

MYTHOLOGICAL AND REVOLUTIONARY ETHOS IN EURIPIDES' *THEBACCHAE* AND SOYINKA'S *THE BACCHAE OF EURIPIDES*

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Abstract

This paper examines the treatment of mythological and revolutionary ethos in Euripides' *The Bacchae* and Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides*. The method employed is comparative textual analysis. At the end, the paper posits that though both Euripides and Soyinka are concerned with the Greek Dionysian communal rites in Thebes, Soyinka makes the revolutionary ethos more pronounced in his own work. In treating this revolutionary ethos, Soyinka introduces the symbolic crucifixion slope, the threshing floor and the carrier motif to show the persecution, tyranny and vicious execution and enslavement of the masses, which are the hallmarks of a society ruled by a tyrant. The paper also posits that the two plays basically follow the Greek fashion whereby plays are not demarcated into Acts and Scenes though there is a slight difference in the *Bacchae of Euripides* where Soyinka removes the Chorus. Also, in Soyinka's adaptation, he retains the characters - with slight differences in spelling. He also retains the poetic and flowery language in the source play.

Introduction

This paper focuses on the treatment of the myth of Dionysus by Euripides and how Soyinka also uses the same theme to propagate his revolutionary ethos. The two works considered in this paper belong to two different periods in drama. The earliest written records of the origin of drama are from the ancient Greece. According to Ashaolu (1984), many literary historians have traced this origin to the yearly festival celebrated in honour of the god Dionysus. During each festival, poets were expected to send in four entries - three tragedies and a satyr. The tragic plays were expected to show a single story line. The third part of the tragic plays was expected to bring a resolution to the problems in the preceding ones. These tragic plays became known as Trilogy. Thus, tragedy became an essential feature of the Greek drama.

Lending a voice to this, Able Media's (1998-2000), lecture note on *Introduction to Greek Tragedy* states that:

The Athenian theater was not a business enterprise like our theater but was financed by the Athenian state as an integral part of an Athenian religious festival: the City Dionysia. Three tragic poets were chosen to present their plays by a magistrate called an archon who had charge of the City Dionysia. Each one of the tragedians presented a tetralogy (a group of four plays), three tragedies and a satyr play, on one morning of the festival. In the first half of the fifth century the three tragedies often formed a connected trilogy, which told a continuous story. One connected trilogy survives, *The Oresteia* of Aeschylus, consisting of three plays: *Agamemnon*, *Libation Bearers* and *Eumenides*... The tragic poets competed with one another and their efforts were ranked by a panel of judges. Aeschylus won thirteen first place victories, Sophocles; twenty four, and Euripides; five.(2).

Since the advent of Greek drama, it has laid a foundation upon which anyone trying to write a tragic play either has to adhere or reject, hence many modern playwrights have been adapting Greek plays in a creative and refreshing way. The two works considered in this paper belong to two different periods in drama. While Euripides' *The Bacchae* belongs to the Greek Era, Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides*, which was published in 1975, is seen as the modern parallel of Greek play.

Mythological and Revolutionary Ethos in *The Bacchae*

The Bacchae centres on the tragedy of Pentheus, the tyrannical and proud king of Thebes who shows defiance to the power of the god Dionysus hence he is punished. In the beginning of the play, Dionysus, a Greek god who is said to have diverse personalities (also known by the Lydian name of Bacchus and manifests himself in different forms), states his mission to Thebes. He has come back to his land of birth to refute the different aspersions cast on his person and that of his mother. He states:

I am Dionysus, the son of Zeus
Come back to Thebes, this land
where I was born
My mother was Cadmus' daughter,
Semele by name
Midwives by fire, delivered by the lightning's blast.
And here I stand, a god incognito,
Disguised as man,

For I have come
To refute that slander spoken by my mother's sister
Those who least had right to slander her;
They said that Dionysus was no son of Zeus
But Semele had slept beside a man in love
And fathered off her shame on Zeus - a fraud, they sneered,
Contrived by Cadmus to protect his daughter's name.
They said she lied, and Zeus in anger at that lie
Blasted her with lightning. (193 - 194).

He states further that, he has also come to Thebes to punish Pentheus, the king of Thebes who has not been giving him due hono'uf as a god:

Like it or not, this city must learn its lesson; It lacks
initiation in, my mysteries; That I shall vindicate'my
mother Semele
And stand revealed to mortal eyes as the god
She bore to Zeus.
Cadmus the king has abdicated,
Leaving his throne and power to his grandson Pentheus
Who now revolts against divinity, in me;
Thrusts me from his offerings; forgets my name
In his prayers. Therefore I shall prove to him
And every man in Thebes that I am god
Indeed. And when my worship is established here,
And all is well, then I shall go my way
And be revealed to other men in other lands.
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 Held.
To these ends I have laid my deity aside and
Go disguised as man. (195)

The Chorus, according to Able Media's note on *The Bacchae*, "consists of female worshipers of Dionysus called. Bacchaes¹ whose name is derived from Bacchus, the Lydian name of the god. Female devotees of the god are often referred to as maenad (from the Greek verb mainesthan "to be mad" and also as bacchant (e)s)-'(199S-2000:2).

The Chorus also reveals the various aspects of the divine personality and rituals of Dionysus. He is shown to be a god of nature in all ramifications. Dionysus is associated with the ivy that is entwined in the hair of his maenads. His attire as well as that of his maenads is made of fawn - skin while the maenads involvement with nature is further symbolized by a cane of fernel called "thyrsos which they carry.

Able Media (1998-2000), states that:

The primary rite of Dioysia religion is that of ecstatic mountain dancing. The culmination of (his rite was an ecstatic frenzv in which the dancers tore apart and devoured *raw* an animal such as a goat or a fawn. These tuo are called *sparagwos* "tearing" and *omophalia* act of eating raw ilesh." TlTe rite of *Omophthalid* was seen as a communion willi the god in (hat the worshiper consumed a part of raw nature which was identified wilh Dionysus himself.

As the bacchantes are set to engage in (the bacchaic dance, Teiresias, an old blind seer goes to invite Cadmus, the-maternal' grandfather of Dionysus and Pentheus, for (the bacchae. Because of old age, Cadmus had ceded his throne to his grandson, Pentheus. Euripides shows Pentheus to be a man of ill temper who does not have any respect for the gods. Pentheus reveals that he has ordered some of the maenads locked up and also threatens that if he lays his hands on the man who claims that "Dionysus is a god"; he will have his head cut off.

Pentheus's anger, is further fuelled when he sees Teiresias clad in 'fawn skin'¹ and having the thyrsos in their hands. He accuses. Teiresias of wanting another god revealed to man so that he can profit from the offerings given to such a god. He says:

If see: this is your doing, Teiresias.
Yes, you want another god revealed to men
So you can pocket the profits- from burnt offerings
And bird-watching. By heaven-, only your age
Restrains me now from sending you to prison
With those Bacchic women for importing here to Thebes
These filthy mysteries. When once you see
The glint of wine shining at the feasts of women,
Then you may be sure the festival is rotten. (203)

This reaction by Pentheus makes Teiresias to warn him:

But Cadmus and I, whom you ridicule, will crown Our heads with ivy and join
the dances of the god-an ancient foolish pair perhaps, but dance we must.
Nothing you have said would make me change my mind or flout the will of
heaven. You are mad, grievously mad, beyond the power of any drugs to
cure, for you are drugged with madness. (205)

Seeing the dangerous way being trod by Pentheus, Cadmus advises him to desist from blaspheming the gods, for he does not want the fate that befell his cousin, Actaeon, who was torn into pieces by hounds, to befall him. Cadmus warns:

You saw that dreadful death your cousin Actaeon died When those man-eating hounds he had raised himself Savaged
him and tore, his body, limb from limb Because he boasted that his prowess in the hunt surpassed The skill of Artemis?.; (206)
Instead of listening to this voice of wisdom, Pentheus orders the destruction of Teiresias's shrine and the arrest of Dionysus
since he finds it difficult to trust Teiresias nor any one around him anymore. Seeing how power- drunk and heady Pentheus is,
Teiresias begs that Cadmus and himself should be allowed to leave. Before leaving, Teiresias prays for Pentheus and the city.

The maenads as well as Dionysus are arrested. While the women are kept under lock and key, Dionysus, who willingly
surrenders himself, is brought before Pentheus who orders him to be chained and locked up. Dionysus warns him of the
consequences of his actions:

I go, though not to suffer since that cannot be But Dionysus
who you outrange by your acts
Who you deny is god will call you to account
When you set your chains on me, you manacle the god (215-216).

This action by Pentheus sets in motion some catastrophe which can be compared to what happened in Oyo when
Obatala was imprisoned in Obotunde Ijimere's *The Imprisonment of Obatala* .

Dionysus once more shows his power by freeing himself from his manacle and also revealing himself as a god of
illusion. He deludes Pentheus by making the king see him as a bull, think the palace is in flames and also thinking that the
phantom Dionysus he is trying to stab is the god himself. "The god's ability to create illusions is one of Dionysus's traditional
power" (Able Media 1998-2000:3).

Despite these experiences, Pentheus is unrelenting in challenging the authority of the god. As a messenger comes to
report the activities of the maenads who are reveling in the joy of the bacchae, the tyrannical nature of Pentheus is brought
more to the fore. First, is the fear of the messenger as to what Pentheus can do to him because of the report he is about
presenting. He first asks:

May I speak freely in my own way and words or make it short? I fear the harsh impatience
of your nature, sire too kingly and too quick to anger. (222)

Secondly, immediately after the report, Pentheus orders a deployment of the 'heavy armored infantry' to attack the
maenads. He orders one of the servants:

You there. Go down quickly to the Electran gates
And order out all heavy-armored infantry;
Call up the fastest troops among our cavalry,
The mobile squadrons and the archers. We march
Against the Bacchae! Affairs are out of hand
When we tamely endure such conduct in our women.
(226)

This action by Pentheus, on one hand, can be said to be patriotic because he does not want Dionysus to disorganise the state but it amounts to a defiance of the gods. This is a crime in Greek mythology. In the words of Lattimore (1958), "Pentheus is anti-religious, suspicious, opinionated... He has the good of the state at heart, like the Sophoclean tyrant. However, much he may confuse the state with himself, he wrongly believes that he can lead the militia into the hills and subdue the maenads by force."(130)

Seeing the stubborn and unrepentant nature of Pentheus, Dionysus decides to play a trick on him so that he can meet with his untimely death. First he pleads that Pentheus should not attack the bacchantes. He pledges to bring the women back without any bloodshed. He also inquires if Pentheus would like to see the Maenads as they revel in the mountain. Pentheus replies: "I would pay a great sum to see that sight"(228).

Dionysus persuades him to disguise himself as a maenad and go to spy upon the women, guaranteeing and leading him to believe that he could watch them without being seen. Pentheus agrees and does as told. Lattimore, (1958), in trying to rationalize why Pentheus agrees to this contrivance writes that Dionysus

... tempts him with the idea of the invisible man, with the fullest power imaginable for a man -something that hard any man could refuse if it were offered- since it would make him, as Glaucon says in the Republic, able to act "like a god", or like the most powerful single man in the world, the Great King of Persia, but whose eyes and ears were everywhere, and of whom all Greek tyrants were imperfect copies.(130).

In an aside, Dionysus reveals that the Maenads have already caught their prey:

Women, our prey now thrashes In the net we threw. He shall see the
Bacchae And pay the price with death. (23 1)

Dionysus takes Pentheus to the mountain where he places him on a fir tree, then betrays him to the Maenads who tear him to pieces. His pride, vaulting ambition, lust and unbridled desires which later leads to his death are described thus by a messenger:

But Pentheus
Unhappy man-could not quite see the companies
Of women. "Stranger", he said, "from where I stand,
I cannot see these counterfeited Maenads,
But if I climbed that towering fir that overhangs
The banks, then I could see their shameless orgies
Better."
And now the stranger worked a miracle.
Reaching for the highest branch of a great fir,
He bent it down, down, down to the dark earth,
Till it was curved the way a taut bow bends
Or like a rim of wood when forced about the circle
Of wheel. Like that he forced about the circle
down to the ground. No mortal could have done it.
Then he seated Pentheus at the highest lip
And with his hands let the trunk rise straightly up,
(240-41.)

When the maenads see him, they bring him down and tear him into pieces. The ironical part of Pentheus' death is that Agave, his mother returns to Thebes bearing her son's head, which she thinks is that of a lion, spiked on a thyrsus. In the presence of Cadmus, she comes to her senses.

At this stage, Dionysus appears to explain his anger and acts:

I am Dionysus,
The son of Zeus, returned to Thebes, revealed,
A god to men. But the men (of Thebes) blasphemed me.
And not content with speaking blasphemies,
(they dared to threaten my person with violence)
did from malice to their benefactor. Therefore,
I now disclose the suffering in store for them.
Like (enemies), they shall be driven from this city
To other lands; there submitting to the yoke
Of slavery, they shall wear out their wretched lives,
Captives of war, enduring much indignity... (254)

Dionysus directs that Agave should go into exile:

Upon you,
Agave, and on your sisters, I pronounce this doom:
You shall leave this city in expiation
Of the murder you have done. You are unclean
And it would be a sacrilege (hat murderers
Should remain at peace beside the grave
(of those whom they have killed) (255)

AS for Cadmus, Dionysus directs his weird migration from Thebe:

You, Cadmus, shall be changed
To a serpent, and your wife, the child of Ares,
Immortal Harmonia, shall undergo your doom
A serpent loo. With her, it is your fate
To go a journey in a car drawn on by oxen,
Teading behind you a great barbarian host.
For thus decrees the oracle of Zeus... (255)

At the end, the grieving Cadmus and Agave prepare to leave the city forever. The people are happy at the death of Pentheus who had not accepted or allowed them to participate in the worship of Dionysus whom they see as a benevolent though fierce deity who is a source of nourishment (milk) and pleasure (wine). In *The Bacchae*, the Dionysiac ritual is consistently connected with joy and freedom. The Chorus sings of the happiness of the Dionysiac worship on the mountainside. The celebration of the freedom from all the constraints of civilization is summed up in the Chorus's wild dionysiac cry 'Evohe' and the comparison of the dancing maenads to (he leaping of a colt.

Thus, Euripides has shown through the death of Pentheus, the supremacy of the god Dionysus whom the people see as a source of freedom from all constraints of tyranny and oppression.

Mythological and Revolutionary Ethos in *The Bacchae* of Euripides

Wole Soyinka's *The Bacchae* of Euripides suits Soyinka's view on the theme of social struggle. In his introduction to the play, Soyinka describes *The Bacchae* as "an aetiological drama within a social struggle." According to Ashaolu (1990), "It is a Nigerian political satire ... and Greek mythologized political comment on the struggle for liberty from the authoritarianism of a tyrannical king"(41). Ashaolu had also earlier stated that:

This view of the tragedy of king Pentheus points out Soyinka's fascination with two prominent features of (the classic tragedy. The first is the mythology of the Dionysian communal purification rites in Thebes. The second deals with the revolutionary ethos usually associated with a tyrant. This interplay of the two transcend a mere imitation of aetiological drama which Soyinka in his introductory note to (the play sees as "a prodigious, barbaric banquet, an insightful manifestation of the universal need of man to mate himself against nature:(40)

In Soyinka's 'Own work', there are some additions and deviations from the plot of *The Bacchae* in order to suit his own goal that a work of art has to be a medium for change. Soyinka asserts in an article titled 'Drama and Revolutionary Ideal' published in *Person: Achebe, Awoonor and Soyinka* (1975) that

I believe implicitly that any work of art which opens out the horizons of the human mind, the human intellect is, by its very nature a force for change, a medium for changes (I 13).

Soyinka, starts his own play by showing the carrier motif where slaves are killed every year to cleanse the land. This cleansing is now meeting with uprising from the slaves. For the year in question, Tiresias decides to give himself as a carrier so "that the city can be cleansed of filth, pollution, cruelties, and secret abominations - a whole year's accumulation ". Asked by Dionysos why he gives himself out for the sacrifice, , Tiresias replies.

I have longed to know what flesh is made of
What suffering is. Feel the taste of blood, instead
Of merely foreseeing it. Taste the ecstasy of
rejuvenation after long organizing its rituals.
When the slaves began to rumble I saw myself again playing Unit futile role, pouring my warning on
deaf cars. An uprising would come, bloodshed and I could watch untouched, merely vindicated as
before, as prophet. (12)

The crucifixion slope used by Soyinka where persecution and execution of the common people takes place and the threshing floor where the slaves -work is an addition to *The Bacchae* to draw attention to a society that is full of oppression of the masses. Thus it is not surprising when the slaves decide they are not supplying any carrier for the annual purification ritual:

SLAVE LEADER. Wait. (*Takes hold of him*). Suppose (he old man dies?)

HERDSMAN. We all have to die sometime.

SLAVE LEADER. Flogged to death? In the name of sonic unspeakable rites?

HERDSMAN. Someone must cleanse the new year of the rot of the old or the world will die. Have you ever known famine? Real famine? SLAVE LEADER. Why us? Why always us? HERDSMAN, Why not?

SLAVE LEADER. Because the rites bring us nothing! Let those to whom the profits go bear the/burden of the old year dying'.

HERDSMAN. Careful. (He pohlts, to the row of crosses.) The palaces does not need the yearly Feast.' of Eleusis to deal with rebellious slaves.(4)

This refusal of the slaves to be carriers is similar to the case in Soyinka's *The Strong Breed and Death and The King's Horseman* where Email and Elesin Oba are unwilling carriers.

The slaves are no longer willing to bear their enslavement hence they can now question the authority of the king and revolt openly against the oppressive system. The Old Slave is thus bold enough to question the wisdom .of Penlheus¹ command to destroy the hut of Tiresias. Pentheus responds by knocking him fiat with a slap.

Worried by the reaction of the slaves who have clearly shown they are unwilling to be used as escape - goats in the communal purification ritual and with the attention being given to Dionysus in this very ritual, Penlheus declares a state of emergency thus preventing the ritual from taking place.

Apart from Pentheus' conflict with the god Dionysos, Soyinka also tries to paint Pentheus in such a way as to establish his guilt. He is made to appear as a bloodthirsty monster, who is repulsive to his subjects. Soyinka does this in order to justify his tragic end. Soyinka also tries to pitch him against the common will of his people as represented by Dionysos. Penlheus' refusal in the play to believe in Dionysos .is not only seen as a sin against the god but. also as a sin against the common desire of the people .for in Dionysos .the people see elements of life, growth, nourishment and pleasure. Thus, to deny the Bacchantes from worshipping Dionysos, is to cut them from their source of pleasure and nourishment.

Despite all the advice, from Kadrnos and Tiresias, Pentheus refuses to change his stance on Dionysos. This hard line makes the two elderly men to warn him: •TIRESIAS: Come, we,have done our duty.

pity Pentheus
His terrible madness. There is no cure,
No relief from portions. Nor from preaching.

KADMOS: Wait. His mind is surely
distracted, His thoughts sheer
delirium - Son, remember That
dreadful death your cousin Acteon
died When those man-eating hounds
reared By his own hands savaged
him, tore him Limb from limb for
boasting that his prowess In the hunt
surpassed the skill of Artemis. Do
not let his fate be yours.

PENTHEUS: (*grimly*) It won't. Bui I thank you for
suggesting a most befitting fate for that
sorcerer when we find him. (34)

The actions and utterances of Pentheus are akin to those of political and military despots in Africa and the entire world.

At the end, Dionysos deceives Pentheus into climbing to the highest branch of a great fir to watch the naked Bacchantes in their orgy of celebration. Pentheus is eager to watch this festival, which is something unheard of. In the process, he breaks the taboo of watching the Bacchantes which includes his own mother Agave, who is the leader. The end result is tragedy. He falls to his death and is torn to shreds by the possessed Bacchantes. When the death of Pentheus comes (as reported by an officer), one sees it as a better purification ritual to clean the city of its pollution than making use of the slaves who are unwilling carriers. Soyinka symbolically allows the spurt of blood from Pentheus's head to turn into wine which is drunk by everybody, including, Agave and Kadmos.

The Bacchae can be seen as providing Soyinka with the material for articulating his struggle against oppression and tyranny. This is confirmed further in his introductory note on *The Bacchae of Euripides*. Soyinka states that Dionysianism means:

The definitive attachment to a suitable deity..in this case Dionysos was nothing more than the natural, historical process by which populist movements (religious or political) identify themselves with mythical heroes at critical moments of social upheaval. Myth is part wish - fulfilment through hero projections. This means, naturally, that it is an outline for action, especially for groups within society who have experienced loss and deprivation. The cleverer tyrants such as Periandros and Kleisthenes recognized this potential and, for their own hardly altruistic motives, actively encouraged the spread of Dionysiac 'rage'

Dionysos history was extravagantly rich in all the ingredients of a ravaged social psyche: displacement, suppression identity, dissociation, dispossession, trials and the goal of restoration... in challenging the state Mysteries he became champion of the masses against monopolistic repressions of the 'Olympian' priesthood, merchantile princes and other nobility, (vii-viii).

Alluding to this, Ashaolu (1984) writes that:

Soyinka fashions out a tragic conflict in which a body of repugnant laws and customs are daringly challenged and broken by a new order. (89)

He adds further:

Soyinka regards Euripides' *Bacchae* as a fitting statement on the prevalent despotic forms of government in Africa His adaptation accordingly transforms the mirth-making Greek deity into an elixir for the suffering of the bean people. ...Soyinka chooses to emphasize the king's hubristic pride and utter disregard for the collective will of his subjects as his tragic flaw. His adaptation consequently breathes with fresh vigour. Besides, his skillful handling of the "masked" political satire brings the play, in spirit, close to the political satire in *Kongi's Harvest*. It is all part of Soyinka's articulation of his fight for the liberation of the oppressed in the society (90).

Though the play is tragic in nature, it can be placed as one of Soyinka's political satires in which he projects the ultimate fall of any tyrannical ruler as in some of his other plays like *Kongi's Harvest* and *A Play of Giants*. As Ogunba (1975), has rightly said of him:

Soyinka is a playwright who takes himself quite seriously as a man with an important message which must be delivered in a most forthright manner....(5)

Art for art's sake has no place in Soyinka's work. He believes that a work of art has to be a medium for change. Iji's (1991), incisive comment helps the more to articulate the pre-occupation of Soyinka when he states that:

Soyinka decries such derogation of individual freedom and other basic humanism when he asserts that there should be no reason why human beings should be denied enjoyment of maximum freedom. (28)

Soyinka's artistic assertiveness and aggressiveness is towards individual freedom. He believes that drama is the most revolutionary art form known to man. He also believes in individual freedom and basic humanism. In an interview with the *Spear Magazine* in 1966, which was quoted by Jones (1973:11), he asserted that "to detract from the maximum freedom socially possible, to me, is treacherous".

Thus Soyinka's quest can be said to tally with George Orwell's (1957), view that the artist always has a

desire to push the world in a certain direction, ...to alter other people's idea of the type of society that they should strive after. (316)

It also tallies with Ngugi's belief that:

Gorki has shown the way. Art should encourage people to bolder and higher resolves in all their struggles to free the human spirit from the twin manacles of oppressive nature and oppressive man. (1981:122)

Thus one cannot but share the view of Ashaolu (1990) that " the *Bacchae of Euripides* may be seen therefore as providing Soyinka with the essential material for the continued articulation of his revolt against oppression and authoritarianism ..."(41).

Conclusion

One can see from this discourse that in both plays - *The Bacchae* and the *Bacchae of Euripides* - both Euripides and Soyinka are concerned with the mythology of the Dionysian communal rite in Thebes but there is the addition of the revolutionary ethos which is associated with the fall of a tyrant in Soyinka's *Bacchae of Euripides*. In treating this revolutionary ethos, Soyinka introduces the symbolic 'crucifixion slope' into *The Bacchae of Euripides* to draw attention to the abhorrent social situation where persecution, tyranny and vicious execution of the masses had led to 'charted ruins'. The threshing floor and the slaves at work suggest a society that stinks with the oppression and enslavement of the masses. Thus it is not surprising when the slaves and the masses start revolting against King Pentheus.

The carrier motif is also another aspect introduced into Soyinka's version of *The Bacchae*. Soyinka introduces this to further echo the revolutionary ethos of the play. Tiresias offers to be the carrier in order to clean the city of "... Filth, pollution, cruelties, secret abominations-- a whole year's accumulation".

Thus, one could conclude that both plays explore the mythology of Dionysus as well as serving as political satires on the ultimate end of any dictator though with Soyinka making the revolutionary ethos more pronounced in his work.

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