

5. Echoes of the Formula “Let the Profane Shut the Doors” (*OF* 1) in two passages by Euripides

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1. Introduction

There are many sources which transmit or allude to a certain hexametrical formula that exists in two variants (*OF* 1):¹

a) φθέγξομαι οἷς θέμις ἐστί· θύρας δ' ἐπίθεσθε βέβηλοι.

I shall speak to those allowed: let the profane shut the doors.

b) ἀείσω ξυνετοῖσι· θύρας δ' ἐπίθεσθε βέβηλοι.

I shall sing for those in the know: let the profane shut the doors.

The persistence of the formula has proved considerable, for we find instances of it dating from possibly the sixth century BC up to Byzantine times. Its meaning, however, has not remained unchanged. The formula came up in the realm of mystery religion with the aim of preventing the uninitiated from watching and hearing certain rituals. If we take the expression “shut the doors” in its literal sense, it could refer to some particular outdoor rites which only the initiated were allowed to watch, requiring all others to shut their house doors and continue to ignore the details of the ritual.²

Given that Orphism and Pythagoreanism are based on writings, there was a tendency to include the formula at the start of their sacred texts. In this case, the expression “shut the doors” takes on a metaphorical meaning, that is, it warns the uninitiated so that they stop reading any further, because, lacking the knowledge acquired by means of the initiation, they cannot understand the doctrines therein revealed. Even though the sacred text could circulate freely, its recipients would only be the faithful, the sole persons capable of understanding it. Besides, the formula doubles as a ‘seal’ (σφραγίς) which permits to identify Orphic-Pythagorean writings as such.

1 About the formula, its variants and its survival, cf. Bernabé (1996) with earlier bibliography.

2 West (1983: 82–83) and Bernabé (1996: 17) interpret it that way.

Concurrently, the formula is also used figuratively in poetry, philosophy and medicine.³ These texts have nothing to do with any religious beliefs, but, as in the case of the mystery cults, they are used in restricted circles where specific knowledge rules. Those who have that knowledge must also be endowed with certain moral characteristics and it is understood that their activities stem from the gods.

Lastly, having lost all linkage to its original meaning, the formula appears finally, as a topic, at the start of some technical writings that bear no relation whatsoever to religion or to any kind of moral attitude.⁴

2. The Euripidean passages: fr. 648 Kannicht of *Protesilaus* and vv. 471–474 of *Bacchae*

The texts where this formula seems to be reflected are two:

A) fr. 648 Kannicht of *Protesilaus*:⁵

οὐ γάρ θεῖμς βέβηλον ἄπτεσθαι δόμων.

Because the profane is not allowed to place his foot on the dwellings.

No solid evidence has been found to ascertain the particular moment in the tragedy to which fr. 648 could correspond. However, some hypotheses exist: either the fragment could correspond to the moment where the servant tells Acastus that he had not been allowed to enter Laodamia's bedroom and that he thought he saw her with a lover, or, conversely, this verse was uttered by Hermes, who would stand guard at the bedroom's door while husband and wife gathered privately.⁶

In none of the two instances would the use of the formula have anything to do with the context of celebration and mystic texts in which it was generated. At first sight, however, it would seem odd to find the term βέβηλος, 'profane' to designate either the servant intending to enter the bedroom or whomever was trying to interrupt the couple's reunion. We must take into account, though, that several sources find something Dionysiac in the fact that Laodamia is so devoted to her husband's image: Hyginus states that the heroine concealed her worship of Protesilaus' image by pretending she

3 Cf. for instance, Pi. O. 2.83–85, Pl. *Smp.* 218b, Hp. *Lex* 5 [8.15 Heiberg].

4 Cf. for instance, D. H. *Comp.* 6.25.5 [176. 2 Ajuac-Lebel], Aristid. *Or.* 3.50 [308. 15 Behr], Gal. *De usu part.* 12.6 [II 196. 5 Helmreich], Gal. *De simpl. med. temper.* 12.2 Kuhn, Gaudent. *Harm.* p. 327.3 Jan.

5 About the myth of Protesilaus and the tragedy Euripides devotes to him, cf. Mayer (1885); Buonamici (1902); Herzog-Hauser (1937); Séchan (1953); Jouan (1966: 317–336); Oranje (1980); Ruiz de Elvira (1991); Jouan – Van Looy (2000: 567–589).

6 The first hypothesis belongs to Jouan – Van Looy (2000: 578), the second to Mayer (1885: 115).

was worshipping Bacchus, Statius tells us that she transformed herself into a maenad, whereas Philostratus describes us a garland-crowned Laodamia celebrating Bacchic rites.⁷

If we center on Hyginus’ version, which seems closest to the one Euripides staged, in *Protesilaus* Laodamia would have concealed her true devotion under the guise of a Dionysiac cult and the offerings the servant carries were probably meant for that supposed celebration. Therefore, when he tries to enter the bedroom, he is sent away and called profane. If that was the case, the use of an adaptation of the formula would make more sense and would be related to the mystery sphere.

B) *Bacchae* vv. 471–474.

Πε. τὰ δ’ ὄργι’ ἐστὶ τίν’ ιδέαν ἔχοντά σοι;

Δι. ἄρρητ’ ἀβακχεύτοισιν εἰδέναι βροτῶν.

Πε. ἔχει δ’ ὄνησιν τοῖσι θύουσιν τίνα;

Δι. οὐ θέμις ἀκοῦσαί σ’, ἔστι δ’ ἄξι’ εἰδέναι.

Pe: And those rites of yours, what kind are they?

Di: That knowledge is forbidden to mortals uninitiated in the bacchic mysteries.

Pe: And in what do they profit those taking part in the sacrifices?

Di: It is not licit that you hear it, but they are worthy of knowing.

This passage corresponds to the moment when Pentheus questions Dionysus to know about those rituals which the women of the land are taking part in, becoming bacchae. No doubt, this is a reflection of the formula in a Dionysiac context.

In these Euripidean texts, some echoes of the formula may be ascertained in the first variant (OF 1a). The key words in these texts are θέμις, βέβηλος and ἀβάκχευτος, which we will analyse now.

3. A religious prohibition (οὐ θέμις)

In both Euripides passages we find the expression οὐ θέμις, which indicates that both are reworkings of the first variant of the formula, where the term θέμις appears. The formula uses an affirmative expression: “I shall speak to those allowed”, while the Euripidean version expresses the same idea from an opposite point of view, using a negation: “it is not allowed” to the profane. Therefore, while in the formula οἷς θέμις ἐστὶ it refers to the initiated, in the texts of the tragedian οὐ θέμις means the uninitiated, the ‘profane’.

The term θέμις belongs generally in the realm of religious language, because it refers to that which is licit under religious or divine law and it is not an imposition by humans or civic legislation. We may stress that the expression οὐ θέμις also appears in an Orphic inscription (OF 625), dated around

7 Hyg. *Fab.* 104; Statius *Silv.* 3.5.49; Philostr. *Iun. Im.* 2.9.6.

the middle of the fifth century BC, which prohibits the ‘profane’ to be buried beside the initiated, so he cannot contaminate them with his impurity.

In the *Bacchae* passage a certain redundancy appears: οὐ θέμις in verse 474 identifies itself with the adjective ἄρρητος of 472, meaning the inefable, forbidden and secret. In this case it indicates the closed, secretive character of Dionysiac cults. It is a term which, together with the composite ἀπόρρητος, is used a lot in the context of mystic religion to allude to their secretive character, closed to those who do not participate in their rituals.

The reflection of the formula can be found in the two verses uttered by Dionysus. The first part of verse 474 (“it is not licit that you hear it”) insists on what is already said in 472 (“that knowledge is forbidden to mortals uninitiated in the Bacchic mysteries”). We could paraphrase that as follows: “it is forbidden for the uninitiated to know about those rituals, and therefore, as Pentheus is not an initiate, it is not licit that he knows about them”.

4. The profane (βέβηλος and ἀβάκχευτος)

Βέβηλος⁸ is the word which appears at the end of both versions of the formula and is also the designation we find in the fragment of *Protesilaus*. When applied to a person, this term is usually related to the realm of mystic religion. It refers to someone who does not belong to any closed, religious circle requiring of a previous initiation process. βέβηλος is the ‘profane’ in the sense that he is unaware of all those ‘truths’ that are revealed in the mystic cults and provide a different experience of life. Therefore, that person who is ignorant of the revelations supporting those doctrines must not hear or see what happens in the said rituals, because he could not possibly understand it and he might even contaminate them with his impurity, devoid as he is of the degree of ritual cleansing attained by the participants in those rites.

But this is not the only designation for those who do not participate in the mystic rites. In this sense, in verse 472 of *Bacchae* the term ἀβάκχευτος functions as a synonym of βέβηλος: it refers to a person who is considered profane for not having taken part in Bacchic rites. It derives from the same stem as βάκχος and βακχεύειν.⁹ These terms, crucial in Dionysism and Orphism, are, however, understood differently in each particular religion: in

8 The seemingly oldest reading transmits it in the vocative plural (βέβηλοι) as an exhortation to the initiated. But sometimes it has been transmitted in the dative (βεβήλοις), making the subject of the imperative to change, no longer alluding to the profane but to the initiated: “close the doors on the profane”. However, this seems to be a later variant. Cf. Bernabé (1996: 14, n. 3).

9 About βάκχος and βακχεύειν cf., for instance, Turcan (1986: 227–244), Jiménez San Cristóbal (2009) with copious bibliography.

Orphism the βάκχος hankers after a durable condition, an ecstasy that is not constrained to the time of the ritual, but starts with it and must be the result of the perseverance and constancy in ascesis that Orphic life precepts require. Conversely, in Dionysism, the βάκχος wants a transitional ecstasy that ceases at the precise moment the ritual is completed.

5. To conclude

In fr. 648 Kannicht of *Protesilaus* and in *Bacchae* 471–474, Euripides seems to echo the widely-known formula “let the profane shut the doors”. This formula belongs to the mystic realm and is specially used as heading in sacred texts, mainly attributed to Orpheus. These two Euripidean passages match with this formula, not only in their meaning, but in the use of certain terms: both texts contain the word θέμις, which points directly to the first version of the formula (*OF* 1a). However, the original formula is an affirmative sentence, whereas, on the contrary, Euripides reworks it into the negative: while the first part of the formula stresses the fact that religious law demands that the participants are initiated, the tragedian says likewise from an opposite point of view; religious law forbids the profane to take part in those rituals. In the passage from *Bacchae* this idea is strengthened by the use, in verse 472, of the term ἄρρητος, which functions as a synonym of οὐ θέμις from verse 474.

At the end of the formula, regardless of which version, appears the term βέβηλος, which Euripides also employs in the fragment of *Protesilaus*. On the other side, we find in *Bacchae* the term ἀβάκχεντος. Both words refer to the profane in the sense that they have not been initiated and, thus, are not in possession of the necessary previous knowledge required to take part in mystic rites.

It seems evident, therefore, that both Euripidean passages may reflect the known formula “let the profane shut the doors” which appears especially in texts of an Orphic-Pythagorean nature. However, in the case of the Euripides passages, the context points towards Dionysism: in *Bacchae* it refers, no doubt, to the Dionysiac celebrations, as the plot of the play revolves around the establishment of that cult in Greece. In *Protesilaus* the context is not quite so evident, though some authors, basing their hypothesis on such later sources as Hyginus, Statius or Philostratus, propose that it may allude to certain supposed celebrations (of a Dionysiac or maybe Orphic character) of Laodamia to cover up her devotion to his husband’s effigy.

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