

Tales of Madness, Miracles, Death and Salvation:
Analyzing the Corpus of Dionysian Myths from the
Perspective of Malinowski's Charter Theory

By

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Much has been written about the myths of Dionysus in the last two centuries. Books, articles, and even films have attempted to capture the spirit and the essence of the mad god. Writers and scholars find his paradoxical nature most intriguing. He is mortal yet divine, and he appears destructive but life-affirming. For the Greeks he is the synthesis of the forces of life that exist in nature. “He is the blood moving in the animal... the sap in the tree.”¹ Dionysus is the life force and spirit of every creature. His connection to life is so strong that even the bonds of death do not end it for he is the god that can offer his followers life everlasting through the rites of his mystery cult. While he is a fertility god, his powers transcend the realm of earth much like Persephone, another earth goddess and queen of Hades who is portrayed as his mother in some myths. Tablets remaining from his mystery cults suggest that Dionysus served as a kind of intercessor who pleaded on behalf of his dead followers so that Persephone might assign them a pleasant dwelling in Hades.² Thus, as the god of the life force, Dionysus is as rich and diverse as life itself, and for this reason the mad god will continue to confound and intrigue us.

In this paper, I propose to examine eleven of the most commonly known myths of Dionysus from the perspective of Bronislaw Malinowski’s Charter Theory to show that his theory has widespread applicability. Malinowski’s theory suggests that myths serve a very practical and not speculative purpose. For Malinowski, myths charter and confirm previously established rituals, beliefs, and institutions of a given society. Using his Charter Theory, I hope to illustrate that the myths of Dionysus have two essential functions. Firstly, they confirm for the Greek listener many aspects of the god himself

¹ E.R. Dodds, *Euripides’ Bacchae* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), xiii.

² Susan G. Cole, “Landscapes of Dionysos and Elysian Fields” *Greek Mysteries: The Archaeology and Rituals of Ancient Greek Secret Cults* (New York: Routledge) 207.

which they had learned from a young age. The canon of Dionysian mythology gives four essential characteristics of the god. Dionysus is a god that often uses the aid of bestial transformations and miracles to announce his arrival and showcase his divinity. Likewise, he is a proud god who offers salvation to all those who honor him as a deity. In contrast, he is extremely vengeful and greatly punishes all those that fail to worship him and reject his godhead.

The second purpose of his myths is to charter or validate preexisting aspects of his cult. Five major traits of his cult appear in the myths. Among these five characteristics, the rituals of *sparagmos* and *omophagia* are one process by which the followers of the god become *entheos* or enthused with the god's spirit. A second and equally effective method for achieving *enthousis* is consumption of the god's presence in wine. The final two aspects of his cult are music and dance. When the followers of Dionysus become enthused with the spirit of the god, they illustrate the presence of the god's spirit within them through the spiritual releases of dance and the playing of instruments such as the flute and the kettle drum.

Over the past two centuries, many different people including anthropologists, poets, classicists, and even psychologists have attempted to explain the function of myth. One of the first men to produce a major, lasting contribution to the field was Max Müller. His Nature Theory states that all myths are essentially allegories about actual natural events concerned exclusively with natural phenomena. Primitive man found himself in awe of many things he witnessed in nature such as dawn, sunset, and eclipses. He then tried to "conceptualize" this awe he experienced with poetic language.³ Since Müller was a classical philologist, he concerned himself chiefly with myths in Greek, Latin, and

³ Ken Dowden, *The Uses of Greek Mythology* (New York: Routledge Press) 25.

Sanskrit. One example of his theory depicts how the Indians described the coming of dawn with one metaphorical word in Sanskrit, *dasru* meaning a tear. After years passed the Indians could not recall from where this word *dasru* had come. Therefore, they developed a myth to fill out the metaphor. In the myth Dawn flees her lover Indra, the chief solar deity, early in the morning to announce the approach of day.⁴ Müller called this process whereby Indo-Europeans became unable to understand the original meaning of these metaphors a “disease of language.”⁵ Because of this confusion, they began to explain these poetic metaphors with myths containing gods, heroes, and monsters.

While Müller’s theory has some application, it is completely irrelevant when discussing any myths that are devoid of natural references such as the wedding of Peleus and Thetis or Hermes’ theft of the Apollonian cattle.⁶ The Nature Theory only pertains to Indo-European myths that describe natural phenomena like the approach of dawn. It cannot provide insight into other myths which are not describing a natural event. Peleus’ wedding to Thetis is one of many myths that does not describe a natural event. The theory may apply to the myth of the destruction of Zagreus by the Titans. This myth, which will be covered in great length later, describes the slaying of the first Dionysus, Zagreus, the son of Zeus and Persephone, by the Titans at the request of the jealous queen Hera.⁷ Zeus sets the young Zagreus atop his throne and places his most potent weapon that of the lightning bolt in the babe’s hands. The image suggests that Zagreus is something of a sky god as he sits on his father’s throne in heaven and holds the power of Zeus’ lightning. When these monsters the Titans attack the young child, they are fighting

⁴ Dowden 26.

⁵ G.S. Kirk, *The Nature of Greek Myths* (London: Penguin Books) 43.

⁶ Kirk 43.

⁷ The entire account of this myth appears in Nonnus *Dion.* 6.155-6.205.

a sky god. There are many Greek myths about battles between sky gods and monsters such as Zeus' own struggle with the Titans and his battle with Typhoeus.⁸ Müller's theory, thus has some application in the Dionysian canon.

Andrew Lang, a pupil of Müller, was next to offer a significant theory for the function of myth. As a student of Müller, he had been a strong advocate of the Nature Theory, but by the beginning of the twentieth century, Lang had begun to modify his understanding of mythology. His Aetiological Theory states that myths explain the natural phenomena themselves rather than any forgotten metaphor. Lang suggests every myth is explanatory. Myths offer causes for realities that exist in our world and act as a kind of "proto-science."⁹ The myth of the creation of the human race from the ashes of the Titans offers a clear example of the Aetiological Theory¹⁰. This particular myth explains that Zeus destroyed the Titans with lightning bolts after he learned of their murder and ritualistic consumption of young Zagreus. From the ashes of the Titans, Zeus forged the human race. The myth makes clear how this natural phenomenon, the creation of mankind, occurred. It does not fill out any preexisting metaphor about nature, but rather the story serves as an explanation of how the human race came to exist and why humans are composed of good and evil from Zagreus and the Titans respectively. Although Lang's Aetiological Theory has wide application in general, it is far from being universal. While many myths are speculative by nature, many are not at all. Lang's Theory like all theories cannot possibly apply to all tales in the massive corpus of

⁸ Zeus' battle with the Titans is described in Hes.*Theog.* 664-720 and the battle with Typhoeus appears in the *Theog.* 853-858.

⁹ Kirk 53.

¹⁰ This story appears in the narrative of the Rhapsodies of the Orphic Bible according to M.L. West's *The Orphic Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 74.

mythology. It is limited in scope and should be used in conjunction with myths about natural phenomena.

At the end of the nineteenth century, another important mythological theory arose: the Ritualist's Theory. This method initiated by W. Robertson Smith became world renowned through the efforts of such scholars as J.G. Frazer, Jane Harrison, and Robert Graves. As the name suggests, this approach attempts to link myth and ritual. The most ambitious ritualists would even suggest that myths ultimately derive from rituals.

According to this theory, people create myths to give their ancient, and now meaningless rituals a significance that they have lost over time.¹¹ Jane Harrison suggests that myths are *legomena* "things said" which accompany *dromena* "things done."¹² Myths accompany rituals and complement them. In a sense they are two ways of discussing the same matter.¹³ One myth that clearly describes a complementary ritual is the myth of Prometheus and Zeus.¹⁴ In this myth Prometheus cuts up a great ox for a sacrifice to the gods. In his cunningness, he covers the best part of the animal the innards and the meat with the ox paunch and conceals the bones and scraps with gleaming white fat. He then asks Zeus to choose whichever portion he desires. Although Zeus perceives the trick, he plans action against humans for the deceitfulness and chooses the portion covered with the fat. Because of Zeus' choice, the Greeks burn only the white bones in sacrifice to the gods and consume the good portions of the flesh. This myth clearly complements the ritual of a standard Greek sacrifice. The sacrifice is the *dromena* or actual ritual that is performed. Hesiod's myth about sacrifice, the *legomena*, explains the meaning behind the

¹¹ Kirk 66.

¹² Dowden 27-28.

¹³ Dowden 28.

¹⁴ This myth appears in Hes. *Theog.* 535-560.

sacrifice itself. It complements the ritual and offers an explanation for its origin. Both elements relate to one event: the sacrifice. The myth serves as an illustration of why the ritual exists. It gives the old ritual a new significance, which up until the arrival of the myth had been forgotten.

Of all the theories mentioned so far, the Ritualist's Theory has the most application to the myths of the wine god. The Ritualist's Theory has many connections to the myth of the ritualistic slaughter of Zagreus and the many images of sacrificial victims such as Pentheus that represent this dying-god and appear in so many myths of Dionysus. Although I do not wish to stray too far from the task of this paper, it does seem important to briefly discuss these images as a precursor to their greater development in the future. The ritualistic slaughter of Zagreus in the account of the Orphic Bible seems to hint at a preexisting ritual. The ancient writer Cornutus indicates that the "earthborn Titans" represent farmers tilling their fields. The dismemberment of the vine during the summer harvest is the ritual to which the myth of Zagreus is referring. Just as farmers cut the grapes off the vine and boil them, so too do the Titans quarter and boil the extremities of Zagreus for consumption. The myth of Zagreus' sacrificial death is the *legomena* associated with the older ritual of harvesting the grape for wine.¹⁵ Finally, just as Zagreus is born anew as Dionysus when the heart of Zagreus is served to Semele in a drink and she conceives the second Dionysus, the grape vine rises to new life each summer and produces a new crop.¹⁶

¹⁵ M.L. West, *The Orphic Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 141.

¹⁶ This story appears in different variations. The myth to which I am referring here appears in Proclus' Hymn 7.14 and Nonnus *Dion.* 24.48.

The theory I plan to work with most closely is the Charter Theory.¹⁷ This method was developed by Bronislaw Malinowski after the First World War. Malinowski had been stranded in the Trobriand Islands, off the coast of New Guinea, and he began noticing the close relationship between myths and social institutions among the Trobriands. He saw that myths were not cosmological but practical. Myths pertained to aspects of practical life such as rituals, beliefs, and institutions.¹⁸ As a result of his field research, Malinowski began to reevaluate Lang's Aetiological Theory. He started seeing myths as a manifestation of preexisting attitudes, morality, rituals, and beliefs. For Malinowski myths are practical and have no theoretical quality. They validate and confirm customs, rituals, and beliefs which have already been taught to the people in the society.¹⁹ The stories do not come from rituals but exist to reinforce previously established rituals, customs, and beliefs of the culture. One use of the Charter Theory might remind the tribe why a certain clan lives in the most arable region of the tribal land or why only some of the families are noble and rule the rest of the tribes.²⁰ The myth of the founding of Thebes which appears in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* serves as an example of the Charter Theory at work: After leaving his homeland of Phoenicia, Cadmus goes looking for his sister Europa, who unbeknownst to him has been abducted by Zeus. Cadmus visits the oracle at Delphi who tells him to stop searching for his sister and instead to follow a cow until it lies down to rest and then establish a city on that spot. Cadmus and his men follow the instructions of the oracle and begin constructing a city. While looking for water,

¹⁷ While many other theories for examining mythology exist, these four are the most influential and are more frequently discussed in mythological texts such as those of Morford and Lenardon, Dowden, and Kirk. Likewise, it seemed unnecessary to address any other methods in order to establish the relevance of Malinowski's Charter Theory in this present endeavor.

¹⁸ Mark P.O. Morford and Robert J. Lenardon, *Classical Mythology* 7th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 11.

¹⁹ Kirk 59.

²⁰ Kirk 60.

Cadmus' men are consumed by a giant serpent. Cadmus notices that none of his men has returned and goes looking for them. When he finds the serpent that had killed his men, he destroys it. However, he now has no citizens with which to establish his city. Athena tells him to sow the serpent's teeth in the soil, and from these teeth spring many armed soldiers who begin fighting each other to the death. After the battle only five men remain, from these five men come the five ruling clans of Thebes.

This myth reinforces a reality for later Thebans: Thebes is ruled by five aristocratic families. For the Thebans, this myth validates their form of government. Five aristocratic families have always ruled the city. The myth merely charters this custom for the people. If any of the Thebans wonder about the validity of this regime, he must look no further than this myth to confirm the legitimacy of their present government.

While no one theory adequately explains the wide diversity of stories that constitute mythology, I believe Malinowski's Charter Theory will be most effective in examining the corpus of Dionysian mythology. Like the Ritual Theory, the Charter Theory suggests that rituals precede the myths that are associated with them. Rituals existed long before any myth about the ritual appeared. The myth is chronologically secondary. For the Ritual Theory, the myth explains the ritual itself in words and gives it a newfound significance. In Malinowski's theory, the myth charters the traditional and preexisting institution, belief, or ritual. It gives an explanation and a validation to the ritual which it otherwise does not have by confirming its origin or practicality. Unlike the Ritual Theory, Malinowski's theory indicates that myths deal with more than just rituals and also confirm previously taught notions of morality, beliefs, and social guidelines. I hope to show that the Charter Theory provides a useful context for analyzing the myths of

Dionysus. I have already suggested that Dionysus' myths serve two purposes: to remind the reader of the nature of the god himself and his religion. If we agree that this is the essential duty of the Dionysian canon, then Malinowski's theory will hopefully appear most appropriate since it pertains not only to concrete rituals of the god's cult but also more abstract ideas about the nature of the god himself. The Charter Theory more adequately explains the presence of the many standard characteristics of the wine god in his myths such as bestial transformations, miracles, the gift of salvation to his followers, and destruction for non-believers.

Dionysus' myths perform two essential tasks: to validate Dionysus' character and to confirm the rituals and institutions of his cult. Of the many characteristics of his divinity, four appear frequently in his myths; they are performance of miracles by his followers or the god himself, bestial transformations, salvation and well-being for his supporters, and punishment and destruction for disbelievers.

Two types of miracles occur in the canon of Dionysian mythology. Maenads, the female followers of the god, perform some while in other stories the god himself performs the miracles²¹. One myth full of not only miracles but all the various aspects of Dionysus' divinity is the *Homeric Hymn to Dionysus*.²² In this myth a young Dionysus is abducted by a group of Tyrrhenian pirates who wish to ransom him for a price believing he is the son of some king. Only the helmsman believes the boy is an immortal and advises his companions to release him. The pirates ignore the helmsman and attempt to bind the victim's hands, but the bonds keep falling off of him. Nevertheless, the pirates do not waiver from their greed and set sail. During the journey many strange things begin

²¹ Maenads are female devotees of the god associated with Dionysian religion who appear most prominently in Euripides' *Bacchae* and will be discussed in much detail later.

²² *Hymn Hom. Dion. 7.*

happening. First a sweet smell of wine wafts through the air of the deck. Vines complete with grapes appear and wrap themselves around the sails, and ivy clings to the mast. Flowers and berries spring up and garlands as well. The god himself transforms into a lion and beside him stands a large bear. The men become terrified and retreat to the stern of the ship, but the lion savagely attacks the captain driving the sailors overboard into the sea. The sailors become dolphins and swim off into the deep. Dionysus reappears in human form and tells the helmsman not to fear him. His faith in the god has saved him. In exchange for his faith, Dionysus then promises to bless the man with a happy life.

In the myth, Dionysus at first remains silent as the pirates plan to ransom him as a captive. Eventually, he decides to make his divinity known to all as he so often does. Performing miracles is one of the easiest ways he can indicate his own divinity for miracles are instantly associated with the divine. Only gods have the power to perform miracles, and humans, who bring about miracles, are permitted only at the bidding of the god. Dionysus proceeds with subtle miracles at first. A sweet smell of wine drifts through the air. Then, concrete manifestations of his godhead start materializing. The sailors see ivy and grape vines wrapping themselves around the masts and the sails. Flowers and berries appear and garland as well. All of these are images frequently associated with Dionysus. In many of his myths, the listener hears of sweet aromas wafting in the air or the appearance of ivy, vines, garland, flowers, and berries. All of these images indicate that Dionysus is present. His followers the maenads often carry a thyrsus or rod wrapped in ivy leaves and crowned with a pine cone.²³ Similarly flowers and vegetation often spring up and the sweet aroma of wine precipitates. As a fertility god, Dionysus is

²³ Morford and Lenardon, 292.

associated with many images of fecundity such as flowers, berries, ivy, garlands, and wine. They indicate the god's presence or serve to announce the arrival of Dionysus and reveal his identity as a god.

In the *Homeric Hymn to Dionysus*, we also find bestial transformations. These transformations may involve the god himself directly becoming a particular animal or beasts simply appearing as an annunciation of Dionysus' presence. In this myth Dionysus himself changes into a lion while the appearance of the bear simply augments the impact of this divine revelation. Bears and lions are common transformations in the myths about Dionysus as well as goats, tigers, snakes, panthers, and very often bulls. There are several reasons Dionysus most often appears in the form of the bull. Firstly, the bull is the most common animal to many of the cattle herding Greeks, and is a symbol of fertility for the Greeks and their near eastern neighbors.²⁴ The bull represents virility in not only its fertility but its courage and ferocity. As a fertility god, the bull is a fitting image of Dionysus since bulls are known for their sexual potency and ability to sire many offspring over a short period of time. Similarly, the raging and furious bull depicts Dionysus' supreme potency to all those in the god's presence. Secondly, the image of the bull recalls for the listener a typical Greek sacrifice. The Greek used bulls as the sacrificial victims more frequently than any other animal in their sacrifices.²⁵ Likewise, the bull as a sacrificial victim recalls the earlier myths of Zagreus in which the first Dionysus was sacrificed by the Titans in the form of a bull and then consumed in a ritual. As a symbol of fertility and power, the bull is most fitting animal substitute for the god. Both Dionysus and the bull are powerful, fertile, sacrificial victims. The bull validates all

²⁴ Dodds xviii.

²⁵ Dodds xviii.

of these aspects of the god which a Greek would have already believed such as the god's fertility, power, and status as a dying-god.

The *Homeric Hymn to Dionysus* also introduces us to the concept of Dionysian salvation. Although scholars are still debating exactly what Dionysus' role was in the afterlife, his followers, *mystai* and *bakchoi*, believed that Dionysus acted as some sort of intercessor.²⁶ Inscriptions on many archaeological tablets provide some insight into the role of Dionysus in the afterlife. These tablets contain a set of instructions for followers of the god before they die. The tablets indicate that the initiates of his cult were to inform Persephone, queen of the dead and judge of one's life, that Dionysus "had released" this particular person.²⁷ Exactly, what the initiate had to do in the mystery cult to acquire this status is not entirely known. Nevertheless, Dionysus served as some kind of mediator on behalf of the person and attempted to persuade Persephone, who then chose the appropriate dwelling place in Hades for each individual. Most *bakchoi* believed they would dwell in the "bacchic meadow" in the afterlife, a very favorable and pleasant portion of the Elysian Fields on account of their service to the "releaser god" Dionysus.²⁸

In the *Homeric Hymn to Dionysus*, there is no mention of the specific gift that was bestowed on the helmsman. We only hear Dionysus made him altogether happy. However, in light of the extant tablets of Dionysus' mystery cult discussed before, the hymn seems to be hinting at a kind of salvation for the helmsman in the after world. The helmsman's faith and experience suggests he probably became an initiate of Dionysus. During Dionysus' discussion with Pentheus in the *Metamorphoses*, the wine god, under the guise of a human, says that he himself is this very helmsman who had become a

²⁶ *Mystai* is a term for an initiate of any mystery cult while *bakchoi* refers to followers of Dionysus' cult.

²⁷ Cole 207.

²⁸ Cole 211.

follower of Dionysus after his experience on the ship.²⁹ This is the key to salvation: Dionysus has offered the helmsman an opportunity for salvation. In order to accept this offer, he must become a devotee of the wine god. Dionysus himself does not so much grant salvation as present the means to salvation to his believers. This theme of redemption and salvation for his believers and followers is illustrated in many of Dionysus' myths.

Finally, as presented in the *Homeric Hymn*, Dionysus not only grants salvation to his followers but brings down destruction on those that fail to acknowledge his divinity. In this particular myth, the pirates do not recognize Dionysus as a god despite the protests of the helmsman and signs of his divinity such as their inability to restrain him with chains. For their incredulity Dionysus severely punishes them. First, he mauls the captain in the form of a lion. Then he turns all the other sailors except the helmsmen into dolphins denying them future lives as men and lowering them to the level of beasts. Dionysus does not allow any doubt as to his divinity. He has gone through many trials to establish his divinity and thus does not look kindly on doubt and suspicion on the part of mortals. This is one of the most salient characteristics of the god that appears in almost all of his adventure myths.

Just as the myths of Dionysus charter ideas about the character of the god himself, they also confirm aspects of his cult. The four major attributes of his religion that appear most often in the stories are music, dance, the concepts of *sparagmos* and *omophagia*, and wine. Music and dance are two hallmarks of the Dionysian cult. Walter Otto observes that madness is the essence of Dionysus with music and dance being the expression of

²⁹ Ov. *Met.* 3.582-3.691.

it.³⁰ Followers of the god become enthused with the god either through wine or sacrificial consumption known as *omophagia*, which will be discussed shortly. The music and dance are then representations of their new found freedom in the god and spiritual release from the bounds of society. Through consumption of wine or the ritual of *omophagia*, the god becomes part of the follower. The participant takes on a new personality: that of the god himself.³¹ Through the god, they achieve complete spiritual release from the pressures of conventional society and experience his divinity. The music and the dance are examples then of this spiritual freedom and release, which the god offers. With the newfound personality of the god, they dance and play music in all the mad frenzied motions of the god himself.

Of the many festivals to Dionysus that existed in ancient society, two seem most appropriate to this project. The first was a midwinter festival that took place at Delphi. During the winter festival, women braved many dangers and climbed to the summit of Mount Parnassus to take part in the ritual of *oreibasia* or mountain dancing.³² Euripides seems to have been referring to the ritual of *oreibasia* in his play the *Bacchae*. Late Greek writers suggest that this festival recalls a time in years past when actual frenzied bacchae went to the peak of the mountain and for a period of time became wild and enthused, dancing, banging their drums, and reveling in the god. This seems appropriate since ritual is almost always older than myth. Thus a time must have existed when women really did dance on the top of the mountain for hours in some kind of ecstatic

³⁰ Walter Otto, *Dionysus-Myth and Cult* Trans. Robert B. Palmer (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press), 143.

³¹ Dodds xiii.

³² Dodds xiv.

state.³³ These types of dances are not entirely foreign to our contemporary society. The whirling dervishes and American Shakers are two examples of cults that use dance and music as a means of experiencing the essence of divinity.³⁴ Both religions use dance and music to express the presence of the god within them. They have taken on characteristics of the deity and experience a spiritual release from the present constraints of human society.

Music often accompanies the dancing and stands as a second depiction of spiritual release. The two most common instruments associated with Dionysus are the kettle drum and the flute. The Greeks associated these instruments with all orgiastic religions such as the cults of Cybele, Cretan Rhea, and Dionysus himself.³⁵ These instruments are not only used by members of his cult like the bacchants but also their sounds often appear out of nowhere to miraculously announce his arrival as they do in the myth of the daughters of Minyas.³⁶ In the ritual of oreibasia, the flute and drums indicate the presence of the god amongst his followers. Just as these orgiastic instruments illustrate the arrival of Dionysus in his myths, they depict his presence among the followers of his cult, who have become enthused by ritually consuming the god.

Sparagmos is another very common theme of the Dionysian cult that appears in many of the myths. *Sparagmos* is the ritual performed by maenads in the myths of Dionysus in which they tear apart a live, wild animal in preparation for the consumption of the raw, warm beast known as *omophagia*.³⁷ Late Greek writers assert that the rendering apart and consumption of the animal was commemorative of the myth of

³³ Dodds xiv.

³⁴ Dodds xiv.

³⁵ E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press) 273.

³⁶ This myth appears in *Ov. Met.* 4.1-4.415 and will of course be mentioned later.

³⁷ Otto 106.

Zagreus' death.³⁸ However, the ritual had much more meaning than a commemoration. The Greeks believed that the blood of the creature was its life force, and, thus, to consume something is, in a sense, to obtain its vitality. For this reason, they consume a sacrificial substitute in which the god is present in order to acquire his divine vitality.³⁹ *Omophagia*, the consumption of the raw flesh serves as kind of ritual communion and way of becoming enthused. It was a ritual whereby the bacchant could share in the divinity of Dionysus by consuming his presence in the sacrificial victim. It would seem appropriate to choose a sacrificial victim that best reflects the powers of the god. Therefore, it should not surprise us that the bull was the most commonly used sacrificial substitute considering its association with virility and fertility. Like Dionysus, the bull as a symbol of fertility is virile and potent. The bull is very prolific. Likewise, both Dionysus and the bull are quite powerful and mad. They are both unpredictable and extremely dangerous. The mad and raging bull like Dionysus will attack at any moment and completely neutralize the opposition. No reason or logical coaxing can persuade him to settle down as he will rage until he decides to stop. Such is the temperament of the god Dionysus. If he becomes enraged, his madness is deadly and uncontrollable.

Two examples of *sparagmos* are found in Euripides' *Bacchae*. During one scene we are told the maenads tore apart a group of Theban cattle in their ecstatic state. Of course, the most horrific and famous example of *sparagmos* in the play is the complete destruction of Pentheus at the hands of his own mother and the rest of the Theban maenads. Whether or not a human sacrifice was ever used in the actual rituals is unknown. Pausanias records a story about the ritual sacrifice of a boy at Potnia in honor

³⁸ Dodds *Bacchae* xvii.

³⁹ Dodds xvii-xviii.

of Dionysus prior to the more recent substitution of the goat.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, it is uncertain for sure how or even if such practices were carried out.

The final important aspect of Dionysus' cult is wine. Alcohol in the form of wine serves as the second method for becoming enthused with the god's presence. As the wine god Dionysus is physically present in any cup of wine. Anyone who partakes of the beverage could be properly called a follower of the god since wine consumption is one method of worship. When the devotee consumes the wine, Dionysus as a part of the wine becomes part of them.⁴¹ He fills them up with his essence, and they become enthused. Like *omophagia*, wine consumption is a ritual communion. Wine stands in as a sacrificial substitute for the blood and flesh of the sacrificial victim. Instead of consuming the blood of the victim, the follower acquires *enthusis* by imbibing the blood of the grape: wine.⁴² In the ritual of wine drinking, the blood of the grape brings about *enthusis* in the consumer as the imbiber ingests the spirit and vitality of the god. The spring festival in Athens at the Anthesteria called "the Feast of Cups" involved this ritual of wine *enthusis*. Just as the women practiced *omophagia* at the winter festival, the revelers of this spring festival used wine to bring about the divine transformation of their states of mind. The grape like the bull is a fitting substitute for Dionysus since the myth of the death of the first Dionysus, Zagreus is the myth which recalls the ritual of the summer harvesting of the grape. Both the god and the grape are sacrificial victims in similar rituals.

⁴⁰ Dodds xix.

⁴¹ Dodds xiii.

⁴² Dirk Obbink, "Dionysus Poured Out: Ancient and Modern Theories of Sacrifice and Cultural Formation" *Masks of Dionysus* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press) 79.

Many of the myths of Dionysus deal with both his characteristics as a god and those of his religion. Therefore, I will present each myth in two ways discussing first those parts of the myth that pertain to his nature as a god and then analyzing those of his cult. I will arrange the stories in the most convenient manner beginning with the myths of his birth and concluding with his ascension to Olympus in the company of his mother.

The mythological cycle yields two main stories about the birth of Dionysus, the twice-born god. One account of the birth of the wine god appears in the Orphic cycle in which the god first appears as Zagreus.⁴³ The story tells that Zeus comes to Persephone in the form of a snake, mates with her, and from their union Zagreus is born. Having a great fondness for his son, Zeus allows the young baby to sit atop the king's throne and even brandish his most treasured weapon lightning in his little hands. The image clearly indicates that Zagreus has been chosen to reign with Zeus as a ruler in heaven. None of this pleases Hera, Zeus' perpetually jealous spouse, who decides to destroy the bastard child. Hera co-opts the Titans to rid Olympus of the new born child. Smearing their faces with gypsum, they cut him into pieces with knives. Although the use of the gypsum is somewhat uncertain, it clearly points to some sort of ancient ritual. It is unclear whether people ever practiced this ritual, but at the very least Nonnus' myth suggests that the murder of Zagreus is a ritualized sacrifice of which only the accompanying story remains.

When the Titans first attempt to kill him, Zagreus begins changing into various kinds of creatures in order to fend them off. He appears as a snake, a tiger, and finally a bull. These bestial transformations as mentioned before are extremely common in all Dionysian myths, and the different creatures are forms and representations of the present divinity Dionysus. The mention of transformations would confirm for the listeners what

⁴³ Nonnus Dion. 6.155-6.205.

they have already learned about Dionysus: he is a god who appears in many different animal forms such as tigers, bulls, snakes, and goats.

After his transformation into a bull, the Titans are finally able to subdue him with blows and shear off all of his limbs. There are two important characteristics of this murder. Firstly, Zagreus dies in the form of a bull. Bulls as mentioned earlier are symbols of fertility, and for this reason they are an appropriate symbol of Dionysus, a fertility god. The raging bull like Dionysus has a certain virility and power. This story would, no doubt, have instantly reminded a Greek listener that Zagreus' death is a divine sacrifice. This ritual death of the "first Dionysus" is reenacted in many of the Dionysian cults, and this image of the dying-god serves as a common aspect of both the god himself and his religion.

Secondly, the Titans do not just kill Dionysus; they dismember and consume him in a form of a ritualized meal. They cut, boil, and roast his remains before eating his flesh.⁴⁴ The myth itself recounts how a proper sacrifice takes place. The priest slaughters the animal and cuts him into portions. He then cooks the fat and offers the smoke to the gods while serving the rest of the animal as food for his feast. However, the destruction of Zagreus is not a standard sacrifice nor is it in honor of any god. Zagreus' death is a divine sacrifice which promises new life. Zagreus' death and resurrection assure the bacchant devotees of their own fates. If they honor Dionysus and consume him, they too shall have new life after death.⁴⁵ All those who share in communion with the god and serve the god on earth shall receive salvation in the next world. As the extant tablets from his mystery cult suggest, Dionysus has released them from the boundaries of death and promised

⁴⁴ Nonnus *Dion.* 6.220.

⁴⁵ Cole 207.

them life after death because they have partaken in his divinity through wine consumption and *omophagia*. Since the god himself is immortal, those who consume his divinity in the ritual meals guarantee themselves everlasting life.

This divine sacrifice is reminiscent of the summer harvesting of the grape. During the harvest, farmers (the Titans) shear the grapes off of their vines and crush them into juice. They then boil the grapes in preparation for consumption.⁴⁶ Even the consumption of the wine is a stylized ritual. As with any ritual, people drink wine in social settings and often in the context of a meal. The Titans prepare the limbs of Zagreus in the same way. They cut them off, boil them, and consume the remnants.⁴⁷ Here we see the close connection between the god and the actual beverage. The god is in the wine, and no distinction can be made between Dionysus and the beverage. He is not the god of wine but the god in the wine. It is for this reason one can become enthused by merely consuming the product of the grape.

The myth of Zagreus is not only a reference to general sacrifices but to the specific ritual offerings of the Bacchantes, the female followers of Dionysus. The Bacchantes according to mythology would seize mammals during the winter festival in the mountains and ritually dismember them for consumption. These practices of *sparagmos* and *omophagia* respectively are two of the most salient and well established aspects of Dionysian religion. Through these rituals, the Bacchant takes on the personality of the god and experiences *enthousis*. Just as Malinowski suggests, this myth charters the establishment of two rituals of the bacchantes: *sparagmos* and *omophagia*. The myth of the Titans validates these bacchic rituals in which the bacchantes tore apart and consumed

⁴⁶ M.L. West 141.

⁴⁷ Proclus' Hymn 7.14 and Nonnus *Dion.* 24.48.

a sacrificial substitute for the god such as a bull, goat, or other smaller animals like fawns. The myth appears later and explains and charters the origin of the rituals of *sparagmos* and *omophagia* at the winter festival.

Later in book 24 of the *Dionysiaca*, Nonnus speaks of the new Dionysus as the child born from the heart of Zagreus (*Dion.* 24.49). Athena had preserved the heart of the first born Dionysus.⁴⁸ According to Hyginus Zeus then presented this heart to Semele in a drink, and she became pregnant with the second incarnation of Dionysus. Although this version is different from most accounts of the second birth of Dionysus, his rebirth, nevertheless, is very significant. This myth in roughly sixty verses sets forth some of the most fundamental concepts of Dionysus and his cult: he is a god who dies and undergoes rebirth just like the vine which is associated with him. Likewise, the followers of his cult recall his death in dismemberment in the rituals of *omophagia* and *sparagmos* and believe they too can be born to new life like the god if they share in his ritualized death and consume his blood: the essence of his divinity and immortality.

The second version of Dionysus' birth is much more common and appears in many more accounts than the birth of Zagreus. In this tale Zeus impregnates Semele, the daughter of the Theban king Cadmus.⁴⁹ Hera, thoroughly enraged at Zeus' infidelity, tricks Semele and advises her to request that Zeus appear before her as he presents himself to Hera. Not knowing what she is intending, Zeus offers to grant Semele any favor. When she asks him to appear before her in his true divine form, Zeus, the father of gods and men, regretfully honors her request since he cannot refuse anything he has

⁴⁸ Proclus *Hymn* 7.14.

⁴⁹ A full account of the myth is contained in Ovid *Met.* 3.259-3.315 and Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.4.3 with very slight variations not even worth mentioning here. An abridged account of this myth appears in Hes.*Theog.* 940-942.

previously promised. His divine appearance completely destroys Semele in a blaze of fire. Nevertheless, Zeus pulls the immature babe from her womb and sews him up into his thigh. At the appropriate time, the baby twice-born Dionysus (*bis geniti*) emerges from his father's leg (*Met.* 3.317). Dionysus as a god ritually dies and is born anew for a second time. Like the vine, with which he is associated, he is ritualistically dismembered but his seed is sown and is born anew in a new field: the womb of Semele. He is the god of death and rebirth. Consequently, in his mythology, he dies as Zagreus and is born anew as Dionysus. These myths very clearly reinforce this notion of the god and explain the nature of certain Bacchic understandings of death and the promise of salvation through faith in Dionysus.

I now turn to the stories of Dionysus' arrival in Greece and parts of the East. During his travels across the globe, Dionysus meets with many different rulers that attempt to oppose his rites and his very nature. One of the first men to expel the god and openly flout him is Lycurgus, the king of Edonia in Thrace.⁵⁰ Not only does the king drive Dionysus out of his city and into the sea, he arrests several satyrs, maenads, and other members of the Bacchic troupe. As is common in many Dionysian myths, a miracle occurs, and the prisoners escape their incarceration (*Apollod. Bibl.* 3.5.1). Apollodorus does not give a description of the miracle, but it probably resembles Dionysus' escape from Pentheus' prison in the *Bacchae* (*Bacchae* 604-641) in which the bonds fall off of Dionysus' hands. After the initial discussion of Dionysian characteristics, it is no surprise that we find a miracle in a tale about the wine god. Both he and even his maenads often make use of miracles either to exhibit the power of the god or get themselves out of

⁵⁰ This myth appears as it is presented here in *Apollod. Bibl.* 3.5.1.

difficult situations as we see in this example. Dionysus takes advantage of his divine power to extract his troupe from their present dangers.

After the miracle, Dionysus begins the long process of exacting vengeance on the Thracian. As is characteristic of Dionysus, he chooses to punish Lycurgus with his most common and appropriate weapon: madness. Madness is the most fitting weapon for Dionysus since his essence is madness.⁵¹ A punishment of madness on the non-believer is an indication of the god's complete and total victory since he destroys the disbeliever by means of the aspect of the god which so offended the man in the first place.

Apollodorus best relates Lycurgus' destruction with two Greek words, “

,” (*Bibl.* 3.5.1). The god inflicted his retribution in the form of a human flaw: madness. Never does one find the wine god directly destroying disbelievers. Rather he uses human frailty against mortals. He seemingly downplays his own role in the person's destruction, and allows a person to bring about his own ruin by going to dangerous extremes.⁵² Lycurgus has attempted to stop the ritualized celebration of a natural human yearning: to release oneself from all the pressures and constraints of society. The rites of Dionysus may seem dangerous on the surface, but they allow outlets for these natural human desires of spiritual freedom. Both complete devotion and opposition to Dionysus are dangerous polar responses. We all must deal with the Dionysian aspects within ourselves in a moderate and controlled way. Only those with the foresight to accept Dionysus and yet control their Dionysian cravings seem to fare well in his myths. They are the models for dealing with this fundamentally human

⁵¹ Otto 143.

⁵² Albert Heinrichs, “He Has a God in Him': Human and Divine in the Modern Perception of Dionysus” *Masks of Dionysus* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press) 19.

dilemma. Thus, when Lycurgus attempts to completely oppose this natural human urge, he goes completely insane and destroys himself.

Once the god has overcome Lycurgus with mania, the king kills his own son Dryas by cutting off his limbs. In the myth, the reader hears that Lycurgus thinks he is shearing the branches off of a grape vine. The myth recalls the ritual of harvesting the grape and the death of Zagreus when he was ritually dismembered. Dryas himself has become another sacrificial victim just like Dionysus in the form of Zagreus. The grape vine is the most relevant plant since it is both related to the wine god and sheared every summer before reappearing anew in the following season. This myth comes much closer to describing what must have been the original source for the myth: the harvesting of the grapes. Greek farmers noticed how they ritualistically cut the grapes from the vine and prepared them for consumption. After a long period of time, they developed a myth to describe this process, the ritual of the summer harvest. In the myth the god Zagreus was slaughtered, dismembered, boiled, and eaten by the Titans. Lycurgus actually thinks he is cutting a vine apart. The connection between the ritual and the myth needs no explanation here since the myth has preserved the ritual it is describing. Lycurgus substitutes his son for the grape as a sacrificial victim. The myth again reinforces the belief in Dionysus' ritualistic death, his resurrection, and his association with wine and fertility. He is a dying-god born, slaughtered, consumed, and born anew just like the vine which returns every summer and brings new life through its ritual sacrifice. When the followers of Dionysus ritually sacrifice and consume the god, they effectively assure their rebirth in Hades just as the sacrifice of the vine guarantees next year's harvest.

They went mad. For their insolence Dionysus brings it about that they go insane. Again madness is a fitting punishment for those that shun the rites of the mad god. The wine god is once more victorious subjecting the women to exactly the things that wished to avoid: *entheos*. In a fit of insanity, the daughters flee and run all about the surrounding areas.

When he sees his daughters mad and wandering through the Argive territories, Proetus seeks a remedy. Melampus, a seer, promises a cure in exchange for a share of the Argive kingdom. When Proetus denies him, Dionysus causes the women to rave more furiously and brings out the other Argive women to join in the insanity. The women leave their homes and even destroy their own children. Aware of the potential of a complete breakdown in social structure, Proetus once more consults Melampus. However, Melampus now requires one portion of the kingdom for himself and one share for his brother Bias as compensation for his remedy. Proetus agrees, and Melampus sets off after the women. After chasing them for many miles, Melampus purifies the women, and they recover their senses. As further payment for this blessed remedy, Proetus gives two of his daughters in marriage to Melampus and his brother Bias.

E.R. Dodds suggests that Melampus cures the women with ritualistic cries and frenzied dancing.⁵⁵ This revelation fits well into a paradigm of Dionysian myths. The girls spurn the god and, therefore, go insane. Melampus then cures them by initiating the actual rites of the god's religion. Melampus, in a sense, does not offer a cure, but simply officially accepts Dionysus and validates his position as a deity by establishing the rites of his cult in Argos. In the end the people adopt all the rites of his cult such as the frenzied dancing and cries mentioned by Dodds. As in other myths, Dionysus rewards the

⁵⁵ E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press) 77.

man who spreads his cult and accepts the god. Therefore, Melampus is repaid for his favor to the god through the gift from Proetus. The myth itself suggests that Dionysus makes the condition worse in effect so that Melampus and his brother, the true believers, may receive a better reward at the end of this situation. Dionysus once more reveals himself as profitable to believers and dangerous to non-believers.

While Dionysus found many rulers hostile to him and his religion, there are some who openly accept the god. One of these kings is Oeneus of Aetolia in Greece.⁵⁶ When Dionysus comes to Aetolia, Oeneus welcomes him into his home and gives him all the necessary components of hospitality such as room and board. Oeneus shows his obedience for *xenia* and thus as an extension to all the laws of the gods. He is an example of a pious man. He invites Dionysus into his home and gives him all the proper respect the god deserves. So great is his reverence for Dionysus that he offers Dionysus relations with his wife Althaea. It seems that Oeneus notices Dionysus' infatuation with the woman and thus leaves the palace so that they might engage in relations. From their union, Althaea gives birth to a daughter Dejanira, who serves as a constant reminder of the god's sexual encounter with the king's wife. King Oeneus could not give Dionysus anything more. He has gone well beyond the necessities of the law of hospitality, which only requires that he offer the god food, clothing, shelter, and a bath. Greek listeners would have instantly recognized him as a reverent man, and for this the god rewards him.

Because of his sincerity and magnanimity, Dionysus presents him with the vine and instructs him how to cultivate it into wine. He also declares that henceforth the beverage that the plant renders shall be called “ ” in honor of his generous guest's name.

⁵⁶ This myth appears in two sources, with the bulk of it coming from Hyg. *Fab.* 129 and a very small reference in Apollodor. *Bibl.* 1.8.1.

Dionysus rewards him as he does all of his disciples. His gifts to the believers are as great as the destruction and terror he brings to non-believers.

The nature of the gift is significant as well. Earlier we saw that Dionysus offers the helmsman happiness through the cult of the god. In this case Dionysus presents Oeneus with a different means to happiness: wine. Wine as an incarnation of Dionysus releases men from their natural and social constraints. It allows men to partake of the god's divinity. While the offer of salvation is a promise of eternal life, wine is a means to happiness on earth. Through the consumption of the beverage, mortals can take on aspects of the divine on earth and transcend their human lives. In addition, wine drinkers are honoring the god through the consumption of the wine. Whenever they drink the wine, they share in his divinity and sacrificial death through the ingestion of the wine. As with the other followers of the god, their devotion to the rites of the god ensures them a special place in the afterlife.

Yet another story of Dionysus' journey through Greece involves his encounters in Attica.⁵⁷ When the god comes to Attica, he meets a man named Icarius. On account of his kind hospitality, the god presents Icarius and his daughter Erigone with the grape vine and teaches them how to cultivate wine. He then instructs them to bring this new invention to all other lands. In his first adventure, Icarius gives some of the wine to some shepherds. Unfamiliar with the potency of the drink, they gulp the wine and become thoroughly intoxicated. Having never experienced such a feeling before, they accuse Icarius of poisoning them and murder him. When her dog leads Erigone to the body of Icarius and she learns of her father's death, she hangs herself. According to Apollodorus,

⁵⁷ The narrative of this myth appears in *Apollod. Bibl.* 3.14.7 and *Hyg. Fab.* 130.

the story ends when the shepherds realize they have done wrong and give Icarius a proper burial.

In contrast, Hyginus' fable reveals more characteristics of the god: *Liber pater iratus Atheniensium filias simili poena afflixit (Fab. 130)*. In his fury Dionysus causes the women of Athens to go insane and begin hanging themselves just as Erigone did. Once more Dionysus inflicts a fitting punishment of madness on his detractors and their families. The Athenians send someone to seek an answer from the oracle of Apollo. The god informs them that they have neglected the deaths of the two pious followers of Dionysus. In response, the Athenians kill the shepherds and establish a festival day for Erigone. In addition having pity for the two faithful adherents, the god places both of them in the heavens as constellations.

The advocates of the god Icarius and his daughter Erigone are rewarded for their xenia and given a mission. They are to spread the gift of the god to others. While distributing this great gift of the god, they will also spread his fame and establish his divinity much to the liking of the wine god. By introducing men to wine, Icarius and his daughter are also establishing at least one of the rites of the god. When the detractors of the god murder Icarius, we once more see a sacrificial substitute for the god himself which calls to mind Dionysus' previous death. Just as Dionysus faces opposition when spreading his cult, so too does Icarius. Icarius and his daughter vicariously suffer for the god who would have had to encounter these attacks himself if it were not for the work of these two. Usually, Dionysus must endure the malicious attacks of dissenters while spreading his cult. In this myth Icarius and Erigone his faithful servants offer themselves as sacrificial substitutes for the god and introduce his cult to the other Greeks of Attica.

Despite the deaths of the two followers, they rise to eternal life through the establishment of an annual festival in their honor and by giving their names to a constellation. Dionysus honors these two devotees with a festival and eternal fame. For their faith he generously rewards them with the eternal life of fame as he is wont to do. Similarly, he severally crushes their enemies when the Athenians bring vengeance down on the guilty shepherds and eliminate the only opposition to his divinity and the expansion of his religion.

The most famous and renowned story of Dionysus' appearance in Greece is the story of the wine god's encounter with Pentheus the king of Thebes. This myth has two well established sources: Euripides' *Bacchae* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Of the two, Euripides gives a much more comprehensive narrative of the tale. His play opens when Dionysus first returns to Thebes. In the prologue Dionysus reminds the audience of his mother Semele's death during her affair with Zeus and the subsequent denial of his godhead by her faithless sisters. Because Semele's sisters (including Agave, the mother of Pentheus) have spread the rumor that Dionysus was not born of Zeus, the god has driven the sisters and the rest of the Theban women into the neighboring hills in a passionate, Bacchic frenzy. There they perform the rites and rituals of his religion. (*Bacch.* 1-34). As is typical, Dionysus strikes out against those that refuse to acknowledge his divinity and afflicts them with his own essence: madness. As the fundamental nature of the god, madness is a most suitable punishment for his detractors. Their affliction forces them to participate in the very rites they sought to avoid and grants Dionysus a complete victory over his dissenters. They have become not only participants but advocates for his cult. The god is no less ruthless towards his own kin driving his own

aunts to the hills with the rest of the Thebans. Right at the outset, Euripides' play fits our paradigm and reminds the listener as Malinowski would suggest that pride and vengeance are fundamental aspects of the god. Dionysus is quick to punish those who do not honor him as a deity and reward supporters on account of his strong sense of pride.

During a later scene in the first episode, the chorus gives a descriptive profile of the Dionysian follower and the most common ritual that the reveler performs.⁵⁸ Illustrating some of the sacred mysteries of Dionysus, one of the maidens in the Chorus of Eastern Bacchanal women speaks of women in fawn skins and a goat that has been torn apart (*Bacch.* 138-143). As mentioned earlier the female Bacchanals often dress themselves in fawn skins. Likewise, *sparagmos* and *omophagia*, the rituals of rendering apart a live mammal and consuming it, are well-known Dionysian rituals. This rite honors Dionysus by recalling harvesting of the grape, the venerated ritual which first spawned the myth of Dionysus' death and resurrection. As I have stated before, the devotees of his cult believe that the god is present in the sacrificial substitute. When she consumes the beast in the rite of *omophagia*, she not only recalls his death and rebirth but becomes intoxicated by the god's presence in the flesh and reaches a state of *entheos* whereby she takes on attributes of the god himself such as madness.⁵⁹ It is a hallmark of Dionysian religion, and Euripides' myth confirms and reminds the listener of this rite as the Charter Theory insists.

Pentheus, the new king of Thebes and first cousin of Dionysus, makes his first appearance in the play at line 215 when he sees Teiresias and his grandfather the former

⁵⁸ The chorus in *Bacchae* is composed of Eastern women that have been followers of Dionysus throughout his travels. In contrast, the Theban women are merely women that have been driven to madness by Dionysus and are convening on the top of Mount Cithaeron performing the Bacchic rituals normally performed by the real bacchantes, who compose the chorus.

⁵⁹ See footnote 35.

king Cadmus. The two old men are thoroughly decked out in the wares of a Dionysian bacchanal equipped with fawn skins and crowns of ivy and carrying the thyrsus, a pole wreathed in ivy and topped with a pine cone. The two old men are off to join the women on the mountain tops in honoring the new god since he has proven his divinity and deserves recognition (*Bacch.* 170-188). Pentheus, however, is distrustful of the new cult and believes that the women are instead partaking in lewd acts of drunkenness and sexual depravity. He is of the traditional Greek opinion of women believing they are passionate and intemperate beasts that are not capable of controlling themselves when they are not supervised by a male audience. They must be engaging in acts of shame and depravity as they have gone to the summits of the mountain without the prudence and temperance of a male chaperone. Teiresias and Cadmus try convince the young man to honor the god for Dionysus will reach great prominence in Greece. Likewise they assure him that the women on the mountain top are merely worshipping the new god. Nevertheless, Pentheus dismisses their pleas and sends a dispatch of troops to find this male Bacchant votary that has brought the vile cult to Thebes (*Bacch.* 355-357).

When the guards return, they bring with them a young man who claims to be a priest of Dionysus. He is, in fact, the god himself disguised as a young man. In this particular myth, the god comes in the form of a handsome young man. Pentheus attempts to question the man and find out about the new religion. The young man warns the king to accept this new faith or expect serious consequences. Nevertheless, Pentheus resists and orders his men to bind the boy in a cell.

Later, Dionysus escapes from the cell and tells the chorus how he tricked poor Pentheus. When Pentheus was taking the young man to his cell, he saw a bull standing

before the cell. The bull is the first sign to Pentheus of the god's divine identity. The god has offered Pentheus an example of his power as god in the hopes of changing the man's mind. Nevertheless, Pentheus attempts to attack the bull, and while the young man disappears, the whole prison catches fire. Such miracles occur in almost every Dionysian story. Like the bestial transformations, the miracles intend to express his divine nature by showing off elements of the god like the power to perform bestial transformations and ignite a building at will.

At this point in the drama, an irate Pentheus reappears to find a messenger awaiting him. The messenger proceeds to tell the king of his encounter with the bacchant women in the mountains. He saw different women led by Autonoe, Ino, and Agave the sisters of Semele performing various miracles. One bacchant struck a rock with her thyrsus, and it released a fountain of water. Another scratched the dirt with her nails and drew forth draughts of white milk. A sweet smell of wine wafted through the air (*Bacch.* 704-711). All of these miracles indicated the god's presence and made a profound statement about the validity of his divinity. The messenger said that upon seeing him and some other men the women chased after them and ritualistically slaughtered a great number of the town's cattle. The messenger also saw the women licking the blood from the fallen cows trying to consume the vitality of the god as the ritual of *omophagia* suggests. Now the less subtle rituals of Dionysus' cult emerge such as *sparagmos* and *omophagia* further announcing the full fledged arrival of Dionysus in Thebes. In addition, the townspeople could not injure them with their spears or any other conventional weapons. Dionysus had performed a miracle and prevented his worshippers from any injury at the hands of the Thebans. This show of power had a strong effect on the messenger who begs Pentheus to

honor and venerate this new and powerful god (*Bacch.* 760-774). The messenger seems to understand precisely what Pentheus does not. Dionysus' miracles have provided enough evidence for the messenger to accept the god. He also assures Pentheus that the god gives those who accept him the grief releasing vine which produces wine and tells Pentheus that without wine man has no hope of love or joy for all comes from the presence of this life giving plant. From communion with god, man finds happiness, joy, and peace and he has no hope of finding these pleasantries in the absence of the grape. Nevertheless, Pentheus cannot let go of his stubborn and traditional views of women. He assumes these weak minded women have merely been led astray as women often are by this cunning young prophet of the east. Nothing divine or worthy of veneration could have brought about the present condition of the Theban women. They merely need to be disciplined and returned to their proper sphere: the house.

For Pentheus, these women represent a great problem. They are neglecting their domestic duties. While they parade around the mountain tops in a sort of ecstatic frenzy, their duties at home remain unaccomplished. Babies and children at home require the presence of these women for their very survival. Likewise, in the absence of the women, no one is taking care of the enormous task of weaving. As Richard Seaford suggests, Dionysus's presence offers a problem for the Greek household and the traditional order of things. If Dionysus is not honored, the women will roam the countryside in madness neglecting their domestic tasks. However, if the god is to be rightly worshipped, the women must be allowed out into the public sphere to join in the festival. The only reasonable solution is to accept the god and permit women to worship him for a short

period of time under the supervision of men.⁶⁰ Pentheus cannot see this as a solution because he is too opposed to the idea of women in the public sphere. He fails to see that accepting the rites of Dionysus would actually pacify this reign of madness. If he were to accept the god's divinity, the Thebans might create a festival within which the god is to be worshipped. By housing the god's worship in a ritual, Pentheus could provide a male overseer to the woman's cult and avoid the complete breakdown of the city's sexual hierarchy. Instead, he feels honoring the god would only encourage this behavior. Therefore, he believes he must rid Thebes of this problem immediately.

The stranger, Dionysus, convinces Pentheus to dress himself as a Bacchant and to spy on the reveling women. The young man decks Pentheus out completely in the appropriate fawn skin and ivy leaves and sends him on his way. Having climbed a pine tree, Pentheus hopes to catch the women in the midst of acts of sexual depravity. Instead the loud voice of Dionysus is heard encouraging the women to destroy the one that opposes the cult of the god. The women, including Pentheus' mother Agave and his aunts, fall on the king and tear him apart limb by limb. This sacrifice of Pentheus, who is dressed like Dionysus in fawn skins, not only commemorates but honors the god. Like the bull Pentheus becomes a sacrificial substitute for Dionysus wearing his clothes and undergoing the same destruction as Zagreus. Dionysus' vengeance serves a two fold purpose of proving his godhead to the people and honoring himself in the process.

Another myth about Dionysus' arrival in Greece describes how the daughters of Minyas reject the arrival of the cult of Dionysus in Thebes. While all the other girls were abandoning their work, putting on their fawn skins, crowning themselves with garlands,

⁶⁰ Richard Seaford, "Dionysus as Destroyer of the Household: Homer, Tragedy, and the Polis" *Masks of Dionysus* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press) 137.

and taking up the thyrsus, the daughters of Minyas sat in their house in defiance continuing to work the loom.⁶¹ Early in the account, Ovid relates numerous aspects that are identified with the cult of Dionysus: fawn skins, garlands, bands of women leaving behind their work at the loom, burning incense, and carrying the phallic image of fertility the thyrsus, (*Met.* 4.5-4.11).⁶²

The Greeks seemed to fear that their women could be most easily brought into the cult of Dionysus on account of their intemperance. Unlike men the Greeks believed the women could not control their passions. Because of their intemperance, women are much more easily persuaded to join his cult of madness than men. Likewise, the poet gives the reader a virtual laundry list of aspects of his religion. He reintroduces the reader to fawn skins and garlands, the appropriate attire for a bacchic ritual. All signs and images remind the listener of the nature of Dionysus' religion and the rituals therein. Returning to the daughters of Minyas, Ovid indicates that they have decided to skip the festival and attend to their domestic work at the loom passing the time by telling stories.

After a three hundred and thirty verse sojourn in which the sisters tell various myths including the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, the poet returns to the myth about the daughters of Minyas once more indicating the severity of their disobedience saying, *spernitque deum festumque profanat* (*Met.* 4.390). Although the verbs are singular, he clearly intends the subject of the two to be the sisters since they are the only ones who have refused to attend the festival to Dionysus. These young women have not only rejected the god but even profaned his very festival by their absence. For the ancient reader, this line would serve as a foreshadowing for the impending punishment by the

⁶¹ The entire account of Minyas' Daughters can be found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 4.1-4.425

⁶² The thyrsus is a rod wrapped in ivy leaves and crowned with a pine cone which represents the god's powers of fertility. Morford and Lenardon 292.

god. All of a sudden a great many manifestations of the god emerge in their presence. First they hear horns, cymbals, and drums all associated with the wine god. Next, a sweet scent fills the air, and they can hear the howls of various wild beasts throughout their house (*Met.* 4.391-4.404). Dionysus announces his arrival with music and many miracles such as the appearance of vines, ivy, and even wild animals. Finally, the god exacts his revenge turning the impious daughters of Minyas into bats. Even in the punishment, one can see telltale signs and characteristics of Dionysus. The wine god often uses transformations to punish the impiety of non-believers as he did in the *Homeric Hymn to Dionysus*.

The myth of King Midas is one of the best known stories in all of mythology.⁶³ Prior to this story the Thracian poet Orpheus, an initiate of the Bacchic mysteries, came to Phrygia and introduced Midas to the rites of Dionysus' cult. Apparently, Orpheus had been a priest of Dionysus' cult and spent time as a missionary expanding his cult in the east. Therefore, when his people bring to him the drunken, old satyr Silenus, Midas recognizes him as a follower of the god. The king knows how the satyrs and the rest of the god's entourage conduct themselves. Instead of confronting Silenus with hostility as so many of the other kings who encountered Dionysus and his troupe had previously done, he hails the old man and offers him the appropriate accommodations. In addition, he holds a ten day festival in the guest's honor. Midas does not stop with his duties of *xenia* but showers the man with the honors of a festival of merriment which is very much to his liking.

After this festival, Midas gladly returns the old satyr to his friend the god Dionysus. As a show of gratitude, the wine god generously offers the king any gift of his choice.

⁶³ Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 11.85-11.145

Foolishly, Midas requests the power to turn anything that he touches into pure gold. Reluctantly the god grants his wish and departs. Midas soon learns that he has made a serious mistake for he cannot even eat or drink on account of the potency of this gift. When Midas confronts him, Dionysus is willing to restore him to his former health. Midas showed him kindness and honored him as a god. For this reason Dionysus has pity on him and brings him back to health.

While Dionysus is a redeeming god with the power of salvation, the person still must make amends and acknowledge his sin before the god forgives him. Ovid reveals this to the reader: *Da veniam, Lenaeae pater! Peccavimus inquit, sed Miserere, precor, speciosoque eripe damno* (*Met.* 11.132-11.133). Midas admits his sin, and Dionysus grants him forgiveness and redemption. In order to cure his affliction, Dionysus tells him to wash himself in the river near the town of Sardis: *simul elue crimen* (*Met.* 11.141). Just as Dionysus punishes those who are disbelievers and rewards his advocates, he only offers redemption and salvation to those who acknowledge his divinity. Like the helmsman mentioned in the *Homeric Hymn to Dionysus*, Midas recognizes Dionysus as a god and honors him. Since he recognizes and honors Dionysus' divinity, the god offers him a form of redemption.

Dionysus gives further proof of his redemptive nature when he brings his dead mother Semele from Hades to reign with the gods on Mount Olympus.⁶⁴ Reportedly, she also changes her name from Semele to Thyone when she becomes a deity. Just as one sees in so many other mythical examples, Dionysus is exercising his redemptive power in this story. His mother, who committed no crime except that of being deceived by Hera, was killed and defamed in her own home city Thebes. For this reason Dionysus feels the

⁶⁴ This account appears in Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.5.3.

need to set things right. He pulls her from whatever region of Hades in which she is residing and elevates her to the level of the divine. She has suffered much and undeservedly so. In addition, her suffering was indirectly on behalf of the god. Therefore, Dionysus feels compelled to offer her salvation and his everlasting gift of redemption, which he presents to all of his faithful followers.

As I mentioned at the outset, I hoped to use Malinowski's Charter Theory to examine eleven different myths from the Dionysian canon to illustrate the widespread applicability of Malinowski's theory. In this analysis, I attempted to show that the myths of Dionysus serve two major functions for the Greek audience. Firstly, they validate beliefs about the nature of the wine god himself. Specifically, they remind us of four essential characteristics of Dionysus. He is a god that often makes use of bestial transformations and miracles to announce and prove his divinity. In addition, he is extremely prideful and known to offer salvation to those who honor and recognize his divinity and the gravest destruction to disbelievers. The salvation he offers is twofold. He gives men freedom from their daily troubles through his grief-releasing vine as the messenger mentions to Pentheus in the *Bacchae*. In addition, his cult enables men to achieve life everlasting through ritual communion in the wine consumption and the rite of *omophagia*. In the process the participant ingests his divine vitality and is assured a place in the "bacchic meadow."

The second purpose of Dionysus' myths is to charter certain rituals and beliefs of his cult. His myths confirm the practices of *sparagmos* and *omophagia*, the ritual communion by which the bacchant becomes *entheos*. Similarly, his myths can be seen as a validation of the ritual of wine consumption practiced by the Athenians during the "the

Feast of Cups” at the Anthesteria. Finally, his myths confirm the bacchant expressions of *enthusis* through music and dance. Through the playing of instruments and dancing, the Bacchants express the presence of the god within them.

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