

## CHAPTER 13 THE THEATER OF DIONYSUS AND THE TRAGIC VISION

### MAIN POINTS

1. In the fifth century B.C., principally in Athens, the ancient myths were recast in dramatic performances in the Theater of Dionysus.
2. Tragic drama is a phenomenon of the new Athenian democracy. Its characters enacted questions of power, excess, and abuse. The people (demos) of democratic (ruled by the demos) Athens could learn from the dramas the immense costs of overreaching limits.
3. Greek tragic drama often confronted two characters, each of whom acted out a set of laudable convictions, but neither of whom was willing to compromise.
4. The vehicle of tragic drama taught the Athenian demos the value of restraint, moderation, and compromise for civic existence.
5. The city Dionysia, held annually for five days in March, included a procession of citizens carrying emblems of the Dionysus cult and celebrating the making of new wine; rituals also involved sacrifices.
6. Tragedies, satyr plays, and comedies were staged. The first Dionysia was celebrated by Athens about 534 B.C., when the tyrant Pisistratus instituted a competition among playwrights. The first winner of the tragic competition was Thespis, who reportedly created the first role for an actor by separating a single performer from the traditional choir. Aristotle notes that tragedy began with the dithyramb, a choral song to the god.
7. Tragedy, allegedly introduced by Thespis, originally means “goat song,” a reference to the goatskins worn by the choir or the chants during the goat sacrifice.
8. Thespis and other dramatists wrote tragedies committed to the spirit of Dionysus, but used myths about other gods and heroes as their primary subject matter.
9. Only one surviving tragedy has Dionysus as its leading character: Euripides’s *Bacchae*, presenting him as an irresistible natural instinct, contrary to the comedy by Aristophanes, *Frogs*, in which he is portrayed as a good-natured drunk.
10. Dramatic presentations then were communal rituals including music and dance.
11. Aristotle defined tragedy in terms of the audience’s emotional response: by having strong feelings aroused, the spectator is able to relieve or purge these emotions, achieving catharsis.

NOTE: While Aristotle was an avid defender of the moral value of the theater, his teacher Plato advised against letting one’s emotions be affected by the dramatic arts. Plato saw the arts as a threat to a person’s rational equilibrium, regardless of the fact that he himself wrote artful literature (the *Dialogues*) that affected his readers’ emotions as well as their reason; the debate still exists today in the current discussion of whether certain art forms are harmful to the spectator, or whether they have a calming, cleansing effect. The debate about violence in films and on television has clear Aristotelian and Platonic overtones; however, it must be remembered that Aristotle, being the defender of the ideal of moderation, never intended for people to be exposed to drama on a daily basis; he believed that too much of a good thing was harmful.

12. The satyr play, following a series of three tragedies, used mythic material but did not take it seriously. The chorus, composed of satyrs, would tell obscene jokes and provoke laughter. Most satyr plays have been lost.
13. The comedy was added to the Dionysia in Athens in 486 B.C. The comic festival, the *Lenaea*, was established about 440 B.C. Comedy began with the Dionysian band of

revelers walking in procession, answering calls from the onlookers. Komoidia is derived from “parade of revelers.”

14. Apollo encourages awareness of one’s human limitations; however, the tragic hero has a capacity for extremes of feeling and behavior that contradicts this. The Dionysian drive toward self-exploration through freedom explores the urges that violate the taboos of civilized life. This drive was especially problematic in the newly emerged democracy that had just been established at Athens: democracy requires submission to the will of the majority and a willingness to compromise that mythic heroes usually scorn.
15. In drama there is no narrative voice, so the characters may speak and act in ways that create several different perspectives on the occurring actions, leaving the audience to contemplate the possibilities.
16. Greek dramatists were expected to base their tragedies on myths, but they often questioned the traditional perspective of the myths.
17. The tragic protagonists are noble, as in the myths, but slightly more realistic: instead of tracing their descent from the gods, they are of noble families; and instead of performing superhuman feats, they are persons of unusual moral integrity.
18. The extraordinary qualities of the heroes are often what cause their predicaments—and their rise above those predicaments.
19. The tragic heroes are doomed to suffer, because they are trapped between conflicting demands. Their suffering ripples outward, affecting others, but their role is to take on the communal suffering, much like a scapegoat.
20. Through suffering they reach wisdom; the tragic quest is typically an internal journey of suffering and transcendence of suffering.
21. Those who are not strong enough to live through the suffering and reach wisdom die, like Oedipus’s wife Jocasta.
22. The tragic universe is ruled by divine beings, but the universe is anthropocentric; the words of the gods are ambiguous, and there is little communication between them and humans. The humans keep struggling to confront the limits of the cosmic order.
23. The tragic universe is not morally neat; there is no assured divine justice and no moral clarity in the end. Peripeteia (reversal) defines the tragic experience.
24. Even if the gods are incomprehensible, the protagonist accepts responsibility for his or her fate; defining ourselves as free moral agents means acting as if we were free and responsible.
25. The final insight of the tragic hero corresponds loosely to the epiphany of the Dionysian ritual: as the drives are released, the order of the drama is restored, and the community survives. In this way Apollo and Dionysus are reconciled.
26. Euripides’s *Bacchae*, taking the festival back to its roots, dramatizes the god’s return to his birthplace, Thebes, where he will take vengeance on the city for failing to honor his divinity.
27. The trait that causes Pentheus’s stubborn refusal to recognize Dionysus and the freedom he offers is his lack of Apollonian self-knowledge.
28. At the beginning of the play, both leading characters appear in roles that mask their real natures. Dionysus appears slight and effeminate, while Pentheus, the masculine defender of order, appears to be in charge. In the play’s major reversal (peripeteia), their masks are stripped away, revealing that each is the opposite of what he first appeared to be. Dionysus tricks Pentheus into unmasking his feminine component—the androgynous traits he finds so disturbing in the Stranger. Meanwhile the god has assumed total control: the king who tried to execute him will become his sacrificial victim.

29. Pentheus's fear of what may happen if human nature is liberated too completely from its socially imposed restraints is actualized in his own death at the hands of his mother, Agave. His dismemberment reenacts Dionysus's own sparagmos by the Titans (see Chapter 8). Like his cousin Actaeon, Pentheus learns too late the necessity of respecting the gods' will.
30. Liberated from the traditional feminine duties, Agave, like Artemis, revels in the freedom to hunt and use weapons. Like Artemis, she inflicts sparagmos on the male who spies on her, who turns out to be her own son.
31. Her plight dramatizes the tragic alternatives available to women in a patriarchal society: the inner destruction of the psyche from oppression and lack of opportunity for fulfillment in the world of action or the social destruction of murdering husbands and children. Medea and Clytemnestra are similarly trapped.
32. Agave compares herself to Heracles. But when Heracles slew his wife and children, he was given a way to expiate his crime, while Agave is condemned to permanent exile. The scene in which Agave slowly comes to recognize what she has done is an extraordinarily painful scene of madness.
33. When Agave returns to a state of sanity, she realizes that the god has robbed her of her choice, has exploited her potential for aggression. In the only kind of freedom still available to her, she rejects Dionysus. Her previous rationalism made her reject the idea that Semele's child was the son of Zeus. In this she resembles Jocasta, who is punished for doubting that the gods influence human affairs (see Chapter 16).

NOTE: Divinity cannot be demonstrated by logic or science. All religions depend on the "leap of faith" beyond the world of reason and the senses that allow the human spirit to perceive the divine intuitively. Pentheus and Agave have failed to understand that to believe in any god is to accept the possibility of the miraculous.

34. As the god's human pawn, Agave resembles Cassandra, a Trojan princess who was also Apollo's prophet. Both women found that union with a god is a poisonous gift that deprives them of their mental power. For both, religious commitment offers unparalleled rapture and insight, but the gods demand unconditional surrender. Only the Maenads, Dionysus's Asian followers, who find grace and peace with Dionysus, seem to be able to reconcile the opposing claims of religious devotion and Greek humanism.
35. Apollo's prophet Tiresias accepts Dionysus unconditionally. Joining the Bacchic dance, Tiresias balances Apollo and Dionysus, control and freedom. He is the only character in the play who is not punished. Another myth describes Tiresias as having been changed from man to woman and back again. Thus Tiresias can appreciate Dionysian mutability and androgyny.
36. Tiresias's accommodation of both Apollo and Dionysus, masculine control and feminine surrender, parallels Delphi's accommodation of two different aspects of godhead. By making room for Dionysus, whose temple also stood on Mt. Parnassus, the Delphic compromise between mental clarity and sensuous abandon helped to contain and control potentially dangerous human tendencies. Regulating Dionysian revels to annual dramatic festivals acknowledges and gives expression to but contains the irrational.
37. Cadmus's honoring of Dionysus is merely shallow expedience. As punishment, Dionysus condemns Cadmus to exile and eventual transformation into a serpent, like the one he had slain when he first founded Thebes.
38. Dionysus gave humanity two gifts, bread and wine, which played a part in some Greco-Roman mystery religions.

NOTE: Bread and wine, used in sacraments in many religions, are symbols of transformation—physically, through the fermentation of wine and the rising of bread; socially, as the ability to engage in agriculture allows humans to reside in fixed locations long enough to grow grain and

grapes; and spiritually, as symbols of the gifts that the gods gave humanity, as well as of the spiritual regeneration that worship can offer to humans. Odysseus points out that the uncivilized Cyclops can make neither bread nor wine.

38. Christianity also uses bread and wine sacramentally. Jesus's first miraculous act is to change water into wine. At the Passover dinner he hosts for his disciples, he announces that the bread is his "body" and the wine, his "blood." His crucifixion is a form of sparagmos, the ritual sacrifice of God's beloved son.
39. Jesus's supernatural abilities were also doubted, especially by his former neighbors. No one in Nazareth recognizes his divine origin. Unlike Dionysus, however, Jesus does not punish the people for their rejection.
40. In interpreting the significance of Jesus's life to a Greco-Roman audience, New Testament authors employed parallels to Dionysian myth. Both have a divine father and human mother; both perform miracles; both are killed—Dionysus by sparagmos inflicted by the Titans, Jesus by crucifixion inflicted by the Romans; both descend to Hades/Tartarus; both are raised up to immortal life in heaven. The Book of Revelations makes another analogy between Dionysus and Jesus. Here, Jesus becomes the divine avenger, ready to destroy those who reject his divinity.

PRIMARY TEXT SELECTION: Euripides,  
The Bacchantes

KEY NAMES OF MYTHOLOGICAL CHARACTERS MENTIONED:

Dionysus

Apollo

Oedipus, king of Thebes

Jocasta, his wife and mother

Creon, ruler of Thebes after Oedipus

Agamemnon, leader of the Greeks at Troy

Achilles, Greek hero of the siege of Troy

Antigone, daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta (and sister of Oedipus)

Orestes, son and slayer of Agamemnon

Pentheus, king of Thebes

Agave, his mother and Semele's sister

Semele, Dionysus's mother

Cadmus, founder of Thebes; Agave's father

Tiresias, prophet of Apollo

KEY NAMES ASSOCIATED WITH THE TELLING/CRITICISM OF MYTHS:

Friedrich Nietzsche, German philosopher (1844–1900)

Thespis, the first Greek tragic dramatist (about 534 B.C.)

Euripides (c. 485–406 B.C.)

Aristophanes, Greek comic dramatist (c. 450–c. 380 B.C.)

Aeschylus (c. 525–456 B.C.)

Sophocles (c. 495–406 B.C.)

William Blake, English painter and poet (1757–1827)

Euripides (c. 485–406 B.C.)

The New Testament