

Women, make some noise

David Bullen

O dear women! My cadre, my sisterhood, my fellow travellers—
you who left your distant lives
to wander all the way from Lydia with me—
lift up your tambourines!
bang loud your drums!
Surround Pentheus' house with noise and let the city see you!

Anne Carson, *Bakkhai*

What is *Bakkhai* about? Good question. Euripides was adapting a myth familiar to his audience, in which the god Dionysus returns to his home city of Thebes to announce his divinity amongst the Greeks. *Bakkhai* is the only surviving play to deal with the subject, but Aeschylus was amongst many said to have produced their own versions. It is possible that, as an episode dealing with Athens' theatre god, the myth was a traditional or even foundational subject for tragedy. It seems likely that a story with Dionysus at its centre would have had special significance for those watching a play in a festival dedicated to that very god. Even so, had other tragic versions of this story survived, it might be clearer that Euripides seems to be doing a lot more than simply retelling Dionysus' homecoming.

By comparing *Bakkhai* to earlier visual and literary evidence of the myth, it is possible to get a sense of Euripides' innovations. Firstly, it seems Euripides invented Pentheus' inexplicable admission that he really would like nothing more than to see the Theban women worshipping Dionysus in what the king has assumed (incorrectly) are debauched, drunken orgies. This leads to Dionysus' suggestion that Pentheus disguise himself as one of those women in order to spy on them. (The evidence suggests that Aeschylus had Pentheus lead an army out to battle against the women.) The second major invention is the identification of Agave, Pentheus' mother, as the one who leads the women's attack when her son's disguise is rumbled.

Both changes point to an interest in the maenad ('maddened one'), or Bacchant, a woman who worships Dionysus in ecstatic dancing. This serves as a reminder of another decision Euripides made that might easily be overlooked: he chose as his chorus a group of these women. He could easily have chosen a different group identity—imagine if they were men left behind by women in their lives, or elders loyal to Pentheus. They aren't: they are the eponymous *Bakkhai*.

Scholars have never really been able to agree on what this all means. For some it is do with ritual, for others it is a reflection on theatre itself. It's a critique of Athenian democracy as beholden to the will of the mob; it's a critique of tyrannical leadership. It is a statement of Euripides' atheism; it is a statement of his resurgent piety. This is not unusual for scholars, but it is striking how almost every conclusion drawn has been countered with another that is its antithesis. How can the same text produce such contradictory readings?

And in case this looks to be an instance where literary critique ties itself in knots, then a glance over to what theatre makers have made of the play reveals that there's not much more consensus there either. Productions have variously found the play to be about religious fundamentalism, countercultural revolution, cult indoctrination, mob mentality, environmentalism, and more. In fact, the first fully-fledged production anywhere in the modern world, which was not until 1908 at the Royal Court Theatre in London, was ultimately cancelled after two performances over a disagreement between the translator—esteemed classicist Gilbert Murray—and the director—noted (if somewhat eccentric) Shakespearean William Poel—over what the play meant. But attending to these two men's argument over interpretation risks missing something more significant: the production only came about thanks to a group of women led by then prominent English actress Lillah McCarthy, who not only produced the play but became the world's first modern Dionysus.

Why were McCarthy and others so interested in *Bakkhai*? The timing is significant: throughout 1908, the issue of women's suffrage was reaching boiling point. Emmeline Pankhurst's trial and imprisonment provided the backdrop to rehearsals. Many of the women involved were ardent campaigners for the vote—Winifred Mayo, who played Agave, had briefly been imprisoned for militant activities earlier that year. Another clue can be found in 1910, in George Bernard Shaw's play *Misalliance*: half-way through he has his most pronounced embodiment of a contemporaneous feminist, Lina Szczepanowska, quite literally crash land in the house of a repressed English family and initiate the release of all sorts of subversive desires. Shaw's inspiration for Lina was McCarthy's Dionysus. It seems that while the men around them argued about interpretation, McCarthy, Mayo, and their fellows had a keen sense of what *Bakkhai* was about, because outside of the theatre they were themselves acting as maenads, after a fashion. This was suddenly a play about women who rebel *en masse* and the seismic social changes that follow.

The association between *Bakkhai* and waves of feminist activism continues throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. In 1968, Maureen Duffy wrote *Rites* for the National Theatre, an adaptation of *Bakkhai* set in a women's public toilet—Duffy, deeming *Bakkhai* to be Pentheus' play, set out to write Agave's. Nearly two decades later, Britain's foremost living playwright Caryl Churchill collaborated with other prominent theatre makers on an avant-garde adaptation, *A Mouthful of Birds*. Churchill and her collaborators put the maenads at the centre, staging them as modern individuals who experience ecstatic release from the mundaneness of everyday life—not always happily. In 2004, the ever mischievous and much missed company Kneehigh staged their version of *Bakkhai*; they also brought Agave to the fore. Director Emma Rice wrote in the programme:

I've always been 'good'. So has my sister. So have my mother and her mother before her. But if we were snapped in half like human sticks of rock, would we have 'good' written through the spine of us? ... *Bakkhai* tells the story of this battle between the wild and the tame. The elation of breaking the rules and the terrible price to pay. It implicates us all and asks the question - what would you do? Women. Being good is only part of the story.

Perhaps, then, this succession of theatre makers—and this really is just a snapshot—offers a way of understanding *Bakkhai*. Yes, it is about Dionysus' homecoming. But perhaps it is as much about the impact this has on the repressed human beings his worship frees. For the most part, this means women: women who resist and refuse, who can't be controlled or contained, who embrace the collective, who embrace their own pleasure. Of course, it is important to note that even if these modern women artists have found something liberatory, feminist even, in this text, it is not to say that Euripides may have intended precisely the opposite effect, presenting a dire warning about the dangers of Dionysus and his maenads.

But to pick up Rice's metaphor, *Bakkhai* is no stick of rock, the same all the way through from start to finish. It appears to be one thing only to transform into something entirely else. At the very least, there's something everyone can agree on: the play presents an opportunity for women—whether men playing women, as in Euripides' day, or otherwise—to make some noise. Do we in the audience, irrespective of our gender identity, really listen to them? Or are we like Pentheus, deceived into thinking we know what these women are saying when in fact we are projecting our own assumptions onto them? It's worth a second thought—look how it turned out for him.

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