

The representations of dionysian in bacchae and art essay



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The Representations of Dionysian World In Bacchae and Art Dionysus was the son of Zeus, the king of the gods, and Semele, the daughter of King Cadmus of Thebes, and he was the last god that became an Olympian. Dionysus had an unusual birth which caused him to have some problems about fitting into the Olympian Pantheon. In fact, the problem lies behind the mortality of Dionysus's mother, Semele. According to the mythology, when Hera discovered the relationship between Zeus and Semele, she decided to deceive them. Appearing as a crone, Hera established contact with Semele and managed to perplex her about the splendor of his divine lover.

The seeds that Hera planted in Semele's mind caused Semele to have miscarriage and die. However, while Semele was miscarrying, Zeus rescued the baby and hid it into his thigh until the baby was ready to be born. Lastly, Dionysus was born from the thigh of Zeus and this gave Dionysus immortality. When Dionysus grew up, Hera struck him with madness and then, Dionysus started to be mentioned as the god of madness. As it can be seen, even from the strange birth, Dionysus was always a part of differences in Greek mythology.

In order to construct the figure of Dionysus better by taking his different characteristics into consideration and understand the mythological stories in which Dionysus is the leading figure, it can be a significant step to examine the representations of the characteristics of Dionysus, the companions of him and some mythological events in which Dionysus has a big role both in art and " Bacchae" of Euripides. To begin with, one of the well-known characteristic of Dionysus and the followers of him is putting on an ivy

crown. It is easy to see the representations of ivy crown both in work of art in fifth century and “ Bacchae”.

In “ Bacchae”, while the chorus, which consists of women companies of Dionysus, is calling out to the Thebes at the beginning of the tragedy, they command that “... crown your head with an ivy crown” (Sutherland, 7). As another example, when the people in Bacchae start to go mad, a herdsman comes to Pentheus and tells what is happening in Bacchae. The herdsman says that he has seen some mad women which crown their heads with an ivy crown (Sutherland, 34). Furthermore, after Pentheus dies, a messenger comes to the stage and tells the story of Pentheus’s death.

The messenger points out that before the mad women, which are called the Maenads, attack Pentheus, they are sitting in a gorge among the cliffs and all of them have ivy crowns (Sutherland, 50). As it can be understood, the ivy crown is one of distinctive attributes of Dionysus and his companions in “ Bacchae”. In fact, if the fifth- and sixth-century vase paintings are examined, the importance of ivy crown can be recognized again. In his book, Thomas H. Carpenter points out that in almost every vase paintings about Dionysus in fifth- and sixth century, Dionysus wears the ivy crown.

He states that in these paintings, the companions also often have ivy crowns (Carpenter, 110). It is obvious that both in the works of art and in the tragedy, “ Bacchae”, the ivy crown is one of the common symbols to represent Dionysus and his companions. Besides the ivy crown, thyrsus is another object that is used to represent the characteristics of Dionysus and his companions both in art and in “ Bacchae”. In Bacchae, while Dionysus is

talking with Pentheus as a stranger, Pentheus takes the thyrsus from Dionysus's hands. By referring the thyrsus, Dionysus says that "... I carry the god's own staff" (Sutherland, 24).

Later in the tragedy, after Pentheus dies, Dionysus tells Cadmus, Pentheus's grandfather, and Agave, Pentheus's mother that Pentheus has deserved the death since besides not to believe in him, Pentheus has insulted him in different ways such as by seizing his own thyrsus (Sutherland, 66). By combining these two parts of tragedy, it is crystal clear that thyrsus has a profound importance and it is a significant symbol that represents Dionysus. As another example from *Bacchae*, after Dionysus deceives Pentheus into thinking Dionysus will help him to observe the council of the Maenads, Dionysus dresses Pentheus up as a woman.

Moreover, Dionysus gives a thyrsus to him since the Maenads are also carrying thyrsus like Dionysus (Sutherland, 45). It can be understood that in *Bacchae*, the thyrsus is also used by the companions of Dionysus. Like in *Bacchae*, it is easy to see the thyrsus in mostly red-figure vase paintings. In his book, Carpenter states that the thyrsus first appear in red-figure vase paintings at the end of sixth century and " continues to be a Dionysian attribute throughout the fifth. " (Carpenter, 110) Carpenter points out that on red-figure vases, the thyrsus has ivy leaves that are attached to the top. He thinks that the ivy figure on the top of thyrsus comes from the *Bacchae*. Moreover, from the first appearance of thyrsus in vase paintings, it is usually carried by companions of Dionysus (Carpenter, 110). In contrast to red-figure paintings, in black-figure paintings, it is hard to see a Dionysian figure with thyrsus. Eucharides Painter, who is interested in both red-figure and black-

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figure techniques, says that these two different techniques require different iconographic models.

Thus, thyrsus usually appears in red-figure vase paintings (Carpenter, 13). At last, when the representations of Dionysus and his companions are examined in terms of carrying thyrsus in Bacchae and in art, it can be inferred that the thyrsus is an important factor to represent Dionysus and his cult. Apart from ivy crown and thyrsus, the beards are sometimes used as one of the characteristics of Dionysus to represent him. By examining Bacchae, it is not easy to understand if Dionysus has a beard or not since there is not enough evidence to claim this.

However, in some parts in Bacchae, it is pointed out that Dionysus is a feminine god. Thus, it may be said that the figure of Dionysus in Bacchae is likely to be beardless. At this point, the works of art during fifth and sixth century can play a leading role in depicting bearded or beardless Dionysian figures. According to Thomas H. Carpenter, Dionysus is depicted in different two ways in the paintings during sixth and fifth century: a mature and bearded god or beardless, long-haired young god.

He states that the bearded figure of Dionysus is usually seen in the earliest vase paintings, coins and terracotta reliefs. He adds that in the fifth century, the vase painters broaden their perspectives on the figures of Dionysus due to the appearance of the new stories of him such as Bacchae. In order to indicate the power of the traditional events that occur in new Dionysian stories, the painters continue to use the old, mature and bearded form of Dionysus until the last quarter of the fifth century.

Furthermore, in the last quarter of fifth century, the idea of using bearded form of Dionysus to show the power of the events starts to lose its significance. Then, Dionysus is first depicted as a beardless and a young god on the vases by Dinos Painter (Carpenter, 98). This new image of Dionysus starts to appear on the new vases. As an example, a dinos which was found in an Athenian tomb near Lykabettos depicts a beardless and young Dionysus figure which holds thyrsus and wears “ an elaborate fillet over a wreath” (Carpenter, 99).

By combining the ideas about the beardless or bearded image of Dionysus in Bacchae and art, it can be inferred that that beards are usually used as a characteristics of Dionysus in works of art until the end of the fifth century. However, with the passing centuries, it is likely to see the new images of Dionysus which is young and beardless. Deducted from this information, it is crystal clear that beard has a significant impact on the representations of Dionysus from the beginning of the sixth century.

On the other hand, the mature and bearded figure of Dionysus is also playing a leading role in the representations of him in the earliest centuries. Another important object that is used for Dionysian figures in the representations is the snakes. In Bacchae, snakes are the parts of the costume of the Maenads. The Herdsman tells that the Maenads gird themselves with snakes and the snakes lick the drops of blood from Maenads’ cheeks (Sutherland, 36). Moreover, in Bacchae, the chorus tells “ an etiological tale about snakes worn by the Maenads in their hair in recognition of a crown of snakes Zeus put on the head of Dionysus” (Carpenter, 110).

With the help of these examples, it is easy to understand that in Bacchae, the snakes are used as descriptive attributes for Dionysian figures. Like in Bacchae, snakes have profound impact on Dionysian figures in the paintings. As an example, early in the fifth century, the woman figure which has snakes on her head and carries thyrsus in her right hand appears in the “ white ground tondo of a cup in Munich by Brygos Painter” (Carpenter, 111). Moreover, the snake image is made on the black-figure painting by Lydos in the middle of the sixth century.

In this painting, Dionysus is with his companions and one of the companions wraps the snakes around her waists while satyr is carrying another snake by the tail (Carpenter, 111). Furthermore, the contemporary cup in London which includes Dionysian figures can also show that the snakes are one of the main symbols which are used to represent Dionysus and his companions. In this contemporary cup, there is Dionysus and he is dancing wildly. Besides, he holds a snake with his one hand, and thyrsus with another (38, Carpenter). Within the frame of the examples from Bacchae and he paintings, it is seen that the snakes are one of the most essential objects that form the characteristics of Dionysus, so in the representations of him, snakes are frequently used as symbols of Dionysian figures. Additionally, wine is one of the most used symbols to represent the characteristics of Dionysian figures, too. It is easy to see the profound effects of it both in Bacchae and the works of art. As an example, in Bacchae, the Herdsman tells Pentheus that the mad women who are over the crest of the city drive shafts into the ground and then, the god, Dionysus, sends them a spring of wine from the ground (Oranje, 71).

As another example from Bacchae, after Pentheus refuses that Dionysus is a god, the chorus of Maenads appears and by referring Dionysus, they say that "... he has conferred the joy of wine"(Sutherland, 20). It is obvious that the wine is used to represent Dionysus and his companions in Bacchae. Wine is depicted in the paintings, too. Before the last quarter of the fifth century, the figure of Dionysus on the vases is based on the idea that he is a wine god. In these vases, the connection between Dionysus and wine is described mainly.

As an example, Carpenter states that in the early figures of Dionysus on vase paintings, he is depicted as a bearded and rustic god who is the bringer of the wine to the city. In fact, Carpenter claims that most of the vases on which the figure of Dionysus appear while drinking wine, have the rustic form of Dionysus(Carpenter, 98). With the help of the representations of Dionysian figures in Bacchae and in paintings from the fifth and sixth century, it can be inferred that wine is another attribute that is used in representations of Dionysian figures mostly to describe Dionysus and his companions better.

Aside from ivy crown, thyrsus, beard, snakes, and wine, nebris which is a special costume that is made from the skin of the gazelle is one of the symbols that is used in the representations of Dionysian figures. In Bacchae, it is seen that usually the Maenads are wearing nebris in worshipping ceremonies. As an example, when Dionysus dresses Pentheus up as a woman, he does not just give the female clothing, he also gives the attributes of worshipping ceremonies: thyrsus and nebris (Oranje, 151). As another example from Bacchae, Tiresias and Cadmus, the king of the

Thebes, wear nebris while going to the worshipping ceremonies (Sutherland, <https://assignbuster.com/the-representations-of-dionysian-in-bacchae-and-art-essay/>)

16). It is clear that nebris is used in Bacchae as a feature to represent Dionysian figures. It is also easy to see the effects of nebris on art objects during fifth and six centuries. Carpenter states that the Maenads on vases usually wear nebris from the middle of the sixth century to the end of fifth century. However, the figures of costumes of women in paintings have changed during the first half of the fifth century. Then, the vase painters have started to depict the costumes of Maenads as leopard frequently.

Carpenter claims that the increase in the number of the nebris figure in the paintings in the fifth century depends on Bacchae (Carpenter, 110).

Furthermore, there are some examples of vase paintings from the second half of the fifth century which include only the Maenads and sometimes satyr. One classic example of these type paintings is the vase-painting of Villa Guilia Painter in New York. In this painting, “ a satyr carries a child to woman who sits on rock, wearing nebris and holding thyrsus” (Carpenter, 58).

As it can be understood by examining Bacchae and the art objects, although the costumes of women on the vase paintings have started to change from nebris to leopard in fifth century, nebris is usually one of the most common attribute of Dionysian figures in the paintings. Thus, it has a key role in the representations of Dionysus and his companions. Besides the objects which construct the representation of Dionysian figures such as ivy crown, nebris, thyrsus etc. , there is another point which is usually seen in the representations of Dionysus: effeminacy.

In *Bacchae*, it is easy to see the examples of Dionysus' effeminacy. To illustrate, when Pentheus commands his soldiers to find Dionysus, he says that " You others, scour the city and track down that stranger with feminine looks" (Sutherland, 17). It can be inferred from this part of the speech that Dionysian is feminine distinguishably. As another example, after the soldier finds Dionysus, Pentheus talks to Dionysus by supposing that Dionysus is a stranger. He says that "... These locks of yours are long, for lack of sport, cascading along your cheek, full of enticement.

That light skin you get not from the beating sun, but in the shade, saving your beauty as lure to love" (Sutherland, 21). From this part of the dialogue, it can be seen that Dionysus has an attractive beauty like a woman. Like in *Bacchae*, the art objects during sixth and fifth century are under the influence of effeminacy of Dionysus. Carpenter states that until the last quarter of the fifth century, the vase painters have depicted the Dionysus' figure in two different ways: a beardless young god or a bearded mature god. The painters have never dressed Dionysus in explicitly female clothing until the end of the fifth century (Carpenter, 105).

With the passing centuries, it is more likely to see the figures of Dionysus in female clothing in vase paintings. Within the frame of this information, it can be said that although effeminacy is usually used to represent the figure of Dionysus in *Bacchae*, it is hard to see the feminine side of Dionysus in works of art, especially in the vase paintings from the fifth century. Additionally, like the Maenads, the satyrs and nymphs are usually playing a key role in the representation of Dionysian figures in art objects. In *Bacchae*, it is not easy to get enough information about nymphs and satyrs.

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However, at the beginning of the tragedy while the chorus of the Maenads is calling out the Thebes, they talk about satyrs. Although in *Bacchae* the satyrs and nymphs are not mentioned enough, they are used a lot in the paintings to represent Dionysian world during sixth and fifth centuries. In his book, Thomas H. Carpenter states that “ the groups of women in early Attic Dionysian scenes are companions of the satyrs more than they are companions of the god” (Carpenter, 52). He thinks that this is the reason behind why satyrs are also depicted with Dionysian figures in the paintings (Carpenter, 52).

Moreover, in the fifth century, many depictions of the Maenads using their thyrsus to protect themselves from satyrs appear (Carpenter, 116). Not only with satyrs, Dionysus and his companions are also depicted with figures of nymphs. To illustrate, an amphora, which is a kind of ceramic vase, from the third quarter of the sixth century includes the figures of Dionysus, two companions of Dionysus and nymphs. In this figure, the two women carry water and a deer while they are running to Dionysus (Carpenter, 53).

As it can be seen, although in *Bacchae*, satyrs and nymphs are not mentioned as the significant attributes of Dionysian figures, they are used a lot in the works of art with Dionysus and the women followers of the Dionysus. This shows that satyrs and nymphs have also important role in the representations of Dionysian figures, particularly in vase paintings.

Furthermore, it can be a good approach to examine the death of Pentheus in *Bacchae* and the representations of this event in the works of art in order to construct Dionysian figures better and understand the mythological events deeply.

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In *Bacchae*, Agave kills Pentheus, his own child, wildly. To kill his son, Agave “took hold of his left arm by the hand, and, her foot braced upon the poor man’s ribs, wrenched out the shoulder, not by own strength but on her hand god conferred such ease” (Sutherland, 53). After she kills his son, each woman starts to play ball with the scraps of Pentheus’s death body with their bloodied hands. As it can be seen, In *Bacchae*, Pentheus’s death includes violence a lot like in the works of art during the sixth and fifth century.

The earliest figure of Pentheus appears on a vase painting before the end of sixth century, a century before Euripides’ *Bacchae* and several decades before Aeschylus’ *Pentheus*. In this painting, the body of the Pentheus’ is carried by women. The torso with the head tied is held by two women and another woman carries severed legs of Pentheus. As a second example, a hydria, which is a type of Greek pottery, in Berlin, includes the dead figure of Pentheus, too. On this hydria, three women carry the flesh of Pentheus.

Moreover, on the one side of a cup in Louvre Museum in France, the women carry the body of Pentheus while holding thyrsus. In contrast to *Bacchae*, the women figures in this cup do not dress any sort of animal skin (Carpenter, 116). In the first quarter of the fifth century, the figures on two vases differ from the old figures. On these vases, there are three scenes that describe the death of Pentheus. As an example, on one side of the vases, the flesh of Pentheus is carried by women and at the right of this side, there is a satyr which raises his hands in fear.

On the second side of the vases, a mature figure of Dionysus is depicted and a satyr plays pine while women are dancing among the flesh of Pentheus. On

the last side of the vases, the women are playing with the scraps of Pentheus body as it is mentioned in *Bacchae*. They do not wear any skin of the animals but they have ivy crowns in their heads (Carpenter, 117). Deducted from the representations of the death of Pentheus both in the works of art and in *Bacchae*, it can be said that the death of Pentheus have a profound impact on the mythology.

Thus, it is represented in most of the paintings during sixth and fifth century. It is clear that these representations provide different angles which make Dionysian figures and mythological stories easier to understand. To sum up, from his birth, Dionysus is mentioned as the god of differences. In order to understand the characteristics of Dionysus, his environment and his stories, it is very essential to examine the different representations of Dionysian figures.

Euripides' *Bacchae* and the works of art during the fifth and sixth century can be good starting points to understand Dionysian figures deeply. After analyzing both *Bacchae* and the art objects, it is clearly seen that in the representations, there are some distinguishable symbols that are only associated with Dionysus and his followers. Firstly, one of these symbols is the ivy crown. Both in *Bacchae* and in the paintings, Dionysus and his companions crown their heads with ivy crown. Besides to ivy crown, thyrsus is the symbol that is used in the representations of Dionysian figures a lot.

Almost every painting in the fifth and sixth century, Dionysus carries thyrsus. Moreover, beards are used as symbols of Dionysus in the vase paintings until the end of fifth century. However, it is possible to see the beardless and

young form of Dionysus in some of the paintings mostly later than fifth century. Furthermore, snakes, wine and nebris are used to represent the characteristic of Dionysian world both in the tragedy, *Bacchae* and the works of art during the fifth and sixth century.

Additionally, Dionysus is represented as a feminine god in *Bacchae* and in some paintings, after the last quarter of the fifth century. Like Maenads, strays and nymphs are usually depicted with Dionysus in vase- paintings during fifth and sixth century although they are not mentioned a lot in *Bacchae*. Lastly, it is possible to see the effects of Pentheus' death which is written in *Bacchae* on hydrias and vases of ancient Greek world. As it can be inferred from all the information, the world of Dionysus has some symbols which make it “ Dionysian”, distinguishable and special.

It is clear that although these symbols are usually represented in similar ways both in works of art and *Bacchae*, they are sometimes depicted differently. The most important point is to understand the differences and similarities between these depictions and construct a better Dionysian world.

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