

1. The Myth of Dionysus

I am Dionysus, the son of Zeus,
come back to Thebes, this land where I was born.
My mother was Cadmus' daughter, Semele by name,
midwived by fire, delivered by lightning's
blast.

And here I stand, a god incognito,
disguised as a man . . .

EURIPIDES, *THE BACCHAE*

No other Greek god came into the world in quite the same way as Dionysus. His father was Zeus, whose name means "shower of light." Lord of the sky, god of the thunderbolt, Zeus was the most powerful of all the gods of Olympus. He loved women, mortal and immortal, and enjoyed many love affairs. His wife, the goddess Hera, was naturally angry and jealous. She was forever seeking revenge for Zeus's many love affairs—and a goddess scorned has fury indeed!

Born of Fire*

One day Zeus was traveling on earth. He wore a disguise, because undisguised no mortal could look at him and live. He came to Thebes, an ancient city of Greece, where he fell hopelessly in love with Semele, the daughter of King Cadmus. Their passion was great, and before long she became pregnant.

Semele wanted nothing more than to look into the true eyes of her lover. She was urged on mercilessly by her nurse—who happened to be the treacherous Hera in disguise. Finally, Semele could stand it no longer. She asked Zeus to grant her a boon.

*The story of Dionysus has been told for thousands of years. There will naturally be changes from retelling to retelling.

Zeus was in a good mood, and he loved the young woman. Foolishly, he swore an unbreakable oath on the River Styx that she could have whatever she asked.

When the innocent Semele asked to see the god of the thunderbolt in his true splendor, Zeus was horrified. He knew that the sight of his godhead would mean her certain death.

"No!" he cried in anguish. "Anything but that. You do not know what you are asking for." But she persisted and Zeus sadly kept his word. As he shed his disguise and revealed his fiery radiance, the unfortunate Semele was almost completely incinerated. Only her womb, around which she had wrapped some ivy, escaped the flame. (Ivy is said to be the only thing on earth that is impervious to the splendor of god.)

Zeus was furious. Quickly, he plucked the fetus from the womb, cut an incision in his own thigh, and tucked the child into it.

The baby continued to grow in Zeus's thigh. When gestation was complete Zeus gave birth to the infant god Dionysus.

This child of fire was a brand new force to be reckoned with. Even the Titans—the powerful first gods of earth, who represented the instinctive masculine qualities—were quaking in their boots. Brutally, they tore the baby to pieces and boiled him for good measure. They weren't going to have anything like this coming into the world!

But Dionysus would not stay dead. A pomegranate tree, symbol of fertility, sprouted from the earth where a drop of his blood had fallen; and Zeus's mother, Rhea, made Dionysus whole once again. In this way the young god was born three times: once from his mortal mother's womb; once from his immortal father's thigh; and once from the wisdom of the earth, represented by his grandmother. With a start like this, one wonders what kind of a god we have on hand!

The Young God

Semele's sister Ino and her husband, Athamas, raised the baby Dionysus as a girl so that Hera would not recognize him.

But the goddess was not deceived, and in her rage she drove the aunt and uncle mad.

Zeus acted quickly. He ordered Hermes, the divine messenger, to transform Dionysus temporarily into a young goat and bring him to the beautiful Mount Nysa. There he would be raised secretly by nymphs, the joyous female spirits of the forests and mountains.

The nymphs loved their young charge. They housed him in a cave and fed him on honey. Dionysus spent his childhood gambolling freely over the mountainside, surrounded by the glories of nature and learning the sensuous pleasures of the earth. His teachers were many and varied: The Muses inspired him with poetry and music. The satyrs, half-man, half-goat, taught him the wonders of dance and exuberant sexuality. The sileni, part-horse, part-man, spirits of the springs and rivers, taught him wisdom. Silenus, the intoxicated old man who was Dionysus's predecessor, taught the young god virtue.

Dionysus passed the years happily, learning many things. Like the grapevine, which can only grow in the sun's intense heat and the moisture of the spring rain, Dionysus had been born of fire and nourished by the rains of the mountain. He understood the power of the vine perfectly, and marked his passage from childhood to young godhood by inventing the art of winemaking (some say he learned it from Silenus), which would bring humanity so much potential joy and desperation.

At last Dionysus stood revealed as a god. This was just what the ever-vengeful Hera had been waiting for. Recognizing Dionysus at last, she cursed him with madness.

The Travels of Dionysus

The raving Dionysus left his home on Mount Nysa and began to travel the world. Mad as he was, Dionysus was still a powerful god. Wherever he went he spread the art of winemaking and his own worship.

He was accompanied by a startling array of followers: His tutor, the fat old drunkard Silenus, rode precariously on a

donkey; grinning satyrs, joyous nymphs, prancing centaurs, and other woodland spirits capered and danced alongside. For human followers he had the Maenads. These wild women of the mountains, initiates of the ancient women's mysteries, worshiped their god with singing, dancing, and bloody feasts. Together, they cut a swath of wild and joyous celebration across the ancient world.

In time Rhea purified the young god of his madness and initiated him into her mysteries, the very secret women's mysteries. The power of Dionysus was then unparalleled.

Wherever Dionysus went he invited people to join in his celebration. One thing soon became clear: Those who chose to worship him experienced divine ecstasy; those who opposed him chose madness.

Kings were especially prone to oppose Dionysus, who seemed the antithesis of law and order. When Dionysus invaded Thrace (an area which is now divided between Greece and Turkey) King Lycurgus fought violently against him and captured the god's army. Dionysus went into hiding deep under the sea with Thetis, an ocean nymph.

Rhea struck Lycurgus with madness and the raving king hacked his son Dryas to death, believing him to be a grapevine. The very soil of Thrace recoiled from the horror and became barren.

At this moment Dionysus emerged triumphantly from the sea and announced that Thrace would not flourish unless Lycurgus was killed. The people of Thrace rushed to obey. They tied horses to the king's arms and legs and pulled him limb from limb.

King Pentheus of Thebes—Dionysus's own cousin—fared no better. Dionysus asked the Theban women to join in his worship, proclaiming himself a new god. King Pentheus was offended by this wild band and ordered Dionysus and his followers arrested.

Teiresius, the old, blind prophet who knew the will of the gods, warned Pentheus that Dionysus was exactly what he

claimed to be: a new and important god. But Pentheus mocked Teiresius and denied Dionysus to his face.

The King's men found it impossible to imprison the god and his followers, and Dionysus and his wild band of celebrants escaped to the hills.

Pentheus pursued them in a blind fury, accompanied by many of the women of Thebes—his own mother and aunts among them. The women went mad and, thinking Pentheus was a wild beast, they tore him to pieces in a frenzy of bloodlust.

It was certainly unwise to refuse to worship Dionysus. When three young women of Orchomenus declined his offer, he drove them mad by changing shape from a girl, to a lion, to a bull, to a panther. Eventually the women were themselves turned into birds.

In another shape-changing story, Dionysus demonstrates another facet of his power. One day some pirates sailing near Greece spotted a young man sitting near the shore. He was so handsome that they thought he must surely be a nobleman and worth a hefty ransom. Filled with greed, they captured him and brought him on board.

They tried to tie him up to prevent his escape but found, as had Pentheus, that the ropes would not hold their knots. Only one crew member, the helmsman, realized that they must have captured a god. He begged the others to let him go. But the rest of the crew refused.

Then something extraordinary happened. Wind blew and filled the sails, but the ship did not move. In a terrifying yet glorious moment, rivers of wine began to stream over the deck; grapevines grew in wild profusion over the sail; and ivy, fruit, and flowers twined up the mast. Dionysus transformed himself into a lion. The terrified crew members jumped overboard and were changed into dolphins in midair. Only the helmsman, who had recognized the god, was spared.

Dionysus continued sailing the waters near Greece. One day, on the island of Naxos, he found Ariadne, the daughter of

King Minos of Crete. The beautiful young woman had been abandoned there by her husband, Theseus. Ariadne and Dionysus fell in love and soon married, and their wedding was attended by the gods. Their marriage was a perfect union. They never quarreled, and they had many children. In the end, however, the mortal Ariadne died. In her memory Dionysus placed her crown among the stars, where it can be seen today as the Corona Borealis.

Dionysus on Olympus

The tales of Dionysian ecstasy and madness spread across the world, and soon the power of Dionysus was recognized from Asia to Africa to Europe. Eventually, Hestia, the ancient and respected goddess of the hearth, stepped down and gave him her seat on Olympus. He sat thereafter at the right hand of his father, Zeus.

Dionysus, beloved and on Olympus at last, was happy but for one thing: He wanted to see his mother, whom he had never known. He decided to make one more voyage.

Braving death, he rescued Semele from the underworld and brought her to Olympus to live with the immortals. He renamed her Thyone, which means "ecstasy."