



Dionysus: The Dual God

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Abstract: The ancient god Dionysus held a unique position in the Greco-Roman pantheon. As the god of wine, religious ecstasy, and theater, he represented a much wider and more diverse sphere of influence than the rest of the ancient gods. Due to this and other facets of his mythology, Dionysus had a much closer relationship with humanity than other gods. His presence was a staple in ancient Greek and Roman culture, and worshipping him was a much more personal endeavor than the worship of other gods. In my research on Dionysus, I examined two plays that opened in the same year, 405 BC, both featuring the god as a main character. These were *The Frogs* by Aristophanes and the *Bacchae* by Euripides. In these plays, Dionysus is presented once as a tragic figure and once a comedic figure. I hypothesize that the cultural context of the Peloponnesian War explains why both characterizations existed simultaneously in the Athenian psyche. Going forward, I’d like to research more instances in which the two sides of Dionysus overlap, and what these overlaps might signal about society at those times.

Introduction

The ancient Greeks and Romans worshipped an entire pantheon of gods, each of whom held influence over one or two domains. For example, Zeus was the god of thunder. Athena was the goddess of wisdom and strategy. It was a straightforward system – there was a different god to pray to for anything one could pray about. However, there was one striking exception to this rule. Dionysus, as he was known to the Greeks (Bacchus to the Romans), was the god of wine, revelry, religious ecstasy, madness, and theater. While these things are tangentially related, this wide sphere of influence is unique among the Greco-Roman gods. Due partially to his diverse interests, Bacchus was also the god most directly relevant to humanity. He was the only Olympian to be born from a human mother. Additionally, during Bacchic rituals the god would literally become one with his human worshippers. Things like madness or ecstasy were much deeper human concerns than, say, thunder. Bacchus’ relationship with humanity throughout history has always fascinated me. Across history, he has been portrayed as both a positive and a negative influence, a hero and a villain. In my research, I explored one particular instance where both sides of the god met in literature.

Background

For the purposes of this research, I would like to limit my analysis to a very specific moment in history. In 405 BC, Athens, Greece was under attack from Sparta in an intense battle called the Peloponnesian War. This was the 24th year of the war, and Athens was beginning lose. Despite the war, Athens held an annual theater festival called the Dionysia. Two plays were presented at this Dionysia that had a particular relationship: *The Bacchae* by Euripides and *The Frogs* by Aristophanes. Dionysus starred in both of these plays. In *The Frogs* he is a comedic figure, a buffoon bumbling around the Underworld until he sobers up to judge an important contest. However, in *The Bacchae,* he is a tragic figure, a vengeful god who drags people mercilessly either to his cult or to their deaths. The fact that Dionysus can exist as both a tragic and comedic figure fascinates me. In this particular case, I theorize that these two presentations of Dionysus are heavily influenced by the Peloponnesian war. Dionysus’s duality as a comic and tragic figure speaks to the Athenian mindset of the time, and I would like to figure out what it is saying.

The Frogs

Aristophanes, the author of *The Frogs,* was an urban playwright living in Athens - the center of the civilized world. His play primarily served as an advocacy piece for the importance of theater. The first half of *The Frogs* mostly plays to very base humor, to entertain the Greek plebeians. Dionysus as the god of theater mourns the death of Euripides, whom he saw as the greatest author. He decides to travel to the Underworld to bring Euripides back from the dead, in effect saving theater. Through this process he embarrasses himself in a number of ways, acting extremely cowardly. However, once he reaches the Underworld, he comes into his own and becomes the arbiter of a theater competition between Euripides and Aeschylus. He eventually chooses to bring back Aeschylus instead, because his theatrical prowess will “save Athens,” from the Spartan commander Alcibiades (Dillon, Aristophanes).

Of the two theatrical genres of ancient Athens, comedy was the much more optimistic one. Comedic plays then and now unify the audience, and end on a tone that is hopeful for the future. In my screenwriting class, we discussed how the comedic genre serves as a reinforcement of a society’s morals. The “bad guy” is bad because he does not follow the common morality or work for the common good, and he is defeated by a unified society. This idea plays heavily into *The Frogs.* Dionysus is the god of the polis (Greek for the city-state), of the unified community. In *The Frogs* he mediates a heated debate. Debate was a tradition and a process very dear to the ancient Athenians. Thus Dionysus is upholding Athenian democracy, reinforcing the morals of the time (Redfield). He was also the god of theater, and hoped to save Athens through theater. The Spartans, by contrast, put no stock in the arts. In *The Frogs,* Dionysus is portrayed as both a member of and a symbol for the polis*,* because Aristophanes saw him as a vessel for the salvation of Athens.

The Bacchae

Euripides, the author of the *Bacchae,* wrote the play while living outside of Athens. In Macedonia, his could have observed the savagery of the Dionysian cults he included in his play. In the *Bacchae,* Dionysus and his wild cult of women are threatening the city-state of Thebes. Dionysus wants to avenge his human mother, who is rumored in Thebes to have lied about his parentage. The king of Thebes, Pentheus, wants to protect his city from the destructive cult. He captures Bacchus, not knowing the god’s true nature, and interrogates him about the women of the cult, called the Bacchae. These frantic women are blissfully ripping live animals apart and kidnapping babies. Eventually, Dionysus exerts his godly influence over Pentheus, convincing him to witness this revelry first hand. The Bacchae, whose members include Pentheus’ own mother, rip him to pieces. When his mother returns to Thebes, she realizes what she has done and exiles herself. Dionysus destroys the city.

Clearly, this portrayal of Dionysus includes none of the slapstick, comedic tone of *The Frogs.* Instead, the *Bacchae* is definitively a tragedy. Ancient tragedies are characterized by the way in which they isolate characters, exploring their faults and the causes of their downfalls. Tragedies like the *Bacchae* have a very negative outlook on life. The worldview that Euripides presents is quite hopeless. There is nothing anyone could have done against the oncoming Bacchus; Thebes’ fate was already sealed. They could not stop the overwhelming power of Dionysus. I think that this portrayal of an unstoppable onslaught represents Sparta’s inevitable conquest of Athens in the Peloponnesian War. The savagery that Euripides portrays in the Bacchae mirrors that of the ruthless Spartan warriors. The loss of self in Dionysus’ cult is similar to that of the Spartan ranks, warriors who were known for their soulless upbringing and training. Through my research I have concluded that the portrayal of Dionysus in the *Bacchae* and in *The Frog* represents the different outlooks of Athenians as Sparta threatened to overwhelm their polis.

In what other instances do we see the two natures of Dionysus collide, and do these collisions prophesy incoming cultural shifts?

Methods

In the research I have done so far, I have analyzed the dual nature of Dionysus in the context of 405 BC Athens, suffering under impending defeat from Sparta. However, this is just one brief snapshot of time in the ancient world, one brief look at a god who was worshipped for centuries. In the future, I hope to extend my research to encompass other authors, other periods of time, and other treatments of this many-faceted god. For example, Charles Segal lists three fragmented works from the ancient Mediterranean which also present a comedic Dionysus: *Taxarchoi* by Eupolis, *Adonis* by Platon, and *Dionysalexandros* by an unknown author. However, many contemporaneous myths of the time portrayed Bacchus as a villain. Renaissance art featured a resurgence of interest in the ancient gods, and Dionysus was characterized as both a fat oaf and a heroic savior in this time period. I hope to track the history of these two representations and discover another case like the 405 BC Dionysia where they intersected.

Expected Results/Budget

I expect that my findings, if conclusive, would be published in an article in a journal such as *Transactions of the American Philological Association* or *The Classical Review.* These and similar journals provided many of the articles that built the foundation for my research, so my findings would find an interested and informed audience there. My journal article would articulate my theory that when two differing portrayals of Dionysus collide, this collision warns of an incoming cultural shift.

Conclusion

I find this research to be a worthy study because it offers an examination of ancient cultures and psyches through a new lens – the portrayal of Dionysus. It is not a coincidence that the two Dionysuses, one a comic figure and one a tragic figure, came together in 405 BC Athens. The impact of the Peloponnesian War on *The Frogs* and the *Bacchae* is clear, especially when examining Dionysus’ relationship to the polis in each of these plays. In *The Frogs,* a comedy, Dionysus can save theater and thus save Athens. In the tragedy of the *Bacchae,* the interminable force of Dionysus spells downfall and destruction for Thebes. Just like these two plays speak to Athenian attitudes about the ongoing war, I believe that examining other portrayals of Dionysus will inform us about other peoples across history.

Budget

It is difficult to articulate the budget that I need for this project, since it is entirely based on analysis of pre-existing art and writing. The biggest cost that my further research would incur would be my own personal time, spent seeking out and exploring other examples of this phenomenon. Many museums do not have pay walls to view their standing collections online, so hopefully I can explore the artistic side of my research online. Other ancient sources fall within Fair Use laws, so many of them are available on the internet as well, if not in a library. The biggest issue I will run into in my further research is finding the fragments of ancient writings which depict Dionysus as a comedic figure. The *Taxiarchoi* by Eupolis is one example of an excerpt which is cited in many places but never included. I am unable to even find this particular example behind a pay wall, so tracking down such fragments of texts will be a large expense of time, effort, and potentially money.

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