

BACCHAE 773-4 AND MIMNERMUS FR. 1

The messenger who reports the miracles from the mountains in Euripides' *Bacchae* (677-774) concludes with an injunction to Pentheus that he accept this god into the city (769-74):

τὸν δαίμον' οὖν τόνδ' ὅστις ἔστ', ὦ δέσποτα,
δέχου πόλει τῇδ' ὥς τά τ' ἄλλ' ἔστιν μέγας,
κάκείνῳ φασιν αὐτόν, ὡς ἐγὼ κλύω,
τὴν παυσίλυπον ἄμπελον δοῦναι βροτοῖς.
οἶνου δὲ μηκέτ' ὄντος οὐκ ἔστιν Κύπρις
οὐδ' ἄλλο τερπνὸν οὐδὲν ἀνθρώποις ἔτι.¹

The messenger's gnomic two-line reflection is emphatic because of its prominent position, the last lines of the impressive description of the Maenads' powers. It is striking also because of its echo, hitherto unobserved, of Mimnermus fr. 1.

Mimnermus was well known in antiquity;² and none of his verses was better known, it seems, than the opening of one poem (fr. 1 West 1-2):³

τίς δὲ βίος, τί δὲ τερπνὸν ἄτερ χρυσῆς Ἀφροδίτης;
τεθναίην, ὅτε μοι μηκέτι ταῦτα μέλοι.

These opening lines were alluded to by Horace,⁴ censured by Plutarch for their licence,⁵ and quoted in the *paroemiographi graeci*.⁶ In the passage from the *Bacchae*, Euripides seems to have echoed these specific lines, not some common proverb. If there was such a proverb, it left no mark on extant Greek writings; while the statement in Mimnermus might reflect common sentiment, it is he who gave the sentiment expression, at least in literature. The citation in the *paroemiographi* reads: *Μιμνέρμου ἡ γνώμη*.

The points of contact between the lines of Mimnermus and the passage in the *Bacchae*, although not overwhelming, are clear.

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οἶνου δὲ μηκέτ' ὄντος οὐκ ἔστιν Κύπρις.
οὐδ' ἄλλο τερπνὸν οὐδὲν ἀνθρώποις ἔτι.⁷

In each case the speaker establishes a hierarchy of pleasures. In Mimnermus the speaker rhetorically asks what life there is, what pleasure, without love; i.e. love makes possible life and pleasure. The messenger in the *Bacchae* proclaims that without wine there is no longer love or any other pleasure for men; i.e. wine makes love and other pleasures possible. The nature and structure of the two statements are, of course, different. The first is posed as a rhetorical question, a question immediately given a personal response in the pentameter; the second is expressed as a general

¹ The text cited is that of J. Roux, ed., *Euripide: Les Bacchantes* i (Paris, 1970).

² Cf. the testimonia collected by M. L. West, ed., *Iambi et Elegi Graeci*, ii (Oxford, 1972), pp. 81-2.

³ The poem, or at least ten lines of it, is preserved in Stob. 4.20.16.

⁴ *Ep.* 1.6.65f.

⁵ *De virt. mor.* 445F.

⁶ *Corpus Paroemiographorum Graecorum*, edd. E. v. Leutsch and F. G. Schneidewin ii (Göttingen, 1851), 678.17.

⁷ It should be noted that the collocation of Κύπρις or Ἀφροδίτη and τερπνός is very rare indeed. A survey (employing the Ibycus program on the TLG database) of the major writers of the archaic and classical periods reveals a few examples of τέρπω/τέρπομαι in conjunction with Ἀφροδίτη or Κύπρις, but virtually none of the adjective τερπνός and either Κύπρις or Ἀφροδίτη, and only one, it seems, in a remotely comparable context, Euripides, *Heracl.* 893ff. Perhaps also the choice of μηκέτι, admittedly a common word, in 773 of the messenger's speech was influenced by its appearance in the second line of Mimnermus' poem.

truth, applying to all (ἀνθρώποις). But these differences are unsurprising considering the circumstances and genres involved. Mimnermus was composing an elegy, where a personal voice was commonplace. The messenger was a character in a drama; and although personal statements were permitted by even such minor characters,⁸ at the end of this speech, which is intended to demonstrate to Pentheus his mistaken judgment about the bacchants, the gnomic, universal statement is more effective.

The reason for the echo of Mimnermus is clear. The messenger is trying to persuade Pentheus to abandon his plans of routing the Maenads but rather to honour this new god, and Euripides is using him as a foil for the intransigent and doomed Pentheus. Mimnermus' dictum was well known: love makes life and pleasure possible. The messenger's conclusion builds on that with a type of *a fortiori* argument: without wine, i.e. Dionysus, love and any other pleasure are impossible. By echoing the verse from Mimnermus and having it as the background, the force of the concluding gnome is enhanced. Thus both its position at the end of the speech and its echo of Mimnermus highlight the gnome's import and underscore Pentheus' mistaken and ruinous opposition to the god.

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⁸ See, e.g., the end of the second messenger's speech in this very play (1150–2).

TWO NOTES ON EURIPIDES

(a) The Avenging Spirit at *Medea* 1260

ἀλλά νιν, ὦ φάος διογενές, κάτειρ-
γε κατάπαυσον ἔξελ' οἴκων τάλαι-
ναν φονίαν τ' Ἐρινὺν ἥν' ἄλαστόρων†.

1260

This is the OCT text of J. Diggle (reprinted with corrections 1987). Medea, having finally resolved to murder her children, has left the stage to do so. The chorus implores her grandsire, the Sun, to stop her. What will happen next? Infanticide? Escape? Divine intervention? The fraught suspense experienced by the original audience is disagreeably prolonged for the modern reader by the textual problems to which he must find at least a provisional solution if he is to make any sense of what is being said. The difficulty here at least can be resolved by the simplest of remedies, deletion – of two obeli, an apostrophe and a smooth breathing.

Despite the explicit and contrary view of the scholia (of B and V), Erinys must here mean the vengeful Medea herself, because it is she alone who threatens the lives of the children. They, poor innocents, have done nothing to attract the attentions of an authentic demon. At 1333 Jason says to Medea that the gods have directed her ἄλάστωρ against him. So D. L. Page, *Euripides Medea* (Oxford, 1952), p. 169 recommends us to 'read Ἐρινὺν ὑπαλάστορον "subject to [the power of] an ἄλάστωρ"; for this force of ὑπό in compound adjectives cf. ὑπόσπονδος ὑποτελής ὑπόνοσος ὑποινος.' Now Medea the human being (cf. 1257) can intelligibly be said to be at the mercy of an avenging spirit, that of Absyrtus for example. Medea as Erinys is a different matter, especially as Euripides apparently equates avenging spirits with Erinyes at 1059, where Medea swears μὰ τοὺς παρ' Αἰδηι νεπτέρους ἄλαστόρας. So if, at 1258–60, Medea is the Erinys within, it is she who has put *the house* at the mercy of an avenging spirit – herself. Read ἔξελ' οἴκων ... Ἐρινὺν ὑπαλαστόρων.