

The Imposter Syndrome of Dionysus: Unmasking the Conflicted Identity of the Wine God in The Myth of Pentheus and Percy Jackson

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Abstract

This paper considers the multi-faceted identity of the Greek god Dionysus by comparing a red-figure cup depiction of the myth of Pentheus by the painter Douris and several scenes with “Mr. D” in *The Titan’s Curse* by Rick Riordan. In particular, it argues that the contradictions and drastic mood shifts evident in these works reveal Dionysus’s constant search for acceptance and respect as a divine entity. To do so, it first establishes Dionysus’s complex identity in Greek mythology, providing background for his violent actions. Next, it completes a visual analysis of Douris’s cup circa 480 BCE, focusing on the contrast between the relaxed god and his ravenous followers tearing Pentheus limb from limb. Then, it examines Dionysus’s role as Mr. D in *The Titan’s Curse*, emphasizing his change of heart with regards to the protagonist, the demigod hero Percy. By viewing these two depictions through the lens of identity and imposter syndrome, this paper argues that Dionysus’s actions stem from a desire for acceptance and respect, qualities ultimately shared by the humans who followed him.

From androgynous youth to bearded middle-aged man, apathetic camp counselor to vengeful cult leader, Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, fertility, ritual ecstasy, and theater, has taken on extremely varied personas throughout different eras and mediums of storytelling.¹ Fittingly, his identity in mythology is equally complex, being the only Olympian with a mortal parent and consequently spending an abnormal amount of time among mortals. Moreover, he is uniquely evangelical among the Olympians, traveling the western world with his frenzied cult of ravenous followers, constantly and often violently demanding reverence from those who doubt his legitimacy as a god.

This paper will examine two mythological sources revealing different aspects of this search for respect and approval, beginning with the coolly and cruelly violent Dionysus of *The Bacchae*, as depicted on Douris's red-figure cup circa 480 BCE, and continuing with the irritable and apathetic Mr. D from Percy Jackson and the Olympians, as depicted throughout several scenes of *The Titan's Curse*. In particular, it will analyze how Dionysus's visual dissociation from Pentheus's brutal murder on the cup depicts his perspective of the scene as measured justice for disrespect of his identity, rather than pure frenzied violence. Likewise, it will investigate how Mr. D's distaste for the demigods of Camp Half Blood stems from the disrespect of heroes for his divine nature, and hence why he is willing to save Percy and his friends from the Manticore when given proper acknowledgement as a powerful god. Ultimately, by viewing these works through the lens of identity and insecurity, this paper will argue that rather than pure ecstasy and madness, Dionysus's violence and aggression represents a deeply human desire for acceptance, not just of power or status, but of his complex personal identity.

In order to further contextualize the analysis of Dionysus's identity and relationship with violence, it is useful to first consider the circumstances of his birth and upbringing. According to Apollodorus's *Library*, Dionysus was the son of Zeus, king of the gods, and a

1. A. Henrichs, *Dionysus*, Oxford Research Encyclopedias, December 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.013.2226>.

mortal princess Semele, daughter of Cadmus, the king and founder of Thebes.² However, his birth was complicated by Hera, Zeus's divine wife, who in her jealousy tricked Semele into asking Zeus to show her his true, godly form. The raw power of Zeus's thunderbolts incinerated Semele instantly, but he was able to save the fetal child and sew him into his thigh, from which he eventually gave birth to the god Dionysus. In order to protect him from Hera's wrath, he instructed Hermes to give the baby to his aunt Ino and uncle Athamas, raising him as a girl as an additional diversion. Thus, even at this early age, Dionysus was exposed to several important aspects of his relationship to identity and vindictiveness. Hera's jealousy and distaste for human partners of Zeus led to his mother's violent death, and her resulting hunt for the lost child forced him to temporarily transform his gender identity.

Upon Hera's discovery of young Dionysus, he received yet another "lesson" in godly behavior, as she "indignantly drove [Ino and Athamas] mad" in retribution for their assistance in raising Dionysus.³ In their madness, Athamas hunted down their elder son Learchus and killed him, thinking he was a deer, and Ino threw their younger son Melicertes into boiling water, killing him as well; upon coming to their senses, they both committed suicide by throwing themselves off a cliff. Dionysus was only saved by Zeus transforming him into a goat, providing yet another example of an identity shift as a method of protection. But perhaps even more impactful was the idea that "madness could be used as a weapon," an idea that would greatly impact Dionysus's later interactions with humanity.⁴ Once again left alone and homeless by the wrath of a goddess, Zeus convinced the nymphs of Nysa (in Asia) to raise Dionysus in exchange for immortality. Finally, Dionysus was able to grow up in peace, reaching his potential as a god upon the discovery of the grapevine and subsequent creation of wine. It was at this point that he, along with his nymph and satyr companions, began to travel and spread the word of the new beverage and, perhaps more importantly, the patron god who created it.

2. *Apollodorus, Library, Book 3*, <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0548.tlg001.perseus-eng1:3.4.3>.

3. *Apollodorus, Library, Book 3*.

4. Rick Riordan and John Rocco, *Percy Jackson's Greek Gods* (Disney, Hyperion, 2016).

With this mythological background established, we turn our focus to the red-figure drinking cup painted by Douris circa 480 BCE. The exterior of the cup is decorated with a large and complex scene that wraps around the entire circumference (Figure 1). While the scene is continuous and thus evokes a sense of crowdedness and even chaos, there is a natural break due to the handles of the cup, emphasized by vine-like details surrounding each handle. When placed down on a table, this divide would be accentuated, as the angle would likely prevent the drinker from seeing the opposite side of the cup (as in Figure 1a); likewise, anyone facing the drinker could only see this opposite side, creating an imbalanced viewing experience. However, while drinking, the entire exterior of the cup would be exposed to the drinker's companions, revealing the scene in its totality.

One side of the cup (which we will refer to as the rear side) depicts five figures (bottom of Figure 1a). On the far left and right are two similarly-depicted female figures, dressed in simple, almost leaf-like drapery and holding what looks like human limbs. There is another female figure to the center right who is dressed similarly but with a more formal outer layer of clothing, clearly holding a detached human foot and calf. However, the most prominent figure of the scene is indubitably the seated male figure to the center left, who wears elaborate drapery, has a long beard and hair, wears an ivy crown, and holds a drinking cup (Figure 1d); clearly, this is a representation of Dionysus, implying that the women around him are likely maenad followers. This identification is further supported by the figure to the left of Dionysus, a naked male figure with a tail and playing an aulos, meant to be one of the satyrs in Dionysus's traveling band of followers. Notably, while Dionysus faces the satyr directly, with an alert facial expression suggesting that he is actively enjoying the music, the maenads have ambiguous, almost dazed expressions and are looking off into the distance. Rather than being frenzied, they appear as if in some kind of trance, unable to recognize the reality of the situation.

The other side (the front side) contains four female figures, a kneeling, naked male figure with animalistic ears, facial features, and legs, and a dismembered torso of a male figure

being held by two of the female figures (top of Figure 1a). Given the mutilated male body and the context of Dionysus on the other side, we can conclude that this cup likely depicts the myth of Pentheus, perhaps best known from Euripides's tragedy *The Bacchae*.⁵ In the opening monologue to this play, Dionysus describes

The reason why I have chosen Thebes as the first place to raise my Bacchic shout . . . is this: my mother's sisters said . . . that I, Dionysus, was not Zeus's son; that Semele, being with child—they said—by some mortal, obeyed her father's prompting, and ascribed to Zeus the loss of her virginity; and they loudly claimed that this lie was the sin for which Zeus took her life. Therefore I have driven those same sisters mad . . . For Thebes, albeit reluctantly, must learn in full this lesson, that my Bacchic worship is a matter as yet beyond her knowledge and experience; and I must vindicate my mother Semele by manifesting myself before the human race as the divine son whom she bore to immortal Zeus.

In this myth, much like Hera did repeatedly during his childhood, Dionysus utilizes madness as a weapon to punish his aunts for doubting his mother's honesty and consequently his own godhood. He then appears to his cousin King Pentheus of Thebes in “the likeness of a man,” acting as a priest of Dionysus in order to test Pentheus’s resistance to accepting Dionysus’s godly nature. In true Dionysian form, he utilizes an alternate identity to gain leverage and power, ultimately manipulating Pentheus to approach the frenzied maenads (including his mother Agave) and try to spy on them. Then, revealing Pentheus’s position to his followers, Dionysus encourages them to attack the “man who made a mock of you,” ultimately resulting in Agave parading with the head of her own son as a trophy, convinced in her frenzy that she had killed a mountain lion (again representing the power of misidentification).

In this context, the details of this front side of the cup become clearer, with the four women representing women of Thebes driven to madness by Dionysus. The two women holding Pentheus’s torso are wrapped with what appears to be a fawn skin, a common

5. Euripides, *The Bacchae and Other Plays*, trans. Philip Vellacott (Penguin Books, 1973).

attribute of the bacchae. In contrast to the dazed women on the left of the front side and the women on the rear side, these two women are intensely focused with their crazed eyes locked on Pentheus. At the same time, the woman on the right (likely Agave) expresses a sort of tenderness, evident from her soft stroking of Pentheus's hair and slightly stooped posture; this only serves to further emphasize the tragedy and horror of the scene, as some part of Agave's motherly nature senses her destruction of her own son.

While this sequence of mythological events and the depiction of them on the cup would appear to portray Dionysus as a ruthless and manipulative killer, the aforementioned tranquility of the reverse side of the cup tells a different story. Dionysus himself does not commit any acts of violence, nor does he even express anger at Pentheus. Instead, by the chosen division of the painting, Douris expresses a sort of indifference of Dionysus towards the gruesome violence of his followers. Whereas the maenads are dazed or frenzied, he is focused and calm, seated and enjoying some music. Moreover, while possibly just a relic of the time, it is notable that Dionysus appears in his older, bearded form here; in contrast to the youthful, effeminate human form he takes to address Pentheus in *The Bacchae*, this depiction of Dionysus radiates power, implying further separation from the mortal struggles of Pentheus and his frenzied maenads.⁶ By doing so, he is not only emphasizing his immortal indifference to mortal strife but also rejecting his own "mortal" identity, quite literally purging his family from power and thus establishing himself as an all-powerful god.

This theme of detachment as a way to assert godhood also rings true in Rick Riordan's portrayal of Dionysus as the disillusioned and disinterested Mr. D, exiled by Zeus to be the counselor of the demigod Camp Half Blood as punishment for pursuing a nymph in whom Zeus was also interested. The first scene containing Mr. D in *The Titan's Curse* occurs when the main character, Percy Jackson, returns to camp after losing his friend Annabeth in a fight with the monstrous manticore (Figure 3). Along with their mutual friend Thalia,

6. Thomas H. Carpenter, "7. On the Beardless Dionysus," in *Masks of Dionysus*, ed. Thomas H. Carpenter and Christopher A. Faraone (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 185–206, ISBN: 9781501733680, <https://doi.org/doi:10.7591/9781501733680-012>, <https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501733680-012>.

a daughter of Zeus, and Chiron, the centaur who trained many famous heroes like Achilles and acts as the camp activities director, Percy argues that they need to embark on a rescue mission for Annabeth. However, Mr. D disagrees vehemently, stating that “we have broken even on this escapade. We have, ah, regrettably lost Annie Bell...And you have procured a small annoying boy to replace her,” referring to Nico di Angelo, another demigod they saved from the manticore.⁷ Right away, he establishes a nonchalant attitude towards the demigods, treating lifelong camper Annabeth as nothing but a replaceable asset. As he does consistently throughout the series, he refuses to use correct names for the demigods, only further diminishing their value and personal identities. Rather than revealing any inherent cruelty or hostility, this is likely a reflection of his own condition, as Mr. D himself has been stripped of his own identity, forced to live without his sacred wine, with only a human-like “orange leopard-skin warm-up suit and his purple running shoes” to identify him as Dionysus (Figure 2). In a later scene where the heroes discuss their upcoming quest, this is even more pronounced, as he is forced to turn the wine he summons into Diet Coke, only able to dream about wine via the magazine he is reading (Figure 1b). Similar to the way he strips Pentheus and the women of his kingdom of their identities through madness in order to affirm his own identity, he redirects his own insecurities and limitations to his treatment of the campers. While Riordan emphasizes a form of hostilities more familiar to his middle grade audience: name calling, and Douris a form more familiar to the men drinking from his cup at symposia: madness and violence, the same theme of mutual misidentification applies.

Beyond this apathy towards the heroes, Mr. D also expresses direct distaste and anger, often willing them to failure and death. While Percy makes his case for saving Annabeth and accuses Mr. D of being a “lazy jerk” who wants all of the campers to disappear, there is a “purplish angry fire in his eyes that usually meant something bad and godly was going to happen if we didn’t shut up” (Figure 3). This hints at his godly powers as well as the vindictiveness of the god from the myth of Pentheus. However, unlike in *The Bacchae*,

7. Rick Riordan, *The Titan’s Curse* (Hyperion Books, 2007).

he is constrained in this case by his “imprisonment” as director of the camp, only able to degrade the demigods with misnomers and microaggressions like cheering “Oh goody!” at a prophecy promising deaths of heroes. The third scene in which Mr. D appears is perhaps most instructive regarding his ability to retaliate against heroes, as he admonishes Percy for illicitly leaving camp to join the quest. While he is able to trap Percy and his pegasus friend Blackjack on the Chrysler building, ensnaring them in grapevines, he does not complete his threat to “throw you off this building,” demonstrating a sort of restraint and disinterest in actual violence. While he still wears his human-like leopard-skin warm-up suit, he “was leaning against the building with his feet levitating in the air . . . hair whipping around in the wind,” portraying a more godly, fearsome, and vengeful figure than at Camp Half Blood. However, he ultimately only lets Percy go under the “hope” that “The prophecy says at least two of you will die. Perhaps I’ll be lucky and you’ll be one of them.” While this may appear to be far more hands-off than the dismemberment of Pentheus, in actuality there is a similar level of restraint and disconnection from the actual violence itself. Much like the cup isolates Dionysus from the murder of Pentheus, instead leaving it to his maenads, Mr. D hopes the prophecy will separate him from having to enact violence himself. Again, this reflects a difference in audience and medium, as the physical object of the cup lends itself to visual divides, whereas the text of Percy Jackson allows for the verbal nuance of dialogue and a prophecy.

Despite these attempts at dissociation and aggression, Mr. D merely craves respect from those around him, significantly changing his attitude when his own identity and power are acknowledged rather than diminished. For example, in the aforementioned first scene, while he initially treats Nico—who is just learning of his status as a demigod—with “loathing” upon calling him “the wine dude,” after Nico explains how “In my game, Mythomagic . . . everybody thinks you’re the lamest god card [but] I think your powers are sweet,” Mr. D. is “perplexed” but also vaguely appreciative (Figure 3a). This combination of emotions reveals his strong desire for even the smallest recognition of his true godly identity. Meanwhile,

he nearly forgets his anger at Percy's insolence, demonstrating his preference for reverence over vengeance. This theme appears even more strongly in one of the later scenes in *The Titan's Curse*, where Percy desperately calls Camp Half Blood for help when he is cornered by the vicious manticore once again (Figure 1c). While initially demonstrating his typical disinterest in the heroes' plight, focusing on his dinner plans instead of the dying heroes, his mood quickly changes after the manticore quips that the heroes are "without any *real* help." Suddenly having his godhood questioned by a (somewhat insignificant) monster, he suggests to Percy that he could ask politely for help, and in his desperation to save his friend, he does. Reflecting the traditional powers and godly domains of Dionysus, Percy suddenly notices the smell of wine and "the sound of madness" as Mr. D drives the human gunmen supporting the manticore crazy, throwing them into sudden waltzes and clogging dances; meanwhile, he viciously kills the manticore by suffocating him in grapevines (Figure 1d). While Percy and the heroes are left in awe and horror by Mr. D's unexpected demonstration of support and power, he is merely bemused, remarking "That was fun" (Figure 1e). At the same time, he reveals a massive shift in his view of Percy by referring to him by his correct full name, Percy Jackson, demonstrating mutual respect for him after just a bit of acknowledgement. Once again, this is not mindless or frenzied violence, but a deliberate expression of his divine identity, something that brings him joy beyond his usual camp counselor duties. Contrary to the myth of Pentheus, this violence comes in acknowledgement of Percy's reverence rather than in retaliation for disrespect, but the underlying desires are the same.

In both of these depictions of Dionysus, he demonstrates a complicated and sometimes conflicted sense of identity. On Douris's cup, he is equal parts violent cult leader and blissful music listener, god of madness and god of joy. Likewise, in *The Titan's Curse*, he is both an apathetic camp counselor and a protective patron, with seemingly little to separate the two. Both primarily portray Dionysus in a human-like form, but they also contain frightening demonstrations of his great power and influence over others. These dualities and contradictions are not only important to his identity in these works, but form the basis of

it. Percy and his friends never know what to expect from Mr. D, just as Pentheus is unable to gauge the strange foreigner Dionysus appears as in *The Bacchae*. This phenomenon is by no means unique, as authors all the way back to the works of Heraclitus in 500 BCE “tried to define the dual nature of Dionysus consciously in terms of pairs of opposites such as male/female, young/old, war/peace, wild/mild, day/night, and life/death.”⁸ Moreover, as the god of theater and the masks used in performances, changing or masking identities is an inherent characteristic of Dionysus.⁹ In many ways, he is constantly masking some part of his feelings or identity in these works. In both cases, he masks his true godly form to be amongst human companions, willingly in the case of Douris’s cup and less willingly in the case of Percy Jackson. In the latter, he masks his general frustration with the gods and heroes as apathy towards their actions and danger, while in the former, he more directly masks his anger with ignorant bliss as the maenads execute his violent revenge. This difference reflects the massive gap in time and audience of the works, with the youthful and educational angle of Percy Jackson contrasting the more mature warning against drunken madness of the myth of Pentheus. But both depictions involve suppression of his true feelings and being, something that manifests itself in negativity and aggression.

Beyond just having a conflicted identity, these two works demonstrate elements of an identity crisis for Dionysus, as he questions his place in the world, resulting in the aforementioned irritability and negativity.¹⁰ Given the mythological context, the cup demonstrates Dionysus’s uncertainty over whether he belongs amongst the gods or amongst men and how to respond when others question his godhood altogether. In Percy Jackson, his godhood is long established, but without access to his sacred wine, followers, or beloved wife Ariadne, he is forced to embrace his new identity as a camp counselor while defending the dignity of his true divine status. The resulting insecurities of these identity crises then form the basis of his

8. Albert Henrichs, “Loss of Self, Suffering, Violence: The Modern View of Dionysus from Nietzsche to Girard,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 88 (1984): 205–240, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/311453>.

9. Richard Seaford, “7 Theater,” in *Dionysos* (Routledge, 2006).

10. Kendra Cherry, *What Is an Identity Crisis?*, Verywell Mind, November 2022, <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-an-identity-crisis-2795948>.

violent and vindictive actions, much how political scientist Marium Akhtar explains “identity crisis as a catalyst for turning a deprived and vulnerable and insecure segment of the society into a violent group, performing terror activities.”¹¹ In the scene depicted on the cup, his insecurities about his godhood result in violent punishment for the “fighter against gods” Pentheus, quite literally destroying Pentheus’s identity to substantiate his own.¹² While Mr. D does not quite exhibit the same level of gruesome violence (likely due to its audience of middle grade readers), the taunting of the manticore is certainly a motivating factor in his destruction, and his desire to reward a (somewhat) pious supplicant (Percy) inspires his actions as well.

Despite the seemingly exaggerated and almost exuberant violence associated with Dionysus, both of these depictions actually show a more moderated and thoughtful god. Rather than mere frenzy or anger, the Dionysus of Douris’s cup and the myth of Pentheus exhibits a calm and, in his view, righteous form of justice in affirming his status as an Olympian. Given his childhood conflict and abuse, he views this protection of identity as necessary and justified. Unlike other gods, whose temples and methods of worship were well-established, he had to travel the world to spread news of his godhood, so he could not allow for doubters like Pentheus to undermine his efforts. In *The Titan’s Curse*, Mr. D acts to protect rather than to destroy, demonstrating an even more virtuous motivation. Moreover, both of these scenarios involve a more disconnected and even “remote” form of violence for Dionysus; in the myth of Pentheus, he influences the maenads to kill Pentheus, and in Percy Jackson, he inflicts madness and grows vines from across the country via an Iris message (effectively a godly phone call). And in both cases, he is seemingly sober, emphasizing his rational decision making and reflecting an artistic tradition in which he “is never shown in the act of consuming his own gift . . . wine.”¹³ Thus, René Girard’s claim that Dionysus’s essential

11. Marium Akhtar, *Role of Identity Crisis and Relative Deprivation As Catalysts of Political Violence and Terrorism*, 7th International RAIS Conference on Social Sciences, March 2018, <https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3152121>.

12. Euripides, *The Bacchae and Other Plays*.

13. Henrichs, *Dionysus*.

nature is as the “god of violence” breaks down in these depictions in exchange for a more complex, thoughtful god, one for whom defending identity comes before ritual madness.¹⁴

Ultimately, it is precisely this search for acceptance and fulfillment that makes the character of Dionysus so appealing across time, from ancient plays at the City Dionysia to the Dionysiac paintings of the Renaissance to the modernist writings of Nietzsche.¹⁵ More than just religious frenzy, he fights to protect his identity: that of a powerful god, but one who is also uniquely connected to the human condition. Perhaps Ellen Steiber puts in best in her essay on Mr. D when she says

There's a lovely symmetry in the myths of Dionysus. His mother, Semele, died because she wanted to see a god in his full glory. Her son allows humans to see the gods through him, and even to take the divine inside them. It's as if he's still working on his mother's problem, saying "Okay, maybe you can't look at the gods full on, but there *is* a way you can experience them, and I'll let you do it."¹⁶

By establishing this connection with humanity, Dionysus allows us to think of insecurity and identity not just as a source of weakness, but one of divine strength. Even while disconnected from the realities of human life, he can connect to our struggles, our contradictions, our plights. And if even a god can feel imposter syndrome sometimes, maybe it's not all that bad after all.

14. Henrichs, “Loss of Self, Suffering, Violence: The Modern View of Dionysus from Nietzsche to Girard.”

15. Henrichs.

16. Rick Riordan and Ellen Steiber, “Dionysus: Who Let Him Run a Summer Camp?,” in *Demigods and Monsters* (BenBella Books, Inc., 2013), 102–139.

Figures

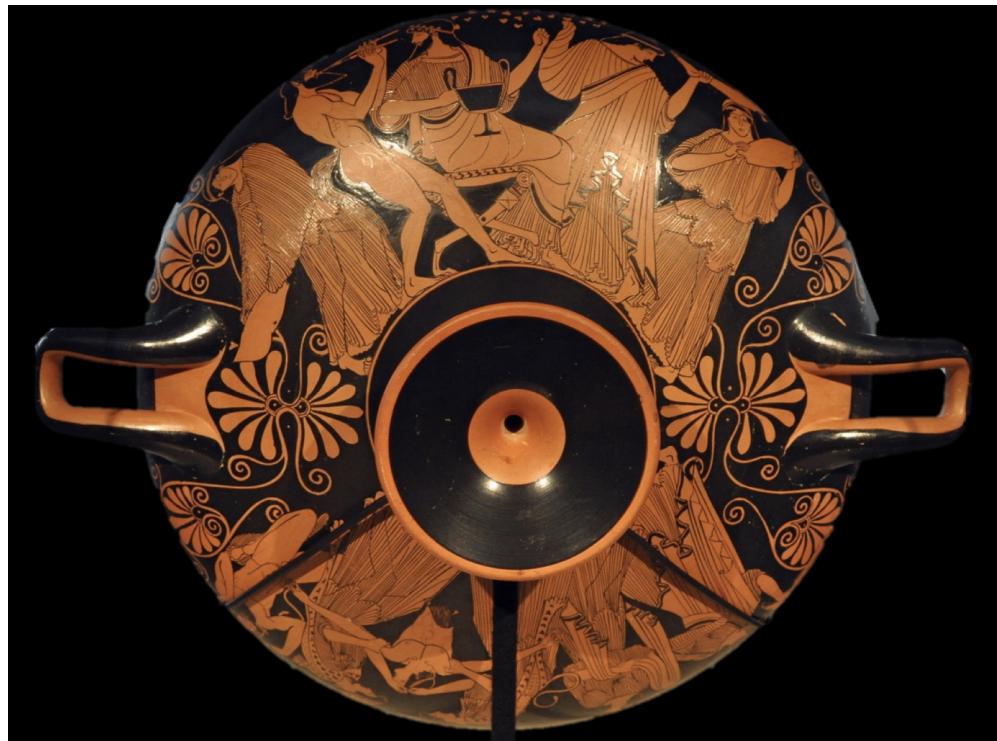


Figure 1: Red-Figure Cup Showing the Death of Pentheus (exterior) and a Maenad (interior), c. 480 BCE Douris (painter), Greek¹⁷



(a) Exterior



(b) Interior

17. Douris, *Red-Figure Cup Showing the Death of Pentheus (exterior) and a Maenad (interior)*, c. 480 B.C., Kimbell Art Museum, <https://kimbrellart.org/collection/ap-200002>



(c) Detailed view of Pentheus



(d) Detailed view of Dionysus

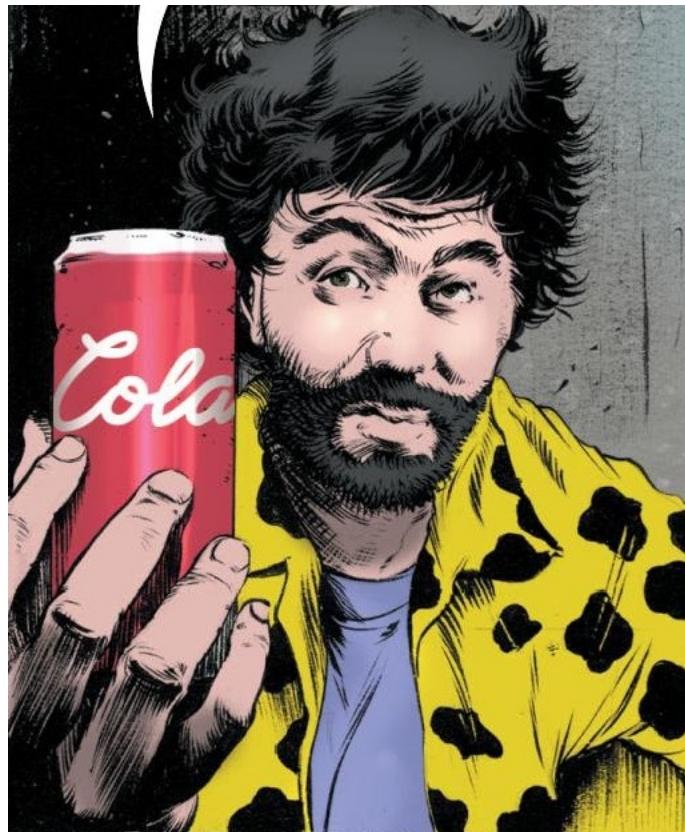


Figure 2: Mr. D from *The Lightning Thief: The Graphic Novel (Percy Jackson and the Olympians Series)*, 2010¹⁸

18. *Dionysus*, Riordan Wiki, <https://riordan.fandom.com/wiki/Dionysus>

Figure 3: *The Titan's Curse: The Graphic Novel* (p. 23)¹⁹

(a) Nico recognizes Mr. D (p. 24)

19. Rick Riordan et al., *The Titan's Curse: The Graphic Novel* (Disney-Hyperion Books, 2013)



(b) Mr. D ignores quest planning (p. 34)



(c) Percy makes an Iris call to Camp Half Blood (p. 97)



(d) Mr. D saves Percy and his friends (p. 98)



(e) Percy in awe of Mr. D's display of power (p. 99)

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