
EURIPIDES' *BACCHAE* AND ATHENIAN DEMOCRATIC IDEOLOGY: AN INTERPRETATION

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Abstract: In this article, I argue that in *Bacchae*, Euripides masterfully attempts to combine the essential qualities of the Dionysian cult, which seek to temporarily alleviate human suffering and drastically alleviate mental anguish, with the fundamental principles and values of the Athenian democratic city-state. These principles prioritise, *inter alia*, every possible celebratory occasion for the emotional relief and moral fortification of citizens. The gruesome dismemberment of Pentheus illustrates, in the most shocking way possible, the disastrous consequences that could arise in a city where, in the name of egocentric intellectuality and inflated narcissism, the ruling class stubbornly denies the populace's inalienable right to enjoy the uplifting effect of religious enthusiasm and festive frivolity, including the subversive, *prima facie*, but essentially therapeutic Bacchic relaxation, which can sometimes culminate in celebratory defiance and dreamlike illusion.

Keywords: Euripides, Dionysus, Bacchic ecstasy, Athenian religion, democracy.

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Introduction

As early as the 1970s, an extremely important development occurred in the field of the interpretive analysis of Attic drama, which in fact remains equally influential even to this day. A beneficial result of this remarkable intellectual progress that arose in relation to the more thoughtful examination of the ancient Greek theatre was that scholars were able to shed light on a very broad set of intractable semantic problems and difficult dramaturgical issues primarily regarding the historical coordinates of the tragic and comic works of the classical period.

The contemporary theoretical trend of New Historicism, as well as the fairly recent concerted effort aiming at the most 'authentic' reading of ancient texts in particular, has motivated many researchers to concur on the helpful view that each age has its own reference value code, which is constituted by certain historical principles and conditions, with which literary creations are inextricably intertwined; and therefore, it would be advisable to answer all related interpretive questions within the political, social, moral and religious context where they arose in the beginning. In other words, the Attic dramatic works should be interpreted through the eyes of the ancient spectators; above all, the overriding themes and prominent ideas from which these magnificent theatrical creations draw

inspiration and stimulus must be thoroughly analysed and explained within the historical and political contours defined by the wider value system of fifth-century BCE democratic Athens (Markantonatos, 2020, 2021a *passim*, 2021b, 2022 with further bibliography and 2023).

Taking into account this remarkable development that paved the way for a clearly more effective elucidation of the central motifs and thoughts of the Attic theatre, in this article I shall attempt to highlight, through a brief interpretive analysis of Euripides' *Bacchae*, the multilayered connection of the religious *fervour* underpinning the plot of an iconic Attic tragedy with the rich and varied political and social nuances of Athenian democratic ideology. A number of scholars in particular have aptly argued that during the radical Athenian democracy religion acquired a particularly significant role in the ever-evolving political and social process, even more so than at any other time in the distant past (Sourvinou-Inwood, 1988, 1990, 2003 and 2008. Cf. also the related discussions in Markantonatos, 2002, 2007 and 2013 with exhaustive bibliography). In a similar way, in *Bacchae*, Euripides draws from the rich sources of political, social, moral and theological reflection in the Athenian city-state in order to give a greater depth of meaning and more dramatic force to his theatrical compositions.

In Euripides' *Bacchae*, the triumphant though chillingly merciless imposition of the Dionysian cult upon the sceptical and fiercely reactionary Theban leadership underlines, by way of a peculiar symbolic illustration, the dominant Athenian ideal of the open and liberal city-state, which must always cater to the emotional comfort and moral rearmament of its citizens through popular celebratory rituals and special festive events. After all, the latter are primarily aimed at both the recreation of the participants and the strengthening of those policies which aim at relieving social tension and mitigating life's stresses and anxieties.

In short, once again in the context of Attic tragedy, the long-suffering Thebes, as a typical mythological counterexample of a failed city-state, serves as a concave mirror, into which the glorious Athens of the classical period is reflected in an absolutely inverted manner, and in particular her exemplary institutions and unparalleled moral values (Zeitlin, 1990). Indeed, according to primary constitutional conventions of the Athenian democratic policy the establishment of numerous annual festivals and cultic sacrificial ceremonies — which mark, among other things, the unreserved enfoldment of all the manifestations of human nature in a time of liturgical excitement and recreational exuberance, beginning with the reverent modesty of the worshipper and reaching the Bacchic ecstasy of the celebrant — invigorates the citizens' spirits and subsequently revives their devotion to their beloved city. Indeed, any attempt on the part of the state to suppress people's primal need to seek respite from labour and relief from

sorrow — through sometimes even deviant but essentially harmless and benign behaviour — is not only doomed to failure, but also deemed as highly subversive of the moral intelligence and martial virtue of all the citizens.

Dionysian Cult and Athenian Democratic Ideology

In order to understand more deeply the wider benefits arising from this momentary tendency of humankind to sometimes indulge in amusements and seek opportunities of celebratory bliss, with a view to forgetting their sufferings and, if possible, to rise to a higher sphere of existence, it would be appropriate to reference Pericles' famous words in his Funeral Speech preserved for eternity by Thucydides (II.38.1):

Καὶ μὴν καὶ τῶν πόνων πλείστας ἀναπαύλας τῇ γνώμῃ ἐπορισάμεθα, ἀγῶσι μὲν γὰρ καὶ θυσίαις διετησίους νομίζοντες, ἰδίας δὲ κατασκευαῖς εὐπρεπέσιν, ὧν καθ' ἡμέραν ἡ τέρψις τὸ λυπηρὸν ἐκπλήσσει. (ed. H. S. Jones & J. E. Powell)

[Further, we provide plenty of means for the mind to refresh itself from business. We celebrate games and sacrifices all the year round, and the elegance of our private establishments forms a daily source of pleasure and helps to banish the spleen.] (transl. R. Crawley)

It is not beyond accident that immediately after his proud boast about the beneficial effects of the popular festivals and fairs that adorn the Athenian calendar with impressive frequency, as well as the comforting pleasures arising from leisurely private pursuits, Pericles singles out the markedly welcoming attitude of the democratic city-state, which is not at all possessed by feelings of obsessive suspicion and xenophobia about the probable intentions and pursuits of its foreign visitors, since it certainly has unlimited confidence in the devotion which all the Athenian citizens have in their hearts for it (II.39). Such a city, which lavishly bestows the most precious goods of the world on its residents and at the same time ensures such an enviable way of life, need not be anxious about its future; for its people are always willing to undergo any sacrifice in order to defend this privileged prosperity.

More than this, it is indisputable that the regular observance of widely-held holidays and festivals, framed by pre-holiday events and post-holiday procedures, not only brings indescribable euphoria to the citizens through a variety of joyous activities, but more importantly forges cohesive bonds within the wider community. The profuse enthusiasm that flows freely from the celebration of special days and historical anniversaries often turns into patriotic fervour,

national pride, and ultimately into such a profound experience that promotes philanthropy and mutual respect through the conscious realisation on the part of the participants that these religious and political events essentially mark the unbreakable continuity of ancestral traditions and the uninterrupted succession of numerous generations. Memories, therefore, immortalised in time-honoured rituals and majestic ceremonies, are those imperishable pockets of wisdom and knowledge that do not only evoke powerful emotions, but also galvanise unsuspected psychic powers in every populace and in every individual.

It would be remiss if we did not sufficiently emphasise here the prominent role played by banquets in the lives of the citizens of an ancient Greek city-state, and especially the populous Athenian polis. Banquet gatherings in particular cross the lines between public and private; for they include in a surprising way multiple aspects of the social, political, intellectual and religious activity of the fellow banqueteers. Feasting euphemisms are not only intended to provide entertainment but primarily seek to forge unique personalities through witty banter, lyrical gaiety, theatrical indulgence and philosophical contemplation (Parker, 1996 and Sourvinou-Inwood, 2011. Cf. also Scullion, 2007 and Carbon, 2015 with recent bibliographical updates). In Ancient Greece, therefore, the festive feast aimed to apply a balm of consolation to the souls of the citizens and at the same time was of great importance for the optimal formation of their character.

Similarly, in *Bacchae*, the myth of the unanticipated arrival of Dionysus in his native city, after the sad event of the unintentional striking-down of his mother Semele by Zeus' thunderbolt, serves as an allegory of humanity's imperative need for mental relief from life's weariness through kindly joviality, dance communion and boisterous performance of jubilant songs and chants. But simultaneously, the same unexpected event is a summative condensation of key democratic values regarding the inextricable connection between festive respite and civic valour.

Already in the scene of the frantically dancing Lydian Maenads (ll. 64-166), comes into full view the dominant idea that governs all manifestations of the Bacchic cult — that is to say, every pain undertaken with the aim of highlighting Dionysus as a supreme divine entity with indisputable authority is not at all due to unbearable suffering and severe trial but the diametric opposite:

Ἀσίας ἀπὸ γαίας
 ἱερὸν Τιῶλον ἀμείψασα θοάζω
 Βρομίῳ πόνον ἥδ' ὄν
 κάματόν τ' εὐκάματον, Βακ-
 χιον εὐαζομένα.

(ll. 64-67)

[From the land of Asia,
leaving behind Tmolus the sacred mount, I have sped,
toiling for Bromios a toil that is sweet
and a weariness that wearies happily.]

Closely connected with the aforesaid concept of redemptive labour, which is undertaken in the service of the god, is the inexplicable feeling of the aged bacchanals, that under the state of an unbridled orgy they can not only forget the sufferings of old age but, more crucially, regain the powers of their past youth. Cadmus, former king of Thebes, enters the scene as a pious Dionysian devotee clad in deerskin, crowned with ivy branches, and holding in his hand the thyrsus, all these peculiar ritual accessories of Bacchus. When indeed he meets the seer Tiresias outside the palace, he immediately expresses his uninhibited enthusiasm for the new-found worship of Dionysus, and moreover in the very final turn of his speech he declares that he is ready to begin the dancing and revelry, since he now feels completely reinvigorated. The elder Teiresias confirms those wonderful and strange things that Cadmus is so eager to proclaim:

[KA.] ποῖ δεῖ χορεύειν, ποῖ καθιστάναι πόδα
καὶ κρᾶτα σείσαι πολὺν; ἔζηγοῦ σύ μοι
γέρων γέροντι, Τειρεσία· σὺ γὰρ σοφός.
ὥς οὐ κάμοιμ' ἂν οὔτε νύκτ' οὔθ' ἡμέραν
θήρσωι κροτῶν γῆν· ἐπιελήσμεθ' ἡδέως
γέροντες ὄντες. ΤΕ. ταῦτ' ἐμοὶ πάσχεις ἄρα·
κάρῳ γὰρ ἡβῶ κάπιχειρήσω χοροῖς.

(ll. 184-190)

[{CADMUS} Where shall our dance steps take us, where shall we set our feet and shake our aged heads? You must give me guidance, Teiresias, grey head to grey head: you are wise. I will not grow weary day or night of beating the ground with my Bacchic wand. How delightful it is that we forget our age!

{TEIRESIAS} So your experience is the same as mine: I too am young and ready to try to dance.]

In the same way, as the play strides forward, the wise soothsayer tries in vain to convince the young king Pentheus about the reality of Dionysus' supernatural existence by thoroughly enumerating in a lengthy speech the various aspects and qualities of the recently arrived mighty god (ll. 266-327). And in this expository

reference to Dionysus there is conspicuous mention of the euphoric and healing effect which the juice of the vine exerts on the rioters, who, with their boisterous chants and lively dances, succeed in both temporarily forgetting their sufferings and repelling for a while the exhausting hardships of an arduous everyday life:

ὅς δ' ἦλθ' ἔπειτ', ἀντίπαλον ὁ Σεμέλης γόνος
 βότρυος ὑγρόν πῶμ' ἠῶρε κάσσηνέγκατο
 θνητοῖς, ὃ παῖει τοὺς ταλαιπώρους βροτοὺς
 λύπης, ὅταν πλησθῶσιν ἀμπέλου ροῆς,
 ἔπνον τε λήθην τῶν καθ' ἡμέραν κακῶν
 δίδωσιν, οὐδ' ἔστ' ἄλλο φάρμακον πόνων.
 οὗτος θεοῖσι σπένδεται θεὸς γεγώς,
 ὥστε διὰ τοῦτον τὰ γὰθ' ἀνθρώπους ἔχειν.

(ll. 278-285)

[But he who came next, the son of Semele, discovered as its counterpart the drink that flows from the grape cluster and introduced it to mortals. It is this that frees trouble-laden mortals from their pain — when they fill themselves with the juice of the vine — this that gives sleep to make one forget the day's troubles: there is no other treatment for misery. Himself a god, he is poured out in libations to the gods and so it is because of him that men win blessings from them.]

It is worth pointing out here that the ill-starred king of Thebes, Pentheus, who as an unrepentant opponent of the gods competes with furious ferocity against the ecstatic Dionysian cult, would have touched a raw nerve with the Athenian spectators, who, as in the similar case of an intolerant and short-sighted Creon in Sophocles' *Antigone*, would have perceived such a dismissive tactic towards revered divine beings and highly respected unwritten laws as profoundly anti-democratic and completely irrational. In other words, in contrast to the pious Cadmus and Tiresias, Pentheus behaves as another egotistical and narrow-minded tyrant, who, blinded by his bottomless arrogance and seduced by a myopic rationality, not only fails to appreciate the obvious weaknesses of his mortal nature, but he is also not in the least inclined to listen to the admonitions of political and religious leaders and the innermost desires of the simple but prudent people; so that he is seized with an unyielding stubbornness and is inevitably annihilated in a horrible way because of his shameless disrespect to the almighty Olympian gods.

Indeed, Pentheus as a *theomachos* is unable to understand the deeper wisdom contained within the inner core of the Dionysian cult, but he stubbornly

likes to display cold braininess, though it is well known that reason is often forced to yield to the inmost yearnings of the human heart (Henrichs, 2019 and Bierl, 1991). In essence, this paranoid conceit that relies on a deplorable illusion of palatial power and spiritual supremacy leads to complete ignorance of reality and awakens chimerical pursuits. The polarity defined by the at first sight diametrical opposition between reason and impulse turns out to be highly complex and puzzling, with the result that often what appear to be different modes of regretful reasoning turn out to be in the end honest assessments of human life. Further, on account of the unnoticeable smothering of subconscious desires and visceral urges this thoughtless vanity creates societies of petrified human beings — that is, mentally deficient individuals, whose gaze remains ominously restricted, and their mental horizon is fixed obsessively on an enclosed landscape of controlled emotions.

Indeed, in *Bacchae*, Euripides places strong emphasis on the anthropomorphic dimension of the divine beings, with the aim of making it clear that those primal feelings and ancient traditions, such as compassion and excellence, but at the same time the burning desire for revenge and the supreme need for survival and subsequently power, pervade the life and deeds of gods and men with equal impetuosity. There can be therefore no escape from age-old instinctual motivations for action; mortals and immortals undeniably declare a willing submission to the unsurpassed spontaneity of these ancestral feelings (cf. ll. 319-321, 330-331, 395-401, 430-431, 641-642, 877-881, 902-912, 1009-1010 & 1349-1350).

After all, the celebratory frenzy of the worshipper, which often spills out unrestrainedly into crude jokes, wine-fuelled revelry and uncontained dancing, is essentially that euphoric and pain-relieving springboard that contributes the most to achieving the desired ecstatic transformation of the Bacchic reveller, i.e., the quest for divine elevation. The paradisiacal images of the elated Maenads on the mountaintops of Cithaeron, where milk, wine and honey gush forth from the ground (ll. 142-143), as well as magical events that exceed all human imagination, allude to primordial cosmogonic narratives, closely related to a pain-free life of an earlier golden age. These genealogical stories are set forth with incomparable lucidity in the archaic Hesiodic poem *Works and Days* and especially in its highly mythological initial section (ll. 42-212), according to which the human species was once fortunate enough to enjoy such coveted utopian privileges corresponding, so to speak, to those of the immortal gods themselves.

In a sense, the Dionysian enthusiasm temporarily suppresses those burdensome feelings, which as a rule cause people mental pain and existential anguish, as it simultaneously overpowers for a while the debilitating reasoning that arise from prosaic intellect and over-analytical thinking, with the consequence that the mortal worshipper soars lightly into the semi-divine realm of god-like

entities and experience fleetingly the omnipresence of the transcendent essence of divinity, without at the same time renouncing the immutable limits of the human condition. It is characteristic, as I have already pointed out, that Euripides attaches particular importance to the miraculous revival of the aged characters, Cadmus and Teiresias, who in the end surrender themselves readily to the ecstatic diversions of Bacchus and thus seem to acquire unimaginable physical and psychic powers, without at the same time denying in the least the irrevocable limitations and inflexible impediments of mortality. In a similar way and according mainly to the two detailed messenger-narratives (ll. 677-774 & 1043-1152), the elated women of Thebes and especially the three daughters of Cadmus, Agave, Autonoe and Ino, are shielded with superhuman strength and thus go on to defeat all male invaders with incredible ease, while at the same time indulging in unthinkable acts of carnage and cannibalism, which of course foreshadow the grisly end of king Pentheus at the murderous hands of his own mother. It would therefore be desirable that both advanced intelligence and sharpened spirit facilitate all citizens and especially those in power to acknowledge the murky depths of the human consciousness and the visceral cravings of the mortal heart.

Epilogue

In *Bacchae* Euripides masterfully attempts to combine essential qualities of the Dionysian cult, which aim at the temporary alleviation of human suffering and the drastic mitigation of mental anguish, with fundamental principles and values of the Athenian democratic city-state, which prioritise, *inter alia*, every possible celebratory occasion for the emotional relief and moral fortification of the citizens. The gruesome dismemberment of Pentheus illustrates in the most shocking way possible the disastrous consequences that could arise in a city where, in the name of an egocentric intellectuality and an inflated narcissism, the ruling class stubbornly denies the inalienable right of the populace to enjoy the uplifting effect of religious enthusiasm and festive frivolity, and even that *prima facie* subversive but essentially therapeutic Bacchic relaxation, which can sometimes culminate in celebratory defiance and dreamlike illusion.

It appears to be beyond belief that this transitory ceremonial intermingling with the omnipotence of the divinity, which in particular takes place with irresistible intensity in the space of the Dionysiac theatre, is paradoxically a fundamental process of readjustment and self-awareness; even so it restores the fighting spirit of the citizens, consolidates social cohesion and, most importantly, rekindles the love for country. A monotonous, depressing and restless life, waiting for a constantly postponed consoling redemption, which, however, never materialises, relentlessly

crushes the patriotic spirit instead of nurturing it and thereupon converting it to optimistic stances on life. After all, in *Bacchae* Euripides once again serves as on the one hand a subtle scale that calculates with extreme precision the weight of the moral responsibility assumed by the Athenian democratic regime towards its citizens, and on the other hand as a sensitive thermometer that measures with amazing reliability the temperature of the epoch-making historical and social events happening during the late fifth century BCE in Athens and more widely in the Greek world, where the need for sobriety, moderation and unselfishness is far more than crucial.

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