

Waiting to Become: A Deleuzian Rebuttal
Leslie Katz
for *The Bacchae*
directed by Daniel Brooks
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Dionysus warns: “if, by rage and force of arms, the citizens/of Thebes drive the Bacchae from the mountain,/then I lead the army of my Maenads into war.” There is a strong sense that Bacchic initiation—which includes training in dances and ululation, as well as the art of the thyrsus (which, in one translation, Dionysus refers to as the “ivy weapon”)—conceals a military aim.

But when war *does* break out, rather than a war of bows and spears, it will be a psychedelic, trippy kind of war, in which women suckle wolf-cubs at their breast and, hurling javelins of ivy, force men to turn tail and flee. The men learn the pointlessness of responding to the onslaught with conventional arms (“[Their] pointed missiles did not draw blood”). Caught unprepared, they are unable to invent *ex nihil* a weapon capable of counteracting this outrageously new species of fighting.

Indicative of this conservative unreadiness, Pentheus is maddeningly old-fashioned in his views of what women can do. To his mind, they’re promiscuous creatures who, emancipated from housework, head to the hills for wild sex. Dionysus persuades him to disguise himself so he can see the Bacchic maidens for himself.

Dressed as a woman and raising the thyrsus, Pentheus says sarcastically: “Tell me, could I lift Cithaeron now-- /Bacchae, cliffs, all of it; could I?” Referring to the weird events the messenger has just reported, he asks caustically “Will I need levers, or shall I tear the cliffs up with my hands and put them on my shoulders?” Mincing in his dress, he seems to give the lie to the messenger’s report: how absurd it is to believe that women—the weaker sex—could ever harness technological strength, not to mention reorder the earth with their bodies, as men do with machines.

To design new machines, however, humans must develop a symbiosis with mechanical formations, must learn—as the Bacchae have learned through Dionysian training—to become machines themselves.

The transformation of the Maenads on the mountain from figures in a pastoral landscape to the instrument of Pentheus’s demise presents a case in point. One moment the women are sitting in the shade, occupied with playing quiet games. The messenger’s simile, “like fillies when their harnesses are taken off,” suggests the notion of an aggregate unhitched, spied in a moment of waiting to become, to reassemble in the form of a new instrumentality. The next moment—at the god’s command—they fly “like darting doves, through the glade,/over the boiling stream, over the jagged stones.”

Deleuze and Guattari might say that the women go from “becoming-bird” to “becoming-machine.” As they reach the tree in which Pentheus is perched, something paranormal happens. “How many hands were on that tree!/ They wrenched it from the ground.” While the women come together in this unearthly swarm that seems, in a hallucinatory way, to assume the form of a mechanical lever, Pentheus’s body is dragged to earth and dismantled. “Agave took him by the arm... under the elbow, then she planted/ a foot against his ribs and tore his arm off.” The messenger attributes her power to the god’s intervention, but what is most uncanny is the way that Pentheus’s body reveals its own resemblance to non-organic matter, broken down into parts that seem, once they have been scattered, to defy reassemblage.

“On Kant’s model, an ‘organized’ being is one in which each part has been trained and disciplined to exist for the sake of others, so that all the interacting parts exist for the sake of the whole.”* What this model fails to acknowledge is the place where unities come undone, revealing temporary assemblages, always on the verge of becoming something new.

The Chorus fail to foresee this immanent truth as well: the way in which their unity is merely a transient connection, assembled for the god's convenience, and whose final, bewildered dissolution is one of the play's most troubling and enigmatic features.

*Keith Ansell Pearson, "Viroid Life," in *Deleuze and Philosophy*, ed. Keith Ansell Pearson