

Dionysus: The Illogical Choice

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On the surface, Dionysos makes the least sense of the Greek Gods. Hera and Zeus make sense because we need a King and Queen, Ares because we understand the power of conflict, Aphrodite because we understand love's hold on us, Artemis because of nature's majesty, Hephaistos to remind us of the majesty of creativity, Demeter because the mother is so powerful and the rest of the pantheon for equally obvious reasons. But why Dionysus, who "...represents the power of intoxication" (Downing 76) and turns life into "an ecstasy – an ecstasy of blessedness, but an ecstasy, no less, of terror" (Otto 78).

What is it about intoxication, ecstasy and terror that deserve an equal place at the table with reason, love, royalty and the rest of the pantheon? I believe it is because Dionysus is the deep unconscious. There is nothing that does not start in the depths, mystery and terror of the unknown that, like Dionysus, plays with us. The other gods are the archetypal organizing principles and he is the raw material. Dionysus is like a stem cell which has yet to differentiate into functionality.

Like the unconscious, Dionysus "...accepts his worshippers as they are, without expecting them to be perfect...(He) is a realist who knows the dark and frightening side of nature as well as the light and joyful side...He is easily accessible, never remote" (Houser 23).

Considering the money we spend on various therapies, it may be difficult to accept that the unconscious is easily accessible. Yet isn't the unconscious a major, if not *the* major, factor in our lives, bubbling up into our fantasies, fears and every other interpretation we make of the world? Rather than being totally conscious, perception is mainly a function of the archetypal imagination connecting the dots of our sensory inputs. This is why we all see and remember the

same events differently. It's not that the raw material is different, but that the meaning and memory we make from it is different.

Dionysos lives in those empty spaces which modern science tells us form most of the world. He is the quantum mechanics that forms the basis of our Newtonian world and the uncertainty principle upon which all apparent certainty is based.

Dionysus represents disturbance of the status quo. His arrival announces that "the primeval world has stepped into the foreground, the depths of reality have been opened, the elemental forms of everything that is creative, everything that is destructive, have arisen, bringing with them infinite rapture and infinite terror" (Otto 95). Any sense of stability and security we may have had is swept away. Other deities enjoy pandemonium, but none revel in it like Dionysos. He is the one who cannot and will not be ignored.

Dionysus, "always on the move and perpetually changing form, was never sure of being recognized as he went from town to village wearing the mask of a strange power, unlike any other" (Detienne 5). Our unconscious powers are also always changing the way they manifest, moving from complex to complex, popping up in daydreams, snippets of conversations we think we overhear and things in the periphery of our vision. They, too, are frequently unrecognized because recognition is a conscious function and our conscious self is uncomfortable with unconscious, because, like Dionysus, its "...appearance is startling, disquieting, violent...It arouses opposition and agitation" (Otto 74). It is the ground upon which consciousness is based. Resenting this dependence, our orderly consciousness gets agitated and opposes it. Self absorbed and conceited, it cannot see something so different from itself.

Just as "Dionysos needs to win recognition of himself as a divine power, at least in the world of men" (Detienne 13), so the unconscious has rarely received the recognition that it is just

as significant as the conscious impulses. But, like Dionysos, the unconscious doesn't need that recognition, for it knows its own power and if not recognized, it can terrorize the resistor with what for it is a casual gesture. Dionysus is never angered when ignored, but on the contrary has an almost impish quality to him. He appears powerless, weak and effeminate yet always slips away from the power that tries to bind him. Like the unconscious, he cannot be tamed by the force of will. He always has the last laugh even if he is laughing at something that terrifies the rest of us.

Dionysus changed the nature of worship. Before Dionysus, the purpose of worship was to please, placate and cajole the deities. Dionysus introduced people to the deity within themselves (Sanford 106). We will do well to remember that our deep unconscious is a deity and deserves to be experienced for itself, not for what it can do for our conscious lives through dream interpretation or therapy. They should be looked at as tools for enhancing our unconscious life, not for bringing it into the service of the egotistical deities who seek to rule our lives.

Midas is a story of Dionysian proportions. Midas was allowed to experience the ecstasy of turning everything into gold, a power that even the gods don't possess. Rather than revel in the paradox and ambiguity that is Dionysus, Midas attempted to retreat to the monotone life of gold, a metal of high value in the material world as well as the idealized color of Olympus. His intoxication with his power in the tangible world soon brought the terrible side of power.

Dionysus is also a trickster figure both because he is sexual and because "divine foolishness is also part of the Dionysian experience" (Sanford 106). Maintaining our foolishness can serve us well as we age because "...an old man (or woman) who identified with the Wise Old Man would become autocratic and rigid, but if he lives with the archetype of the fool as his

companion, then he would remain alive and warmly human, imbued with what we may call the strange wisdom of Dionysus” (Sanford 106).

Exhilaration comes from the soul just as wine comes from Dionysus and for similar reasons. Dionysus gave us wine because “In his wanderings about the earth, Dionysus was often rejected, but Icarius received him hospitably...” (Sanford 101). We have seen that the unconscious is wandering all over our consciousness and is often rejected. But when we are hospitable to our unconscious and give it a kindly reception, it will give us a gift of bliss because, like Dionysus, it knows that life is hard and we need tools to deal with it. Dionysus “... offers wine to help ease it, gives honey to sweeten it, and provides periodic festivals when pent-up passions can be released in acceptable way” (Houser 13). Our unconscious knows when we need a break from the grind of reality and knows invigorating ways to release our tension if we will only pay attention.

Dionysus is “... not the god of the extinction of consciousness as we experience it in drunkenness, but the god of the release of spirit and the animation of the soul” (Sanford 101) and neither does the unconscious want to destroy consciousness and its gods. It asks only to inform and be informed in a creative tension similar to the way that Apollo and Dionysus successfully shared Delphi.

Our unconscious isn't the same as anarchy, and Dionysus “...was not the god of lawlessness, for he had his own law to which people were called” (Sanford 96). Just as “Dionysus was kind and generous to those who were his friends but ruthless and destructive to those who rejected him” (Sanford 100) so our unconscious can support and affirm our life if honored, or undermine it if repressed. The terrible side of intoxicated delight can take over, and

just as Pentheus was torn apart and devoured by his mother, we can also destroy our own creativity in a fit of distorted intoxication.

The price of both worshipping and crossing this god can be particularly gruesome. The fact that Pentheus was torn apart was not that shocking, considering the fate of Acteon and others, but it's the way the innocent were manipulated into participating. Those women were his worshippers and he had them do a horrible thing that must have haunted them the rest of their lives. Dionysos reminds us of the uncomfortable fact that there is no safety in this world. Even if we worship him as asked, terrible things may happen. The gods do not care about us.

Perhaps our unconscious imagined theatre because Dionysus taught us that intoxicated delight in real life can lead to tragic consequences. However, we need to indulge our tendencies for intoxicated delight or they will drive us crazy. But indulging them can lead to tragedy. Theatre is a way to integrate intoxicated delight with the tragic because even a tragedy can make intoxicating theatre. This is also true about sexual fantasy. We can't repress it, but acting it out can be tragic.

Dionysos probably started in Greece, but disappeared for a while until his great return, probably from Thrace and Phrygia. Thus it wasn't an arrival as much as a re-awakening of an old established cult which had roots in Greece and needed to reappear "... in order to fill a psychological and spiritual need, perhaps to compensate for an emerging cultural tendency to identify too much with the rational at the expense of those life-giving energies of the irrational which alone can bring freedom to the soul" (Sanford 97). We need Dionysus now for the same reasons because we have built a prison of rationality. We are intoxicated with the delightful properties of the material world and trapped into a dependence on them even as we realize the terror behind it all.

Any speculation about the apparent paradox of this god who represents both unimaginable horror and intoxicated delight must include his birth. Nothing Dionysus does is worse than what happened to him in the womb, which should be the safest place, but was turned into a firestorm of destruction. Not only did the Queen of the gods cause the death of his mother, but his father Zeus, her agent, must have known what he was doing and didn't care. (Semele's days were numbered the moment she got pregnant since no human ever went through two pregnancies with Zeus.)

The god who came from Zeus's womb is the god of women. All the other wombs produced gods of men. Athena's birth is different because she was born of the head, but Dionysus gestated down in the womb area. This shows us that Zeus has power as the great mother. It also suggests that Zeus has tremendous feminine energy concentrated in his genital area that is not completely integrated with the rest of him. Perhaps this imbalance explains why he has such trouble and obsession with sexuality. His may be desperately searching for an external union with feminine energy that should be taking place internally.

Dionysus was killed before he was born, so he was born dead. He is the god of all in us that is dead. He shows us that even death has life and he calls that death to life by bringing ecstasy to bear on it. In this way he releases those elements which we are killing through repression.

His devotion to his mother, who was betrayed by his father, is such an important part of Dionysus that this "...mythologem (may) mirror the mother/child relation even more adequately than does the Demeter/Persephone one" (Downing 71). He traveled to the underworld to bring her back so she could be made a goddess, perhaps every boy's fantasy of what he would like to do for his mother.

In a sense, displaying himself to Semele was an intoxicating delight to Zeus who didn't care, or didn't think, about the terrible consequences. Thus, the defining act of Dionysus' birth became the essence of his divinity. In this sense he is just a more transparent example of the rest of the gods, who don't really care about people except as play things who will worship them.

Men in their prime are not worshippers of Dionysos, perhaps because "he is a male god in whose realm submission signifies access to a particular kind of power" (Downing 72). Men are heroes, still trying to make sense of the world through conquest and domination. Dionysos asks us to question heroism itself. He shows the ultimate power of chaos and how fragile is the world we construct from our outward energies. "The key element lies in his madness, but we must remember this is not the common madness we know as insanity. Instead, it is the divine madness the Greeks called mania" (Sanford 105).

Dionysos is the most masculine of the gods because he is the only one who is not a womanizer. "Dionysos himself is never shown with an erection" (Houser 2) and "alone among the Greek gods Dionysos is never accused of seduction or rape or even infidelity... he does not violate women; he brings them to themselves" (Downing 74).

He has power with women that none of the other gods, including Zeus, can even dream about. Zeus can trick women into having sex with him by pretending to be something he isn't, but Dionysos has women chasing him because his idea of feminine energy goes way beyond the sexual. Therefore he can help women realize their own potential as complete people with an integrated and vibrant sexuality.

Why is Dionysos so adored by women? They worship him in rituals that are open only to women. I believe this tells us that letting our feminine energy cavort unconstrained in the fields of our unconscious will lead to ecstasy. However, if our male energy tries to stabilize and

intellectualize this process (as Pentheus did), the energy will not reach an ecstatic crescendo but will explode in terror. The exclusion of men suggests that women know something of the power of Dionysus that they don't want men to discover.

If men worshipped Dionysus they would move from the realm of Aphrodite, where, "we are taken over by a passion that only this one particular other in the whole world can satisfy, though he or she may be unavailable to forbidden or implacably inimical. In Dionysian passion there is not other – except the god, and he is no longer *other*; he and I are one" (Downing 77).

Men's' obsession with women would be replaced with a deep connection to themselves and they would stop "hitting" on women. Sexual advances are Dionysian because they are a source of both intoxicating delight and terrible horror for women. Men's sexual impulses both give enormous power to women and make them powerless. If men worshipped Dionysus there would be a major shift in power, which would be both intoxicating and terrifying for women.

Dionysus tells us that a man in a monogamous relationship can have incredible sexual power over women.

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