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Notes on Athenian Drama as Ritual Myth-Telling within the Cult of Dionysos*

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1. Countless books and articles have been written on Greek drama. It is practically impossible for one person to read all these studies without losing the trail in the jungle of more or less pertinent theories and interpretations of the plays, their authors, their metaphors, messages, formal conventions, structures of thought, hidden meanings, and so on. The predominant approach over recent decades has been philological (and that of literary criticism): ancient dramas are seen as literature and the surviving texts are analyzed as the literary products of a particular author. Indubitably, this kind of study can illustrate the style and methods of individual authors and more generally the conventions of drama conceived of as a literary genre. But we must remember that for the contemporary Athenian audience the plays were not literary texts. Especially in recent years, perhaps as a partial counter-reaction, there has emerged a variety of new approaches to Greek drama; among them the anthropologically oriented one made famous by French scholars and the one that concentrates on questions connected with how the plays were actually performed on stage.[1]

The present contribution is not based on the reading of the extant dramatic texts but focuses on the role of drama in the determinate cultural-historical context of the *polis,* the city-state of Athens. I shall be arguing that drama in Athens is an integral part of the Dionysiac cult and had a collective importance being an institution organized and maintained by the *polis,* and that it is misleading to consider this phenomenon as pure

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[1] For some recent trends, cf. M. Kaimio, 'Understanding Greek Tragedy', The Finnish Institute at Athens. Inaugural Lectures 21-22 May 1985, 1986, 5-12.

entertainment or as pure expression of creative spontaneity of individual authors. In the first part (section 2) I have found it necessary to discuss briefly some facts concerning drama that should be known to every student of ancient Greek culture. However, the grouping together and commentary on these issues form an indispensable basis for the subsequent treatment.[2]

2. Of crucial importance to the present theme is the relationship of Greek theatre to the cultural field that we are accustomed to call 'religion'. A widely held opinion is that although it *originates* somehow in the religious sphere, fifth-century Athenian drama has little or nothing to do with religion itself; at most one is expected to find reflections of the personal religious sentiments of individual authors (such as the "monotheism" in Aeschylus, the "enlightened" criticism of traditional religion in Euripides), glimpses of contemporary religious practices or ritual survivals (sacrifice, lamentations, hymns, dances, and the use of masks).

A more organic theory of the ritual origin of drama than that of collecting survivals was formulated at the beginning of this century by the so-called Cambridge School of Classical Anthropology.[3] Its representatives

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[2] The basic facts of Greek Drama can be read in various manuals. The Dramatic Festivals of Athens by A. Pickard-Cambridge (2d ed. revised by J. Gould and D.M. Lewis, Oxford 1968) is important for details on the public presentation of plays. In this paper, which does not in any way aim to be exhaustive, references to scholarly discussion have been intentionally kept to a minimum. On the whole, I would like to acknowledge my debt to the studies by A. Brelich, 'Aspetti religiosi del dramma greco', Dioniso 39 (1965) 82-94; 'Aristofane: commedia e religione', in M. Detienne (ed.), Il mito. Guida storica e critica, Bari 1975 (4th ed. 1989), 104-118 (originally in Acta Class. Debr. 5 [1969] 21-30); I Greci e gli dei, Napoli 1985, 106-111, and to some more recent treatments of drama in classical Athenian society, especially those of O. Longo, 'The Theater of the Polis', in J.J. Winkler and F.I. Zeitlin (eds.), Nothing to do with Dionysos? Athenian Drama in Its Social Context, Princeton 1990, 12-19 (originally in Italian in Dioniso 49 [1978] 5-13) and S. Goldhill, 'The Great Dionysia and Civic Ideology', ibid., 97-129 (revised version of a paper published in JHS 107 [1987] 58-76). A.F.H. Bierl's recent book Dionysos und die griechische Tragödie: Politische und 'metatheatralische' Aspekte im Text, Tübingen 1991, reached me only after I had finished the present manuscript. I have inserted in notes a few references to this study, the purpose of which, as the subtitle shows, is however to analyze the presence of Dionysos in the texts of the plays - a task completely different from that undertaken here.

[3] This school followed the path trodden by Sir James Frazer and included Jane Harrison, F.M. Cornford, A.B. Cook and Gilbert Murray (actually Oxonian). A critical survey of these theories is provided by R. Friedrich, 'Drama and Ritual', in Drama and Religion (Themes in Drama 5), Cambridge 1983, 159-190. Cf. also R. Ackerman, The Myth and Ritual School: J.G. Frazer and the Cambridge Ritualists, New York-London 1991. The seeds of this kind of ritual theory are to be found in Nietzsche's Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik (1872), cf. Friedrich, 161-162; Ackerman, 97-100.

argued among other things that Dionysos was a personified year, a year-spirit (they used the unattested Greek term *eniautos daimon*) who is imagined to die and undergo rebirth each year. The theatrical drama would then have evolved from magical fertility rituals and presentations of this year-god's life-story so that the ritual pattern was still present in the extant plays. Such opinions, often based on bold assumptions, were received with criticism by many contemporary classicists and are nowadays rejected in the research into Greek theatre as well as Greek religion. In fact, the purely literary approach which tends to detach Greek drama from its living context and deny its connections with religion gained strength in the atmosphere of reaction against the Cambridge scholars.[4]

However, in this paper we are not interested in the origin of drama or in examples of ritual details contained in the plays. Besides, we should speak of many origins rather than a single origin since it should be clear that drama did not result from an evolution on its own but was a deliberate creation of the *polis* of Athens.[5] The establishment of tragedy certainly owes much to the cultural policy of Peisistratos and his sons as well as to the activity of Kleisthenes at the end of the sixth century. In the formation process various elements obviously combine to form a new whole. But tracing all the origins does not explain *why* and *for what purpose* the institution was created and maintained. It is this new creation and its function in fifth-century Athens that form the object of the present research.[6]

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4 The whole issue of the historical relationship between ritual and drama has been put on a new footing by F. R. Adrados, Festival, Comedy and Tragedy. The Greek Origins of Theatre, Leiden 1975 (originally in Spanish 1972) who derives drama from "rituals of agricultural religion" but is more data-based than the Cantabrigians, and by W. Morgan and P. Brask, 'Towards a Conceptual Understanding of the Transformation from Ritual to Theatre', Anthropologica 30 (1988) 175-202 who argue that the emergence of theatre in state level societies such as the Athenian *polis* was an adaptive transformation of collective rituals of traditional societies characterized by functions of social control and integration, and that these functions were inherited by drama in the new circumstances.

5 The purport of the fact that drama was an invention has been all too often overlooked in discussions on the origins. A salutary exception is J.-P. Vernant in J.-P. Vernant and P. Vidal-Naquet, Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece, New York 1988, 185-188 (originally in French 1986).

6 This is also the reason why I am not going to dwell on the various recent studies on the connections between tragedy and sacrificial ritual. In these discussions it is a question either of sacrificial origins (W. Burkert, 'Greek Tragedy and Sacrificial Ritual', GBRS 7 [1966] 87-121, cf. Friedrich [n. 3], 167-174; J.-P Guépin, The Tragic Paradox: Myth and Ritual in Greek Tragedy, Amsterdam 1968; R. Girard, Violence and the Sacred, Baltimore-London 1977 [originally in French 1972]) or of sacrificial structures and themes in the plays (e.g. P. Pucci, 'Euripides: The Monument and the Sacrifice', Arethusa 10

For that intent we should bear in mind some incontrovertible facts concerning the plays and the conditions of their presentation. Firstly, the subject matter of at least tragedy (with only rare exceptions)[7] and satyr-play is myth. Comedy was introduced to the festivals somewhat later and it usually dealt with the contemporary world, although always transposing it into an unreal dimension, into an 'other world', which is in a way analogous to the recreation of an unreal mythical world by tragedy. Therefore it would be too simplistic to say that comedy describes contemporary Athens; rather it deliberately depicts something that is *not* the prevailing reality (the city among birds, the revolt of women, the school of Sokrates, etc.). It is also true that comedy is in many ways dependent on tragedy, largely operating with mythical material by refashioning and recreating it.[8]

A good deal of what we know about Greek myth-making derives from tragedy. The tragedians did not invent their plots but narrated traditional tales, although they could within certain limits modify them (cf. below). However the basic fact remains that they narrated myths and one can hardly deny that mythology is a religious phenomenon. Consequently, the protagonists of these narratives are not ordinary human beings but principally mythical heroes of the past who could have public cults in Athens or elsewhere in Greece all the while their vicissitudes were told on stage (examples being the cults of Oidipous, Orestes or Erekhtheus and even that of the children of Medeia). There is an even more explicit link

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[1977] 165-195; H.P. Foley, Ritual Irony: Poetry and Sacrifice in Euripides, Cornell UP 1985). From the present point of view a more stimulating idea is that expressed by J. Svenbro, namely that the very composition and presentation of a mythological narrative at a religious festival may have been considered as a sacrifice to the given god. The poems of Pindar offer support for this idea. If it is applied to drama we could consider all plays as sacrifices to Dionysos. We know that in the Athenian theatre the altar of Dionysos was actually situated on the stage. Cf. J. Svenbro, 'Il taglio della poesia. Note sulle origini sacrificali della poetica greca' in C. Grottanelli and N.F. Parise (eds.), Sacrificio e società nel mondo antico, Roma-Bari 1988, 231-252.

7 As regards the one and only surviving 'historical' tragedy, Aeschylus' Persae, one can remark (as has been done sometimes) that here historical events are strongly mythicized.

8 On myth in comedy, cf. E.W. Handley in The Cambridge History of Classical Literature I, 1985, 370-373. On the programmatic use of the mythological patrimony in Aristophanes' Birds, see B. Zannini Quirini, Nephelokokkygia. La prospettiva mitica degli Uccelli di Aristofane, Roma 1987. Besides, it has been observed that the themes and characters of comedy have much in common with those of *mythological* narratives in other cultures which have as protagonists grotesque and sub-human (also theriomorphic) persons conventionally called "tricksters" in scholary literature. Cf. Brelich, 'Commedia e religione' (n. 2), 114-116.

with the heroic cult when at the end of the tragedy its foundation is mentioned or some kind of allusion to it is included.[9] This factor, which to literary-minded critics may seem somehow superfluous as regards the structure of the play, nevertheless helps us to gather the close relation that could exist between the myth narrated and the actual cultic situation.

A further fact to keep in mind is that the plays could not just be performed at any time in any place, but their performance took place during public festivals celebrating Dionysos (never any other god). These festivals were bound to determinate days of the year by the public calendar of the *polis*. Without these conditions there could not have been either dramas or dramatists. In sum, the drama presentations were a public institution; they were organized year after year and supervised by the *polis* in connection with a religious festival of Dionysos.

The most important of these occasions were the Great Dionysia, or the City Dionysia, which were celebrated in late March from the latter part of the sixth century onwards. The performances during other Dionysiac festivals - the Rural Dionysia in December, the Lenaia in January and the Anthesteria in February - are usually considered somewhat more recent and secondary although the festivals themselves probably antedated the Great Dionysia. If we take a closer look at the latter, we see that performing dramas was only one part of a festival which included various other activities. As the temporal setting of the performances was the time of the Dionysia, the spatial setting was that of the cult place of the same god.

At the beginning of the festivities a statue of Dionysos was brought from outside the city in a ritual procession to the theatre (which was actually called the theatre of Dionysos). This was done to re-enact his first mythical arrival from the town of Eleutherai. The theatre included an altar in the middle of the orchestra, and in the immediate vicinity was a small temple dedicated to the same god.

In addition we know that the priest of the god, together with the most important officials of the *polis,* had a special seat of honour in the theatre, and a sacrifice to the god also took place there. The first part of the rituals was dedicated to the performance of dithyrambs. Not very much is known of these but it seems clear that they were ritual dances and choral

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[9] A selection: Aesch. Eum. 778ff.; Soph. Oed.Col. 1518ff.; Eur. Alc. 445ff., Hippol. 1423ff., Iph.T. 1449ff., Med. 1378ff.

songs in honour of Dionysos. The organization of the festival was one of the responsibilities of the *arkhon,* the chief magistrate. It should perhaps be added that the public itself was not a casual one but to a great extent coincidental with the civic community of the *polis.*[10]

3. If one examines this temporal-calendrical, spatial and socio-political system without prejudice, it is very difficult not to see here a ritual activity organized by the *polis* and performed by its citizens. The presence of Dionysos in every phase is so predominant that I would say the dramatic production ought to be seen as more closely connected with this cult than it usually is. That is to say: it should be seen as an integral part of the Dionysiac ceremonies, not only as loosely connected with them. As it is clear that all the other components of the festival are clearly cultic and ritual, why could not the representation of the dramas be cultic and ritual alike? Do we do justice to the historical and religious context if we isolate a part of the ritual complex and view it only as a separate phenomenon?

As to the ritual character of drama in fifth-century Athens there prevail many misconceptions. To take a random example, in the recent and authoritative Cambridge History of Classical Literature we read that tragedy was not a ritual, "having none of that rigid repetitive character by which ritual is marked".[11] But it is exactly the character that it possesses, the performances being staged every year at the same time in the same place in the same ritual surroundings. The misunderstanding perhaps derives from the fact that the plays themselves were always different. However, this does not constitute a problem if we consider all tragic performances as public myth-telling situations.[12] Myths are always told although *which* myths are told may vary. Nevertheless they all formed part of the inherited mythological patrimony of the very society to which both the narrator (the dramatist) and his audience belonged.

At this point a few words may be timely to avoid eventual misunderstandings. Referring to the dramatist as myth-teller does not mean that he is merely a passive mediator of inherited material. Anthropological and religious-historical research has frequently dealt with problems related

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10 This is emphasized by Longo (n. 2), 13-16.

11 R.P. Winnington-Ingram in The Cambridge History of Classical Literature I, 262 (with a reference to B. Vickers, Towards Greek Tragedy, London 1973, 41-42).

12 I now find this opinion expressed in a most concise way also by D. Sabbatucci: "la tragedia è un rito di narrazione di miti" (Il mito, il rito e la storia, Roma 1978, 139).

to the transmission of tradition and to the ways in which the tradition is retold. It has been observed that myths are not formally static and monolithic but reworked and recreated with every act of narration. It has also been pointed out that the narration of myths was not a form of entertainment as we understand the word but usually had a profound collective importance for the given society.[13]

Of course the Athenian dramatist as myth-teller certainly reshaped the tradition. But I believe that here the impact of individuality has often been exaggerated at the cost of the traditionality of the material and the collective nature of the performing conditions. There is no point in denying that the dramatist as an individual artist can re-elaborate the tradition in keeping with his personal points of view (that we moderns are then accustomed to label in our studies as political, religious, philosophical, moral, critical, artistic, or suchlike), but as well, and perhaps even more significantly, he can do so from the point of view of the *polis*, the institution that had charged him to tell myths on the public occasion of the Dionysia. One illustrative example of this kind of reworking *ad maiorem gloriam Athenarum* is how, in narrating episodes of the Theban cycle, the dramatic authors constantly portray the city of Thebes as a negative model, a kind of anti-Athens, where - in order to affirm contemporary Athenian values - they depicted a world which served as a contrast.[14]

4. I have not yet referred to an important morphological feature in the dramatic performances that connects them even more to cultic

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[13] It would be superfluous to discuss here various theories on myth and its narration. Let us only quote the clear formulation of U. Bianchi on the validity of myth in the society which narrates it: "Il mito, laddove è 'valido', è impegnato nella vita e nell'ideologia: anzi, ne fa parte integrante, e in esso si riflette, sotto un certo rispetto, l'esperienza ideologica e quella esistenziale della popolazione che lo ha come proprio" (Problemi di storia delle religioni, 2d ed., Roma 1986, 148). Recent theoretical discussions on Greek myth include e.g. W. Burkert, Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual, Berkeley 1979, 3-56; F. Graf, Griechische Mythologie, München 1985, 1-7; J. Bremmer in J. Bremmer (ed.), Interpretations of Greek Mythology, London-Sydney 1987, 1-9; C. Calame, Thésée et l'imaginaire athénien, Lausanne 1990, 15-68; G. Nagy, Greek Mythology and Poetics, Cornell UP 1990, 8-9; G.A. Samonà, Il sole, la terra, il serpente, Roma 1991, 21-52.

[14] Cf. Sabbatucci (n. 12), 117-141 and F.I. Zeitlin, 'Thebes: Theater of Self and Society in Athenian Drama', Nothing to do with Dionysos? (n. 2), 130-167 (published also in J.P. Euben [ed.], Greek Tragedy and Political Theory, Berkeley 1986, 101-141). Another good example of reading the dramatic production with regard to the value system of the *polis* is provided by E. Hall, Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy, Oxford 1989. This studies how the dramatists conceptualized the barbarian as the negative embodiment of Athenian civic ideals.

activities, namely, that they were competitions, *agones*. The competitions in various skills are a specifically Greek form of ritual and are found in numerous heroic and divine cults.[15] And it is significant that competitions were organized in myth-telling as is evidenced by rhapsodic contests.[16] Also in archaic choral lyric performances we are dealing with public and to some degree mimetic myth-telling in a ritual context.[17] These parallels are of vital importance for the understanding of the structure of the Athenian cult enacted at the Great Dionysia.

5. One reason for the detachment of the dramatic production from its religious setting is certainly that many scholars have been victims of the Aristotelian theorization of tragedy. Aristotle's Poetics has been read as if it should reflect the opinions prevailing in fifth-century Athens when the tragedies were composed. However, in Aristotle we have only one opinion (or, more generally, that of the philosophical discourse of the time). In any case it is an opinion expressed in a culturally and politically different *polis* from the one which introduced the dramatic festivals. To put the matter in chronological perspective, we need only remark that over 150 years separate Aristotle from Thespis, the first known tragedian.

In fact, in an interesting but little known study, M. Massenzio has revealed a process of desacralization in the Aristotelian treatment of tragedy.[18] In other words, Aristotle has deliberately dissociated the tragic phenomenon from the sacral sphere. But in so doing he could not avoid using Dionysiac terminology and imagery so that the "poetic" in Aristotle

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15 Also in some Dionysos cults, e.g. annual contests in music, swimming and boat-racing were arranged at Hermion (Paus. 2,35,1).

16 To see the rhapsodic contests at public festivals as occasions for pure entertainment is erroneous since the festivals were dedicated to gods and the performances were markedly formal and ritual. The epic narration was preceded by a prayer (*prooimion*) to the given god. In terms of morphology, the narrative part itself could be a hymn (cf. the so-called Homeric Hymns). The performances served as an instrument for cultural indoctrination and tended to integrate the citizens into the order of the *polis*, as is noted recently by B. Gentili, Poetry and Its Public in Ancient Greece, Baltimore-London 1988 (originally in Italian 1984), 156-157.

17 Cf. J. Herington, Poetry into Drama: Early Tragedy and the Greek Poetic Tradition, Univ. of California Press 1985, 20-31. Note that Alcman's lyrics seem to have been composed for competitions. There is of course a historical relationship between choral performances in general and the evolution of drama. Cf. also n. 32 below.

18 M. Massenzio, 'La poesia come fine: la desacralizzazione della tragedia. Considerazioni sulla Poetica di Aristotele', Religioni e civiltà 1 (1972) 285-309. On the importance of this article see also Sabbatucci (n. 12), 145-151.

(characterized by otherness, enthusiasm, *mania,* breaking of equilibrium, etc.) largely corresponds with the "Dionysiac" in Greek religion. Thus Aristotle too, *nolens volens,* brings us to the world of Dionysos.

6. We have seen above that dramatic performances were an organic part of the Dionysiac rites of Athens. But what actually was their significance in that context? Certainly they did not bring to the stage mythological accounts concerning the god himself with the exception, for instance, of Euripides' Bacchae.[19] It is an ancient (and modern) proverbial saying that the tragedies have "nothing to do with Dionysos" (οὐδὲν πρὸς τὸν Διόνυσον), a commonplace that has caused much perplexity among scholars.[20] The Dionysiac function of Greek drama must however be sought elsewhere, not in the dramatic portrayal of the god.

A solution to the problem was formulated some time ago by A. Brelich[21] and his intuitions have been validated by more recent (mostly independent) research both on drama and Dionysos. According to Brelich, comedy and tragedy have a complementary function as to the edification of the *polis*. His theory might be briefly summarized as follows: whereas tragedy, which is situated in the mythical and irreversible past, brings on stage conflictual and often cruel episodes where the superhuman heroes appear guilty of *hubris* and other kinds of excess,[22] comedy visualizes the other excess, the subhuman chaotic world with ridiculous and 'tricksteric' protagonists whose behaviour is markedly uncivilized. Ultimately these

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19 For the Dionysiac in the Bacchae, cf. R. Seaford, 'Dionysiac Drama and the Dionysiac Mysteries', CQ 31 (1981) 252-275; C. Segal, Dionysiac Poetics and Euripides' Bacchae, Princeton 1982; J.-P. Vernant in Myth and Tragedy (n. 5), 381-412; H.S. Versnel, Ter Unus. Isis, Dionysos, Hermes: Three Studies in Henotheism, Leiden 1990, 96-205; Bierl (n. 2), 177-218. In Bierl's book one can find a comprehensive discussion on the role of Dionysos in all extant dramatic texts.

20 Souda, s.v. τραγῳδία. According to the Souda, the reason for this expression was exactly that the tragedies did not usually deal with Dionysos. Cf. also Plut. Q.conv. 615a; Zenob. 5,40.

21 Cf. the bibliography in n. 2.

22 Note that the *heroes* of Greek mythology were not exclusively noble and imperfect figures (as one could expect judging from the modern use of the word 'hero') but characterized with various ambiguous traits (violence, one-sidedness, cheating, madness, etc.), and this in accordance with their belonging to an earlier mythical time when the world had not yet reached its present normality. See A. Brelich, Gli eroi greci: Un problema storico-religioso, Roma 1958. On the prominence of cruelty and violence in drama, see now M. Kaimio, 'Violence in Greek Tragedy', in T. Viljamaa, A. Timonen and C. Krötzl (eds.), Crudelitas (Medium Aevum Quotidianum, Suppl.) 1992, 28-40.

two models[23] are to be considered in negative terms with respect to the actual civilized life in a civilized *polis,* and the spectator is thus in a way warned against transgressing the critical line that could land him in these 'other' worlds. The final achievement of drama is thus the (periodical and ritual) reinforcement of the civic ideology, equilibrium and value system of the *polis*. The dissolution of normal order as these two models are ritually enacted during the Dionysiac festival is followed by the re-establishment of the order of the *polis* which, as was said, is now understood as the best possible. This, notes Brelich (but without any further discussion), is structurally and ideologically analogous with many Dionysiac myths where the god arrives from outside and creates a state of disorder (e.g. by causing ecstasy or *mania*) after which a new, more complete order is achieved.

7. On the whole there seems nowadays to be an increasing body of opinion in favour of the idea that drama ultimately validates the present social, political and cosmic order.[24] Other arguments can certainly be added in support of this line of interpretation opened by Brelich.[25] It seems to me methodologically correct, above all because it is not an abstract ahistorical construction but finds support, for instance, in the very function of myth (the establishing and sanctioning of actual reality), in the typically Greek idea of the necessity of avoiding any excess (crystallized in such catchwords as "σωφροσύνη" or "μηδὲν ἄγαν"), and in some aspects

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23 Here, as also Brelich remarks in 'Commedia e religione' (n. 2), 112, we come near the Aristotelian statement that tragedy represents people as superior to men as they normally are, comedy as inferior (Poet. 1448a17).

24 E.g. C. Segal, Interpreting Greek Tragedy: Myth, Poetry, Text, Cornell UP 1986, 25, 65; Morgan and Brask (n. 4), 178, 187-189; Longo (n. 2), 16; Hall (n. 14), 2; D.C. Pozzi, 'The Polis in Crisis' in D.C. Pozzi and J.M. Wickersham (eds.), Myth and the Polis, Cornell UP 1991, 126-163. Cf. what was said about the rhapsodic competitions (above, n. 16), another occasion for public myth-telling.

25 Goldhill (in diverse arguments and without quoting the Italian scholar) comes to conclusions that in some aspects resemble those of Brelich, maintaining that "it is the interplay between norm and transgression enacted in the tragic festival that makes it a Dionysiac occasion" (cit. n. 2, 127). He also points out the complementary character of tragedy and comedy: "the tensions and ambiguities that arise from tragedy to comedy, all fall under the aegis of the one god, the divinity associated with illusion and change, paradox and ambiguity, release and transgression" (128). However, there is a difference between the two scholars: while Goldhill's main point is that drama questions the norms in the sphere of Dionysiac transgression, Brelich thinks that it rather reaffirms them thus stressing the reintegrative moment in the Dionysiac experience.

of Dionysos and his festival. It is on these latter aspects that we are going to focus next.

As was said, Dionysos is a god who comes from outside - a "visiting" god.[26] During the Athenian dramatic festivals too, as in many myths, he actually only visited the *polis*. The Dionysiac event basically consists of three phases: the previous state, the alteration of that state (which has been called enthusiasm, ecstasy, transgression, dissolution, etc.) and, finally, a new more complete state. This scheme can be applied also to the Great Dionysia. We have seen above that every year at the beginning of the festival the statue of the god was taken to the temple outside the city and then ritually made to return. It was situated in the theatre where it was present during the drama performances. The removal of the statue was a sign of the separation from the normal state and its arrival in the theatre meant the beginning of the altered state. Drama in a way transfers the *polis* into a Dionysiac dimension for a determinate period. When the Dionysiac ends after the festival, the community is restored to the everyday reality. But the community is not exactly the same as before: it has been reinforced by the Dionysiac experience.

This three-structured pattern is in fact the same as that of every transition rite or rite of passage.[27] On this basis we could say that we have here a collective transition rite organized by the *polis* in order each year to reintegrate its citizens. Collective transition rites often are situated in seasonal periods of passage as for instance the different kinds of New Year festivals in many societies. Indeed the Dionysia took place in a moment of seasonal change in the springtime.[28] There is thus a clear connection between the renewal of nature and the renewal of the community through the Dionysiac festival. The drama performances represent the liminal stage

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26 Cf. the famous definition "der kommende Gott" in W.F. Otto, Dionysos. Mythos und Kultus, 2d ed. Frankfurt 1948. Dionysos as a stranger is now discussed by M. Detienne, Dionysos at Large, Harvard UP 1989 (originally in French 1986). For a brief general survey on the god, cf. W. Burkert, Greek Religion: Archaic and Classical, Oxford 1985 (originally in German 1977), 161-167.

27 As is known since A. van Gennep (Les rites de passage, Paris 1909) three stages can be distinguished in these rites: 1) separation, 2) the marginal or liminal phase, 3) reaggregation (what we have called here reintegration). For these rites, cf. now also U. Bianchi (ed.), Transition Rites: Cosmic, Social and Individual Order, Roma 1986.

28 This is emphasized also in various sources (cf. Pickard-Cambridge [n. 2], 58-59). The connection of Dionysos with spring is evident also at the somewhat earlier Anthesteria, see, e.g., M. Guarducci, 'Dioniso primaverile ad Atene. Riflessioni sul vaso di Lydos nel museo di Villa Giulia', Numismatica e antichità classiche. Quaderni Ticinesi 9 (1980) 37-62.

in the transition rite. It is noteworthy that in this phase the normal state is usually altered and suspended to make room for something 'other', often conceived of as something disorderly and negative. We have argued above, following Brelich, that what the plays brought to the stage was ultimately negative and against the prevailing order.

We saw that the temporal setting of the Dionysia was a period of passage. In the same way the topographical setting was in a "no-man's land" on the southern slope of the Akropolis between the *polis* with its civic activities and the space dedicated to the gods at the top of the hill. The coincidence of the temporal and spatial location of Dionysos is hardly casual and reveals that liminality is one very essential feature in this Athenian cult complex.[29]

If we continue to use the concept of liminality[30] we can conclude that, during the dramatic performances, the *polis* finds itself in a liminal time, in a liminal place and in a liminal state of mind (the typical Dionysiac change in consciousness between the prior state and the reintegration into it on a new level).

8. It is within the frames of liminality that we must perceive some details in the rites at the Great Dionysia which in a concrete way refer to the acquisition of a new status for certain groups of individuals. Thus in this festival we find an occasion for individual passages in the larger framework of a collective passage concerning the whole *polis*.[31]

One part in the initial procession was played by the *epheboi,* the group of young men between the status of child and adult. At least in the

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29 The interrelation between the calendrical position of the festival of a deity and the topographical position of the cult in archaic *poleis* is a subject for study in its own right. For an early Roman case, see my article 'Iuturna, Carmenta e Mater Larum. Un rapporto arcaico tra mito, calendario e topografia', Opusc. Inst. Rom. Finl. 4 (1989) 65-88. The cult places and festivals did not exist *naturally* but were *culturally* created and organized by the determined community. This statement seems a mere triviality but in fact its implications are not often realized.

30 I am not the first to introduce this term into the discussion on Dionysos, also Segal (n. 19) and R.J. Hoffman, 'Ritual License and the Cult of Dionysos', Athenaeum 67 (1989) 91-115 have used the word to characterize some aspects of the god. However, they have not been interested in the structure of the ritual complex of the Dionysia.

31 Cf. Bianchi (n. 27), 47 on the distinction between the not iterable individual ("aimed at the acquisition of something new [a new status]") and cyclically repeated collective passages ("aimed at the renovation of life, the community's life"). Of course the individual passages are normally connected with the basic interests of the community, above all with its self-reproduction so that a clear-cut distinction is not always possible (Bianchi, 45). We shall see that this is very much true as to the rites performed at the Dionysia.

fourth century the *epheboi,* in their second year of ephebate, gathered in the theatre after which they received the military weapons on behalf of the *polis.*[32] Moreover, orphaned children of men who had died fighting for the *polis* had been educated at state expense, and, when they reached manhood, they paraded fully armed in the theatre.[33] I believe that these public exhibitions of young men in military training are not casual but organically related to the cultic setting of the Dionysia. They reveal the pertinence to the festival of the themes of passage and renewal of the citizen body. Dionysos is in fact often imagined as an eternal adolescent,[34] neither child nor a man, a kind of prototype of those on the threshold of adulthood - in other words, another manifestation of the liminality associated with the god.

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32 The question of the role of the ephebes is admittedly rather complicated for chronological reasons. All our sources are posterior to the classical period. Whether there was an institution of *ephebeia* in classical Athens is not certain. In any case *ephebos* was a denomination for those on the threshold of adulthood (cf. Hdt. 6,83; Aesch. Sept. 665). The most remarkable analysis on ephebate as a liminal period is P. Vidal-Naquet's 'The Black Hunter and the Origin of the Athenian Ephebeia' (an article from 1968, revised version in The Black Hunter, Baltimore 1986, 106-128, to be read together with the essay 'The Black Hunter Revisited', PCPS 32 [1986] 126-144). On the various problems, see A. Brelich, Paides e parthenoi, Roma 1969, 216-226 (perhaps too sceptical); Goldhill (n. 2), 124-125. Here a brief mention may be made of an interesting but somewhat conjectural theory of J.J. Winkler on the origin of the tragic choruses: 'The Ephebes' Song: Tragoidia and Polis' in Nothing to Do with Dionysos? (n. 2), 20-62 (revised version of a paper publishd in Représentations 2 [1985] 27-62). According to Winkler they developed from military dances performed by young warriors. He connects the term *tragoidoi* (used of the members of the chorus) with the verb *tragizein,* which can denote the voice-breaking of those undergoing puberty. The chorus would be, then, representative of the members of the community who were reaching full citizenship. My only comment here is that the whole issue should also be related to the question of to what extent the choral lyric performances in general are ultimately connected with the passage to adulthood. The Pindaric choruses of the Epinicia seem to have been made up of young men (cf. Herington [n. 17], 30) and the Alcmanic mostly of young girls. The function of the Epinicia in an originally initiatory structure is discussed by G. Nagy, Pindar's Homer: The Lyric Possession of an Epic Past, Baltimore 1990, 136-145; in the case of Alcman the initiatory background is quite evident, cf. C. Calame, Les choeurs des jeunes filles en Grèce archaïque I-II, Roma 1977 and, more recently, R. Monaldi, 'L'autodescrizione del coro nel Partenio di Alcmane', SMSR 57 (1991) 253-288.

33 The intimate relation of the parade to the civic ideology in general has been aptly discussed by Goldhill (n. 2), 105-114.

34 Cf. e.g. Segal (n. 19), 159-160. According to Burkert (n. 26), 167 and others the rejuvenation of Dionysos takes place in the middle of the fifth century, but cf. Il. 6,132; H.hymn.Dion. 3. Characteristically there is sometimes also a sexual ambiguity, being an amalgamation of male and female features (e.g. Versnel [n. 19], 133). Also in this way he was representative of young boys whose sex had not yet been socially determined by a transition rite. In various societies documented by anthropologists "i maschi non-iniziati non sono considerati come uomini, bensì o bambini o - in rapporto con sesso - ragazze" (Brelich, Paides e parthenoi [n. 32], 59).

A comparison could be made to what happened in the theatres of Sparta and Arcadia. In the Spartan theatre[35] a competition regularly took place. It was a kind of violent ball-game, played by a group of young men called the *sphaireis*. They represented the age-group that was passing from youth to manhood.[36] In the Arcadian theatres the youth (*neoi*) "showed themselves" once a year in front of the citizens during a festival of choral song called *Apodeixeis*.[37] Why in the theatre? Was it only because it offered a suitable location for these occasions or was it because the ritual activity of precisely this age-group was inherent in the use of the theatrical space?

I think that another comparison, and this time to some archaic Roman data, may prove useful at this point. We know that the Dionysos cult spread throughout the Italic and Etruscan world from the seventh century B.C. onwards. In the Italic areas and in Rome the god was called Liber.[38] Now, the Latin *liber* corresponds etymologically and semantically to the Greek words formed from the root *eleuther-*,[39] and it was no less than Dionysos Eleuthereus who presided over the Athenian festivals (according to the myth because he came there for the first time from the town of Eleutherai). Dionysos Eleuthereus may actually have had a part in the formation process of the early Roman Liber.

The Liberalia, the festival of the god in Rome, took place on the 17th of March, i.e. precisely in the same period of the year as the Athenian Dionysia. Moreover, it included some kind of public spectacles (*ludi*) and the use of masks and ritual license.[40] This morphological affinity is

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35 Discussion on the Spartan theatre is fraught with chronological problems. The tradition speaks of a theatre there as early as the beginning of the fifth century (Hdt. 6,67; Plut. Ages. 21,29; Lucian. Anach. 38), while the oldest archaeological evidence is from the Hellenistic period. A short survey on the question is to be found in D. Musti - M. Torelli (eds.), Pausania. Guida della Grecia III, Milano 1991, 211.

36 This has been explicitly stated by Pausanias (3,14,6) who defines them as οἱ ἐκ τῶν ἐφήβων ἐς ἄνδρας ἀρχόμενοι συντελεῖν. For the initiatory character of this competition, cf. Brelich, Paides e parthenoi (n. 32), 122-123.

37 Polyb. 4,20,12. Cf. Brelich, Paides e parthenoi (n. 32), 187.

38 On the Italic and early Roman Liber-Dionysos there are two recent treatments where the relevant archaeological and literary sources are discussed: A. Mastrocinque, Lucio Giunio Bruto: Ricerche di storia, religione e diritto sulle origini della repubblica romana, Trento 1988, 245-275; E. Montanari, Identità culturale e conflitti religiosi nella Roma repubblicana, Roma 1988, 103-136.

39 Cf. n. 43 below.

40 Cf. G. Piccaluga, Elementi spettacolari nei rituali festivi romani, Roma 1965, 57, 150-152.

undoubtedly important although we are not in a position to speculate about the contents of these performances.

What is more important and more amply documented is a transition rite for the youth that was organized at the Liberalia. The ceremony consisted of sacrifices to Liber and of a procession of young men of the age of seventeen. On this occasion they received the clothes worn by adult male citizens (*toga virilis*) and their names were inscribed in the official lists.[41] The day presents also a martial aspect comparable to the armed parades in the Athenian theatre: the priests of Mars (*Salii*) performed ritual dances in their full armour. This priestly college has often been interpreted as representing the age-set of young warriors.[42] All this accords very well with the etymological explanation of the words *eleuther(eus)* and *liber* as originally denoting the growth of the populace.[43] It is also noteworthy that when we hear of the institution of the earliest real theatrical performances in Rome (from the fourth century B.C. onwards) the sources seem to attribute certain importance in this process to the *iuventus,* a term to be understood, according to J.-P. Morel, as the "classe d'âge militaire".[44]

At any rate, even the many similarities between the Dionysia and the Liberalia (the probable genetic-historical relation between the gods Dionysos and Liber, the spectacular and public character as well as the temporal coincidence of their festivals) justify us in postulating that rites concerning those faced with the military training and entering the world of social adulthood, and, more generally, the idea of the renewal of the community were more pertinent in the Athenian cult than the available evidence at first sight seems to suggest.

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41 For further details, cf. Piccaluga (n. 40), 147-152; Mastrocinque (n. 38), 254-262; Montanari (n. 38), 118-119.

42 Cf. the latest discussion in M. Torelli, 'Riti di passaggio maschili di Roma arcaica', MEFRA 102 (1990) 95-99. The Roman *Salii* would be, then, largely correspondent with Winkler's proto-chorus of Athenian drama (cf. n. 32 above).

43 Both words have been derived from the root *leudh-* (cf. Germ. *Leute*). The Etruscan name for Dionysos, Fufluns, expresses the same idea being formed from the root *pupl-* (cf. Lat. *populus*). See e.g. E. Benveniste, 'Liber et liberi', REL 14 (1936) 51-59; G. De Simone, 'Gli Etruschi a Roma: evidenza linguistica e problemi metodologici', in Gli Etruschi a Roma. Studi in onore di M. Pallottino, Roma 1981, 93-101. For *e-re-u-te-re/i* in the Mycenaean texts from Pylos, cf. J. Puhvel, 'Eleuther and Oinoatis. Dionysiac Data from Mycenaean Greece', E. Bennett (ed.), Mycenaean Colloquium for Mycenaean Studies, Univ. of Wisconsin Press 1966, 51-62.

44 J.-P. Morel, 'La *iuventus* et les origines du théâtre romain (Tite-Live, VII, 2; Valère Maxime, II, 4, 4)', REL 47 (1969) 208-252.

Returning to Athens, it may be noticed *en passant,* and without taking any definite position, that the view outlined above of the Dionysia as a 'political' (from *polis*) occasion for the citizens (of the male sex) including the theme of renewal and reintegration of the *polis* (which is constituted by the citizens) automatically speaks in favour of the absence of women (excluded from citizenship) in the dramatic performances of classical Athens.[45]

9. At the end of section 7 we established the temporal, spatial and 'mental' in-between state, or liminality as we called it, as fundamental notions in the Dionysos cult of the Great Dionysia. In section 8 I hope to have established yet another liminal aspect, namely the ritual participation in the festival of young men between childhood and adulthood. Since Dionysos is a god who brings a transformation, he is likely to appear in contexts where initiation and transition themes can be traced. In these contexts the god figures often in conjunction with Artemis.[46] We have this conjunction also in Athens: Pausanias reports that the small temple of Dionysos from which the statue was annually taken to the city was situated near the sacred precinct of the goddess.[47]

In general the suspension of the normal order and the ritual license that characterized the Dionysia[48] resemble that which takes place in Greek

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45 This is an old and vexed problem without no conclusive evidence in either direction. Recently I participated in a seminar held by Oliver Taplin (University of Helsinki, September 1992) where he quite persuasively argued for the absence of women, mostly on the basis of the texts of the plays, but also referring to the political character of the institution. For references to earlier discussion and ancient testimonia, cf. A. Podlecki, 'Could Women Attend the Theater in Ancient Athens?', Ancient World 21 (1990) 27-43. Two things must be remembered in this connection: 1) women usually played an important part in the Dionysos cults and 2) they undoubtedly attended the ritual procession organized at the beginning of the Dionysia. So, if they were absent, such absence was only during the dramatic performances. Certainly the absence of women would not have been regarded as such an embarrassment in fifth-century Athens as it would be in our contemporary western societies (and as it has been among modern scholars). We have tried to argue in this article that Greek drama was a religious phenomenon and in religious matters there often is a distinction between the male and female spheres. The performances within the Dionysos cult as a male occasion might be compared to the all-female rites in honour of Demeter during the Thesmophoria. (Also this festival was a highly 'political' event in that it aimed at the securing of the birth of new citizens.)

46 M. Massenzio, 'La festa di Artemis Triklaria e Dionysos Aisymnetes a Patrai', SMSR 32 (1968) 101-132; Brelich, Paides e parthenoi (n. 32), 276-277, 477.

47 Paus. 1,29,2.

48 The ritual license in various Dionysos cults has been recently discussed by Hoffman (n. 30).

as well as in other cultures in periods of seasonal change, especially in the New Year. But here it is more important that dissolution, obscenity, transvestism, merry-making and wine-drinking, all typical of these festivities, are features attested in many cults of Dionysos as well.[49] The inclusion of the Great Dionysia in the festival calendar of Athens precisely in this period of the year only strengthens the possibility of reversing the day-to-day reality. The reactualization of the irrevocable mythical past through tragedy or the visualization of the invalidation of prevailing values through comedy were an integral part of this ritual license which was only meant to be temporary and unthinkable outside the sacred time and place of the Dionysiac festival.

10. I would like here to add some substantial cultic facts attested outside Athens but which present striking parallels to the Athenian cult and confirm that there is an intimate link between Dionysos, the drama performances, the theme of dissolution and subsequent re-establishment of the normal order of things, and the annual periodicity.

Pausanias tells about the Dionysiac cult complex in the Corinthian city Sikyon: *once a year* the votaries transported *in procession two statues of Dionysos into the temple of the god,* which is situated *near the theatre.* The statues are called *Bakkheios* and *Lusios* respectively.[50] Now, these epithets can be interpreted as relating to two phases in the Dionysiac experience: to the enthusiastic frenzy (the altered state) and to the

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[49] The merry-making at the Dionysia festivals has sometimes been seen as an indication of their "profanity". This is however dangerously misleading since the incompatibility of the revelry with the category of the "sacred" is a product of a Christian world-view particularly present in northern Christian cultures and not universally valid.

[50] Paus. 2,7,5-6. The whole situation has been analyzed by G. Casadio, 'Antropologia orfico-dionisiaca nel culto di Tebe, Corinto e Sicione', in Sangue e antropologia. Riti e culto (Atti della V settimana di studi), Roma 1987, 191-260. Two statues of Dionysos, *Bakkheios* and *Lusios,* were also exposed together in the agora of the nearby Corinth (Paus. 2,2,6). In Thebes we have Dionysos *Lusios* near the theatre and the cult is celebrated once a year (Paus. 9,16,6). The presence of Dionysos *Bakkheios* in the same place has sometimes been postulated, cf. Casadio, 236. On Naxos we hear of the masks of Dionysos *Bakkheios* and *Meilikhios* (Athen. 3,78c = Aglaosthenes in FGrHist. 499 F 4) obviously manifesting the same idea of two phases in the Dionysiac event.

necessary deliverance from it (the reintegration into the normal state).[51] In fact, the statue of *Bakkheios* was brought at the head of the procession, while that of *Lusios* followed. Here we find represented the two faces of Dionysos which we supposed to have been in action in Athens too when, during the festivities and dramatic performances, the normal order is altered to be subsequently re-established. It is hardly a coincidence that the city of Sikyon is actually mentioned among the scarce and elusive information that has come down on the origins of tragedy: Herodotus mentions the "tragic choruses" at Sikyon which the tyrant Kleisthenes (ca. 610-570) gave back to the cult of Dionysos from that of the hero Adrastos.[52]

As regards the epithet *Lusios* "Liberator", we may refer to a gloss by Photius: Λύσιοι θεοί· οἱ καθάρσιοι.[53] Should we then, after all, seek the origin of the concept of *katharsis* in the Dionysiac sphere as meaning the relief felt in the reintegration into the normal state after the dramatic experience, which - as was suggested above - showed to the participant of the rite something threatening to be avoided, and not in the medical terminology as seems to be the commonly-held view nowadays? [54]

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[51] This has been done as early as E. Rohde, Psyche. Seelencult und Unsterblichkeitsglaube der Griechen II, Freiburg 1898 (2d ed.), 50 ("als Bakcheus weckt Dionysos den heiligen Wahnsinn, den er selbst durch dessen höchste Steigerung zuletzt, als Lysios der Lösung und Besänftigung zuführt"). The opinion of M.P. Nilsson, Griechische Feste von religiöser Bedeutung, Leipzig 1906, 302, that *Lusios* provokes the breaking of the normal state, has been influential. I find, however, Rohde's line of interpretation adopted by many recent studies, e.g. W. Burkert, Ancient Mystery Cults, Harvard UP 1987, 170 n. 130; Casadio (n. 50), 238-239 (with discussion and references); Detienne (n. 26), 25.

[52] Hdt. 5,67. I follow the opinion of Casadio (n. 50), 209 that the tragic choruses had belonged originally to Dionysos. The Herodotean passage has often been interpreted in the sense that Kleisthenes transferred the choruses from their original context (the cult of Adrastos) to the cult of Dionysos.

[53] Phot. s.v. That we are here dealing with the Dionysiac realm is confirmed by another gloss: Λύσιοι τελεταί· αἱ Διονύσου (Phot. and Souda s.v.). Except for the expression *lusioi theoi,* as a divine epithet *lusios* is attested exclusively in connection with Dionysos. Both the verb *luein* and the noun *lusis* can be used of deliverance from somehing disturbing and negative, cf. LSJ s.vv.

[54] For the predominance of the medical interpretation: A.A. Long in The Cambridge History of Classical Literature I, 538 n. 1. Cf. also J. Pigeaud, Folie et cures de la folie chez les médecins de l'antiquité gréco-romaine, Paris 1987, 163-183. The concept of *katharsis* belongs to Dionysos (he causes it in Soph. Antig. 1144; according to Schol. in Pind. Pyth. 3,139 the god is a deliverer, *kathartikos,* from *mania*). A detailed discussion of these problems would, however, take us too far from the principal theme.

11. By way of conclusion, I shall emphasize schematically the main issues that emerge from these notes. I am convinced that the scholarly tradition has tended to overlook or belittle many questions which, in my opinion, call for a more serious assessment and, no doubt, for further investigation. In fact, my way to view the extraordinarily many-faceted phenomenon of Athenian drama is not intended to provide any definitive "truths". I concede that it is possible to apply a variety of other (and perhaps complementary) readings as well when evaluating this phenomenon in its religious and historical context.

1) The formal affinity of drama performances with the ritual competitions that took place in various religious festivals reveals that they can be seen as a particular application of that cult practice.

2) The whole dramatic phenomenon is a cultural creation of the Athenian *polis*. It represents institutionalized ritual myth-telling. This myth-telling - organized and regulated by the *polis* - can happen only once a year, during a time consecrated to Dionysos by the public calendar in a place consecrated to the cult of the same god. It forms thus an integral part of this specifically Athenian form of the Dionysos cult. Both the time (seasonal change) and the place (a zone detached from the normal civic and cultic activities) were connoted by what we might call "liminality".

3) The connection of drama with Dionysiac ideology seems in many respects more significant than is traditionally recognized. Notwithstanding the question of its origins, fifth-century drama, such as it is in the context of the Athenian *polis,* is very much a religious matter. It can be seen in the frames of the ritual license typical of the festivals of Dionysos in that it presents situations that could not (or at least should not) happen in the normal life of the civilized *polis*. Within the three-structured Dionysiac experience drama is situated in the liminal phase of dissolution or alteration of the normal order, which in this way is finally reinforced.

4) Consequently, the Dionysiac festival can be regarded as constituting a kind of passage leading to an annual renewal and consolidation of the community. Ultimately the dramatic performances reaffirm the common values and the 'politic' (from *polis*) ideology. The theme of passage is significantly echoed in the transition rites performed by the youth in connection with these performances.