

Motherhood and Madness in Dionysian Myth: Something to do with Demeter (and Dithyramb)

The most ubiquitous motif of Dionysian myth is when the god drives a person or community mad, and such stories frequently adhere to the so-called "resistance myth" pattern (Seaford 1996:26), where the madness induced by the god is a consequence of the community's rejection of his divinity. This madness frequently results in mothers killing their own children (Seaford 1994:254–7), the most famous example of which is Agave's slaughter of Pentheus in Euripides' *Bacchae* (E.*Bacch.* 1114ff.). Although the close association between mothers and Dionysian madness was certainly facilitated by a number of cultural factors, in this paper I will discuss one of these factors that has in my view been under-explored: the close connection between Dionysus and mother goddesses, especially Demeter, in myth and cult.

The association between Dionysus and Demeter has long been recognized in the literature (exx. Graf 1974:40–78 and Burkert 1983:279, n. 23). Although they were connected through their association with essential crops, grain and the grape, they become symbolically associated with fertility and rebirth; in Demeter's case, this symbolism is realized in her connection with motherhood and the harvest, and for Dionysus in his own death and rebirth.

Beyond this shared symbolism, there are key motifs found in myths about Dionysus and Demeter that provide insight into the prevalence of "mad mothers" in Dionysian myth. The most interesting of these motifs is when a mother kills her child specifically by cooking him, as in the Demophoon episode from the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (HH 2.234–48), where Demeter, acting as Demophoon's nurse, roasts him in the fire to render him immortal. We find this motif in stories involving Dionysian madness as well, most notably in the stories of Ino (at least in Apollodorus' version in *Library* 3.4.3) and Procne (as in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 6.645–6), both of which I will discuss in detail.

The crucial detail of these stories is the child's rebirth after being cooked, and ultimately, these myths of rebirth via exposure to fire are symbolic of initiation into mystery cults. Demeter and Dionysus were central to some important mystery religions in ancient Greece, especially the Eleusinian Mysteries (Burkert 1983: 248–97) and the Dionysian Mysteries (see Graf 1993), and initiation into these cults was imagined as a process of death and rebirth (West 1983:143ff.); the μύσται had to discard their old life and symbolically "die" in order to be reborn as a member of the cult. In cults of Demeter and Dionysus, an important vehicle of initiation is fire (Burkert 1983:276–7), and so the motif of a child's rebirth after being cooked is a mythological expression of ritual initiation into these mystery cults, and it provides the essential link between myth and ritual.

I will conclude with a brief discussion of dithyramb, a kind of choral song that originally celebrated the birth, death, and rebirth of Dionysus (at least according to Plato, *Laws* 700b); it was characterized by frenzied dancing and chaotic musical accompaniment. Dithyramb is interesting for present purposes because it combines in an explicit and ritualized way the themes of initiation and rebirth with madness, and we see this combination already in Archilochus' fr. 120, our earliest literary reference to dithyramb. Furthermore, we have evidence that dithyramb was performed at cults of Demeter, such as the cult of Demeter Chthonia at Hermione (Prauscello 2013) and even at the Thesmophoria, an Athenian festival in honor of Demeter as the paragon of motherhood and female fertility. The performance of dithyramb at such festivals of Demeter suggests that dithyramb could celebrate more symbolic expressions of rebirth: fertility and motherhood. Therefore, I will ultimately argue that dithyramb, because it combined the themes of madness and female fertility when it was performed at cults of Demeter, helped to facilitate the close association between Demeter and Dionysus and in turn motherhood and

madness in Dionysian myth.

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