A NOTE ON EURIPIDES' BACCHAE 39-42

In this portion of the prologue, Dionysus, after describing the course of his journey (13-22), says that he first made Thebes rise up and shout (23-25), since (ἐπεί) his mother's sisters denied that he was a god (26-31); wherefore (τοι νάρ) he drove them and the other women in a bacchic frenzy (παράχιστον ξέφλαιν) to the hills (32-38).

δεὶ γάρ πόλιν τὴν ἐκμαθεῖν, καί μὴ θέλει,
ἀτέλεστον οὕσον τῶν ἔμοι βασιλεύσαντων,
Συμπλήρωσε τοι μητρὸς ἀπολογήσασθαι μ' ὑπὲρ
φανέντα θυτησὶς δαίμον' ὑπὲρ 

It is common to take the participial phrase at 40 as an object clause dependent on ἐκμαθεῖν, despite the obvious objection that the resulting point hardly needs to be made: the city already knows that it does not celebrate the rites of Bacchos. What it does not know, and apparently needs to learn, is that Dionysus is in fact a god.

The participial phrase can be taken as the object clause of ἐκμαθεῖν if the γάρ at 39 is strictly causal, supplying the immediate ground of the preceding action. The sense would be: I, Dionysus, drove these women into the hills because they must learn that they do not celebrate my rites. But the γάρ does not function in this narrow manner. The reason for Dionysus' action (of driving the women to the hills), as Dionysus himself has clearly stated, is simply that the city has denied his divinity (26-31), and not the fact that they must learn that they did so. Still less can it be said that the action itself is caused by the additional fact (introduced by a correlative τι in 41) that Dionysus is now bound (δεῖ) to defend his mother (ἀπολογήσασθαι) by appearing to mortals as a god (φανέντα θυτησὶς δαίμον'); for this does not give the reason why they were driven mad, but simply the reason why Dionysus chose to act.

The γάρ at 39 must therefore be taken more loosely, as 39-42 sums up the reasoning of the entire passage. Dionysus says that he drove the women mad because (ἐπεί) they denied his divinity (23-38). He now adds that he did all this because (γάρ) it is necessary (δεῖ) that the city thoroughly learn (ἐκμαθεῖν), even if it does not wish to do so (καί μὴ θέλει); and also (τι) because (γάρ) he is bound (δεῖ) to defend his mother (ἀπολογήσασθαι). In this case, however, ἀτέλεστον οὕσον cannot easily be the object of ἐκμαθεῖν. For it is still extremely weak, and almost contradictory, if Dionysus is made to say: 'I drove them mad because they denied my divinity—and I chose to do all this because they must thoroughly learn that they do not celebrate my rites'.

Now, φανέντα θυτησὶς δαίμον' (agreeing with μ') clearly explains ἀπολογήσασθαι. The epiphany is the apologia. Dionysus defends his mother not with a speech, but through an epiphany that answers precisely the denial of her sisters'. The parallel ἀτέλεστον οὕσον (agreeing with πόλιν) may also be taken circumstantially, offering an explanation of ἐκμαθεῖν:

the city must thoroughly learn, as it is now (οὗσαν) without his rites"). The passage will then run as follows: Dionysus says that he drove the city wild (23-25) because they had denied that he was a god (26-31); this is why he drove them to the hills (32-38). And he says, in summary, that he did all this because it is necessary that the city thoroughly learn (ἐκ-μαθέω), even if it does not wish to do so (χεῖ μὴ ἔλεε)—for the city is now (οὗσαν) without his rites—and also (τε) because he is bound to offer a defense of his mother, by appearing as the god she bore to Zeus").

This gives us precisely the sense required. Dionysus wants to be recognized as a god, and to this end he has traveled from Asia to Greece establishing his rites (13-22). In Thebes, however, his own birthplace, his own mother's sisters have denied that he was born of Zeus (26-31). It is just because of this denial that he has driven the Thebans mad (23-25, 32-38). He now says, in 39-42, that he did all this because (γὰρ) it is necessary (a) that the city fully learn—not that it has denied him (for clearly, what the city needs to learn is not that it has denied him, but that Dionysus is a god"), but again, because it has denied him—even if it does not wish to do so; and also (b) because he is bound (δεῖ) to offer an apologia suae matris that will consist not in words, but in that very epiphany through which he will prove (against the denial of her sisters) that he is indeed the god, Dionysus, born of Zeus (γενέναι θνητοὶ δαίμονι δι᾽ αὐτῆς Δίαν).

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2) This is obviously the point of 23-38 (see the paraphrase in the text above). It is also clear from 13-22, see esp. 21-22: κινεῖ ἀφοβίζοντα...ἐν ἔμφον δαίμονι βροτοῖς. Cp. 242-47, 517-18, 775-77, 857-61, 974-76, 1297-1302, 1340-45. For the importance of this topic for the drama as a whole, see H. Yunis, A New Creed: Fundamental Religious Beliefs in the Athenian Polis and Euripidean Drama (Hypomnemata 91; Göttingen 1968), 77-81; also H.S. Versnel, Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion I: Ter Unus. Isis, Dionysos, Hermes. Three Studies in Hemontheism (Leiden 1990), 158-72; and cp. n. 8 infra.

3) This is stressed by the A-B-A structure of 23-38, which first offers the fact (23-25)—then the reason for it (ἐνεί; 26-31)—and then repeats the original fact (τοκήρ; 32-38). The unity of the passage would be destroyed by adding on a new reason for the action.

4) Oranje (35 n. 87) says that "it does not matter to Dionysus that Thebes still has to learn his rites, but it does that Thebes shall understand to the bitter end (ἐκ-) that she has not been initiated into his rites". This strong formulation avoids
some of the triviality of the view under discussion. But in order to achieve this end, Orange must bury the significance of the whole of v. 40, while placing an enormous burden upon the prefix ἐκ- that is not semantically necessary (for ἐκ- having the more general sense of ‘thoroughly’, and so serving only to intensify the ἀσθ., see R. Renzhan, Studies in Greek Texts [Göttingen 1976], 24 ff.; also n. 7) infra), and which is therefore difficult to justify since nothing in the preceding lines has prepared us for the notion that Dionysus is especially concerned that the city learn to this bitter end. Nor is this notion picked up again subsequently and explained; contrast n. 8) infra. We are never told why Dionysus, at this stage of the play (cp. Dodds ad v. 52), should make this threatening prediction, and such foreshadowing is difficult to square with the fact that Pentheus is given several opportunities to repent (Yunis, 79 f.; Versnel, 165 f.), and so must himself bear at least some responsibility for his own disaster (cp. 1120 f. τὰς ἔμαθες ἀμφισβήτησι; also Versnel, 170 ff.). Orange’s view would be more attractive if it were syntactically required that the participle clause be taken as the object of ἐκμαθήσας. But this also is not the case; see n. 7) infra.

5) Cp. 42 (φανέρα θυετοὺς δαίμονες ἢν τίκτες Δί) with 27 (Δίκωνος οὖν δραθεὶς ἐκράνει Δίς).

6) Rijksbaron, 11 f., realizes that the participles of 40 and 42 (ἀπέλεγον ἀδερφόν and φανέρα) are likely to be syntactically parallel, but thinks that the τέ of 41 links both of these two participles as object clauses of ἐκμαθήσας, while ἀπολογήσασθαί is simply an infinitive of purpose dependent upon φανέρα. This produces the very awkward construction such that ποιά is both subject and object of ἐκμαθήσας in vv. 39-40, but only its subject in vv. 41-42, where a new accusative object (μᾶς) is suddenly introduced. Besides, the neat and simple arrangement of clauses: (39) δίς + acc. + inf., (40) pple. agreeing with the previous accusative, (41, joined by τέ to the preceding lines) inf. + acc., (42) pple. agreeing with the previous accusative, shows that we are probably dealing simply with two parallel constructions. As such, the τέ in 41 can only join the two infinitives of 41 and 39, each of which is thus dependent upon the initial δίς, and each of which is governed by its own subject accusative.

7) This interpretation would seem to have usage on its side. ἐκμαθήσας is commonly used with a simple accusative, or with an object clause introduced by ὡς (Soph. Phil 71), ἐὰ (Eur. And. 715 f., 1050 f.; Soph. El. 1223; Aesch. PV 816 f.) or τί (Eur. Ion 206; Phoen. 863 f.; Soph. OT 1439, 1443; OC 114 f.). But unlike the simple μαθέναι (cp. Es. 1113 κακοῖς γὰρ ἐγώ ἀλλάξεις ἐμφάνισαν), ἐκμαθήσας never, so far as I am aware, appears in tragedy with a participial object clause. Nor is it used absolutely “πρὸ διαφημήσαι αὐτοῖς παιδευτήσαι”, as P. Elmsley, Euripides’ Bacchae (Lipsiae 1822) suggests ad loc. On the other hand, the word is occasionally used very loosely, without any stated object, where the sense must be determined from the general context: see OT 116-17; ὡς ἥγγεσι τοῖς ἠμιπάθετοι ὁδοῖς/καταδί τοὺς τις ἐκμαθήσας ἐχρῆσαι’ ὅν, 576: ἐκμαθήσας’ ἢ γὰρ δὴ φονεῖς ἀλώσθωμεν, 634-35: ἦσα δ’ ἢν σῖν/ πρὸς τὸν παρόντα ἐκμαθήθει, ἐ’ ἐλπίδα.

8) Cp. n. 2) supra. The understood object of ἐκμαθήσει, then, is not τὰ ἐμαθέσασα Ἐλμσάις (Elmsley), Dionysus, who is the speaker of vv. 39-42, twice more uses forms of μαθά- in a similar context, where again it is the recognition that Dionysus is a god that is at issue: see 490 σ’ ἐμαθαῖς γε κακῶσθαι’ ἢς τὸν θεόν (cp. 480, ἐμαθαῖς, also in the mouth of Dionysus); and especially 1340-45 Δι. ταύτ’ οὔχι θυντοῦ πατρὸς ἐκθέμενος λέγω/Δίκωνος, ἀλλὰ ἔγος... ε’ δὴ σωφρονίσει/ἐγνώθε’ δς’ οὐκ ἠθέλετε, τὸν Δίδ γόνων/εδαχομεν’ ὅποι’,... /Κα. Δίκωνος, λοιπόν ἀρ’ ἡμικράνειαν. /Δι. δ’ ἐμαθαί’ ὣμοι, οὐ τ’ ἀρνοῦτ’ οὐκ ἠθέλετε. The only other occasion on which Dionysus
uses some form of this word (637 πρῶτα τοὺς λόγους μάθε) is obviously of a different order.

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