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# 1 The Transformations of Dionysus: Chasing the Ancient God of Wine through History

**Abstract** Around the beginning of Christian time, the philosopher Plutarch let it be known in his *Moralia* that the gods of old were dying and defeated. However, the pagan gods were never that easy to kill, and throughout history, myths of their survival appear in texts and images depicting them as revenants hiding in cultures not their own, affecting them in strange and intoxicating ways. One such is Bacchus-Dionysus, the ancient reveler, god of wine. Based on Ernst R. Curtius's theory of the existence of a literary continuity, connecting the age of Antiquity with those that follow it, this study traces the establishment and development of the motif of an appearing Dionysus, as it travels through texts from Antiquity and into the present.

**Keywords:** Comparative Motif Study, Myths of Antiquity, Literary Continuity, Reception Studies, Gods in Exile

## 1. Introduction

A golden thread is wound through European history, carrying parts of the culture and ideas of Antiquity with it, ensuring that though much may be forgotten, not all is lost. This is the message of *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* from 1948, philologist Ernst R. Curtius's comparative study on the reception and survival of Greek and Roman literature into the Middle Ages – a survival he theorizes has continued up to at least the works of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (Curtius 2013: 16). Curtius presents as proof of this common European continuity a series of examples of *literary constants*: metaphors, mannerisms, rhetorical figures, and other literary phenomena, which have their root in Antiquity but have lived on in later literatures where they have been developed and transformed. An important point in *European Literature* is that to understand a historical period, it is necessary to see it in the context of its continuity, which includes both what came before it and what has come after (383). Following this perspective, a literary text (or really, any text) can be understood as a combination of two concepts: the *thesaurus* and the *tabula rasa* (394). The thesaurus, as the treasury of history, includes all that has been written about any given subject, while the *tabula rasa* is that which is newly invented. These two concepts should not be seen as separate, however, because for Curtius, literature is defined by a “timeless present” [which] means that the literature of the past can always be

active in that of the present” (15). It is based on the idea of the survival of literary constants through generations of representation that I start my hunt for the wine god Dionysus and the motif that reflects the survival of his myth: his appearance or return. For unlike what Curtius feared, the styles and stories of Antiquity did not cease to influence later literatures with Goethe’s last full stop in *Faust* (Goethe 2014), the last volume of which was published in 1832. Indeed, we find from that time and into our present literary incidents still salty with the smell of that wine-dark Aegean Sea, we left behind in ancient history.<sup>1</sup> The motif of the forgotten or unknown deity who returns to a time or a place not their own is one example of this. This motif has been popular in varying degrees throughout the centuries, and different gods have been its focus.<sup>2</sup> However, when locating the origins of the motif in Antiquity, Dionysus is an apt example, for he was already then known as a stranger, destined to die and return, as the fruit of the grapevine is plucked or wastes away before it grows again. Tracing the development of the motif of his appearance and the representations of his character from some of the oldest texts to some of the most recent should reveal much about how the myth of Dionysus has changed over time and what it might have come to signify in our present. In the following I focus on representations that deal with a “living” Dionysus, that is, a god who is considered or depicted as a contemporary force, and not merely, as is the case of most theoretical approaches, as a figure of the past.

## 2. The conception of Dionysus the stranger

*The Homeric Hymns*, written between 800 and 450 BC, are some of the earliest detailed sources on the cult of Dionysus. In them the core concepts of his myth are established. Born to mortal Semele, from the seed of Zeus, first prematurely

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- 1 The term “wine-dark sea” is a common translation of a popular ancient epithet. It can be found many times in different translations of the Homeric *Iliad* (for example the 1999 one by Robert Fagles) and *The Odyssey* (for example the 2006 translation by Robert Fagles), as well as in *The Orphic Hymns* (for example the 2013 translation by Apostolos Athanassakis and Benjamin Wolkow). Since the translation is not quite literal, with the meaning of the original ancient Greek words being closer to “wine-faced-” or “wine-eyed sea,” the epithet “wine-dark sea” is itself an example of a modern representation of an antique subject.
  - 2 In my 2017 article “Pan i Londons gader: Hvorfor genopstod en græsk naturgud for en kort periode i Storbritannien?” I study another variant of the motif: the appearance and brief, intense popularity of the Greek god Pan in British *fin de siècle* literature. Apollo and Venus also seem to have been favorites in nineteenth-century literature (Gyldenstrøm 2017).

in a flash of lightening that killed his mother, then carried to term and born a second time from his father's thigh, he is *Eiraphiotes*, the *in-sewn* (1976: 1). Hidden in his childhood from the jealous eyes of Hera and raised by nymphs, his divine nature is not recognized when he appears to mortals, and he is taken for ransom by pirates. But their shackles cannot hold him, and he becomes the smiling god, who looks on them "with his dark eyes" (56), as he makes fragrant wine spring from nothing, and grapevines grow to maturity in moments. Turning into a lion, he takes on the epithet of "loud-roaring Dionysus" (57), from whom men flee. He is also the "boisterous" (65), the "ivy-wreathed" (65), and the "woman-maddener" (1) who haunts first the valleys of the wilderness, and then, it is understood, the minds of mortals. Thus, Dionysus was early on the god who appears to mortals, from a state of hiding and anonymity, through potentially terrifying miracles. Naturally, the miracle of the grapevine need not be destructive, as demonstrated when the singer of *The Homeric Hymns* asks the god to renew the bountiful harvest: "Hail to you, Dionysos, with your many grapes! / Grant that we joyously reach this season again" (65). During the annual Athenian festival of *Anthesteria*, as far back as the fifth century BC, the people of Athens celebrated the sacred marriage between the god of wine and the wife of the city leader to secure the prosperity and well-being of all (Moraw 2011: 233–34). Alongside the official festivals there were a wealth of Dionysiac mystery cults, whose members sought the experience of ecstasy in the practice of the *mysteria*, ecstatic and intoxicated rituals led by wandering *telestai*, "experts in ritual" (Burkert 1993: 260). In this sense, we know that Dionysus was not necessarily a destructive god, if given due respect. Nor was he simply the woman-maddener, but also an ally of women, depicted often among his dancing followers in the throes of the mysteries, the *maenads*, and sometimes with a single non-maenadic mortal woman as his tranquil companion (Moraw 2011: 234).<sup>3</sup> The best example of Dionysus as an ally of women is perhaps his marriage to the Cretan princess Ariadne, a marriage which was always depicted as very happy on vases and other surviving imagery and material artefacts (Moraw 2011: 235). The earliest sources on the characteristics of Dionysus demonstrate that he was imagined as both a destructive and invigorating force. However, he appears primarily in the role of a destructive, vengeful god in the well-known tragedy by Euripides, the *Bacchae*, first staged around 405 BC (2014). Here Dionysus assumes human form to return to his birth city Thebes. His divine influence is in full bloom, as he travels

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3 Remember that a *maddened* woman is not necessarily a woman who has lost her self-control, but one who has lost interest in fulfilling her duties and is condemned for it.

into the city from the East, where he has “set all Asia dancing” (Euripides 2014: 8), and with his arrival, the women are driven from their looms, the earth flows “with milk and wine and the nectar of bees” (12). Despite these miracles, most of the royal house of Cadmus, of which Semele was a princess, refuses to recognize the divinity of Dionysus as well as the blood they share with him. Angered, disguised Dionysus sets to drive King Pentheus mad, by the same madness with which he has driven the women into the hills as maenads, where they are said to be breastfeeding wolf cubs (41) and flaying great bulls alive (43). In the *Bacchae* he is truly the *maddener*; the gift of intoxication takes on the shape of insanity. Noticeably, in that insanity also lies the potential to get a glimpse of the realm of the divine. Pentheus does not recognize Dionysus at any moment, but when he has fully lost his senses, to the point of seeing “two suns in the sky” (54), he also sees Dionysus in the shape of a bull, which was one of the forms the shape-shifting god was wont to take (*The Orphic Hymns* 2013: 30). Seeing is not understanding, and vengeful Dionysus, still a stranger to Pentheus, convinces him to spy on the maenads. When they discover him, they fall over him with fury, ripping him apart as if he were just another wild animal. The king’s own mother, Agave, tears off his head with her bare hands and carries it home with pride, claiming she has slain a mountain lion. Not until the very end of the play does she realize what she has done. Dionysus calls himself here “a god both terrible and gentle to the world of man” (Euripides 2014: 52). In the *Bacchae*, this gentleness is demonstrated in the temporary mercy from the insanity that strikes the women and ensures that they do realize what occurs as they rip apart their kin. It does not last. However, the idea lives on that the wine god could come in peace if only he was welcomed. Dionysus then, in the *Bacchae*, is not only the liberator of inhibitions, the bringer of ecstasy, but also a vengeful and angry god whose gifts will turn sour if not respected. It is made apparent by Pentheus’s fate that it is not up to mortal man to understand and judge the divine mystery of the god’s true nature. We mortals may be able to experience the presence of the god while under its temporary, intoxicating influence, but we must not presume to understand it. We must acknowledge and respect the signs of the divine, precisely because it is above us.

The mystery of the twofold, human yet divine, merciful yet cruel god grows with the development of pre-Hellenic Dionysus into Orphic, Chthonic Dionysus. At the center of the beliefs of the Orphic mystery cult stood the myth of how Dionysus was torn to pieces and devoured by the titans before being reborn, symbolizing the soul’s release from the prison of the body, which the initiates would re-enact for the purpose of spiritual purification (Athanasakis and Wolkow 2013: XIV). Excerpts from *The Homeric Hymns* mention that Dionysus

was cut “into three pieces, in triennial feasts [and] men shall always sacrifice to [him]” (1976: 1). So, it was not that the myth of the destruction of the god’s body was specific to the Orphics, but rather it gained added meaning with the Orphic re-interpretation and additions to it. In *The Orphic Hymns*, written down 650–1100 years after the Homeric, Dionysus is known as not only the “loud-roaring, reveling [and] two-natured” (2013: 27) but also the “thrice-born [...] ineffable, secretive [and] pure” (27). He is said to “take raw flesh” at frenzied triennial feasts (43) and the singer asks him, with some fearfulness, to come, not only with a good wine harvest but also in a “spirit of perfect kindness” (27). As more qualities are added to the characterization of Dionysus, the thesaurus of his mythology grows. The myths do not so far in Greek history seem to replace one another, rather contribute to a shared mythological *corpus*, or a body of mythological truth, that acknowledges the entirety of the god’s collected history. This makes Dionysus throughout Greek pre-Christian history increasingly a god of opposites, both dead and alive, mortal and divine, frenzied and peaceful, with his different aspects taking priority depending on his worship. When the religious singer calls for the god to come in kindness, it is exactly in recognition of the many other ways he could choose to show himself.

In Antiquity, the fact that Dionysus dies at all was arguably more remarkable than that he is reborn, as it was not a habit of the gods to expire. But this changed with a development that likely began with the Greek philosopher and historian Plutarch’s manuscript *The Obsolescence of Oracles* from between 50 BC and 120 AD (Plutarch 1936). The manuscript is a discussion on why the oracles of Greece were becoming less effective and more rarely used. In considering the mortality of gods, Plutarch’s narrator cites the story of Thamus, a sailor who, upon passing the isle of Paxi, hears it announced that “the Great Pan is dead” (Plutarch 1936: 401). Plutarch goes on to describe how these deaths had been happening as far away as the British Isles, and it is made known that the era of the gods is coming to an end. Interestingly, Plutarch leaves an opening in the text for the return of these gods. He writes: “There is one island where Cronus is confined, guarded while he sleeps by Briareus; [...] and round about him are many demigods as attendants and servants” (405).<sup>4</sup> The god who only sleeps may wake again, and as demonstrated by the myths of Dionysus, even the god who dies may not be dead forever.

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4 Cronus was the king of the titans and the father of Zeus in Greek mythology, and Briareus was a hundred-handed giant, who according to myth helped the gods defeat the titans (Hesiod 1983).

So far, the living myth of Dionysus, or what I have called the mythological corpus, had expanded with each iteration, so one may well speak of one greater myth grown from many sources, instead of several distinct myths. But, as his cult was imported to Rome, it seems to have lost much of its Greek mystery. If one is to believe the Roman historian Titus Livy, the bacchanalia which developed from the Greek festivals and rites to Dionysus were first and foremost excuses for licentiousness and depravity among the Romans. Accounting for a public scandal from 186 BC, where the senate decided to take measures against the Bacchic cult in Rome after a series of condemning witness accounts, Livy describes the Roman bacchanalia as nightly rites where “no form of crime, no sort of wrongdoing, was left untried” (Livy 1936: 255). According to Livy, the Bacchic gatherings served to cover up violence, sexual promiscuity, murder, and even forgery of legal documents under the protective guise of religion (241). This description, of course, is done from the perspective of the outsider. It considers the Bacchic cult for its political and moral implications – as something which might have threatened law and order in the empire – and greatly simplifies what may have looked very different from inside the cult. Still, the text demonstrates how Dionysus, the god of many-fold mysteries, was simplified on his journey into Rome, becoming Bacchus the reveler almost entirely. His other aspects were either easily forgotten, after all the Romans already had gods of their own, or melted together with pre-existing deities, so that with time, Bacchus became one and the same as Roman *Liber*, the liberator (Ovid 2005: IV). The mythological corpus was greatly lessened and much of the thesaurus ignored. What remains of Roman Bacchus now is a god primarily of the bacchanalia, whose appearance or possession grants mortals escape through intoxication, be that escape from sanity, responsibility, or morality.

### 3. The return of the gods in exile

As the Greek religion was replaced by Christianity, new myths were only rarely developed. However, already in medieval times, illustrations were made of the ancient gods where they were dressed in fashion from the same period and taking part in a medieval present, or at least in a medievalized Antiquity. French poet Christine de Pizan’s beautiful, illuminated manuscript *Épître d’Othéa* from 1400 to 1410 is full of such illustrations. One illustration, for instance, shows the goddess Venus, dressed in an olive-green court dress with floor-length split sleeves lined with ermine, her blond hair elegantly draped in braided buns atop a white headdress, sitting on a throne in the clouds. She has several small red hearts gathered on her lap, and below her on the earth stands a great crowd of eager worshippers, offering up more hearts for her to take (Figure 1.1).



**Figure 1.1.** “Vénus et les amants” (Venus and the lovers)

Another illustration shows a white-haired, bearded Bacchus drinking from a very large bowl of wine and resting on clouds above monks and nobles toasting together on earth (Figure 1.2) – which recalls how medieval monks were often brewers and explains how a contemporaneous relevance could easily be attributed to the god.



**Figure 1.2.** “Bacchus et ses disciples” (Bacchus and his disciples)

It is not uncommon for medieval manuscripts to portray mythological or historical characters in medieval clothing (and it is perhaps not very different from how present-day historical films will combine costume with fashion). Yet, this type of portrayal lends itself easily to the idea that these characters could have a presence in a developing contemporaneous present. In fact, a direct lineage from this type of representation can be followed into the nineteenth century, as it was the idea of a host of Greek gods surviving into the Middle Ages that inspired



the German poet Heinrich Heine to write *Les Dieux en Exil* (*The Gods in Exile*) in 1855 (first published in German in 1853). Here Venus is still in her mountain, where the medieval legends of Venus and Tannhäuser put her;<sup>5</sup> Apollo has become a common shepherd, and Mars a traveling soldier, but of all the gods, writes Heine, Dionysus had the better fate (47). In *The Gods in Exile*, Dionysus has inserted himself in the very core of Christian worship, remaining relevant within religion and not having to hide outside of it. In the essayistic text, a fisherman discovers that the monks he ferries over the local lake once a year attend a pagan revel at their destination. As the fisherman spies on the revelries, Dionysus is seen at their center, described as a beautiful young man with serene and care-free eyes (53), while the revel itself, though made up of ghostly revenants, seems to transcend all melancholy of death:

These graceful phantoms have risen from their ancient sarcophagi and from under the ruins of their temples to celebrate once more the holy mysteries of the cult of pleasures! Yes, this is a posthumous revel: once more, these merry revenants want to celebrate with games and songs the joyous arrival of Semele's son, the redeemer of joy; once more, they want to dance the pagan polka, these gay steps one dances stripped of hypocrisy, unpolluted by public virtue, and where one abandons oneself to rapturous, divine intoxication, to all-consuming, desperate, frenzied, unbridled passion: *Evoe Bacche* [Hail Bacchus]!<sup>6</sup>

Heine's description draws on the ancient Greek seasonal celebrations of the returned god as the liberator and he who makes the vine grow. The bacchanalia reveals some of the danger of the *Bacchae* – in the wildness of the orgiastic revelry, where each celebrant has relinquished control of their senses, there is no saying what might happen to an interloper. Additionally, it significantly criticizes contemporary morality, which is made to blame for this joyful nature having gone underground. Taking place outside of the moralizing gaze of society, the revel becomes both proof and metaphor for a suppressed but unkillable Greek spirit that refuses, season after season, to give up its joy of the miracles of nature. The fisherman, however, sees only the work of the devil. The narrator makes

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5 See for instance Heinrich Kornmann's *Mons Veneris* from 1614 (2012).

6 “ces gracieux fantômes sortis de leurs sarcophages séculaires et dessous les ruines de leurs temples pour célébrer encore une fois les saints mystères du culte des plaisirs ! Oui, c'est une orgie post-hume: ces revenants gaillards, encore une fois, veulent fêter par des jeux et des chants la bienheureuse venue du fils de Sémélé, le rédempteur de la joie; encore une fois ils veulent danser la polka du paganisme, les danses riantes qu'on dansait sans jupon hypocrite, sans le contrôle d'un sergent de ville de la vertu publique, et où l'on s'abandonnait à l'ivresse divine, à toute la fougue échevelée, désespérée, frénétique : *Evoe Bacche!*” (Heine 1855: 55).

it clear that this perspective has been determined by a Christian worldview, as he writes that “the entire pale congregation appeared as nothing more to [the fisherman] than a congress of vampires and demons who were seeking by their maleficent rites to bring about the ruin of all Christians.”<sup>7</sup> The fisherman sets out to ask for help from a nearby Franciscan monastery but discovers to his horror that the prior has the face of Dionysus. However, it seems the evils of the pagan gods have been much exaggerated, as the fisherman is not in any danger. Disguised Dionysus manages to be two things at once: the wine god in body and spirit as well as a responsible prior who performs his duties as a Christian authority. Instructing the fisherman to forget the whole thing, for his own sake, he sends him home in the name of Jesus Christ. Heine’s Dionysus then appears to be a forgiving and peaceful god, whose gifts are only misunderstood as punishments, and of whom we have naught to fear but our own inhibitions. The motif of Dionysus’s appearance as represented in *The Gods in Exile* acts to reflect the theme of a pagan past lost and replaced by a repressive and fearful Christianity. In doing so, it draws on the vast thesaurus of Dionysiac mythology but reinterprets the myths in a modern context, where much of their dangers seem to have dissipated.

The English aestheticist writer Walter Pater would develop Heine’s idea of the exiled gods during the 1870s and 1880s – first in the essay “A Study of Dionysus: The Spiritual Form of Fire and Dew” from 1876 (1914), where he researched the development of the myth of Dionysus. Here Pater argues that the god started out as a kind of tree-spirit (1914: 11), who with time became the embodiment of all flowing life (13). Based on the development from seasonal god into the Orphic cult’s celebration of the devoured and devouring god, Pater outlines a biography of the wine god: from a sun-kissed, “ruddy god of the vineyard” (1914: 40), Dionysus enters Athens to become the vengeful god of the *Bacchae*, before he is transformed into the pale and sorrowful Dionysus of the Orphics and ultimately ripped apart by his worshippers, finally returning to a deathlike slumber and a possible new awakening. Pater’s reading of the historical development of Dionysian myths gives the mythological corpus represented in his texts a distinct temporal quality. It has become a plot, with a chronological order, a beginning, and an end. This development is demonstrated in Pater’s slightly later short story “Denys l’Auxerrois” from 1886 (2014). Here, once again, the narrative takes place in the Middle Ages, in a small town, where one inhabitant is not like the others.

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7 “Toute la blafarde assemblée ne lui parut qu’un congrès de vampires et de demons dont les maléfices tramaient la perte des chrétiens” (Heine 1855: 56).

Pater never outright identifies Dionysus in this story, but the descriptions of the strange appearance of *Denys* and the progression of his fate leaves no doubt at all. When Denys is first seen in the town, it is as a humble gardener, known vaguely to be born out of wedlock, whose produce is the finest at the market. But from the day he steps foot in the church, something changes, and a new age seems to take hold of the town: “A shrill music, a laughter at all things, was everywhere [and] it seemed there would be winter no more” (2014: 177). First, as the spirit of life, Denys finds himself the cause of a blissful and bountiful energy rushing through everything living, making men and women run off together and vines grow wild. But following the season of joy, Denys returns from a journey East with a craving for flesh. A darkness follows his return, rumors spread of murders that he cannot guarantee he did not commit, and Denys goes into hiding in a nearby monastery. Paradise has overgrown, and ecstasy becomes madness with the transformation of the spirit of the vine into the moody and vengeful god of the *Bacchae*. It all ends in horror. When Denys first arrives in town, he plays the role of a returned Dionysus during a re-enactment of one of the ancient festivals, where the return of the god of the growing vines would be celebrated with great cheer. At the end of his story, another pagan procession is to take place, one where the personification of winter is hunted through the streets, and Denys assumes the role. When the spectators lay eyes on him, they become as if possessed, gripped by a blinding fury, and the crowd rips him apart alive. Dionysus becomes the devoured, as Pater’s biographical reading of his myth has destined him to be and “the pretended hunting of the unholy creature [becomes] a real one” (Pater 2014: 187).

In “Denys l’Auxerrois” the god’s effect on those around him seems to have more to do with where he is in his mythical life cycle than with what the characters around him do or believe in. Denys does not seem to have much choice in the matter nor self-knowledge of his potentially divine nature. It is left unclear whether Dionysus was ever there, or if the incidents were simply the tragic re-enactments of a ghostly mythology woken by a temporary weakening of Christianity. Here, the history of the ancient myths does not merely lie in the background, deepening the meaning of the present narrative; it has become destiny and drives the plot. As the story is brought to its close, Denys dead and fast forgotten, Christian morality returns to the town. As such, writes Pater, the story signifies the temporary return of a golden age, of which “almost every people, as we know, has had its legend” (2014: 166). “Denys l’Auxerrois” is a reflection and a play on ancient sources, tempered through Pater’s interpretation. The transformation of Denys is not merely a repetition of stories of Dionysus’s death and rebirth as they appear in, for instance, *The Orphic Hymns*, but also a

reflection of the development of his myth through ancient history. The suffering of Denys who does not recognize himself as a god adds a level of melancholy to the story, and the greater theme appears to be the lamentation for a lost connection to a beautiful moment in time, which can only be reached through ghostly repetitions and may never be fully understood. Yet, in the timeless present of literature, as Curtius describes it, the myths may come alive to the reader, and the doomed life-circle of Dionysus may play out time and time again.

#### 4. The presence of the god as possession

A certain approach to the motif of Dionysus's appearance is strictly focused on the experience of his presence, pushing the details of his identity as a character in the background. According to this string of thought, Dionysus should not be sought in the flesh, but in the mind. German philologist-turned-philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche took this approach in *The Birth of Tragedy* from 1872 (1995). In this work Nietzsche argues that ancient Greece was dominated by two forces, which are also the forces that drive artistic practice: the *Dionysian*, which stands for the drunken, primal impulses of creation, the "annihilation of ordinary bounds and limits of existence" (Nietzsche 1995: 23), and the *Apollonian*, which is the form-giving and reflected force of representation (3). By making abstractions of the gods, Nietzsche released them from the confinement of a historical past and gave them a present relevance. His characterization of what is Dionysian cuts away many of the characteristics which had been attributed as belonging to Dionysus, throughout the development of the thesaurus of mythology. Yet, *The Birth of Tragedy* also adds greatly to this thesaurus. Its influence on later literary treatment of Dionysus cannot easily be overestimated. Searching for the meaning of Dionysus in modern times, there is no ignoring Nietzsche.

Philologist Walter Otto stayed close to the ancient sources in his seminal *Dionysus: Myth and Cult* from 1933 (1965). Still, his interpretation of Dionysus is comparable to Nietzsche's. To Otto, Dionysus is first and foremost "the god who comes, the god of epiphany, whose appearance is far more urgent, far more compelling than that of any other god" (Otto 1965: 79). Otto argues that to the Greeks the myths were living testimony of a primary occurrence – the experience of divinity made manifest – and for this reason, they should still be seen as such today. Following this approach, the myths and rites that re-enact them become themselves sources of the experience of the presence of the god if they are responded too affectively. It is as if feeling a cold draft and thinking of a ghostly presence would call that ghost into being behind you. Precisely for this reason, Otto's Dionysus is also primarily the god of madness because he

makes his intoxicating presence known in a way that can be felt affectively but not understood logically, all by transgressing the very limits of interpretation. Experiencing the presence of the god contains then the seed of both insanity and enlightenment; the one who feels it finds themselves easily with Pentheus in Thebes, blinded by two suns, getting a rare glimpse of the ineffable.

Nietzsche and Otto had very different approaches to the cult and myths of Dionysus, but both define the nature of the god as something which is felt, rather than seen. According to this vein of thinking, Dionysus *is* the experience of his presence as well as its intoxicating inspiration, which can be consciously or unconsciously felt. At times, this presence takes the form of possession: the experience of being taken over by the god.

The experience of the presence of the god can be seen represented figuratively in texts that depict it as motif, which is most likely how most people will read the *Bacchae* now, regardless of how it might have been to see it performed in Antiquity.<sup>8</sup> A more modern example can be found in J. Russell Taylor's poem "The Posing of Vivette" from 1897 (1898). Here a painter has a model posing as a bacchant (the Roman equivalent of a maenad), and while she is initially confused by the whole thing, something changes as she starts to imagine what it must have been like at the bacchanalia:

[*She hums a little tune, then stops. He looks up.*]<sup>9</sup>

**Vivette!** Don't wink, don't breathe!

That's just the expression. Don't—

**VIVETTE.** Io, Io,

Iacchus!

**THE ARTIST.** Yes, the wine god. . . . But, Vivette!—

**VIVETTE.** 'Tis day, Silenus. We have overslept:

[and following a bout of hymnic praise, as he touches her arm, she declares:]

**VIVETTE** A man here at the Mysteries! Agave's fingers shall drip red again. . . .

Mænads, a man! (Taylor 1898: 90–92)

The unfolding drama is resolved peacefully, the model calmed and quickly forgetting the whole thing. The tone of the poem is light and humorous, and we get the sense that the risk of Bacchus returning to full power is not overwhelmingly great, as long as one does not dwell on the idea of his presence. At the end of the poem, the artist character says to the model, "I'll paint you serving tea-cups

8 There is some evidence that Dionysus was thought and actively felt as present in Greek theater (Burkert 1993: 268).

9 First bracket and italics appear in the original. Second bracket is editorial.

after this” (92), reflecting that if the presence of the god is only real when it is felt, avoiding it altogether should not be terribly difficult. However, avoidance is not always the goal. The ritualistic text can also aim to awaken the experience of the divine presence outside of itself, taking the form of living ritual. This was likely the purpose of most ancient hymns, each dedicated for specific rituals and describing the gods with highly detailed but carefully selected epithets. In modern time we also find texts that attempt to re-create the feeling of the presence of the god through ritualization and repetition – such is the case of two examples as different, and like one another, as twentieth-century occult ritual practice and experimental theater.

English occultist Aleister Crowley was a poet before he created the esoteric movement *Thelema*. A present Bacchus-Dionysus did not play a big part in his published works, but he did write his own version of the legend of *Orpheus* in 1905. Here it becomes clear that Crowley was interested in the god as a force of revelation, as he has Dionysus say, “I lift the mask of matter; / I open the heart of man; / For I am a force to shatter / The cast that hideth – Pan!” (Crowley 1905: 115) – Pan being, to Crowley, representative of the most basic and destructive forces of man (Crowley 2004: VII). This pattern was repeated in private ceremonies of Crowley’s secret society A.:A.:, as demonstrated in hymn-like texts that were most likely recited or sung at initiations into the order and from one rank to the next. Here, Bacchus is again given the role of liberator, he who brings both joy and destruction so that the singer must exclaim “Thou art behind me: I scream with mad joy” (Crowley 1907–1911: 11), before he symbolically invites the destiny of Dionysus destroyed by offering himself up as sacrifice: “Thou shalt crush me in the wine-press of Thy love [and the] bees shall gather a new honey; the poets shall sing a new song” (13). This highly symbolic representation of the god follows the pattern of the Orphic rites, by seeking renewal and higher power through destruction and sacrifice. Additionally, performed as a living hymn and used in a ritual context, it attempted to re-create the experience of that Orphic miracle. The re-creation of religious ecstasy was similarly the theme of the experimental piece of theater *Dionysus in ‘69* by The Performance Group (Schechner 1968). The participatory piece was performed the summer of 1968 and was a re-interpretation of the *Bacchae*. The script was altered during performances, with the final piece being different from time to time as it became a co-creation between the mostly naked actors and the audience who was invited to come onto the stage and experience the play on their own bodies (Schechner 1994: 40). According to the director, Richard Schechner, the spectators would frequently undress to take part in the murder of Pentheus, a scene played out as a writhing mass of bodies which would symbolically devour the actor (1994: 41). Re-creating the

*Bacchae* as a physical and partially spontaneous experience places *Dionysus in '69* in the same category as ritual, as it had the potential to make the presence of the god not only enacted reality but also affectively experienced reality. It can then be observed that the version of the motif of an appearing Dionysus that is focused on possession can function figuratively, but it can also attempt to escape the level of representation to become the primary experience, as indeed it often does thematically in texts that represent this very tendency. Within the realms of fiction, the border between representation and the represented is thin. Representation calls to the represented, urging manifestation, as the ritual does to the myth. The old belief that speaking the name of a thing brings it into being lives on in texts that place possession and revelation at their core.

## 5. The drunken god

Leaving behind Dionysus the possessor for the moment, a series of more recent works have focused on his role as the drunken and reveling god, often closer to his Roman history than to the Greek tradition. Comic writer Eddie Campbell first created his Bacchus character for the series *Deadface* in 1987. After the fifth issue, Bacchus was given his own spin-off, and the saga has since been revised and reprinted in the collected *Eddie Campbell's Bacchus*, first published as such between 1990 and 2001. In *Campbell's Bacchus*, the god is one of a few divine beings who have survived until the modern day. In other words, he is not a recently reawakened or resurrected god, but one who never went to his rest, much like Heine's cloistered Dionysus. However, the god does hint at having died before. When a drinking buddy comments that Bacchus has a "lived-in face" (Campbell 2014), he responds with the words "Lived in... and died in." In Campbell's universe, immortality then does not mean everlasting youth, and Bacchus is a leather-faced old man, with deep-set eyes, who states that his appearance is the result of "too much wine, women and song." Now in his old age, he spends most of his time drinking with company as aged as himself and telling tales from his youth. Some are straight out of the thesaurus of mythology, combining bits and pieces from different sources, while others are fresh from the tabula rasa, and often outrageous. Campbell's Bacchus is very much the drunken god, but he goes beyond that archetype. The representation of the god is one that allows for the entirety of his mythological background but still treats the myths like distant memories. Bacchus becomes the teller of his own myth, but with the added function of representing the very human experience of growing old, reflecting on times past, and seeing the world change around you.

In the comic series *The Wicked + The Divine*, published between 2014 and 2019, the narrative follows the fates of a pantheon of pagan gods, who have been reincarnated into the bodies of young people. They are destined to live short, glorious lives as divinities, and within two years, they will die. So, the rebirth and death of Dionysus in the series is nothing extraordinary, comparatively, and the story does not pay much attention to the Chthonic parts of his myth. Instead, the emphasis is on the god's role as reveler. When he is first introduced, it is as "the dancefloor who walks like a man" (Gillen, McKelvie et alia 2015), the soul and life of ethereal underground dance parties, the bringer of joy and peace, who unifies his followers in a state of effortless ecstatic bliss. He is a character who cares deeply about others, and to whom the party is even more important in a world haunted by fear and death, because at least: "...they'll remember being happy for a night." *The Wicked + The Divine's* representation of Dionysus is, for all his efforts to keep the party alive – and we see him dancing throughout the main series, in colorful occasional squares, while the other divinities fight, argue, and kill – someone who struggles with bouts of melancholia and a quickly shifting temper and who never sleeps. Dionysus is here both the reveler and the maddener, with the twist that the madness only affects himself. In special editions of the comics, the reader is presented with earlier incarnations of the gods. Dionysus is depicted in ancient Rome, playing the part of Bacchus on stage for the sake of gold (Gillen et alia 2019). And in the 1920s, Dionysus is drawn as the god of wine and cubism, his body fracturing into colored cubes of light ever so often, his mind haunted by visions of the coming great war. So, there are nods to both a more simplified Roman Bacchus and the parts of his myth that are to do with prophetic revelations and artistic inspiration. Still, the information we are given about the nature of the god leaves much to be imagined. As in Campbell's *Bacchus*, this does not mean that the entire thesaurus has been erased from the mythological corpus of the text; it is merely, for the most part, pushed firmly into the past.

Bacchus as the drunken god also appears in the TV-series *The Magicians*,<sup>10</sup> first broadcast between 2015 and 2020. The story draws on C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* published between 1950 and 1956 (1982) by following a group of young present-day New Yorkers who discover that they can access a magical dimension full of marvelous beings. Bacchus is one of a handful of known gods in the universe,

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10 The show is based on Lev Grossman's trilogy of novels, *The Magicians* (2009), *The Magician King* (2011), and *The Magician's Land* (2014), but Bacchus is not a character in the books.



and his character can be said to combine the Roman wine god, as we know him, with twenty-first century traits that are typically found in American college fraternities and contemporary party culture. Bacchus appears almost continuously drunk or drinking, takes very little seriously, and is motivated by one thing, and one thing only: making sure there is always a top-quality party to go to (for the worthy). He first appears in episode 27, “The Tales of the Seven Keys,” wearing Hawaii-themed swimming trunks, a white blazer, and a peacock-feathered hat. As the protagonists attempt to gain access to his current venue, he slams the door in their faces, loudly declaring “come back when you’re fun!” (Fisher 2018: 16:07). Again, the characteristics of the wine god paint him primarily as Bacchus the reveler, but also here, hints to his greater myth are discreetly incorporated within the representation of the character, as when he informs the protagonists that “historically, I do smite vibe killers!” (Fisher 2018: 32:12). Pentheus, spying on the women and protesting the celebrations of a new god of wine, was nothing if not a vibe killer. Bacchus is also constantly in the company of maenads in *The Magicians* who double as nurses, echoing the story of his childhood among the nymphs. And when one of the protagonists seeks out the god with the purpose of poisoning him, a maenad declares with relief that it is a good thing he has arrived, because Bacchus has “been darker the last few weeks” (Smolkin 2019: 13:30), foreshadowing the death of her deity and echoing the darkening of Dionysus as it is depicted in *The Orphic Hymns* and by Walter Pater. In the end of his story in *The Magicians*, Bacchus is torn apart alive, but as the source of his godhood is removed in this instance, he has no chance to rise again.

In all of these cases, the primary function of Bacchus-Dionysus is to be and deliver the essence of wine, be it portrayed as intoxication, joy, or the most enjoyable, outrageous party imagination will allow. While the depictions may seem superficial on the surface, they hint at the greater thesaurus of Dionysiac mythology, making it apparent that while adding to mythological corpus behind each text, they do not really remove or deny any aspects of the god’s long history – albeit *The Magicians* puts an end to it in that universe with a death the god cannot return from. Primarily, these three examples push the unneeded parts of the mythological history into the background, the better to focus on Bacchus the reveler, the drunken god, he who gives the gift of intoxication.

## 6. The search for the sublime in *The Secret History*

In Donna Tartt’s novel *The Secret History* from 1992 (2002), a group of university students enmesh themselves in the study of ancient Greek in the 1980s to a degree that it becomes the framework for their whole way of life. Antiquity

transforms into, as the golden age which Pater mourned, a spirit that may, with enough dedication, be reached again. The dream which guides them is to rise above the phenomenal world and experience the sublime. It also runs thematically through the narrative as a constant drive, bejeweling the words and every action of the main characters. On the level of the plot, it is demonstrated by the attempt of the students to re-create the rites of the Dionysiac mysteries, thinking themselves prepared for the maddening revelation of ecstasy, beauty, and terror. They are not.

Tartt opens the novel by quoting Nietzsche: “A young man cannot possibly know what Greeks and Romans are. [And he] does not know whether he is suited for finding out about them” (Tartt 2002: Epigraph). And perhaps they are simply not suited, or they forget to ask the god to come in kindness, because when the Bacchic miracle of revelation and possession takes place, it comes bearing gifts that no one would have wanted to receive. Dionysus is never revealed to the reader. Instead, the description of his revelation comes through the experience of the protagonists:

It was heart-shaking. Glorious. Torches, dizziness, singing. Wolves howling around us and a bull bellowing in the dark. The river ran white. It was like a film in fast motion, the moon waxing and waning, clouds rushing across the sky. Vines grew from the ground so fast they twined up the trees like snakes; seasons passing in the wink of an eye. (Tartt 2002: 156)

A faint impression of the euphoric state of possession is given, so clearly linked to the life-stream itself, the passing of the seasons, and the growing of all things. And so, it is the figurative representation of the possessive Dionysus, who cannot be understood, but must be felt, which dominates the narrative. The motif of his revelation is faithful to the pre-Hellenic parts of his myth. The revelation has much the same meaning and effect as it does in the *Bacchae*, as the bacchanalia results in the death of a man, ripped apart by naked hands and a strength the protagonists cannot later understand. The students who took part in the ritual do not remember much of it, but just as Agave, they still must deal with the consequences. They did not necessarily do anything to anger the god, but as experience from the *Bacchae* shows, individual fault does not always mean so very much. Did the women of Thebes who were at Agave's side, unknowingly taking part in the murder of Pentheus, do anything personally to warrant such a punishment? No, but just as the women of Thebes, the students have transgressed the bounds of human experience; their temporary release from reality has been so violent that a return to normalcy is made almost impossible. Yet, no mortal can remain in the realm of the divine, and the protagonists must one by one

realize that there is no other escape from the banalities of life once the god is gone, than death. This dilemma is what drives the plot forward. The first murder turns into a second, to cover it up, and finally results in the suicide of one of the students and the resignation of the others to bear the dull pains of ordinary existence.

Returning to the source, Tartt ignores most of the mythological thesaurus, the characteristics of the wine god's personal attributes, the development of his cult throughout Greek and Roman history, to engage with the mystery itself: the experience of the presence of the god. Dionysus is never a character, but the Dionysian threatens, primordial and dark under the Apollonian world of ideas throughout the development of the narrative, before breaking through in full power, revealing the search for the sublime to be a search unto death. If the presence of the god ever slips through to the reader, it is perhaps in those brief sections where the revelation is described, and imagination may call forth an emotional response. Tartt's novel, in revealing very little about the god and focusing on the experience of those who have met him, places itself in the tradition of rituals and hymns: by seeking to create the experience of the presence of the god rather than to explain it. By transgressing what can be understood, the revelation seems more miraculous, and the mythological corpus acts more like it did in ancient times, by deeming no aspects of the god closer to the truth than others, treating them as echoes of a greater transcendent reality.

## 7. Dionysus as meta-motif in *In Exile*

Alexandra Turney's novel *In Exile* from 2019 directly references several of the above-mentioned works. Part one is begun with a quote from *Gods in Exile*, part two with one from "Denys l'Auxerrois," and the manuscript of the *Bacchae* is read by the protagonist as she goes through her own story. The framework is set for the reader to expect a revelation of a darkening Dionysus in the vein of Pater's interpretation of his myth's development.

Contrasting Tartt's indirectly experienced Dionysus, Turney's Dionysus is overwhelmingly, physically present in the novel, as he appears to three teenaged girls sometime in late twentieth-century Rome. The first chapter is told from his perspective, as he wakes from having slept for some four or five centuries, in a state of weakness and confusion. The rest of the novel follows the perspective of fifteen-year-old Grace. Dionysus's appearance and development as a character thematically coincides with and follows Grace's journey of self-discovery through puberty. He appears to her one day as the miracle maker, making milk and honey flow from the walls and tapping a rich, seductive wine from his veins.

Slowly drawing in her and her friends, with the excuse that he cannot regain his strength without them, he leads them on a path through ever-more intoxicating Bacchic rites. Here he has most in common with the proud and vengeful god, as we know him from the story of the pirates and from the tragedy in Thebes, because he will not be denied.

When Grace tries to tell the god, she will not and cannot help him, he becomes manipulative, invasive, and insistent. Standing under her window at night, he gives her the impression that “she couldn’t argue with him, and she couldn’t get away from him. Some instinct – the same subconscious instinct that made her avoid certain men in the street – told her that if she left, he would follow her” (Turney 2019: 34). The insistence of the god is the same kind of insistence of predators met late at night, a kind of convincing that you give into because it feels more dangerous not to, and the only mention of his mortal wife Ariadne is that she was so afraid of him, “she trembled perpetually” (72). Here Turney takes liberties with the myths; there is little in the ancient sources indicating that Dionysus was thought to be a danger to the woman who he loved. Turney’s Dionysus character combines a universal fear of the uncontrollable and demanding supernatural, with the specific fear of an overpowered male sense of entitlement. This is underlined by the age of the female characters and by their relative inexperience, which seems to leave them powerless against the very commonplace and human weapons of guilt, manipulation, and insistence on which Dionysus draws. With the enunciation of his need of being worshipped for the sake of his survival – in contrast to a divine right to be so – the mystery also becomes transactional. This brings Turney’s approach to Dionysus close to a theoretical tradition of interpreting mythology anthropologically, otherwise demonstrated by such works as James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* from 1890 (1900). In interpreting the sacrifice to and of the god as a kind of economy, the mystery of his myth is arguably lessened, as his motivations are made more human than divine.

Following the Paterian-Orphic model, Dionysus turns darker as the plot develops and ironically, the girls grow less suspicious. The more they drink the miraculous wine-blood, the more they crave it, turning into maenadic alcoholics. This might have continued perpetually, had it not been for the metamorphosis of the god. Growing ever hungrier for pleasures not satisfied by simple bliss, Dionysus the reveler becomes Dionysus the devouring. Nothing is enough for him: not the bare-handed killing of animals in his honor, not his own sexual conquest of the girls, not even, finally, the extinction of a human life. Only when they have ripped apart the god are they released. The book ends rather abruptly.

The reader is spared the consequences of the crime and so is the god, returned to his slumber.

*In Exile* can be read as a partially metaphorical depiction of what it means to become a woman and the joys and dangers that lie in waiting for those who desire but have not yet learned how to navigate temptation. The motif of Dionysus's appearance becomes the vehicle of the theme of dangerous sexual liberation. He is not the source of Grace's desire but acts to tear down any boundaries for it, making it volatile and dangerous both to herself and others. This gives the story a moralistic element. If Grace had only denied the strange man and all his demands of her body, she never would have suffered and killed as she did. The moral then becomes the exact opposite of that of the *Bacchae*. Do deny the god, or he will punish you for your worship. At the same time, the motif, despite being built on the framework of earlier depictions, runs the risk of being emptied of any meaning outside of that of the book itself. With several parts of the thesaurus of the Dionysiac myth being contested and rewritten, rather than merely pushed to the background – such as the god's function as an ally of women – the mythological corpus is made smaller. The effect is a lessening of the Dionysus character's divinity, through the erasure of parts of his mystery. The repetition of the transformation of the god from light to dark comes to point at its own intertextuality while ignoring the greater mysteries of death and rebirth.

## 8. Motif and meaning

I have gone through a series of portrayals of appearing Dionysus, demonstrating a continuation and variation of an already vast thesaurus of myths that co-existed about him in Antiquity and have survived into the present day. We find in the antique sources Dionysus the god of the bountiful wine harvest, Dionysus the vengeful, the roaring, the devouring and the devoured, and Dionysus the mad or the maddening, the ineffable, the ally of women, the drunkard, the resurrected, and the free. These descriptors early on start to overlap and bleed together, forming a shared mythological corpus, a single, many-sided myth of Dionysus. Behind each instance of representation, this myth lies waiting and is often only partially reflected, hinting at a greater truth. Sometimes, as in the case of Roman Bacchus as understood through the words of Livy, this myth is temporarily reduced, and the thesaurus seems to disappear almost entirely from view. Yet, Bacchus the drunken god often contains within him hidden depths, revealing that the drunkenness of the god need not exclude his mystery. In modern depictions, the motif of Dionysus's appearance and the character of Dionysus himself can also be observed to reflect and reinterpret varied parts of

the thesaurus of Dionysiac mythology, often without challenging the truth of those parts that are not directly used. Unavoidably, the available thesaurus grows with each new representation, exemplified by how Pater's "Denys l'Auxerrois" will refer back to the sources of Antiquity and Heine's *The Gods in Exile*, while Turney's *In Exile* is modelled on the same sources as well as on Pater's texts. But while the thesaurus only grows, as it is not determined by individual narrators or any other truth outside objective reality, the mythological corpus is unique to every text. In one textual reality, Dionysus may never have been anything other than the name of an artistic drive, while in another, he can die and never rise again. Still, the myth of Dionysus, as it is available to reader and writer alike in the form of the parts of the thesaurus known to them, gains much added meaning with new interpretations and iterations. The narrative does not exist in a vacuum, and with the perspective on the god that considers the experience of his presence a central factor in making it reality, interpretation cannot be but considered an element of narrative. Every instance of the depiction of the motif of the appearing Dionysus becomes a combination of what is known and what is created, as well as what is thought and what is understood. Rising from this finely threaded web of connotations, Dionysus can appear as a challenger to our modern ways of thinking, a liberator from traditional constraints, a revelation of some primordial madness, or primarily a drunken god who does not threaten those that meet him with more than a good time. Or, he can be a small-minded, cruel, and weakened divinity, who has forgotten the purpose of his miracles. The meaning of the god depends on the narrative in which he appears.

Dionysus's appearance in modern times brings the past into the present and connects those who experience it with a mythological reality liberated from the history of religion and given an acute and current relevance. This appearance almost always points to a meaning outside of mythology, be it a larger theme, a moral lesson, or a non-mythological plot in need of Dionysiac support. The one exception being what the ritual aims to achieve: when the experienced appearance of the god transgresses all meaning and interpretation and escapes the text to touch us for real.

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