

# *These Women Murder: Sexual Politics in Sade and “The Bacchae” of Euripides*

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## ABSTRACT

Often called the most “modern” of the great classical tragedians, Euripides is a figure of some ambivalence, and his final play, *The Bacchae* confirms the ambiguities—as well as the power—of Euripidean drama. This paper examines the dynamics of gender and sexual politics in late classical Greece via *The Bacchae*. After an analysis of the play in its social and historical context, attention will turn to the works of the Marquis de Sade. It will be shown that within the diabolical algorithm of Sadism lurks an inherent potentiality for female empowerment in the modern age, just as bacchic revelry held for women in the classical world of Euripides. Though the two are not by any means identical, fundamental similarities can be enumerated, and allow for a more nuanced interpretation of the place and position of women in *The Bacchae*. Both Sade and Dionysos call for a release of the senses from the social restraints of morals, values, and virtues. Second, both Sadism and bacchic maenadism are leveling forces, erasing—at least in theory—all artificial distinctions between male and female, Jew and Greek, rich and poor, and even “man” and beast. Third, and perhaps of greatest significance: women are allowed, under the reign of Sade and Dionysos, a sexuality that is not tied to reproduction or maternity. As other Greek playwrights noted, this last is an area where women hold an incredible natural power, given that the keys to the continuation of the male line and the future of the species lie in their hands.

*Charming sex, you will be free; just as men do, you shall enjoy all the pleasures that Nature makes your duty, do not withhold yourselves from one. Must the more divine half of mankind be kept in chains by the other? Ah, break those bonds: nature wills it.*

– The Marquis de Sade

*These were young mothers who had left their infants behind...*

– Euripides, *The Bacchae*

Of all the classical Greek tragedians, Euripides is the one most often perceived (and lionized) as a “modern” by scholars of today, and justifiably so. Steeped in a critical perspective, the youngest of the Tragic Triad brought classical drama down to earth, by allowing for the characterization and dramatization of the lives of actual figures, even if they are still clad in mythical garb. In addition, the plays of Euripides evince skepticism about the *patrios nomos*—“the totality of all traditions and customs on whose observance the ethical life of the *polis* depends” (Friedrich 16). As such, the poet was condemned, like Socrates, for his contributions to the death of the *polis* as a political, social, and moral entity. Perhaps a kinder epitaph would suggest that Euripides actually portrays, in his tragedies, both the problems and possibilities of the late classical world, without actively working to either destroy or protect such a world.

In any case, Euripides is a figure of some ambivalence, and his final play, *The Bacchae* (also known as *The Bacchantes*), confirms the ambiguities—as well as the power—of Euripidean drama. *The Bacchae* remains something of a riddle for classical scholars, with various interpretations having been offered with regard to the author’s perceived intentions. More significant (considering that the poet’s real intent can never be known) is the portrayal in *The Bacchae* of the various contemporary crises of the *polis*-world—in particular the dynamics of gender and sexual politics in late classical Greece. Hailed as a great sexual liberator at times and demonized as a misogynist at others, discussions of gender and sexual politics in the classical world often beat a path back to the door of

Euripides. Most often it is his *Medea* that is examined under these terms, but *The Bacchae* also illuminates a number of salient issues, as we shall see.

At first glance, the inconclusive characterization of Dionysos and his followers in *The Bacchae* is matched only by the ambiguities surrounding the tragic fate of Pentheus. Euripides was writing during a period of turmoil; the Peloponnesian War was finally coming to an end with a far from glorious victory for the Spartan side. The long war was disastrous for the city-states of the Greek world, with great destruction wrought on all sides. Moreover, as Thucydides tells us in his *History*, *stasis* was spreading rapidly throughout Hellas, and civil strife was rampant. Correspondingly, and in important ways consequent with the profound political crisis, there emerged in the latter fifth century a wave of critical thinking, led by the Sophists, which in many ways undermined the solidity and stability of traditional Greek (and especially Athenian) society. In particular, critical examination called for a free subjectivity based not upon the *patrios nomos* but instead upon *physis* or nature itself. This new sense of individuality was aimed to some degree at emancipation from the tyranny of the *polis*. The younger “*physis* Sophists,” in particular, stressed a proto-fascist will-to-power—a dismissal of all that the *polis* represented in order to pursue natural and instinctual drives.

In short, disorder was the order of the day, and not merely at the level of politics. The influx of orgiastic religious cults at this time can hardly be surprising considering the weakness of the *poleis* and *nomoi*. These new cults did not specifically belong to Dionysianism—a older movement that had become accepted and regulated by the *poleis*. Rather, they resembled the cult of Dionysos prior to its Hellenization; i.e., bacchanalism in its rawest form. In *The Bacchae* Euripides portrays the cult of Dionysos in its earlier forms, but with allusions to the newer ecstatic cults invading Greece in his own day.

Originally, Dionysos was the god of life, in its free, natural, abundant, and instinctual forms. Despite his official recognition in the classical pantheon, and domestication within the borders of the *polis*, Dionysos had not been com-

pletely purged of his earlier ways. His temper remained, and flared up during the period of crisis in late fifth century Greece. The past, it seemed, had returned, or was trying to return, and the debate between Pentheus and Tiresias in *The Bacchae* with regard to the rebirth of Dionysos reflects the actual intellectual climate of the day. Modern readers cannot help but get a stilted version of this phenomenon, as all our witnesses—from the Old Comedians to Plato—are hostile to religious cults and movements of the Dionysian type. Of course, it is also significant that all of these witnesses were men, and men that, like Pentheus, were highly wary of the celebration of female rites under cloak of darkness, beyond the gaze of man and “his” *polis*.

As noted, despite the outcome of the play, with its apparent criticism of the bloodthirsty Bacchantes, there is a felt ambivalence in Euripides’s treatment of the two central male characters, Dionysos and Pentheus. With respect to the former, we must not conclude too hastily that the poet would stand with Plato and Aristophanes in condemning the bacchanal outright. Although it may be easy to blacken Dionysos from Euripidean eyes, it would be difficult to make his Pentheus into some sort of martyr of enlightenment (Dodds xliii), desperately struggling against immortality and superstition. Instead, Pentheus reminds us of Sophocles’s Creon (*Antigone*), particularly in his stubbornness, his brutality towards the helpless, along with what Dodd calls his “stupid” reliance on physical force as a means of settling spiritual disputes. In addition, Pentheus reveals a latent effeminacy and the sexual curiosity of a Peeping Tom—hardly the characteristics of a classical hero, even a tragic one.

The stranger, Dionysos, is the embodiment of tragic contradictions—joy and horror, insight and madness; innocence and cruelty—which are implicit in Dionysianism. But even if we accept Norwood’s conclusion (in *The Riddle of the Bacchae*) that Pentheus’s adversary is no god but only a powerful and rather repulsive type of man, we may nevertheless see in *The Bacchae* a more favorable view of religion than is to be found elsewhere in Euripidean drama. The worship of Dionysos must have been more congenial to the poet than other Hellenic cults and the traditional pantheon of deities, which he frequently attacks. Indeed, the chorus, throughout the play, remains steadfastly Dionysian:

Blessed is he, that happy man who after divine imitation is holy of life and joyous of soul, worshipping on the mountain with rites that make men pure. (*The Bacchae*, 1<sup>st</sup> chorus)

Even though we (the audience or reader) eventually lose sympathy with the Chorus in their thirst for bloody revenge, these lines may be Euripides’s admission that he was not entirely blind to the other side of Bacchic worship. Lesky claims that, while it is true that Dionysos is immoderate in his revenge and unjust towards Cadmus, he is also the bringer of utmost rapture to humankind—lifting humans from the bonds of despair and leading them, reconciled, back to nature. (Lesky 104) This, says Lesky, is tragedy at its greatest, where human will finds its great antagonist and the resulting tensions flare up into the tragic conflict that makes the drama what it is (according to Goethe, at least, Euripides’s best). Conacher concurs: Perhaps for the first time, he says, Dionysianism is seen as a “universal interpsychic phenomenon”: humanity’s

periodic need of release from the rational and the commonplace, to return to the “elemental springs of life” by means of the emotions. Thus, the real means for the catastrophe appear in the characterization of Pentheus, on the one hand, stubborn and presumptuous; and Dionysos, on the other, an irresistible human force with equal potential for great good and great evil.

Such a reading of *The Bacchae*, while relevant, is ultimately inconclusive when it comes to an examination of the play from the standpoint of sexual politics and gender relations. Dionysian ritual, in drama and in fact, was predominantly, and sometimes exclusively, a female affair, so the characterization (by male scholars) of Dionysianism as a *universal* inter-psychic phenomenon seems to miss the point. Pentheus forbids the introduction of Bacchic rites, justifying himself on the grounds that revels conducted at night and in the mountains, carried out by men and women under the influence of drink, cannot help but lead to promiscuity, a general weakening in public morality, and the eventual demise of the *polis* itself. What Pentheus fails to mention is the fact that, of all the Bacchic revelers, only two are male, and even these two are portrayed as foppish, thus effeminate, old men. Says Tiresias: “Only we see clearly and are wise, all the others [i.e., other men] are perverse and blind” (B 196). Dionysos’s followers are virtually all women, despite the fact that, as a god of nature, he dissolves and thus transcends conventional divisions of gender as well as those of wealth, status, age and power. Herein, perhaps, lies the attraction of the bacchanal for the women in the classical age of the *polis*: Dionysos liberates women, in particular, from the monotony of ordinary domestic life and from the confines of familiar social categories and expectations. At a deeper psychic level, he also relieves them from the burdens of civic responsibility and the weight of consciousness—“from the prison and prism of rationality” (Eubens 146). Of course, this “liberation” from custom and consciousness would be most attractive to those who have so little to lose and so much to gain from rejecting the heretofore stable but increasingly unstable life within the *polis*.

The status of women in classical antiquity was low, and, according to Eva Cantarella, was on the decline in the late fifth and early fourth centuries. All female-male relationships were constructed for the purpose of male needs, in one form or another. The position and condition of women was nearly non-existent socially, and regulated by a series of laws that established women’s inferiority and permanent subordination to men. It is no wonder that mystery cults asserted themselves during this era. The bacchic or Dionysian ritual itself was the only moment in which women could express a part of themselves that had been suppressed: their senses. In its licentious character, however, bacchanalia challenged the principles not only of the family and the legal order but of a political realm based upon established laws, traditions, ethics and customs—the *patrios nomos*, which was at the very heart of the patriarchal social order that was at the very foundations of classical Greece.

Thus, while *bacchic* revelers are in some sense apolitical—eschewing democracy, oligarchy, and tyranny for the delights of *physis*—female *bacchae* are something more. Generally, female orgiastic rites (“maenadism”) have been interpreted in terms of a safety-valve; i.e., a temporary release for women from the pressures of civilized social life that helps such life to continue without serious rupture. Such an account may have relevance to organized carnival of mediaeval

Europe (Zemon-Davis), or the more regulated and controlled Dionysianism of Euripides's Athens, but when, as in *The Bacchae*, maenadism occurs *outside* of the watchful eyes of the polis, the metaphor of safety-valve no longer applies. Pentheus's reaction is one of genuine alarm and fear. While this may be based partly on generalized worry of the bacchic threat to civilized life, it may also be a thinly disguised reaction to a distinctively female phenomenon in which, for once, women are free from direct male supervision—other than that of the subversive and gender-bending Dionysos himself.

There are some difficulties, however, that can and must be raised with respect to the issue of female “empowerment” and women's opportunities for “freedom” within the context of bacchic cults. The benefits seem obvious: worship of this outsider god effects at least a theoretical leveling of social and gender differences. But what of the drawbacks? The savagery and brutality of *sparagmos* and *omphagia* are not for all tastes, nor is the complete renunciation of the domestic *oikos* in favor of *thiasos*, the (female) cult group. The loss of *oikos* means the abandonment of children (replaced, in *The Bacchae*, by gazelles and wolves). In denying human reproduction along with maternity, this threatens the very continuance of the species. Moreover, while bacchic worship frees the individual from the ties of the laws and socio-political customs, it also demands surrender of self to the collectivity, the *thiasos*, which may or may not be beneficial to the empowerment of women in the Greek world.

It is common to raise the dichotomy of male / reason / polis and female / senses / physis when discussing Greek drama and the historical position and relations of men and women in premodern eras. The *Bacchae*, however, seems to involve more than a conflict between a natural / feminine will-to-power and a political / masculine hegemony of collectivity. What may appear to be a clear-cut case of gendered power relations is actually confused by the realm of sexuality, which inevitably enters into and plays a fundamental role in gender politics. It is not so much that sexuality was taboo in the Greek polis (certainly no more so than in Victorian London), but rather that sexuality, both male and female, was controlled and supervised by men. Female sexuality was restricted to the realm of reproduction and motherhood; if eroticism was permitted, it could only be enacted upon male instigation and male need.

We noted above that *The Bacchae* is a play filled with ambiguities, not least of which is the possibility of female empowerment out of the “liberation” offered by Dionysos. One possible way of looking at this particular issue in more detail is with reference to a certain infamous French writer whose works have generated much interested in recent scholarship on gender and power in literature: Donatien Alphonse-François, the Marquis de Sade (1740-1814). Sade is a figure who stood on the threshold of the modern era, living and writing at a time when, just as in the classical Greek world of Euripides, questions of human nature and social institutions were being debated freely and with great and lasting political consequence. Indeed, late-eighteenth century France, like late-fifth century Greece, was characterized by the disruption and dissolution of civil, social, and moral life. Skepticism emerged in both periods (e.g., Sophists in Greece, materialists in France), and belief in the intrinsic corruption of existing social and political systems gained apace.

Sade relied heavily upon Baron Holbach's *Système de la Nature* (1770), which set forth a line running from Diderot through Nietzsche to Artaud, carrying naturalism and materialism to its logical conclusions and proclaiming the supreme right of the individual to pleasure in opposition to publicly inscribed rules of behavior. Sade applied, or perhaps re-applied, the *Système de la Nature* to the realm of sexuality and sensual license, extending such beyond the political realm altogether—or perhaps creating a new realm of, quite literally, “sexual politics.” In some ways Sade is the modern-day Dionysos, reborn in revolutionary France. Gilles Deleuze asks a question that could just as easily be applied to Euripidean drama in late classical Greece: “Can there be any plainer literary statement of the destructive tendencies of the century in relation to religion, law, justice, love, and sexual morals than that contained in the... novels of M. de Sade?” (Deleuze 2). Even in Sade's “satanic barbarism,” however, we can discern a positivistic longing for a new and lasting foundation for domestic and social organizations—one that may even allow for female empowerment.

Before toasting Sade as a utopian feminist, let us be frank in admitting his personal misogyny. However, this fact does not eliminate the possibility of a feminist reading of Sade's work and the tentative development of a Sado-Dionysian rubric for female empowerment. Sade did not deify nature, but he recognized that society was hypocritical in its antagonism to nature. According to Simone de Beauvoir, the real plagues of our civilization are established injustice, official abuses, and constitutional crimes—in Sadeian terms, these are the inevitable accomplishments of abstract laws (*nomoi*) that are imposed upon a plurality of separate and distinct individuals. Sade preferred some sort of “reasonable anarchy,” by which civilized beings could be restored to their primitive instincts. An important aspect of this restoration was the liberation of the erotic imagination for its own objectives.

Sade did not compose his numerous and shockingly detailed tableaux of cruelty simply in order to titillate or corrupt his readers. He was anxious to communicate, with a kind of desperate intensity, his feelings about nature, human behavior, conventional morality, and individual and social problems. Although Sadeian heroines never reach the heights of a Medea, they are allowed momentary vistas of the glorious freedoms their creator is willing to grant all those who embrace the libertine path. For the libertine way, like the Dionysian way, ultimately confounds gender expectations, at least when taken to its radical conclusions. In *Aline et Valcour*, Sade describes an ideal community where women and men enjoy perfect equality, and in *The Self Made Cuckold* one of his characters asks: “What is the barbarous law which enslaves this sex [women] in an inhuman fashion while giving us [men] all the liberty we want?” (258)

If there is one thing that Sade savagely rejects it is *submission*, that “hypocritical resignation which is adorned with the name of virtue.” Men and women both renounce their authority and freedom whenever they fall prey to the “stupid submission to the rule of evil, as recreated by society.” The great code of virtues promulgated by society, says Sade—sexual mores in particular—are just attempts to palliate the all-too-obvious inadequacies of the law. For Simone de Beauvoir, “Sade is quite right in cutting through sophisms and exposing the inconsistencies of a society that protects the very things it condemns, and which, though permitting debauchery, often

pillories the debauchee” (51). Self-proclaimed Sadeian feminist Angela Carter goes further in positing that Sade’s work concerns the nature of sexual freedom and is of particular significance to women because of its refusal to see female sexuality in relation to its reproductive function—a refusal as unusual in late eighteenth century France as it was in ancient Greece, when the sexual license and general sensual openness of bacchic maenadism opened the door to a non-reproductive female sexuality. Moreover, Sade reinstates sexuality as a primary mode of being rather than specialized and male-controlled “vacation from being.” Carter class Sade a “terrorist of the imagination,” and one who turned “the unacknowledged traits of the encounters of sexuality into a cruel festival at which women are the prime sacrificial victims when they are not the murderers themselves” (21).

Sade describes the condition of women through the aegis of sexual relations, the medium in which he believed women might heal themselves of their socially-inflicted scars—in a cleansing praxis of destruction and revenge. According to Carter, when acted out in a repressive society (like Euripidean Greece), Sade’s “diabolical lyricism” of sexuality necessarily becomes violence and negation. Sade’s greatest woman characters are also his most cruel; once they have tasted power and learn how to use it, they are enabled to extract vengeance for the humiliations they were forced to endure as the passive objects of the sexual energy of others, and as reproductive beings. As such, Sade was unusual in his period for (indirectly and directly) claiming rights of free sexuality for women, and for installing women as beings of agency and power in his imaginary worlds.

A free woman in an unfree society will be a monster. — Her freedom will be a condition of personal privilege that deprives those on which she exercises it of her own freedom. The most extreme kind of this depravation is murder. *These women murder.* (Carter 21)

Thus, within the diabolical algorithm of Sadism lurks an inherent potentiality for female empowerment in the modern age, just as bacchic revelry held for women in the classical world of Euripides. Though the two are not by any means identical, fundamental similarities can be enumerated, and allow for a more nuanced interpretation of the place and position of women in *The Bacchae*. Both Sade and Dionysos call for a release of the senses from the social restraints of morals, values, and virtues. Second, both Sadism and bacchic maenadism are leveling forces, erasing—at least in theory—all artificial distinctions between male and female, Jew and Greek, rich and poor, and even “man” and beast. Third, and perhaps of greatest significance: women are allowed, under the reign of Sade and Dionysos, a sexuality that is not tied to reproduction or maternity. As other Greek playwrights noted, this last is an area where women hold an incredible natural power, given that the keys to the continuation of the male line and the future of the species lie in their hands.

While it not obvious that either Sadism or Dionysianism is a reasonable alternative to so-called civilized life—whether in the age of the *polis* or today—the liberation of the senses has an obvious appeal to those who are marginalized under patriarchal social and domestic systems. It also raises the possibility of a non-political dimension in which women especially can achieve some semblance of liberty and power,

even if that power entails a ruthless negation of all social structures, and one that is easily manifested in murder, revenge, and brutality. With Segal, we might conclude that there can be little joy in donning the maenad’s garb, but only a sense of temporary relief that may open the eyes of the patriarchal polis-world and its Pentheus-like protagonists. Acts of transgressive sex and violence are clearly no permanent solution to the complex problem of female oppression, whether in the world of Euripides, Sade or Artaud, yet in all three eras the existence—even if only imaginative—of a purely sexual realm opens up a counter-balance to the oppressive weight of politicized sexuality.

Greek tragedy, and classical literature more generally, reflects profound ambivalence towards the female sex. Paternalistic disparagement is mixed at times with a definite and genuine fear of the negating power of the feminine. Many contemporary scholars suggest that, with respect to the treatment of women, we make a sharp distinction between Euripides and his two older contemporaries, Aeschylus and Sophocles. Medea is most often cited in this regard as the ultimate Euripidean heroine, but *The Bacchae* provides, in its anxious ambiguity, a more nuanced portrait of both the misogyny and the limits and possibilities of female sexuality in the late classical period.

History tells us that every oppressed class gained true liberation from its masters through its own efforts. It is necessary that woman learn that lesson, that she realize that her freedom will reach as far as her power to achieve freedom reaches. It is, therefore, far more important for her to begin with her inner regeneration to cut loose from the weight of the prejudices, traditions and customs.... A true conception of the relation of the senses will not admit of conqueror and conquered; it knows of but one great thing: to give oneself boundlessly in order to find one’s self richer, deeper, better. (Emma Goldman, *The Tragedy of Woman’s Emancipation*)

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