

Towards Conceptualizing Dionysus' Myth and Cult in Euripides' *Bacchae*

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“Under the charm of the Dionysian not only is the covenant between man and man again established, but also estranged, hostile or subjugated nature again celebrates her reconciliation with her lost son, man. Of her own accord earth proffers her gifts, and peacefully the beasts of prey approach from the desert and the rocks. The chariot of Dionysus is bedecked with flowers and garlands: panthers and tigers pass beneath his yoke. Change Beethoven's “jubilee-song” into a painting, and, if your imagination be equal to the occasion when the awestruck millions sink into the dust, you will then be able to approach the Dionysian. Now is the slave a free man, now all the stubborn, hostile barriers, which necessity, caprice, or “shameless fashion” has set up between man and man, are broken down. Now, at the evangel of cosmic harmony, each one feels himself not only united, reconciled, blended with his neighbour, but as one with him, as if the veil of Maya had been torn and were now merely fluttering in tatters before the mysterious Primordial Unity. In song and in dance man exhibits himself as a member of a higher community: he has forgotten how to walk and speak, and is on the point of taking a dancing flight into the air. His gestures bespeak enchantment. Even as the animals now talk, and as the earth yields milk and honey, so also something supernatural sounds forth from him: he feels himself a god, he himself now walks about enchanted and elated even as the gods whom he saw walking about in his dreams. Man is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art.: the artistic power of all nature here reveals itself in the tremors of drunkenness to the highest gratification of the Primordial Unity” (translated by W. A. Haussmann in O. Levy (ed.), ³1923, 26-8).

This passage from the first chapter of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* (1872), representatively summarizing the philosopher's manifesto of the Dionysian identity of Greek tragedy, is the ground of the modern concept of Dionysus. Obviously echoing Euripides' *Bacchae* (692-711), it defines the Dionysian as a strong emotional experience that rejoins human beings with nature and makes man a member of a higher ecstatic unity by the breaking down of all boundaries and loss of self while singing and dancing¹. Under the strong influence of Nietzsche, the Cambridge Ritualists (1910's) paid attention to the primordial elements of maenadism, and the Ritualists of Paris (1970's) transformed the god's rituals into a paradigm of human

¹ See Silk and Stern 1981. For the reception of Nietzsche's concept of tragedy, Gordon 2001; Witt (ed.) 2007.

suffering and mortality². On the other hand, leading interpreters of the *Bacchae* underlined the psychological dimensions of the Dionysian by claiming that “to resist Dionysus is to repress the elemental in one’s own nature” (E. Dodds)³ or that “the god symbolizes the power of blind, instinctive emotion” (R. P. Winnington-Ingram)⁴. Given that this conceptual framework, abstract and academic, has been gradually formulated by the many interpreters of Euripides’ *Bacchae*⁵, I think it important to investigate if in the play itself are there elements indicative of the conceptualizing of Dionysus⁶.

In the parodos, the chorus of the Lydian *Bacchae* refer to the their Dionysiac piety⁷ as being addressed to everybody:

Ἀσίας ἀπὸ γᾶς
ἱερὸν Τιμῶλον ἀμείψασα θοάζω
Βρομίῳ πόνον ἠδὺν
κάματόν τ’ εὐκάματον, Βάκ-
χιον εὐαζομένα.
τίς ὀδῶ, τίς ὀδῶ; τίς
μελάθροις; ἔκτοπος ἔστω,
στόμα τ’ εὐφημον ἅπας ἐξοσιούσθω
τὰ νομισθέντα γὰρ αἰεὶ
Διόνυσον ὑμνήσω. (64-72)

ᾧ μάκαρ, ὅστις εὐδαί-
μων τελετὰς θεῶν εἰ-
δὼς βιοτὰν ἀγιστεύει
καὶ θιασεύεται ψυ-
χὰν ἐν ὄρεσσι βακχεύ-
ων ὀσίοις καθαρμοῖσιν,
τά τε ματρὸς μεγάλας ὄρ-
για Κυβέλας θεμιτεύων
ἀνὰ θύρσον τε τινάσσω
κισσῶ τε στεφανωθεὶς
Διόνυσον θεραπεύει.

² See Henrichs 1984; for Nietzsche’s contribution, Henrichs 1986.

³ Dodds, ²1960, xvi.

⁴ Winnington-Ingram, 1948, 84.

⁵ For details, see Nikolaidou-Arabatzi, 1998, 1-140.

⁶ For the *Bacchae*, see the commentaries by Dodds ²1960; Roux 1972; Seaford 1996. In the Greek bibliography, see Nikolaidou-Arabatzi 2006.

⁷ See Festugière 1956.

ἴτε βákχαι, ἴτε βákχαι,
 Βρόμιον παῖδα θεὸν θεοῦ
 Διόνυσον κατάγουσαι
 Φρυγίων ἐξ ὀρέων Ἑλλάδος εἰς εὐ-
 ροχόρους ἀγυῖας, τὸν Βρόμιον. (73-87)

From the land of Asia, leaving behind sacred Tmolos, for Bromios I speed sweet toil and weariness happily unwearingly, exalting with ecstatic cries the Bacchic god. Who is in the road? Who is in the road? Who is in the palace? Let him come out. And let everybody by keeping sacred silence make himself pure. For I will always hymn Dionysos (with the songs that) have been established. (64-72)

O blessed is he who, truly happy, knowing the initiations of the gods is pure in life and joins his soul to the thiasos in the mountains performing Bacchic ritual with holy purifications, and correctly celebrating the mysteries of the great mother Kybele, and shaking the thyrsos up and down and crowned with ivy, serves Dionysos. Onward bacchantes, onward bacchantes, escorting Bromios, a god and son of a god, Dionysos, from the Phrygian mountains to the streets, broad for dancing, of Greece, Bromios. (73-87)⁸

In this general advocacy of Dionysus' cult, the obviously female verbal forms ἀμείψασα θοάζω (65), εὐαζομένα (68), and κατάγουσαι (85) –directly referring to the Bacchae themselves– make the framework for the male ones ἄπας ἐξοσιούσθω (70), θεμιτεύων (79), τινάσσω (80), and στεφανωθείς (81), with which males are not excluded from the rites of the chorus of the Bacchae, although in the real cult the Dionysiac maenadism was an absolutely female affair.⁹ The Dionysiac cult is thus subtly addressed to both sexes as an ideal ritual prototype. But what is described in the parodos is pure ritual and bacchic.

The attempt at connecting maenadism with the male sex becomes clearer in the scene of Cadmos and Teiresias, in the first Episode (170-369). The two old men enter the scenic space, both dressed in maenadic investment: fawnskin, crown, and thyrsos (176-77, 180). Before the eyes of the spectators, they dance like the maenads, by hitting their feet on the earth together with their thyrsoi, and shaking their grey heads (184-88). Moreover, they delightfully advocate Dionysus' cult by saying that they will not tire of dancing since they have forgotten their old age and feel young (187-89, 190). Cadmus claims 'he has no shame for old age in his intention to crown his head with ivy and dance' (204-5), and Teiresias declares that 'the god has not distinguished between the young man having to dance and the older man; but he wishes to have honours in common from all, and to be magnified while distinguishing

⁸ The text from Diggle 1994; the translation by Seaford 1996.

⁹ See characteristically, Gernet, 1953, 383, for maenadism as a 'chose féminine'; cf. Kraemer 1979. For the data of the real cult, Nikolaidou-Arabatzi, 2006, 59-66; for the representative role of the Bacchae in the Greek cultic life, Goff 2004.

nobody’: οὐ γὰρ διήριχ’ ὁ θεὸς οὔτε τὸν νέον/εἰ χρὴ χορεύειν οὔτε τὸν γεραίτερον,/ἀλλ’ ἐξ ἀπάντων βούλεται τιμὰς ἔχειν/κοινὰς, διαριθμῶν δ’ οὐδέν’ αὐξέσθαι θέλει (206-9). And most importantly, they give the theoretical explanation of their beliefs by arguing that (in Teiresias’ words) ‘we do not exercise cleverness in the eyes of the gods; ancestral traditions, and those which we have obtained as old as time, no argument will throw them down, not even if wisdom is found through utmost thought’: †οὐδὲν σοφίζόμεσθα τοῖσι δαίμοσιν./πατρῖους παραδοχὰς, ἅς θ’ ὀμήλικας χρόνω/ κεκτήμεθ’, οὐδεὶς αὐτὰ καταβαλεῖ λόγος,/οὐδ’ εἰ δι’ ἄκρων τὸ σοφὸν ἠϋρηται φρενῶν† (200-4)¹⁰. By representing Cadmus and Teiresias performing maenadism on stage in this way, Euripides generalizes participation in the Dionysiac cult by both sexes and all ages¹¹; simultaneously, he gives the first abstract elements of the Dionysiac piety by paying attention to the sentiments of the participants and the ancestral –non-clever– wisdom of Dionysus.

The poet’s intention to define the content of Dionysus’ wisdom is set in the stasima of the chorus, singing about the god’s myth and cult with parallel references to the sentiments of the performing maenads. In the first stasimon¹², just after the departure of the bacchic couple of Cadmus and Teiresias, the Bacchae invoke Purity against Pentheus’ insolence, and advocate the calm aspect of the Dionysiac cult (wine-drinking, love, and well-being in general) by emphasizing the satisfaction of the participants (‘to laugh with the pipe, and to put a stop to anxieties’, 380-81) and their own ideas about human wisdom (especially in the first antistrophe):

ἀχαλίνων στομάτων
 ἀνόμου τ’ ἀφροσύνας
 τὸ τέλος δυστυχία·
 ὁ δὲ τᾶς ἡσυχίας
 βίωτος καὶ τὸ φρονεῖν
 ἀσάλευτόν τε μένει καὶ
 ξυνέχει δώματα· πόρσω
 γὰρ ὅμως αἰθέρα ναίων-
 τες ὀρῶσιν τὰ βροτῶν οὐρανίδαί.
 τὸ σοφὸν δ’ οὐ σοφία,
 τό τε μὴ θνατὰ φρονεῖν
 βραχὺς αἰών· ἐπὶ τούτῳ
 δὲ τίς ἂν μεγάλα διώκων

¹⁰ Despite the problematic tradition of the text, it is obvious that here we have a theoretical argument of Dionysian wisdom.

¹¹ See the comments by Seaford 1996 on vv. 170-369.

¹² For the content of the first stasimon, see Musurillo 1966.

τὰ παρόντ' οὐχὶ φέροι; μαι-
νομένων οἶδε τρόποι καὶ
κακοβούλων παρ' ἔμοιγε φωτῶν. (386-401)

Of unbridled mouths and lawless folly the end-result is misfortune; whereas the calm life and good sense remain untossed (by storms) and hold together households: for even though they dwell far away in the air of heaven the heavenly ones see the affairs of mortals. Cleverness is not wisdom, and to think non-mortal thoughts means a short life. Given that, who would by pursuing great things not obtain (i.e. lose) what is available? These are the ways of men who are, in my view, mad and of bad counsel.

The phrase that obviously summarizes the chorus' verdict against Pentheus' insolence is 'cleverness is not wisdom' (395), the crucial point of Euripides' supposed recantation of the 'atheism', of which Aristophanes (*Thesm.* 450-51) had already accused him¹³. But, since Pentheus previously (in his encounter with Cadmus and Teiresias, 215-369) had rejected the Dionysiac cult with logical arguments, we should understand that 'cleverness' (τό τε σοφόν) here refers dramatically to the king's rational explanations (τάδε Πενθέως αἰεῖς; / αἰεῖς οὐχ ὀσίαν/ὑβριν ἐς τὸν Βρόμιον, 373-75), whilst 'wisdom' (σοφία) refers to the general content of Dionysiac piety¹⁴. Regardless of the fact that what the chorus says may reflect the ideas of the poet, the main condition for interpreting the choral odes of a tragedy is to take account of their dramatic effect. In this case, the maenadic chorus of the *Bacchae* defend the Dionysian wisdom and juxtapose it to the insolence of Pentheus. Consequently, what is primarily conveyed as ἀσοφία is not the damnation of human σοφία in itself (as the poet's supposed confession), but the Dionysian realm of non-rational happiness, applied to everyone. So the chorus can end its song by singing in the second antistrophe that 'the god rejoices in festivities (418), and loves Peace giver of prosperity' (419-20); that 'he hates a man for whom to live out by day and dear nights a life of happiness is of no concern' (424-26); and that they themselves 'would accept whatever the mass, the ordinary people, have taken as normal, and practice it' (430-31). It is obvious that the wisdom of Dionysus is meant as sense-full un-wisdom (ἀσοφία), and is conveyed by the god's own thiasos to the spectators as a concept of human happiness.

The same is true for the third stasimon, but the chorus' claim here in favour of Dionysian wisdom is placed in a fictional –and maybe mystical¹⁵– framework created by a self-referential projection of the chorus to the escape of a fawn from the hunt (862-76). The performance of the real Lydian maenads of the play is thus identified

¹³ The 'palinode' theory of the romantic scholars for the *Bacchae* goes back to T. Tyrwhitt (in the eighteenth century); see Dodds, ²1960, xl-i.

¹⁴ For how it is possible for the two terms, σοφόν and σοφία, at 395 to be non-identical, see Reynolds-Warnhoff 1997.

¹⁵ For the mystic significations of the third stasimon, see Seaford 1996, comments on vv. 862-911.

with the imaginary chorus of the fawn (especially connected with Dionysiac cult) in an idyllic space and undefined time. In deep emotion of this delightful –and eternal– ambience, marked by the theme of escape, the bacchic chorus interrogate in ecstatic voice:

ἤ τί τὸ σοφόν, ἢ τί τὸ κάλλιον;
παρὰ θεῶν γέρας ἐν βροτοῖς
ἢ χειρὶ ὑπὲρ κορυφᾶς
τῶν ἐχθρῶν κρείσσω κατέχειν;
ὅ τι καλὸν φίλον αἰεὶ. (877-81=897-901)

What is the wise (gift), or what is the finer gift from the gods among mortals? Is it to hold the hand powerful over the head of your enemies? (No, for) What is fine is dear always.

These lines, alluding to a permanent happiness that is preferable to occasional power over enemies¹⁶, are repeated as a refrain after the antistrophe and before the epodos. The antistrophe (882-96) reminds the audience of the eventual divine punishment of human insolence, and the epodos (902-12) blesses human every-day happiness¹⁷. In despite of the clear pointer to Pentheus' insolence and his forthcoming punishment by Dionysus, the third stasimon investigates wisdom in the permanent happiness of escape over insolence; and although this wisdom is offered as a divine gift in general, the poetic framework is that of the ecstatic –and ideal– happiness of the dancing fawn of Dionysus. Thus, the Dionysian un-wisdom is given as somehow imaginary, but the power of Dionysus is confirmed as representative of the Divine.

Meanwhile, the god has revealed himself to the Bacchae of the orchestra in the palace miracle scene (576-659), and the first messenger has described with clarity the deeds of the Theban maenads on Cithaeron (660-774). After his useless rational explanations, Pentheus was called –by Dionysus' prediction 'listen and learn' (ἀκούσας ... μάθε, 657) – to experience (together with the audience) the irrational realm of bacchic ecstasy, by watching in the eyes of the messenger the invisible deeds of the maenads on Cithaeron. From what is referred to in the speech, I distinguish the description of the miraculous calmness of the maenads. Since the maenadic wildness, but not calmness, is often found in fifth century vase-paintings, representing maenads (and Dionysus himself) holding pieces of dismembered animals (e.g. *ARV*² 298,

¹⁶ For this interpretation I follow the emendation of the text by Blake 1933, who punctuates interrogatively after βροτοῖς and changes ἢ for ἤ; see the comments on vv. 877-881 in Nikolaidou-Arabatzi 2006. For the problems of interpreting this passage, Winnington-Ingram, 1966; Cropp, 1981; Leinieks 1984.

¹⁷ Romilly 1963; Oranje 1984, 159-66.

585.34, 592.33)¹⁸, I think it Euripides' innovation to depict the calm version of maenadism in the famous lines of the first messenger speech¹⁹:

αἰ δ' ἀποβαλοῦσαι θαλερὸν ὀμμάτων ὕπνον
ἀνήξαν ὀρθαί, θαῦμ' ἰδεῖν εὐκοσμίας,
νέαι παλαιαὶ παρθένοι τ' ἔτ' ἄζυγες.
καὶ πρῶτα μὲν καθεῖσαν εἰς ὤμους κόμας
νεβρίδας τ' ἀνεστείλανθ' ὅσαισιν ἀμμάτων
σύνδεσμ' ἐλέλυτο, καὶ καταστίκτους δορὰς
ὄφεσσι κατεζώσαντο λιχμῶσιν γένυν.
αἰ δ' ἀγκάλαισι δορκάδ' ἢ σκύμνους λύκων
ἀγρίους ἔχουσαι λευκὸν ἐδίδοσαν γάλα,
ὅσαις νεοτόκοις μαστὸς ἦν σπαργῶν ἔτι
βρέφη λιπούσαις· ἐπὶ δ' ἔθεντο κισσίνους
στεφάνους δρυὸς τε μίλακός τ' ἀνθροφόρου.
θύρσον δέ τις λαβοῦσ' ἔπαισεν ἐς πέτρῳαν,
ὄθεν δροσώδης ὕδατος ἐκπηδᾷ νοτίς·
ἄλλη δὲ νάρθηκ' ἐς πέδον καθῆκε γῆς
καὶ τῆδε κρήνην ἐξανῆκ' οἴνου θεός·
ὅσαις δὲ λευκοῦ πώματος πόθος παρῆν,
ἄκροισι δακτύλοισι διαμῶσαι χθόνα
γάλακτος ἐσμούς εἶχον· ἐκ δὲ κισσίνων
θύρσων γλυκεῖαι μέλιτος ἔσταζον ῥοαί. (692-711)

And they, throwing off deep sleep from their eyes, sprang up to their feet, a miracle to behold of good order, young and old women and girls still unmarried. And first they let down their hair onto their shoulders, and tied up their fawnskins –those whose binding knots had come undone, and they girdled the dappled skins with snakes that licked their cheeks. Some held in their arms a roe or wild wolf-cubs and gave milk – those who having recently given birth had, with their breasts still swollen, left their babies. They put on themselves ivy crowns, and of oak and flowering bryony. One of them took a thyrsos and struck it against a rock, from which a dewy stream of water leaped out. Another lowered her fennel-rod to the surface of the earth, and for her the god sent up a spring of wine. Those who had a longing for the white drink scraped at the earth with their finger-tips and had streams of milk; and from the ivy thyrsos dripped sweet flows of honey.

¹⁸ Carpenter, 1993, 189-96.

¹⁹ For the relation of the *Bacchae* to the myth and cult of Dionysus, see Nikolaidou-Arabatzi, 2006, 33-88.

These fictional descriptions that inspired in Nietzsche, as I mentioned initially, the modern conception of Dionysus, belong to Euripides' artificial imagination. It is remarkable that the descriptions of the maenads are prefigured by the phrase 'a miracle of good order' (θαῦμα εὐκοσμίας, 693) that implies harmony as an abstract condition penetrating the world of Dionysus²⁰. The poet thus creates a mythic and/or romantic image of the god before the chorus escape, like a fawn, to the wisdom of the Dionysian eternal happiness in the third stasimon, discussed above.

Now I come to the exceptional scene of Pentheus' transvestism, prepared before the third stasimon and performed just afterwards. A few lines after the messenger speech, Pentheus' hostile attitude against Dionysus and his thiasos changes, and he becomes willing to see in his eyes the maenadic deeds on Cithaeron (810); moreover, the king agrees to be dressed in maenadic clothing after the slight mania the god inspires in him (850-53). Hence, despite the possible motivations of his revulsion²¹, Pentheus' transvestism should firstly be seen in the ambience of maenadic acting. So, at the beginning of the fourth episode, the king comes out of his palace in bacchic investments (915): a long robe with pleats hanging below the ankles (936); a sash fitted on the locks of hair (929); and a thyrsos shaken in the left or right hand (941-42). Pentheus seems to himself to see two suns and a double Thebes and seven-mouthed fortress (918-19); he sees Dionysus as a bull with horns on his head (920-21). Moreover, he enjoys himself in his bacchic dress and asks Dionysus to arrange the pleats of his robe and the locks of his hair (934-38). Because of the dancing in bacchic frenzy, the belt of Pentheus' robe is loose and a lock of his hair has come out of its place under the sash (928-31, 935-36). Pentheus feels proud of seeming like a maenad, especially Ino or Agave, his mother (925-26). He cannot hold his head straight from shaking (933), and wonders if he will be able to carry the folds of Cithaeron, together with the bacchants, on his shoulder (945-46). It is obvious: after his transformation, Pentheus acts as a real maenad under the mania of Dionysus²². Apart from its undisputable tragic meaning, the scene of Pentheus' transvestism further extends the Dionysian concept. With Pentheus' bacchic frenzy being theatrically performed, Euripides represents maenadism as an individual experience, too, since Pentheus can feel ecstasy outside the thiasos of Dionysus²³.

From the entry song of the chorus to the transvestism scene of Pentheus, the maenadism of the *Bacchae* transcends the limits of the real cult that connected maenadism only with women, and is represented as an experience addressed to both female and male sexes, with psychological dimensions and a special miraculous order (*eukosmia*). Certainly, in the play, Dionysus acts as a god, and it is his divine *physis* to which the audience responds. But, by tragically elaborating the elements of the god's

²⁰ For Dionysus' εὐκοσμίας, Gold 1977.

²¹ The motivations of Pentheus' revulsion are usually explained from a psychological aspect: Dodds, 1960, on vv. 810-12; Winnington-Ingram, 1948, 102-3.

²² For Pentheus' bacchic frenzy, Scott 1975.

²³ For the possibility of the bacchic frenzy also being an individual experience, Podlecki 1974; cf. Winnington-Ingram, 1948, 171.

cult, Euripides creates the artificial concept of Dionysus' wisdom, so that the Dionysian penetrates, in an abstract content, the choral odes and dramatic actions of the play as well; but it is not separated into an abstract psychological or theoretical concept. Modern scholars, however, have tried to distinguish between the mythic and cultic side of Dionysus of the *Bacchae*, and have found in the Euripidean image of the god abstract expressions of the polarities of their own time. So, they created the philosophical and/or academic quality of modern definitions of Dionysus, primarily sketched in Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*.²⁴

²⁴ For the distance between the ancient divine *physis* of Dionysus and the abstract content of the modern perception of the god, see Henrichs 1993.

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