

“Possessed by Bacchus”
Elizabeth Drumm
November 11, 2009

Outline:

I. Dionysus’ non-Greek origins:

Cybele: mother goddess of Phrygia and other Asiatic cults whose cult existed in Greece before Zeus (Guthrie, 59-60).

Curetes: originally a group of *daimons* who danced around the baby Zeus when hidden in a cave from his father, Kronos. They sang and clashed their spears and swords so that Kronos would not hear the baby cry. The Curetes came to refer generally to “enthusiastic and Bacchic types, who in the guise of acolytes, by dances in arms with tumult, noise, cymbals, tympana and weapons, also with the music of flutes and shouting, arouse the passions in the course of religious ceremonies” (Strabo, 63 BCE- 24 CE, cited in Guthrie, 43).

Corybantes: identified with Curetes by the 5th century. Jeffrey Henderson claims that they were “Eastern divinities associated with ecstatic dancing, and a popular way to refer to lunatics” (*Lysistrata*, 214n119).

Semele: in Euripides, the Theban mother of Dionysus. Some sources suggest that she is also Zemelo, a name found in Phrygian inscriptions and an Anatolian Earth-mother (Guthrie, 154).

Etiological myth: a myth that “has arisen to provide a basis for an existing ritual whose real origin is lost” (Guthrie, 44).

II. Metatragic elements of the Bacchae:

Metatragic: “the self-conscious reflection by the dramatist on the theatricality and illusion-inducing power of his own work, on the range and limits of the truth that dramatic fiction can convey” (Segal, 216).

Illusion: “false mental image or conception that may be a misinterpretation of a real appearance or may be something imagined.”

III. The role of tragedy in the polis (revisited).

Quotations:

1. *Chorus of Asian Bacchae*:

“--And I praise the holies of Crete,
The caves of the dancing Curetes,
There where Zeus was born,
Where helmed in triple tier
Around the primal drum
The Corybantes danced. They,
They were the first of all
Whose whirling feet kept time
To the strict beat of the taut hide
And the squeal of the wailing flute.
Then from them to Rhea’s hands
The holy drum was handed down;
But, stolen by the raving Satyrs,

Fell at last to me and now
Accompanies the dance
Which every other year
Celebrates your name:
Dionysus! (120-134)

2. *Dionysus*:

Let the earthquake come! Shatter the floor of the world!

Chorus:

--Look there, how the palace of Pentheus totters.

--Look, the palace is collapsing!

--Dionysus is within. Adore him!

--We adore him!

--Look there!

gape and crack!
--Above the pillars, how the great stones

--Listen. Bromius cries his victory! (585-95)

3. *Dionysus*:

He seemed to think that he was chaining me but never once
so much as touched my hands. He fed on his desires.
Inside the stable he intended as my jail, instead of me,
he found a bull and tried to rope its knees and hooves.
He was panting desperately, biting his lips with his teeth,
His whole body drenched with sweat, while I sat nearby,
quietly watching. (616-21)

4. *Messenger*:

...But snatching off his wig and snood
so she would recognize his face, he touched her cheeks,
screaming, "No, no, Mother! I am Pentheus,
your own son, the child you bore to Echion!
Pity me, spare me, Mother! I have done a wrong,
But do not kill your own son for my offense."
But she was foaming at the mouth, and her crazed eyes
Rolling with frenzy. She was mad, stark mad,
Possessed by Bacchus. (1115-24)

Bibliography:

Aristophanes. *Lysistrata*. Jeffrey Henderson, ed. Oxford UP, 1987.

Lionel Abel. *Tragedy and Metatheatre: Essays on Dramatic Form*. New York: Holmes and Meier, 2003.

Barbara Goff. *Citizen Bacchae: Women's Ritual Practice in Ancient Greece*. Berkeley: U. of California Press, 2004.

W.K.C. Guthrie. *The Greeks and Their Gods*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1950.

Charles Segal. *Dionysiac Poetics and Euripides' Bacchae*. Princeton: Princeton U. P., 1997.