

CHAPTER 21

Bacchae

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From antiquity until the late nineteenth century, the *Bacchae*, written near the end of Euripides' life and produced posthumously, sometime after 406 BCE, was thought by many to be evidence of a kind of deathbed conversion on Euripides' part, a "palinode" in which Euripides recanted his atheistic views (Dodds (1960) xl–l). The *Bacchae* brings onstage and reveals triumphant the god Dionysus. The "foreign" god arrives in Thebes in order to introduce his rites, and the Theban land runs with milk, honey, and wine, as a host of supernatural marvels—earthquake, fire, phantoms—occur, all due to the presence of Dionysus, who is victorious over his opponents and especially over Pentheus, king of Thebes, who dies after experiencing gruesome dismemberment at the hands of his mother, Agave, and her sisters. A narrative about Euripides' life took shape: Euripides left Athens and traveled north, to Macedonia, where ecstatic religion was all the rage (see Scodel in this volume). As Euripides approached death, his views changed, he finally came around to religion, and gave the god Dionysus, at least, his due. It was suggested that, whereas the playwright had previously brought onstage harsh opponents of the gods (e.g., *Ion* 439–43, *HF* 339–47), the *Bacchae* represented a departure from such searing critiques, and the play was considered a proDionysus masterpiece. A fairly uncharitable reading of Pentheus tended to go hand in hand with this interpretation. The king was seen as prudish, tyrannical, and rash, too quick to dismiss the new god. (On contemporary productions of the play, see Goff in this volume.)

The idea that the *Bacchae* offers unmixed praise of Dionysus is a glaringly simplistic reading of a complicated play, since the *Bacchae* may just as easily be read (and, indeed, has been read) as antagonistic to Dionysus. Given ancient Greek conceptions of appropriate gender roles it is possible to imagine the Greeks might have viewed Pentheus in a slightly more favorable light, a young king who is just doing his job as ruler of a *polis* (citystate), attempting to keep the women in their homes in order to avoid the complications of unruly behavior and illegitimate offspring. And whatever we think of Pentheus early on in the play, in the final scene we feel sympathy for the plight of the humans onstage. It can be argued that the divinity has responded with excessive cruelty to those who reject him. Dionysus tells Cadmus, who earlier in the play had dutifully advocated worship of the god, that he will metamorphose into a serpent and will lead an invading army against the Greeks. As the play draws to a close, Cadmus has harsh words for Dionysus, and Agave wants nothing to do with Bacchic practices.

Of course, it should be noted that what appears to us as cruelty on the part of Dionysus actually characterizes the gods in Euripides' plays and in Greek literature more generally. To take just one example, Aphrodite in Euripides' *Hippolytus* wishes to punish Hippolytus for his lack of reverence toward her and does so by using the hapless Phaedra as a pawn in her scheme (see also Ebbott in this volume). Gods (and humans) when slighted in Greek literature generally tend to respond forcefully. "Help your friends, harm your enemies" were words to live by

(Blundell (1989)), an injunction difficult to stomach for those more schooled in “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” As for Cadmus’ criticisms of Dionysus, they certainly echo remarks by characters in other Euripidean plays.

Clearly, the *Bacchae* offers no single, monolithic message. Yet the controversy concerning the message of the play with regard to Dionysus remains interesting because it touches on the relationship between the *Bacchae* and Classical Athenian conceptions of Dionysus and Dionysiac ritual. We no longer ask the question—“Is Euripides for or against Dionysus?”—or —“Is the *Bacchae* pro or anti religion?” Instead, we recognize that Euripides tends to create characters that make statements frequently in conflict with the statements of other characters, and he tends to leave his audience with more questions than answers. We will never (with any certainty) reconstruct Euripides’ own feelings one way or another about the gods from his plays. More recently, we have been asking different questions of the play; for example, current discussions of the play frequently draw attention to the relationship between the myths told about Dionysus and actual cult practice, a problem to which I shall return below (Henrichs (1978); Seaford (1996); Parker (2005)). And the field of Classics is currently witnessing a growing interest in gender and ritual (e.g., Goff (2004); see also Mueller in this volume). Yet, this isolated scholarly debate reveals that the Dionysus portrayed in the *Bacchae* has intrigued and baffled readers (and audiences) for centuries, and suggests that the play is saying something about Greek religion, even if there is little consensus surrounding what the message(s) might be.

Of course, it is a challenge to come to grips with the representation of divinity in Euripides’ plays in general (see Lefkowitz (1989); and see Fletcher’s essay in this volume); one gets the feeling that his portrayal of the gods is in some sense different from that of Aeschylus or Sophocles, but Dionysus as a god, and maenadic worship, continue to be difficult to comprehend (Henrichs (1993); Seaford (2006)). After all, the *Bacchae* presents a disturbing view of Greek religion and the god Dionysus. Swarms of Theban women abandon their homes to worship Dionysus on the mountainside where, having left behind their own children, they suckle beasts. Becoming maenads, “mad women,” they rip apart fierce bulls with their bare hands. Meanwhile, the city of Thebes is filled with the raucous sounds of *tympana*, “kettledrums,” or “tambourines” from a separate group of Dionysiac devotees, a traveling band of Bacchantes from Asia. Out in the mountains, a mother kills her very own son in a horrific act of *sparagmos*, “ripping a victim limb from limb.” How are we to make sense of this kind of religion or this kind of god? And what does the *Bacchae* and its depiction of women worshipping Dionysus have to do with contemporary Classical Athenian religion?

It is the purpose of this essay to contribute to the discussion concerning the relationship between the *Bacchae* and Greek religion, and to situate the *Bacchae* alongside other Classical Athenian texts that comment on “foreign” cult (a problematic category, as we shall see). But first, a cursory summary of a few important and fruitful treatments of the *Bacchae* will provide context for an investigation into the connections between the language in Euripides’ play concerning maenads and the way Classical Athenians spoke about particular kinds of ritual within their own *polis*. As we shall see, the play is saying something about Dionysus and contemporary ritual practice, just not the sort of pro or antiDionysus statements previously

emphasized.

1 Recent Trends in Scholarship on the *Bacchae*

It is important to recognize that the *Bacchae* is set in Thebes not Athens. In tragedy, Thebes tends to be cast as a dysfunctional city, the place where everything goes terribly wrong (Zeitlin (1990)). Athens, by contrast, (and sometimes Argos, too) tends to be the place where matters are set right. Thebes, then, is a place where we might expect a perversion of normative ritual practice. What is more, since the primary concern of this essay is to consider how the *Bacchae* relates to Classical Athenian conceptions of foreign cult and nonmainstream Dionysiac ritual, it must also be emphasized that this play is not set in the fifth century BCE. Although the play was performed at the very end of the fifth century, it, like other tragedies, does not depict the world at the end of the fifth century. Athenian tragedy tends to deal with contemporary Athenian anxieties, but displaced onto a mythical past. In no way does the *Bacchae* simply reflect contemporary Athenian religious practices or attitudes.

Dionysus has been described as the elusive god, the god of paradoxes and contradictions, and as such he is difficult to sum up succinctly. He tends to confuse boundaries that the Greeks liked to keep separated—boundaries that make for social order and the tidy and sensible running of a *polis*—like the division between male and female. In *Bacchae* Dionysus (actually, his priestdisguise) is described as effeminate by Pentheus (453–59, 353) as he is in a fragment from a play by Aeschylus; and he is constantly surrounded by female figures in literary and visual texts. Dionysus also straddles the divide between god and human, with a mortal mother, Semele, and a divine father, Zeus. Oddly enough he has not one but two births, first from Semele, when she is incinerated by a lightning bolt, and second, after the king of the gods has rescued the baby from fiery destruction, and brought Dionysus to term in his thigh (his “male womb,” 526–27). Dionysus is not quite Greek—in the *Bacchae* Dionysus has traveled to Thebes from the east—and he is not quite foreign, since he is returning to his home, his birthplace. A new god (he has just arrived in Thebes where he is involved in establishing his rites) and old (we have evidence for the worship of Dionysus in Linear B tablets), Dionysus is associated with the disparate (to us) realms of wine, madness, theater, and the underworld (Graf and Johnston (2007)). As Dodds puts it, Dionysus’ domain is “not only the liquid fire in the grape, but the sap thrusting in a young tree, the blood pounding in the veins of a young animal, all the mysterious and uncontrollable tides that ebb and flow in the life of nature” (Dodds (1960) xii).

Even as earlier scholars condemned Euripides’ dramatic works as unstructured and decadent, the *Bacchae* was wellregarded for its formal precision and “tragic spirit,” and interpretations have been varied and conflicting (Mills (2006)). Famously (or infamously), Nietzsche’s provocative discussion of the Apollinian and the Dionysian in *Birth of Tragedy*, and his conception of Dionysus as the “spirit of music” and nature has shown tenacious qualities (despite frequent hostility to it and disagreement with it on the part of some Classicists), surfacing even when unacknowledged in accounts of the god (Silk (1981)). More recent approaches to the *Bacchae*, to name just a few, have emphasized metatheater; gender

and Athenian ideology; psychoanalysis; and myth and cult. Of course, these approaches frequently overlap.

Dionysus is the god in whose honor dramas are performed at the annual Great Dionysia festival at Athens, and many scholars have provided useful ways of thinking about the play in terms of metatheater, in other words, the ways in which the play represents a self consciousness with regard to tragedy and, more generally, drama, since, by the time the *Bacchae* was produced, the Athenians had been watching tragic plays at the Great Dionysia for many decades and had time to reflect upon the genre (Segal (1997) [chapter 7](#), and afterword; Foley (1980)). Discussion of metatheater must, of course, take into account the scene in which Pentheus succumbs to Dionysus and dresses as a maenad complete with long flowing gown, *thyrsos* (a fennel staff topped by ivy and/or a pinecone, an omnipresent Bacchic accoutrement), fawnskin, and *mitra* (a special headdress) in order to spy on the women on Mt Cithaeron. Dionysus is a kind of stage director who destroys Pentheus specifically with the trappings of theater: “Dionysus makes the Chorus his players and his destruction of Pentheus a ‘play,’ replete with set, costume, and spectators” (Foley (1980) 110). Pentheus is to play a part, disguised as a maenad, but unlike typical actors in dramatic productions, Pentheus dies in his role. Pentheus moves from being a spectator (with prurient pleasure he sets out to see what the women are doing out there in the wilds) to spectacle (he is seen by the women and killed, and the gory death scene is described in vivid detail by a messenger).

One influential study deals with the robing scene to emphasize gender and Athenian ideology (Zeitlin (1996)). Froma Zeitlin examines the ways that tragedy tends to “play the other:” if the Greek “self” is defined as male, and the woman is defined as the “other,” then tragedy exhibits a preoccupation with this “other,” as the woman (or crossdressed man) is placed onstage “for exploring the male project of selfhood in the larger world” (Zeitlin (1996) 347). Zeitlin begins with—and throughout the piece returns to—*Bacchae*, as a sort of paradigmatic case for tragic drama. Pentheus is destroyed by the god Dionysus, who does not simply mix up or blur gender roles; rather, the god draws on the feminine as source of his power. He is, thus, an appropriate deity for the tragic genre, so bound up with Athenian conceptions of gender:

Pentheus’s feminization is the emblem of his defeat, Dionysos’s effeminacy is a sign of his hidden power . . . At the moment when the two males appear together on stage in similar dress, we might perceive an intrusive spectacle of the inclusive functions of the feminine in drama—one on the side of power and the other on the side of weakness

(Zeitlin (1996) 342; see also Wohl (2005); Buxton (2009)).

It becomes clear over the course of the play that, despite his expressions of disgust concerning maenadic practices and his desperate efforts to regain control over the *polis*, it is (at least in part) Pentheus’ innermost wish to see the women on Mt Cithaeron that gets him into his cross dressing predicament. Thus, the play has sparked psychoanalytic readings, with references to Pentheus’ oedipal desires. Pentheus’ biological father is absent, and his grandfather, Cadmus, who is old and weak, has transferred his royal power to his son. Pentheus’ mother, meanwhile, offers her son, “infantile dependence on her, the ‘luxury’ of being held once more, like a baby, in her arms (966 ff.). The play, however, ends with the reassertion of the reality principle . . .

Pentheus' end represents the impossibility of the infantile fantasies that he is living out . . . the mother's murder of her infantilized son acts out the impossibility of this fantasy solution to the oedipal situation" (Segal (1986a) 283–84).

Each of the approaches I have surveyed emphasizes different elements in the play—the proliferation of theatrical elements, the complicated role of gender, and the workings of Pentheus' psyche. Others have pointed out that the sensational elements present in *Bacchae*—*sparagmos* (tearing apart live animals), human sacrifice, and *ômophagia* (raw eating, a practice antithetical to the Greek dietary code and sacrificial conventions in which a defining characteristic of the human condition is that meat is carved with a knife and eaten cooked)—appear to be lacking in cult practice, especially Athenian cult of the Classical period (Henrichs (1978)). It is unrealistic to think that Athenian women were liberated from their homes on a regular basis to worship Dionysus in the wilds in anything like the manner described in Euripides' play. While women did carry out important religious tasks at Athens, our sober archaeological record of Athenian religion is a far cry from the ecstatic and violent transports detailed in *Bacchae*. We have no unambiguous evidence for maenadic practices at Athens during the Classical period. We do have such evidence for later years, and from places other than Athens. Many have attempted to come to grips with the ways in which the play (and myths of Dionysus more generally) relates to ritual as it was actually practiced.

The past fifty years in scholarship on the *Bacchae* trace out two very different answers to this problem. During the 1950s and 60s, the work of Dodds (1951) provided a compelling approach to maenadic practices, shedding light on what ancient maenadic ritual had to do with manifestations of ecstatic ritual crossculturally. Yet Dodds' work spawned a somewhat literal approach to Euripides' play (even if this resulted from a misreading of Dodds' work) and scholars began to try to reconstruct actual maenadic ritual from Euripides' tragedy. A bit later, largely in response to scholarship building on Dodds' approach, Henrichs (1978) sensibly urged caution: the *Bacchae* is myth. The *Bacchae* does not have much to do with contemporary Athenian religion at all. Instead, argued Henrichs, it is necessary to distinguish between maenads in history and maenads in myth.

It has, however, been suggested that the *Bacchae* has something to do with actual religious practice at the end of the fifth century, and that the play responds to an influx of foreign cults at Athens (Dodds (1960) xxii–xxv and Versnel (1990)). Although clearly a onetoone correlation between Athenian religion and the practices represented in *Bacchae* does not exist, it is possible to contextualize the *Bacchae* within a broader discourse about foreign cult at Athens.

2 Foreign Cult

Although no unambiguous evidence exists to support the notion that women were really running off to the hills to participate in the rites described in *Bacchae*, Athenians certainly did like to imagine maenads doing precisely that. Aeschylus wrote tragedies that dealt with Dionysiac worship (although the plays do not survive); Euripides, in addition to *Bacchae*, composed

plays that dealt with the theme; and several other (less wellknown) playwrights wrote about the subject during the Classical period (Dodds (1960) xxviii–xxxiii; Seaford (2006) 91–98 and (1993)). One of the more popular subjects of Athenian vase painting was Dionysus surrounded by maenads—occasionally they are engaged in *sparagmos*, dancing with *thyrsos*, and banging on *tympana*. These vases provide us with information about the way the Athenians imagined maenads, rather than documentation about historical maenads.

Mythical maenads, then, play a historical role in the Classical Athenian imagination, and although epigraphical or archaeological evidence about maenads at Athens during the Classical period is absent, visual and literary texts emphasize ecstatic Dionysiac ritual and maenads. As we shall see, Classical Athenian texts describe other rituals for which there is historical evidence in ways that echo, with striking precision, the way that maenads are described in *Bacchae*. These rituals in honor of gods from the East with strange (to the Athenians) names, like Adonis, Attis, Cybele, Bendis, and Sabazius, were also often associated with boisterous groups of women.

Such deities have been described as “foreign” gods. Yet it has been suggested that “the ‘foreign gods’ . . . are not a group recognized as such by the Greeks. They are assembled by modern scholars, in the belief that they [the foreign gods] were in fact worshipped outside of Greece” (Parker (1996) 159). And because of the negative valuation placed on foreign ritual, modern scholars have tended to describe such ritual as an aberration, essentially unGreek, an infection from abroad. These so-called foreign cults were modified and adapted once they were imported to Athens, and we should not expect an Athenian description of a foreign cult to offer accurate information about the original rites for the deity in his or her homeland. The category “foreign cult” is problematic because the distinction is not so much between Greek and nonGreek as between established and nonestablished religion.

Nevertheless, foreignness did function as a metaphor for the ancient Greeks. For example, ecstatic dancing and *tympana* playing are markers of foreign cult, and these actions (even if not *really* foreign) can underscore the strangeness of a ritual. Such practices are very much associated with Dionysus, who is portrayed in literary texts as an Eastern divinity only just arrived, although the Greeks were worshipping Dionysus as early as Mycenaean times.

Rituals in honor of gods such as Sabazius and Adonis, as well as certain nonmainstream rituals for Dionysus included ecstatic elements, a certain kind of dancing, and the sound of particular instruments. Of course, Classical Athenian texts do not characterize all foreign ritual in exactly the same way. For example, Bendis is a foreign god, yet rituals for Bendis do not carry the same connotations. As we shall see, a specific set of associations is attached to certain foreign cults in the minds of Athenians. Classical Athenian portrayals of maenadic rituals for Dionysus, as well as descriptions of informal Dionysiac rites and certain other foreign cults, consistently characterize the participants as engaging in sexual activity, drinking, and playing *tympana*.

3 Sex, Drugs, and Kettledrums

In *On the Crown*, the orator Demosthenes provides an example of the ways in which Athenians tended to group together rituals considered foreign. Demosthenes wishes to paint a defamatory picture of his opponent, Aeschines, and he brings all manner of charges against Aeschines in order to besmirch his character: his family is poor; his father is a slave; when he was growing up, he spent entirely too much time with his mother. But another way Demosthenes taints the name of his opponent is to connect him with the worship of certain questionable deities from the East, specifically Sabazius and Attis. In some texts Sabazius is virtually indistinguishable from Dionysus and he is frequently associated with wine. In a vivid and theatrical description, Demosthenes speaks of Aeschines racing through the streets with crowds of unbridled women, brandishing snakes, shouting Sabazius cries, and reveling in Attisdevotion. Indeed, later in the speech, he returns to the subject of Aeschines' mother, calling her a *tympanistria*, a player of the *tympanon*. Demosthenes associates Aeschines explicitly with the worship of marginal deities, treating Sabazius and Attis as nearly one and the same. Demosthenes is deploying peripheral ritual to disparage his opponent. It is unlikely that Demosthenes' description refers to a ritual as it was actually practiced, given the hostile purpose that the passage serves in the speech. Yet it is noteworthy that Demosthenes describes Aeschines' involvement in marginal practices, all jumbled together, a hodgepodge of nonmainstream ritual.

When it comes to Demosthenes' own attention to divinities, however, he takes an altogether different tack, aligning himself with deities of another sort. Earlier in the speech, the orator had paused and lingered, quite dramatically, to invoke Pythian Apollo along with other gods and goddesses connected with the native soil of Attica. During the Classical period, orators do not stand up and proclaim publicly that they themselves are devotees of nonmainstream, foreign cult like that of Sabazius or Attis. Rather, they choose to associate their opponents with such activity.

Dionysus was the recipient of a number of festivals at Athens. The Great Dionysia at Athens is a different kind of ritual activity from the maenadism portrayed in *Bacchae*, even though the Great Dionysia is in honor of the same divinity that the maenads in Euripides' play worship. The Great Dionysia had the backing of the Athenian state; it was a festival during which Athenian power was on display in the heart of Athens. By contrast, in the *Bacchae*, the representative of the state, Pentheus, king of Thebes, is very much opposed to the worship of Dionysus. In what follows, I do not discuss statesanctioned rites for Dionysus, like the Great Dionysia. Instead, descriptions of maenadic practices and nonmainstream Dionysiac practices will be my focus.

While our evidence for unofficial Dionysiac worship at Athens during the Classical period is scant, in the opening lines of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, Lysistrata grumbles:

But if someone had called them to a festival of Bacchus, or of Pan, or to Kolias or to a festival of Genetyllis, it wouldn't even be possible to get through with all the kettledrums. But as it is, not one single woman is present here.

(1–3)

Lysistrata, who wishes to put a stop to the Peloponnesian War by holding a sexstrike, is upset

because the women she has convened for the serious task of warprotest have not arrived. If she had called them to a festival, she explains, like that for Dionysus, or Pan, or Aphrodite (Kolias and Genetyllis seem to have to do with Aphrodite), the women would be there in droves with their kettledrums. The ritual that she describes in honor of Dionysus at Athens is one that has an unofficial nature, and that seems to involve groups of women and kettledrum playing (Parker (1996) 161–62 and 191–94; (2005) 325).

Euripides' *Bacchae*, more than any other extant play, offers an extended meditation on foreign, nonestablished religious practice. Three elements are consistently emphasized, as the king of Thebes describes the women who revere Dionysus as sexobsessed, drunk on wine, and associated with the clatter of *tympana*. The first words that Pentheus utters clearly formulate his position that the women who have left their homes for Mt Cithaeron to honor Dionysus are, in fact, worshipping Aphrodite: "The pretext is that they are maenad priestesses, but in reality they serve Aphrodite before Bacchus" (215–25). Dionysus, in the prologue to the play, tells the audience that he has arrived in Thebes, and that he has disguised himself as a foreigner. Pentheus does not know Dionysus is Dionysus and, what is more, he does not believe Dionysus is a god. Pentheus' position is, rather, that Dionysus is merely a charlatan, some sort of wandering magicianwizard (*goês*, 234). Since Pentheus cannot conceive that the women are worshipping Dionysus, he believes that they must be "worshipping" Aphrodite. *Ta aphrodisia*, "the things of Aphrodite," is one way that an ancient Greek could say "sex." And anxieties about uncontrolled sex and, more specifically, questions of paternity and illegitimate children loom large in this play. Pentheus associates the Theban women's activity with uncontrolled sexual activity and with the goddess Aphrodite.

The inextricability of Aphrodite and Dionysus in *Bacchae* is underscored by still another character, as the messenger explains to Pentheus, "when wine is no longer present there is no Aphrodite, and there is no longer any other pleasure for men" (773–74). Dionysus is of course the god of wine (we are told in the play that Dionysus introduced it to humans), and he is closely identified with the liquid since at one point Teiresias remarks that Dionysus, "is poured out to the gods" (284). Pentheus' first words and his vivid image of women on the slopes of Mt Cithaeron with their wine mixing bowls is but the first of several instances when Pentheus characterizes the women as bibulous and associates Dionysiac worship with wine.

Pentheus, then, associates the women's practices with sex and with drinking. But it is the kettledrums that really get to him. In the prologue to *Bacchae*, Dionysus orders his band of followers to strike their *tympana* so that the city of Cadmus may see (61). In this formulation the persistent thumping sound becomes a spectacle. The *tympana* are mentioned again in the *parodos* (first choral ode), and it is likely that the Chorus even had the instruments with them given that they refer to *this* kettledrum (124). Pentheus is most disturbed by the kettledrums when he exclaims that he will put a stop to the racket and threatens to make the women slaves at the looms (511–14).

Meanwhile, despite Pentheus' insistence that it is sex, wine, and kettledrums that characterize the women's ritual, the messenger reports that the women are, rather, conducting themselves chastely and temperately (686). The messenger goes on to explain that they are "not as you say,

drunk on wine and the sound of the pipe, slinking off to deserted spots and hunting Aphrodite through the forest” (686–88). The messenger’s remark is a succinct formulation of Pentheus’ triadic characterization of maenadic activity, and, moreover, in the messenger’s description *auloi* (pipes), rather than the percussion instrument, provide the orgiastic music (or, rather, do *not* provide the orgiastic music, since the messenger asserts it is not happening).

While the messenger manages to witness maenadic activity and return unscathed, Pentheus does not fare so well. Despite Pentheus’ hostility to Dionysus and the maenads, by the end of the play Pentheus becomes precisely what he despises, namely, a participant in maenadic practices. By the end of the play, Pentheus finds the rites for Dionysus irresistible. Despite Pentheus’ hostility to Dionysiac ritual, his aversion to the practice, Pentheus too is drawn into the Dionysiac sphere.

Pentheus’ characterization of maenadic activity in *Bacchae* is a typical reaction (at least as far as the Athenian imagination is concerned) to a particular kind of foreign ritual in the *polis*. Other Classical Athenian texts concerned with such religious activity describe these practices in similar ways, and Pentheus’ description of the maenads may be compared with an experience that Xuthus describes in Euripides’ *Ion* (for further discussion of the play, see Griffiths in this volume). After Xuthus learns that Ion is his son, Ion and Xuthus attempt to figure out who Ion’s mother could be (550–54). Xuthus reveals that, years before, he participated in ceremonies for Bacchus in Delphi. He admits that it was likely that Ion was conceived when Xuthus was “in the throes of Bacchic pleasures” (553).

The passage from *Ion* associates Dionysiac ritual and sex just as in Pentheus’ descriptions in *Bacchae*. As a result of the Dionysiac ritual in which Xuthus took part, an illegitimate child was produced (or rather *notionally* produced, since within the context of the play it turns out that this is, in fact, not how Ion came to be conceived). Nevertheless it is clear at this moment in the play that the Dionysiac festival that Xuthus attended is understood to be the kind of event where this sort of thing could easily transpire—sex with a participant on the part of an over eager spectator, resulting in a child. It is revealed during the investigation spearheaded by Ion that Xuthus was, to some degree, a participant in the ritual. Of course Xuthus is a man and maenadic worship of Dionysus is predominantly associated with women (Henrichs (1978) 133). But like the situation in *Bacchae* when Pentheus is overcome by the Dionysiac, the dividing line between spectator and participant becomes a bit blurry. Like Pentheus, Xuthus is brought into the *thiasos*, the maenadic group. Maenadic ritual (at least in the Athenian imagination) was troubling to Classical Athenians, and texts that underscore the breakdown between spectator and participant and showcase unsuspecting men drawn into the Dionysiac sphere emphasize these concerns (cf. Scullion (2013)).

Classical Athenian literary descriptions of the Adonia (or Adonis festival), another foreign ritual at Athens involving groups of women, confirm the picture from *Bacchae* and *Ion*. The way that Athenians conceptualize foreign ritual is consistent. At the Adonia, a festival in honor of Aphrodite and Adonis, who is from the East, women gathered together in groups, cultivated “gardens of Adonis,” and climbed atop houses by means of ladders. There, the women mourned the death of Adonis by singing lamentations (Winkler (1990); Detienne (1994);

Oakley and Reitzammer (2005); Reitzammer (2008) and (2016)). The Adonis festival and maenadic worship of Dionysus look similar in texts that imagine them. For example, Moschion, a character in Menander's *Samia* (38–49) experiences a group of women holding an Adonis festival. As he explains, the activity disturbed his sleep; he looked on for a while as a spectator, but eventually joined in the festivities. In the end, he got a girl pregnant. Much of the rest of the play is concerned with the illegitimate child that resulted from Moschion's participation in the Adonis festival.

Menander's *Samia* revisits the issues seen in *Bacchae* and *Ion*. Even though the Adonia is a different ritual in honor of a different divinity, it is nevertheless described in ways that evoke descriptions of ecstatic Dionysiac worship. The tendency to associate foreign, female ritual activities with sex in the cases of Pentheus and Xuthus, is, once again, emphasized with Moschion's confession of the pregnancy. Again for Moschion, the distinction between spectator and participant is blurred, inasmuch as he joins in the Adonis festival. The same descriptive cluster, then, surrounds another foreign ritual, suggesting that it is part of a much larger discourse surrounding a particular kind of religious experience, a typical reaction to certain types of ritual practice at Athens.

Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* depicts another disgruntled representative of the *polis* who, like Pentheus, is faced with a “flareup” of female ritual activity (for a discussion of foreign cult and *Lysistrata*, see Reitzammer 2016). *Lysistrata* was produced in 411, a few years after the failed Sicilian expedition, and a scholion (an ancient note on the play) indicates that the play had an alternative title *Women at the Adonis Festival*. An unnamed Official stumbles onstage to find women occupying the Acropolis and holding a sexstrike in order to stop the Peloponnesian War:

Official: Has the depravity of the women caught fire for everyone to see, and all their *tympanaplaying* and cries of “Sabazius!” and this festival of Adonis on the rooftops, which once I was hearing when I was in the Assembly? Demonstratus was saying—may he rot —“Sail to Sicily!” and meanwhile his wife was dancing away and saying “Alas for Adonis!” And Demonstratus was saying to levy Zacynthian hoplites and she, rather tipsy, was up there on the roof saying, “Beat your breast for Adonis!” But he rammed it through, Demonstratus did, that man hated by the gods, that polluted Cholozyges. Such are the unruly acts from these women.

(387–398)

The pattern recurs: sex, drugs, and kettledrums. First, the Official characterizes the women as oversexed and unruly. The word translated here as “depravity” is *truphê*, a loaded term connoting feminine excess, and one of the charges levied against foreign cult in antiquity (Parker (1996) 162). The women of *Lysistrata* are very much associated with sex/Aphrodite through their denial of sex, since, as they deny *ta aphrodisia* (sex) to their husbands, they become all the more desirable. Once again, the association between female ritual practice and drinking appears, as the Official describes the woman as a little tipsy, while the thudding *tympana* continue to be a key component in the portrayal of the ritual. What is more, in *Lysistrata*, the spectator is drawn into the ritual. By the time *Lysistrata* and her friends are

finished with him, the Official is dressed as a woman and given a veil and a sewing basket (529–38). Soon after, the women hold a mock funeral for him, as he is dressed as a corpse, becoming a kind of Adonis figure (599–613). The Official, who had earlier been so opposed to the ritual practices of the women in his *polis*, is metaphorically killed. This is precisely what happens to Pentheus in *Bacchae* who had been so hostile to the maenads, though in Pentheus' case his death is not on the level of metaphor. For the Official in *Lysistrata*, it does not really matter which of those divinities the women are worshipping, Sabazius, Dionysus, or Aphrodite; it does not really matter what specific ritual cries they make—"euoi!" (the cry that the maenads make when they revere Dionysus) or "Alas for Adonis!" It is just a lot of racket, so much noise to his ears, and such a formulation recalls Demosthenes' similar movement from Attis to Sabazius worship in *On the Crown*.

Like Demosthenes, the Official in *Lysistrata* and Pentheus in *Bacchae* dismiss the ritual practice that unnerves them as socially marginal and foreign. Yet, in *Lysistrata*, the ritual celebrated by women on the rooftops invades the male space of debate. And, since the women are foretelling the deaths that will occur as a result of the failed Sicilian expedition, the play asserts the validity of the voices of those participating in foreign activities.

Likewise, Pentheus in the *Bacchae* tries to minimize the effects of foreign ritual on his *polis*, by ordering that the city gates be shut immediately and by attempting to hunt down and contain what he imagines to be a few renegades at Thebes. Yet, in *Bacchae*, despite Pentheus' attempts to dismiss the ritual activity for Dionysus as merely marginal and foreign, Dionysus sets the whole city of Thebes dancing, including the king of Thebes himself, as he heads out to the mountains, carefully adjusting his dress and his *mitra* to watch his mother and the maenads.

In conclusion, by examining the ways that Athenians conceived of a variety of nonmainstream rituals, by looking closely at descriptions of what happens when groups of women get together to perform foreign rituals, it is possible to tease out a precise cluster of elements that recur. Characters in maleauthored texts describe women who get together in these groups as sex obsessed, drunk, and accompanied by kettledrums, precisely the way maenads are described in *Bacchae*. In addition, the distinction between spectator and participant simply does not hold when it comes to these sorts of rituals. Instead, the individuals who are describing the religious activity in all of their stereotypical language are also participating in the very same activities. The spectator—Pentheus, Xuthus, Moschion, the Official in *Lysistrata*—repeatedly becomes precisely that which he describes, and what is more, in the case of Pentheus and the Official in the *Lysistrata*, the spectator becomes precisely that which he despises. Ultimately, the preoccupation in all of these texts concerning the collapse of the boundary between spectator and participant suggests Athenian concerns about the effects of such ritual practices upon the *polis*.

We began with the old interpretive problem—is the *Bacchae* (or was Euripides) pro or antiDionysus? It is certain that Dionysus and his ritual are irresistible (whether one believes that Dionysiac practices result in beneficial or detrimental effects on the *polis*). While it would be unwise to read the *Bacchae* as a simple reflection of ritual practices or as a simple reflection of Euripides' own religious beliefs, at the same time, it would be a mistake to write

off this valuable document as pure myth, having nothing to do with contemporary Athenian religion. The presentation of cultural material pertaining to foreign practices at Athens offered here contextualizes the *Bacchae* within a much broader discourse about foreign ritual at Athens, providing a deeper awareness of the historical importance of mythical maenads at Athens during the Classical period.

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FURTHER READING

For an introduction to the *Bacchae*, a balanced discussion of the scholarship, and a thorough bibliography, an excellent place to start is Mills (2006). Dodds (1960) and Seaford (1996) provide commentaries on the play. For a detailed and informative introduction to the god Dionysus, see Seaford (2006), and see also Carpenter and Faraone (1993). Burkert (1985) and Parker (1996) and (2005) both offer authoritative accounts of Dionysus and Greek religion more generally. For Dionysus’ underworld associations, see Graf and Johnston (2007). Henrichs has published extensively on the play and on Dionysus (see, for example, Henrichs (1978) and (1993). Goff (2004) provides an introduction to the growing scholarly interest in Greek religion and gender. For gender and the *Bacchae*, see Zeitlin (1996), Wohl (2005) and Buxton (2009). On metatheater, see Foley (1980) and Segal (1997). All translations are my own. I would like to thank John Gibert, Mark Griffith, David Jacobson, and Leslie Kurke for reading earlier drafts of this chapter.