it seems to provide him with a kind of tacit norm for what tragedies are like, as for instance when he pairs it with the *Iliad* to contrast the difference in scope between epic and tragedy (*Poetics* 26). Hegel uses *Antigone* to frame the potential conflict between individual and universal claims (*Phenomenology of Spirit*, § 437, §§ 449-76); for returns to *Antigone*, see also Butler 2000 and Honig 2013. On Hecuba as emblematic tragedy for Elizabethans, Pollard 2017; for early modern Europeans more widely, Lupić 2018.

3 Nietzsche 1956; Dodds 2020. The final performances of the Performance Group's *Dionysus in 69* were filmed and edited by Brian De Palma (1969). On *Bacchae*'s rise, Mackay 2006, 71-5; on early modern *Bacchae*, see Orgel 2021, 64. According to Richard Seaford, the play was especially popular in antiquity as well (1996, 52-3); see also Perris and Mac Góráin 2019, 39-84.

4 The term *metatheatre* was invented to describe an early modern phenomenon of tragic exhaustion, in which the conventions of tragic drama have become so familiar that they no longer make any immediate claims on actors or audiences, a situation curiously like that played out in criticism of *Bacchae* between Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* and *Dionysus in '69*; Abel 1963.

to the Elizabethans", the play's frank violence and uninterpretable double vision parallel the aesthetics of much Elizabethan drama, but as "prototypical – not a source . . . an archetype." (Orgel, 64-5). Bruce Smith has called this kind of formal or thematic convergence *confluence* to distinguish it from the more direct contact or imitation of *influence* (1988, 6).

Aside from its occulted presence in early modern drama, *Bacchae* exhibits another particularly concrete and motivating absence. The surviving Byzantine manuscript of the end of the play has at least two significant lacunae in the climactic final scene. Necessarily these passages are also lacking from Renaissance editions of *Bacchae*. Twentieth-century editions of *Bacchae*, however, regularly supplemented the received text with passages from another play, *Khristos Paskhōn*, or *Christus Patiens*, the Suffering Christ or the Passion of Christ, adding what is now often picked out as *Bacchae*'s most distinctive, extraordinary scene of horror and self-examination, Agave's slow recognition that the mutilated body she proudly brandishes before her is that of her son Pentheus, whom she and the other Bacchantes have just butchered.[5] *Khristos Paskhōn*, the patching play, is itself a patchwork. It is a Byzantine cento compiled of lines taken from Greek tragedies and reassembled to tell the crucial Christian story of violence, grief, and recognition.[6] It was traditionally attributed to Gregory of Nazianzus, a classically-trained orator and Father of the Church of the fourth century CE, although most current scholarship assigns it to an unknown author in the twelfth century.[7]

5 *Khristos Paskhōn* was first proposed as a source for *Bacchae* by Kirchhoff 1853, who does not however include the lines in his 1855 edition. I did not consult other nineteenth-century editions. The editions of *Bacchae* of Gilbert Murray 1909; Dodds 1944; Diggle 1994; and Seaford 1996, all supplement their texts with lines from *Christus Patiens*, although not always the same ones.

6 Xanthaki-Karamanou (2022, 209-16) synthesizes the presence of *Christus Patiens* in the text of *Bacchae*. Pollman 2017 analyses how the *Christus Patiens* forcefully remakes *Bacchae* into a Christian tragedy.

7 For texts of *Khristos Paskhōn*/ *Christus Patiens* I have consulted *Sancti Gregori Nazanzeni Theologi Tragoedia, Christus Patiens* 1542, ed. Bladus; *Christus Patiens Tragoedia Christiana . . .* 1885, ed. Brambs; and de Nazianze 1969, ed. Tuilier. André Tuilier, the editor of the latest of these editions, controversially includes *Khristos Paskhōn* among Gregory of Nazianzen's works,

The *Bacchae* known in early modern Europe, then, differed materially from the play that has become emblematic for twentieth- and twenty-first-century audiences. Here I mean "materially" literally, to the (missing) letter(s). Without fully registering that it does so, the modern *Bacchae* reassimilates passages from a Byzantine cento that initially borrowed them and returns them to the play in which they originated: we obscure their absence. The Renaissance *Bacchae*, in contrast, did not preserve those passages in the pagan, Athenian play but elsewhere in a Christian, Byzantine one, and even more in an atmosphere: in some sense, early modern readers felt their presence. Smith's concept of *confluence* is, I think, meant to be less direct and exacting than that of *influence*, but in the case of *Bacchae* it is materially more so. Here, I want to take this material confluence of *Bacchae* with *Khristos Paskhōn* – their physical conflation and flowing together – as my emblematic Greek tragedy for the Renaissance reception of antiquity, repeatedly appropriating and recontextualising favoured elements so that they acquire new resonances and new relations, and then carrying these with them as shadowy connotations as they are set into yet other contexts.

I will return to *Khristos Paskhōn* – *Bacchae* is great but *Khristos Paskhōn* is weird. What *Bacchae* did the Renaissance know, and how did it differ from modern editions? *Bacchae* survives in two fourteenth-century manuscripts from which all extant versions derive, Laurentianus Plutei 32.2, or L, in the Laurentian Library in Florence, and Palatinus Graecus 287, or P, in the Vatican Library.[8] Prior to being copied into these manuscripts, some text from *Bacchae* was lost. Roughly the second half of the play is physically and unmistakably missing from L; the text breaks off in mid-sentence at the end of a page. Since in the existing manuscript the text ends at the bottom of a recto, it looks as if it has been copied to accommodate this abrupt ending.

with which it seems to have circulated originally, and attributes it to him; I discuss this argument further below.

8 See the discussion of the text in Dodds 1960, liii-lix; Mason 1948. See also links to digital images of the manuscripts, L: http://mss.bmlonline.it/s.aspx?Id=AWOIex_hI1A4r7GxMH6w#/oro/175 and P: https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Pal.gr.287

P, then, is the relevant manuscript for the last scene of *Bacchae*. It is the only source for the text of the second half of the play, but in that part of the text, lacking in L, there are at least two lacunae of indeterminate length. As with the lost ending of L, these lacunae must have been missing from the copytext for P; P itself is not damaged where the line or lines are missing, making reconstruction of the length of the lacunae challenging. One lacuna occurs after 1300 and is marked by two consecutive lines assigned to Agave, which unexpectedly interrupt a stichomythia between Kadmos and Agave:

> ἦ πᾶν ἐν ἄρθροις συγκεκλῃμένον καλῶς;
> Πενθεῖ δὲ τί μέρος ἀφροσύνης προσῆκ᾽ ἐμῆς;
> (1300-1)
>
> [Has it all been fitted together decently in its joints?
> What part of my folly belonged to Pentheus?][9]

Each question fills a single line, as stichomythia would require. It thus seems fairly clear that there is a loss of at least one line. After these two lines, the play continues with a longer speech given to Kadmos. The other notable lacuna occurs after 1329, where there is a fairly obvious shift in both speaker and topic of discussion: before it, Agave is speaking about the trauma she has undergone; after it, Dionysus is pronouncing on the fate of Kadmos and his family:

> ὦ πάτερ, ὁρᾷς γὰρ τἄμ᾽ ὅσῳ μετεστράφη
> δράκων γενήσῃ μεταβαλών, δάμαρ τε σὴ
> ἐκθηριωθεῖσ᾽ ὄφεος ἀλλάξει τύπον,
> (1329-31)
>
> [O father, you see how much my fortunes have changed. You will change and become a snake, and your wife will change, made savage, into the form of a snake.]

There is a lexical and conceptual link between Agave's verb for her overwhelming recognition, μετεστράφη / *metestraphē* (1329;

9 Here and elsewhere except as noted, I use Diggle's text and Seaford's translation. In this passage I restore P's initial ἦ with no breathing diacritic. Diggle marks a lacuna of at least three lines, although of course its actual length is uncertain.

changed or turned around) in the earlier line and the participle μεταβαλών / *metabalōn* (1330; changing or being turned) for Kadmos' physical change in the later one. This establishes a strong thematic echo, maybe even a retrospective commentary on the alteration of the text, but as an explanation for the lacuna – as eyeskip, for instance – it is unlikely.

There may of course be other lacunae that escape notice, but because of their formal properties – interruption of stichomythia in the one, discontinuity of syntax in the other – those following 1300 and 1329 in particular are hard to overlook. Nevertheless, the Renaissance editions and translations I consulted mostly manage to overlook them.[10] They show no sign that anything might be missing or amiss, although some early editions fiddle with the text of the latter and apparently more significant lacuna to make the shift across the gap smoother, including simply omitting the semantically confusing 1330.

It is thus worth asking whether anybody in the Renaissance really noticed that *Bacchae* was at least partially dismembered and missing some of its parts. Some of the play's early modern editors try to correct the text, starting with Aldus' *editio princeps*, which suggests that they were not completely unaware that something was not right, but of course early editors often emended freely, and had to. Readers of printed editions could easily have breezed (or staggered) past these gaps, especially if, as Tom Bishop has argued, not everyone reading Greek texts was able to read them especially easily or well.[11] The presentation of the Greek text without marking lacunae, the absence of commentary to accompany them, and the cleaning-up of available Latin translations to make sense of the

10 I consulted the following editions: Aldus 1503; Hervagius 1537; Hervagius 1544; Hervagius 1551; Plantin 1571; Commelini 1597; Stephanus 1602. I also consulted Latin translations Oporinus 1550; Lucium 1562. I was guided by Pollard's indispensable list of editions of Greek (2017, Appendix 1, 232-41). Sincere thanks to the Yale University Beinecke Library, the Northwestern University McCormick Special Collections Library, and the Newberry Library in Chicago, for their help locating these copies.

11 Tom Bishop, in an unpublished talk, "Technologies of Reading; or, How Much Greek Does a Playwright Need?": Theater without Borders conference (remote), June 2021.

gappy Greek conspired to make that kind of careless reading likely.[12] *Bacchae* was printed less often in the Renaissance than Euripides' other tragedies, and was sometimes even excluded from collections that contained the other tragedies. But it is hard to know if this represented a tacit judgment that the play was somehow deficient, or if its narrow textual tradition simply made it less likely to be edited and reproduced, with each subsequent omission from editions making it harder still to reprint, comment on, or even to find.

What, then, did Renaissance readers of *Bacchae* see? A good text or a lacunose one? What did they miss if they missed the lacunae? Or, since it is not clear that the apparent absence of lines was even noticed, what did they get from it, which may be quite different from what we get with our back-filled texts? The lacunae in *Bacchae* appear at moments that, if we understand ourselves to be looking at gaps, seem at the very least semantically freighted. Agave's last line before the break in the stichomythia could be translated as "Is all well put together in every part?" (1300); the last line before the second lacuna, again Agave's, could be translated as "O father, you see how changed I am" (1329). In the context of the play, the first line is part of Agave's recognition that the body she is holding is Pentheus'; the second is the beginning of her lament for him. But as we read them now, they seem to cry out for metatextual extension to the philological and performative labour of reconstructing a body, a text, or a play, only partly put back together and certainly also greatly changed.[13] Renaissance scholars in other contexts did not hesitate to analogise the texts they were laboriously reassembling to mutilated bodies; in his second *Centuries* (c. 1490) Angelo Poliziano offered an extended simile of the text of Cicero's *De natura deorum* that he was stitching together and the dismembered body of Hippolytus, and

12 None of the texts I consulted explicitly note lacunae, although none of them provide full commentaries. Instead they ignore them. The Latin translation in Lucium 1562, which otherwise follows the text of Oporinus 1550, has a different translation for the disturbed lines 1329-30 and omits 1331. Interestingly, the copy of Herwagen 1537 that I consulted at the Beinecke showed pen marks at the ellipsis after 1300.

13 For an effort to read the physical gaps in play manuscripts from a different historical context, that of early modern English playing, see Walker, 2013.

even by then the figure of tattered-texts-as-tattered-bodies was well-worn.[14] In "On Isis and Osiris" (2nd c. CE), Plutarch had interpreted the labours of Isis to recover the scattered pieces of her lover and brother Osiris as an allegory for the search for truth in the world, an interpretation John Milton follows in *Areopagitica* (1644).[15] In the third century CE, in *Strōmata* 13, Clement of Alexandria says that the sects of Greek and barbarian philosophers fragmented Christian truth just as the Bacchants tore apart the limbs of Pentheus, which means Christian truth can be recollected from pagan sources. But to my knowledge Clement's simile is not repeated elsewhere in reference to the text of *Bacchae*, where it would have been so thematically apt, and that itself may be evidence that earlier readers did not see the holes that modern editors think we should.[16]

The story of Pentheus and Agave was well known in the Renaissance; it appears in the *Aeneid* and the *Metamorphoses* as well as in more recondite texts, and in *Metamorphoses* it comes between two very familiar tales, those of Narcissus and of Pyramus and Thisbe (3.511-719). But it seems to have been known as a story rather than as a performance, much less from Euripides' play. In Euripides' play, Agave believes that Pentheus' body is that of a lion she has killed; Ovid's Agave, in contrast, thinks she has killed a boar. But I found no clear references to the detail of the lion in accounts of Pentheus' death from the Renaissance. I also found nothing about Pentheus' cross-dressing, which likewise seems so powerful and strange a part of *Bacchae*. Even allusions that could point to Euripides' play – references to Pentheus seeing two suns and two Thebes, for instance – are more likely to lead back to Vergil, where Dido's nightmares about Aeneas are a pastiche of symptoms of tragic madness, "just as deranged Pentheus sees the ranks of Eumenides, / and a twin sun and two-fold Thebes showing themselves" ("Eumenidum veluti demens videt agmina Pentheus / et solem geminum et duplices se ostendere Thebas", *Aeneid* 4.469-70). Spenser recalls the story of

14 Poliziano 1972, 4.1*r*; see also Greene 1982, 169. Giamatti (1984) does not record this instance but looks at several others in which the body of Hippolytus becomes a model for humanist recovery of torn texts. See also Burrow 2013, 163-71; West 2007; West 2011.

15 Plutarch, "On Isis and Osiris", *Moralia* V; Milton 1991, 263.

16 On Milton's use of Clement, see Leo 2016, 200-1.

Pentheus' death when he likens Agave's madness to the female fury of Adicia, but he does not seem to be getting it from Euripides, since she seems to be accompanied by men: "that madding mother, mongst the rout / Of *Bacchus* Priests her own dear flesh did tear" (*Faerie Queene*, 5.8.47). As little as Euripides' other plays might have been known in Elizabethan England, Euripides' *Bacchae*, it seems, may have been known even less.[17]

But some of what has vanished into these textual and historical gaps might be recoverable, curiously, from ancient accounts of the play in performance. *Bacchae* holds such a central position in the scholarly and performative imagination now in large part because of its stunning *coups de théâtre*. It seems both to approach a ritual ecstasy at the heart of performance that is so easy to fantasise about, and, perhaps more soberly, to invite metatheatrical reflection on, as Ellen Mackay has observed, the way the stage takes revenge on its enemies.[18] There is no performance tradition of *Bacchae* in the Renaissance to speak of, or indeed until the twentieth century.[19] But there is at least one widely known ancient account of *Bacchae* that insists on the impact of its performance. In Plutarch's *Life of Crassus*, Crassus is killed in a skirmish leading an army against the Parthians and his body captured. That night in a theatrical performance at the Parthian capital, Crassus' severed head is brought on as a stand-in for that of Pentheus by the actor portraying Agave. Plutarch includes some lines from *Bacchae* that accompanied this horrifying entrance, making clear that he is thinking of Euripides' play in particular:

> Ἀγαύη φέρομεν ἐξ ὄρεος
> ἔλικα νεότομον ἐπὶ μέλαθρα,
> μακαρίαν θήραν
> (1169-71)

17 This is the argument of Orgel, "Elizabethan *Bacchae*."

18 Mackay 2006, 71, citing Martin Puchner but developing his claims substantially.

19 None of the 222 performances recorded in the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama (APGRD, http://www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk, hosted by the University of Oxford) dates from before the twentieth century. The earliest performance is one sponsored by Gilbert Murray, who edited the play in 1908 along with Euripides' others.

[AGAVE We are carrying from the mountain / A newly cut tendril to the halls, / A blessed hunting.]

and

ΧΟΡΟΣ τίς ἐφόνευσεν;
ΑΓΑΥΗ ἐμὸν τὸ γέρας.
(1179)

[CHORUS Who killed him? // AGAVE Mine was the prize.][20]

"Thus they say was the finale (ἐξόδιον) with which the expedition of Crassus ended, just like a tragedy" (εἰς τοιοῦτό φασιν ἐξόδιον τὴν Κράσσου στρατηγίαν ὥσπερ τραγῳδίαν τελευτῆσαι), concludes Plutarch, perhaps thinking of Crassus' mortifying exit from the stage of history, or perhaps of the parodic satyr play that ended each cycle of tragic dramas. First time as tragedy, we might gloss, next time as farce.

Accounts like this one preserved a sense of the performative force of *Bacchae* as an enacted play, not just as a story or a text.[21] At least one English drama also seems to suggest that the performance of *Bacchae* was emblematic and striking. Philip Massinger's *The Roman Actor* (1626), a relatively late entry in the long tradition of plays that represent acting as potentially murderous, begins with the question:

AESOPUS What doe we acte to day?
LATINUS *Agaves* phrensie
With *Pentheus* bloudie end.
(1629, 1.1.1-2)

It is hard not to imagine that this pointed reference to Pentheus and Agave in the first lines of *The Roman Actor* is pointing at something, but it is not easy to determine exactly what. Does

20 Plutarch, *Life of Crassus*, ch. 33. In the second quotation, Plutarch's Greek is close but not identical to that of modern editions of *Bacchae*, so I use my own translation.

21 Another crucial witness to what is missing from *Bacchae* is the account of the *compositio membrorum* given by the third-century CE rhetorician Apsines, but this does not seem to have been known in the Renaissance; Dodds, 57, 232-34. See also Segal 1999-2000; Perris and Mac Góráin 2019.

the fact that Pentheus and Agave will be acted point towards the tortured theatricality of Euripides' play? A reference to *Bacchae* or some impression of it would neatly foreshadow the thematics and action of *The Roman Actor*. Its first part insistently takes up the (usual) paradoxes of acting and reality, and its titular protagonist offers a spirited defence of playing before being murdered during a performance by the jealous Roman emperor Domitian. The Roman setting of *The Roman Actor* signals decadence and pagan cruelty rather than any attempt at the traction of history (think *Ben Hur*, 1959, or, for that matter, Fellini's *Satyricon*, 1969); Massinger's play is a farrago of recognizable names in fantasy get-up. But perhaps this derivative quality underscores that the gesture here is towards the theatricality and metatheatricality of *Bacchae*: Agave's frenzy and Pentheus' bloody end do not need to fit *The Roman Actor* historically, but emblematically. The titles of some other plays performed by the acting company do not suggest parallels in Greek or Roman drama, and the lethal play that kills the protagonist resembles a Tudor moral drama. These factors all suggest *Bacchae*, whether known directly or filtered through Plutarch's story of it.

Plutarch's account of Crassus' posthumous star turn is among the pieces of evidence that led later philologists to speculate about what is missing from the text of *Bacchae*: a scene in which Agave brings together the torn pieces of Pentheus' body, finally setting with them his head, which she has been holding and lamenting over his body. This seems to have been just the sort of thing Elizabethans and other early modern aficionados of tragedy would have loved – extreme passions, extreme transgressions, all framed by intense expressions of female grief. Indeed, a scene that seems likely to be an imitation of Agave's mourning over Pentheus' body – Theseus' mourning over Hippolytus' body in Seneca's *Phaedra*, where however the action of grief shifts to the male parent – featured in what was among the first, maybe the very first, ancient tragedy publicly staged since the collapse of the Roman Empire, in 1486 by the humanist Pomponius Laetus' colleagues and students in Rome.[22] Seneca's *Phaedra*, or *Hippolytus*, and this scene, remained

22 Segal (1986, 215) observes: "The last scene of the *Phaedra* has a peculiarly complex form of literariness and textuality, for Seneca here 'contami-

powerfully influential across Europe for the next two centuries, and in particular among English playwrights of Shakespeare's age (Burrow 2013, 171). But there is scant trace of such a scene in the *Bacchae* that anyone could have read in the Renaissance. It was not until the nineteenth century that classical philologists proposed a possible source for such a scene among the missing lines of the play, a Christian tragedy from Byzantium (Kirchhoff 1853). And so we return to *Khristos Paskhōn*.

As it is probably less well known to most readers now even than *Bacchae* was to Elizabethan playwrights and other writers, *Khristos Paskhōn* requires some introduction. It is a tragedy, or perhaps what Milton called in *Samson Agonistes* a "Dramatic Poem which is call'd Tragedy", of 2610 lines – significantly longer, then, by fifty percent or more, than ancient tragedies – about Christ's crucifixion and Mary's lamentation over his body written in the elevated idiom of Attic tragedy. But *Khristos Paskhōn* is not exactly a tragedy. It stretches tragic form and echoes tragedy's demanding, highly wrought language because it is a *cento*, a text composed by gathering and reassembling lines from other texts into something new, conforming to the desire that Hannah Arendt attributed to Walter Benjamin of writing a work composed entirely of quotations.[23] *Khristos Paskhōn* is composed almost entirely of lines and passages from Greek tragedies, especially those of Euripides and including some that are no longer extant, as well as Christian and Biblical sources. Some are almost unchanged from their sources; others are altered to a greater or lesser degree to fit their new contexts, and some lines seem to be entirely new – seem, because without a corresponding line in a more ancient text, how would we know? The composition of centos from classical works was a not uncommon literary activity in late antiquity, nor

nates' Euripides' *Hippolytus* with the *Bacchae*". Cruciani (1983) collects early accounts of the performance staged by Laetus in early April 1486, outside the Palazzo della Cancellaria, near or maybe even in the Campo dei Fiori.

23 In Arendt's introduction to Benjamin's *Illuminations* (1968, 4). On Milton's own use of a similar form, the *catena*, see Schwartz 1990. But a catena privileges an original text as a centre of gravity for accumulating commentary, even as it revises the original text. A cento also may preserve themes and pressures without referring them directly to an original.

indeed in early modernity; Homer and Vergil in particular were often cut and pasted into centos.[24] This literary spoliation, like its architectural counterpart, might simply prop up a structure for which earlier technologies had been lost. Often these pagan texts were rearranged to reflect a new Christian message, asserting a Christian overcoming of the pagan past, wresting the spear from Homer's hand, or hinting at an unsuspected universalism, with even pagan sources dragooned unknowingly into evangelising the good news.[25] For modern scholars, cento composition means at very least that *Khristos Paskhōn* preserves pieces of the Greek tragedians that do not otherwise survive, although radically recontextualised. We cannot know for sure that its lines belong to the missing parts of *Bacchae*, although subsequent papyrus discoveries seem to confirm at least some of the speculations of the play's editors since the nineteenth century.[26]

But during the Renaissance *Khristos Paskhōn* was not recognised as a cento or a product of spoliation. It was thought to be an original work dating from the early days of the Christian church, a "true drama", as it calls itself near its conclusion – *alethes drama*, a true play or a true action (2605) – not a collage composed by setting together lines already written, but a thoroughgoing imitation based on deep immersion in both tragedy and Christianity, explicitly calling attention to its double heritage in Jerusalem and Athens:

ἐπείδ' ἀκούσας εὐσεβῶς ποιημάτων
ποιητικῶς νῦν εὐσεβῆ κλύειν θέλεις
πρόσφρων ἄκουε: νῦν τε κατ' Εὐριπίδην
τὸ κοσμοσωτήριον ἐξερῶ πάθος:

24 On *Khristos Paskhōn* as cento and more generally, see Pollman 2017; Alexopoulou 2013; Sticca 1974. Recently, the text of *Khristos Paskhōn* has begun to attract scholarly attention in its own right, for example, Bryant Davies 2017; Pollman 2017; Xanthaki-Karamanou 2022. Pollman 2017 also discusses other late antique and medieval centos. On other Renaissance centos, see Tucker 2009a, 2009b, 2010.

25 The latter is Clement's argument in *Strōmata* 13; see also Pollman 2017.

26 On papyrus fragments that may support a reconstruction from *Christus Patiens*, see Diggle's edition, "Fragmenta", 353, and Xanthaki-Karamanou 2022, App. III, 209-16.

> [Since you have heard poems sacredly, / You want to listen to sacred things poetically / Listen closely – now according to Euripides / I will proclaim the *pathos* [the Passion, but also the suffering] that saves the world.][27]

Khristos Paskhōn circulated in multiple manuscripts dating from the mid-thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries under the name of Gregory of Nazianzus, to whom it was also attributed in the Byzantine encyclopedia, the *Souda* or *Suda*.[28] It was first printed in Rome in 1542 as Του Αγιου Γρηγοριου Ναζανζηνου Του Θεολογου Τραγωδια Χριστος Πασχων / *Sancti Gregori Nazanzeni Theologi Tragoedia, Christus Patiens* by Antonius Bladus, reedited and reprinted in both Louvain and Paris in 1544, and translated into Latin at least three times by 1550 – which is to say that by the end of the sixteenth century it was arguably more prominent a play than *Bacchae*, which had never been published in a single play edition at all and had been translated only twice into Latin, both times with other plays of Euripides.[29] By around 1600, the attribution to Nazianzen had been called into doubt, but not the work's status as an early Christian adaptation of the most admired expression of Greek literary culture.[30] It is now generally assumed to date from the twelfth century.[31] *Khristos Paskhōn* is also a document virtually

27 Brambs ed. (*Christus Patiens* 1885, 1-4); I have modified a translation by Fishbone 2002.

28 Parente, Jr. (1985, 352), citing Tuilier (*La Passion du Christ: Tragedie*, 1969, 75-116). The most frequent alternative to Nazianzen among early modern readers seems to have been Apollinaris of Laodicea, another bishop of the fourth century.

29 Parente 1985, 353-5. Seae also a record of Nazianzen's *fortuna* by Sister Agnes Clare Way, http://catalogustranslationum.org/PDFs/volume02/v02_gregorius.pdf, there paginated as 43-192, cited by Parente as Sister Agnes Clare Way in P. O. Kristeller and F. Edward Cranz, eds., *Catalogus Translationum et Commentariorum: Medieval and Renaissance Latin Translations and Commentaries*, 2 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 1971): 106-111.

30 Leo summarizes the state of the debate (2016, 206n11).

31 Wittreich (2002) claims that the attribution to Nazianzen was really only current among those in Grotius' circle and fellow travelers like Milton (195), but Parente (1985) argues that Nazianzen was still often taken to be the author through the seventeenth century, even if sometimes tendentiously (355). Sticca (1974, 26) asserts that attribution was more or less evenly split

unique in kind.[32] There are several centos from late antiquity, but nothing like *Khristos Paskhōn* in date (if the later date is correct), form, length, complexity, or choice of source texts in tragedy.

The early modern reception of *Khristos Paskhōn*, not surprisingly, seems to have been confined to learned circles rather than popular ones. But for scholars and scholarly playwrights seeking to adapt Greek tragedy and Christian history to each other, *Khristos Paskhōn* was bracing evidence that Christian tragedy was not only possible but ancient and orthodox. It offered a counterexample to the quasi-Aristotelian dicta about tragedy that had been crystallising over the course of the sixteenth century and that seemed to make such a synthesis impossible. In the Renaissance, when *Bacchae* seems perplexingly invisible, humanists like Hugo Grotius and John Milton were enthusiastically poring over *Khristos Paskhōn* as a possible model for a Christian tragedy in the authentic, strenuous style of the great Greek tragedians.[33] Grotius cited it as an inspiration for his 1608 Latin play, which was also entitled *Christus Patiens*; in the preface to *Samson Agonistes* printed in 1671, Milton used it to defend the appropriateness of Biblical tragedy by pointing out that "Gregory Nazianzen, a Father of the Church, thought it not unbeseeming the sanctity of his person to write a tragedy, which he entitled, *Christ Suffering*."[34] *Khristos Paskhōn* did not remotely adhere to unities of time or place (although this was something Grotius tried to correct in his tragedy of the Passion) but sprawled

through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, while maintaining the minority position for Nazianzen's authorship. André Tuilier, the editor of the most recent edition (*La Passion du Christ: Tragedie*, 1969), also continues to defend the attribution to Nazianzen; aside from the edition, see Tuilier 1997. Contra, see Pollman 2017; Follieri 2009.

32 Sticca notes, "It is the *opinio communis* of scholars that the *Christos Paschon* represents the only authentic dramatic expression of the Byzantine religious theater" (1974, 26), although he takes the minority position of fourth-century composition.

33 On anxiety about the possibility of Christianizing Greek tragedy, including *Christus Patiens*, see Leo 2016.

34 Grotius 1626; Milton, *Samson Agonistes* in Orgel and Goldberg 1991, 671. On Grotius' use of *Khristos Paskhōn*, Waller 2019. A special issue of *Milton Quarterly* 36 (2002) included a new translation of *Khristos Paskhōn* by Fishbone, 130-92; as well Wittreich's overview of Milton's relation to it, 193-8.

across multiple characters and settings. Like the divine comedy it represented, it accommodated a happy ending to its tragic events; not coincidentally, some of the plays identified as Euripides' were also used to justify tragicomic outcomes (Pollard 2017, 180). But it was obviously knit from the same stuff as the Greek tragedies that Aristotle knew and that Renaissance readers admired, even if those readers did not recognise how literally and materially this was true.

A lot of *Khristos Paskhōn* might charitably be described as tragic noise: not very specific predictions of impending disasters or descriptions of those that have happened offstage, the usual expressions of grief and dismay. It is of course easier to adapt general lamentations than particular descriptions from one plot to another. Passages from *Bacchae* are echoed in over three hundred lines throughout *Khristos Paskhōn* – over ten percent of the text, in other words – and they often feel much more particular than others – a mother mourning her son, an unrecognised divinity.[35] Sometimes the citations are startlingly incongruous: a Theologian character who sometimes serves as narrator or interpreter as in Western European medieval drama talks of his conversion using lines that recall Medea's murder of Pelias by tricking him into being dismembered and boiled in a cauldron (*KP* 932-40); and the chorus of women waiting in the garden to visit Christ's tomb echo the Bacchae sleeping out on the mountain celebrating the ecstasy of Dionysus (*KP* 1832ff.; *Bacch.* 673-84). The parts that seem to supplement *Bacchae*'s missing pieces are taken mostly from Mary's lament over the crucified and disfigured body of Jesus, some smug vaunting of the Theologian over the punishments coming to those who crucified him, and Christ's assertion of divine being with human birth.

But this last instance exemplifies what is perhaps most striking about *Khristos Paskhōn*: its double vision of pagan and Christian tragedy, forcing their differences and similarities into jarring, illuminating proximity. Christ is διφυής, "double-natured" or "twice-born" ("διφυοῦς", *KP* 1795) like Dionysos in *Bacchae*. Mary

35 I am following Brambs' attributions of lines (*Christus Patiens* 1885, 15-17), and excluding around forty lines that may be missing from the received text of *Bacchae*.

is a Semele (*KP* 1550-54; cf. *Bacch.* 27-30). Adam coincides with Kadmos as a "sowe[r] of the earth-born crop" (*KP* 193; *Bacch.* 257) and "our first sower" (*KP* 879; *Med.* 1224). *Khristos Paskhōn* features multiple *angeloi* or messengers, but they shift from a talkative, harried Messenger of Greek tragedy (*KP* 130-266, 363-418, 639-81) to the sublimely laconic Angel of the Bible (*KP* 2060ff.; Matthew 28:5-7 etc.).[36] There is a similar play on words where the vocative *daimōn* bends from its ancient Greek use to address someone behaving strangely towards a Christian sense of *demon* (*KP* 274; *Rhes.* 854). Christ's part is disorientingly divided between suffering Pentheus and triumphant Dionysus, and also defined in opposition to both of them.[37]

There is one dazzlingly vertiginous moment when a Messenger (not in this case an angelic one) tells the High Priests "I would rather sacrifice to him than grow angry and kick against the pricks (*pros kentra laktizoimi*), a mortal against a god" (*KP* 2268-9). The lines are taken from *Bacchae* 794-5, when Dionysus, acting as his own priest, admonishes Pentheus how the king should behave towards the new god. But they pass through the Book of Acts as well, where they are the words spoken by the risen Christ to the unconverted Paul, another god warning another mortal: "Why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the pricks" (*pros kentra laktizein*, Acts 9:5, 26:14).[38] When *Khristos Paskhōn* borrows it back from Euripides, also in the service of Christ, this short phrase – a common enough idiom, surely,[39] but just as surely distinctly recognisable in these crucial occurrences – becomes charged with the distinct energies of each of these powerful contexts: Dionysus to Pentheus, Christ to Paul, the convinced Messenger to the erring, unrepentant Priests.

36 Fishbone's translation recognizes this shift by calling earlier figures *Messenger* and the later one *Angel*, but the Greek text uses the same speech prefix.

37 Xanthaki-Karamanou, *'Dionysiac' Dialogues*, 114-91, shows how thoroughly *Khristos Paskhōn* develops particularly Euripidean themes, so that we read Euripides in its Christianity and Christianity through its Euripides.

38 Leo (2016, 193-5) discusses the several passages in the New Testament widely recognised in the Renaissance as quotations from pagan Greek literature, but this is not among the ones canonically identified.

39 Erasmus, for instance, includes it in 1575, 139.

Still further reflexively, the word translated "pricks" or "goads", *kentra*, puns etymologically on the Greek word for cento, *kentrōn*.[40] *Khristos Paskhōn*, at least, warns its reader not to protest against it as cento, a mortal confronting a text that seems to maintain its divine force even in dismemberment and transformation.

In sum: the Renaissance *Bacchae* is missing some of the features we associate most strongly with *Bacchae* now, in particular its investment in extreme emotional or psychic states, its enactments of female grief, and its exploration of a powerful blend of ritual abandon and metatheatrical self-awareness (although there are still plenty of those even in the Renaissance *Bacchae*). Many of these features appealed mightily to early modern readers in other contexts, and we might imagine that had these been more present, a Renaissance *Bacchae* might have been more culturally prominent. As it was, *Bacchae* in its Renaissance form seems to have been nearly unknown, and perhaps unusable as a whole.[41] But many of its elements were eminently and demonstrably crucial, unrecognised, in overlapping cultural fields: performance, classical scholarship, the history of emotions and their representation, religious expression. Taken together, *Bacchae* and *Khristos Paskhōn* exemplify the particular Renaissance practice of reception as recontextualization, or spoliation: a reuse of pieces that does not clearly acknowledge their sources except to signal their strangeness to their new configuration, and that preserves their strangeness while accommodating them. In fact, some of *Bacchae*'s most ecstatic passions reached the Renaissance as separable elements despoiled from their original context but retaining their impact, in the surprising form of a bookish Byzantine cento, from which readers of the Renaissance divined – through *divinatio*, unpredictable philological sympathy – an astonishingly Euripidean spirit in the guise of the celebration of the mourning of Christ.

40 Alexopoulou 2103, 125; Liddell-Scott, *s.v.* κέντρων, is something that has been scarred by a goad or a punch, κέντρον, and thus figuratively a patched text that has been stitched together from scraps.

41 But on the Renaissance propensity to use classical tragedies as collections of potential excerpts, see Burrow 2013, 163-71.

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