

RITUAL, MYTH AND TRAGEDY: ORIGINS OF THEATRE IN DIONYSIAN RITES

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Abstract

In the deep, dark forests and in the lush green valleys, worshippers of Dionysus celebrated the eternal cycles of death and rebirth, symbolized in the sacred mask of the wild god. Drunk and intoxicated, wearing the mask of Dionysus, the actor is at once the shaman and the priest. Channeling the presence of the fearsome divinity, he drinks the sacred wine and eats the raw flesh of his prey. In this eternal moment, he becomes one with the god and the beast residing inside of him. Within Ancient Greek culture, the sacred rites of Dionysus have been appropriated and transformed to theatre performances. The shaman became the actor, the participants became the audience, the sacred altar became the stage. From myth as a ritual performance emerged the theatre of tragedy, in which the undying spirit of Dionysus, majestic and terrifying, speaks to us even today.

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According to Eliade, myth and ritual are vehicles of the “eternal return” to the mythical age. Ritual is an imitation of the divine acts of gods or mythic heroes, through which the archaic man “detaches himself from profane time and magically re-enters the Great Time, the sacred time” (Eliade: 1975; 23). The site of the ritual is symbolically transformed into a sacred center, and the validity of the mythic act is confirmed by the repetition of the divine sacrifice (Eliade: 1954; 20). Every ritual is based on an archetypal divine model: “We must do what the gods did in the beginning” (Satapatha Brahmana, as cited in Eliade; 21). This Indian idiom summarizes the basic idea underlying rituals of various cultures (21).

Generally, ritual may also be defined as a “broadly conceived, any prescribed, stylized stereotypical way of performing some act. Narrowly, a single act of a religious performance” (Vivelo 1978, as cited in Morgan and Brask: 1988; 177). The term ritual refers to culturally structured, repetitive actions with the explicit aim of articulation of those higher forces which are believed to govern the universe. In terms of Western thinking, ritual is usually perceived as having a sacred character and is often involved in a culture’s “religious” sphere of action and thought. Ritual involves portrayal and performance, a performance space, and performers. It often includes the use of masks, makeup, costumes, dance and music. And finally, it often involves an audience, in ritual a highly participatory one (177). Morgan and Brask stress rituals’ social function:

The major function of ritual in traditional societies is the sanctioning of the extant social order, the maintenance of societal integration and therefore of social control, whereby whatever authority structure may exist in a society receives cosmological approbation. (...) The discourse of ritual is timeless, and the past is projected through varieties of symbolic manipulation into the future. Even the initiates in ritual are traditionally prepared for the course of events and the content of the ritual. Participation in ritual performance, or even observing solo performances of ritual such as shamanic curing, is a major mode of enculturation and thought conditioning in traditional societies (Morgan and Brask: 1988; 185).

Tambiah defines ritual as “a culturally constructed system of symbolic communication”, involving patterned and ordered sequences of words and acts, whose content and arrangement are characterized in varying degree by formality stereotypy condensation, and redundancy (Tambiah, as cited in Graf: 2007; 38). In this sense, ritual can be perceived as subset of the broader area of ‘performance’. Both depend on the notion of communicative actions directed towards an audience, and both are differentiated in some way from ordinary, everyday processes of communication. The two can be compared and contrasted in terms of emphasis on aesthetic enjoyment versus functional power - the difference between a poem and a magic spell. Bauman notes that “performance usually suggests an aesthetically marked and heightened mode of communication, framed in a special way and put on display for an audience” (Bauman, as cited in Graf: 2007; 38). Anthropologist Victor Turner characterizes both ritual and theatre as aspects of

“cultural performance”(Turner: 1982, as cited in Morgan and Brask: 1988; 185).

The dramaturgy of ritual simultaneously employs the elements of role play and dialogue, music, song, and dance. All of these aspects are oriented towards the same means, though none of them acts in the same way as another, nor would any of them make the same sense if performed individually. Anthropology has borrowed the term ‘synaesthesia’ from psychology to describe the “multifarious cooperation of many communicative means that compose ritual’s highly representational character on the one hand, and its bold concreteness on the other” (Kowalzig: 2007; 47).

Theatre may be conceived as involving the following elements - what is performed, the performance itself and the audience. What is performed may be “dance, musical drama, variety entertainment, mime, the improvisation and portrayal of a story involving impersonation and dialogue, or the acting out of a written script including plot and character portrayal” (Brockett 1984, as cited in Morgan and Brask: 1988; 177). In theatre, the audience consists of onlookers who usually don’t directly participate in the performance; rather, they are instructed. The dramatic theatre often addresses the validation of cultural institutions, societal hierarchies and ethic values. The usual focus on pre-Classic and Classic Greece as the origin of theatre emphasizes the fact that Ancient Greek theatre involved a portrayal of the actions of deities, other supernatural entities and mortals (Morgan and Brask: 1988; 178).

Ancient Greeks performed myths and stories, and acted out social and religious rituals, using text, music, dance, costume and impersonation in some combination or other. ‘Theatrical’ performances, in the form of solo or group activities formally presented to an audience in a designated space and for a conventionally recognized occasion, can be found in almost all societies, ancient or modern, Eastern and Western. The borderline between ritual and theatre, ceremony and play, may not always be easy to draw (McDonald and Walton: 2007; 13). Ancient Greek rituals had a vital narrative and a performative aspect, put together as myth and ritual. Within the aesthetic contextualization of myth - ‘hearing’ and ‘seeing’ the stories in performances — was essential in enhancing the gods’ credibility. Not only do myths have more validity when enacted through rituals, but it is myth that makes ritual interesting and meaningful. Greek religious choral song, hymns, paeans and dithyrambs feature the telling of myth as part of a ritual performance (Kowalzig: 2007; 2-3).

Greek tragedy has its roots deep in religious ritual. The orchestra of the Theatre of Dionysus was a place of particular sanctity; the actor was sometimes identified with the priest; and the community surrounded the celebration, just as the tribe occupied the sacred ground in non-dramatic ritual. Arnott notes another paral-

lel between Greek drama and ritual – the overlapping of dramatic and ‘ceremonial time’. The concept of ‘ceremonial time’ was defined by certain anthropologists as “the use of ritual or magic, in a place of sanctity, both to summon up the spirits of the dead and to predict the future. Channelled by a shaman of appropriate power, all time flows into the present moment” (Arnott: 1991; 155-156).

The earliest reference to ritual as the generic force behind performing is mentioned in Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Aristotle speaks of the innate human tendency of mimesis fused with religious belief, which together produced ritual which gave rise, at the beginning of the Classic period, to Greek theatre (Morgan and Brask: 1988; 178). Aristotle claimed that drama, in particular, tragedy, emerged from the dithyramb of the Dionysus cult rituals. The dithyramb was a choral poem in honor of the god of wine Dionysus. The rituals were usually led by a male figure who represented Dionysus. Having taken on this masked persona as a character, the leader improvised through mimesis and dialogue. Aristotle believed that Greek tragedy began this way, with the leader’s improvisations within a performance space enabling the fully developed theatre of tragedy (179). At this point, “strictly coded ritual and communal participation led to the improvisation of theatre and to participants becoming spectators” (Hunningher: 1961, as cited in Morgan and Brask: 1988; 179).

With time, as participants in the rituals became increasingly separated from the ritual activities they eventually lost faith in the magical efficacy of the rites. They then became mere spectators and the rituals became theatrical drama (180). Murray assumes that Greek tragedy originated from the *sacer ludus* - the ritual dance. He points out the connection between the ritual and the Satyrs who were often associated with the Dionysian rites and initiations. The Satyr-play represents the joyous arrival of the Reliving Dionysus at the end of the *Sacer Ludus* (Stuart: 1916; 178).

In his famous work *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche speaks of the intellectually oriented “Apollonian” phenomenon of drama as emerging in early Classical Greece from the Dionysus cult’s body of ritual. Nietzsche believed that tragedy emerged as an Apollonian expression of the ecstatic experience of Dionysian rituals and was accomplished by “amalgamating dialogue and individual character portrayal with the Dionysian chorus” (179). The ecstasy of Dionysian rituals was expressed in the divine dithyramb. Nietzsche writes:

In the Dionysian dithyramb man is aroused to the highest intensity of all his symbolic capabilities. Something never felt before forces itself into expression—the destruction of the veil of Maya, the sense of oneness as the presiding genius of form, of nature itself. Now the essence of nature must express itself symbolically; a new world of symbols is necessary, the entire symbolism of the body, not just the symbolism of mouth, face, and words, but the full gestures of the

dance—all the limbs moving to the rhythm. And then the other symbolic powers grow, those of music, rhythm, dynamics, and harmony—all with sudden spontaneity (Nietzsche: 1999; 11).

Dionysus has often been opposed to Apollo, most notably by Nietzsche in the antithesis of the Apollonian (order, structure, light, intellect) and the Dionysian (chaos, darkness, emotion, instinct) principles, and is associated with disguise and transformation. He is the god who breaks down boundaries (youth/age, male/female, human/animal, emotion/intellect), His followers are the maenads (“the mad women”) and the male satyrs, half-human and half-animals. In their orgiastic celebrations the worshippers of Dionysus ran wild through the forest, drunk with wine and the intoxication of the group experience, hunting their prey and eating their raw flesh. Dionysus is a god of the wild, a god of escape from the normal routine (two of his most important titles are *eleuthereus*, “freer,” and *lyaios* “re-leaser”). Dionysian festivals were probably an attempt to rein in this potentially dangerous god and drama was a means of channeling the ecstatic emotional experience involved in his worship. The Athenians may well have been trying to temper and tame the wild aspects of this god by organizing his rites within Dionysian festivals, rites that included the performance of dithyrambic choral songs and of drama (Allan and Storey: 2005; 26). A worshipper of Dionysus, through his orgiastic drunken rituals, imitates the drama of the suffering god (Eliade: 1954; 22).

Ancient Greeks worshipped Dionysus in various theatrical forms - through masks, costumes, miracle plays, music and dance (Foley: 1980; 108). Masks in Greek drama were sacred objects, literally reflecting the transformation of their wearers into the mythical persons enacted onstage. Greek drama was primarily a religious experience, and the mask was an instrument for instantiating the presence of gods and heroes in the context of Dionysian drama (Wiles: 2007, as cited in Harrison, Liapis and Panayotakis: 2013; 9). The “galvanic entrance of the god and his inescapable presence” have been expressed in the symbol of the mask. On the ceremony of mixing of the wine, Dionysus was present in person in the form of a large mask hung on a wooden column. A long robe extended down from beneath the bearded mask, giving the impression of a full-figured idol. Ivy sprigs were placed over the mask much like the crown of a tree (Otto: 1965; 86).

Beside masks, worn by the actors and chorus and considered to be markedly Dionysian objects, Scullion lays out other extra-Aristotelian scholarly arguments which support the thesis that tragedy is by origin and essentially Dionysian. These include Dionysian themes, which are specially prominent in tragedy; tragic drama, along with comic and satyric drama, is taken to be markedly Dionysian in spirit and is derived from Dionysian ecstasy; the prize of tragedy a bil-

lygoat, taken to be a markedly Dionysian animal; and tragedy contains choruses, which were regarded as an inheritance and perpetuation of its ritual origin (Scullion: 2002; 110). In ancient Greece, tragedies were performed at festivals of Dionysus, who was considered the as the patron of drama. The guild of dramatic performers organized in the late third century was called the 'Artists of Dionysus'. The connection between tragedy and Dionysus was, however, above all an Athenian phenomenon -in Athens, Dionysus was the god of tragedy (112).

In Athens, two festivals were produced in honor of the god of wine - the Lenaia and the City Dionysia. While the festivals honored the god Dionysus and the plays performed in a theater adjoining his sacred precinct, they were also state occasions run by the public officials of Athens, part of the communal life of the city (polis). The City Dionysia occupied five days in the Athenian month of Elaphebolion ("Deer Hunt"), which corresponds to late March or early April. It was one of the developments fostered by the tyrants, a great city festival in honor of the god Dionysus, uniting all the rural festivals into one. The tyrants aimed to create a sense of national unity and shared cultural identity with such centralized institutions. For the City Dionysia, a myth was developed to document the progress of the god Dionysos from Eleutherai, a community on the northern border of Attica, to Athens (Allan and Storey: 2005; 14).

The Lenaia took place in the Athenian month of Gamelion (meaning "marriage"), which corresponds to late January. Little is known about the purpose and rituals of the Lenaia – mystical elements have been suggested, the celebration of the birth of Dionysos, or the ritual of sparagmos, eating the raw flesh of the prey. On this occasion, the parade consists of "jokes from the wagons," insults directed at the spectators, and a general Dionysian sense of debauchery. Celebrations of the Lenaia were originally performed in the agora, rather than at the precinct of Dionysos at the south-east corner of the agora, where the theater itself was located. Whereas the City Dionysia was under the handled by the archon eponymous, the leading political official at Athens, the Lenaia was under the control of the archon basileus, who had taken over the traditional religious role of the early kings. Competitions for tragedy and comedy were introduced to the Lenaia around 440. This seems to have been the lesser festival and it is assumed that newcomers would try their hand first at the Lenaia before producing at the more important Dionysia (Allan and Storey: 2005; 17)

The theatrical performances were preceded by a variety of ritualized performances, which strongly conditioned the audience's perception of them. Before the festival, there would be a religious procession bringing Dionysus' effigy into the theatre and sacrifices would be made in the precinct of Dionysus, possibly in connection with choral dances at various altars. On the first day of the festival, be-

fore the scenic spectacle began, the city's strategoi would have poured the libations, the tribute of the allied cities would have been displayed, public honors to benefactors of the polis of Athens would have been announced, and the war orphans would have paraded in recognition of their fathers' sacrifice and as a reminder of the citizen's principal duty (Harrison, Liapis and Panayotakis: 2013; 15-16).

Like other fertility rites, those of Dionysus expressed the ancient magical belief that man, animal and nature are one. And like the others, they issued later in professed Mysteries, in secret rites and stories which "surprisingly revealed to man his rightful place in the world" (Cosmopoulos: 2003; 232). However, the Dionysian rites were also a means of and channeling the ecstatic emotional experience of intoxication and euphoria, experienced within the cult of Dionysus. Dionysian mysteries present an aesthetic contextualization and Apollonian appropriation of the myth of the dying and the resurrecting god. The god of nature and wilderness, Dionysus is the embodiment of the ever-renewing and regenerating cycle of nature. Through sacred rites, his worshippers repeat the divine sacrifice and thus return to the primordial times, the mythical age.

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