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The Rites in the Mysteries of Dionysus

The Birth of the Drama

The Greek drama can be apprehended as an extended ritual, originating in the ceremonies of the Dionysus cult. In particular, tragedy derived its origin from the sacrifice of goats and the hymns which were sung on that occasion. *Tragedia* means "song of the male goat" and these hymns later developed into choruses and eventually into tragedy, in the sense of a solemn and purifying drama.

The presence of the god Dionysus is evident in the history and development of the Greek drama at the beginning of the fifth century B.C. and its sudden decline 150 years later. Its rise seems to correspond with the Greek *polis*, where questions of justice and divine law in conflict with the individual were obviously a matter of discussion and where the drama had individual and collective *catharsis* (purifying) in mind.

In this respect Dionysus characterized the essence of the drama, by crossing and transgressing the border between the divine and the human world. When the gods interacted with men in the Homeric epics, they did so for their own selfish reasons, but in the classical drama they reflect and judge the activity of men. The drama thus reflects a change of paradigm from the world of myth to an ethical dialogue between men's world and the will of heaven.

Dionysus was the god of intoxication and ecstasy and his followers were called *maenads*, from the Greek word *mania*, "madness". He was able to inspire his subjects with what was called *enthusiasm*, a word that still survives in a much milder sense. The change of mental condition was represented in the *persona*, the mask, which denoted the crossing of the border between reality and fantasy. (Burkert 1995: 162.)

Dionysus was also regarded as a young god in earlier scholarship, emerging from wild Thrace with all his rage and madness. But the lists of gods and goddesses of the oldest literature in Linear B show that Dionysus belonged to the oldest gods in Greek religion. His sudden appearances depend rather on his epiphanies in Greek myths, where he arrives at a town or village, spreads ecstasy and madness around him and finally disappears. (Detienne 1989: 2–26.)

The plot of the *Bacchae* of Euripides exemplifies Dionysus's revelations, in which he acts both protagonist and director. The Bacchantes cry at the beginning of the play for the god to reveal himself to them and also to their train. He appears, however, in the *persona* of a young and beautiful man, a stranger from Asia Minor in the midst of his worshippers, who praise the ecstasy and the blitheness of the mysteries (*telete*). His antagonist, King Pentheus of Thebes, tries to capture or expel the stranger and the foreign sect from his country, but every contact makes him more and more curious to "behold" what these mad Bacchantes and their religion mean, in spite of the fact that he is not initiated. Dionysus helps him to "behold", i.e. to have visions of "two suns, two towns of Thebes" and so on. Pentheus leaves the world of men and crosses the border to the other side in his efforts to witness the rites of the Bacchantes. However, Dionysus also provides another vision, in which Pentheus appears as a lion in a tree. Crying in fury they pull down the tree and tear him into pieces after which his own mother carries his head in triumphant procession towards Thebes. Not until her father forces her to look towards the heavens, does the Dionysian world disappear from her eyes and she realises what has happened.

To behold the holy objects was thus the central rite in the mysteries of Dionysus, which parallels the rites of the Eleusinian mysteries, where the participants also were called *epoptai*, "beholders" and where the objects were a newborn child or an ear of oat. Euripides mentions other rites in his tragedy: the Bacchantes dance in the mountains in ecstasy and, most striking of all, their attacks on wild animals and even on males in the vicinity. Most of the descriptions of the bloodthirsty Bacchantes, who act like beasts of prey, originate from *The Bacchae*. One may suspect that the panther, one of Dionysus's guises, may have inspired the picture of how the Bacchantes behaved, in art as well as in literature. (Otto 1965: 110.)

Tragedy still represents Dionysus as the transgressor of borders. He appears both as man and as woman, and he makes the manly Pentheus appear as a woman. Distances do not exist any longer and there are no distinctions between sexes; the god is far away and near, both mad and the wisest of the wise. Women and men become like wild animals, living in wild nature, tearing wild animals into pieces and devouring them raw, like animals.

At the same time Dionysus cooperated with the goddess of agriculture, Demeter. She brought bread and he brought wine, two products that separate mankind from animals. Still there is a difference between them: the oats of Demeter brings bread and belong to civilisation, whereas the grapes of Dionysus represent both culture and nature in the wine, crossing the borders between man and god. The wine gives joy and eases pain, but muddles and destroys and ultimately leads to crimes and misfortunes.

The Dionysian mysteries in Southern Italy

In Greece the civic rites of Dionysus were connected with the growth of vegetation and the production of wine. There existed a large number of festivals in honour of the god, especially during the spring and the autumn. One such festival was the Anthesteria, when the New Year's wine was tasted in memory of the holy wedding between Dionysus and Ariadne. This festival was dominated by women and the wife of the basileus, the king-archon of Athens, played Ariadne's role in the drama. We do not have any evidence of Dionysus's role at this festival; perhaps the god was represented by a symbol or a *persona.* (Nilsson 1975: 121.)

His mysteries are supposed to have developed as early as the sixth century B.C. in Greece (Burkert 1995: 166). At the same time, the god seems to have gradually changed his appearance from middle-aged man to a young and beardless one. This change probably introduced an erotic theme into the rites, reflected in *The Bacchae* of Euripides, where King Pentheus complains about the new god who seduces women, and although the Bacchantes avoided human men and appeared as chaste in the myth, their relation to the god are filled with erotic allusions (Keuls 1985: 382–71).

It was predominantly women that enacted the most striking expressions of the orgiastic side of Dionysian religion. To judge from their dress and their cultic accoutrements, they seem to have belonged to the upper classes and Euripides's drama gives us the same impression. (Keuls 1985: 360.) For these women, the Dionysian rites, featuring ecstatic dancing on the hillsides with flaming torches and the feeling of being possessed by the god may well have been experienced as a release which contrasted with their customarily restricted way of life. Anthropologists have observed that ecstatic cults fulfil a social function by providing suppressed groups with a licensed and controllable outlet for frustration (Turner 1969: 175ff.).

The Dionysian mysteries, as well as maenadism, spread to Magna Graecia, the Greek colony in Southern Italy. Evidence of the cult in Italy dates from the fourth century B.C. (Burkert 1995: 294–95). According to Livy, who mentions the rites as Bacchanalia, the mysteries were introduced by a Greek arriving from Etruria and then spread like wildfire among the Romans, exploding in a scandal in 186 B.C., then the Roman senate banned the mysteries as criminal and lascivious. The mysteries had originally been a cult for females only and up to that point, everything followed a chaste and honourable ritual. A chosen priestess, Paculla Annia by name, had changed the rites and initiated her own son and later other men. She had also changed the rites from being performed in daylight into nocturnal sessions. This was the beginning of the decay, according to Livy to a point, where every human crime was permitted and where Roman matrons performed obscene rites with their hair undone. The initiation of young men

had been changed into sexual debauchery such as rape by the Bacchic priests and so on. After the banning of the Bacchanalia, the affair took a more serious turn when people began to accuse one another of being participants and about seven thousand people were finally condemned to death and executed. If this number is correct, victims of this suppression of the Bacchanalia were far more numerous than the Christian martyrs during the first three centuries of the Christian era. (Livy 1955: viii–xix.)

There are, however, some objections to Livy's account. His stories of mysterious abductions and horrible torture, as well as other forms of exploitation, seem to be exaggerated, if not pure inventions. The suggestion of homosexual contacts is not known from any form of Dionysian mystery, as far as we know. However, a senatorial decree on a bronze tablet strictly regulated the cult and banned rites performed in secret or outside the city. The number of participants was restricted to five persons and no man from Rome or Latium was allowed to mingle with the female Bacchantes, according to this decree. (Beard 1998: 290.)

Becoming a *bacchus*

There was some grain of truth in Livy's account, such as the information about preparation before initiation. The initiate had to abstain from certain foods and from sexual intercourse for ten days. A purifying bath preceded the sacrificial-like ceremony of a pig or cockerel. After that, the initiate swore a solemn oath never to betray the meaning of the mysteries and to serve Dionysus forever.

The initiation itself meant overcoming the fear of death. Dionysus was able to carry his mother, Selene, out of gloomy Hades and he would also be able to save the individual from the Underworld. He had also saved Ariadne from death, when he carried her off from the arms of Hypnos and made her his wife. Ariadne's temporary death illustrated the experience of physical death by the individual who had been initiated into the mysteries. For this reason, Dionysus's wedding on Naxos is represented on many sarcophagi, which represent him as the lord of nature and nature's reviving power. (Turcan 1999: 312–14.)

Other symbols on these sarcophagi were the centaurs, pulling the chariot of Dionysus and Ariadne, which sometimes carried medallions of the deceased. The centaurs were other symbols of immortality and were mythological beings that carried the spirits of the dead to heaven. Grapes were also represented together with the wine, symbolizing the crossing of the border of this world to the next. This symbol survived in the Christian Church as denoting Eternal life. (Turcan 1999: 314.)

Based on the many sarcophagi with motifs of Dionysus and his attributes, we may conclude that his mysteries were popular among the Romans in Late Antiquity. The ban and the restrictions of 186 B.C. did not hold, especially not in Southern Italy.

Villa de Misterii

The Villa de Misterii was excavated in 1929–30. In his first report, the Italian archaeologist Amadeo Maiuri described and reproduced the magnificent pictures of the frescoes. The frescoes of the Triclinium were called the room of the mysteries, since the wall painting illustrates scenes from the Dionysian mysteries. Most scholars have agreed about this explanation, but the French historian Paul Veyne has suggested that the frescoes do not feature Bacchic rites, but rather the wedding of an upper-class girl (Veyne 1998: passim).

This article will not provide a detailed discussion of Veyne's hypothesis, which goes back to the first interpretation of the frescoes. The triclinium was principally used as a wedding-room, especially as two little bedchambers, *cubiculi*, were connected with this part of the villa. Formulas and symbols of love and marriage were also used in the mysteries, which makes any interpretation ambiguous; there is nevertheless strong evidence to suggest that the frescoes depict scenes belonging to the mystery religions.

Most scholars, even Veyne, agree that the central figures in the background portray Dionysus and Ariadne, who are partly destroyed. The god is resting in Ariadne's lap and evidently drunk or, as Veyne puts it, overwhelmed by strong passion for his wife. A composite statement would be that the god's facial expression reflects ecstasy, whether of intoxication or love or both. His legs are resting limply and one sandal is lying to his left. Nevertheless, Dionysus dominates the picture together with Ariadne, who was a strong symbol for the awakening of the soul.

The fresco to the left, which could possibly be the first picture, illustrates the preparation of the mysteries. A woman is entering a room where a boy is reading from a roll of parchment to two other women. Some scholars have interpreted the boy as Dionysus himself reading to his mother Selene and her friend Ino. On the other hand, this boy could be the young child who in the mysteries was called " the holy child" and whose parents were still alive. From the mysteries of Isis and Serapis, we know a young figure with a roll of parchment, usually called the *ierogrammatus*, and he also appeared in the Dionysian mysteries. Beside him a woman, holding a parchment in her bosom and a stylus in her hand, looks vacantly at her right side as if she was waiting for the mysteries.

The cult of Dionysus changed its character in Southern Italy. From a rather simple organisation with only one leader, a hierarchy developed into high priestesses and a priest and those who carried a *cist*, the box containing the most holy things, such as the *liknon* or the *phallos*. Some people in the cult were called *bacchoi* or *bacchai*, while others were exalted into holy *bacchoi* or *bacchai*. In this hierarchy, a secretary and treasurer were important figures and probably these two are depicted as the woman and boy in the first picture.

Perhaps they belong to the same picture as the young woman on their left side, who is carrying a basket with bread to the sacrifice. She carries a wreath of laurel and belongs to those participants who were called *stephanophoroi*. She forms a link to the next fresco, which seems to portray a sacrifice or the preparation of a ritual meal of water (or milk or wine) and bread, something that was served in the mysteries of Mithras. Three women are preparing this meal and one of them has her back turned to the spectators, thereby hiding this part of the mystery. These women seem to belong to the performers of the cult (Simon 1961: 124).

The next link represents a silen with a lyre, which marks the crossing of the border between the human and the divine worlds. He is wreathed and seems to be striking up a wedding hymn for the couple in the background. The lyre is the instrument of Apollo, not yet of Dionysus, but the borders between the Apollonian and the Dionysian were fluid in Southern Italy (Nilsson 1975: 125). The *sileni* were veritable drunkards in myth as well as in art, but this one appears sober and dignified. He represents the wise *sileni* who mediate the power of the magic music and even of the mystery itself (Brendel 1966: 214).

Satyrs, too, belonged to the company of Dionysus and a young satyr playing the syrinx, while a young girl is breastfeeding a goat with light fur, is following the silen. Another goat with dark fur stands beside it and these two animals probably represent the victims in the sacrifice. This bucolic scene hints at the cult of Dionysus, where the title of shepherd refers to one particular kind of official, especially in the south of Italy, called *boukolos* or *archiboukolos* (Simon 1961: 126). Nevertheless, the suckling of the white goat unsolved and we never hear about women suckling animals, whereas exposed babies like Attis are suckled by a goat.

The next picture depicts a young woman, fleeing, scared of something. Her fear is caused by the phallus, which may be dimly seen in the *cist* behind the wedding couple according to some scholars, while others suggest that the flogging scene on the other wall frightens her. But is she really frightened by some unseen object or does she appear with her cloak fluttering around her head like a prophetess or a priestess who is going to cover her head before a holy rite or pronouncement.

In the next scene, three satyrs are grouped together and the youngest one holds the mask of Akratos, the aspect of the unmixed wine and the genius of the Bacchantes (Brendel 1966: 228). This represents intoxication, with its aspects of divinity and violence. The oldest of the satyrs holds a bowl, over which the third is leaning. This could be a kind of divination, where the reflexion in the wine or water is interpreted in certain ways (Brendel 1966: 230; Simon 1961: 152–54). In my opinion, it could represent a sacred drink, denoting the young man's initiation into the mysteries, since the mask or rather the *persona* itself is another symbol of initiation. Dionysus himself appears among the participants and is about to inspire them, the very meaning of the noun *enthusiasm.* The change from the normal conditions to Dionysian ecstasy is emphasised by the *persona,* in which the border between man and god disappears and becomes absorbed in the term *bacchus.*

The central scene, where Dionysus himself with an ivy wreath and a *thyrsus* wand is leaning, his head in a woman's lap. As mentioned earlier, most scholars agree that she must be his wife, Ariadne. At their feet, a woman is kneeling with a *cist* covered with a veil, but it is obvious that this contains a phallus. Dionysus was sometimes represented in this form and carried in a wagon during the ceremonies of Rural and Great Dionysia in Attica. It probably protects against the winged black creature on its left, since a phallus often carries a protecting function. A phallic *lar* was often depicted at the entrance to doors and statues of Priapuos were set up in gardens in order to protect them.

The *cist* has the form of a *liknon,* a simple flail, which was also used as a basket and sometimes used like a modern baby-carrier.

The thought that the purified souls ascended like chaff belongs to the mystery language. The child, the oats and the flail were components of the understanding as well as protective and fertilizing phallus, as far as we know from the testimonies of church fathers like Clemens of Alexandria (Nilsson 1975: 21–37).

This is the centre of the mysteries, which took place at night as the women have flaming torches resting on their shoulders. The three pictures in the background thus portray scenes directly connected with the mystery itself. There is one mysterious figure left on this wall, the dark fury. She is one of the most discussed figures among the frescoes. Perhaps she is whipping the woman to her left, who is resting her head in another woman's lap (Nilsson 1975: 123; Simon 1961: 133). Behind this is concealed a fertility-rite of the same kind as the whipping with thongs at the Lupercalia, and perhaps the blows are a part of the initiation of the Bacchant (Simon 1961: 135).

Such a rite is not known in any description of the Dionysian mysteries (Turcan 1999: 309). The fury is rather one of the phantoms that frighten the

initiates, during the ceremony. Probably she represents the part of the mysteries that illustrates death as terrible and cruel. No one of the frescoes in Villa de Misterii portrays the scene where the wild titans tore Dionysus as a child into pieces, but this picture could be a reminder of the horror that was once the source of the mysteries of Dionysus.

The fury has a wand in her hand that she draws behind her back, frightened of the phallus in the basket. There are parallels to this wand, such as the story of Circe in Homer's *Odyssey*. Her dress with short skirt and high boots was worn by hunting women, but was also the standard attire of punitive demons of the kind known as Phoinai. As demon she could be Dike, the goddess of justice, who reported man's crimes to Zeus and belonged to the Underworld (Nilsson 1975: 125). According to anoter suggestion, she represents Lyssa, the personification of lunacy, which also involved the Dionysian fury.

The kneeling woman with her head in another woman's lap is the next picture. She is stripped to her waist and her eyes are closed; the nakedness and the closed eyes express the newborn state of the initiate at the end of the initiation. There is serenity and expectation in her figure, expressed by her relaxed fingers – if she had been whipped, they would have looked more tense – and her calm face.

The other woman is already initiated and is probably serving as a mystagogue, the one who teaches and instructs the initiate. She holds her left hand protectively over the young woman's head and her right around her shoulders. Her eyes are looking upwards but not fixedly on something, as if she is waiting for the mysteries to be fulfilled.

On their left are standing two women. One of them is stark naked, except for a veil wrapped around her body, and is holding cymbals in her hands, as if she is marking the rhythm in her dance. The other woman in her darker clothes carries a *thyrsus*, which like the cymbals is a ritual item of the Dionysian cult like the dance. The dancing woman represents the bright side of the mysteries, while the dark one represents the darker element. These figures probably have nothing to do with the mysteries as such, but represent a contrasting effect, introduced by the artist (Nilsson 1975: 126).

In the next scene, a bride is being adorned by her mother or a servant. This means that the initiate has experienced the mysteries and passed through the ritual. The bride was a common concept in the mystery religions and the secret rooms where the ceremonies took place were often called the bride chamber (see Näsström 1990: 85). This scene depicts the phase where the initiate enters the same state as the other adherents. She is wearing a saffron yellow dress, another allusion to Dionysus, as saffron belonged to him. Two cupids are also present; one of them is holding a mirror up to the bride, which is quite natural in the situation, when a bride

is being dressed. The mirror belongs to the mysteries, however, as the evil titans lured the infant Dionysus from his wet-nurse with a mirror to a place where they tore him into pieces. The mirror formed part of the paraphernalia in the mysteries of Dionysus.

The final fresco shows a woman, dressed as a bride, with her right hand resting on her cheek and the left on the elbow rest of her chair. This picture represents the end of the fulfilled mysteries. The bride has been initiated into the secrets which were know by the other mysts and this is the last of the frescoes in the Villa de Misterii.

Other interpretations of the frescoes are possible however, such as Veyne's suggestion of a wedding among the aristocracy. We have already pointed out the parallels between an initiation and a wedding and we could also add the similar symbols of a wedding as a mystical event, especially as expressed in the wedding of Dionysus and Ariadne. These symbols were transferred into Christian art, as with the vines and ivory creepers symbolizing eternal life and used as decoration on tombstones. Christ was also depicted with one foot pierced by an oat and the other by a vine. A part of paradise was also symbolised by a vine. The vine, in particular, had great significance, as it was connected with Holy Communion where the bride and mystical union with God merged one ritual into another.

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