

# Concepts of Ecstasy in Euripides' "Bacchanals" and their Interpretation

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In dealing with ecstasy in antiquity, scholars usually refer to Euripides' "Bacchanals"<sup>1</sup> as one of the most reliable sources with regard to this phenomenon. This drama can also be supplemented by vase paintings, which to a great extent deal with motives from the circle of Dionysos. Furthermore, the "symposium" theme of Dionysos and his *thiasos* is the most frequent motive on vessels and drinking cups in classical Athens (Gericke 1970).

A well-known amphora in Munich, dating from 500–495 B.C., depicts an ecstatic maenad (fig. 1) and the characteristics given by the painter correspond almost in detail to Euripides' description in spite of a distance in time of about a hundred years. The only missing features are the fawn-skin around her neck (111–112) and the wreath of living snakes around her head (101–103). The frieze of the amphora shows the maenad in question in a moment of ecstatic climax which is accented by the painter in locating the toes of her right foot just a little below the border of the frieze.<sup>2</sup> She is dressed in long garb (833), barefooted (665), her head is decorated with a wreath of ivy (80) and her hands are holding the thyrsus-staff (835). Her head is tossed back (865), the eyes turned upwards and the mouth open (1122). In my opinion, the painter has brilliantly represented the rigid body of the maenad with muscles tense just at the moment when she is about to fall senseless to the ground (138). Another vase painting represents this change in the state of ecstasy (fig. 2) and we know from Plutarch that the maenads needed rest and sleep after the rapture (Plu. Mor. 249 E-F).

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<sup>1</sup> References to the text of the "Bacchanals" in this article are to Arthur S. Way's edition and translation 1942 (Loeb). The "Bacchanals" was Euripides' last drama and he wrote it in Macedonia in 406/05 (Dieterich 1909, P-W VI, 1270). From Diodorus Siculus (IV, 3, 3) we know, that in many Greek towns Bacchic bands of maidens and matrons joined the ecstatic Dionysiac cult every other year, but

we can imagine that Euripides met with a more primitive cult in Macedonia. It is the most controversial of Euripides' works, containing many aspects and problems on several levels. This article only deals with one aspect of the drama.

<sup>2</sup> This detail, detaching the maenad from space and time, does not agree with Euripides' description of the experience of ecstasy.



*Fig. 1. Maenad in trance. Amphora. Antikensammlungen, München. Inv. 8732 (2344) (Reichhold 1975, Tafel 13).*

The artist can only give us the external aspect of ecstasy but Euripides goes a step further by describing the inner experience in the following way. The maenads live in the open air on snow-covered Mount Cithaeron, reclining on pinesprays and oakleaves (684–685) in a fragrance of incense (148). Young mothers, who had left their babies at home, give their milk to fawns and wolfcubs (699–703). With their honey-dripping thyrsus-staves (711) the maenads create water and wine from the rock and their fingers

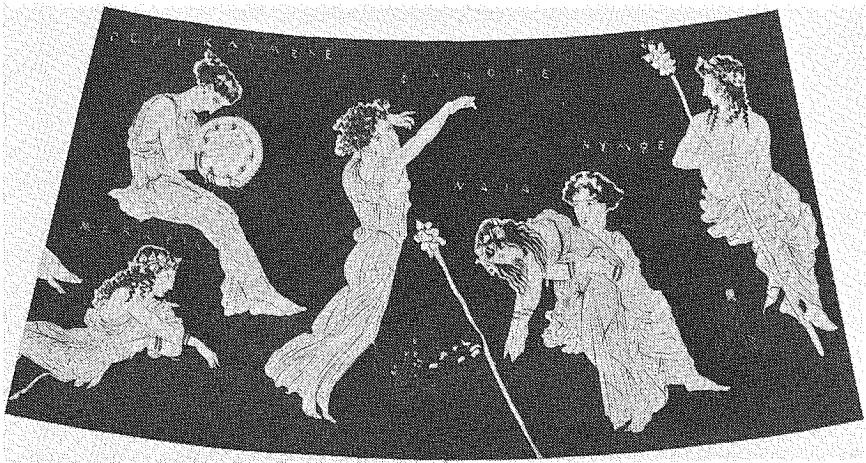


Fig. 2. Dancing maenads. Red figured lecyte. Sammlung Sabouroff I 55. (Weege 1926, 75).

draw forth milk from the earth (704–710). They tear bulls to pieces (742–744) and a pine from the soil with their hands (1110). They carry fire upon their hair without burning themselves (757–758) and they walk bare-footed in the snow (662–665). When the women are attacked by Pentheus' men they chase them away with their thyrsus-staves (763–764), but they themselves cannot be hurt by the soldiers' iron-javelins (761). When they go plundering goods and babies (753–754) in the Theban lowlands (749–750), they carry the spoils unfastened on their shoulders (755–756). The maenads hear Dionysos' voice calling without seeing him (576–580) and he reveals himself to them in the shape of fire (597). When Pentheus is maddened by Dionysos he imagines himself as seeing two suns and two towns (918–919) and the god himself in the shape of a bull (920–923). Finally, the maenads are said to prophesy when they have the god in their bodies (300–301).

In actual fact, we observe that the ecstatic experience, as depicted by Euripides contains such psychological phenomena as hallucinations, including optical, acoustic and olfactive delusion, anesthesia, delusion as to one's own strength and possession.

Euripides' description can be explained in different ways according to the view taken of religion and its function. In this respect, we shall provide a sociological and a psychological interpretation. Both of these take for granted that the Greek woman was not able to accept her inferior and repressed position. As she was not able to express her dissatisfaction in politics, she had to express her aggressions in a religious context as the only

acceptable sphere of activity for women outside the home. Both these theories are founded on comparisons of modern ecstatic cults and modern family patterns.

I. M. Lewis adopts the sociological view (Lewis 1971, 100–127) of the Dionysiac cult and compares it with modern African ecstatic cults on the borderline between Islam and Christianity. In these cults women become physically ill and possessed by a spirit as a result of stress in the home. They are cured through permanent membership of the cult, where through the experience of trance they become on good terms with the possessing spirit. With the authority of the spirit, the women are able to request some relief from housework and also certain gifts such as jewels and other expensive articles from their husbands. The latter accept the demands of the spirit and in this way a balance is established between the sexes. In these cults, possession is looked upon as a sexual unity between the woman and the spirit. In comparing this with the Dionysiac cult, Lewis is of the opinion that it differs from the latter in that the woman in the Dionysiac cult, instead of becoming physically ill, was possessed by some kind of madness manifesting itself in a compulsion to dance and to leave the home. This madness was cured in the cult through a sexual union with the god by means of ecstatic dancing in the mountains and the tearing and eating of animals. In the Dionysiac cult, however, the woman was only temporarily delivered from her duties towards the family during the trance. In any case, she obtained some relief without any restrictions and her husband participated in the cult by yielding to the god in permitting his wife to give free vent to her hostility in this way.

Ph. Slater looks at the Dionysiac cult in a Freudian psychoanalytical perspective (Slater 1968, 219–307) and compares the American middle-class family in the twentieth century with the family situation in classical and post-classical Greece. Here he finds a family pattern characterized by sexual antagonism and segregation. A dominating wife/mother with complete influence over the home threatens and rejects the husband/father, whose hostility in turn originates from a dominating mother. In Slater's opinion the husband tried to limit the power of his wife through keeping her indoors and being away from home as much as possible. Consequently the power of the woman increased in the home but she was frustrated by her isolation and sexual dissatisfaction. Her feelings towards her husband were projected onto their sons and she entered into conflicting relations with them: at the same time as she demanded virility, she denied their sexuality. In Slater's opinion, this is the main reason for homosexuality in ancient Greece. The woman in turn was able to give free vent to her disappointment in the Dionysiac cult by expressing her aggression towards her sons in

tearing and eating animals and in obtaining sexual satisfaction through union with the god in a trance.

In my opinion, Euripides' depiction of the experiences of the maenads during the trance can be explained anthropologically as a regression to an earlier state of culture, as opposed to a civilized state. As we noticed earlier, the women are dressed in fawnskins and barefooted, devoting themselves to hunting and warfare in a primitive manner. They do not use any hunting implements, they tear the animals to pieces with their bare hands and eat the meat raw (140). Iron tools are banished. The women tear a fure tree to the soil by means of wooden instruments (1104) and their thyrsus-staves serve as javelins. When plundering the villages of the plains and kidnapping the peasants' babies, they carry their prey unfastened on their shoulders. In this context it may be of interest to note that hunting and warfare have much in common with ecstasy in their basic patterns: a high degree of concentration, silence and tranquility in combination with a sudden change to rapid movement (1084–1090). There are scholars who are of the opinion that the psychological experiences of hunting and warfare of a primitive kind could be the origin of ecstasy (Gladigow 1978, 25).

I believe that the anthropological view can be combined with a religious perspective, which should be the best approach for understanding a religious drama. Considering Eliade's description of "illud tempus" and his theory of the eternal return to this state in myth and cult (Eliade 1976, 438–462) the maenad's experiences in the trance are to be seen as a regression to this original state of which the basic pattern is to be found in Hesiod's *Erga* (109–118) but also in Plato's description of the reign of Cronus (Plat. Pol. 271). According to Euripides' version the characteristics of this original state are that all boundaries are dissolved. Nature takes part in the maenadic frenzy (726–727) and the boundaries between man and beast are abolished when the maenads give the young animals milk and the god reveals himself in a theriomorphic shape. The borderlines between the sexes are erased; the women have acquired male strength and they appear in male roles as hunters and warriors while at the same time they express their womanliness and maternity. We may note in passing that there are many examples of sex reversals (Segal 1975) in the "Bacchanals" and even Zeus is said to have a "male womb" (527). Furthermore, the boundaries between mortals are annihilated: there is community of property and even of babies. The limits between man and god are destroyed: the maenad maintains herself without working by milk and honey like the gods, she is invulnerable and she carries the divine fire on her head. In my opinion, she experiences herself in the trance as the complete individual, as the androgyne, through unity with the god. This sexual union is reflected in the vase



*Fig. 3.* Dionysos. Amphora. Antikensammlungen, München. Inv. 8732 (2344) (Reichhold 1975, Tafel 13).

paintings and in the drama: the painter dresses the god in a long womanly garb (fig. 3), and Euripides gives him the epithet “womanly” (θηλύμορφος) (353).

Finally, it is interesting to compare this pattern of ecstatic experience with T. Stace’s criteria of mystic experience (Stace 1961, 110). The maenads feel united with nature and with the god and they experience eternal bliss (72). An important point of divergence from Stace’s catalogue is that the maenads are still on the borders of time and space. In spite of their ecstatic state they are completely oriented to real life when they gather at an appointed time (723), put their clothes in order (696–698), arrange themselves in ordered ranks (693), sing songs in turns (1057) and finally

raise a cult cry together (725). Euripides characterizes their behavior as "good order" (ἐνκοσμία)<sup>3</sup> (693) and the maenads themselves as "wise" (σώφρων) (686, 940). In any case, this does not correspond with the boundless nature of ecstasy and we must consequently ask what was Euripides' purpose in writing his drama. As we have already seen, scholars have explained it in different ways. In this connection, I should only like to make a few comments on Euripides' reasons for using philosophical terms while depicting an ecstatic cult.

Euripides (485/4-407/6) lived in Athens during a time characterized by the overthrow of traditional religion and morality. Some sophists denied the divine basis of these phenomena considering them to be of human origin and a heated debate began about the antithetical concepts *nomos-physis* (Heinemann 1972, 125–147). Euripides was familiar with the different philosophical views and at the same time he criticized the traditional religion (Dieterich 1909, PW VI, 1278). In the "Bacchanals" we find trains of thought which in my opinion are to be found a couple of generations later in the philosophical system of the early Stoics. Without considering the causes of this we can only note that Euripides was a contemporary of Antisthenes (450/45-365), a pupil of Socrates who, according to most scholars,<sup>4</sup> founded the Cynic school, from which the early stoic Zeno (334-236) emanated (Rist 1969, 54–57). Even in the third century B.C. there were impulses to overcome the antitheses *nomos-physis*, and Euripides' last drama is a step in that direction (Heinemann 1972, 166–169). In the "Bacchanals" for example we find an allegorical explanation of the myth of Zeus' rescue of Dionysos from Hera's wrath (288–297). It is interesting to notice the etymological explanation based on the similarity of words,<sup>5</sup> a method which we recognize in early stoicism (Pohlenz I 1948, 97). Furthermore, Euripides has a different opinion about the origin of religion and morality:

Little it costs, faith's precious heritage. To trust that whatsoever from Heaven is sent Hath sovereign sway, whate'er through age on age Hath gathered sanction by our nature's bent (νόμινον ἄει φύσει τε πεφυκός) (893–897) and

In true womanhood inborn (ἐν τῇ φύσει) dwells temperance touching all things evermore (315–316)

<sup>3</sup> Barbara K. Gold gives the philological approach in her article "ΕΥΚΟΣΜΙΑ in Euripides' Bacchae", in *The American Journal of Philology*, 98, 1977, 3–15.

<sup>4</sup> D. R. Dudley is nevertheless of the opinion that Diogenes is the founder of the Cynic school and that there is no direct connection,

Socrates—Antisthenes—Zeno (*A History of Cynicism*, 1938).

<sup>5</sup> The argument is based on the similarity of μέρος, "fragment", μηρός "thigh", and ὄμηρος "hostage" (Euripides, "Bacchanals", 27).

Religion is *nomos*; however, the divine *nomos* anchored in *physis* and the human being has virtue by nature. Euripides attaches religion to nature in a very tangible way in his drama and so did the early Stoics, who had a materialistic view of life (SVF I, 85, 98). Dionysos reveals himself as fire from heaven (1083–1084) and from earth (725–726) and the maenads carry his fire on their heads. Equally the early Stoics characterized their divine principle as fire (SVF I, 537. II 423) and they thought that the destruction of the world would take place through it (SVF I, 98). All nature participates in the maenadic frenzied dance (726) and we find a Stoic line of thought where the soul of the Stoic sage moves in an accordance with the movements of the cosmos (Rist 1969, 88–89). Euripides furthermore anticipates the Stoic ideal of equality on the basis of an equal share in *logos* (SVF II, 1027) when he states that both the rich and the poor have a share in the wine (421–423) and that the cult is open to everybody (206–209) without any initiations as in the mystery religions (Gatz 1967, 177). Probably he thought that women are more predisposed to religious experience as he makes only the women really meet the god in the drama. Equally, the sex reversals here have their counterpart in Zeno's ideal state which is also a kind of vision of an original state where only the wise are citizens (Pohlenz I, 1970, 137–139). In Zeno's ideal state sexual relations are free, the children of the wise will be loved by all (SVF III, 728), and men and women should wear the same clothes (SVF I 257). Euripides also moves paradise into the sphere of human life; the maenads' experience it "here and now" and not beyond death in a transcendent perspective of time (Gatz 1967, 169). Finally, the maenads are characterized as wise and their wisdom coincides with that of the Stoic sage. We recognize the Stoic *ataraxia* (SVF III, 109) in the following verses.

For it is the wise mans (ὁ σόφως ἄνδρος) part to rein his wrath in soberness (σώφρων) (640–641)

For in his Bacchic rites the virtous-hearted (σώφρων) shall not be undone (317–318) and

O, not with knowledge (το σόφρον) is Wisdom (σοφία) tought (396).

Euripides' and the Stoic human ideal are both characterized by moderation and virtue. Euripides has the maenad obtaining wisdom through mystical experience in ecstasy while the Stoic sage attains unity with *logos* in a similar manner as we shall see.

In my opinion, Euripides tried to rescue religion from the attacks of the critics by inventing a synthesis of the antitheses *nomos-physis*. In any case, he did not wish to rescue the traditional religion, but thought that true religion was a religion of nature; he was however afraid of basing it in



nature alone without some restraining bonds. These bonds he expressed in "good order", and this concept characterizes the maenadic frenzy. In this drama he shows didactically the consequences of other ways of thinking and the characters have different attitudes towards religion. Cadmus, the townbuilder (171–172), represents at the same time culture and *nomos* and has an opportunistic view of religion (333–336). In the end, his punishment is to be changed into a snake (1330) and he is further doomed to raze important Hellenic towns to the ground (1333–1336). Agaue, on the other hand, stands for *physis*—she is pure nature, she is changed to a beast of prey and tears her own son into pieces (1125–1127). She never attains the balance between *nomos* and *physis*, and she rejects *physis* in favor of *nomos*. When passing mount Cithaeron in her exile she says:

O that afar I might hide me,  
Where accursed Cithaeron shall look not on me,  
Nor I with mine eyes shall Cithaeron see,  
where memorial is none of the thyrsus-spear.  
Be these unto other Bacchanals dear. (1383–1387)

Pentheus "the sufferer" represents the openly irreligious attitude (241–246) and at the same time he is the "unnatural" nature due to his perversity towards women (811–816, 1059–1062). Consequently he has to die an unnatural death, sacrificed to Dionysos and torn to pieces by his own mother who is a priestess (1125–1127). For Euripides the truly religious human being is measured and sober (686) and this, in my opinion, is expressed in the fact that the ecstasy in his drama is not connected with drunkenness and sexual excesses (683–688) as for example in the Bacchanalia in Rome (Liv. 39. 8–19). In Euripides' drama the maenad provokes the ecstasy by tossing her head to and fro (fig. 1, 865–866) to the accompaniment of music from flutes (160) and drums (fig. 2. 156). It is interesting to notice that the Stoic also obtained unity with the cosmos through movement. By means of the morally right action he acquired the "right tension" (*εὐτονία*) in the principal part of his soul (SVF III, 121, 28). It began to move in accordance with the movements of the cosmos and he attained the status of the sage without his own knowledge (Rist 1969, 88–93)—in my opinion a kind of materialistic mysticism.

Euripides defines ecstasy as when Dionysos "throws" Pentheus "out of his mind" (*ἐξίστασθαι φρενῶν*) (850), but as a matter of fact the maenad is thrown "inside her mind" by the "good order" (*εὐνομία*) in order to experience a harmonious unity with nature.

Finally, we can state that both Euripides and the philosophers thought that the sage was the ideal human being, but Euripides found this ideal within religion and, moreover, in an ecstatic cult—*within* the limits of

reason. Nevertheless, we must express the opinion that the elements of the equation do not fit together—ecstasy and reason are in fact incompatible quantities.

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