

Diary of a Hetaera

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An Account of the City Dionysia



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Dear Diary,

It is days like these in which I am most satisfied with my position in life. If I were merely a domesticated wife, I would not have the pleasure of attending the festival of Dionysus. For common women are forbidden from attending this most joyous occasion. Only the most intellectually endowed entertainers, such as myself, are allowed to accompany the men in their drunken masses. Of course, simple streetwalkers are present, however they do not join the men, such as I, in both conversation and other activities which do not require me on my back. Indeed, this whole event is filled with male libido, ego and pride. If not, then they wouldn't parade around with wooden phalloi, grossly exaggerated in size. Supposedly the Oracle told them to do so many years ago, when the Athenians were cursed by a plague after rejecting a statue of Dionysus in which the Eleuthereans gave to them. I say that it's a pretty awful excuse for garnishing one's person with such a ridiculous looking appendage. Men lust over a woman's intimate parts, from top to bottom, but do we find such allure in that funny looking extremity? Some days I think the Gods have a bit too much of a sense of humor.

Today was the fourth evening of the seven-day event, held in the month of Elaphebolion. It was today in which Euripides' new play, *The Medea*, was performed. Surely he shall finally win again this year. Although at the tender age of twenty-two I am too young to remember, the first and last time one of his tragedies took first place was exactly ten years ago. I must admit that I am quite fond of him for several reasons, not only exclusive to his strong jaw-line and celestial colored eyes. I find solace in his works, in which women take center stage. Often they are characterized as over-emotional and erratic acting, however they are bold women nonetheless. In

his latest play, which I witnessed tonight, the main character uses her children and ability to give birth as a weapon against her husband. She kills their two sons to exact revenge on him, who has left her to marry another woman. It was startling to watch, and it certainly created much controversy among the citizens in the audience! Of course, the mass majority of them were men, greatly outnumbering the women by about fifty to one. No wonder they all busied themselves with chatter over the play afterwards for hours on end. Surely with such a stir over the unique subject matter, Euripides shall win! ¹

When a poet wins first place, he is awarded a beautiful wreath of ivy. However, I am told that in the beginning a goat was originally the prize. Animals have certainly played a significant role in the festival. The very first day alone, the theater was purified by the sacrifice of a young pig. Later on in the same day, a bull was also sacrificed to please the Gods. Only after doing so were the playwrights and their actors introduced to the masses. After that, several different choirs of young men from all around Attica competed in a contest in which they sang dithyrambs. Dithyrambs are hymns sang specifically with honor to Dionysus, and are quite entertaining to watch. The men are separated into three circular formations, each group dancing in a different direction and singing a different part of the song.

Since Dionysus is the god of vegetation, an abundance of wine has flowed in the past few days. Where as Athenians typically pride themselves in the art of moderation, the incredible displays of drunkenness that take place during this time of year must make up for all of that moderate behavior. However, it is fair to say that during this time we do get a large population of foreigners visiting, specifically for the festival. Hence they do not practice the same ideals of

moderation as we do, ensuring intoxication. I do suppose that a great purpose of this festival isn't so much as pleasing Dionysus as it is to please Greek foreigners who visit from all over. Athens has an enormous amount of pride, and we certainly do love to put it on display for all of Greece to see. What better way to show our intellectual prowess than to feature the current works of our most elite poets! I suppose it's all in good fun. If Dionysus isn't at least amused by our virile men parading around with wooden members strapped to themselves, then I surely am.

I still have yet to witness a comedy, my dear diary, as work is my main motive for being at this festival. It's unfortunate that the comedies are held with less regard than the tragedies. If a poet wins a prize for his satire piece, it is not such a large to do as an award for a tragedy, but it is still considered an honor. I do love to laugh, and I have been told by my clients that the comedies are so humorous that it makes one's belly swell with pain from howling. Sadly, because the comedies are not as important of an event as the tragedies, some of my clients prefer to reserve that time in the evening to drink and socialize, while the bulk of the public is paying attention to the show. From what I am told, it has also become very expensive to attend the plays. Some of my more frugal clients would naturally rather spend their money on other luxuries when humor is not their pleasure.

I must say that one of my favorite moments of the festival occurred today, just before the first play. Nearly a hundred young men were presented on stage and regaled with food, drink and song. They were the sons of the men who have recently been killed in war, protecting our land. Although it was a bittersweet moment, it was still very touching. I can certainly come to the conclusion that even though Athens is run by men, just as any other nation in which I am

familiar with, we certainly do not lack compassion when it comes to the human spirit. In fact, emotions play a large role in the underbelly of this festival, as Dionysus represents the freedom of a man's soul and the euphoria in which one can experience within the spirit. Many people have misconceptions of Dionysus, believing that his only importance is associated with wine and drunken debauchery. The truth is (as far as I know) that Hera, his stepmother, hated him with great intensity. After killing his mother, Semele, Hera cursed Dionysus with madness, which caused him to roam the world in a stupor of insanity. During this time, he gained followers. These followers, under the perception of crazy Dionysus, worshipped him with rituals, which involved drunken revelries and orgies. While this does not accurately reflect Dionysus' true powers or significance, it is what has made him most popular, especially among men. Hence the wooden phalloi and other similarly shaped statues in which are prayed to that supposedly appease the God. I still say it's quite foolish. Silly, small minded men.

It is unfortunate that if I were to ever express any of my audacious thoughts to anyone, I would surely seal my own demise. Even women have become blind to the idea of subordination. They'll be quick to scold you for stepping out of line, just as fast as their male counterparts. I dare to dream that most men would actually be pleased if their women were more worldly and assertive. I have learned from experience that men are drawn to strong, independent thinking women. If this were not true then myself and other working women would not be so successful in our trade. But alas, women such as I are not seen as worthy patrons for matrimony or motherhood. Our thoughts are too radical and our actions are too bold. In addition, a common housewife is not allowed to be so educated. I could never imagine living a life of ignorance,

never asking questions or learning of the arts. I guess that paying taxes is a small price for freedom, knowledge and self-respect.

~ Ademia²

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Notes

Art on cover, titled Hetaera, painted by Franciszek Żmurko paveikslas in 1906

¹ Euripides in fact did not win that year, mainly based on the fact that his play was so incredibly controversial. He only had a total of 2 wins before his death in 406 BC. The same year, his play The Bacchae won after his passing.

² The Greek name Ademia means “Without Husband”