



DEVIATION FROM ESTABLISHED ORDER IN EURIPIDES’

BACCHAE

Vasiliki Chatzipetrou

vickychatzipetrou@gmail.com

ABSTRACT. Euripides’ play the *Bacchae*, is a profoundly social and political play where matters of significance like women’s rights, freedom of expression along with established social order and patriarchy are addressed. Euripides’ barbarian women become the means of resistance in the struggle of the superior males to retain their position in society without disrupting established order as it is defined by them. It seems that the opponent awe of patriarchy is “the other” i.e. the barbarian Bacchae or the maenads who were barbarized due to the Dionysian mania. Additionally, the deviation from established order leads to barbarism as one notices in the barbarian women’s conduct or Pentheus’ effeminacy which constitutes an act of barbarism in itself.

KEY WORDS: barbarian women, Dionysus, mania, effeminacy, established order

Euripides’ theatrical play *Bacchae* is considered an example of social and political protest where important matters regarding freedom of expression, personal choice and responsibility, women’s rights along with the role of patriarchy and established social order are addressed. A play where the eternal battle for gender domination, moral and social clashes as well as the reversal or transcendence in the roles of the sexes are interconnected.¹

Most plays of Euripides are deeply political and portray the playwright’s reaction to the impending decay of the πόλις. In the *Bacchae*, the poet expresses an exasperation much more profound than in other plays which may even justify the sharp criticism on moral, religious,

¹Συρόπουλος (2000) 94

social and political matters.² Euripides manages to combine the personal and the political in his exploration of human relationships and interactions with the introduction of an aesthetic innovation brought on stage, i.e. with the inclusion in his plays, of the socially outcast and insignificant characters like women.³ Women play a domineering and decisive role in Euripides' work, as their particular social status converts into a dramatic tool of manipulation of the *μύθος*, and expression of his personal beliefs and points of view.

In *the Bacchae*, the Euripidean barbarian woman becomes the means of resistance in the struggle of the superior males to retain their status quo. They are the very same men who control the inferior and outcast social groups, which include women too, via a dialectic which reinforces the fear people have for the unknown. Either due to their otherness –Bacchae- or due to their Dionysian mania –maenads- barbarian women are presented as the opponent awe of patriarchy and conservatism. The ones who are determined to eliminate or subdue all that they cannot or will not comprehend and accept. Thus, the only way to prevail, is to proceed to confrontation. One should not forget that in a male-dominated, social and political environment where every desire or expectation for self- direction is perceived as a threat, which is then stifled violently on a personal as well as a collective level, the use of force seems to be the only alternative. For this very reason, the maenads, carried away by the Dionysian *οἶστρος*, moved destructively and committed violent acts of crime against the main representative of the established order.

From the very beginning of the play, one notices that the *Bacchae* is a political, religious, and social play which succumbs to the expediencies, the conventions and the rules that comprise tragedy, at least in the way in which the innovator Euripides perceives tragedy. At any rate, the poet deploys the Euripidean techniques to aggrieve the established order of the Athenian polis, which he had harshly criticized through his work and which he ultimately abandoned, thus taking a stance against its decadence. “Female barbarism” is one of the techniques which is applied throughout the plot of the play. Even though the well-established Euripidean motifs of what constitutes “a woman” with the innate inclination towards passion and confusion are prevalent in the play, one cannot fail to notice that any attempt to approach the matter superficially, like for example from the stereotypical standpoint of belief on the inferior nature of women, is simply pointless.

This play is about the Bacchae, the priestesses and Dionysus' followers, who comprise the chorus, and have followed the god to Hellas from different parts of Asia. The Asian, barbarian

²Thumiger (2007) 213

³Rabinowitz (1993)13

women and later the Theban women function as followers of the god. They are possessed by the *βακχεία*, which was a simultaneous methexis, on a personal and collective level. Through ecstasy the followers shed their personality and find themselves in another situation or capacity or performing a different role.

The play starts with the arrival of Dionysus in Thebes, the homeland of his mother Semele with the purpose of imposing his cult in Greece. However, he comes across Pentheus' *θεομαχία* (battle of the gods). Dionysus appears in a human-like form and inspires *μανία* (ecstatic frenzy) to the Theban women, amongst which are his mother's sisters -his aunts- which he basically transforms into Maenads and sends them dancing and hunting on mount Kithaeron abandoning their *οἶκος*. There, sacred Dionysian orgies (sacred rituals) took place. Dionysus manages to persuade Pentheus in a magical way and with a slight craze to deny his masculine nature and disguise himself into a maenad-woman so that he himself, may spy on the women on Kithaeron [775-861]. However, the disguised Pentheus is instantly recognized by the maenads, and with Agave, his mother, leading, attack and dismember him as they mistakenly, take him for a wild animal. Agave tragically believes that she has killed a lion whose head she bears on a pike and triumphantly descends into the city to flaunt her trophy [1105-1152].

The scene of Pentheus' punishment is so brutal and intense that one may understand how upsetting that must have been for the Athenian audience. In *the Bacchae*, the women supporters of Dionysus, whether deriving from Asia or Thebes, represent a composition of otherness and femininity which incited Pentheus to salvage and ultimately control them. In the light of this observation, the maenads and the Bacchae, the god's women-supporters who have however, violated their social status and have exited their *οἶκος*, are considered barbarian, i.e. foreigners and non Greek and are condemned to enslavement.

Perseus perceives the women of Thebes as a threat to the *πόλις* and the established order, an external problem and not only a social one [778-785]. Notwithstanding, the Theban women are supporters of a foreign cult, they indulged in worshipping a foreign god and are additionally participating in orgiastic and barbarian rituals. This only renders them inferior, just like the barbarian Asian Bacchae who spend their time outside their home, in the desert of Kithairon, away from the *πόλις*. Thus, the behavior of the Theban maenads has degraded them to barbarians and foreigners in the eyes of king Pentheus, so they deserve to be captured and enslaved [511-514].

The groups of women which Pentheus and his citizens are currently facing, should and deserve to be enslaved as they are barbarian and of inferior nature, they have proceeded to

irrational actions and moreover have violated their social roles. They have also defied the legacy of their ancestors' religion and are participating in violent, unethical and orgiastic rituals to a foreign god.

For Euripides, effeminacy, apart from barbaric descent, constitutes a very important argument for which one deserves to be enslaved or captured. According to Rabinowitz in the Trojan women, the playwright addresses some of the Greek citizens' cultural anxieties whilst simultaneously constructing a new category of slaves, the one with barbarian or foreign women. For this reason, he highlights the femininity of those women who are captured by armies and thus clearly states how Greek citizens will never become slaves as they are not women.⁴

In the play, the depiction of barbarian women as the unwise, inferior women who are driven by their basic instincts, by carnal pleasures and desires is easy for Euripides as these were the prevailing perceptions for women at large. By nature, women are inferior and their role in society is completely detached from those of men.⁵ Foreigners-barbarians are also culturally inadequate and evidently inferior to the Greeks, so through this deduction the playwright is facilitated in his work, as he may easily maintain the required distance between Greek men and the unlikely possibility that they could become possessed by their desires and go astray whilst putting the *πόλις* safety in jeopardy. In *the Bacchae*, women are proven to be mentally inferior and of course imperfect, while their lack of rational thinking justifies their entire demise, the complete and utter submission to the god and finally their persecution from the city's authorities.⁶

From the women's viewpoint and also Pentheus', as the poet presents it in this play, this personal decadence reaches its peak with the unconditional liberation of the barbarian Bacchae and the renunciation of Pentheus' masculinity as opposed to his femininity. In light of this, the liberated, inferior barbarian women on the one hand and Pentheus' transformation to a maenad on the other [851], are reduced to an excuse for the final demise of the central characters of the drama. It is much easier for Euripides to punish the "female transformation" of Pentheus', and the Athenian audience to accept it, even though he is fighting against the god, as the demise of women, at large, is less painful for the Athenians.

Whilst the Athenian audience were watching the performance of the *Bacchae* on stage, they

⁴Rabinowitz (1998) 59-61

⁵According to Aristotle, the male is by nature superior and the female inferior. The male sets the rules and the female is subjected to them and is governed. (Aristotle, *Πολιτικά*, 1254b 12-15) *Again, as between the sexes, the male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject. And the same must also*

⁶Demand (1998) 70-71

must have come up against many and important matters like the unacceptable women's liberation which directly implies exiting from the *οἶκος* and departing from one's hometown, not forgetting their offensive appropriation of stereotypically male roles (e.g. hunters) [731-758], as well as their enticement to unethical, orgiastic and brutal acts, and their contempt to the gods and men, the *ὑβρις*. Where *hybris* here is manifested as a deviation from social ethical, religious, gendered and established order.

The emotions provoked could be much more easily handled through a unique game of gender roles. In the light of this observation, it is obvious that the *Bacchae's* femininity justifies their conduct, whereas the need to prevail against nature requires the adoption of male practices. The transformation, the actions and decline of the maenads is much more pleasant to the audience as they are excused due to the barbarian elements of their character and imperfect nature. On the other hand, Pentheus' subjection to women's clothing and his transformation to a maenad, constitute his suffering more "tolerable", as besides his *θεομαχία*, Pentheus is crushed as he denied his gender and nature. Therefore, his effeminacy serves as an additional excuse for his violent death.

In the same way in which Pentheus takes on this tyrannical stance, proposing the imprisonment of the *Bacchae* and the maenads so they may return to their former righteous and ethical way, the Athenian audience perceives this line of reasoning as logical. Pentheus is struggling to bring the maenads back to their former status, i.e. the righteous one, of being women and slaves, as both are regarded as men's vested, legal possessions, with minimal basic rights and limited opportunities for protection.⁷ These actions of his are justified and accepted not only due to the women's violation of the customary traditions but mainly because they are barbarians, i.e. foreigners either by birth (the Chorus) or by connection with the god Dionysus (Maenads).

Furthermore, perceptions and beliefs concerning women have been categorised by the science of social anthropology in an implicit manner. On the one hand, there is the anthropological type of woman who resides within her *oikos*. That is the woman with the submissive role. According to Engel's model, she is the mother, the housewife, the housekeeper, the domesticated person who belongs to the husband as his property. On the other hand, there is another type of woman which prevails. The one which is extracted from men's phobias, the exotic version of a woman as a barbarian and demonic being. According to this perception, this type of woman may be identified as a witch, a shrew, a lamia, a mermaid, an elf, a fairy,

⁷Kamen (2012) 8-19, 89-90

or a maenad with as many variations as these depictions imply.⁸

The second category of depictions of women, is the one which deviates from the prevailing patriarchal model of the domesticated woman. A woman who defects from her home and becomes a wanderer, is endowed with properties which, in their majority, are supernatural. The most common amongst these are the *vakheia*, sorcery, and lust. The portrait of the seditious, exotic and monstrous woman is transcendently reinforced in any instance when the balance in the home which expresses the “normality” of humankind, is disrupted and violated.⁹ The stained and bloodthirsty maenad of the ancient Dionysian cult, constitutes the projection of this perception of the expatriated, barbarian woman. The survival of this model of barbarian women is achieved through the Euripidean dramaturgy, and more specifically through *the Bacchae*, where the coherence of the drama with the social and political affairs is reflected.¹⁰

The women in *the Bacchae* are representatives of the early archaic Greek cult with a predominant figure of an orgiastically leading, omnipotent deity which can change people’s psyche in a mystical and unspeakable manner but most importantly, raises objections for the traditional established order and patriarchal perceptions of the woman’s place which is confinement in her *oikos*. The barbarity which is attributed to the maenads and bacchae literally signifies two sides of the same coin. On the one hand, the way in which the androcentric and official religion is depicted, that which exploited the aforementioned archaic cult so as to justify and enforce their rule on the mass and on the other hand, they convey the manner in which the primeval religion was imprinted on the consciousnesses of the people in the classic Greek antiquity.¹¹

In *the Bacchae*, Euripides depicts religion as feminine. As its character is “feminine”, all the social traditions associated with the gendered roles are discredited from within. The Theban women, as other barbarian Asian Bacchae with the queen mother as their leader, arose from their domesticated social status and thus undermined the very foundations of the patriarchal society and the male dominated authority. They achieved a dynamic, mass flight from their homes to the desert of Kithairon, where free and under the spell of the *βακχεία* practice the orgiastic Dionysian rituals. In this way, they contrast the male authority with their physical strength and have thus become barbarians in the eyes of all those who serve the male-

⁸Σκουτέρη-Διδασκάλου (1991)

⁹Σκουτέρη-Διδασκάλου (1991) *ibid*

¹⁰Segal (1978)

¹¹Segal (1978) *ibid*

dominated model of governance.¹²

With their flight, the Theban women castrate the dominant and superior men (Pentheus) whilst being regarded as deceitful and anti-conformist, as they are transformed into maenads, altering their human aspect. Thus, they confirm the genuine, archaic standard of women who have fled from the πόλεις where they are transformed into something completely different, discarding the character of the married domesticated woman. At this point does their barbarization occur, the alienation of anything which keeps them “tied” to the institution of patriarchy. The essence of the Theban women’s transformation and their rebellious activity resides in the necessity for reaction towards the customized, established order. In their behavior and language, one notices the resistance and political stance of those who are suppressed, of the groups of people who are marginalized and of those people who wish to politically oppose the male-dominated and conservative authorities.¹³

The Euripidean dramaturgy overflows with examples of women who dare to act with ὕβρις. Women who fall victims of their passion and love, dare to escape from reality, assault others and even commit infanticide. In the face of the maenads of *the Bacchae*, the Euripidean portrayal of women who have a distorted view of the dominant ethics and who are fully barbarized is now verified.

The βακχεία represents the βάρβαρον ἦθος, [the barbarian ethos] which preoccupies Euripides throughout his intellectual journey, initially in moderation and profoundly towards the end. In his early plays, the women’s βάρβαρον ἦθος is located in the chorus and lyric parts of the plays. However, this gradually changes and the βακχεία becomes the means with which Dionysus operates and acts as an advocate of the archetypal meaning of life. Therefore, the Euripidean Dionysus is elevated to a bearer of the initial version of the ἀφθαρτος ζωή [imperishable life], which is none other than “a woman”. A woman’s barbarian character, whether it is the Asian Bacchae or the Theban women who are under the influence of the βακχεία, is utilized by the poet as a means of attribution for the tragic solution. The latter has a political dimension and thus constitutes political action and deliverance. In Euripidean works, the barbarian woman is utilized in a way where the Dionysian ethics and conduct within the patriarchal and conservative political ideal may be displayed, and the gendered conflicts may be politically interpreted. Thus, the transgression in the symbolism of the Dionysian worship may be achieved through political proposals.¹⁴

The barbarian Bacchae and maenads’ conduct attempts to substitute the patriarchal political

¹²Segal (1978) ibid

¹³Segal (1978) ibid

¹⁴Ξένιος (2011) 55-59

ethics with the tested, primeval and archaic piety to the god.¹⁵ In *the Bacchae*, it is clear that the boundaries of the customary ethical order do not identify with those of the Dionysian ethics and for this reason, Euripides differentiates them as he understands the necessity for expansion. The barbarian women's reverence and devotion to the god, trivializes the *θεομάχον βασιλευ* (king who fights against the god), who acts with *ύβρις* as he abides with the political ethics and obsesses with the punishment of the astray women of his city. In this context, Euripides contrasts the gender of "weak" Asian and Theban women with the "powerful" masculine gender of the city and reverses the roles. The barbarian women are the ones who glorify god Dionysus, showing high primeval ethics whilst the king is the one who opposes him, following the political ethics. Therefore, the women acquire "masculine" traits whereas the man acquires "feminine" while the victim becomes the abuser.¹⁶

In *the Bacchae*, the barbarian woman is the one who promotes the religious ethics and progressively, with Dionysus' assistance, vocalizes it into a political ideology, without restraints and limitations. For the playwright, the true barbarian women are the Bacchae, the Asian women who willingly followed god Dionysus to the west to help him establish his new religion in Greece. Although the maenads do act as barbarians, they do so under the influence of the *βακχεία*. They are actually victims in the change of gender roles which the androgynous god induced. Subjected as they were to the power of disguise, they acquired the male and bestial characteristics which aided Dionysus to impose his religious ethical order so he may succeed in his objectives, which were to reform the old *πολιτεία*. With the same cosmogonic power of disguise into a maenad, god Dionysus humiliates the king who opposes him and who resists in the establishment of his Dionysian *πολιτεία*.¹⁷

In the Euripidean drama, the *βάρβαρον ἦθος*, (barbarian ethos) communicates the central characters of the drama with the tragedy which defines them and promotes them to the main supporters of the city's past. Their "otherness" and their stance opposes current tradition and, become the means of projection of the city's concerns in regards to death, love, agony and joy as well as with those social outcasts who continue to submit to the voice of the mighty patriarchal social and political structures.¹⁸

For the Euripidean dramaturgy, everywoman-heroine constitutes a tragic, isolated entity whilst with her descent into barbarization she literally reactivates the most archaic form of

¹⁵Pembroke (1967)

¹⁶Ξένιος (2011) *ibid*

¹⁷Segal(1978) *ibid*

¹⁸Ξένιος(2011) *ibid*

dominion on others, that which is in close relevance with the family law.¹⁹ Euripides' conceptual and philosophical principles are better and more suitably classified with the use of the Dionysian vocabulary. And this is so, because the word of the dominant and authoritarian male is conveyed as *μήτις* "ploy/strategy", whereas the word of the women-heroines, the Bacchae or the maenads is conveyed as "truth", as far as the violence of the *πόλις* is concerned.²⁰

For Euripides, the concept of female barbarism is emotionally charged in a different conceptual context as is the clash of the cultural grid Hellas-west and east-barbarian lands. In this context, the myth rationalizes but at the same time challenges the valid and current social and political ideology. Euripides' works, with the Sophists' standards, constitute valuable evidence of the existing multiplicity in the delivered poetic speech which allows the viewer to assess the myth. Through this procedure, the early archaic worship is maintained and survives, even if it may be weakened in the consciousness of the classic Athenian audience.

In Euripides' tragedies, *ὑβρις* takes place every time the boundaries of the sane and logical political perception are exceeded. For this reason, the poet proceeds to the indirect contestation of these political ethics, which through its representatives lead to *ὑβρις*, degrading the male kings of the polis and compromising the current military achievements. More than anything else, however, it has an impact on the dominant speech, *κυρίαρχος λόγος* with the reclamation of the woman's place in the public sphere and the reinstatement of the lost sanctity of the female nature via the prevalence of the barbarian and ancestral Dionysian worship.²¹

To conclude, in *the Bacchae*, a barbarian woman's personality constitutes a political factor in the groups of the Chorus and the maenads. This is because, through language and conduct, all or some of the truths which exist in the polis' common speech, with which they were nurtured, is detected or approached. For Euripides, the correlation of the *βακχεία* and sacrifice helps in the promotion of the sanctity of this language, in the degree in which women's conduct is defined, assessed and conceived. So in essence, the correlation between the women's *βακχεία* and sacrifice initiates the audience to the sanctity of the primeval Dionysian cult, a fact which requires the contrast of the sacred speech to the political speech, for the prevalence of the first, instead of the latter.²²

¹⁹Pembroke (1967)

²⁰Pembroke (1967) *ibid*

²¹Ξένιος (1992) *ibid.*; Ξένιος (2011) *ibid*

²² Ξένιος 1992 *ibid*

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