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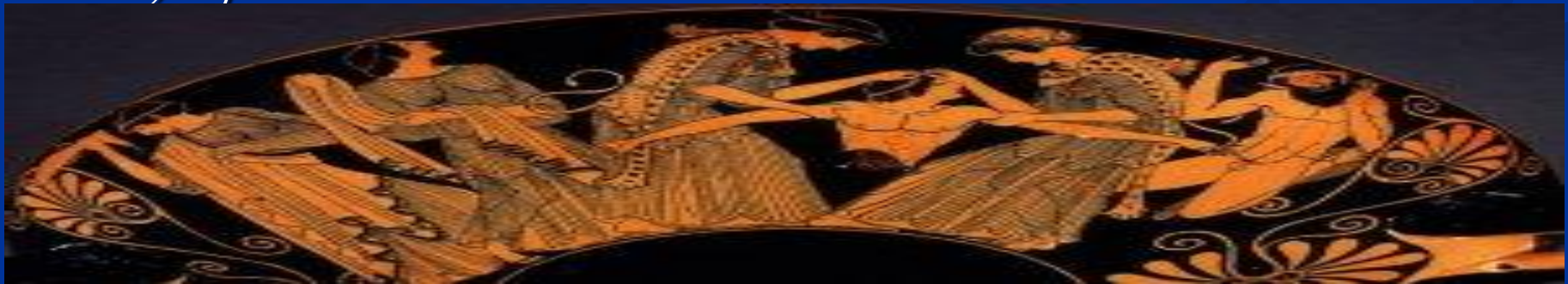
READING ANTIQUITY: A SURVEY OF
ANCIENT LITERATURE

LECTURE 8: ATHENIAN
TRAGEDY: EURIPIDES' *BACCHAE*
DR. CRYSTAL ADDEY



Euripides the dramatist

- Youngest of the three great tragedians (c.484-406 BC).
- Career: Had plays produced between 450's and 406 (*Bacchae* and *Iphigeneia at Aulis* are his final plays).
- Chronology a bit securer, because there is a fair no. of firm dates - including *Troades* 415, *Bacchae* and *IA* at end, *Orestes* 408. Others can be fitted into periods of a few years because of detailed stylistic work suggesting clear development of trends, especially in his use of metres.
- Number of surviving plays: 19, including the satyr play *Cyclops*.



Euripides the dramatist (2)

- He was not as popular with the Athenian public as Aeschylus and Sophocles seem to have been, winning fewer prizes (4 first prizes out of 22 occasions).
- **Paradox of career - generally recognised as one of the top two, with Sophocles, who were the only serious rivals to Aeschylus- yet more controversial and seen as upsetting and worrying.**
- He was attacked far more by Aristophanes etc., for making tragedy too 'modern', losing its dignity, too 'relevant' and critical – yet Aristophanes and others admired and were excited by his plays.

Euripides' plays: some major themes

- 1/ Less of a concentration on a single powerful character or clash of two than in Sophocles (*Antigone*). There are often 3-5 main characters. Concentration on major themes and often dramatic surprises in his plots.
- 2/ Great interest in gender and conflict between sexes -accused of being misogynistic (*Ar. Thesm.*). However moderns see him equally as upsetting men and male values, and showing women in a sympathetic light or as victims - but he does also show them as full of passion, and above all taking extravagant revenges (*Medea*, *Hecuba*). Generally, violent, horrific revenge is a major theme.

Euripides' plays: some major themes

- 3/ He can be seen to be critical of some aspects of politics. He uses rhetoric, and democracy which reflect contemporary Athens -e.g. *Orestes* - rerun of *Eumenides* but Orestes condemned in a sham trial, and then turns to raw violence, trying to kill Helen, before gods come in to sort it out. And critical of war - above all *Trojan Women*.
- 4/ **Gods and religion come into sharp focus** - justice of gods' arrangements criticised, excessive anthropomorphism of motives apparently scrutinised.

Euripides' *Bacchae*: Themes

- **Religious Cults of Dionysus:** The different cults of Dionysos shown in the play and the religious and moral problems they pose for the *polis*.
- **The god Dionysus and his powers:** This play is about the many aspects of the god Dionysos, and the difficulty of assimilating him and his powers in society.
- It examines the depths of human emotions such as ecstasy, joy, revenge; and reason, and rationalisation about religion.
- **Metatheatricality:** the play reflects on drama and the theatre.

Euripides' *Bacchae*: the Plot

- Thebes, under the young king Pentheus, first rejected the god Dionysos, who arrives, claiming honour, from the East; so he maddened the women and drove them to the mountains.
- Teiresias the priest/prophet and Cadmos, Pentheus' grandfather and the old royal representative, now accept the god, for different reasons, but Pentheus maintained fierce rejection, suspicion and hostility, and threatens to bring women back by force.
- The chorus of Bacchae / maenads, female followers of Dionysos from the East predict shame and disaster. The messenger brings on a tame Stranger (Dionysos in disguise), but says that some women Pentheus had arrested earlier have miraculously escaped back to the mountains.

Euripides' *Bacchae*: the Plot (2)

- Debate between Pentheus and Dionysos.
- Pentheus tries to lock Dionysos up; from inside Dionysos as the real god sends an earthquake, visions of himself as a bull, mysterious light etc.
- Pentheus is baffled and shocked – Dionysos (in disguise as the Stranger) walks out free, calm and smiling.
- A messenger reports that the women on the mountain do miraculous and wonderful things but when threatened by the herdsmen, they attacked them, tore cattle apart, swept into a village, and pillaged, snatched children away, and couldn't be hurt by spears. The Messenger concludes that this power here is of a strong god who should be honoured.

Euripides' *Bacchae*: the Plot (3)

- This is the main turning point in the plot - Dionysos and Pentheus continue to debate, but gradually Dionysos gains psychological control as Pentheus weakens, and/or enters into him as a god. He persuades him to trust him, and to go and spy on the women himself dressed in drag - and achieves this in part because of Pentheus' own obsession with sex and desire to see the women.
- Finally Pentheus is seen mad, and humiliated, turned into a woman, more effeminate and curly-haired than Dionysos, longing to spy.
- Then -after chorus have looked forward to revenge - messenger gives one of the more horrible speeches, how Pentheus was pulled out of his high tree, torn apart by the women, led by his mother Agave, in a great hunt, driven also into a greater madness, thinking finally he was some beast like a lion.
- Final scenes show the women coming to their senses, to realise what they've done, lead by old Cadmos. Lament for Pentheus, with deep sympathy for human victims; and final epiphany, recrimination, and self-justification by Dionysos.

Dionysus and the Bacchae



K152.2 DIONYSOS RIDING LEOPARD



W152.101 Bacchantes and Other Figures

Aspects of Dionysiac Religion relevant for the play

- **1/ General:** The myth is the standard one, in many cities, where Dionysos arrives and initially disrupts society when he is rejected usually by male authority. Dionysos is characteristically a constantly mobile arriver: this reflects symbolically an aspect of his nature - a god who is always a bit subversive of social norms and hierarchies, emotionally upsetting, taking women from families, encouraging free and licentious celebrations, releasing inhibitions, arousing powerful emotions - can the *polis* cope with, tame or even accept such a god?
- **2/ Ecstatic maenadism of women:** The play makes a clear distinction between the 'normal', controlled and emotionally exciting, ecstatic rites described by the chorus (esp. in *parodos* - 64-167) as essentially good and harmless, if wild; and the yet wilder and much more miraculous and destructive activities of the women driven directly to it, originally against their wills, by the god. Connection with women's rites in Athens and elsewhere is complex and problematic

Bacchantes and Maenads



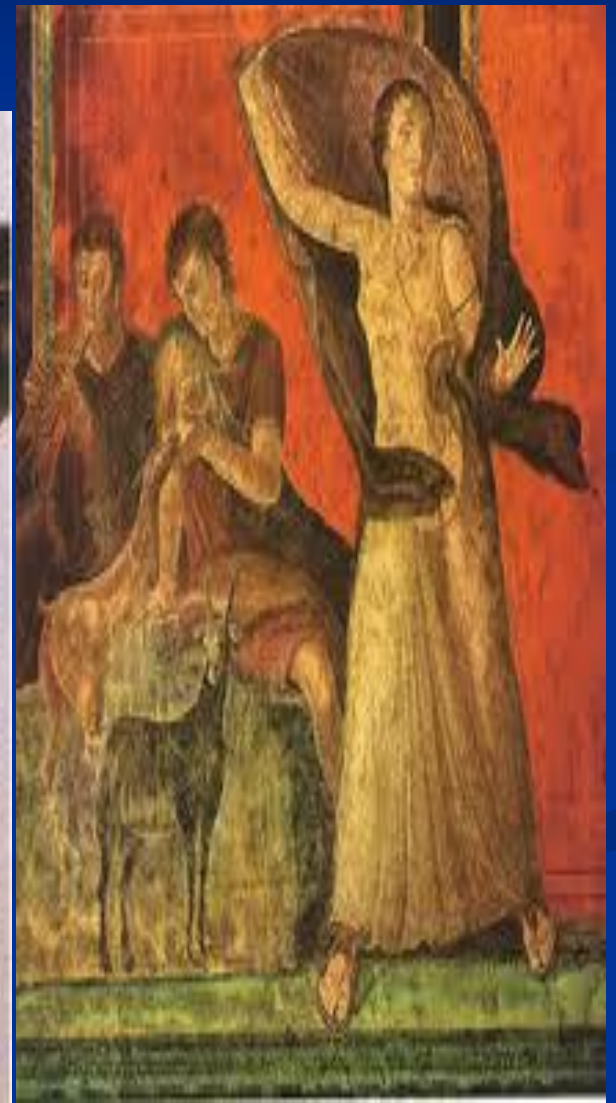
Aspects of Dionysiac Religion relevant for the play (2)

- **3/Cults of Dionysos the wine-god in Athens:** Inside Athens, many state and deme cults and theatrical festivals (rural Dionysia, Anthesteria, Lenaia, City Dionysia): cults celebrating new wine, peace, processions with masking and plays, much food and drink; open to all members of the community; many more informal social associations etc., and *symposia*, drinking occasions in Dionysos' honour. These are the most usual aspect of Dionysiac cult for ordinary Athenians, especially males. Emphasis on the simple pleasures of ordinary people, a more democratic god, open to all, men and women.
- **4/ Mysteries:** There were also optional initiation mysteries of Dionysos, not unlike those of Eleusis. It is argued that aspects of Dionysiac ritual, scenes and ideas in the play reflect the initiand's ordeals - changing clothes, sitting down, seeing secret and hidden things, Dionysus' miracles etc.

Dionysus: god of wine



Dionysiac Mysteries



Aspects of Dionysiac Religion relevant for the play (3)

- **5/Dionysos as the god of the theatre:**
- The only surviving play in which the god of the theatre, the festival of the plays, appears himself throughout (cf. the appearance of Dionysos the comic master in *Frogs*).
- He directs/leads the action, controls the entry of the chorus, is the manager and manipulator of the whole action of the play, playing different roles.
- He is both the god himself in power and majesty, at the start and end, and his servant and initiate in between - yet also performing miracles, in different places at once; playing with illusion.
- Metatheatrical aspects of play: Dionysos as a character in a play performed in his honour. Dionysos in disguise. Pentheus dressing up in disguise – dressed up by Dionysos. Agave holds Pentheus' head at the end – the word used in Greek is the same word as for 'mask.'

Dionysos and the Polis

- What should a *polis* do with such cults, such emotions and such powers? The picture is immensely complex and ambiguous but various points can be made.
- A/ Much of the treatment of the ecstatic women cults is positive, powerful, pastoral, beautiful and emotionally satisfying (esp. in first song - 105-15; 135-66; and messenger speech - 680-713).
- B/ But even in the benign forms of women's cults, there are expressions of alarming subversion and violence.
- C/ The wilder cults of the mad women are much worse - but produced because they didn't accept the cult - unleashed much darker, more powerful forces .

Dionysos and the Polis (2)

- **D/** What of the views of the males trying to maintain the *polis*? Are Cadmos, Teiresias and Pentheus all wrong, or are some better than others?
- **Cadmos:** welcomes Dionysos, happy and keen to go out and rave - but feel it's more for family and community advantage than anything else. Shallow character, fond of his family; decent. But little understanding of the cult or the god.
- **Teiresias:** still the traditional blind religious expert of Thebes. Here, though, characterised, also with some humour as keen to latch on to new cults, and as the representative of the Sophists and new ideas.

Pentheus

- He rejects Dionysos totally - but from a mixture of genuine concern about potential disruption from a strict male perspective, and equally from an immature and perverse obsession with the idea of sexual excess and drunkenness, which makes him wholly vulnerable to Dionysos' subtle attacks. He is also over-given to violence and bluster.
- The character of Pentheus and his fate seem to suggest that responding to the complex emotions stirred up by this very ambiguous and varied god poses major problems for a state - but clearly the play gives the impression that rejection, suppression and persecution are not likely to work and are a very bad idea.

Dionysus, Pentheus and the Maenads



Questions?



Reading for next week

- For next week, please read:
- Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*,
[<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text;jsessionid=D7A806390A1C9BAAEAE5BCCBA146E300?doc=Perseus%3atext%3a1999.01.0242>]
- Menander, *The Woman from Samos*
- Whilst reading, try to get a sense of the relationships between Comedy and society and politics and between (and differences between) Comedy and Tragedy. Also consider how and why Comedy speaks out to its audience.