

CLCS 4009: Reading Antiquity
LECTURE 8 HANDOUT: EURIPIDES' *BACCHAE*

“He shall recognise Dionysus the son of Zeus and see that he is by turns a most terrifying and a most gentle god to mortals.” (Bacchae, lines 860-1)

CHARACTERS

Dionysos	also known as Bacchus, the divine son of Zeus and Semele
Teiresias	the blind prophet of Apollo
Cadmus	formerly king of Thebes, father of Agave and grandfather of Pentheus
Pentheus	king of Thebes
Servant	of Pentheus
Messenger	from the mountain
Messenger	attendant of Pentheus
Agave	daughter of Cadmus and mother of Pentheus
Chorus	of Lydian women, devotees of Dionysos (Bacchus)

GLOSSARY

<i>bacchae</i>	female followers of Bacchus, another name for Dionysos
<i>bacchanals</i>	the revels of the followers of Bacchus (Dionysos)
<i>bacchant</i>	a devotee of Bacchus (Dionysos)
<i>Bacchic</i>	adjective of Bacchus (Dionysos)
<i>Bromius</i>	a title / epithet for Dionysos, meaning ‘roaring’
<i>Euoi</i>	a Dionysiac cry of joy
<i>Io</i>	a cry of celebration
<i>maenad</i>	inspired, possessed, frantic women, the female followers of Dionysos
<i>thyrsus</i> (plural: <i>thyrsi</i>)	a fennel rod or wand with ivy leaves attached to its tip, carried by the followers of Dionysos

THE NATURE OF THE GOD DIONYSOS

Charles Segal, *Dionysiac Poetics and Euripides' Bacchae* (Princeton, 1982), p.10.

“Dionysus is an Olympian god, but he has chthonic attributes. Divine, he appears in the bestial form of bull, snake, or lion. He has a place at the centre of the civic religion. The Greater Dionysia of Athens, where tragedies and comedies were performed, is the most familiar example. Yet his worship also involves ecstatic flaming torches on the mountains. He is a male god, but he has the softness, sensuality, and emotionality that the Greeks generally associate with women. He has the force and energy of a vigorous young man, but the grace, charm and beauty of a girl. He is Greek, but he comes from barbarian Asia, escorted by a band of wild Asian women. He is a local Theban divinity, but he is also a universal “god of many names,” whose power, as Sophocles says in the last ode of the *Antigone*, extends from Italy to the East. As he crosses the geographical division between Hellene and barbarian, so he crosses the class division within society, offering his gift of wine as an “equal joy” to both rich and poor (421-23). Both a native by birth and a violently resisted intruder, he honours Thebes and threatens its destruction. He is neither child nor man, but, eternal adolescent, occupies a place somewhere between the two. He has the residual functions of both a fertility daimon and a chthonic deity.”

BAKCHAI OR MAENADS? THE FEMALE WORSHIPPERS OF DIONYSOS

Albert Henrichs, "Changing Dionysiac Identities," in B.F. Meyer & E.P. Sanders (eds.), *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition Volume 3: Self-Definition in the Graeco-Roman World* (London, 1982), p.146.

"Maenad" (*mainas*) was essentially a poetic word which has decidedly reprehensive connotations even in the *Bacchae* of Euripides. The maenads of actual cult are usually called *Bakchai*. The few cases in which they are called 'maenads' are due to imitation of poetic diction or to an archaizing tendency. Pausanias makes it clear that the Delphic Thyiads ('women who are in a ritual hurry') 'are mad' (*mainontai*) in the service of Dionysus because they practise mountain-dancing on Mount Parnassus; in other words, his explanation of maenadic 'madness' is ritualistic, not psychological."

DIONYSOS AS THE GOD OF THE THEATRE AND DRAMA

Charles Segal, *Dionysiac Poetics and Euripides' Bacchae* (Princeton, 1982), p.13-14

"In the Dionysiac performance, as in the Dionysiac ritual, the individuality of personal identity gives way to fusion. The actor, wearing the mask that has close associations with the Dionysiac cult from early times, fuses to some extent with the personage whom he represents in the theatre. The spectator, watching the performance, at some point loses his separateness and identifies with the masked figure before him. Whether or not the sufferings of that masked actor also symbolically represent the sufferings of the god is a controversial point in the history of the Greek theatre. Whatever the historical situation may be, this process of symbolic identification and dissolution of self into other is an important point of connection between the maenadic and theatrical aspects of Dionysus..."

The tragic performance itself exists in a kind of contradiction. In a sense, tragedy is the meeting point between the civic Dionysus worshipped by the citizen choruses within the walls of the city and the ecstatic Dionysus worshipped by the maddened women exulting in the mountains. As part of the civic ritual of Athens, the performances in the theatre of Dionysus affirm the social order at a state-sponsored occasion in a public and holy place. Tragedy also endorses that order through its lofty poetic language, traditional and dignified, through the elaborateness of the state-financed costumes and the discipline of the dancers, and through the choral odes, which often celebrate the city or the moral and heroic values of the city or comment upon the action from the point of view of ordinary citizens. Yet the narrative material of the myths that tragedy dramatizes shockingly violates this order with the most feared and abominated pollutions: matricide, incest, patricide, fratricide, madness. The actual *content* of these works denies what their ritual *context* affirms."

p.215-216: "Dionysus is the god not only of wine, madness, and religious ecstasy, but also of the drama, of the mask. His worship breaks down the barriers not only between god and beast and between man and wild nature, but also between reality and illusion. In the tragic theatre, as in the Bacchic ecstasy, the participant "stands outside" of himself: he temporarily relinquishes the safe limits of personal identity in order to extend himself sympathetically to other dimensions of experience.

In the *Bacchae*...Euripides uses the figure of Dionysus as god of the tragic mask to reflect on the paradoxical nature of tragedy itself – paradoxical, because by creating illusion tragedy seeks to convey truth; by causing us to lose ourselves it gives us a deeper sense of ourselves; and by representing events filled with the most intense pain it gives us pleasure. The paradoxes of Dionysus, therefore, his liminal status, his place between – between truth and

delusion, sanity and madness, divinity and bestiality, civilization and the wild, order and chaos – are in part also the paradoxes of tragedy. The self-conscious reflection by the dramatist on the theatricality and illusion-inducing power of his own work, on the range and limits of the truth that the dramatic function can convey, I call the metatragic dimension of the play.”

Edith Hall, “Introduction,” in James Morwood (trs.), *Euripides’ Bacchae and other plays* (Oxford, 1999), p.xx.

“Most Greek tragedy did not treat myths directly involving Dionysus. His connection with the theatre expresses his function as god of altered consciousness, of appearance, and of illusion. In one of the most powerful moments in world theatre Dionysus, himself disguised as a mortal, puts the finishing touches to the Bacchanal disguise of Pentheus ...Pentheus is in a Dionysiac trance; he can no longer distinguish between reality and illusion; he is taking on the identity of someone other than himself. This scene self-consciously forces the onlooker into contemplating the experience of watching any performance which entails the impersonation of one being by another....Pentheus dresses in a maenad’s attire, just as each chorus-member had adopted the costume and mask of a maenad before actuality was forsaken and the drama began; in the original production this also required assuming the identity of the opposite sex, for all the performers would have been male. *Bacchae*, therefore, can be seen as a meditation on the very experience of theatre; a mimetic enactment of the journey into and out of illusion, the journey over which Dionysus presides in the mysterious fictive worlds he conjures up in his theatre.”

DIONYSUS AND THE POLIS

Richard Seaford, *Reciprocity and Ritual: Homer and Tragedy in the Developing City-State* (Oxford, 1994), p.254-55

“A relatively early version of this type of myth is provided by Euripides’ *Bacchae*...That Dionysos has come to Thebes from outside, as a *xenos*, is emphasised in the prologue and throughout the play. On those who reject him he imposes frenzy, and inverts the civilized order by sending the females to Mt. Kithairon to perform such animal practices as eating raw and suckling wild animals. This savagery culminates in the frenzied Agaue leading the hunting and tearing apart of her own son in what is despite its savagery a kind of sacrifice. And yet it is insisted that Dionysos be honoured by everybody together, and repeatedly emphasised that it is the polis that must accept his ritual, as indeed in the lost ending of the play it does. As elsewhere, Dionysos is to be god of the whole polis.

The *Bacchae* provides us with another crisis that ends with the creation of a polis cult for Dionysos.”

The killing of Pentheus as a sacrifice, p.284-285:

“Let us first establish that the dismemberment of Pentheus is sacrificial...sure enough Pentheus is explicitly described as a ‘sacrificial victim’ (1246), with his mother as ‘priestess’ beginning the killing (1114). Moreover, it has been shown by Seidensticker (1979) that the event reproduces the stages of the normal animal sacrifice: not only the adornment of Pentheus as victim and the ‘procession’ but also, in particular, the prayer (1078-81), the moment of silence and concentration (1083), the encirclement and pelting of the victim (1096-1106), the female cry accompanying the killing (1133), the dismemberment of the victim and offering of its flesh for a communal feast (1184, 1242-7).”