WOMEN ON THE MOUNTAIN: EXPLORING THE DIONYSIAC MYSTERIES

A Thesis
Presented to
The Honors Tutorial College
Ohio University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for Graduation
from the Honors Tutorial College
with the degree of
Bachler of Arts in Classics

by
Robert Leary
August 2010
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private or Public</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dionysiac Terminology</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madness and Worship</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dance</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Bacchae</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Images</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction: What are the Mysteries?

Much is known about the ancient civic cults of Dionysus. Festivals like the City Dionysia and Anthesteria, where dramatic competition would take place and allies would bring tribute or festival-goers would participate in public drinking games are well-known and studied manifestations of this civic worship. Each citizen of the city would participate in these civic celebrations. However, there were other, private forms of the worship of Dionysus – specifically, the Dionysiac mysteries – for which there is very little extant evidence. Paradoxically, although little about this worship is known for certain, these forms of Dionysiac worship spanned from South Italy to Anatolia and were practiced for nearly one thousand years. Whereas a plethora of ancient writers attest to the civic festivals of Dionysus and we also have extant archaeological evidence from them, references to this other form of Dionysiac worship are scant, especially before the end of the fifth century BCE, coinciding with the performance of Euripides’ Bacchae.

Euripides’ Bacchae, performed in 405 BCE, presents us with a turning point in the history of this private Dionysiac worship. Relatively little evidence for these Bacchic mysteries exists before its performance, while there is a comparative explosion of references and artifacts concerning these rites afterwards. Even further, aspects of the Dionysiac mysteries dating after the performance of the Bacchae are similar to potential aspects of the mysteries that can be gleaned from the tragedy. More importantly, some of these characteristics were not present before the production
of the *Bacchae*. Clearly, this phenomenon could just arise from the severe lack of evidence before the fourth century BCE. However, the potential exists that the *Bacchae* had some influence on the private Dionysiac worship that followed it.

While some scholars, like Richard Seaford, have relied entirely on philology in order to further understand private Dionysiac worship. I aim to produce a more complete understanding of the mysteries using literary as well as archaeological evidence. Unfortunately, the literary references for these private cults that do exist span from the sixth century BCE to the second century CE, a period during which these private forms of worship could have changed. Additionally, much of the literary evidence, like tragedy for instance, is based on myth, making it difficult for us to discern reflections of true historical worship from mythic lore. Similarly, there are images from Greek vases with potential associations to Dionysiac worship that must be examined in the larger context of literature as well as archaeology. Adding to these complexities, inscriptions, which provide certain actual evidence concerning private Dionysiac worship, are found in Northern Greece, South Italy and Anatolia – locations far from Athens, where most of the literary and iconographic evidence originates. While this variety could increase the overall understanding of private Dionysiac worship, it is more likely that the geographic diversity could lead us to create a universal understanding of a worship from what were actually distinct incarnations based on location. Given that this form of Dionysiac worship was practiced over such a long period of time and in such different locations, we could create a concept of a
worship that never existed. However, with this concern in mind, used cautiously, the evidence will enhance an understanding the Dionysiac mysteries.
Private or Public

While civic Dionysiac worship is characterized by state-sponsored festivals, these other types of non state-sponsored, exclusive worship would be considered private. In the opening lines of the fifth century BCE comic playwright Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata*, Lysistrata states that the other women are late because they were at some sort of Bacchic feast (Βακχεῖον). Since this sort of feast would have operated outside of the civic structure of Athenian festivals, they are an example of private Dionysiac worship.

The mysteries are a specific form of private cult practice, which necessitate the initiation of the participant. The best documented form of Greek mystery religion is the Eleusinian cult, about which we know much, due to archaeological evidence of the sanctuary buildings, inscriptions, representations on reliefs and vases, as well as literary references. In these mysteries, initiates would undergo an entire program of processions and ceremonies, perform secret rites and, ultimately, have a truth revealed to them after undergoing some transitional state, making their prospects for life (perhaps with better crops) and afterlife somehow improved.\(^1\) Initiation and mystery rites would also bring the celebrant closer to the gods. As Arthur Darby Nock describes, “mystery rites indicated a higher status and closer relationship with the god into whose mysteries one would be initiated.”\(^2\)” During the secret initiation rites, many

---

\(^1\) Burkert, 1985, 285-7; Foley, 1994, 70; *Hymn to Demeter* 480-482, 486-89; Isokrates’ *Panegyrikos* 4.28; Pindar fr. 137a; Cicero *De Legibus* 2.14.36

\(^2\) Nock, 1952, 793
of the stories of the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* would have been reenacted or alluded to by ceremonial action\(^3\). Special participants would have acted the important roles, like Kore, that were associated with the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*\(^4\). For initiands, seeing gods like Kore would have instilled in them the feeling of achieving a closer status with gods. Although initiation would only have happened one time in a person’s life, participants would come back to celebrate the mysteries on multiple occasions, witnessing the initiation of new people. Aristophanes’ *Frogs* features a chorus of Eleusinian initiates who sing traditional hymns and chant for the god Iacchus, with whom some identify the god Dioynsus, who is a prominent character in the Eleusinian mysteries\(^5\). Admittedly, the Eleusinian mysteries had civic connotations -- the overall ceremony beginning with an Athenian festival at the Eleusinion in Athens\(^6\). The Eleusinian mysteries were also geographically static – only occurring in Eleusis. In contrast, the Dionysiac mysteries were not tied to a specific location and occurred throughout the Mediterranean where Greek colonization was found.

\(^3\) Burkert, 1985, 288  
\(^4\) Foley, 1994, 68  
\(^5\) Dover, 1997, 28  
\(^6\) Burkert, 1985, 286
Dionysiac Terminology

In order to be considered mystery religion, like the Eleusinian mysteries, the Dionysiac mysteries must also have featured such a transitional state – coming closer to the god Dionysus. How would this have happened? Here, some terms, specifically, telete, and orgia particularly illuminate the discussion. In a larger sense of the word, telete is applicable to many sorts of ritual. In Homer, the related verb telein is used to mean “perform an act or ceremony,” like at Il. 24.660, “τάφον τελεῖν,” meaning “to perform a burial,” or Od. 4.7, “ἐξετέλειον γάμον,” meaning, “to perform a marriage ceremony.” Feyo Schuddeboom explains that telete refers to a form of religious ceremony in every instance other than one reference in the pseudo-Homeric Batrachomyomachia. Schuddeboom goes on to write that, at least from the time of the tragedians, the term telete refers specifically to “orgiastic cult acts,” and specifically initiation into the mysteries. He cites passages including the prologue of Dionysus in Euripides’ Bacchae that say, “καταστήσας ἐμὰς τελετὰς,” meaning, “established my rites,” referring to the Dionysiac mysteries (l. 22). E.R. Dodds makes a similar argument, writing that telete is a word, “originally applicable to many sorts of ritual (Pindar calls the Olympic games a τελετή) but from the later fifth century...
onwards used chiefly of the rites practiced in the mystery cults. It does not always mean ‘initiations’: initiation can happen only once.”

The first instance of the term *orgia* in literature is in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, where Demeter says, “ὀργια δ’ αὐτῇ ἔγὼν υποθήσομαι,” meaning, “and I myself will teach you the rites,” possibly referring to the Eleusinian mysteries (l. 273). N.J. Richardson writes that *orgia* originally had this broad meaning, but later referred specifically to sacrifices and mystery rites. Schuddeboom also claims that the term *orgia*, and the related verb *orgiazein*, refer to a vague religious rite.

However, in the later context of Dionysiac worship and the *Bacchae*, he writes that it refers to the worship of Dionysus and ecstatic worship. Susan Cole writes that ματίνα, or madness, is induced by participation in these *orgia*, madness that would bring the participant closer to the god. This sort of overwhelming experience of a changed and extended consciousness, or madness, which, according to Walter Burkert, is “if not the sole origin, at least one of the most essential supports of religion,” was probably reenacted in history by ecstatic Dionysiac worshippers, in order for them to achieve a closer relationship with the god. Accordingly, the term *orgia* should conjure images of ecstatic ritual with the aim to achieve this “extended consciousness” and become closer to the gods.

---

9 Dodds, 1960, 76  
10 Richardson, 1974, 251  
11 Schuddeboom, 2009, 142-143  
12 Cole, 2007, 331  
13 Burkert, 1985, 109
The word *mainas*, as first attested to in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, originally just referred to a madwoman (l. 386). Eventually, it came to be synonymous with the women driven mad by Dionysus in myth, as in Euripides’ *Bacchae* in reference to the maddened women of Thebes. At line 52, Dionysus says, “εὐνάψω μαϊνάσι στρατηλατῶν,” “I shall marshal my maenads to the field.” Later, at line 130, Pentheus refers to them as, “μαινάδας θυσικόους,” or “maenad priestesses.” From these accounts, maenads are mortal women who have been driven mad by Dionysus. Generally, Dionysiac maenads, like the ones on a pointed amphora in Munich are represented with their head back, hair tossed in the air with arms and legs extended or bent in active positions, holding a *thyrsos* – Dionysiac staff with ivy vines and leaves – or small animal and are often accompanied by satyrs (Images 1 and 2).

The term *thiasos* generally refers to a band or group, usually of women, known for Bacchic revelry. As Dodds notes, *thiasos* did not always have Dionysiac connotations and could be “applied to any religious confraternity which existed for the purpose of private as distinct from civic worship.” However, he adds that, “it describes especially the characteristic unit of organization of Dionysiac religion.” Fritz Graf interprets a *thiasos* as a generic ritual feast, or gathering of people, and this definition, due to its cautious nature, seems best when examining the Dionysiac mysteries. Occasionally, as in mytho-historical accounts in Herodotus (4.79-80),

14 Munich 2344, ARV 182.6, LIMC VII pl. 36: Arias, Hirmer, and Shefton (1962: figs. 122-4, pls. xxx-xxxii)
15 Dodds, 1960, 70
16 Graf, 2007, 39
Euripides’ *Bacchae*, and Apollodorus (2.2.2) these *thiasoi* are comprised of people who have been actively driven mad (maenads) by Dionysus. However, other historical sources like Plutarch, Pausanias and inscriptions describe *thiasoi* of women who voluntarily participate in Dionysiac worship in order to achieve their own sort of ecstatic “madness” (μαίνιναι) and become closer to the god. Richard Seaford cites a passage from the *Bacchae* (ll. 73-75) which ties *teletas* to joining one’s soul to the Bacchic *thiasos* (Θιασεύεται ψυχάν) in order to posit that *thiasoi* participated in the Dionysiac mysteries. Based on this phrase, it seems that entry into the mysteries is associated with the *thiasos*.

Diodorus Siculus, the Greek historian writing in the first century CE, recounts specific details concerning the *thiasos* of the Dionysiac mysteries of his time. Diodorus writes:

“Consequently in many Greek cities every other year Bacchic bands (Θιάσοι) of women gather, and it is lawful for the maidens to carry the *thyrsos* and to join in the frenzied revelry, crying out “Euai!” and honouring the god; while the matrons, forming in groups, offer sacrifices to the god and celebrate his mysteries and, in general, extol with hymns the presence of Dionysus, in this manner acting the part of the Maenads who, as history records, were of old the companions of the god. He also punished here and there throughout all the inhabited world many men who were thought to be impious, the most renowned among the number being Pentheus and Lycurgus (4.3.3-4).

Aside from the mentions of Pentheus and Lycurgus that obviously connect this passage to myth, the typical mythical characteristics of maenadism are prevalent: *thiasoi*, revelry, Bacchic cries and hymns to Dionysus. Diodorus’ inclusion of the phrase “in many Greek cities,” indicates that Greek maenadic worship was widespread.

\[17 \text{ Seaford, 1982, 252}\]
throughout the Greek world. Greek maenadism was not restricted to specific locations in the Mediterranean. Diodorus’ statement that celebrants were “acting the part of the maenads of old” indicates that ritual maenadism was a reflection of mythical maenadism. Since Diodorus writes many centuries after Euripides wrote of maenadism in the *Bacchae*, we must exercise caution in using his account to enhance our understanding of Dionysiac worship in conjunction with the writings of Euripides.

The traveler Pausanias, writing in the second century CE, provides the final knowledgeable account of maenadism in the Mediterranean, indicating that *orgia* and *thiasoi* remained an important part of private Dionysiac worship into the Roman period. He writes:

… the beautiful dancing-floors of Panopeus, I could not understand until I was taught by the women whom the Athenians call Thyiads. The Thyiads are Attic women, who with the Delphian women go to Parnassus every other year and celebrate orgies (*orgia*) in honor of Dionysus. It is the custom for these Thyiads to hold dances at places, including Panopeus, along the road from Athens.

Pausanias’ excerpt is unique for his first-hand encounter with historical *thiasoi* of maenads. Versnel acknowledges that this is one of the very few literary mentions of the “ορειβασία,” or maenadic hike of the mountain. This is also, as Henrichs notes, a rare clue that historical maenads existed in Attica, even if they did not practice maenadism there. Accordingly, while Athenian maenads certainly existed in the time of Pausanias, they probably traveled from Attica to Delphi in order to perform their secret rites.

---

18 Versnel, 1998, 138
19 Henrichs, 1978, 154
Although there is discussion over the meaning of the word *sparagmos*, it is generally interpreted as “tearing apart” or “ rending.” *sparagmos* is mentioned in Euripides’ *Bacchae* (ll. 1124-1137) during the account of the rending of a calf and of Pentheus at the hands of his own mother and aunts. As the messenger describes, “His ribs were clawed clean of flesh (σπαραγμοίς)” (l.1135). The figure Aktaion, Pentheus’ cousin who is torn apart by his dogs for boasting to be better at the hunt than Artemis, is referenced four times in Euripides’ *Bacchae*\(^\text{20}\) (ll. 230, 337, 1227, 1291). Although the term *sparagmos* does not appear in connection with Aktaion, the story of his dogs tearing him asunder is referenced twice (337, 1291) and at line 1291 the location of Pentheus’ destruction is described by Cadmus as “οὐτὸς τοίνυν Ἀκτέωνα διέλαχον κύνες …on Cithaeron, there where the hounds tore Aktaion to pieces.” These descriptions of *sparagmos* are visually depicted on sixth and fifth century BCE Attic pottery, like the Red-figure psykter dating to 510 BCE in Boston, along with other Dionysiac motifs like ivy, *thyrsoi* and even Dionysus himself (Image 2)\(^\text{21}\). Benjamin Weaver notes the blurring of distinctions for the meaning of the word between ‘cutting’ and ‘tearing apart’\(^\text{22}\). While Dionysiac depictions of women cutting animals apart with a short sword do exist, the majority show women tearing apart animals with nothing but their hands, and a sword is never referenced in the *Bacchae* in regard to the *sparagmos* of the cattle or Pentheus.

---

\(^{20}\) According to Pausanias 9.2.3, in another version of the myth, Aktaion is punished for coveting Semele, mother of Dionysus and aunt of Pentheus.

\(^{21}\) Boston 10.221, ARV 16.14, *LIMC* VII pls. 256-7

\(^{22}\) Weaver, 2009, 15
The word *omophagia*, in a broad context, is defined as the, “swallowing raw of an animal body.” Although the term *omophagia* does not necessitate Dionysiac connotations, it does appear once in the *Bacchae*, and it sometimes used as an epithet for Dionysus in other contexts. Line 135-138 reads: “ἡδὺς ἐν ὀρεσιν, ὡταν ἐκ θιάσων δρομαίων πέση πεδόσε, νεβρίδος ἐχων ἱερὸν ἐνυτῶν, ἀγρεύων αἷμα τραγάκτόνον, ὀμοφάγον χάριν,” “He is sweet in the mountains, whenever after the running dance he falls on the ground, wearing the sacred garment of fawn skin, hunting the blood of the slain goat, a raw-eaten delight.” Even though there is no historical evidence supporting the contention that *omophagia* and *sparagmos* were part of actual worship, some scholars like ER Dodds and Richard Seaford have written that the two practices would have been a part of Dionysiac worship contemporary with the *Bacchae* largely based on one Milesian inscription dating more than a century later and episodes from the *Bacchae*.

The 276/275 BCE Milesian inscription states, “Whenever the priestess performs the rites of sacrifice (τὰ ἱερὰ) on behalf of the whole city, nobody must “ὀμοφάγιον ἐμβαλείν” before the priestess has done so on behalf of the city.”

Albert Henrichs postulates that the term “ὀμοφάγιον ἐμβαλείν” would have been a sacrificial deposit placed in a pit, probably to Dionysus as his epithet Raw-Eater. Henrichs also cites specific examples of the term *embalein* used with regards to feeding animals. Xenophon uses the term to refer to feeding horses (*Anab. 1.9.27,

---

23 Dodds, 1960, 276
24 Seaford, 1981, 263 citing Dodds, pp. xvi ff; Milet vi. 22
25 Henrichs, 1978, 150
Cyrop. 8.1.38), while in other instances it is used in regards to beasts of burden and sacred fish (Theophr. Char. 4.8; Ael. Nat. anim 12.2). This indicates that some form of raw meat may have been used during Dionysiac mysteries in Miletus to ritually feed Dionysus. The question still remains concerning vases like the psykter in Boston showing a group of women, probably maenads, tearing apart Pentheus, which Dodds also uses to justify his claims that Dionysiac mystery cult did indeed feature sparagmos – but the difficulty remains that we are still unable to definitively say whether these vases depict merely myth or mythological reflections of worship.

One series of vases which could possibly feature mortal women performing Dionysiac ritual, are the so-called Lenaia vases. The last of which, a stamnos in Naples by the Dinos painter, depicts four women: Dione, who holds a skyphos and a ladle; Mainas and Choreia, who beat a tympanon; and Thaleia, who holds a thysos and torch (Image 3). In the middle of the four women sits what could be interpreted to be a ceremonial column equipped with a mask of Dionysus atop a table with two large vases to its sides. The identity of these women is a mystery. Henrichs declares the Lenaia vases, including this example, to be the only vases, “on which maenads are engaged in ritual.” Carpenter argues, according to similarities with other vases that do feature nymphs, that these vases feature nymphs in a generic Dionysiac setting according to the desires of the patrons buying them. Whether or not this is entirely true, these vases certainly do not depict the scenes we would expect from reading Euripides’ Bacchae – no sparagmos, no animals and no definitive, exaggerated

27 Henrichs, 1978, 153
28 Carpenter 1997, 81.
dancing. Ultimately, even if these women are correctly identified as mythical nymphs and not historical worshippers, their mythic action could be symbolic for an actual Dionysiac ritual.

These depictions of maenads exhibit special occasions or actions that may either be interpreted as reflections of mystery cult or myth. The women shown on the vases maintain poses that could resemble ecstatic, reveling dance poses, which are attested to in the fourth century BCE to have been a part of Dionysiac mysteries. The tympana and auloi, flutes, shown on these vases also echo the later fourth century BCE accounts of orgiastic thiasoi reveling in the mountains to the sounds of flutes and drums. The tearing apart of animals, sparagmos, is an important motif found on Dionysiac vases of the sixth and fifth centuries. Aeschylus’ mid-fifth century BCE Bassarai features the sparagmos of Orpheus at the hands of a group of women. Pentheus meets a similar demise in Euripides’ Bacchae, performed at the end of the fifth century BCE, when he is torn apart by a group of women including his mother and aunts. Unfortunately, other than Herodotus’ reference to Skyles, no fifth-century BCE writer sheds any light on fifth century BCE Dionysiac mysteries that could corroborate any of the iconography as depicting mystery cult. Unfortunately, no vase depicts the rending of Pentheus by three women labeled Autonoe, Ino and Agave, the aunts and mother of Pentheus who tear him apart in the Bacchae. As Benajamin Weaver points out, Agave begins the sparagmos by grabbing Pentheus’ shoulder and stepping on his chest for leverage in tearing it off\(^{29}\) (ll.1129-1137). This exact act is

\(^{29}\text{Weaver, 2009, 35}\)
not matched in any iconographical depiction, and we are left guessing as to whether or not any depictions of *sparagmos* reflect Euripides’ *Bacchae*, some other myth, or actual acts of Dionysiac mystery.

It is necessary to use the literary, iconographic and inscriptive evidence in conjunction to create the most plausible understanding of private Dionysiac worship. The literary evidence varies from the mytho-historical accounts of Herodotus, to the Greek tragedies of Aeschylus and Euripides, and even first-hand accounts from travelers and historians like Plutarch and Pausanias, spanning over 700 years. The sparse number of historical accounts, especially before the fourth century BCE should caution those who study private Dionysiac worship. Based on similarities between accounts of the Dionysiac mysteries in Plato, Aristophanes and Plutarch, Seaford operates under the assumption that the Dionysiac mysteries had not changed greatly from the Classical period into later times. Accordingly, as Burkert writes, “Conservatism is the essence of those rituals in which a community such as a *thiasos* perpetuates itself by the transmission of a ritual treasured as originally taught by their god.” If this is true, then utilizing evidence from across the temporal spectrum is an appropriate method for creating an understanding of the Dionysiac mysteries.

Archaeological evidence, in the form of fifth and fourth century BCE golden leaflets or *lamellae* and Hellenistic inscriptions, also provide evidence concerning the Dionysiac mysteries. Many literary references that possibly refer to Dionysiac worship, like Euripides or Aeschylus, are in a mythical context, and feature elements

---

30 Seaford, 1981, 252
31 Burkert, 1972, 34ff
like *sparagmos* for which there is little evidence to support actually being a part of Dionysiac worship. However, archaeological evidence, used in conjunction with literary support, serves to confirm what could or could not have actually been a part of the Dionysiac mysteries.

Inscribed golden leaflets, or *lamellae*, found in tombs of Northern Greece and South Italy present a number of references to Dionysus, initiation and the afterlife. One from the late fourth century BCE found in a tomb at Pherae, known as Pherae-28, reads, “Send me to the feasts (θιάσους) of the initiates; I possess the rituals (ὀργία) of Bacchus and the rites of Demeter Chthonia and of the mountain mother”\(^{32}\). Two other late fourth century BCE ivy-shaped tablets found on a woman’s chest in Pelinna have the inscription, “Tell Persephone that the Bacchic one released you”\(^{33}\). Yet another leaflet dating to 400 BCE from a tomb in Calabria reads, “And you too, having drunk, will go to the sacred road on which other glorious initiates (μυσταί) and βάκχοι (Bacchoi) travel”\(^{34}\). These *lamellae* feature much of the same language as the literary evidence concerning the Dionysiac mysteries, but place it in a specific context. Each of these leaflets was found in a tomb, and most are explicitly connecting the experience of initiation with the afterlife.

---

\(^{32}\) Graf, Johnston, 2007, 38
\(^{33}\) Graf, Johnston, 2007, 37
\(^{34}\) Graf, Johnston, 2007, 5
Madness and Worship

In the fourth century BCE Phaedrus, Plato refers to Dionysiac association, writing that, “We made four divisions of the divine madness, ascribing them to four gods, saying that prophecy was inspired by Apollo, the mystic madness (τελεστικήν) by Dionysus, the poetic by the Muses, and the madness of love, inspired by Aphrodite and Eros (265 B).” Each of these forms of madness seizes its target and cannot be brought on without the will of the god. Burkert writes that this Platonic passage means, “One must surrender to the madness and allow oneself to be seized by the god in order to become free and well, not only for the present but for all the future.” This sort of madness was integral to the mystery worship of Dionysus. The first and second centuries CE biographer and essayist Plutarch, further supports the contention that frenzied θίάσοι were the staple of the Dionysiac rites. In his Life of Alexander, Plutarch describes the Bacchic practices of Macedonian women of the fourth century BCE:

πάσαι μὲν αἱ τήδε γυναῖκες ἐνοχοὶ τοῖς Ὀρφικοῖς οὕτως καὶ τοῖς περὶ τὸν Διόνυσον ὁργασμοῖς ἐκ τοῦ πάνω παλαιοῦ… πολλὰ ταῖς Ηδωνίσι καὶ ταῖς περὶ τὸν Λίμιον Θησσαλίας ὁμοια δρώσιν· ἀφ’ ὦν δοκεῖ καὶ τὸ θρησκευέν τὸν θυμόν ταῖς κατακόρους γενέσθαι καὶ περιέργους ἱερουργίας· ἢ δὲ Ὀλυμπιᾶς μᾶλλον ἑτέρων ἑλώσασα τὰς κατοχὰς, καὶ τοὺς ἐνθοσιασμοὺς ἑξάγουσα βαρβαρικώτερον, ὅφεις μεγάλους χειροθέτεις ἐφείλκετο τοῖς θιάσοις
All the women of these parts were addicted to the Orphic rites and the orgies of Dionysus from very ancient times… and imitated in many

35 Burkert, 1985, 292
ways the practices of the Edonian women and the Thracian women about Mount Haemus, from whom, as it would seem, the word “θρησκεύειν” came to be applied to the celebration of extravagant and superstitious ceremonies. Now Olympias, who affected these divine possessions more zealously than other women, and carried out these divine inspirations in wilder fashion, used to provide the reveling companies with great tame serpents (2.5-6)

Plutarch, a Delphic priest who was also initiated into the cult of Dionysus, uses many of the usual Dionysiac terms including orgia and thiasoi in order to describe the Dionysiac mysteries. Plutarch specifically mentions “divine possessions” in this passage, further indicating the importance of frenzy in private Dionysiac worship. The presence of thiasoi also hints that these rites probably also featured ecstatic worship. In his Mulierum Virtutes, Plutarch details another story of women followers of Dionysus:

“The women devotees of Dionysus, to whom they give the name of Thyads, in Bacchic frenzy wandering at night unwittingly arrived at Amphissa. As they were tired out, and sober reason had not yet returned to them, they flung themselves down in the market-place, and were lying asleep… The wives of the men of Amphissa, fearing, because their city had become allied with the Phocians, and numerous soldiers of the despots were present there, that the Thyads might be treated with indignity, all ran out into the market-place, and, taking their stand round in silence, did not go up to them while they were sleeping, but when they arose from their slumber, one devoted herself to one of the strangers and another to another, bestowing attentions on them and offering them food (13).”

Here, Bacchic madness is mentioned again by Plutarch, when the women have become so tired from their frenzy that they fall asleep in a public place. Henrichs views this story as an indication of the social status of Hellenistic maenads, writing that, “the rites of the official colleges of maenads such as the Delphic Thyiads were

\[^{36}\text{A later term used to refer to the θιάσος.}\]
not offensive or suspicious in the public eye… the freedom of movement which they enjoyed during their ritual formed a marked contrast to the seclusion of ordinary women.” Plutarch’s narrative also indicates that other Greeks respected these ecstatic women, most likely for their religious status, to an extent great enough to ensure that they were not treated injuriously. These maenadic women maintain the normal characteristics of maenad worshippers: traveling in thiasoi, reveling until exhaustion, and achieving such an ecstatic state of mind that sober reason still had not come back to them (μηδέπω τοῦ φρονεῖν παρόντος) by the time they reached Amphissa from Mount Parnassus.

According to Martin West’s reconstruction of fragments, in Aeschylus’ fifth century BCE tragedies Edonoi and Bassarai, madness plays a paramount role in mythical Dionysiac contexts. In these plays, Dionysus comes to Thrace from the east. The king Lycurgus refuses to worship the god, and he is driven mad, ultimately killing his children. Later, Orpheus converts from worshipping Dionysus to following Apollo and is torn apart by a group of “Bacchants,” who are said to be followers of Dionysus. West writes that these two plays most likely influenced Euripides’ Bacchae, and there are a few chief similarities and differences. In the Bacchae as well, Dionysus enters a city, Thebes, from the east. The madness with which Lycurgus is overcome in the Edonai is very similar to the madness that Dionysus

---

37 Henrichs, 1978, 136
38 West, 1990, 29-38
39 West, 1990, 27
40 Dionysus was chiefly seen as “the god who comes.” The Athenian festival, the City Dionysia, featured a procession of a statue of Dionysus Eleuthereus from the Attic deme Eleutherae to Athens proper, furthering the motif of the god who comes from outside the city. Otto, 1965, 83.
bestows upon the women of Thebes in the *Bacchae*. The *sparagmoi* of Euripides’ Pentheus and Aeschylus’ Orpheus are striking, but, as West writes, the women who tear Pentheus apart are relatives being punished with madness by Dionysus, but the women who rend Orpheus are probably voluntary followers who came with Dionysus and are not experiencing madness\(^{41}\). Since there are no prior references to Pentheus’ own mother, Agave, and aunts, Ino and Autonoe, as being Pentheus’ killers, this could have been an original addition of Euripides.

Madness again appears in the myth recounted by pseudo-Apollodorus, the date of which is uncertain but probably the second century BC, which features a story about the daughters of Proteus. In this myth, the three daughters of Proteus are driven mad by Dionysus because they, “would not accept the rites (τελετάς) of Dionysus… In their madness they roamed over the whole Argive land, and afterwards, passing through Arcadia and the Peloponnese… and besides that, the other women raved (ἐμαίνοντο) with them; for they also abandoned their houses, destroyed their own children, and flocked to the desert (2.2.2).” As Otto writes, this passage continues the Dionysiac motif of madness as punishment\(^{42}\). Just as the women in the *Bacchae* are driven mad by Dionysus and tear Pentheus apart, these Argive women are also maddened into killing their own children. Again, the historical act of ecstasy, as it could have been a part of Dionysiac worship, must have been different. The women who would have been initiated into the rites of Dionysus did so willingly in order to further accept the god Dionysus – not as punishment for rejecting the vengeful god.

---

\(^{41}\) West, 1990, 45  
\(^{42}\) Otto, 1965, 106
Henrichs explains a possible reconciliation between these two different forms of maenadism by writing that, “Dionysiac myth and Attic drama are clear reflections of maenadism as practiced\(^{43}\).” Essentially, two phenomena could have been occurring at this time. Either later, historical women would induce the madness of the Dionysiac mysteries in imitation of the mythical maenads who were driven mad by Dionysus as punishment, or the actual maenadic worship would have been dramatized in myth. Madness is so closely related to Dionysus, that there is even an account of Dionysus himself being driven mad. Apollodorus writes:

Dionysus discovered the vine, and being driven mad by Hera he roamed about Egypt and Syria. At first he was received by Proteus, king of Egypt, but afterwards he arrived at Cybele in Phrygia. And there, after he had been purified by Rhea and learned the rites of initiation, he received from her the costume and hastened through Thrace against the Indians. (3.5.1).

Stricken mad by Hera, the only cure for Dionysus’ madness is initiation into the mysteries of Cybele, the Phrygian mother goddess. The associations between the mysteries of Dionysus and Cybele are further strengthened by the mention of the two cults in the same ode of the Bacchae. Lines 72-82 celebrate not only those who, “τελετάς θεών είδώς know the mysteries of the god,” but also the “ματρός μεγάλας ὄργια Ἐφθας rites of the great mother Cybele.” Clearly, there exists a connection between the ecstatic cults of Dionysus and the Eastern mother goddess Cybele.

\(^{43}\) Henrichs, 1978, 143
A psychological analysis of this madness further illuminates the discussion of the Dionysiac mysteries. William James establishes four criteria for an experience to be described as mystic: ineffability, which is the principle that mysticism must be directly experienced, cannot be transferred to others and is a state of feeling – not an intellect that can be articulated; noetic quality, meaning that mysticism is a state of knowledge which gives insight into new depths or truths; transiency, which means that a mystical state cannot be sustained for long; and passivity, the property that the person undergoing a mystical experience feels grasped or held by a higher power\textsuperscript{44}. These criteria apply very well to the context of Dionysiac mysticism. The noetic quality of the Dionysiac mysteries can be found in references from the \textit{Bacchae}. During the discussion between Dionysus and Pentheus at line 470, Dionysus shies away from revealing the truth of the mysteries when posed with requests by Pentheus like, “what form do these mysteries take?” to which Dionysus replies, “It is forbidden to tell the uninitiated,” or “tell me the benefits that those who know your mysteries enjoy,” to which he retorts, “I am forbidden to say. But they are worth knowing.” Eventually, frustrated Pentheus makes the accusation that Dionysus is evading his question.

The transiency of Dionysiac madness can be found in Euripides’ \textit{Bacchae}, when the ecstasy of the Theban women eventually wears off after the death of Pentheus when they return back to their normal state. In the \textit{Bacchae}, Agave recounts her own transition from madness to normalcy by saying that she no longer feels the

\textsuperscript{44} James, William, 1965, 380-381
same, “flurry. No, I feel – somehow – calmer. I feel as though – my mind were somehow – changing” “οὐκ οἶδα τοῦτος τοῦτο. γίγνομαι δὲ πῶς ἐννοοῦς, μετασταθείσα τῶν πάρος φρενών” (ll. 1269-1270). Plutarch’s account of the fatigued Attic maenads falling asleep in the market of Amphissa is another example indicative of the temporary nature of Dionysiac mysticism (Mul. Vir. 13). After their slumber, they return back to their state of normalcy.

The passive property of Dionysiac mysticism is the most apparent. The aforementioned mythic maenads described in Euripides’ Bacchae and Apollodorus’ myths experience a complete take-over of their faculties. Similarly, the historical maenads of Plutarch’s accounts, while seeking such an experience, could only have performed acts to themselves to make themselves available to the madness, and would only have undergone the true maenadic experience at the pleasure of the god Dionysus.

Writing in the fourth century BCE, Plato may offer insight into this notion that the actual initiand or participant does not control whether or not he or she actually has a mystic experience, but that it is at the god’s sole discretion. In the Phaedo, he writes, “… he who passes unsanctified and uninitiated into the world below will live in a slough, but that he who arrives there after initiation and purification will dwell with the gods. For 'many,' as they say in the mysteries, 'are the thyrsos bearers (ναῤῥηκοφόροι), but few are the mystics (βάκχοι)’ —meaning, as I interpret the words, 'the true philosophers (69c-d).’” As Versnel points out, Plato is reinforcing the relationship between Bacchic worship and initiation, as well as the principle that those
who have been initiated will be granted a better afterlife than those who have not\textsuperscript{45}. Although Plato could potentially only be using this reference to the Dionysiac mysteries as a comparison to philosophy, his likening of these initiates to the “true philosophers” indicates an acknowledgment that these initiated people have knowledge of a truth that most other people do not. His comments may also indicate an understanding that many may bear the \textit{thysos} and attempt to achieve a special experience with the god Dionysus, but few actually achieve it.

The \textit{Bacchae} features two sets of Dionysiac women – the chorus of Dionysus-worshipping Bacchae, and the Theban women, also referred to as Bacchae, who have been driven mad, occupy Mount Cithaeron, and eventually kill Pentheus. At first glance, their forms of madness seem very different. The Asiatic women who worship Dionysus are his followers, and, like historical mystic adherents to Dionysiac religion, voluntarily accept and make themselves available to receive Dionysiac madness in order to achieve a closer relationship with the god. The Theban women have been stricken unknowingly with this madness. Viewing the two types of madness in the context of James’ four criteria, they are very similar. Both sets of Bacchic women are unable to direct their madness and have been taken over by Dionysus. Both groups – the voluntary and involuntary – are also privy to otherwise unseen sights, as Pentheus describes to Dionysus after he has been driven mad and convinced by Dionysus to go up the mountain, “I seem to see two suns blazing in the heavens. And now two Thebes, two cities, and each with seven gates. And you – you are a bull who walks

\textsuperscript{45} Versnel, 1998, 152
before me there” “καὶ μὴν ὁρῶν μοι δύο μὲν ἡλίους δοκῶ, δισσὰς δὲ Θῆβας καὶ πόλισμ᾽ ἐπτάστομον καὶ ταῦρος ἡμῖν πρόσθεν ἦγείσθαι δοκεῖς” (II. 918-921). Accordingly, the two forms of madness – the one used as punishment by Dionysus and the kind invoked by those who voluntarily channel the god – are similar in practice, if not the same.
Dance constituted an important part of the lives of ancient Greeks. They would have watched its performance in civic festivals, and possibly could have actively participated in it during private rituals. In his Laws, Plato draws a distinction between the orderly dance of Apollo and the muses and the disorderly dance of Dionysus. At 815c, he writes:

ὅση μὲν βακχεία τ’ ἔστιν καὶ τῶν ταύτας ἐπομένων, ἀς Νύμφας τε καὶ Πάνας καὶ Σεληνοὺς καὶ Σατύρους ἐπονομάζοντες, ὡς φασίν, μιμοῦνται κατωνωμένους, περὶ καθαρμούς τε καὶ τελετάς τινας ἀποτελοῦντων

All the dancing that is of a Bacchic kind and cultivated by those who indulge in drunken imitations of Pans, Sileni and Satyrs (as they call them), when performing certain rites of expiation and initiation

Plato’s assertion draws a clear association between dancing and Bacchic initiation, and also strengthens Henrich’s earlier contention that Dionysiac myth and ritual are reflections of one another.

Dionysus’ associations with dance run even deeper. Dionysus is even invoked in the final choral ode of Sophocles’ Antigone as the “overseer of chants in the night, with your attendant Thyiads who in night-long frenzy dance and sing you as Iacchus the Giver (ll. 1146ff).” Going beyond Apollodorus’ story of Hera driving Dionysus mad, Plato remarks that dance may even have originated from Dionysus:

ὁ θεός οὗτος ὑπὸ τῆς μητροῦς Ἡρᾶς διεφορήθη τῆς ψυχῆς τῆν γνώμην, διὸ τᾶς τε βακχείας καὶ πᾶσαν τῆν μανικήν
According to Plato, the very origin of Bacchic ritual dance leads back to Dionysus’ maddening by Hera. According to Steven Lonsdale, the sort of unhinged mainia brought on by Bacchic dance could potentially be beneficial or destructive⁴⁶. Those, like actual worshippers, who accept it willingly, experience a closer communion with the god. However, the mythical figures who do not accept Dionysus willingly – like Pentheus, the daughters of Proetus, or Lycurgus – meet a terrible fate. One purpose of inducing mainia would be to produce internal calm. Plato notes that mothers would sometimes put their children to sleep by moving them about, rocking the child constantly and crooning to “καταυλοῦσι τῶν παιδίων, καθάπερ ἡ τῶν ἐκφορόνων βακχείων ἱάσεις; cast a spell on them, like victims of a Bacchic frenzy,” and put them to bed, reminiscent of Plutarch’s account of the Bacchic women who were so tired after performing their dances that they fell asleep in the middle of a public place (Mul. Vir. 13). Similarly, in adults, such frenzied dancing would serve to calm the soul:

η τῶν ἐξωθεν κρατεί κίνησις προσφερομένη τὴν ἑντός φοβερὰν οὐσαν καὶ μανικὴν κίνησιν, κρατήσασα δὲ, γαλήνην ἔσχιον τε ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ φαίνεσθαι ἀπεργασαμένη τῆς περί τὰ τῆς καρδίας χαλεπῆς γενομένης ἐκάστων πιθήκης,

⁴⁶Lonsdale, 1993, 76.
According to this, participants in the Bacchic rites would not only have danced in order to achieve a union with the god, but also for the cathartic effect of cleansing their soul (ψυχή). Similarly, a passage from the Bacchae assures us that dancing played a role in the Dionysiac mysteries, “θρασεί δ’ ἐγκατακρούων ποδὶ τὰν ἀκόλαστον φιλοπαίγμονα τιμὰν, χαρίτων πλείστον ἔχουσαν μέρος, ἀγνάν, ἱεράνσιος μύσταις χορείαν Boldly stomp your feet in time to the wild fun-loving rite, with full share of the Graces, the holy dance, sacred to your mystics (l. 323).”

Literary sources are valuable for comprehending the relationship between dance and the Dionysiac mysteries, but iconography may also help us to pursue this understanding. Many of the sixth and fifth century BCE Dionysiac depictions could provide more evidence concerning Bacchic dance, but, like literary evidence, they most likely present us with, at best, a mythological reflection of true Dionysiac themes and worship. From them, like most literary references, we must glean evidence of true private Dionysiac worship. A sixth century BCE red-figure pyxis in Naples shows a
Dionysiac scene with two women holding snakes and *thyrsoi* bordering two satyrs with Dionysus in the middle from whom ivy sprouts and covers the top portion of the scene (Image 4). One woman holds a fawn and stands next to a fawn. A 480 BCE red-figure cup from Basel exhibits many of these same Dionysiac elements: Dionysus is present with women wearing ivy wreaths who are playing instruments and holding offering bowls, another woman not donning a wreath has torn apart a fawn and satyrs dance around with *thyrsoi* (Image 5). A 450BCE red-figure pyxis in the Baltimore Walters Art Gallery features very similar imagery: although Dionysus is absent, there are dancing women with snakes around their arms, wreaths of ivy and a fawn (Image 6). Since these women seem to be depicted dancing wildly, the simple solution would be to associate them with Dionysiac worshippers. However, as Guy Hedreen and Tom Carpenter point out, very few, if any, definite depictions of maenads exist. We must be careful to separate the categories of historical maenads or worshippers of Dionysus and mythical Dionysiac women. As Hedreen and Carpenter would have us believe, most depictions of Dionysiac women are mythical, immortal nymphs. Accordingly, instances of vase painting that show female attendants to Dionysus in the presence of satyrs are probably nymphs. The Francois Vase depicts the myth of the Return of Hephaistos, including Dionysus, Hephaistos, satyrs and nymphs. Hedreen argues that, according to similar name labels, most other vase paintings featuring

---

47 Naples, Mus. Naz. 128333 -- ABV 367, 93, LIMC VIII pl. 35: Leagrosgruppe; Gabrici, E., RM 27, 1912, 143-146 Taf. 8
48 Basel, Switzerland, BS 1906.276. – ARV² 418, 16, LIMC VIII pl. 39: CVA 2 Taf. 13, 4; 18, 1.2
49 Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, ARV³ 774, 1, LIMC VII/ pl. 27: Sotheby-Maler; Wehgartner,1., Taf. 4, 45. 46.
50 Hedreen 1994, 48 and Carpenter 1997, 52
women with satyrs also have nymphs painted on them, and not maenads\textsuperscript{51}. One might think, because of their strong associations in the \textit{Bacchae}, that the presence of snakes, the lyre and the donning of fawn skins would indicate a maenadic identity, but, as Carpenter indicates by citing a red figure cup in Paris by the Brygos painter, these attributes may also be employed by nymphs\textsuperscript{52}. Even the open mouth and swung back head, commonly thought to indicate ecstatic dance, and also potentially indicating song, are features of nymphs on this cup. Accordingly, although they do feature characteristics described as maenadic in Euripides’ \textit{Bacchae}, because of their possible status as a nymph, it is not possible to conclusively identify the women on the vases described above as historical worshippers of Dionysus. However, these vases demonstrate that these iconographic characteristics did have Dionysiac connotations and that it would not be entirely fanciful to think that they could have also been a part of the Dionysiac mysteries.

One specific form of Dionysiac performed poetry was the \textit{dithyrambos}, which is first mentioned in a poem by the seventh century BCE poet Archilochus, where he says, “I know how to lead the fair song of lord Dionysus, the dithyramb, when my wits are lightning-struck by wine (fr. 120W).” Lonsdale reads these verses to mean that there was a leader of the dithyramb, like the \textit{choregos} of dramatic chorus, who would teach the dance steps to the rest of the dithyramb performers\textsuperscript{53}. Since there is little known about the actual dithyrambic performance we cannot be confident that the

\textsuperscript{51} Hedreen, 1994, 53
\textsuperscript{52} Paris, Cab.Med. 576, \textit{ARV} 371.14, Boardman (1975, fig. 255 (I)) and Berard, Bron, \textit{et al.} (1989; 142, fig. 202 (A,B)).
\textsuperscript{53} Lonsdale, 1993, 89
“leader” would teach the dance to his fellow performers, but such a parallel to choral performance, with which we are familiar, is attractive. Walter Burkert treats the Dionysiac dithyrambs, reveling circle dances and songs conducted at the civic festivals, specifically referring to them as Dionysiac “ecstatic hymns." Burkert explains that the name dithyrambos refers equally to the god Dionysus, his hymn and his dance. Dithyrambos was even used as an epithet for Dionysus, merging the experience of the dance with the experience of the god. Although the dithyramb was performed during civic festivals, the experience of dancing in it could have been similar to the feeling of the ecstatic dances of the mysteries. The dithyramb could have taken on a tamer character from the time of Archilochus to the fifth century BCE, when it was performed at civic festivals. According to a later source, the dithyramb was called the tyrbasisa, indicating that the dance had a confused, raucous nature, just as the ecstatic dances to Dionysus. However, it is important to note that the purposes of the two types of Dionysiac dance are different: the dithyramb was a spectacle to be watched, while the value of the dances of the Bacchic rites was the individual’s performance of them.

---

54 Burkert, 1985, 102-3
55 West, 1992, 16
Music

Greeks interacted with music nearly every day – it would have accompanied the processions and sacrifices of civic festivals, and even constituted its own performance competitions. Poets like Pindar and Simonides were renowned for their talent of composing odes and paeans to be sung at these festivals. However, along with dance, music would have been crucial to the overall experience of the Dionysiac mysteries and achieving the divine madness of Dionysus. Music is mentioned in connection to the mysteries in a variety of literary contexts. Aeschylus’ *Edonai*, describes how the flute excites the madness of a Thracian orgy (*Aeschylus Fr. 57*). Here, it is possible that Aeschylus may have used elements of actual Dionysiac worship in his tragedy, and that the flutes and *thiasoi* of which Aeschylus writes may also have been a standard part of the Dionysiac mysteries in the fifth century BCE. As Martin West writes, the *aulos* and *tympanon*, flute and drum, were two staples of “orgiastic cult” activity, which would include the mysteries of Dionysus as well as Eastern deities like Cybele and Sabazius\(^\text{56}\). Longinus, a first century CE writer, in his treatise *On the Sublime*, writes that the *aulos* could send listeners out of their minds and set their feet tapping to the rhythm, which is an ideal affect for the Dionysiac mysteries, for which the goal is to achieve an ecstatic experience. According to ancient literary sources, the *tympanon* was almost exclusively reserved for this sort of

\(^{56}\) West, 1992, 105, 124
cult activity\textsuperscript{57}. The \textit{Bacchae}, a potentially rich source for information regarding the Dionysiac mysteries, mentions the \textit{tympanon} on many occasions. The very invention of the \textit{tympanon} and the story of how it became a part of the rites of Dionysus are even recounted by the chorus at line 120:

O secret chamber of the Kouretes and you holy Cretan caves, parents to Zeus, where the Korybantes with triple helmet invented for me in their caves this circle, covered with stretched hide; and in their excited revelry they mingled it with the sweet-voiced breath of Phrygian pipes and handed it over to mother Rhea, resounding with the sweet songs of the Bacchae; nearby, raving Satyrs were fulfilling the rites of the mother goddess, and they joined it to the dances of the biennial festivals, in which Dionysus rejoices.

The Korybantes, male ministers of the mother goddess Cybele, who watched over Zeus in secret so that he would not be killed by his father, created the drum in order to drown out the noise of Zeus’ cries, and nearby Dionysiac revelers heard this drum and incorporated it into their rituals. Later, at line 156, the chorus cries out to its fellow Bacchants, “On you Bacchants… sing the praises of Dionysus to the booming kettledrums (\textit{τυμπάνον})… when the holy and melodious flute (\textit{αὐλός}) sends out its notes of holy joyfulness.” From this, it is clear that there is a connection between the Dionysiac mysteries and these two instruments. It should come as no surprise that Dionysiac iconography reflects the connection between Dionysiac worship and the \textit{aulos} and \textit{tympanon}. Vases like the 480 BCE cup from Paris explicitly depict nymphs and satyrs reveling and playing these instrument as well as a woman tearing apart a fawn and Dionysus himself, explicitly connecting the \textit{tympanon} with Dionysiac

\textsuperscript{57}Herodotus 4.76.4; Bacchae 59, 124, 156, 513; Cyclops 65, 205; Aristophanes’ Wasps 119; Lysistrata 388
contexts (Image 7)\textsuperscript{58}. Again, while we cannot be certain that the women depicted with the instruments are historical worshippers of Dionysus, we can see the associations between Dionysiac dancing and music, even if only on a mythic level.

\textsuperscript{58} Paris, France, ARV\textsuperscript{2} 987, 2, \textit{LIMC VIII} pl. 38
Women

According to literary references, iconography and inscriptions, the Dionysiaca mysteries, in their earliest incarnations, were probably practiced exclusively by women. At line 51 of the Bacchae, Dionysus proclaims, “But if the men of Thebes attempt to force my Bacchae from the mountainside by threat of arms, I shall marshal my Maenads and take the field,” utilizing the feminine plural form bacchae (Βάκχαι) when referring to the crazed Theban women on Mount Kithairon. Additionally, at line 259, Pentheus states, “Only your age restrains me now from sending you to prison with those Bacchic women for importing here to Thebes these filthy mysteries (τελετάς),” using the same feminine plural term, bacchae, with regard to the Dionysiac followers who accompanied Dionysus from Asia and comprise the chorus of the tragedy. In this same excerpt, Pentheus connects the spread of the Dionysiac mysteries, teletas, with these female worshippers. Although it is unclear whether one or both groups of women are meant by Euripides to represent the historical participants of the Dionysiac mysteries, if they were, they would indicate that these practitioners had been female.

Euripides’ Bacchae features a dialogue that strengthens the argument that the Dionysiac mysteries were exclusively practiced by women. Clothed in fawnskins and bearing thyrsoi (ll. 176, 180), Tiresias and King Cadmus – both men – resolve to venture up the mountain to dance in the Dionysiac rites. “Surely I could dance night and day, untiringly beating the earth with my θύρσος!” to which Cadmus replies, “It
is the same with me, I too feel young, young enough to dance” (ll. 185-190.) After this exchange, Cadmus asks Tiresias, “Are we the only men who dance for Bacchus?” and Tiresias responds, “They are all blind, only we can see” (ll. 195-6.) In addition to the irony of this statement, it indicates that men probably did not practice the Dionysiac mysteries. Although Tiresias and Cadmus are men and plan to walk up the mountain to participate with the women, Tiresias’ assertion that all other men are “blind” signifies that other men were not a part of the mysteries.

On the other hand, the story of the non-Greek Scythian king Skyles, according to the fifth century BCE historian Herodotus, indicates that men could possibly have participated in Dionysiac rites along with women. Skyles, labeled a hellenophile by Herodotus, elects to become initiated, “τελεσθαι θναται,” into the mystery cult of “Dionysus Bakcheios” (4.79-80). Despite his house ominously being burned to the ground by a lightning bolt, Skyles nevertheless finishes the rite to the end (ἐπετέλεσε τὴν τελετὴν.) Herodotus claims that the Scythians reproach the Greeks for such Bacchic reveling (βακχεύειν) because they do not find it seemly for a god to “bring people to madness (μαίνεσθαι ἐνάγει ἀνθρώπους.)” Skyles goes mad and raves through town with his thiasos, or band of Dionysiac celebrants, loses his throne and is killed by his people. As Martin West writes, bone tablets found in Olbia indicate that Dionysiac cult flourished in that area beginning from the sixth century BCE, providing us with a context of Dionysiac cult for this reference from Herodotus. Although

---

59 Tiresias, a blind seer, proclaims that all other men are blind and that only he and Cadmus can see.
60 West, 1982, 19
most accounts of the *thiasos* mention it as being exclusively for women, Skyles’ story shows that men could possibly have been initiated as well. The geographic location of this story is also significant – Skyles is not a Greek and he is not practicing the cult of Dionysus in a Greek city. However, Herodotus, who provides the account, is Greek and writes the story in Greek terms. Herodotus also explicitly mentions that Skyles loves Greek culture, indicating that his choice to be initiated into the Dionysiac mysteries was possibly to further associate himself with Hellenic customs. Since Skyles was a barbarian hellenophile, it is possible that his participation in the Dionysiac mysteries was a perversion of the norm – Skyles, misunderstanding the rites, participated in an exclusively female rite. However, since Herodotus does not write this to be true, we cannot assume that Skyles merely bungled the mysteries. Until the first century CE, this is the only written indication that men could ever have participated in the Dionysiac mysteries.

The Roman historian Livy details the history of Bacchic rites, with particular attention to whether or not men participated, when discussing the Senatus Consultum of 186 BCE, a written law banning Dionysiac practices or “Bacchanalia.” He writes,

> At first they were confined to women; no male was admitted, and they had three stated days in the year on which persons were initiated during the daytime, and matrons were chosen to act as priestesses. Paculla Annia, a Campanian, when she was priestess, made a complete change, as though by divine monition, for she was the first to admit men, and she initiated her own sons, Minius Cerinnius and Herennius Cerinnius. At the same time she made the rite a nocturnal one, and instead of three days in the year celebrated it five times a month. When once the mysteries had assumed this promiscuous character, and men were mingled with women with all the licence of nocturnal orgies, there was no crime, no deed of shame, wanting. (34.14)
This passage from Livy discussing the Senatus Consultum of 186 BCE and Herodotus’ account of King Skyles provide us with the only literary evidence that men ever participated in the Dionysiac mysteries. Here, Livy writes that the mysteries were originally (potentially in the time of Euripides) exclusively practiced by women. From the time of Pacculla Annia, for whom we do not have a date, and presumably until Livy’s lifetime, men became involved, adding debauchery and licentiousness to the rites. Livy’s treatment of the Senatus Consultum of 186 BCE is explicit – according to him, men definitely became a part of the Dionysiac mysteries. However, it is important to keep in mind that Livy’s account of the Senatus Consultum of 186 BCE gives us evidence that is relatively late as well as geographically limited to Italy. Livy himself did not write until the latter half of the first century BCE – more than a century after the enactment of the Senatus Consultum and almost four centuries after the production of the Bacchae. Because of this, the excerpt from Livy would have few implications on the earlier incarnations of the Dionysiac mysteries from Greece or Anatolia, but does add pieces to the larger puzzle of what the Dionysiac mysteries were and who could participate in them.
Laden with themes concerning the Dionysiac mysteries, Euripides’ *Bacchae* provides a potential wealth of evidence concerning fifth century BCE Dionysiac mysteries. In the *Bacchae*, while disguised, Dionysus himself says that he was initiated into his own rites, *teletai*, indicating that this practice existed in the fifth century BCE and was common knowledge to the Greeks who would have been viewing the play from the audience (ll.466). Dodds argues that the chorus’ parodos is modeled on formulaic beatitudes common in Greek poetry and actual cult hymn. He notes that the chorus announces that they are about to sing, “the traditional things in honor of Dionysus,” (l. 71) and that they sing in traditional cult meter. Dodds also stresses the Asiatic associations of the parodos that, he says, point to a Dionysiac cult whose roots lie in the East. If the parodos indeed refers to actual traditional songs associated with mystery rites, the words of the chorus would have resonated especially with those members of the audience who had been initiated into mystery rites.

Richard Seaford argues that, “In Euripides’ *Bacchae*, Dionysos visits Thebes in disguise to establish his mysteries there,” citing lines 22ff, 40, 49, 465, 470 and 1387. These lines feature Dionysiac themes and repeatedly reference Dionysiac initiation. At line 20, the Dionysus describes that he has established his rites (τελετάς) in Asia and that Thebes is the first Greek city he has come across, that he has “made shriek in ecstasy and clothed in fawnskin.” At line 40, Dionysus states,
“for this land must learn that it is uninitiated in my Bacchic rites (ἀτέλεστον οὖσαν τῶν ἐμών βακχευμάτων.)” Dionysus says at line 49 that he will later reveal his true self (δεικνὺς ἐμαυτόν), which could hint at the establishment of his mysteries, where it is said that certain truths are revealed. Lines 465 and 470 chronicle a dialogue between Pentheus and Dionysus (whose identity Pentheus does not know), where Pentheus asks how one is initiated into the rites (τελετάς), and Dionysus replies that, “Dionysus himself initiated me.” At line 1387, Agave says, “μήθ᾽ ὅθι θύρσου μνήμ᾽ ἀνάκειται Βάκχαις δ᾽ ἄλλαισι μέλοιεν,” that she wishes to go nowhere there is a “dedicated thyrsos … let these be the concern of other Bacchants.” Here, it seems as though a place with an established “thyrsos” means a location that practices Dionysiac rites.

Clearly, the text of Euripides’ Bacchae reflects some presence of the Dionysiac mysteries of the fifth century BCE, but is it possible that the Bacchae itself could have influenced the manner in which the Dionysiac mysteries were practiced? Henrichs takes a close look at a Roman copy of a Hellenistic inscription from Magnesia ad Maeandrum dating to around 200 BCE quotes a Delphic oracle that features details concerning the Dionysiac mysteries in Magnesia that provides further evidence that the Dionysiac mysteries were practiced only by women63. The inscription features an oracle given to the city:

Go to the holy plain of Thebes to fetch maenads from the race of Cadmean Ino. They will bring you maenadic rites and noble customs and will establish troops of Bacchus in your city.

The postscript then reads:

κατὰ τὸν χρείσμον διὰ τὸν θεόπροπον ἐδωθείσαν ἐκ Θῆβων μαῖναδες τρεῖς, Κόσκω, Βαύβω, Θετταλῆ. καὶ ἡμὲν Κόσκω συνήγαγεν θιάσων τὸν Πλατανιστείνον, ἢ δὲ Βαύβω τὸν πρὸ πολεώς, ἢ δὲ Θετταλῆ τὸν Καταβατον. Θάνουσαι δὲ ἀντα ἔταφησαν ύπὸ Μαγνετῶν, καὶ ἡ μὲν Κόσκω κεῖται εν Κοσκόβουνοι, ἢ δὲ Βαύβω ἐν Ταβάρνει, ἢ δὲ Θετταλῆ πρὸς τοῖς θεάτοις.

In accordance with the oracle, and through the agency of the envoys, three maenads were brought from Thebes: Kosko, Baubo and Thettale. And Kosko organized the thiasos named after the plane tree, Baubo and thiasos outside the city, and Thettale the thiasos named after Kataibates. After their death they were buried by the Magnesians, and Kosko lies buried in the area called Hillock of Kosko, Baubo in the area called Tabarnis, and Thettale near the theater.

According to Albert Henrichs’ translation, the oracle instructs the Magnesians to build a temple to Dionysus and import three maenads from Thebes. The postscript indicates that they bring in three women: Kosko, Baubo and Thettale, who lead their own thiasoi; and, when they die, they are buried at public expense. Clearly, since they were buried at public expense, these women and their roles were valued by the people of Magnesia. The presence of three women and three thiasoi is significant, and
reminiscent of the three Cadmean sisters, Ino, Agave and Autonoe, of the Bacchae who tear apart Pentheus. The Theban people are even called “the race of Cadmean Ino.” The Bacchae is our earliest extant evidence that the three Theban sisters led their respective thiasoi. Two hundred years after the performance of the Bacchae, its legacy lasts in the form of the oracle given to the Magnesians.
Conclusion

Subsequently, whereas the public festivals of the Greek world would have been state-sponsored and attended by all Greeks, the Dionysiac mysteries were private and exclusive to women from their inception until around the second century BCE when men were allowed to practice the rites. After taking a closer look at iconographic and inscriptional evidence that has been used by some to justify the contention that women would tear apart animals and consume raw flesh during the Dionysiac mysteries, we can now see that there is no indication that these actions existed outside of the realm of the myth. Instead, there is only historical evidence that women would have practiced rhythmic dancing with the aim at achieving a higher level of consciousness from the god Dionysus – a madness. Although women would have voluntarily participated in these rituals, myth presents us with numerous groups – the Theban women of the *Bacchae*, the daughters of Proetus, even Dionysus himself – who were inflicted or *punished* with the divine madness. As described above, Euripides’ *Bacchae* even presents the reader with both – one group who volunteers for worship and another who is afflicted with insanity. Which group represents the historical women who would have practiced these maenadic rites? Perhaps the key issue is not regarding what the figures in myth or depicted on pottery represent, but rather the manifestation of heightened conscious that is present in both art and life. It is not possible or important to determine whether the myth could have been created to
represent the madness of historical maenadic ritual or whether the ritual was a manifestation of what the Greeks would have perceived from the myth.
Images

IMAGE 1 Munich 2344, ARV 182.6, LIMC VIII pl. 36: Arias, Hirmer, and Shefton

(1962: figs. 122-4, pls. xxx-xxxi)
Red-figure vase dating to around 500 BCE. Typical reveling maenads and satyrs with heads tilted back and arms and legs depicting motion. The women hold *thyrsoi* and the woman on the right holds a snake.

IMAGE 2 Boston 10.221, ARV 16.14, *LIMC* VII pls. 256-7

Red-figure psykter dating to 510 BCE. Two women, presumably maenads, hold the severed torso of a man – a *sparagmos*. The woman on the left holds a *thyrsus*. The name Galene on the vase does not match any name from Euripides’ *Bacchae*. 

See Webster (1972: 68-73)

Early fifth century BCE red-figure vase. Two women stand near a table ladling liquid into cups. A ceremonial column with the face of Dionysus is between them.

Although this vase could possibly depict a Dionysiac rite, there is no evidence that they are performing the Dionysiac mysteries.
Leagrosgruppe; Gabrici, E., RM 27, 1912, 143-146 Taf. 8

Sixth century BCE red-figure pyxis. Two women hold snakes and partake in the *thyrsus* satyrs. Dionysus is in the middle, from whom ivy sprouts and covers the top portion of the scene.
IMAGE 5 Basel, Switzerland, BS 1906.276. – ARV² 418, 16, LIMC VIII pl. 39: CVA
2 Taf. 13, 4; 18, 1.2
480 BCE red-figure cup. Depicts Dionysus with women wearing ivy wreaths who are playing instruments and holding offering bowls. Another woman without a wreath has torn apart a fawn and satyrs dance around the *thyrsoi*. 
IMAGE 6 Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, ARV² 774, 1, *LIMC VIII* pl. 27: Sotheby-Maler; Wehgarter, 1., Taf. 4, 45. 46.

450BCE red-figure pyxis. Features women playing the *aulos* and holding snakes. The women also wear wreaths of ivy, and a fawn is present.
480 BCE red-figure cup. Depicts nymphs and satyrs playing *auloi* and *tympana* as well as a woman tearing apart a fawn. Dionysus himself is present, connecting these instruments with Dionysiac contexts.
Bibliography


Bremmer, Jan, Greek Maenadism Reconsidered, ZFE, Bd. 55, 1984, pp. 267-286


Dodds, *Greeks and the Irrational*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1951, Appendix I: Maenadism, pg. 260


Tucker, TG and Harrison, Jane. *The Mysteries in the Frogs of Aristophanes*. The


