

Myths of Male Fertility

LW4U1 - GRADE 12 CLASSICAL CIVILIZATION - MR. A. WITTMANN

UNIT 2 - LECTURE 7



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Dionysus / Bacchus

- ◆ God of wine, theatre, reproductive force, male fertility
- ◆ Associated with nature & the irrational, chaotic
- ◆ Panthers, leopards, pine cones, thyrsus, phallus
- ◆ Mythic biography pieced together from various sources
- ◆ Most important of which is Euripides' Bacchae

Birth and Early Youth

- ◆ Zeus + Semelê (Princess of Thebes)
- ◆ Hera: "Let this 'Zeus' come to you as he does to his wife Hera."
- ◆ Semelê is burned to ash
- ◆ Unborn infant son, Dionysus saved and sewed into Zeus's thigh (twice born)
- ◆ Dionysus given to Ino, sister of Semelê queen of Orchomenus (another city in Boeotia)
- ◆ Dionysus disguised as a girl
- ◆ Hera drives Ino and King Athamas insane – they kill their own children
- ◆ Zeus changes Dionysus into a goat & given to the nymphs of Nysa
- ◆ Dionysus driven mad by his own wine and begins his wanderings
- ◆ Dionysus now leads his Bacchae (maenads) & satyrs



Wanderings of Dionysus

- ◆ Egypt, Syria, and Phrygia
- ◆ In Phrygia, meets Mother Earth goddess Cybelê (Greek Rhea)
- ◆ Human followers with their tambourines and flutes and feminine dress
- ◆ Returns west on his chariot drawn by panthers
- ◆ Spreads his cult around Greece but meets resistance & destroys all who oppose



Resistance to the God

- ◆ Best known story of resistance to the Dionysus told by Eurípides in his tragedy, the Bacchae
- ◆ Dionysus in Thebes to spread his cult and to punish the blaspheme against his mother, Semelê, by her sisters Antonoë and Agavê
- ◆ Women and others flee to the mountains
- ◆ King Pentheus opposes the cult
- ◆ Pentheus interrogates Dionysus, in disguise
- ◆ Dionysus destroys palace & returns to the mountains

Resistance to the God (continued)

- ◆ A report comes in about miracles and wonders being performed in the mountains by the Maenads
- ◆ Pentheus now wants to see the “orgies” for himself
- ◆ Pentheus disguises as a woman and killed by the Bacchantes
- ◆ He was pulled down from a tree and torn to pieces
- ◆ His own mother, Agavê, pulled off his head
- ◆ Agavê comes on stage with the head on her thyrsus and realizes what she has done



Eastern Origins?

- ◆ Dionysos = son of Nysa (in Asia Minor)
- ◆ From Thrace or Phrygia or Lydia
- ◆ Semelê = Zemelô
- ◆ Thyrsus = Hittite tuwarsa (vine) ?
- ◆ Dionysus = Lydian bakivali (Bacchus)?
- ◆ Always depicted as a new and foreign god but he's in Homer and Linear B tablets in relation to viticulture
- ◆ Worshiped by Mycenaeans (c. 1500–1100 BC)

Fertility

- ◆ Deeper meaning begins with the fact he is god of fertility, preserved in epithets...
 - ◆ he of the trees, god of blossoms, god of moisture
- ◆ A dying fertility god, like Dumuzi or Osiris
- ◆ Perhaps originally the husband/son of Semelê (Zemelô)
- ◆ Always depicted as a new and foreign god
- ◆ Reflects perhaps Greek aversion to violence and irrationality

Cult of Dionysus

- ◆ Associated with Roman Liber
- ◆ Different from other cults, appealed especially to women
- ◆ Reflection of and reaction to their submissive social role?
- ◆ Olympians remote and known through their external works
- ◆ Dionysus presence direct and personal = “the god who comes”
- ◆ Dionysus eventually tamed and give a civic role
- ◆ Romans suppressed it until 186 BC (Bacchanalia)



God of the Theatre

- ◆ Pisistratus (530 BC) expanded the old Dionysus rural festival and est. urban festival the dêmos of Athens
- ◆ Citywide “drinking party” to celebrate the new year
- ◆ Combined elements both of the rational (Apollo) and the irrational (Dionysus)
- ◆ Communal vicarious experience of dark psychological & social emotions

THE END