

Asterism: The Maenads in Mythology

Jordan: [music]

Jordan: [music]

Intro

Hi, I'm Jordan.

Kit: And I'm Kit.

Jordan: Welcome to Starry Time

Kit: Asterisms edition.

Jordan: Where stars plus lines equal stories

Kit: With an asterisk.

Jordan: In these episodes, we'll explore ideas, concepts, or people that didn't make it into the main show or just a few things that we'd like to talk about a little bit more.

Kit: Yeah. So, in this episode, we wanted to do a medium, I say medium dive, uh, to the extent possible on the Maenads.

Jordan: Yes. So you might remember from our myths and retconstellations portion of Lyra, these are the lady killers of Orpheus, who are mentioned very briefly towards the end.

Kit: Yeah. So, usually when we do these side myths, we also roll in some astronomy to talk about. For example, we talked about the Nereids both in myth and in astronomy. We talked about the Pleiades in myth and astronomy, but there doesn't seem to be any astronomy Maenads, which I think is both rude and probably because of the myths related to, uh, these folks. So instead, this month, we're actually just going to stay in the myth zone and do a little myth retelling and ret constellationing related to the Maenads.

Jordan: For this month, we're going to do, like you said, a little bit of myth retelling and ret constellationing. And I worked hard, came up with a couple of these to redeem myself for, again, my, [sigh] Orpheus like performance in my retconstellation of Orpheus.

Kit: Well, to be fair, I think the source material here is a little more interesting. Uh, there's a lot of ambiguity in it, which means there's a lot of room to come up with something. And honestly, the Orpheus, as we talked about, the Orpheus myth, has been retconned already. So I think this is a better use of your efforts.

Myth Retelling

Jordan: Before we can retcon, we kind of have to go over the original myths. So, Kit, can you tell us who are the Maenads?

Kit: So, the Maenads or the Mae-nids, I'm not sure which exactly one is right, so we'll

probably use them interchangeably. Um, they are known in Roman mythology as the ba- Bassarids or the Bacchae or the Bacchantes. So, um, those are all. I don't know why I gave myself all of those to pronounce, but I did. And so these are the followers or priestesses or nymph nurses and or other women who have been possessed by the Greek god Dionysus, who is known in Roman mythology as Bacchus.

Jordan: It sounds like it starts out hard with Maenads, which could also be mae- nads. And then it just gets worse with Bassarids and Bacchae and Bacchantes. But I think you really swung for the fences and, you know, gave yourself a challenge and came through, Kit, excellent work. But there seem to be some conflicting ideas about whether the Maenads are willing or unwilling followers and to the extent to which they are mythical in their own right. But we'll focus more on the mythological elements of these followers of Dionysus. The Maenads are described as frenzied and mad, and they are often depicted with loose hair, bare feet, and wearing a fawn skin. They are also often seen in vase paintings and in other ancient art with snakes and with the Thyrsus, which is a pine cone staff associated with Dionysus and also fertility.

Kit: Speaking of Dionysus, we have met him before during this very season of our podcast

Jordan: Quests and Curses!

Kit: Yep, all the way back in the myth of Corona Australis, the southern crown.

Jordan: Kit. Spoilers. I could never forget the myth of Smelly Dionysus's mother. She may be a central figure in one of these future retconstellations that I've brought to the table today.

Kit: All right. Yes. So we are talking here about, um, Smelly, also known as Semele.

Jordan: Smelly

Kit: Smelly. Um, so Semele and Zeus are said to be the parents of Dionysus in some versions of his origin story, of which there are quite a few. And if you remember, this is the story where Zeus falls in love with our precious Semele and Hera tricks Semele into asking Zeus to show his true form, which promptly causes Semele to burst into flames and burn to death. Um, but, you know, being divine, Zeus is able to extract, uh, Dionysus from Semele's womb and, uh, sew Dionysus into his leg and be born that way.

Jordan: For more on how that story

00:05:00

Jordan: goes, be sure to check out our myths and retcons for Corona Australis. But yes, Dionysus becomes the god of wine, perhaps even the inventor of it, and is associated with fertility, theater, insanity and ritual madness.

Kit: Yeah, so he is a very prominent Greek god, which you might have guessed based on all of the different origin stories for him. He has a very, very long history of worship in ancient Greece and in Rome.

Jordan: The Greeks and Romans liked a party. There are as many origin stories for Dionysus as there are reasons to get down and party.

Kit: We like to party. We we like to party. [laughter]

Jordan: We like to party. We like, we like to party. Dionysus is a very interesting Greek god because, as we discussed, he's definitely quite a mischievous character who is known for pushing the boundaries and rules. He's uninhibited, so kind of an interesting archetype. There's a ton more we could say about the mysteries and cults of Dionysus but this isn't about him. Not this week.

Kit: Well, it's sort of about him, but we're, but I think it makes sense to table all of the Dionysus specific myths that do not involve the Maenads.

Jordan: We already talked about one of the most famous Maenad myths, which is them tearing apart our guy Orpheus, featured in our myths and reconstellation episode two weeks ago.

Kit: Yeah. So that one, if you want to know more about that, go ahead and check out that previous episode. But the second common myth about the Maenads is actually preserved in quite good detail in a play by Euripides titled the Bacchae, which was first performed in 405 BC.

Jordan: Euripides, spoiler alert, loves a good tragedy. And guess what? Here's another one to add to the collection.

Kit: Yeah. Greeks loved their tragedies is, I guess, my takeaway

Jordan: Parties and tragedies.

Kit: So the myth, in somewhat short form, goes something like this: Dionysus is living with his mortal family after the death of his mother, Semele.

Jordan: Remember, Smelly was mortal.

Kit: And his mortal family is just so happens to be, uh, the ruling family of Thebes, because, you know, why not? So, basically, his mortal family is very dismissive to Dionysus. They're like, you're not a god. You're just a guy. And all of this hogwash that you have about being a god is just, it's not true. It's just all bluster. And Dionysus at this time, a young god, is outraged by this disrespect.

Jordan: So, in some versions of the myth, though not the play necessarily, Dionysus takes off from home and amasses a cult of woman worshippers and then returns to Thebes, where he finds out that the King of Thebes, Pentheus, who also happens to be Dionysus's cousin, outlaws the worship of Dionysus, which also makes him not exactly happy. In fact, one might even call him super mad.

Kit: Either way, Dionysus feels disrespected. He feels angry. He is affronted by this entire situation. And so at this point, he essentially, I guess, emmm mind controls all of the women of Thebes, um, and has them join in to his group of Maenads and it's very important to note here that he mind controls all of them, including the king's mother, who is his aunt.

Jordan: And he turns them all into Maenads, which becomes very important later.

Kit: So all of the women of Thebes go up into the mountains and start to party.

Jordan: Party time.

Kit: Maybe they're with Dionysus's other followers. Maybe it's just them. Unclear. So at

this point, the cousin king is starting to get a little concerned and also a little angry.

Jordan: Mhm.

Kit: That all these women have sort of abandoned their responsibilities and are out there worshipping Dionysus, which he has outlawed.

Jordan: Seems like a pretty big slap in the face from Dionysus. This is a big feud we got going on here.

Kit: But Dionysus is not done with his cousin, King Pentheus. He disguises himself as a mortal and convinces Pentheus to go to the mountain and kill these frenzied women for worshipping Dionysus which seems a bit extreme. But long story short, Pentheus creeps up

00:10:00

Kit: to the mountain, is caught spying on the Maenads, who promptly tear him to pieces. Just rip him apart. And this is actually this frenzy, this tearing apart is led by his mother. Now his mother returns to the palace with her son's decapitated head under her arm, touting it like a trophy, saying, that it is the head of a lion. So she rolls in, shows this to her husband, the king's father, and woo, wow, that did not go over well. No.

Jordan: No, tough look.

Kit: At this point, she and the other sisters are all exiled, and Dionysus curses the old slash new King, Cadmuse, and his wife, who I thought was this other person, so I'm not

totally clear on that. And he curses the King into snake form for some period of time. And that's the play slash myth.

Myth Analysis

Jordan: Yeah, this is a pretty bloody play, but I think the interpretation itself is pretty easy. I mean, the Maenads operate as extensions of Orpheus [editor note: should be Dionysus], and they are women unbound by societal gender norms of the time, whether by their own choice or agency or by possession from Dionysus or by wine itself. And they are feared and dangerous by their unwillingness to conform to the norms of society.

Kit: Yeah. So in a lot of ways, um, and really, the pulling apart of Orpheus and this myth are really the only fully intact stories that we have about the Maenads. They sometimes pop up in other settings. As we mentioned, there's also, um, a role of Maenads as priestesses in the actual cults of Dionysus. There's some other nymph related stories, but these are really the big stories where there's a really actual full story involved. And this myth in particular reminds me a lot of the myths of the Amazons warriors, which are also surprisingly sparse. Like, there are some source myths, full stories about the Amazons warriors, but more often they're just sort of like, they pop up into stories. And I've always thought about the Amazons myths as well as, and I think this myth falls into this category, as well as a way in which a patriarchal society copes with unruly women or women who don't follow into these patriarchal rules. And these myths function simultaneously as a warning to keep other folks in line, as well as a way in which to create fear around these people that, you know, don't conform.

Jordan: Pretty great way to tell a story that reinforces patriarchal rules if you make

everyone who's opposed to you look feral and mad and crazy, and that's kind of the message they're trying to pass down here. Anyone who would, you know, question their authority must be a dissident or must be someone who can't be trusted.

Kit: Absolutely. But, yeah, I guess my major takeaway, um, when reading about the Maenads is I thought there was going to be a lot more mythology about them. Um, when we mentioned it in our Orpheus myth, I was like, tell me everything. I was like, this looks fascinating, um, but there really isn't a ton of depth. And maybe this is just that we've lost some of these stories, but I want to know more. I want things to be named in the night sky after them instead of, you know, Zeus and the other questionable heroes that, uh, we've heard about.

Jordan: But, yeah, see our episodes on Hercules and Orion and even Gemini for more. But Kit, now that we've discussed the interpretation, I think we actually only really have one choice.

Kit: Retconstellation?

Jordan: Retconstellation. Let's take a quick break and then come back with our retcon.
[music]

Retconstellations

Kit: Welcome back to our segment, Retconstellations. In this segment, we reimagine, reboot, and revise the myths that we've discussed in hopes of modernizing, subverting, or deepening the story that we've covered. Sometimes, though, all we're trying to do is

just make them a little less cringey.

Jordan: Kit, would you like to start us off today with your Maenads ret constellation?

Kit: Yeah, I sort of imagine them as a tribe like the Amazons, but, you know, instead of, you know, training to become very skilled, fearsome warriors, they're just super into wine and music and farming and, like, don't, don't get, don't get us wrong-- you don't want to mess with them because they will defend themselves, but they're not necessarily

00:15:00

Kit: interested in being full time warriors like the Amazons are. So my general idea is basically just to retcon the Maenads into a sort of sisterland of the Amazonian land. Maybe the two groups have a strong alliance. Maybe there's trade between the lands. And so that's where I want to leave the Maenads, as this sort of secondary group of people to incorporate into the podcast extended universe. Um, you know, just like Sagittaria leads the Amazons in my podcast extended universe, I'm going to be on the hunt for a leader and an origin story that really does the Maenads justice. But that's kind of, that's where I'm percolating and what I'm thinking about in terms of retconning this going forward, I'd like to be- have this be a sustained effort.

Jordan: Kit, we got plenty of constellations left to go. I can't wait to see how the Maenad territory gets explored. I think as we explore the night sky, more of the Maenad mythos and how they connect to your extended universe will become clear. In the meantime, yes, we'll think of them as a terra incognita, a part of your world yet to be explored. But perhaps as we go on through the constellations, the road to the Maenad territory will

become clear.

Kit: Exactly. So, how about you, Jordan? Where did you go with this Maenad retconstellation?

Jordan: Well, Kit, I actually have two. I have one that takes place in ancient Greece with the characters we already know and love, and I have one that reimagines the story in a different time and place.

Kit: Mmhmm.

Jordan: I will start out with my first reconstellation, which is set in ancient Greece and is called Smelly's Revenge. [laughter] And in my version of the story, Semele does not get burned alive for looking at Zeus. She is, in fact, saved by the Maenads, who create some sort of magical haze that protects her and blinds Zeus so that she can't turn into flames. Then she befriends them, and they work together and travel, trying to find Dionysus and they capture Zeus again in eagle form. Then the Maenads use their trickster powers to hypnotize Zeus and tell them, like, hey, you know, like, you could be a better leader, dude. And, like, Dionysus, like, he deserves better, you know, give him some guidance, you know. Now they got Zeus kind of sedated. They're trying to, you know, appeal to his better nature. You know, they're not going to kill him, like in lots of my retconstellations. They're just trying to persuade him sort of like try to do better, you know. And in the last scene of this retconstellation, Zeus, he, um, promptly wakes up from this hypnotic state, turns from an eagle back into a human, and, um, because of his dumb little bird brain, instantly forgets everything they told him. And everything continues as it always was. Because, Kit, this first one is not a retconstellation at all. This is a disasterism.

Kit: Disasterism. Wow. Wow. Wow. That is new lore, everybody. Disasterism. Uh, wow. Welcome to the pod!

Jordan: That one was a little bit futile, though, so I wanted to give the Maenads credit. So another way I was thinking about them was to change the scene. And I was imagining them sort of as like a telepathic, all woman spy ring. And whatever war you want to put them in is kind of irrelevant. I think in my head it was Cabaret meets Imitation Game, gothic World War Two thing where they, like, infiltrate Nazi bad guy clubs and take advantage of their dumb dumbness. And the Nazis think they're really drunk, but they're just pretending because they're telepathic and they're tricking them. And if you notice any similarities to the Amazons in the Of Mass and Matter trilogy, I too, saw some connections there. But, yeah, I don't think it really matters what war you put them in. Just, um, a sisterhood of spies may or may not be telepathic. And are they immortal? Who knows? Do they live a hundred years? Who knows? What their powers are? You know, you're gonna have to read quite a few books about this spy ring in order to figure it out. So that was my retconstellation that sort of twisted the idea that they're crazy and insane and made them the orchestrators of their own fate.

Kit: Yeah, I like that. I like that idea of, like that of being underestimated, being presumed to be, you know, drunk or whatever it is, but instead it's actually them with the power and the control and the ones that are sort of manipulating the strings. Yeah, definitely shifts the locus of power, for sure.

Jordan: Kind of got a little Wandavision, a lot, little Jean

00:20:00

Jordan: Grey. It's a little bit of that kind of vibe. But a group of them that all work together.

Kit: Like Black Widow, something like that.

Jordan: Exactly. Yeah. Miss Romanoff herself. So get at me Marvel if, uh, you want any help with the Maenads spin offs. Your characters stick around for lots of different wars. This might be perfect. [music]

Outro

Thank you for joining us today as we retold and retconstellated the myths of the Maenads.

Kit: This has been Kit.

Jordan: And Jordan.

Kit: Sisters, lovers of stars and stories.

Jordan: And we'll see you next time

Kit: On Starry Time. [music]

00:20:42