

Dionysus: Dual-natured God of the Earth

Imagine living in ancient Greece, a world far less sophisticated and secure than our own. Your enemies come not just in the form of the warriors who occasionally attack from a neighboring island but also from natural phenomena that your culture hasn't the science to explain or defend against: earthquakes, magma-spewing volcanoes, horrible storms, massive waves, and lightning from the sky. Imagine how vulnerable you would feel! Now imagine that there is a potion you can drink that not only eases your fears and rouses your courage, but also allows you to find hope and joy in this dark world and encourages you to create art to examine and improve it. Would you take the potion? Most ancient Greeks did. It is called wine, and to ensure that there was always an ample supply, they also worshipped Dionysus: God of the Vine. Later adopted by the Romans, he was called Bacchus (Zimmerman 40). The only Olympian god with a mortal parent, Dionysus spent much of his time on earth. He was far more friendly to mortals than most of his Olympian counterparts, and at harvest time he was known as "the joy-god Dionysus, the pure star/That shines amid the gathering of the fruit" (Hamilton 50). But, just as the wine that inspires can also make mortals shamefully drunk, Dionysus had a darker side, and in winter when the grape vines withered and died, the earth felt his sorrow. The myths of Dionysus illustrate many common themes in Greek mythology, and not all of them are joyful. In the story of his mother, Semele, we see that love between a god and a mortal seldom succeeds. His involvement in the stories of Midas and Pentheus show how pride and arrogance are punished. Finally, his importance as dual-natured god of earth illustrates that the morality of ancient Greece is quite different than the modern Judeo-Christian concept of morality. Although he has been called "the party god" because he brought much joy to mortals, the myths of Dionysus illustrate some unhappy themes.

Love between gods and mortals seldom works out. The story of how Dionysus came to be clearly illustrates this. Semele was one of many mortal girls that Zeus fell in love with. He visited her, and she felt his presence, but she did not see him, for mortals cannot survive the visual splendor of a god. Semele suspected that this enchanted lover was a god, and they conceived a child, but she still wasn't sure which god was the father of that child. Meanwhile, Hera (Zeus's rightfully jealous and often betrayed wife on Olympus) heard about the affair, and she visited Semele in the form of a trusted friend. Hera, in disguise, planted the idea that Semele ought to find out exactly who was the father of her child and suggested a strategy for doing so. The next time Semele felt she was in the presence of the mysterious god, she asked him for a favor. Because Zeus was so madly in love with her, he swore by the river Styx that he would grant whatever she wished, and she immediately asked to see him in all his godly splendor. Since not even a god can break an oath sworn on the Styx, Zeus had to comply. When he did so, Semele was consumed by fire and lightning (Skidmore). From the ashes, however, Zeus rescued the child and hid it within his own side until it was time for it to be born. The child was Dionysus, and Zeus had Hermes deliver the infant to the Hyades, nymphs who cared for

and raised him on earth, far from the wrath of Hera. Although this is supposedly a “love story,” the fact that Semele was first enchanted and used by Zeus, then fooled by Hera, and finally destroyed by fire indicates that love between mortals and gods is just not meant to be (Hamilton 56). As is usually the case, there is no consequence for the gods, but the mortals are destroyed or have to suffer unfair consequences like Semele did. But without this poor mortal, the myths of Dionysus would never have illustrated any other common themes in mythology, which, as it happens, they do.

The Gods punish pride and arrogance. There are two myths involving Dionysus in which this is the case. The first picks up where the story of his birth leaves off. After being raised by the Hyades, Dionysus was placed in the care of a lesser earth god named Silenus, who was fun-loving but irresponsible (Evans 18). They wandered the world making merry, often accompanied by satyrs, horny little horse-men, and Maenads, women known for their wild behavior, who would drink and dance themselves into strange trances and sometimes kill animals barehanded (Zimmerman 158). The satyrs knew the secret of making wine from grapes, and Dionysus taught this skill wherever he went, gaining many followers in the process. Because his celebrations (sometimes called Bacchanals, a variation on his Roman name) involved joyous singing and dancing, when Dionysus and his followers arrived in Thebes, they were taken captive by his cousin Pentheus, who did not know that the child of Semele had been saved and who had no clue that Dionysus was a god. The blind prophet Teirisius warned Pentheus that his captive was a god, but Pentheus spoke roughly to Dionysus and ordered him bound and imprisoned. Of course, no prison could hold him or his followers, and even Pentheus’s mother joined the Maenads as they danced away to the hills. Pentheus and his guards pursued them, and this was when Dionysus showed his dark side. He drove his followers to madness, and the women thought Pentheus was a wild beast, so they rushed to destroy him. He was torn to shreds, his mother one of the first to attack. “As they fell upon him, he knew that he had fought against a god and must pay with his life” (Hamilton 60). This is one example of how the gods, even the friendly ones, punish pride and arrogance, destroying those foolish enough to defy them.

The story of King Midas also illustrates this theme, although Dionysus showed more compassion this time. Midas was the less-than-intelligent king of Phrygia, and one day a very intoxicated Silenus staggered into his court and fell asleep in a rose garden. As a joke, Midas’s servants garlanded the drunken fellow with flowers and delivered him to the king. Midas welcomed the visitor and took care of him until he was able to make his way back to his train of followers, led by Dionysus. In appreciation of Midas’s kindness, Dionysus said he would grant Midas a wish. The king, thinking himself worthy of the finest gift and too dumb to think ahead, wished that all he touched would turn to gold. His food turned to gold before he could swallow it, and his daughter turned to a golden statue when he hugged her. What he thought would be a great gift had tragic consequences, all because his pride (and greed) clouded his thinking. The king begged Dionysus to remove the gift, and the god relented, telling Midas to wash in the river Pactolus. He did so, and the “gift” was removed. (Gold was later discovered in the sands of the river.) Although Dionysus was compassionate towards Midas and the punishment served to teach him a lesson, this myth still illustrates that pride and arrogance before the gods will always lead to trouble.

A final theme that the myth of Dionysus illustrates clearly is that what is considered moral and correct in classical mythology is not the same as our modern Judeo-Christian morality. Although the ancient Greeks were aware that too much wine could lead to drunken and shameful behavior, they still revered the God of Wine and counted him (along with Demeter, goddess of the harvest) as one of two “great gods of earth” (Hamilton 48). According to early sources, Dionysus has dark, curly hair, red lips, and sparkling eyes (Evans 54). He is sometimes pictured with a thick (god-like) beard and carrying a wand entwined with vine leaves (*Those Fabulous Folks on Mount Olympus*). Descriptions from later Roman times when he was known as Bacchus, however, indicate that he was grossly fat and wallowing in debauchery as he traveled the country with his Bacchantes, priestesses of his cult of wine (Pontikis). This is not the sort of appearance and behavior that is honored in the modern world. We tend to admire healthy bodies, strong physiques, and monogamous marriages. Also, the fact that one of his powers was to entrance mortals and drive them to rip animals limb from limb with their bare hands would not earn Dionysus the same approval now as it did from the ancient myth makers. Modern culture considers such behavior barbaric, and it would never likely be praised as it was in ancient Greece and Rome. The ancients knew that wine could bring courage and joy as well as drunkenness and debauchery, and for that reason they gave Dionysus a dual nature. On one hand, he was the god of wine, agriculture, and natural fertility, as well as the patron god of the Greek stage. On the other, he represents the strangeness of mysterious religions, ecstasy, and intoxication (“Dionysus”). So, while modern readers can appreciate him as a god who brings joy, the darker side of his personality is not as readily accepted.

It is not difficult to see why the ancient Greeks and Romans worshipped Dionysus. Although they lived in a world very different than our own, they shared many of our sensibilities. That comes through in the themes illustrated by the myths of Dionysus. In the story of his birth, we see that the strange love between gods and mortals seldom works out. His adventures with Pentheus and Midas remind us of the dangers of pride and arrogance. Finally, the sense of morality he represents is one we partly understand but partly shun in modern society, so while he illustrates many of the beliefs and emotions we share with the ancient myth makers, he also shows how far we have come.

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