

**Jennifer J. Dellner**

**"Paul Dances With the Pig, Tenderly":**

**The Politics of Ecstasy and Acts of Possession in A Mouthful of Birds**

The phrase "the politics of ecstasy" is coined by David Lan to describe the subject matter of A Mouthful of Birds (1986), a post-modern interpretation of the Bacchae co-authored with playwright Caryl Churchill. The use of the Bacchae evolved from an interest on the part of the playwrights in "possession and in women being violent--- two things that come together in the Bacchae" (Churchill & Lan, 1986); thus, the creation of a play that would contextualize modern forms of possession (addiction, anxiety, memory, passion, etc.) within the Euripidean paradigm of the relation between pleasure, power, and violence. Viewing "possession" as at once a "resistance" (i.e. Dionysus' to Pentheus' authority) and as an abandonment of control (the violent "ecstasy" of the Maenads), A Mouthful of Birds plays out key scenes from Euripides' Bacchae, whose characters ultimately become one with the contemporary world of the seven vignettes of possession. In this way, the Bacchae stands for that very modern psychoanalytic narrative of the individual possessed by patterns from the past, both personal and cultural. As Churchill asserts, "We could have left the play as the seven stories without including anything from The Bacchae itself, but...we kept it as something that bursts from the past into these people open to possession..." (Churchill & Lan 1986)

This paper argues that by working from the framework of the Euripidean tragedy and with the psychological notion of an "undefended day" (or, rather, viewing the Bacchae as being about an "undefended day"), Churchill and Lan bring into intersection and confrontation traditional readings of the Bacchae's madness as violent and "possessive" with contemporary psychological models of the self. "ecstasy" becomes psychosis, which literally forces the characters to "stand apart" from social and psychological authorities. Contested by ecstasy, external and internal constraints assert themselves against the characters, leading one to question whether self-control and self-possession partake of the same realm.

The paper continues by offering the interpretation that A Mouthful of Birds relies upon the Bacchae as a model for the violence enacted by and upon women through avenues normally leading to pleasure (a drink, a child, love). Churchill explicitly states in her notes concerning Euripides' tragedy that it is about "*the pleasure of physical power, the exhilaration of destruction*" (emphasis mine). So far, then, it can be claimed that this paper presents a "contemporary 'traditional' reading of the Bacchae, in that Dionysus has long stood within the traditional cannon as as the antagonist of tradition and authority. It is here that the vignette from which the paper draws its title becomes crucial to understanding that Churchill and Lan's use of the Bacchae ultimately calls upon the forces which Dionysus represents in order to interrogate, subvert, and challenge exactly that "traditional," "counter-cultural" reading of Euripides' portrait of the god and his victims.

In what first appears as the delusion of an overworked trader in pork futures, Paul, but naturally is real ---Paul becomes possessed with his love for one of the things he has

always defined himself by wishing to kill: a pig that he unsuccessfully tries to save from the slaughterhouse. Though his love is destructive of first his marriage, then his career, Paul is not presented by A Mouthful of Birds as a Pentheus figure "subverted" only to obliteration and death by his Dionysian encounter, but rather becomes one of the two Dionysuses who preside over the killing of Pentheus in the final murder of the play; Paul/Pentheus dies, but Paul/Dionysus lives to reclaim and re-member the experience of his ecstasy. Agave, too, is rewritten, and does not return from the mountain, though the "ecstasy" passes: "There's nothing for me there. There never was. I'm staying here" (II.24). In contrast to the resulting "loss of meaning" proffered by post-modernism's interpretation of the split and fragmented self (a model supported by the "broken-up" vignette structure of the play), the final chorus.