

Motivation behind the *Senatus Consultum de Bacchanalibus*

The Bacchanalia Affair of 186 BCE was “the first major religious persecution in Europe” (Riedl, 2012, p. 113). The Bacchanalia was a secret mystery religion that celebrated the Roman god Bacchus and originated in southern Italy (Schmitz, 1842, p. 413). The specific practices of the Bacchanalia are unknown due to the strict secrecy under which the group operated. In Livy’s account of the *Senatus Consultum de Bacchanalibus* (“Senatorial decree concerning the Bacchanalia,” *SC de Bacch*), he states that the group began as an all-female group before allowing young men who were under female leadership, however, his account of the actual practices of the Bacchanalia is considered by Mac Góráin to be a dramatic rendition and should not be taken entirely at its word (Thatcher, 1915, p. 69; Mac Góráin, 2019, p. 14). Due to the more extreme practices of other mystery religions, such as the castration of male priests in the cult of Cybele, the Roman Senate was wary of other mystery religions, viewing them as illegitimate and treating them similarly to modern-day cults (Wasson, 2015). The practices of the Bacchanalia were heavily restricted following the *SC de Bacch*, with all men prohibited from being a Bacchanalian, priest, or officer, and women prohibited from being officers. No more than five members could gather to perform rites (Thatcher, 1915, pp. 76-77). Some scholars believe that the Bacchanalia was restricted in Rome based on the moral standards of the Roman Senate, and others believe that the Bacchanalia was restricted due to its practice of female leadership over male members. However, it is clear that the Bacchanalia were restricted due to their female leadership and not based on morality because of the emphasis on female and male roles in the *SC de Bacch*.

The belief that the Bacchanalia was restricted based on the moral standards of Roman Senators originated in Livy's account of the trial. Livy's account is the only written record of the *SC de Bacch* aside from the decree itself (Takács, 2000, p. 303). His description of the Bacchanalia features a heavy emphasis on the morality of its practices, with Livy writing multiple times about the prevalence of sexual intercourse between members and stating that "the grand maxim of their religion [was] to think nothing unlawful" (Thatcher, 1915, pp. 65, 69; see also Takács, 2000, p. 301). Furthering this, Schmitz claims that no matter the original reasoning behind the *SC de Bacch*, the number of words with immoral connotations (including "*bacchor* [and] *bacchans*") derived from Bacchus illustrates the immoral standings the practices of the Bacchanalia held after the *SC de Bacch* (Schmitz, 1842, p. 414). In contrast, Limoges argues that because Livy wrote his account during the reign of Caesar Augustus, his writing is influenced by the religious beliefs of that time, which were more rational and objective than beliefs held during *SC de Bacch* (Limoges, 2008, p. 78). While Schmitz uses Livy's account to demonstrate the immoral or anti-Roman nature of Bacchanalian rituals, he does not provide an in-depth analysis of the actual *SC de Bacch*, which provides an idea of the perception of Bacchanalian rituals at the time they were restricted, choosing to rely instead on a dramatized account from years after the event.

Analyzing the *SC de Bacch* in the context of Rome at the time of the trial shows that the Bacchanalia was restricted due to female leadership over male members (Limoges, 2008, p. 88). In the *SC de Bacch*, men were explicitly prohibited from participating in Bacchanalia rituals without permission from the praetor. Women could still participate in rituals, albeit in a much more restricted manner than previously (Thatcher, 1915, pp. 76-77). Limoges also points out that the *SC de Bacch* does not

mention any of the moral justifications for the Senate's decision that are present in Livy's account, which demonstrates some of the liberties Livy took with his retelling of the trial (Limoges, 2008, pp. 88-89). Takács argues that the fact that male teenagers were being initiated by their mothers into the Bacchanalia concerned the Roman Senate because it placed their allegiance to the Bacchanalia and their mothers above their allegiance to their fathers and Rome (Takács, 2000, p. 306). Women in leadership roles posed a threat to traditional Roman society as they were "legally, without question, subordinate to men" and these activities brought them out of the home, threatening the status quo (Takács, 2010, pp. XXII, 98). Livy's account of the *SC de Bacch* also emphasizes the importance of women in the Bacchanalia, writing "a great part of them are women, and this was the source of the evil; the rest are males, but nearly resembling women" (Thatcher, 1915, pp. 71-72). This quote by Livy demonstrates the threat this group of women posed to traditional Roman values and furthers the idea that the goal of the *SC de Bacch* was to restrict female influence over men, rather than the morality of the Bacchanalian rituals.

It is clear that the Bacchanalia were restricted due to their female leadership and not based on morality because of the emphasis on female and male roles in the *SC de Bacch*. Within the decree, restrictions on the practices of Bacchanalian members were separated by gender, and male members faced more restrictions than female members (Thatcher, 1915, pp. 76-77). There is also no mention of morality concerns within the *SC de Bacch*, these criticisms of the Bacchanalia did not surface until Livy's account years later, where the religious influences of his time caused there to be a large emphasis on the immoral nature of Bacchanalian rituals (Limoges, 2008, p. 78). Since the *SC de Bacch* does not feature any concerns about the rituals themselves and instead focuses on

the roles each gender is allowed to hold within the Bacchanalia moving forward, any claim after the fact that the Bacchanalia was restricted based on perceived morality is speculation. In contrast, the emphasis on male and female restrictions, including essentially banning men from participating in any Bacchanalian rituals without Senate approval, makes clear the idea that the Senate was concerned about the long-term implications on Roman society should women continue presiding in leadership roles over men (Thatcher, 1915, pp. 76-77).

The arguments concerning the idea that the Bacchanalia was restricted due to moral concerns begin with Livy's account of the *SC de Bacch*. In his account, Livy places a heavy emphasis on the immoral nature of Bacchanalian rituals and describes the practices at length. This account, however, is influenced by the religious trends of the time of Livy's writing. After analyzing *SC de Bacch*, it is clear that the Bacchanalia was restricted due to female leadership over men. In the *SC de Bacch*, men were essentially forbidden from participating in the Bacchanalia, while women were still allowed to serve certain roles and hold some rituals. This demonstrates that the concern of the Senate was not the practices themselves, but rather male participation in the group and female leadership over these men. In addition, this allowed the Senate to restrict what they viewed as a dangerous and illegitimate religion, preventing their festivities from taking place without Senate approval. In conclusion, the Bacchanalia were restricted due to their female leadership and not based on morality because of the emphasis on female and male roles in the *SC de Bacch*.

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