

2019

Roman Bacchae: Dionysiac Mysteries, Masculinity, and the State in Livy's Bacchanalian Narrative

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Recommended Citation

Panoussi, V. (2019). Roman Bacchae: Dionysiac Mysteries, Masculinity, and the State in Livy's Bacchanalian Narrative. *Brides, Mourners, Bacchae: Women's Rituals in Roman Literature* (pp. 120-139). John Hopkins University Press. <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/asbookchapters/144>

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Roman Bacchae

Dionysiac Mysteries, Masculinity, and the State in Livy's Bacchanalian Narrative

In the previous sections, we have often seen the conflation of wedding and burial rituals with elements stemming from maenadic madness. It is fitting to begin the section on Roman Bacchants by examining a text that focuses on the Bacchic mysteries practiced in Rome. Livy's narrative of the Bacchanalia reflects many of the beliefs and prejudices we encounter in almost every text containing representations of women engaging in Bacchic activity, within the context either of maenadism or of mystery cult. Livy's text showcases the intimate ways in which Bacchic worship is linked particularly to women in Roman thought (more so than in Greek), allowing them to exercise unparalleled agency both in the private and the public sphere.

Livy's narrative of the Bacchanalian affair of 186 BCE (39.8–19) describes the Roman state's interference in the practice of Bacchic mysteries. Livy presents the event as a violent but necessary shift of power. Initially controlled by women, the cult is now carefully monitored by the state and is purged of the sexual excesses and moral turpitude that previously characterized it. In other words, Livy dramatizes a process through which Roman religious practice is brought to coincide with the state's view of religious, moral, and sexual norms by means of legal restrictions. The state's intervention is necessary because the celebration of the Bacchic mysteries, a religious activity primarily belonging to the sphere of women, spills over to the sexual practices of male citizens, especially those of young age, and threatens their identity as Romans.

In the case of the Bacchanalian affair of 186 BCE, we are fortunate to possess both Livy's detailed narrative and a decree issued by the Roman senate (*Senatus consultum de Bacchanalibus* CIL² 581 = ILLRP 511) listing the measures taken to suppress it.¹ As a result, we have been able to study Livy's narrative as a historical document in conjunction with the text of the *Senatus*

consultum and from a literary perspective.² As scholars have noted, Livy's account displays many elements familiar from Roman comedy (Scafuro 1989, Walsh 1996), using a juxtaposition of genders (men versus women) to articulate broader differentiations between female and male social roles, the private household and the Roman state, and what constitutes what is foreign and what is Roman.

Livy begins his story with the affair between a well-to-do ex-prostitute, Faecenia Hispala, and a young Roman knight, Publius Aebutius. His corrupt stepfather, Sempronius Rutilus, and mother, Duronia, plot against him by arranging his initiation into the Bacchic mysteries. They are certain that Aebutius will either be murdered or will engage in such illicit activities that he can be easily blackmailed. Hispala, who happens to have inside knowledge of these mysteries, reveals the plot to Aebutius, who seeks advice from his paternal aunt, Aebutia. She urges him to speak to the consul Postumius. The latter, after consulting his mother-in-law, Sulpicia, in order to determine the credibility of all these witnesses, interviews Hispala, who repeats her story to him. Postumius, convinced that this is a calamity affecting not just Aebutius but the state as a whole, calls a meeting of the Senate and a public assembly, whereby he helps pass a series of decrees for the protection of all Roman youths from moral corruption or death.³ In one of these decrees, Hispala's services to the Roman state are rewarded with a host of privileges conferring on her full Roman citizenship status, including permission to marry Aebutius.

In this chapter, I focus on the episode as a literary and ideological artifact and argue that it illuminates women's agency in relation to their religious duties. The state perceives this agency as threatening and pernicious. Although Livy's text exhibits an obvious moral compass, the women's roles and practices that are brought into the spotlight emerge as complex and fluid. For instance, proper feminine social and familial roles are complicated when Aebutius' mother, a proper Roman *matrona*, fails in her duties, whereas the former slave prostitute, Faecenia Hispala, succeeds in helping save the state. By extension, the institution of marriage is presented in a distorted form (Aebutius' mother cannot successfully balance her duties as wife and mother), while the ideal of marital bliss is embodied in the eventual union of Aebutius and Hispala. This idealized couple, however, does not fall within the usual Roman notions of marriage: Hispala is not a young virgin but an older *scortum*, and Aebutius is not only inexperienced but at risk of being disenfranchised as a Roman citizen.

Furthermore, the women's control of the Bacchic mysteries actively jeopardizes young men's successful transition into adult male citizenship.⁴ Livy correlates women's empowerment with young men's disempowerment. An examination of his narrative shows that women's empowerment through their celebration of the mysteries abets and even promotes a relaxation of sexual mores, and threatens the social and sexual identity of young male citizens, who are made passive sexual objects. This threat is expressed not only by means of metaphors but also through the depiction of the mysteries as physically endangering young men's lives. The state intervenes and succeeds in realigning social views and practices, but only by inflicting terror and bloodshed on a vast portion of the citizen body.

This analysis of Livy's episode shows the importance of Bacchic rites in the Roman imagination. It also constitutes an apt demonstration of the normative notions that Romans sought to ascribe to women's religious action and to Bacchic rituals in particular. Livy's effort to outline these issues in his narrative is instructive. In the episode, he seeks to create clear-cut distinctions between the roles of men and women, private and state religion, and Roman and foreign customs and mores.

A schematic outline of Livy's use of these issues serves as a useful starting point for understanding how other authors manipulate Roman beliefs and prejudices vis-à-vis the Bacchic cult in order to express various tensions, anxieties, ambiguities and rifts in the fabric of Roman ideology. Without assuming that Roman ideas about Bacchic rites are stable and unchanging, one can argue that Livy's account provides a dependable measure against which we can gauge divergent or converging notions in other authors' narratives. To be sure, Livy looks at the events of 186 BCE from the perspective of the first century BCE, and thus inevitably projects views current in the Augustan period onto Roman Republican times. My purpose is not to examine Livy's account for its historicity, so I will not focus on his credibility as a source. I rather concentrate on the ways in which his narrative allows us a glimpse of enduring ideas about gender, religion, and the state in Roman thought.

Livy's Bacchanalian episode revolves around a clash of polarities which help clarify its moral message. The men are either opposed to the corrupt women or are dominated by them: the integrity of Aebutius' *domus* is threatened by Duronia and her husband, and the morally upright households of Aebutia and Sulpicia are juxtaposed to it. Also opposing Aebutius' corrupt *domus* is the state, whose purity is expressed by the solemnity of the sum-

moning of the *contio* (assembly) and the consul Postumius' careful and thorough investigation of the matter. The state thus safeguards the sanctity of households such as those of Aebutia and Sulpicia, and acts to protect that of Aebutius. Likewise, polarities characterize the description of religion. The Bacchic mysteries are cast as foreign, barbaric, and hostile to Roman morality and social values, whereas *religio* as performed by the Roman state is protective of the citizens.

In the same vein, the morally bankrupt Bacchic rites, which are celebrated during the night, are opposed to Postumius' and the Senate's actions, which take place during the day. Nighttime is synonymous with secrecy, conspiracy, and corruption, whereas daytime is associated with openness, justice, and moral rectitude. Finally, *stuprum* emerges as a condemnable practice, jeopardizing the sexual, civic, and physical integrity of Roman males. Excessive female power, exercised during the celebration of the Bacchic mysteries, fosters engagement in *stuprum*. The moral force that seems to oppose it is *pudicitia*, which, however, is constantly lacking.⁵ In this light, women's ritual power is dangerous not only for the moral health of Roman women but also, most importantly, for the making of Roman male citizens.

Despite the symmetrical juxtaposition of opposites in Livy's account, the narrative structure is decidedly uneven. The first part, the story of young Aebutius and the *scortum* Hispala, is longer and dramatic, containing numerous elements from Roman comedy (Scafuro 1989: 125–28, Walsh 1996: 191–99). The second part, including the consul Postumius' actions and his address to the assembly, is brief, more focused on a rapid sequence of events, and, if scholarly attention is any indication, less interesting than the first part. As a result, the emphasis on the threat that the cult presents to the state helps portray it as grave and deserving of the state's actions to suppress it. At the same time, however, the episode as a whole provides elements for analysis that make its moral message more ambiguous than the narrative's careful juxtaposition of polarities asserts.

In what follows, I will first examine how the narrative articulates opposites to create unambiguous moral choices for the reader. Next, I will examine the correlation between women's rites and sexual deviance, which is particularly dangerous for Roman male citizens' moral and physical selves. I argue that the narrative complicates this message by mirroring the violence exhibited by the Bacchantes against the violence exercised by the state. This in turn raises questions about the relationship between the state's moral agenda and the citizenry's religious and sexual practices.

Noise and Moral Disorder

The boisterous nature of the Bacchic rites is used by Livy and other Greek and Roman authors (e.g. *E. Ba.* 120–34; *Cat.* 64.254–64) to express a reversal of the opposition between order and disorder. Livy emphasizes noise in order to make several points relating to his argument that the mysteries promote moral disorder. The main characters within the story echo the narrator’s opinion that Bacchic mysteries are raucous because they are part of a more generally uncivilized behavior and aim to conceal wicked deeds. Put differently, their noise constitutes a tangible extension of their immorality and the danger they pose to Roman society and state. Livy makes the point in a subtle but effective way, with a trio of references to the mysteries’ wild noise (*ululatus*), strategically placed to form a climactic progression. First, there is a statement of fact by the omniscient narrator:

oculebat uim quod prae *ululatus* tympanorumque et cymbalorum strepitu nulla uox *quiritantium* inter *stupra* et caedes *exaudiri poterat*. (39.8.8)

The violence was covered up by the fact that, on account of *the howlings and the crashing of the tambourines and cymbals*, the voices of the initiands *crying for help* could not be heard *amid the debauchery and murders*.

The passage asserts that noise is synonymous with a particular kind of disorder and uncivilized behavior that leads to the dissolution of moral principles and results in murder. The participants in the rite are represented as unwilling victims crying for help (*quiritantium*),⁶ forcibly subjected to *stuprum*, and eventually murdered (*caedes*), presumably because of their resistance. Soon after this statement, Hispala, in her speech to Postumius, virtually repeats the narrator’s earlier comments in 39.8.8:

Eos deducere in locum qui circumsonet *ululatus* cantuque symphoniae et *cymbalorum et tympanorum* pulsu, *ne uox quiritantis* cum per uim *stuprum* inferatur *exaudiri possit*. (39.10.7)

They brought them [i.e. the initiands] to a place that resounds with *howlings* and the singing of songs as well as the beating of *cymbals and tambourines*, so that the *voice of the initiate crying for help* as he is forcibly subjected to *stuprum* could not be heard.

The emphasized words display a pronounced similarity between the statement of the narrator and Hispala’s account. In my opinion, the connection of

the two passages is too close to be coincidental. Both the narrator and Hispala express the same point of view vis-à-vis the purpose of the mysteries' noise. Hispala thus emerges as representing the discourse of order and morality in the narrative, an alter ego of the omniscient narrator. Although as a *scortum* she is potentially an agent of moral disorder, she endorses the morality sanctioned by the state. She also uses the vocabulary and conceptual framework that the narrative as a whole seeks to illustrate and promote.⁷

Hispala's success in this regard becomes obvious in the last reference to Bacchic noise, which occurs during Postumius' speech to the citizen body (*contio*):

Bacchanalia tota iam pridem Italia et nunc per urbem etiam multis locis esse, non fama modo accepisse uos, sed crepitibus etiam ululatusque nocturnis qui personant tota urbe, certum habeo, ceterum quae ea res sit ignorare. (39.15.6)

I am certain that you have heard that the Bacchic mysteries have long taken place throughout Italy and now even in many places throughout the city; [you have heard this] not only from rumor but also from the nighttime bangings and howlings resounding all over the city; yet I am certain that you are not aware of what this thing is.

In this instance, consul Postumius, the agent of the state, shares Hispala's private knowledge and opinion with the entire citizen body. The consul's words reveal that the citizens are unaware of what is really happening, marking a contrast with Hispala's inside knowledge. Now Postumius, like Hispala, is the one who mediates in order to preserve moral order. His mention of the racket coming out of the celebration of the Bacchic mysteries connects the citizens' experience with Hispala's information and alerts them to the pernicious nature of the rites, which are synonymous with moral disorder and endanger the lives of Roman citizens. Postumius' mention of the disturbing sounds presents a climax in the progressive deployment of the argument that Bacchic noise is constitutive of disorder and violence. By using this motif, Postumius fully assumes Hispala's attitude toward the mysteries and shares it with the other male citizens. The narrator's point of view is thus successively repeated by two characters, first an insider, then a mouthpiece of the state.

Hispala, then, is shown to embody the value system of the state and becomes the agent through which Postumius is able to protect the citizen body. It is important to note here, however, that Hispala is the one with the inside

knowledge, without whom the true nature of the noise would remain hidden: in other words, it would just be noise to the citizens and the state, not the moral disorder that she reveals it to be. Viewed in this context, the deployment of the motif of the Bacchic *ululatus* is part of Livy's strategy of aligning female and male, private ritual and religion sanctioned by the state, which have hitherto appeared at odds with each other.

Why does Hispala become the instrument of moral order? Does this not conflict with her social status as *scortum*? To answer these questions, I will now turn to examine the role of women in articulating civic ideology. Livy's greater narrative strategy presents women's "bonded" agency as instrumental for the preservation of the moral health of the state.

Reversal of Social Roles

The role of women—and of *matronae* specifically—as vital agents in this episode is worth investigating. The narrative juxtaposes positive and beneficial feminine behavior against its opposite. Faecenia Hispala, a former prostitute and slave, stands between the morally upright and corrupt *matronae*.⁸ She initially inhabits both spheres but is eventually absorbed by the category of the proper *matrona* through the granting of full citizenship rights and her marriage to Aebutius. The episode's women are instrumental agents, propelling the plot forward. The Bacchantes are agents of moral corruption; the good *matronae* alert the authorities to the problem at hand; and Hispala's testimony is the catalyst for the state's action. Yet there is also a certain symmetry in the way all women exercise agency. Hispala is able to reach the authorities through the protection of Aebutius's female *domus*.

The Bacchanalian narrative presents an abundance of mothers and daughters who fail to operate appropriately within the relational systems in which they are embedded. One of the most striking cases is that of Aebutius' mother, Durovia, who fails in her role as mother by siding with her new husband against her son's interests.⁹ Livy deftly makes use of disease as a metaphor for deficient morality. In the opening of Aebutius' story, the narrator equates the cult with a contagious disease: *huius mali labes ex Etruria Romam uelut contagione morbi penetrauit*, 39.9.1 (the stain of this evil infiltrated Rome from Etruria, like the spread of a disease).¹⁰ Next, Livy combines the traditional role of mothers as caretakers and healers of illness¹¹ with the motif of moral corruption as an ailment. Evidence of this we find in Durovia's arguments in favor of Aebutius' initiation into the mysteries. She argues that the initiation must occur in fulfillment of a vow she had made

when her son was sick in order to secure his recovery (*se pro aegro eo uouisse, ubi primum conualuisset, Bacchis eum se initiaturam*, 39.9.4 [she had vowed for him while he was sick that she would initiate him into Bacchic rites as soon as he had recovered]). To be sure, the irony of the statement is somewhat heavy-handed. Since her son's moral corruption is a disease much greater than any physical ailment, Duronia abuses her maternal duty, which is to keep her son disease-free. Quite the contrary: she actively conspires to cause Aebutius' social, legal, and even physical death.

Two other *matronae* are also instrumental in securing a safe haven for Aebutius and Hispala and for setting in motion the actions that will result in the salvation of the state. Aebutius, who appears to have no other surviving male relatives,¹² reaches out to his aunt Aebutia, who immediately advises him to contact the authorities. As a paternal aunt, Aebutia's actions affirm the problematic behavior of Aebutius' own mother, while simultaneously emphasizing the importance of patriliney for preserving the integrity of the Roman family structure. Postumius, in turn, consults with his mother-in-law, Sulpicia, about the credibility of Aebutia before he has a meeting with her.¹³ Aebutia, making a heartfelt plea to the consul herself, acts as a proper mother to Aebutius (39.11.7) and contrasts sharply with the actions of his real mother.

Both Aebutius and Postumius rely on the judgment and advice of their female relatives before they take up any action. Moreover, Aebutius' complaint to the consul appears insufficient, since Postumius seeks additional corroboration from Sulpicia, and casts light on Aebutius' sociopolitical status as somewhat less credible or important. That a woman would offer that corroboration attests the consequence of *matronae* in the social and political sphere. The narrator adds his own positive appraisals: Sulpicia is characterized as a woman of authority (*grauem feminam*, 39.11.4) and confirms that Aebutia is an honest woman of the old ways (*probam et antiqui moris feminam*, 39.11.5).

Livy uses several dramatic devices from comedy and tragedy that confirm Roman stereotypes about feminine behavior and offset the virtuous nature of the *matronae* and their importance for the welfare of male citizens. Both Aebutia and Hispala are depicted as crying, fainting, or fearful for their life and for that of their loved ones.¹⁴ Such touches of drama not only add flavor to the narrative but also reveal deep-seated notions about the nature of women. Despite these demeaning stereotypes, the *matronae* start unraveling the "conspiracy," which occurs within the physical boundaries of a *domus* whose head is ostensibly a woman. Hispala divulges the Bacchic secrets

in the inner part of Sulpicia's house (*in interiorem partem aedium*, 39.12.3), which contrasts sharply with the morally corrupt households that abet the secrecy of the Bacchic rites. The integrity of Sulpicia's *domus* means that its innermost space is able to withstand the unveiling of secrets that destroy households. Her presence serves to comfort and encourage Hispala, who would be understandably terrified by having to speak to the consul; she also represents the virtue of the entire household—a safe haven for moral uprightness.

Between these two types of women stands the former slave prostitute, Faecenia Hispala. Despite her low social status, she possesses an integrity that helps end the moral corruption of the Roman state. Hispala assumes some of Aebutius' expenses (since his family did not provide him with adequate funds) and warns him against the dangers of Bacchic initiation: in this, she acts as the type of mother that Aebutius obviously lacks. She acts as a proper wife, providing sexual companionship and legally offering her fortune to him after her death (39.9.7).¹⁵ Hispala also acts as other respectable *matronae* in ensuring, at great personal peril, the safety of all male citizens and therefore the welfare of the entire Roman state. Her status is thus marked by a certain fluidity and affords her an opportunity to move between the opposing worlds of Bacchic corruption and matronly *pudicitia*.¹⁶ At the same time, as scholars have noted (Scafuro 1989: 129–31, Walsh 1996: 196–97), her status aligns her with the slave of Roman comedy, who similarly oscillates between authority and oppression.¹⁷

It is important here to delve into the reasons behind Livy's adoption of the model of the comedic slave in the case of Hispala. In her study of the slave in Roman comedy, Kathleen McCarthy concludes (2000: 212–13) that the image of the carefree and clever slave, although contrasting with the harsh realities of his or her life, justifies slavery in the eyes of the masters. The temporary opposition (but eventual collusion) of the fictive slave with the social and political order that demands his or her servitude further validates that order.¹⁸ Hispala's role in Livy's narrative is similar. Just as the fictive slave in Roman comedy is temporarily opposed to social hierarchies by assuming authority, so in the Bacchanalian affair, Hispala assumes authority that is not appropriate for her status as a *scortum*, but is on a par with that of other aristocratic *matronae* such as Aebutia and Sulpicia. The consul's appropriation of Hispala's "authority" and moral stance justifies the social hierarchies that demand Hispala's oppression and submission.

In addition, as McCarthy demonstrates (2000: 212), the slave's childlike qualities in comedy accord with a paternalistic view of the slave as in need of a master and thus argue for the necessity of slavery. Hispala's gender as a woman is analogous to the childlike nature of the fictive slave. Hispala eventually benefits from the paternalism exhibited by the consul and the state that he represents. She is rewarded with a change of social status from *scortum* to *matrona*, since she is eventually allowed to marry Aebutius.

Another reason for Livy's appropriation of comedic protocols is that it strengthens his narrative's moral message by presenting an opposition between Hispala and the morally corrupt Roman *matronae*. This symmetric opposition—the *nobile scortum* versus the corrupt *matronae*—eventually serves to accentuate the problematic nature of women engaging in Bacchic behavior and the gravity of the social problems engendered by their activity. On the other hand, the collusion of Hispala with the state's values emphasizes its moral superiority even further because it is juxtaposed to the other women's reckless disregard for their role as mothers and wives. Hispala's agency and authority are contrasted with those exhibited by the women practicing the cult. Nevertheless, both are eventually placed under the control of the state. The state is established as the only source of authority capable of regulating ritual activity for both Roman women and men.¹⁹

Hispala's marginal and fluid social status also presents an option that cannot be safely sustained: the existence of a woman of high moral fiber but low status contrasting with the dubious morality of the women of the citizen class. This option is eventually eliminated by conferring citizen status upon Hispala. As Scafuro (1989: 126) perceptively notes, this is not the case in New Comedy, which “never allows for a resolution based on the actual granting of citizen rights to a courtesan or to a member of that class—or to any non-citizen.” Livy here appears to depart from the comedic prototype to create a more inclusive state than the one depicted in comedy for the purpose of eventually restoring the coincidence of morality and status.²⁰

Yet this departure from the comedic prototype is also telling of a perhaps more radical appropriation of women's ritual agency by the state's processes of ideological formation. The figure of Hispala not only exposes a fissure in the ideological alignment of character with status, but also provides a model for her absorption by the state in terms that properly belong to the *modus operandi* of women's rituals. Hispala's isolation in the *domus* of Aebutia (to protect her from retaliation by the Bacchantes) corresponds with the isolation of

initiands before they are deemed worthy of entering as full members of the cult.²¹ Scafuro (1989: 131) notes that Hispala's isolation is in fact a form of purification, similar to "the ten-day period of sexual abstinence that precedes initiation into the Bacchic cult."

This is a striking instance of the state's practices imitating ritual. The state is thus shown not as negating female agency arising from the performance of (Bacchic) ritual, but as symbolically absorbing it. Hispala's integration as a nonanomalous entity into Roman society is predicated upon a "purification" which is granted through her symbolic partaking in female religious practices that are normally performed by women of the social category in which she deserves to belong. Aebutia's *domus* is a female-controlled space, but one that is sanctioned and controlled by the state. Accordingly, Hispala emerges from her time in Aebutia's house as a full member of Roman society, a status confirmed by her wedding to Aebutius and her assumption of full citizenship.

Women's rituals and the Bacchic mysteries in particular thus emerge as a locus for the creation of social identity for women. This forms a stark contrast with their previous depiction as a haven for every sexual depravity, to which my discussion will now turn.

Women's Rituals and Sexual Deviance

As we have seen, Livy's depiction of the Bacchic mysteries casts them as an activity dominated by women. Apparently such women-controlled rites not only constitute a locus where men engage in shameful sexual acts, but also promote and even forcibly impose them on young male participants. The connection between the women's ritual dominance and illicit sexual activity is made in no uncertain terms in Postumius' speech to the assembly: *primum igitur mulierum magna pars est, et is fons mali huiusce fuit*, 39.15.9 (first, then, the great majority are women, and that was the source of this evil).²²

The narrator carefully—if not explicitly—connects women's control of the Bacchic rites with deviant sex practices. Both in the opening paragraph and throughout the episode, the omniscient narrator and the two main characters, Hispala and Postumius, repeatedly refer to the happenings in the mysteries using terms such as *stuprum*, correlating the cult with sexual corruption.²³ They also marshal longstanding notions regarding women's "natural" proclivity toward drinking and sex. For example, in the episode's opening paragraph, the narrator castigates the practice of drinking and feasting in the context of ritual (39.8.5: *additae uoluptates religioni uini et epularum* [the pleasures of

wine and banquets were added to religion]). Although he does not directly link it to the women,²⁴ he hints at women's well-known fondness for wine:

cum uinum animos <mouisset>²⁵ et nox et mixti feminis mares, aetatis tenerae maioribus, discrimen omne pudoris exstinxissent, corruptelae primum omnis generis fieri coeptae, cum ad id quisque quo natura pronioris libidinis esset paratam uoluptatem haberet. (39.8.6)

When wine had shaken their minds, and night, and the mingling of men with women, tender youths with older folk, had overcome every barrier of shame, vices of every sort began to take place, since each person had ready at hand the pleasure to fulfill the desire toward which his nature would be more inclined.

The passage expresses the idea that drinking promotes sexual desire and that, in the case of women in particular, it is more or less synonymous with adultery. The Roman state had laws in place prohibiting women from drinking.²⁶ These legal sanctions reflected a belief that drinking presented great danger for the virtue of Roman women. Another contributing factor relating women's control of the ritual with the sexual promiscuity in the mysteries is Livy's repeated mention of the "mixing" of men with women.²⁷ It seems that whenever men and women mix, women's "natural" tendency for sexual excess takes over, and men, especially young men, fall prey to its pernicious influence. Livy sees a single outcome from drinking and evening gatherings of mixed sexes: illicit sexual activity. In other words, drunk men and women of all ages will have no resistance to the opportunity for illicit sexual pleasure (*paratam uoluptatem*) and will surrender to their sexual desires (*natura pronioris libidinis*), which is to be understood as being inherently deviant (*discrimen omne pudoris exstinxissent*). As a result, the women's control of the rites makes it possible for sexual excess and moral dissolution to take place. Both imperil male citizens, as they affect their sexual practices and, as we shall soon see, their social identity.

Within this framework, we should reexamine the conclusion of the episode's opening paragraph, which refers to the nocturnal nature of the Bacchic mysteries and the disruption they cause to civilized society with their raucous noise. We have previously interpreted the prominence of these qualities in the narrative as constitutive of the mysteries' status as "other" and as part of a system of polarities around which the episode's conflict is structured. What is important to note here is that both elements, night and noise,

facilitate secrecy and violence, poisons and trickery (*uenena, dolo* 39.8.8), all ideas primarily associated with women.

Related to the issue of the women's control of the mysteries is the problem of acceptable religious practice. Postumius' speech to the *contio* argues against the women-controlled Bacchic rites. He begins with a distinction between "correct" and "incorrect" *religio*. The former is practiced by the Roman citizens who comprise the *contio*²⁸ and is different from that of the women, which the consul characterizes as depraved, foreign, and lustful:

nulli unquam contioni, Quirites, tam non solum apta sed etiam necessaria haec sollemnis deorum comprecatio fuit, quae uos admoneret hos esse deos quos colere, uenerari precarique maiores uestri instituissent, non illos qui prauis et externis religionibus captas mentes uelut furialibus stimulis ad omne scelus et ad omnem libidinem agerent. (39.15.2–3)

Never for any assembly, citizens, has this formal prayer to the gods been not only so suitable but even so necessary, a prayer which reminds you that these are the gods *whom your ancestors had appointed* to be worshipped, venerated, and to receive your prayers, not those who would drive our minds, *enslaved* by depraved and foreign rites, as if by the Furies' scourges, toward every crime and every lust.

Postumius calls attention to the performance of the solemn oath by the consul and the citizens of the assembly as a fresh reminder of the proper character of traditional religion, instituted by the Roman ancestors (*quos . . . maiores uestri instituissent*) and transmitted to their present-day descendants. The rite's Roman character and long history are ensured by its continued observance by the male citizens and are thus starkly opposed to the women-controlled, foreign, and degenerate Bacchic mysteries.

The passive participle *captas* denotes the passivity and enslavement that the mysteries impose on young Romans. Postumius further employs a vivid image of the Furies' scourge to invoke fear and notions of punishment.²⁹ The Furies mentioned here, however, are an instrument not of justice but of incitement to sexual and criminal offenses. The idea of an external, female demonic agent driving the young men away from traditional religion plays upon the same ideas of the threatening nature of a *religio* that is controlled by women. Yet the problem of the proper control of *religio* is intimately connected with the integrity of male sexual identity, which is endangered by the activities practiced in the course of the mysteries.

Male Corruption

Male homoerotic activity is at the root of the moral problem that the mysteries represent for the Roman state. The mysteries foster *stuprum*, a notion that is crucial for our understanding of the dynamics of sexual politics in the episode. To be sure, *stuprum* is not necessarily synonymous with same-sex congress. Adams (1982: 201) and Williams (2010: 67) note that it encompasses all disgraceful sexual behavior, including but not limited to homoerotic behavior.³⁰ Livy may well have both types of behavior in mind, since *stuprum* also affects the women's *pudicitia*. *Stuprum* emerges as even more perilous for men, however, because it endangers their social identity (see also Langlands 2006: 119). If we examine the instances where *stuprum* is mentioned in the episode, whether by the narrator or through the main characters (His-pala or Postumius),³¹ we see that it is often combined with the verb *patior*, indicating that the recipient of the act is passive and at times unwilling.³² We can then conclude that *stuprum* is an illicit sexual act, imagined in this particular case as forced upon the participants, and working as some kind of pollution, infecting the victim with the desire to inflict it on others. Accordingly, we are not dealing with a case of undifferentiated *stuprum*, but one that relates to the integrity of male social, political, military, and personal identity.³³

After Postumius has reminded his audience of the superiority of state-controlled *religio*, he proceeds to connect *stuprum* with effeminacy. For Postumius, the only possible outcome of a women-controlled ritual is the negation of male identity. The speech begins by mentioning *stupra* as perpetrated by both men and women but gradually focuses on the homoerotic activities performed by men and the problems it causes in their ability to come of age into full citizen status:

Si quibus aetatibus initientur mares sciatis, non misereat uos eorum solum, sed etiam pudeat. Hoc sacramento initiatos iuuenes milites faciendos censetis, Quirites? His ex obsceno sacrario eductis arma committenda? Hi cooperti stupris suis alienisque pro pudicitia coniugum ac liberorum uestrorum ferro decernent? (39.15.13–14)

If you knew at what ages males were initiated, not only would you feel pity for them but also shame. Do you think, citizens, that young men initiated in this cult ought to become soldiers? That weapons ought to be entrusted to those brought up in this polluted shrine? That those who have been buried in

their own debauchery and that of others would distinguish themselves in war defending the chastity of your wives and children?

Postumius relates the ability of men to become soldiers with their engagement in *stuprum* and the feminization it brings, thus connecting *stuprum* and same-sex erotic practices. Once exposed to *stuprum*, forcibly or voluntarily, the young men are not able to become trustworthy soldiers. The rituals provide the opportunity for the permanent corruption of young men.³⁴ In other words, with the women controlling *religio*, men are necessarily feminized. This new sexual identity, the result of rejecting the accepted male sexual roles, makes it impossible for them to fulfill their social identities as soldiers, husbands, or sons.³⁵

According to Postumius, it is impossible for effeminate men to remain contained as a marginalized population due to personal choice; quite the contrary, their status is linked with crime and deceit and as such poses a serious threat to the integrity of the state:

Minus tamen esset, si flagitiis tantum effeminati forent (ipsorum id magna ex parte dedecus erat), <et> a facinoribus manus, mentem a fraudibus abstinissent; nunquam tantum malum in re publica fuit, nec ad plures nec ad plura pertinens. (39.16.1–2)

Nevertheless, it would be less serious if they became effeminate by their misconduct (that was in great measure their own disgrace) and if they had kept their hands from crime and their thoughts from fraud; never has there been so much evil in the state, nor affecting so many people in so many ways.

Postumius repeatedly stresses the problems associated with these men—their inability to conform to the norms of their sex, their questionable moral character, and their growing numbers—in an effort to present cogent arguments for the state's action against them.³⁶ In other words, the intervention of the state is primarily a reaction to male homoerotic practices, which are perceived as enabled and abetted by the women's excessive religious power. For Postumius, women and homosexuals conspire to take over the Roman state: *Crescit et serpit cotidie malum. Iam maius est quam ut capere id priuata fortuna possit; ad summam rem publicam spectat*, 39.16.3 (each day this evil grows and creeps along. Now it is greater than a private matter; it aims for the control of the state).

The consul links the spreading of the cult to the primarily sexual desires purportedly aroused by its practices. The consul uses the word *libido* twice to describe the attraction that the cult presents to its participants (39.16.5 and

39.16.11). He links *religio* with *libido*—a connection facilitated by the casting of the rites hitherto as women-controlled, sex-crazed, and foreign. According to Postumius, the combustible mix of religious fear and sexual excess makes these rites particularly dangerous for the Roman state. He declares every male susceptible to these dangers, from impressionable youths to adult Roman citizens: “*Ne quis etiam errore labatur uestrum, Quirites, non sum securus*” (I am not free from worry that one of you, citizens, may slip by error, 39.16.6). Effeminacy, uncontrolled sexual appetite, and unacceptable sexual practices constitute a form of pollution that infects the citizenry and threatens the preservation of the male familial, social, political, and military identity.

Stuprum et Caedes

Aside from the perils that illicit sexual activity presents for the mysteries’ male initiates, Livy stresses their violent nature and the threat they pose to young men’s lives. The threat to the physical integrity of male citizens is an extension of their social death. Acts of violence against morals, laws, and the sanctity of life are par for the course for the Bacchants: *stuprum* is closely followed by murder (*caedes*). *Stuprum* assails not only the social identity of the citizens but also the cohesiveness of the social fabric, which is held together by a legal system that protects from fraud and punishes for murder.

Nevertheless, the violence of the Bacchants is mirrored by the violence the state visits upon them. The narrative is constructed in such a way as to support the claim that the number of deaths resulting from the state’s crack-down is commensurate to the menace presented by the cult. State violence is thus justified for the greater good, as opposed to the mysteries’ violence, which is immoral, illegal, and murderous. In the end, however, the question arises whether the state’s need for violence to control the cult provides evidence for its popularity and the wide acceptance of its practices. Livy’s narrative carefully crafts an alignment between morality and state violence. This may arise from a need to cast cult practices as deviant, when in reality they were probably more accepted and less intimidating than the narrative suggests.

Livy’s opening paragraph carefully outlines a link between *stupra* and abuse of legal procedures, ranging from forged wills to false witnesses, and culminating in murder. Sex is therefore synonymous with *uis*, that is, violence against the state’s citizens. Sexual corruption goes side by side with legal or actual death:

Nec unum genus noxae *stupra* promiscua ingenuorum feminarumque erant, sed falsi testes, falsa signa testamentaque et indicia ex eadem officina exibant, uenena indidem intestinaeque caedes, ita ut ne corpora quidem interdum ad sepulturam exstarent. Multa dolo, pleraque per *uim* audebantur. (39.8.7–8)

Nor there was only one kind of vice, *illicit sex* of men and women, but also perjured witnesses, forged signatures and wills, as well as indictments, came out of the same factory. From this place also came poisonings and secret murders, so that sometimes not even bodies would be found for burial. Many things were attempted by treachery and even more by *violence*.

According to this passage, the legal system is under attack by the cult's practitioners, who are so utterly immoral that they routinely kill. Furthermore, they are so successful that they are able to avoid prosecution for these murders and have resources that permit them to extinguish any trace of their crimes. Poison emerges as the weapon of choice, a weapon traditionally associated with women, and goes hand in hand with a special kind of *uis*: that which is achieved through trickery (*dolo*).

Once again, Livy uses characters to echo the narrator's point of view on the deadly combination of *stuprum* and *uis* within the context of the mysteries. The narrator's main points are repeated by Hispala's speech to Aebutius: *publicitiam famam spem uitamque tuam perditum ire hoc facto properat* (in this way, [your stepfather] is in a hurry to destroy your virtue, your reputation, your prospects, and your life, 39.10.4).³⁷ Hispala here paints Bacchic initiation as a threat to morality (*publicitiam*), social standing (*famam*), potential (*spem*), and survival (*uitam*).³⁸

We have already seen this technique earlier, when the narrator's interpretation of the true nature of the noise of the Bacchic mysteries (a cover for illicit sexual acts and murder: *nulla uox quiritantium inter stupra et caedes exaudiri poterat*, 39.8.8, quoted above) is echoed by Hispala's advice to Aebutius (*ne uox quiritantis cum per uim stuprum inferatur exaudiri possit*, 39.10.7). This device intimately connects *stuprum*, *uis*, and murder. Hispala's own fear of the Bacchants' violence makes her reluctant to speak to Postumius and attests the truth of her narration. She confesses to the consul her fear that they would kill her by performing *sparagmos* (39.13.5). On the one hand, this statement conforms to Hispala's depiction of the mysteries as violent and murderous, spilling over and outside the context of cult practices, but on the other, it exposes an element of humor or naïveté, since she appears unable to distinguish between elements of the cult known from literature and actual

happenings in the mysteries. This instance of subtle patronizing humor in the characterization of Hispala calls into question her claim of firsthand knowledge regarding the mysteries and thus undermines her authority.

Alongside *uis*, the use of the term *corruptela* promotes the narrative claim that the mysteries are an agent for all kinds of corruption.³⁹ As in the case of *uis*, the narrator initially mentions it in the episode's introduction (39.8.6 and 39.9.4), while it is subsequently echoed by Hispala in her speech to Postumius (39.10.6).⁴⁰ The narrator uses the term *corruptela* to denote either the general state of moral corruption in Aebutius' household or specifically the plotting of his death so that the stepfather would not be held accountable for mismanaging his inheritance (*uitricus, quia tutelam ita gesserat ut rationem reddere non posset, aut tolli pupillum aut obnoxium sibi uinculo aliquo fieri cupiebat*, 39.9.3 [the stepfather, because he had managed his guardianship in such a way as to be unable to give an accounting, wished that his ward either be eliminated or be bound to them by some tie]). *Corruptela* not only refers to a deficient moral compass but also threatens Aebutius' legal and physical existence. In this instance, Livy's use of *corruptela* equates moral and physical death.

Postumius' speech echoes the words of the narrator and Hispala, but in doing so causes a mirroring between the practices of the state and of the Bacchants. The obstacle presented by the mysteries to the proper function of the legal system and to healthy social relations is in the forefront of the Senate's decision to prosecute and punish the guilty by death: *qui stupris aut caedibus uiolati erant, qui falsis testimoniis, signis adulterinis, subiectione testamentorum, fraudibus aliis contaminati, eos capitali poena adficiebant* (they inflicted capital punishment upon those who were defiled by debauchery or murder, who were polluted by false testimony, forged seals, substitution of wills, or other frauds, 39.18.4). Livy connects the people who were forcibly submitted to *stuprum* with transgression of social and legal boundaries and with a proclivity for violence, culminating in murder (*caedes*). Notice the use of the verbs: the passive forms (*uiolati, contaminati*) normally convey lack of agency; in this case, however, the citizens' loss of an acceptable social identity determines their guilt and justifies the state's violent punishment. According to the state's logic, their death is necessary because the violence they have suffered works as an incitement to commit further violent acts. Therefore it needs to be eliminated through the use of state-sanctioned violence.

The state's reaction to Postumius' speech spreads terror to the city and the whole of Italy (*magnus terror urbe tota fuit, nec moenibus se tantum urbis*

aut finibus Romanis continuit, sed passim per totam Italiam (there was great terror throughout the city, nor was it just contained within the walls and borders of Rome but everywhere throughout Italy, 39.17.4). The narrator adds that more than seven thousand men and women were involved in the cult and were affected by the state's measures. Such a large number of targeted individuals belies an atmosphere of chaos similar to that of civil war: informers were paid to give names to the authorities; some tried to escape but were eventually arrested; others committed suicide; many stood trial. Numerous people were probably successful in escaping, because Livy mentions that Rome was emptied (*solitudo*, 39.18.2) and the state was forced to look for them and conduct trials in venues outside the city (39.18.3–4). As we have seen, the state's reaction to those it found guilty of *stuprum* and *caedes* was to inflict the death penalty, while women were given over to the *patria potestas* for punishment.⁴¹ Livy makes an almost casual statement about the extent of the violence used: *plures necati quam in uincula coniecti sunt. Magna uis in utraque causa uirorum mulierumque fuit* (more were killed than were thrown in prison. There were great numbers of men and women in each case, 39.18.5). Nevertheless, the statement betrays a certain uneasiness about the extent of this violence.

Viewed in this light, the state's violence emerges as particularly problematic. Is seven thousand cult followers a number to be believed? Is the state's reaction commensurate to the threat? If yes, why wasn't the cult completely eradicated? Instead there were provisions for the continuance of its controlled practice.⁴² Although it may be not safe to assume that these numbers reflect a reality,⁴³ they still display an ideological view of reality and thus constitute a measure by which we can gauge the extent of non-state-sanctioned practices in the population of Rome and Italy.

If, on the other hand, the state's response was an overreaction, the problem presented by the mysteries was one of sexual politics, and the state's violence may have reflected a disconnect between public practice and state morals. That is, the alignment that is so carefully constructed between the narrator, Hispala, Aebutius, and Postumius is negated by the violence the state exercises. Accordingly, there seems to have been greater social acceptance or at least tolerance of the mysteries and the practices occurring therein than Livy's narrative suggests. The narrative's uniform, unquestioning view of sexual and religious practices, which privileges the dominant male morality, is exposed as a construction, because it seeks to oppress alternative modes

of religious and sexual expression.⁴⁴ Put differently, Postumius' casting of the rites as "other" belies their status as Roman in the public's consciousness.



In conclusion, Livy's Bacchanalian narrative is useful to our understanding of perceptions of women's role in religion and ritual in several important ways. First, the narrative presents Roman notions on the role of gender that endure long after Livy's own time and can help us gauge the backdrop against which various other authors cast their own depictions of women's religious activities and experiences. Second, Livy provides us with an ideological narrative that seeks to smooth over any difficulties arising from religious activity not controlled by the state. As a result, by examining the narrative elements that cast Bacchic mysteries as foreign, feminine, feminizing, and uncivilized, we can detect the ideological thrust of Livy's episode and argue that it conceals a wider acceptance of the mysteries. (To be sure, Livy's ideologically charged narrative denigrates women as religious agents by presenting them as using their power to feminize young men and jeopardize their moral, sexual, and social trajectory into male citizenship.) Livy's text cannot tell us whether the homoerotic practices that are so castigated by the narrator and the other characters were actually embraced by the cult. Still, his tale of the events confirms that women-controlled rituals enjoyed wide acceptance. By extension, the mysteries' purported tolerance of alternative modes of sexual expression suggests the same tolerance on the part of those who either participated in the cult or accepted its religious legitimacy. Livy's narrative shows that this tolerance was widespread enough to be deemed dangerous. The state's violent reaction illuminates the importance ascribed to Bacchic cult and to the women's religious role therein, as well as attitudes towards other socially marginalized groups. In the next chapter, we turn to poetic representations of Bacchic rites in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and we examine how the empowerment of women through maenadism reorganizes Roman norms regarding marriage, family, and justice.