Wild Ecstasy

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Abstract
This article draws inspiration from the Greek statue known as "The Dancing Satyr". The analysis focuses on the wild hybridity of the mythological Satyr and of its "companions" (Faunus, Pan, Silenus, Bacchus, the Bacchantes) that have become icons of subversive pleasure. Going back to the Greek juxtaposition of mind/reason and body/desire, the essay questions the seductive flow of wild ecstasy that the figure of the Satyr and its "Court" continue to emanate up to the modern revisitations of our culture which conceives the self as centred on rationality. Referring to cross-cultural 19th-century and contemporary re-elaborations of this figure (J. Keats, C. Kingsley, R. Kipling, G. Del Toro's script for *El Laberinto del Fauno*, D. Greig's *Bacchae*), while emphasising the fascinating effects of that wildness, even in its violent tragic forms, the article stresses the kind of bliss that springs from the Satyr's fertile hybridity. The echoes of this wild ecstasy continue to radiate through the centuries, from the Hellenistic culture to the modern literary and artistic reworkings, even with political implications. The analysis thus interrogates the permanence up to our days of the mythical fascination with the very ambiguity both of the Satyr and the Bacchantes, in spite of the moralistic rearticulations in Christian gothic imagery and of neoconservative patriarchal retellings.

Key-words: The Dancing Satyr, the Mediterranean, subversive pleasure.

> What leaf-fringed legend haunts about thy shape,
> Of deities or mortals, or of both,
> In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
> What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
> What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
> What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?
>
> John Keats, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*

1. Between Italy and Africa

The channel between Italy and Cape Bon in Tunisia separates Europe from Africa, but on a clear day they move closer: Dido,

when she climbed her high funeral pyre at Carthage, might have seen the shadow of Sicily lying on the horizon.

In the high temperatures of summer, when the sea is calm as a mirror and a haze hangs in sheets of hot glass overhead, the illusions of Fata Morgana raise mirror images in the air; from Sicily on one side and Tunisia on the other, the few people who aren't wrapped in the torpor of the torrid meridian temperatures can watch the enchantress's cloud-capp'd towers appear in the skies and in the depths of the sea: each country and each continent reflecting the other in lifting, multiplying, magical reflections. Nor are exceptional meteorological conditions needed for the African continent to appear before the eyes of the inhabitants of the Italian islands on the volcanic outcrops of Pantelleria, Linosa and Lampedusa.

This Canale di Sicilia, as the Italians call it, is the sea road that has for centuries carried the traffic of the Mediterranean in all its multiplicity, keeping one continent apart from another by a channel only around a hundred miles wide – about the same distance as separates Croatia from mainland Italy, and less than the stretch between Corsica and France. In this channel, the storm raised by Juno drove Aeneas's fleet to shipwreck, landing him destitute on the shores of Carthage, where he, his son and his companions were lavishly given shelter by Dido, the Queen[1]. In this channel – maybe – the same sudden capricious winds of the Mediterranean were raised by the storm-spirit Ariel at the order of Prospero, and the tempest then blasted the ships of his usurping brother and other noblemen from Prospero's former life as Duke of Milan; Shakespeare's romance opens when these rulers and their courtiers are on their way home to Italy – to the harbour in Naples – after attending the wedding of the King of Tunis to

[1] The idea of the Mediterranean as an area of cultural exchange between the West and the East has always been a central focus in the author's writings. Among her most recent research field is the cultural legacy of Troy in contemporary British culture. From September 14 to 23, 2014, the writer held a cycle of lectures on this topic, entitled "Writing and Cultural Memory in Contemporary English Literature", at the University of Palermo. She focused on contemporary works ranging from Seamus Heaney's *The Testament of Crisseid* and Christopher Logue's *War Music* to Alice Oswald's *Memorial*, Elizabeth Cook's *Achilles*, Lavinia Greenlaw's *Double Sorrow*, and Clare Pollard's *Ovid's Heroines* (editor's note).

Claribel, the daughter of Alonso and the sister of Ferdinand. This strait might also be the route that "the foul witch Sycorax" took when she fled from Algiers (named Argier in the play). When Shakespeare calls her "the blue-ey'd hag", is he evoking the characteristic eye colour of the Berbers in the mountains of North Africa? The island of Pantelleria has been identified as the possible setting of *The Tempest*, but the geography of the play is built on many strata. On the one hand, the enchanted isle could be Aeaea, where Circe the enchantress lives in *The Odyssey*, for her name also reverberates with that of Sycorax and with the word "sorcery" itself. Her magic is cast in the mould of the Homeric enchantress's powers. But the play also alludes to the Caribbean and its hurricanes (the "still vex'd Bermouthes"), and Caliban's name puns on the savage cannibals whom Columbus, for one, imagined there. And, finally, in the great sea of stories from the east, this strait between Europe and North Africa might also be the channel where Mahmoud, King of the Black Isles, reigns in the *Arabian Nights*[2] – or at least I recognise it as such when I read "The Tale of the Ensorcelled Prince", which fills the space of the eighteenth to the twenty-seventh nights.

Volcanic eruptions melted Pantelleria and turned its mass to the fossilised glass stone called obsidian pantellerite, so deep and glossy and black that the Aztecs made out of it the smoking mirrors used in the worship of Tezcatlipoca, god of the night[3]. In the story, the hero, who is the son of the King of the Black Isles, has been cast under a spell by his dissimulating wife, a terrible witch beneath her ordinary,

[2] Most of the essays and articles that Marina Warner has devoted to the analysis of *The Arabian Nights* in terms of narrative contents and cultural contexts have been included in her dense book *Stranger Magic: Charmed States and the Arabian Nights* (2012) which has been awarded international prizes such as the 2012 National Book Critics Circle Award for Criticism, the 2013 Truman Capote Award for Literary Criticism and, in 2013, a Sheikh Zayed Book Award (editor's note). In 2015 Marina Warner was awarded the prestigious Holberg Prize for her work on stories and myths in relation to the historical context.

[3] While writing this, I came across the news that Giorgio Armani, who has a house on Pantelleria, was inspired by the petrified lava of the island to create a beauty cream called Crema Nera, which comes in an elliptical black pot with a piece of the obsidian to act as "the ultimate beauty tool designed to glide over the contours of the face […] cool on the skin and wonderfully tactile". *Vogue*, September 2007, p. 395.

proper and loving exterior; her curse has frozen him into a statue of marble from the waist down, as if he were fused by enchantment to the very stone of his future realm.

The story is a tangled web, as many of the *1001 Nights* are, but it includes the appearance of white, red, blue and yellow fishes, caught in an enchanted lake. These are transformed islanders, further victims of the Prince's sorceress wife; when cooked, they turn black and charred in the pan. In the tale's denouement, it transpires that these original subjects of the King of the Black Isles formed a model cosmopolitan and multi-faith community: the white being Muslims, the red, fire-worshipping Zoroastrians from Persia, the blue, Christians, and the yellow, Jews. But the wicked enchantress laid waste "the houses, the public places, and markets" of her husband's kingdom and "made a pond and desert field of it" (Mack 1995: 60), changing the people into fish, and then, not content with that, causing them to burn to cinders when caught and prepared for the table (so not just a cannibal barbecue, but a spoilt one). With its dynamic movement towards restoration and justice, this tale clearly opposes mobility to immobility, multiplicity to exclusion, vivid and myriad colours to lightless black, and life to death: the sorceress fixes her victims in stone and wants no other life in her world besides herself and her chosen lover. At the end of the tale, when her powers have been undone by the Sultan, the fish are restored to human form, the prince regains his power of movement, his fabulous wealth, as well as his previous comely shape, and everyone returns to live in harmony and prosperity: the tale offers a wish and a prayer for a certain kind of civil society (pp. 48-65). Not all the tales in *The Arabian Nights* present such a well-meant, harmonious picture of inter-faith relations in the Mediterranean countries along the North African and Middle Eastern shore. But the Prince of the Black Isles seems to voice this ideal.

Pantelleria may or may not be one or all of these fabled islands. But, lying between Europe and Africa, Italy and Tunisia, it pricks and seeds the imagination as a fertile in-between zone, a boundary marker as well as a natural bridgehead. The channel in which it raises its volcanic, shield-like shape is not, however, only a sheet of water, a surface on which the poets and geographers of myth have inscribed their made-up stories, where historians have traced battles

and disasters and pirate raids and national changes of fortune. It is more than a body of water where nautical mappers draw shipping routes and chart the flux and whims of local currents, and a zone of supposed neutrality zealously patrolled by the frontier police of fortress Europe. (Refugees cross these coastal waters to seek asylum in Lampedusa, the nearest European point to Africa apart from Ceuta, opposite Gibraltar; the news constantly reports fatal attempts at crossing them sometimes even by swimming). Their stories do not make themselves visible, for these waters also have depths, depths to 500 metres and more, so deep and dark that algae and seaweeds cannot flourish. But bottom-dwelling fish glide there, growing sometimes to immense sizes, as well as the squid and octopus, whiskered and tusked sea monsters such as Roman plutocrats pictured in mosaic on the floors of the palaces they built for themselves in the most pleasant and luxurious postings – Rome's richest colonies in North Africa.

2. A Satyr from the Sea

In these waters, in 1991, a fishing boat worked by two veteran fishermen from the port of Mazara del Vallo in Sicily was trawling its usual patch of the sea and the sea bottom at a depth of 30 metres when the fishermen found a strange creature in their nets: a sea serpent of a kind they had never seen in their familiar hunting grounds before; nearly a metre long, with strange markings on its skin. From experience, they knew what to do and, once they had despatched its life, packed it for presentation to the Institute of Research on Marine Resources and Environment in their local town for identification. As they had rightly surmised, it was a marvel, a rarity: the saddled snake eel, Pisodonophis semicinctus (Osteichthyes: Ophichthidae), an inhabitant of the Atlantic ocean, and never before seen in the Mediterranean.

A few years later, in March l998, the same fishing vessel found in the same waters another strange gift from the sea. This time, the leg of a man. The limb was as cold as the snake, and as much a part of the element in which it had lain for over two thousand years, being entirely encrusted with all the busy organisms – crustaceans, spirophylli – that perform the patient labour of sea change, metamorphosing eyes into pearls, wrecks into castles of coral, and

grinding granite into the fine, rosy sand that glorifies the beaches of Africa and Italy. Under the marine carapace, it was hollow bronze, a left leg, bent at the knee almost at right angles, with the foot outstretched and clearly lifted off the ground, toes pointed like a dancer's. This much they could see. They knew it was treasure: the seas off Italy and Greece continuously yield sculptures from the heyday of classical antiquity. Such finds feel like miraculous apparitions from the past: when these works of art return to the surface, they fold up time and the people who lived in those parts of the world all those ages ago step straight into our present time, full of the power of their technical brilliance and virtuoso artistry, but also their vision. This vision came to define humanism, and with humanism, ideals about freedom and dignity, the life of the mind and the life of the body that were fundamental in shaping the idea of Europe and Western culture. When the Riace bronzes (c. 450 BC), two magnificent, larger than life-size male figures, were fished up out of the sand in 1972, where they were discovered by a scuba diver on holiday, then cleaned up and put on exhibition, they seemed to be messengers from the unconscious, recalling us to a knowledge that was partly glimpsed by the Florentine classicists but still needed to unfold.

The following year, the same vessel was trawling the same area where the crew had brought up the dancer's leg; they guessed that the statue would have gone down whole, part of a cargo carrying art to adorn one of the new villas that the colonial governors were putting up on the beautiful coast. They had tried before to fish for the rest of the sculpture, but without success. On this occasion, by a kind of miracle – imagine finding another piece in all that water – they struck the rest of him, but as they pulled in the net from those great depths, it tore, and part of the sculpture – the other leg, his right one – broke away and fell through the sea again. They had the torso, though, arched backwards, and still attached to the head, which is flung sideways and back, wavy hair miraculously undamaged and streaming back in thick strands like flames. The eyes are white, not pearls but alabaster, the irises deeply gouged – they must have been implanted with glass, perhaps with obsidian, the black fossil glass of the local island. The expression on the dancer's face is ecstatic – what the Greeks thought of as 'filled with Dionysus', and we call "blind drunk". The fishermen had

retrieved one of the greatest works of classical art found in recent times.

The workmanship bears all the signs of Greekness: it was made with the perfected skill of lost-wax casting on a colossal scale. Once the restorers went to work and freed the sculpture from its rich crust of marine life, they found that it had been assembled from six pieces (the head, torso, legs and arms cast separately). The restoration also revealed that the sculptor had modelled the toes, the calf, that floating hair, the slightly parted lips, the muscles of chest and shoulders, back and bottom, with sensitive, absorptive involvement, like someone in love with delectable skin and flesh. The modelling had captured a figure in whirling motion and high, self-forgetful excitement; a young man, except that he has the pointed elfin ears and low brow of a faun, as well as a sizeable hole at the base of his spine for a tail, which is missing.

I saw 'The Satyr of Mazara del Vallo', as the work is now known, in the exhibition Praxiteles at the Louvre in the spring of 2007. It was the climax of an unusual, exploratory show, which tried to inventory the works of Praxiteles, byword for Greek sculpture. And then – owning up to the fact that very few, if any, authenticated works survive by the master himself – it fascinatingly explored the concept of Praxitelean style or form through a host of attributed works, imitations, tributes and variations since the fourth century when the artist himself lived. The Satyr has been ascribed to this most famous of Greek sculptors by some connoisseurs because he is especially associated with breaking away from the stiff, erect, quasi-Egyptian effigies of the archaic style, and introducing a warmer, more supple, and naturalistic sense of vitality and movement. However, most of the works attributed to the artist are carved in marble, and even if they stand off-centre in the sinuous bend of the contrapposto pose, they are static by contrast to the soaring of the Satyr.

His motion exactly catches the Latin word saltus, used for dance, and surviving in the English "somersault": he is curved in mid-flight like an acrobat, and the effect of this arched, airborne moment has been emphasised because that right leg, the one that would have been stretched out to take his weight on the ground, went missing when it broke off, flying through the element of water, to another, lower ground on the seabed. The dynamic of the Satyr's arching dance gives new meaning to the idea of the beautiful naked youth:

the nobility that humanists discovered in the erect, free-standing, hieratic nude here brings in different insights, and conveys a more complex and more comprehensive human psychology, which allows space for the bubbling up of the unconscious, of irrational desires, excessive passions, untrammelled grasping after pleasure in loss of self.

The word "self-possession" is a late coinage in English, a product of an enlightenment ideal of individual control and fulfilment. The Satyr here embodies the difference between that development and the Greek cult ideas of possession by something other and outside oneself, accompanied by a deep commitment to a belief in the fertility of that condition.

So the Satyr flies, as he follows in the train of Dionysus (or Bacchus, as the god is also known), alongside the delirious maenads, fat and sottish Silenus, the spotted pards that drew his chariot as he made his triumphal progress from India to Europe. The sculpture that sank off Pantelleria was part of a group, it is thought likely, a statuary installation to be erected in honour of Dionysus, either in a temple or in a grotto or nymphaeum, such as the one the Emperor Tiberius later assembled in the sea-cave at the foot of the Monte Circeo, south of Rome. The dancing Satyr would have had companions in his ecstasy – Bacchae leaping beside him, a drooping Silenus, fauns playing panpipes. Like them, a satyr worships wine, liberty, pleasure, sex; he embodies the joy of all that. "Satyriasis" – like "nymphomania" – is a word coined by a classical scholar to describe what the followers of Bacchus liked and did with abandon.

The natural habitat of the god's followers is Arcadia – the wild and rocky landscape of the province becomes a metaphor for wild, free spirits. It is a geographical place with certain savage features, and a country of the mind. Satyrs, both single and in cave-dwelling families are the proper fauna of this wilderness, the perennial inhabitants of Arcady, and they are partly animal, not purely human. Like Pan, another hybrid who haunts Arcadia, satyrs know something more of nature and are closer to it.

While a faun, like a nymph or a dryad, is a special kind of character from the mythic population, he is also a type, and as such can be multiplied: Pan is the great god, a single individual; so is Faunus – another god, just as Zeus is, or Apollo. But both

Pan and Faunus belong to the satyr species, and there are any number of them who look just like the god. Dancing satyrs and fauns, like the trooping fairies, come in choruses, throngs, gaggles and gangs: they join forces, expressing a mood and a generic way of being. Their character lends them to performance, and indeed, in Greek art, they are most often found in theatrical scenes, images from plays. Plato in The Laws refers to the conjunction of Dionysiac cult with mimes and performances (Plato: 56). Sometimes, the Emperor himself took part in such festivities, playing the role of the god. Gaius, especially, claimed to be "the new Dionysus". An inscription found at Mactaris, for example, a classical site in present-day Tunisia, catches the blurring of ritual, masque and partying as the cult cast local boys and girls in the part of the god's followers. The god is saying: "Play, you Fauns, you Dryad girls, play and sing at my shrine, from my grove, you Naiads from the farms" (*Carmina Latina Epigraphica* 2151, quoted in Wiseman, 2006: 57). It is startling to our current sensibilities that the great, tragic cycles were concluded with a satyr play: a romp, a rampage, an outrageous, foul-mouthed and orgiastic comedy, in which all the characters were dressed in masks and hooves with gigantic phalluses bobbing at their waists. But after the solemn and terrible events on stage, the satyrs' romps brought about release, a lowering of the temperature, the distancing of laughter. Vase paintings, bronze mirrors, relief sculptures on temples depict their play (in both senses), and though they are often older and bearded, they share some traits with the Satyr of Mazara del Vallo.

So he could represent an actor playing the part, a young man dancing in a festival in honour of Dionysus – this would even explain his human feet (as opposed to satyr's hooves). The distinction in the fourth century BC between theatrical mimesis and religious ritual cannot be made except through setting: the amphitheatre often stood in a temple precinct, but some rituals took place in sacred cult sites away from the acropolis or other monumental complexes. The sculpture could have been on its way to a site where cult dances and masquerades took place – or if it were destined for display in a villa, to memorialise those occasions of carnival extremes, to make them continually present and visible in between festivals, to hold the mood.

3. Pan's Labyrinth

These figures from Greek and Roman myths did not lose their grip on imagination after their official cults were abandoned – or abolished; their energy continued to radiate, unlike that of certain gods (Hestia, Iris, Hephaistos) who are mostly forgotten. They embody a state that is also a question – a live issue, an existential problem. They are not simple personifications of undiluted nature. Their intimacy with the wild places does not turn them into nature spirits or pastoral divinities, because they have adopted all the pursuits of the town – as enshrined in wine, in banquets, in drinking parties and orgies, and the pursuit of pleasure and excess. For many, they drew "the lineaments of gratified desire". They embodied release. John Keats, Charles Kingsley, Rudyard Kipling, Stéphane Mallarmé – writers very different from one another – were attracted by the figure of the satyr or faun. Keats meditates on the joys of "Bacchus and his crew" in "The Song of the Indian Maid", as well as in his more famous "Ode on a Grecian Urn"; Kingsley in *The Water Babies* (with "the Piper at the Gate of Dawn") gave the Neo-Pagans of Victorian Britain a vision of a lost naturist innocence; Kipling in *Puck of Pook's Hill* reimagined the ancient rustic folklore of England; and Mallarmé gave his languorous faun afternoon longings.

Recently, a colossal and sinister satyr returned, a less frisky, impish creature than the Victorian fantasists had imagined, returned. The Mexican Gothic fabulist and film-director Guillermo del Toro cast this figure from classical nature myths in the enigmatic title role of his triumphantly successful film, *El Laberinto del Fauno* (*Pan's Labyrinth*, 2006)[4]. It reminded twenty-first-century audiences that the features of the great god Pan had been plundered for the portrayal of evil incarnate in Christian imagery: in the form of the Devil, who frequently appears horned, with tail, fur-covered thighs, pointed ears, cloven hooves – and, often enough, the classical satyr's long, furry, erect penis. A dark, political fairy-tale set in the immediate murderous aftermath of the Civil War, Del Toro's script allegorises the bloodbath of that conflict, and it is striking that his approach to pagan satyrs reclaims the type for the side of the just.

[4] I am most grateful to Jack Zipes for letting me see his forthcoming essay on the film, and to Victoria Nelson for her essay *Gothika* (2012).

His fantastic twist on the tradition gained him huge popular success for the first time in his career, making an impact with crossover audiences who do not usually flock to the horror genre.

Traditional motifs that have conventionally evoked soul-imperiling forces set the mood from the start – sinister insects, for example. But they are friends here to the forces of righteousness: the heroine Ofelia is led by a praying-mantis-like fairy to meet the magus-like faun, enthroned as lord of his labyrinthine underworld, rendered with a metallic palette of nocturnal greys and silvers. He makes a towering and alarming apparition from a Gothic nightmare or heavy-metal album cover, a Satanic, crowned, hybrid creature with huge horns and curling buffalo-style antlers branching into claws at their ends, hands tapering into shiny, long, sharp, black talons, and the beguiling voice of the stranger your mother always told you never to trust. It is not impossible that Del Toro and his designer had in mind the Satyr of Mazara del Vallo, for this anti-hero has milky eyes that echo the blind, ecstatic, alabaster stare of the Satyr found in the sea, and his pelt is studded and encrusted as if with barnacles and corals.

During this first encounter, the Faun reveals to Ofelia that she is a lost and forgotten princess, a Persephone figure whose father is Lord of the Underworld. Ofelia is a great reader of fairy-tales, and she recognises herself in this description. From then on, she surrenders herself to the faun's will like an initiate to a master, convinced that the ordeals he sets her will secure her mother's survival: she is a mythological quester of great determination and bravery. Throughout the film, the satyr directs her harshly, placing her in enormous danger in a series of tests – encounters with gigantic and disgusting cannibal spiders, weird blind ogres, and other monsters. Nevertheless, the Faun is presented to us throughout as a wise counsellor, Ofelia's ally, champion and guide to her true destiny, and as we, the audience, are wholly on her side, we are compelled by the director to go along with her instincts and set aside our conventional doubts and fears about his sinister rulings. The cultural historian Victoria Nelson discusses, in her study *Gothika*, how Del Toro belongs to a widespread reanimation of magical thinking, 'the old world view', in which "all things in the physical world are bound up in an invisible web of influences ruled by forces in that other dimension outside time and space"

(2012: 224-5). The highly charged mood of this political horror film returns bestial hybridity to its pre-Christian character: Del Toro's Pan is a deposed god of nature and magical power, not a personification of moral evil. It is significant that a faun or satyr today beckons towards a new Arcadia, a secret kingdom where a faun has the key to all knowledge. Yet the Faun does not succeed in saving his disciple Ofelia: though the film's ending remains ambiguous, it is certainly not happy. The promised consolations of fairy-tale are strictly withheld: unease always threatens in a satyr's underworld.

4. Unease in Arcadia: "The God of the Cry"

The Bacchae (c. 405 BC), Euripides' tragedy about the Dionysiac cult, still remains the supreme expression of this prevailing ambiguity around the demands of the god and his followers. Written around the same time as the sculpture of the Satyr of Mazara del Vallo was made, *The Bacchae* has lost none of its power to stir overwhelming mixed feelings – fascination, horror, perplexity and, in my case at least, deep melancholy. With the ever-rising temperature of public anxiety about contemporary Bacchanalia, and the promiscuity, bingeing and drug-taking of young people, especially girls ('Ecstasy' pills are not casually named), this play has become ever more highly charged.

In Greek, the god is invoked as Dionysus Bromios, usually translated as Dionysus the Roarer, but in a recent production of the play for the Edinburgh Festival, the Scottish playwright David Greig decided to call him The Scream, alluding to "Arthur Janov's Primal Therapy or the screams of teenage girls at Beatles concerts" (Greig 2007: 14). To my ears, this failed to catch the quality of the women's chorales in *The Bacchae* – the wail and dithyrambic pulse of Euripides' songs – nor did it match the powerful singing of this production's black, all-female gospel choir dressed in flaming reds. Other translators have used "Cry", and it serves better – because its meanings arc through calling to weeping, and the god does set up a call that the women of Thebes cannot resist, while at the end he has indeed given cause to weep.

Greig's "Scream", his attempt to express the sound of the Dionysiac cult, did, however, bring back to me the North African

tradition that calls on women in times of distress – and sometimes celebration – to turn their faces up to the sky and give tongue like hounds, ululating. In his film *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), Gillo Pontecorvo recorded the women of the Casbah doing this in order to voice their resistance to the French colonial masters. This traditional high-pitched howling chilled their French assailants to the bone, and it still reaches right through to the nervous system, even at a distance of many decades – even distanced by the notable aesthetics of this particular masterpiece. In North Africa today, women continue to ululate; sometimes to give voice to joy, sometimes to grief. It is the sound of the Bacchae. This sound is ritual and collective above all – though personal experiences can give it cause, it is more usually a group performance, a ritual, joint expression. For this reason, the maenads and satyrs, fauns and nymphs in Dionysus's worship are not acting in propria persona, but are actors in a sacred drama.

Productions of the tragedy often focus on the play's prophetic knowledge of the dangers of repression, reasoning that its horrendous outcome is unleashed because Pentheus, King of Thebes and a cousin of Dionysus, tries to suppress the cult, with its attendant debauchery and wildness (as he sees it). John Tiffany, the director of Greig's recent version, emphasised this interpretation, and the beautiful drag-queen comedian Alan Cumming played the part of Dionysus lightly and lavishly. That production fully assumed the god's right to make his demands, and never introduced a note of self-doubt over the consequences: Euripides's implicit criticism of the cruelty of the gods did not find expression there[5].

The tragedy occurs when Agave, Pentheus' mother, follows the god's call to the mountains and runs wild there in Bacchic ecstasy; at Dionysus' urging, Pentheus decides to dress up as a woman in order to intrude and peep on her and the other women; in her possession, when she discovers him, she mistakes him for a mountain lion and tears him limb from limb. She enters with his head, crowing triumphantly over it as if it were a hunting trophy, until her Bacchic

[5] David Grieg, from a literal translation by Ian Ruffell, *The Bacchae* (after Euripides) Faber, London, 2007, a co-production between The National Theatre of Scotland and the Edinburgh International Festival, in association with the Lyric, Hammersmith.

fit quietens and she recognises that this is no animal, but her own son. That is the punishment Dionysus inflicts: the boundary between act and image, between sacred simulacrum and profane actuality, dissolves. A chain of pretences unmasked follow one another, as if detonated by Pentheus' initial trespass.

The First Messenger, reporting to Pentheus about the Bacchae's behaviour on the mountains speaks reverently at first, marvelling at their beauty and grace and oneness with the wild:

All the women were asleep.
Some lay on beds of pine needles,
Some on oak-leaf litter, all still.
They seemed so natural, not at all
Drunk or dancing or debauched
Like you said, but at one with
The forest. Well –
Our cowbells must have woken them…
but oh,
It was a beautiful sight – pure. (*The Bacchae,* Greig: 44)

But the messenger then describes how, after one of the herdsmen has attempted to snatch Agave in order to please Pentheus by bringing her back to the city, the enraged women rose and rent the men's animals as well as the snakes they were dandling and suckling. They even grew so powerful in their possession that they hurled 'big bulls' to the ground and flayed them alive. He warns Pentheus:

If you'd seen it –
Sir – you'd know now and fear the true
Power of furious women. (p. 47)

His terrible and vivid description of the scene prophesies, with pitiless dramatic irony, the end to which Pentheus himself will come. Unlike Medea, Agave did not know what she was doing when she killed her son, and so *The Bacchae* is her tragedy, though, as in the case of Pentheus, Euripides does not show her mercy. *The Bacchae* is the most implacable of tragedies, and the playwright's final statement on the relations between gods and mortals. Greig renders the closing verses of the Chorus with a stark litany of submission, like a sadist's commands:

No – you can't choose the gods that you worship …
No – you just have to answer their call

So you must learn to sing
You must sing this hymn
This hymn to The Scream.

Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. (p. 88)

In the article he wrote about translating the play, Greig concludes:

> For me, Euripides' concerns remain as relevant as they were 2000 years ago. There are still men who would control women in order to bolster their shaky sense of self. There are still men who are lost because they refuse to lose themselves in dance. And so we still live with the psychotic and uncontrolled violence that will appear whenever a repressed Dionysian force reasserts itself – as it always will. (Greig 2007: 14)

But I am not convinced by this, perhaps because I identify with these repressed and repressives, and feel great waves of pity and fear on account of Pentheus, not to speak of Agave; Euripides' Dionysus repels me, and the playwright's portrayal of the gods' arbitrariness fills me with rage and hostility (which I feel he shares). The lurid scenes of the Bacchae suckling serpents, overmastering bulls, tearing wild animals limb from limb and lapping wine from the ground are not simply unleashed by the prohibition of Pentheus: they inhere in Bacchic frenzy. Even if the immediate episodes of carnage in the play are provoked first by the herdsmen interrupting and then by Pentheus infiltrating in disguise and peeping at them, the marks of Dionysus' worship in every representation are excess, riot and orgy.

This world-turned-upside down craziness takes place in natural scenery, wild places, forest thickets and rocky mountainsides – the landscape of Arcadia. On Greek vase paintings and reliefs, maenads are recognisable because, like their master, they are wrapped in the furry hides of wild animals, leopards and panthers, and they dance in ecstasy with the severed limbs of a deer or other creature in their hands. Dionysiac cult was sacrificial, and celebrated union with the wild through shamanistic identification with wild creatures, possession enacted through slaughter. The message of *The Bacchae* closes in on obedience to divine ordinances, whatever they are,

however extreme and irrational their demands, and Euripides, silent as he is about what he thinks and feels, certainly opens a door for us to glimpse the horror of this divine tyranny.

Euripides may be warning his contemporaries against denying the power of the id, and communicating to posterity his insight into the necessary release given by drink and sex and party-going, but this message is very disquieting as well as somewhat trite – is Pentheus so wrong to be appalled by drunkenness and riot? Most interpretations leave it at that – but it's an unsatisfactory meaning, I think. *The Bacchae* could be played, it seems to me, to press to a deeper point: that Dionysus punishes for real those who forbid his rites because they take them for real, failing to see that ritual contains acts, turns them into make-believe, that is, into image, representation, in a theatrical staging of his cult: not wine itself, but dancing and singing in praise of wine.

The masked actors in the original staging, and the players in modern versions of *The Bacchae*, play-act their carousing, and it remains off-stage, unseen except in the mind's eye. The wild hills and groves outside the city are behind the invisible fourth wall of the ritual space. Arcadia is always in this sense a figment, conjured by art's illusionary function. Keats's "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard/Are sweeter" expresses this aesthetic condition of elusiveness, and his Romantic Arcady preserves its dreams for eternity: "Forever wilt thou love and she be fair". But the modern, experiential twist on this does not dare to hope so much: the bliss of Arcadia is necessarily always absent.

Then, why does the dancing Satyr of Mazara del Vallo embody a state of bliss? Why did I long to follow Dionysus when I saw Lord Leighton's painting of a maenad in the frontispiece of my first book of mythology, H. A. Guerber's classic Myths of Greece and Rome? Why did I give my dear love a relief from the British Museum of a Bacchante dancing with the haunch of a deer in one hand? (We set her into the wall so that we can see her from the kitchen window when making supper or washing up.) And why did the hotel in Sydney, where I was staying while writing this, have a Grecian urn on its roof-terrace garden adorned with a satyr leaping, his head flung back – in the same position as his ancestor found in the sea off Pantelleria?

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