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## The Meaning of Excess in a Dutch Maenad Painting

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## The Meaning of Excess in a Dutch Maenad Painting



Maenads and Dutch art seem like a paradoxical pair. Maenads were well known symbols of revelry in ancient Greece, and the seventeenth century Dutch population were known to be mostly Calvinist and Catholic, all with strong belief in the necessity of temperance. The maenads and the Dutch obviously clash morally: in fact, there are not many paintings of these

mythological figures in the seventeenth century Dutch catalogue. The only depictions I could find were *Bacchante with an Ape* by Hendrick ter Brugghen and one of a man, not a maenad, called *Smiling Young Man Squeezing Grapes* by Gerrit van Honthorst.<sup>1</sup> These two paintings are both from the Utrecht art market and both inspired by Caravaggio, who made several paintings of Bacchus himself. So, what do these paintings demonstrate about Dutch society? Through analyzing the paintings' symbols of grapes, an ape, walnut, and pear, it is clear that the Dutch took a moralist lens on maenads in order to remind the viewers about temperance and morality. But the compositions and the skin tones of the figures in these paintings allow the seventeenth-century Dutch viewers to identify with the depicted figures. The artists bring the maenads out of history, out of mythology, and make them look like the audience could reach out and touch them. This portrayal takes away some of their mythical power, but in doing so it brings the temptation closer to reality. Thus, the symbols, compositions and colors in Dutch maenad paintings show that the Dutch scorned revelry and excess but at the same time acknowledge the fact that temptation was part of the human condition.

Before discussing the paintings, it is necessary to give a background on maenads.<sup>2</sup> They were women in Ancient Greece who worshipped Dionysus, the god of wine and revelry. Women were restricted in ancient Greek society, so every second winter the men gave them the chance to climb up a mountain to be free from responsibility and the pressure of a male-dominated society for a while. While on the mountain, Dionysus inspired them into ritual frenzy and sacrifice.

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<sup>1</sup> I analyze both ter Brugghen's and van Honthorst's paintings in this essay, but I mostly focus on ter Brugghen's work.

<sup>2</sup> 'Bacchante' is the Latin term for maenad. In this essay I refer to the woman depicted in ter Brugghen's painting as a maenad even though the title says 'bacchante' because maenads lived in ancient Greece, not in ancient Rome.

Sometimes they sacrificed cakes, at other times, animals. They also “removed their shoes, left their hair down, and pulled up their fawn-skins,” to resemble animals, and to symbolically let go of the garments of proper society (Bremmer). Once they began their rituals, “stimulated by the high-pitched music, the flicker effects of the torches, the whirling nature of the dances, the shouting of *euhoi*, the headshaking, jumping, and running, the maenads eventually fell to the ground—the euphoric climax of their ecstasy” (Bremmer). In these ceremonies they let their inhibitions run wild. When most people hear the word maenad, or bacchante, they think of the *Bacchae* by Euripides, in which maenads would “tear animals apart, handle snakes, eat raw meat, and [were] invulnerable to iron and fire.” (Bremmer) They likely did not do this in real life, though it was entirely possible that they did not feel pain in their frenzy; even so, people think of maenads as wild and ferocious. (Bremmer) According to the Oxford Classical Dictionary, the maenads did not actually consume alcohol, even though Dionysus is their patron god. (Heinrichs) Nevertheless, maenads and wine are linked because of their relationship to Dionysus.

## **PART I: SYMBOLS OF LUST AND EXCESS**

In ter Brugghen’s *Bacchante with an Ape*, the fruit and ape symbolism point to the sins of lust and excess. The main figure of the painting is a pale woman covered in cloth and wearing a turban. She looks directly out at the viewer and her shoulders and collarbone are exposed, as is her right arm, which crosses in front of her body, and her hand is squeezing grapes into a gold chalice. To her right is a small monkey on a table, which is holding its own grapes. Next to the monkey is a walnut and a pear. She seems like she is a happy woman about to hand the glass to

the viewer, but the painting is more complex than this simple appearance. It conveys quite a lot about morality, and even illustrates how it disapproves of excess (despite the wine glass). The symbols within the painting reveal it all.

The ape in the left corner represents lust and lawlessness. In art, apes are associated with Dionysus and Bacchus and have been depicted with him before: “since the middle ages the ape has been associated with drunkenness and was sometimes represented in the company of Bacchus.” (van Suchtelen 35) This close association between the animal and the god further proves that this is a maenad painting and warns about lust and excess. According to Dutch painter and engraver Karel Van Mander, who wrote the most famous Dutch emblem book of the seventeenth century, the *Schilder-boecke*, “the ape means the vicious person... An ape can symbolize impudence as well; because he shows his shameful part to everybody / and he does other shameful things in everybody’s presence.” (van Suchtelen 40) Thus, the ape symbolizes lust - one of the seven cardinal sins - in this painting. There is an abundance of Dutch bordello paintings that categorize lust as immoral, so this portrayal should not be any different.<sup>3</sup> In *Bacchante with Ape*, specifically, the ape is ““an illustration of the foolish actions of the drunkard’s more particularly the irrational act of squeezing grapes that, without fermentation, obviously cannot produce wine” and it represents “the sinner, the fool, and the degenerate person; it is associated with the sense of taste, with drunkenness, and with lust.” (van Suchtelen 39, 35) These similar interpretations of apes in art must have informed ter Brugghen’s

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<sup>3</sup> Some examples of bordello paintings: *The Matchmaker* by Gerrit van Honthorst (1623), *The Procuress* by Dirch van Baburen (1623), *Merry Company* by Gerrit van Honthorst (1619-1620)

representation of the ape in this painting, especially when one takes into account the meaning of the different fruits as well.

Next, the fruits in the painting also symbolize sin. The grapes that the woman and ape hold do not have any specific moral connections according to other scholars, but they do relate to Dionysus, and therefore are connected to excess. Grapes once made into wine symbolize lust as well. Ariane van Suchtelen, a research assistant at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, agrees: “in ter Brugghen’s painting, the sense of taste – the sense that, with touch, was in worst repute – can be related to the temptation of wine and carnal pleasures: the sexual provocation of the woman – the smile which she looks at the viewer, the forward-looking, half-uncovered body – is clearly related to the wine she prepares in her cup.” (van Suchtelen 40) The wine, made of the grapes she squeezes, is connected to the maenad’s implied lewdness. As for the other fruit, the pear and walnut are “shown prominently in front of the animal, [and] should be interpreted in a negative sense that is related to the ape and the woman” because alone, the pear has “negative associations because of its tendency to rot quickly.” (van Suchtelen 39) Thus, ter Brugghen included the pear in the painting to send the message that if a person engages in loose behavior or imbibes excessively, they themselves will rot.

Another way the fruits in the painting demonstrate morality is through the senses, making *Bacchante with an Ape* an Allegory of Taste and an Allegory of Touch painting. Paintings that depict the five senses were also moral in meaning: they illustrate to the viewer that the senses are responsible for committing sins and warn them not to fall prey to them. Of the five senses, the Dutch frowned upon taste and touch the most because of their connections to gluttony and lust.

The maenad exemplifies an allegory of touch by squeezing the grapes and holding the wine chalice. Similar to the maenad, the ape also represents touch because it holds grapes. Even though neither the woman nor the monkey explicitly tastes anything, the monkey is clearly about to eat the grapes it holds, and therefore is still an example of the Allegory of taste. In terms of the maenad, it is clear from her arm placement that either she intends to drink the wine herself, or, more likely, offer it to the viewer. “Ter Brugghen has [...] chosen to employ Bacchanalian iconography” of apes, grapes, and wine, instead of apples, which are more common in Allegory of taste paintings. (van Suchtelen 40) Thus, this painting doubles down on morality – the senses trick people into sinning and through the temptation of the maenad and wine.

## **PART II: REALISM, PORTRAITURE, AND IDENTITY**

Beyond the symbols of the ape and fruits, the composition of the painting makes it look like a portrait and invites the viewer into the frame and humanizes the figure. The maenad in the painting pierces the viewer’s gaze with her own. And her smile has a slight tilt to it, like a smirk. By the look on her face, it seems she is conspiring with the viewer. Her arm crosses in front of her body and it feels like the juice from the grapes in her tight grip will fly out at you. She is leaning out towards the viewer, like she is about to whisper at them, too. Even with her bodily contortions, her frame is still shaped like a pyramid, a common device used in portraits to demonstrate the importance of the figure. These details bring the viewer into the painting and make her seem more real. Additionally, an arm in front of the body is a typical pose seen in

portrait paintings, as a way to bring the subject closer to reality. Since the Dutch were obsessed with realism, these details are not surprising. “However, this moral lesson is contained in a painting that strikes us instantly by its cheerfulness, charm, and attraction, leaving it up to the beholder to decide how seriously to take the implicit warnings.” (van Suchtelen 41) The cheerfulness of her smile and the redness of her cheeks show just how innocent temptation can look.

Furthermore, when *Bacchante with an Ape* is paired with *Young Man Squeezing Grapes* by Gerrit van Honthorst, the two paintings seem like pendants. Though they were painted five years apart by different artists, these two paintings are eerily similar. There are slight differences, though – instead of a woman, van Honthorst painted a man. There is also a lack of an ape or other fruit. But still, there are haunting similarities that make the two alike. The smiling man’s left shoulder is exposed, and he is squeezing grapes into a ceramic mug. He is even closer in this painting than the maenad in the other painting. It is clear that he wishes to hand the mug to the viewer when he is finished. He has slitted eyes and ruddy cheeks, just like the maenad. These paintings, though they are not pendants, work together. As pendants, they act as a married couple – they could be real people with real lives who commissioned portraits. These depictions, when put together, strip the fantasy away from the viewer and make the temptations they offer real. If the viewer is married himself, perhaps he could see himself and his spouse in the pendants. Yet, these paintings are not technically pendant portraits. However, it is entirely possible that these



artists knew about each other's paintings - ter Brugghen and van Honthorst's had worked together in the past.

The final detail of this painting that brings the viewer into the painting and allows the Dutch people viewing her to identify with her is her skin color. The maenad is a pale white in this painting, when in reality maenads living in Greece in the fifth century BCE should have been at the lightest a pale brown.<sup>4</sup> According to Shelley Haley, a professor at Hamilton College and expert in ancient critical race theory, *albus*, *candidus*, *ater*, *fuscus*, and *niger*, meaning white, glistening white, lusterless black (opposite of *albus*), and shining/glistening black (opposite of *candidus*), respectively (Haley 31).<sup>5,6</sup> But *albus* is not white in the sense of Nordic coloring because “the “developed world” of Roman world view was definitely the world of pale-brown Mediterraneans.” (Haley 31) Therefore, “the reference point for *albus* is pale-brown..... *ater*, *candidus*, *fuscus*, and *niger* become degrees of brownness.” (Haley 31) And so, maenads were brown skinned based on their geographic location in the Mediterranean. Ter Brugghen should have known, since he lived in Italy for a time, saw Italians face-to-face, and clearly had some knowledge of the classics, that people in the Mediterranean are darker than those native to the Netherlands. In addition, “it was not difficult to obtain brown colors at the time. Open market paintings were made mostly brown because the color was so inexpensive.” (Kaczmarek 7) There was no economic reason not to portray the maenad in a racially accurate way. It is possible that he painted the maenad like a Nordic white woman because of a racial prejudice against brown

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<sup>4</sup> To be fair, the yellowing varnish makes her look slightly more tanned, but she obviously does not have any brown pigmentation in her skin or otherwise olive undertones.

<sup>5</sup> Critical race theory is the exploration of society through the lens of race.

<sup>6</sup> Haley wrote her piece about ancient Rome, but because Greece is in close proximity to Rome and also in the Mediterranean, I argue that her conclusions still apply to Greek maenads.

and black people, which was a rampant issue at the time due to the Dutch East India Company's increase in African slave trade. But I propose another reason. I argue that ter Brugghen made the maenad Nordic, white, and blond-haired to create realism in a different way. A truly 'real' depiction of a maenad would have been brown and dark-haired, but in order for a Dutch woman or man to identify with the subject of the painting and feel the realness of the maenad, she would have to look like them. The maenad is no longer an illustration of a woman from millenia ago or from thousands of miles away in the Mediterranean, but a woman the viewer could see on the streets or at a dinner party in the seventeenth century Northern Netherlands. In this way, the viewer realizes that they could be the maenad, and they could rot for their sins like a pear. The viewer, seeing themselves in her, reaffirm that temptation is real and that they have to control themselves.

Ter Brugghen was not the only artist to display warnings against temptation in his paintings. Other artists mostly painted tavern and bordello scenes to make statements about morality, due to the strong Calvinist influence in Dutch society in the seventeenth century. He used his painting in a clever way, displaying a classical theme with subtle hints that it was wrong to give into temptation like the maenad did. From the ape to the grapes, ter Brugghen makes it clear that drinking leads to lawless and lust-filled activities, and the pear signifies that those activities are wrong. Even so, the maenad herself invites the viewer to drink with her anyway, and her strong resemblance to them with her white skin and her blond hair make the Dutch viewers see themselves in her. This painting reveals to them that temptation is close, looks like

they do, and that they could become the maenad, sure to rot like a pear, if they are not careful.

Ter Brugghen successfully brought into Dutch art an immoral classical figure while not compromising Calvinist values.

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