

The Mysterious Dionysus

by R.L. Fowler

Few figures in Greek mythology are as fascinating as Dionysus. If you look up his name in a dictionary, you'll probably find an explanation like "the Greek god of wine. Also known as Bacchus." That is probably the dominant image of him: a jolly libertine, endlessly carousing and making merry, bedecked with ivy and grape vines and surrounded by riotous troops of nymphs and satyrs. But if you look a bit further than this familiar picture (cheering though it might be) to other reports of Dionysus, Euripides' play *The Bacchae* for instance, then a rather different, more chilling portrait emerges of a dark, mysterious and violent god who possesses his victims and drives them to commit horrible crimes of destruction and human sacrifice. That is when the fascination of Dionysus begins to assert itself; and it never goes away because, in fact, we don't really know who he was. He was a mystery even to the Greeks.

Wine certainly was part of his business. But not only wine: any life-giving liquid (such as wine was in the ancient world) was his gift - water, sap, blood. Where there is no moisture, as in a desert, there is no life. So he is really a god of life itself, and the most basic elements in it - a god of raw nature, not of civilization. His worshippers left the cities and went to the country. Women especially found his cult attractive; their life in the city was much more restricted than that of their husbands. Participation in a Bacchic rite was an opportunity literally to let their hair down - respectable Greek matrons wore their hair done up in buns. Once in the country, chanting and dancing to the infectious rhythms of drum and tambourine, freed of the normal inhibitions of everyday life, invigorated by contact with the sources of life - or "enthused", as the Greeks said, which in their language meant that the god had really entered into and possessed you - the worshippers of Dionysus, if legend can be believed, found themselves capable of supernatural powers. They could foresee the future, produce milk and honey from the earth, tear wild animals apart with their bare hands, destroy whole cities.

We must allow for exaggeration. One Dionysiac group at Delphi proved themselves decidedly human when they got cut off by a blizzard and had to be rescued. The legends of extraordinary powers and dark deeds really only add a spicy sense of the forbidden to the somewhat licentious proceedings of a Dionysiac ritual. They worked on the susceptible imaginations of worshippers by suggesting what might happen if things got out of hand. The basic experience of Dionysiac worship is a familiar one: after days of fevered, sleepless activity, participants reach a state of emotional exhilaration, followed by exhaustion. The whole purpose is cathartic: to get rid of frustrations, "blow off steam", and thus be better able to face everyday life. Dionysus is about shaking off shackles. He's a social safety valve, and pops up in unexpected places. There's something of Dionysus still in the world, in everything from rock concerts to fundamentalist religious revivals. We talk about "crowd psychology"; the ancients, who lived a long time before psychology was invented, talked about Dionysus.

Or at least, this Dionysus is about shaking off shackles. There are other ones. Looked at in one light, wine is an elemental substance; but it's also a pretty civilized drink. It's relaxation without rowdiness (one hopes), it's bonhomie, pleasant afternoons in a Mediterranean bower. Dionysus with the lid on, so to speak, is anything but a destructive god; he's a god of civilization, of decent relations and goodwill. And we mustn't forget the theatre, which is his province alone. Dramatic festivals were grand events, spectacular celebrations punctuating the tedium of daily life. Unlike the jaunts to the countryside, which were anti-social and for small groups of devotees, these festivals were for everybody and worked like a social glue to help keep the group together.

So what do these two Dionysuses have in common? One seems destructive, the other constructive; one is potentially vicious, the other is benign. No one has come up with a satisfactory answer to this puzzle yet. And to add to the confusion, there's another Dionysus: the god of the happy afterlife, who guaranteed eternal bliss to worshippers initiated into special cults and taught his holiest secrets. Cults of this type are known as "mystery religions" to modern scholars, but simply "mysteries" to the Greeks. That seems an appropriate note on which to end. About the only thing we can say for certain about Dionysus is that he was mysterious.