

GREEK & ROMAN STUDIES 209  
SELECT OLYMPIANS: *Dionysus: A Special Case*



Dionysus crowned with vine leaves and wearing a panther's skin. Detail of Attic red-figure amphora by the Kleophrades Painter, 500-490 B.C. Staatliche Antikensammlungen, Munich.

Assigned Reading: Chapter I.13, “Dionysus, Pan, Echo, & Narcissus”,  
in Mark Morford et al., *Classical Mythology* (11<sup>th</sup> ed.), pp. 300-333

What makes our final ‘select’ Olympian, Dionysus (also known as Bacchus), a ‘special case’? Is he not a member of the pantheon for the same reason other Olympians belong to it, namely, a family relationship to Zeus (who is his father)? Like any of his colleagues, does he not hold a particular ‘portfolio’ in Zeus’ government? (Dionysus is the god of the vine and, by extension, of drunkenness and ecstasy and—by further extension—of the theatre.) In these respects, he is no different from his fellow-gods, other than being, perhaps, more colourful. Not even Dionysus’ numerous inconsistencies set him apart, for the myths of other gods, too, manifest contradiction or paradox, as we have seen.

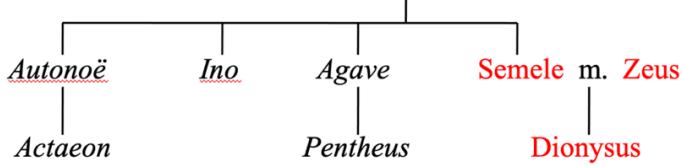
No, Dionysus is unique because his inconsistencies, his paradoxes are not simply the historical accidents of a tradition patched together from divergent sources. They are, rather, engineered into his myth from the start. He is—by his very role in the pantheon—the god who cannot be defined. He is divine but also one of us. He comes from afar, yet he was born in central Greece. He arrives late on the scene, though archaeology and palaeographic records demonstrate that his worship in Greece predates that of most Olympians. In story after story, he must fight for recognition, while in historical fact he was one of the most popular of Greek gods. He contains these opposing multitudes because that is what he stands for mythologically: contradiction, conflict and, always, surprise.

Going by the vast number of ancient vase-paintings and sculptures that portray his myth, Dionysus was, of all the Olympian deities, the most appealing to artists. It is not difficult to see why. Where other gods strike static poses, Dionysus is always in thrilling motion, often surrounded by his retinue of dancing Maenads (or Bacchae) and high-stepping satyrs. But there is, perhaps, a deeper reason for his popularity in both literature and the visual arts. Although he is a god, he was born human: therefore, we see ourselves—our origins as well as our aspirations—in portraits of this hybrid man-god.

Dionysus’ divinity comes from his father, Zeus, while his humanity derives from his mortal mother, Semele, a princess of Thebes. Thanks to the machinations of a jealous Hera, Semele gave premature birth to her child when she was struck by one of Zeus’ thunderbolts. The mother died (though, according to some myths, she was afterwards divinized). The fetus, however, was saved by being sewn into Zeus’ thigh where, after a period of gestation, it was ‘re-born’ as a full-fledged god (since now his father and, so to speak, his second mother—Zeus in both instances—were fully divine). We can piece together this bizarre story from one of Dionysus’ Homeric Hymns (#1 below) and Euripides’ *Bacchae* (#2), a tragedy about the fatal cost of doubting Dionysus’ godhead.

### Dionysus' Family Tree

*Cadmus (King of Thebes) m. Harmonia*



*(above) Dionysus is descended from Cadmus, King of Thebes,*

*and his wife Harmonia; this makes him the great-grandson of Aphrodite and Ares.*

Interestingly, Semele and two of her sisters had sons who, in one way or another, experienced sparagmos (i.e., being rent apart). Actaeon was torn to pieces by his hounds (cf. Morford, pp. 225ff.). Pentheus was dismembered by his own mother and the other women of Thebes (cf. Euripides' *Bacchae*; Morford, pp. 316f.). Dionysus himself was not only blasted from his mother's womb, but (according to the Zagreus myth; see Morford, p. 322) his infantile body-parts were devoured by the Titans.



#### **Dionysus the Twice-Born**

1. [Dionysus to the helmsman:] “I am loud-crying Dionysus, whom my mother, Semele, daughter of Cadmus, bore after uniting in love with Zeus.”

*Homeric Hymn 7 (To Dionysus)*

(Morford, p. 324)

2. [Chorus of Bacchae:] “[T]he lightning bolt flew from the hand of Zeus and she brought the child forth prematurely . . . . Immediately Zeus . . . took up the child and enclosed him in the secret recess of his thigh . . . and hid him from Hera thus in a second womb.”

Euripides, *Bacchae* 88f. (Morford, p. 306)

3. “At the proper time Zeus gave birth to Dionysus, whom he entrusted to Hermes . . . . Hermes took him to the nymphs of Asian Nysa.”

Pseudo-Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 3.26  
(not in Morford)

*(left) The Birth of Bacchus, with Juno & Jupiter in the clouds. Giulio Romano, c. 1530. Oil on panel. J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, California.*

Dionysus' hybrid lineage (part human, part divine) is, in itself, not unusual in Greek mythology. With good reason, Zeus is called ‘father of gods and men’, the latter being his various offspring by mortal women: Arcas (by Callisto), Epaphus (by Io), Perseus (by Danaë), to name a few. The sons of such unions are normally designated ‘heroes’; Hesiod habitually calls them ‘demi-gods’ (hemitheoi). Most of them grow up to establish royal dynasties. Their fates after death involve a transfer to the Elysian Fields or, occasionally, ‘catasterism’ (being transformed into a constellation). Rarely, as in the case of Heracles, they are divinized when they die. Dionysus, however, is unique in having been ‘re-born’ as a god. Still, his myths will not let him forget his former, human identity: wherever he goes, he must fight for recognition and the worship that is his due. His status in actual religious cult was a different matter: Dionysus was honoured as the object of several ‘mysteries’, such as those of Eleusis and Orpheus, precisely because in achieving divinity he had set a precedent that his human worshippers might hope to follow.



(above) The 'Second' Birth of Dionysus. Hera (with sceptre) tries to intercept the new-born child (circled) as he emerges from Zeus' thigh, while others observe (clockwise from lower left): Nysan nymphs, Aphrodite (with Eros), Pan, Apollo (with laurel branch), and Hermes (with caduceus). Detail of Apulian red-figure volute krater, c. 410 B.C. Museo Nazionale Archeologico, Taranto, Italy.



(above and below) The whole sequence of Dionysus' birth-myth is depicted on the lid of a Roman marble sarcophagus (mid-2<sup>nd</sup> cent. A.D., now in the Walters Museum, Baltimore). (left to right above) The fetus is saved from Semele's womb; it is sewn into Zeus' thigh; upon Dionysus' rebirth, he is taken by Hermes (notice the figure in winged sandals at centre) to the nymphs of Nysa, where he is raised to become the adult companion of Pan in the wilderness. The Dionysus myth appears with some frequency in the funerary art of Late Antiquity, symbolic as it is of rebirth and apotheosis. The scene on the sarcophagus itself (see Morford, p. 302) is also popular in this context: the triumphant return of Dionysus from Nysa (variously located in Asia Minor, Arabia, India, or the Far East) to his homeland of Greece, there to reclaim his birthright.



### **The Myth of Arrival**

An inherent element of Dionysus' myth is his constant mobility, as has already been mentioned. He is a restless, energetic god. More than that, he is a god of arrivals—he appears to come from elsewhere, out of the blue, by surprise. Having spent his childhood far from Greece in the dells of Nysa, when Dionysus returns as an adult, he is unrecognized by his fellow-Greeks. Clothed in the exotic garb of the East and accompanied by his band of wild devotees (Maenads or Bacchae), he seems a foreigner as well as a late-comer. Historically, in fact, Dionysus' cult was indigenous to the Aegean basin from as early as there are records to prove it (Linear B tablets of the second millennium B.C., where his name appears as Di-wo-nu-so). It could be argued that, in reality, he is older and more 'native' than many of his fellow-Olympians.

4. [Dionysus speaking:] “I left the fertile plains of gold in Lydia and Phrygia and made my way across the sunny plateaus of Persia, the walled towns of Bactria, the grim land of the Medes, rich Arabia, and the entire coast of Asia Minor . . . After having led my Bacchic dance and established my mysteries in these places, I have come to this city of the Hellenes . . .”

Euripides, *Bacchae* 1ff. (Morford, p. 303)



*The Triumph of Dionysus. The god, on a chariot pulled by panthers, holds a thyrsus. The thyrsus was a staff tipped with a pine-cone, often seen in the hands of Bacchus or his Bacchic followers. Perhaps it was a phallic symbol of some kind. Mosaic from the House of Virgil at Sousse, Tunisia, 3<sup>rd</sup> cent. A.D.*

### **The Myth of Resistance**

5. [Pentheus speaking:] “That fellow . . . claims that Dionysus is a god, who was once sewn up in the thigh of Zeus, when he was in fact destroyed by the fiery blast of lightning along with his mother, because she lied and said that Zeus had been her husband.” Euripides, *op. cit.* (Morford, p. 308)

In Euripides' play, Pentheus, king of Thebes, refuses to acknowledge Dionysus' divinity. This is an instance of the artificial 'myth of resistance' that is built into the god's story; historically, the cult of Dionysus was immensely popular. Pentheus' resistance, however, is important to the meaning of the tale, which concerns a healthy attitude towards everything Dionysus represents. Although the king possesses many fine virtues (he is not a tyrant; he wants to protect his city from harm), he possesses

them to a fault. His adherence to social proprieties (e.g., traditional gender roles) is stifling; his teetotalling abstention from the god's ecstatic gifts leaves him unprepared for their effects once they overcome him anyway; his rigid morality masks a prurient voyeurism. Pentheus is not resisting a mere human, as he thinks; his quarrel is with a natural force much larger than himself. He is at war with a god and with his own biological and psychological impulses.

### **The Joys of Serving Dionysus Voluntarily**

For a proper understanding of Euripides' tragedy, it is important to note that two groups of Bacchae (female followers of the god) are distinguished in the play. The first group comprises the Chorus, from which the play (as was customary) takes its name: stage-players dressed in the flowing garments of Maenads, carrying their thyrsi as props, who express a joyous ecstasy in the service of the god. After all, we would be surprised to hear actors pronouncing criticism of Dionysus, the divine patron of their craft. On the contrary, these characters, having devoted themselves without inhibition to Bacchus, sing his praises:

6. [Chorus of Bacchae:] "Run, run, Bacchae, bringing the roaring god, Dionysus, son of a god, out of the Phrygian mountains to the spacious streets of Hellas."                      *Ibid.* (Morford, p. 306)

7. [Chorus of Bacchae:] "Every Bacchanal runs and leaps in joy, just like a foal that frisks beside her mother in the pasture."                      *Ibid.* (Morford, p. 306)



Two views of the Attic red-figure amphora by the Kleophrades Painter, c. 500-490 B.C. (left) A satyr (half-goat, half-man) and two Maenads; (right) Dionysus, holding a kantharos (drinking cup), with two more Maenads. Antikensammlungen, Munich.

### **The Dangers of Being Overcome by Dionysus**

The second group of Bacchae in Euripides' play are the women of Thebes, whom we do not meet (except for Agave, Pentheus' mother, in the very last scene). These ladies, citizens of a city whose king has forbidden the observance of Dionysus' rites, are utterly unprepared for the revolution that the god brings to their way of life. Their first taste of freedom, as they cavort in the mountainous wilderness, soon turns to a taste for blood, according to a Messenger's report:

8. [Messenger reporting the actions of the Theban woman whose punishment for resisting Dionysus is to be bewitched into his service:] “Like a hostile army they descended upon the villages . . . When the Bacchae hurled the thyrsus from their hands they inflicted wounds on many. Women routed men . . .”

*Ibid.* (Morford, p. 313)

#### **Dismemberment (Sparagmos)**

9. [Messenger:] “Agave wrenched Pentheus’ arm out of his shoulder . . . From the other side, Ino clawed and tore at his flesh, and Autonoe and the whole pack converged on him.”

*Ibid.* (Morford, p. 318)

*The most shocking detail of the Messenger’s breathless account at the play’s end is the sparagmos in which the Theban women have engaged. In their frenzied trance, they turned on their own king and tore him limb from limb. Pentheus had gone out to witness for himself the orgies that he decried, but he fell victim to the hallucinations of his own mother and aunts, who mistook him for a wild animal. Pentheus, who would not integrate the Dionysian side of human nature with his own personality, fittingly suffered the ultimate dis-integration.*

*Members of Euripides’ audience would not have observed this scene actually played out before them (rather, it is reported). Vase painters, though, supplied the image in gory detail. A vivid example may be seen in Morford (p. 317); a similar representation is given below, from the lid of a lekanis from the fifth century B.C. If such a scene seems incongruous for the vessel that it is decorating (a bowl intended to hold face powder and other cosmetics), we should recall that all myths, in some fashion, are about the struggle between cosmos (order) and disarray.*



Pentheus is torn apart by his mother and aunt, while Dionysus and two Bacchae observe. Lid of an Attic red-figure lekanis (cosmetics bowl), c. 450-425 B.C. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

#### **A DIFFERENT MYTH**

*As bizarre as some of the details of Dionysus’ ‘mainstream’ myth may seem (as represented in the Homeric Hymns and Attic tragedy in particular), they are much less exotic than the god’s ‘underground’ tradition in the mystery cults of Demeter and Orpheus (#10). Initiates at Eleusis, for example, celebrated a figure named Iacchus, probably a cult title of Dionysus in his role as mystic leader of the annual*

*nocturnal procession from Athens to Eleusis. As such, he had his own local mythology and a genealogy that rendered him not the son of Semele but of either Demeter or Persephone.*

*In the Orphic cult, another set of mysteries that prepared its initiates for the afterlife, Dionysus was known as Zagreus, offspring of the Queen of the Underworld who had conceived him when Zeus mated with her in the form of a serpent (#11 & 12). His grotesque fate at the hands of the Titans (#13) had profound implications for the human race (#14).*



### **Two Dionysi?**

10. “Some writers of myths relate that there was another Dionysus, born much earlier in time . . . According to them, this Dionysus . . . was the son of Zeus and Persephone. His birth [genesis], sacrifices, and honours are celebrated by night and in secret . . . He excelled in shrewdness [anchinoia] and was the first to yoke oxen, thus effecting the sowing of seed, for which reason they represent him as wearing a horn. A second Dionysus was born more recently of Semele . . . The two Dionysi were thus born of one father but of two mothers. The younger one inherited the deeds of the older, and so people of later times, being unaware of the truth and deceived because of the identity of their names, thought there had been but one Dionysus.” Diodorus Siculus, *Library*

4.4.1ff. (1<sup>st</sup> cent. B.C.)

(left) *Iacchus (=Dionysus?) as torch-bearing leader of the initiates to Demeter's shrine at Eleusis. Detail of the Ninnion Tablet, a votive plaque depicting moments from the annual Eleusinian Mysteries; 4<sup>th</sup> cent. B.C. National Archaeological Museum, Athens.*

### **Zagreus**

11. “Semele awaited a more brilliant union [than the marriages of her sisters], for Zeus who rules on high intended to make a new Dionysus grow up, a bull-shaped copy of the older Dionysus, since he thought with regret of the ill-fated Zagreus. This was a son born to Zeus in the serpent-bed by Persephone, consort of the black-robed king of the underworld.”

Nonnus, *Dionysiaca* 5.562 ff.  
(5<sup>th</sup> cent. A.D.; not in Morford)

(right) *Persephone nursing bull-headed Zagreus? A scene from the Orphic myth of Dionysus/Zagreus.*  
*Red-figure vase painting, 4<sup>th</sup> cent. B.C.*



### *Orphic Dionysus*

12. “I invoke Dionysus, loud-roaring [*eribromos*], *Evoē*-shouting, / primeval [*protogonos*], double-natured [*diphyēs*], thrice-born [*trigonos*], Bacchic lord, / savage, ineffable [*arrhētos*], obscure, twin-horned [*dikerōs*], two-shaped [*dimorphos*], / ivy-covered, bull-faced [*taurōpos*], warlike [*arēios*], howling [*euīos*], pure [*hagnos*], / eater of raw flesh [*ōmadios*], triennial [*trietēs*], cluster-bearing [*botryotrophos*], foliage-wrapped [*ernesipeplos*]; / O counsellor of much wisdom [*eubouleus*, *polyboulos*], child of Zeus and Persephone, / born of their secret bed, immortal spirit [*daimōn*]: / Hear, O blessed one, my voice, / sweetly, kindly breathe upon me, / you who possess a gracious heart, in the company of your well-girdled nursemaids.”      *Orphic Hymn 30* (4<sup>th</sup> cent. B.C.?)

### *The God's Own Dismemberment*

13. “The [Orphic] mysteries of Dionysus are wholly inhuman [*apanthrōpa*]; for while he was still a child . . . the Titans came upon him by stealth and, beguiling him with childish toys, tore him limb from limb . . . . [They] threw the limbs of Dionysus into a cauldron, boiled them down, fixed them on spits and held them over the fire. But Zeus . . . blasted the Titans with his thunderbolt and entrusted the limbs of Dionysus to his son Apollo for burial, who laid the mutilated corpse to rest on Mount Parnassos.”    Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Greeks 2* (Christian, 3<sup>rd</sup> cent. A.D.)

### *Humanity's Dual Nature*

14. “They say that through Hera's treachery, the Titans tore Dionysus to pieces and ate his flesh. Zeus, being angry at this, struck the Titans with thunderbolts, and from the soot of the vapors that arose came the matter out of which humanity emerged . . . . Our bodies are Dionysiac. We are, indeed, part of Dionysus if we are composed from the soot of the Titans who ate Dionysus' flesh.”

Olympiodorus of Alexandria (or Damascius?),  
*Commentary on Plato's Phaedo* (6<sup>th</sup> cent. A.D.)