

CHAPTER 8

DIONYSUS: ROOTED IN EARTH AND ECSTASY

MAIN POINTS

1. Each winter Apollo left Delphi to live with the Hyperboreans, a mythical tribe in the North, and Dionysus moved into Delphi for those three months.

2. The contrast between Apollo and Dionysus: moderation and mental balance versus an irrational power that allows people to explore their potential for emotional and behavioral extremes.

3. Qualities in common: both sons of Zeus, they share his will to power and his creative drive; both are born under difficult circumstances and both establish cults.

4. While both Apollo and Dionysus are associated with “ecstasy”—a standing outside of oneself—there are also important distinctions between them in that respect. Apollo remains aloof from the worshipers who are not themselves possessed by the god: only the Pythia, who speaks in tongues (glossolalia), is. On the other hand, any follower of Dionysus can hope to be seized by the god in an ecstatic frenzy.

5. One theory suggests that Apollo and Dionysus are two sides of the same divinity, combining moderation and excess. Apollo and Dionysus then may represent two equally important aspects of the human psyche. The worshiper may encounter the divine either through oracular knowledge or by orgiastic rites.

6. Both gods inspire poetry, song, and dance—Apollo with his lyre and Dionysus with his timbrel.

7. Dionysus and other male fertility gods of the ancient Near East with whom he is often identified—Tammuz (Dumuzi), Adonis, and Osiris—share a common fate: violent death, descent into the Underworld, and rebirth as immortal beings.

8. Some versions of the myth bring Dionysus to Greece from Thrace, others from Asia Minor. While he brings with him a foreign cult and strange companions and music, he also has the nature, in a paradoxical way, of a native son: his birth, after all, took place in Thebes.

9. Euripides’s play the *Bacchae* tells of Dionysus’s (Bacchus’s) return to Thebes from Asia Minor with a throng of Asian maenads (female followers of the god).

10. Dionysus’s birth follows the heroic pattern: Hera attempts to prevent Semele from giving birth; in disguise, she convinces Semele that the lover who visits her in the dark is an ogre. Semele persuades her lover to show himself as he really is, and when Zeus appears in a blaze of light, she is incinerated. From her corpse, Zeus takes the embryo of Dionysus and places it in his thigh, from which Dionysus is born. (See Note, p. 35.) For Euripides’s rationalization of this myth on the basis of linguistic confusion, see Chapter 1.

11. Sprung from Zeus’s genital area, Dionysus is a fertility god representing the growth, death, and rebirth of vegetation. He is a masculine counterpart of Persephone.

12. Dionysus was the god of life-giving fluid. As such, he was most difficult to control and liable to change form and nature: he could change instantaneously from a sweet adolescent to a savage bull or lion. He was capable of extreme cruelty as well as great benevolence. For instance, he drove the women of Thebes, including his own aunts, mad because the city would not accept his new ritual and him as a god.

13. The same duality characterizes his most famous gift: wine can give pleasure but can also cause disorientation and unrestrained actions, which have dire consequences.

14. Two motifs characterize the myths of Dionysus: he is foreign in many respects and he must confront hostility to himself and his religion.

15. Hera's persecution continued when Dionysus was an infant. Hermes took him for protection to Semele's sister Ino, who disguised him as a girl. In reprisal, Hera drove Ino and her husband mad. Zeus then took Dionysus abroad to Nysa and concealed him in the form of a goat.

NOTE: The story of the mortal woman or man who perishes by seeing the divine being in his or her true splendor is common. In Greek myth, it is found in stories such as Actaeon perishing after seeing Artemis and Tiresias losing his sight after spying on Athene. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, Moses witnesses the presence of Yahweh in the shape of a burning bush, because the full view of God would kill him. A frequent theme in folklore mirrors the lovers' aspect of the story of Semele and Zeus. In the Norwegian fairytale of "East of the Sun and West of the Moon," the young woman's lover is a bewitched polar bear by day and a handsome prince by night; by sneaking a peak at his true nocturnal nature, she ruins his chance of breaking the spell and becoming human again. However, since it is a fairytale, it does have a happy ending. A reversal of the theme happens in "Beauty and the Beast" and its variations, in which the young woman is supposed to "look beyond" the terrible facade to see her lover's true nature.

16. Dionysus's first lover, Ampelus, is gored to death by a bull, and Dionysus weeps for him; watered by his tears, Ampelus's body shoots forth a vine with grape clusters.

17. Dionysus teaches winemaking to the gardener Icarius, who then travels around the countryside instructing farmers in viticulture. While dressed in the skin of a goat, he is murdered by drunken shepherds.

18. The retinue of Dionysus, made up of "outsiders"—satyrs, silens, and maenads—clearly marks him as "other."

19. When kidnaped by pirates, Dionysus changes them into dolphins, an etiological explanation of why dolphins are friendly to humans.

20. Dionysus acquires a retinue in India consisting of satyrs, which combine human shape and goat shape; the goat is the favored sacrificial animal in the Dionysian cult and one of the shapes in which Dionysus often chose to appear.

21. Satyrs (Roman: fauns) are famous for their sexual prowess and are often depicted with exaggeratedly large and erect penises.

22. The silens (a human with a horse's tail and hoofs), Bacchantes (women followers), and Priapus (a fertility deity) also follow Dionysus. Dionysus's worshipers carry the thyrsus, a long staff topped with a pine cone and entwined with ivy. By the sixth century B.C., the silens (originally old men) and satyrs (half-human, half-goat) were used interchangeably.

23. In the sixth century B.C., a mythic association was made between Dionysus and Orpheus. Both Dionysus and Orpheus descended into Hades, died a violent death, and thereafter achieved immortality. Both were sexually ambiguous.

NOTE: Students may not be familiar with the tragedy of Orpheus and Eurydice at this point (see Chapter 9). Eurydice, Orpheus's beloved wife, died from a snakebite, and Orpheus vowed to go to the Underworld to fetch her back. With his music he moved everyone in the Underworld, including Hades and Persephone, to such an extent that they allowed him to make an attempt to bring Eurydice with him to the land of the living, while playing his music. However, if he turned to look at her before they had safely arrived, she would be lost to him forever. Accompanied by Hermes, Eurydice's shadow began following her husband, but he moved quickly in anticipation of her rescue, and she could not keep up. When he arrived at the land of the living, he turned around to see her, but she was still enveloped by darkness; at that moment, Hermes whisked her back to the Underworld. In desperation, Orpheus tried a second time, but Charon wouldn't ferry him across to the Land of the Dead.

24. After the loss of Eurydice, Orpheus renounces women and turns to captivate young men with his music. Some female worshipers of Dionysus tear him limb from limb in anger over rejection and cast his body parts over the earth.

25. Some scholars believe that Orpheus's physical dismemberment suggests that during prehistoric times, a young male was ritually sacrificed by being cut to pieces, which were then planted in the ground. This would be a variant of the sparagmos motif. There is not much evidence for this theory.

26. Orpheus's journey to the Underworld earned him an association with occult knowledge. Orphism was a mystery worship that offered spiritual guidance along a path of self-purification and preparation of the soul for life after death. Because its myth pictured the human being as a combination of divine spark and base physicality, Orphic teaching and practice sought to awaken that divine potential. Initiates who consumed a meal of flesh and wine (representing the body and blood of Dionysus) in a variant on the sparagmos motif could, in the next world, be united with the god for eternity. Orphism espoused the idea of reincarnation and viewed Hades as a place of renewal and rebirth.

27. Orphism promoted another variation of the Dionysian myth. According to that version, Dionysus was the son of Zeus and Persephone. Since Zeus planned to make his son king of the universe, Hera induced the Titans to tear him apart, burn his body, and eat it (sparagmos). Athene saved the boy's heart, which she gave to Zeus, who swallowed it and then impregnated Semele. Dionysus was reborn to Semele as Dionysus Zagreus.

28. Subsequently, Zeus kills the Titans with his thunderbolt. Humans spring from the ashes of the Titans and are thus descendants of rebel Titans as well as the divine flesh of Dionysus, so humans carry a divine spark within them.

29. Orphism taught that the body is a prison (soma sema), and death frees the soul.

30. The festival for Dionysus, the Dionysia, featured a procession with followers carrying a statue of the god and replicas of his phallus. The Dionysian Mysteries were very popular in Greece and Italy and persisted well into the Christian era.

31. Orphism created a balance between the passion of Dionysus and the austerity of Apollo, suggesting a unity of the two gods. Orphism anticipated many doctrines of Christianity, and early Christians used the figure of Orpheus or Dionysus to depict Jesus.

PRIMARY TEXT SELECTION: Hymn to Dionysus

KEY NAMES OF MYTHOLOGICAL CHARACTERS MENTIONED:

Apollo

Dionysus

Bacchus, another name for Dionysus

Semele, Dionysus's mother

Hera

Ino, Semele's sister

Ampelus, Dionysus's first lover, the origin of wine grapes

Icarius, the first viniculturist

Satyrs, half-human and half-goat, part of Dionysus's entourage

Silens, humanoid creatures with horse tail and hooves

Bacchantes, female followers of Dionysus

Priapus, a fertility god depicted with an erection

Orpheus, Eurydice's husband, musician, bisexual

Titans, offspring of Gaea, killed by Zeus

KEY NAME ASSOCIATED WITH THE TELLING/CRITICISM OF MYTHS:

Euripides (c. 485–406 B.C.)