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A show for Dionysus

Since Nietzsche published *The Birth of Tragedy* in 1872 Dionysus has been the dominant Greek deity in the imaginations of scholars. His glamorous and ambiguous personality has stimulated a great deal of research and interpretation, recently intensified by the discovery of new evidence for Dionysiac mystery cult.[1] Not all the factors at work have been academic and intellectual; in the 1930s, for example, the power of Dionysus could be strongly felt in the rallies orchestrated by Hitler and Mussolini (R. P. Winnington-Ingram wrote his pioneering *Euripides and Dionysus* under the influence of his response to fascism).[2] Since the Second World War Dionysus has found a new place in theatrical life, largely because *Bacchae* has seemed to actors, directors and audiences to need so little mediation as a play for the times, in which drug culture, rock music, sex and violence, the many varieties of modern ecstatic cult, and even football hysteria all find recognisable analogues.[3]

Yet despite the intensive and brilliant work devoted to Dionysus in his ancient context[4] we still have to face some obstinate puzzles. If tragedy at

1 For reception see Henrichs (1984), (1993), (1994); Bierl (1991) 13–20. For a review of recent findings on mystery cult see Bremmer (1994) 84–97.

2 Cf. p. 269 below, on Auden and Kallman. On Winnington-Ingram see M. L. West's account (1994) 584–5: 'There is no explicit reference in *Euripides and Dionysus* to the events of the thirties. But in his [unpublished] memoir he states outright that the book was haunted by the Nuremberg rallies. Euripides' view of Dionysus, as he portrays it, is in some degree the counterpart of his own view of Hitler.' As West points out, Winnington-Ingram and E. R. Dodds were in close touch, and each influenced the other's work; Dodds's commentary on *Bacchae* (first published in 1944) and his *The Greeks and the Irrational* (1951) have both contributed powerfully to the reading of Dionysus in the second half of the twentieth century. Cf. Lloyd-Jones (1982) 174–5.

3 Cf. Cartledge (1993) 176: 'Euripides' *Bacchae* has been presented as a hymn of counter-cultural liberationist rebellion' (on a production at the Berliner Schaubühne in 1974); an article in *The Independent on Sunday* for 27 August 1995 compares the 'hysterical atmosphere' described by participants in the 'Charismatic' Nine O'Clock Service in Sheffield with accounts of Dionysiac worship.

4 See Bibliographical Note for surveys, esp. by Bremmer (1994) and Henrichs (1996).

Athens was originally and essentially under the sign of Dionysus, though other deities would appropriate drama for their own festivals in due course (see Ch. 9, pp. 223–4), what was it about this art form that was particularly Dionysiac? Was there a logic in the Athenian construction of Dionysus that made him uniquely appropriate as god of the drama, and especially of tragic drama? (Comedy has seemed to pose less acute problems because of its more obvious appropriateness for performance at festivals in honour of the wine-god.) Was it a matter of stories about Dionysus shaping the mythological groundwork and plot patterns of tragedy, as used to be the standard view,[5] or of the god's symbolic characteristics – as the Other, the outsider, sexually ambivalent, transformative, elusive[6] – making him good to think with, or of the distinctively dramatic features of his rituals (the mask, ecstatic possession, mystic initiation)?[7] These factors are not easily separable and cannot safely be treated as strict alternatives to one another in any explanatory model. All must be relevant in some way, but there is something to be said for trying to put the old questions in a new perspective, by thinking first of what made Dionysus good to perform with (and through). In this chapter I discuss two questions, first, what was common to the different performance elements at the City Dionysia,[8] and second, whether Dionysus offered something that no other deity did, or could have done.

DIONYSIAC PERFORMANCE

The Great or City Dionysia at Athens, the most fully developed and ambitious concentration of Dionysiac performance known to the fifth century, had a great deal to do with dithyramb, a poetic composition sung and danced in honour of Dionysus by choruses of fifty men or boys,[9] as well as with tragedy, and in due course (from 486) comedy was prominent, too, with a day of the festival devoted to comic competition. As for tragedy itself, at any rate all through this early period, it was inseparable from satyr drama, with the same playwrights competing in the same event with tragedies and a satyr play. The common denominator in all these lyric and dramatic performances was song and dance, and among them it was satyr play that was the most obviously Dionysiac element, since the chorus of

5 Cf. e.g. Pickard-Cambridge (1927) 165–6, restated by Seaford (1994) 272 with n. 165. For discussion see pp. 46–7 below.

6 Discussed below, pp. 44–53. Cf. also Chs. 1 and 10.

7 Discussed below, pp. 47–53. Cf. also Chs. 1 and 10.

8 For the arrangements at the City Dionysia see Chs. 1 and 3; much less is known about the Lenaea, where tragedy was in any case a late arrival.

9 See Zimmermann (1992) for details.

satyrs, far more than any other choral group, was explicitly and by definition part of the god's entourage, and satyrs of various types, as we know from vase-paintings, had been associated with Dionysus well before the dramatic festivals were established.[10] The meaning of tragic performance – its place in the festival, in democratic ideology, in the teaching of the citizens – needs therefore to be approached with satyr play in mind. Each set of three tragedies, whether or not they were thematically linked, was followed by a (culminating?) short play in which the chorus was made up of Dionysus' devoted followers, the playful, violent, sensual creatures, part-human, part-animal, whose dancing and singing were in vehement contrast with the tone, style, music and costume of the choruses of tragedy. But what is important is that the *same performers* provided the show:[11] it was not a question of a few clowns or unattached music-makers offering incidental entertainment as a relief from the seriousness of tragedy.

A favourite way of defining satyr play is to call it an 'after-piece',[12] but perhaps any term which suggests that satyr play was some kind of addition is misleading, and the readier we are to think of it as a *culmination* of each tragedian's competitive entry the more sense we may be able to make of the fact that these plays were in some ways so like tragedy – in range of vocabulary, metrical style, cast of characters and so on. The chorus might indeed be made up of entertainingly uninhibited creatures of the wild, but the heroes themselves were allowed to retain their heroic dignity, and there was nothing of the hilarious obscenity and grotesquerie of comedy in the way they were made to behave.

What then was satyr play for? To give the big popular audience a light and enjoyable performance to look forward to, with plenty of opportunities for the display of virtuoso skills? To 'bring them back to their senses', to adapt a phrase from Tony Harrison, the only modern writer to use satyr play as a model for live drama of his own,[13] and thereby to make the audience strongly aware of their own animal spirits, their interest in food

[10] See Buschor (1943); Brommer (1959); Bérard & Bron (1989); Lissarrague (1990); Hedreen (1994); Green (1994) 38–46 with n. 43.

[11] The implication of the ancient didascalic record is that each set of tragedies and satyr play (*tragikē didaskalia*) constituted a single entry, with the same chorusmen taking part throughout. This is certainly the view of most scholars: see e.g. Winkler (1990b) 44. Seaford (1984) 4 speculates that different choruses may have performed the tragedies and the satyr play, but he cites no evidence, and his argument is mainly designed to explain why the Pronomos Vase [7] shows only eleven chorusmen plus Silenus, on which see Pickard-Cambridge (1988) 236. Green (1994) 10, with n. 23, also considers the possibility that different choruses performed tragedy and satyr play, but on no stronger grounds than a guess as to the stamina of the performers.

[12] E.g. Seaford (1984) 1. Cf. Nagy (1990) 391: 'a subordinated attachment of tragedy'.

[13] *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*, first performed at Delphi in 1988, followed by performances

and drink, sex, jokes, as well as hard political or moral or existential problems? To worship Dionysus? That is, to enact the success of the followers of Dionysus in escaping the wicked ogre, or whatever power has kept them in servitude, and in celebrating the freedom to dance for their god in the band of devotees (*thiasos*)?[14]

Audience expectation, as Peter Burian points out (Ch. 8 below), will shape perceptions. When ancient Athenian audiences saw *Oresteia*, or *Trojan Women* and the plays that went with it, they knew that a satyr play was still to come *with the same chorus and actors performing*, and the total meaning of the show must have been construed in the light of that knowledge. Tony Harrison puts it more eloquently: 'With the loss of these [satyr] plays we are lacking important clues to the wholeness of the Greek imagination, and its ability to absorb and yet not be defeated by the tragic. In the satyr play, that spirit of celebration, held in the dark solution of tragedy, is precipitated into release, and a release into the worship of Dionysus who presided over the whole dramatic festival.'[15] The only difficulty with this attractive formulation, which rightly stresses the interconnexion between the different elements, is that its image of 'release' leaves us guessing about the tragic parts of the *tragikē didaskalia* (the total set of plays offered by each tragedian): in what sense may *they* have been felt to be 'worship of Dionysus'?

The early history of performance at the Dionysia cannot be used to throw light on the question because it is a notoriously unclear and disputed area, with almost no reliable evidence to work from.[16] One of the few facts that is definitely known is that satyrs in Dionysiac cult comfortably predate the introduction of plays of any kind into the Dionysia,[17] but there is no record of the process whereby the tragic competition came to be defined as a contest of three tragedies and one satyr play. A famous passage in ch. 4 of Aristotle's *Poetics* (1449a20) implies that tragic plays of the kind that have survived were the successors of humbler dramas with small plots and ridiculous diction, having developed from something[18] vaguely described as *saturikon*, 'relating to satyrs' (i.e. less elevated, more boisterous?), but the same chapter also traces the origin of tragedy to those who 'led off the dithyramb' (1449a1), and other sources, especially Horace (*Ars poetica*

of an adapted version in 1990 at the National Theatre in London and at Salts Mill in Yorkshire; revived in 1991. See Harrison (1991) and Astley (1991).

[14] See Seaford (1984) 33–44 for an account of the typical themes of satyric drama; Simon (1982a) for vase-paintings.

[15] Harrison (1991) xi.

[16] For details see Pickard-Cambridge (1988) ch. 2; Csapo and Slater (1995) ch. 2 with pp. 412–13.

[17] For bibliography see n. 10 above; Seaford (1984) 5–10.

[18] The vagueness is due to the absence of a noun for *saturikon* to agree with.

220–4), claim that satyr play was added to the competition *after* tragedy had become established at the Dionysia. As scholars have suggested,[19] there may be ways of reconciling these traditions, but for our purposes what matters is that in the fifth century, at any rate, satyr play was treated as an intrinsic element of the *tragikē didaskalia*. Perhaps there is a clue to this kind of thinking in Plutarch's comment about Ion of Chios and his criticism of the social manner of his contemporary Pericles: 'Ion apparently expects that virtue, like a complete *tragikē didaskalia*, should not be without a satyric element' (*Pericles* 5).

But this pattern did not last: satyr play began to detach itself from the 'three-plus-one' formula, and at some point in the fourth century a new arrangement was introduced, with a single satyr play starting off the tragic performances but not itself forming part of the contest.[20] Already in the fifth century there had been pointers in the same direction: when tragedy was introduced at the Lenaea in the 430s satyr plays were not included in the contest, and when Euripides staged *Alcestis* in 438 in the place of a satyr play this perhaps reflected a perception on the part of performers and audiences that the old tradition was not inviolable.[21] It is hard not to link this trend with the development of an acting repertoire and with an interest on the part of actors in staging revivals at the rural festivals of plays that had had a particular success at the City Dionysia (cf. Ch. 9 below, p. 213). By the time revivals of 'classics' were established at the city festival itself, as part of the competition (from 386), these were performances of single tragedies, prompted, it seems, by the professional concerns and aspirations of actors. There is no reason why we should think that such changes came about because satyr play was perceived to be a 'quaint', 'primitive' survival from some folk tradition: the surviving samples are in fact extremely sophisticated pieces of writing, and the form did not go wholly out of fashion: experiments were made later with new kinds of satyr play and separate competitions.[22] But once the 'three-plus-one' pattern had been superseded, the definition of tragedy must have been significantly affected. Certainly the classical canon that evolved in late antiquity did not include satyr play as an automatic concomitant of tragedy, and notions of the tragic in more modern times have normally been unaffected by the satyric element. This makes it all the harder for us to test the idea that this might be the piece of the jigsaw that tells most about Dionysus.

19 For recent suggestions see Seaford (1984) 11–12; Nagy (1990) 384–5.
20 Cf. Pickard-Cambridge (1988) 123–5, 291; Csapo and Slater (1995) 41–2.
21 Cf. Green (1994) 38, 45–8, with n. 43.
22 Seaford (1984) 25–6. The development of comedy must have had some bearing on these changes.

For the modern reader, trying to understand how performance at the Dionysia communicated itself to contemporary audiences, it is peculiarly frustrating to have no surviving satyr play known to have been composed for the same year's Dionysia as a surviving tragedy; Euripides' *Cyclops*, for all we know, may not even have been meant for performance at Athens at all,[23] and no other play survives in complete form or with a date. But there must be something to be teased out from the few fragmentary texts that have come down from antiquity.

François Lissarrague[24] has interpreted this evidence in the light of what vase-paintings from the sixth and fifth centuries have to tell about the satyrs and their world ('an imaginary world, which is constellated around Dionysos' . . . 'satyrs reproduce the "normal" values and activities of Greek males by transforming them, according to a set of rules that are never random'). He points out that satyric drama works on the same lines:

> The location is often rural, pastoral, or exotic, a liminal territory far from cities or royal palaces. The themes seem to have been quite conventional. We find all kinds of ogres, monsters, or magicians, and the satyrs are often their captives. Sometimes they try to pass for athletes. Frequently the subject of the play is tied to a discovery or an invention: of wine, for example, or music, metallurgy, fire, or the first woman, Pandora. That is, everything takes place as if satyrs were a means to explore human culture through a fun-house mirror; the satyrs are antitypes of the Athenian male citizenry and present us with an inverted anthropology (or andrology) of the ancient city-state.

Lissarrague argues persuasively that the dynamic interplay between satyr play and tragedy depends on the presence of satyrs, required by the nature of the chorus, in the serious world of the heroes:

> The recipe is as follows: take one myth, add satyrs, observe the result. The joke is one of incongruity, which generates a series of surprises. Euripides' *Kyklops*, for example, depicts the progressive rediscovery of wine and the rituals for drinking which were so basic to Athenian culture . . . the presence of satyrs within the myth subverts tragedy by shattering its cohesiveness. Tragedy poses fundamental questions about the relations between mortals and gods, or it reflects on such serious issues as sacrifice, war, marriage, or law. Satyric drama, by contrast, plays with culture first by distancing it and then reconstructing it through its antitypes, the satyrs. It does not seek to settle a controversy, nor to bring man face to face with his fate or the gods. It plays in a different key, with the displacement, distortion and reversal of what

23 Easterling (1994) 79–80. The popularity of satyr plays on vases from Sicily and South Italy in the early fourth century is worth noting.
24 Lissarrague (1990) 233–6.

constitutes the world and culture of men; it reintroduces distance and reinserts Dionysos in the center of the theater.

A more holistic view based on the strong likelihood that the same performers participated in these different kinds of show might suggest that tragedy and satyr play, taken together, offer a model for holding contradiction in some kind of equipoise: if satyr play works through distancing and displacement so too does tragedy, with its heroic – and marginal – settings and characters (cf. Part II below). The point might be not so much to contrast 'serious' and 'distorted' as to juxtapose two fields or worlds of experience, neither literally represented but each enacted through performance in such a way as to make sense for Dionysus as well as for his worshippers. ('Playing in a different key' is perhaps the most helpful of Lissarrague's metaphors.) This might be another way of putting what Harrison means by 'the wholeness of the Greek imagination' (p. 39 above).

Albert Henrichs[25] has recently stressed the enormous importance of the dance, or rather of *choreia*, the combination of song and dance performed by a *choros*, for an understanding of the Dionysiac element and ambience of tragedy. His study of the way in which choruses draw attention to their own performance is extremely suggestive for the argument that I am presenting here, if we explore its implications when applied to satyr choruses. The basic premise of Henrichs' discussion is that

> choral dancing in ancient Greek culture always constitutes a form of ritual performance, whether the dance is performed in the context of the dramatic festival or in other cultic and festive settings. The external setting in the sanctuary of Dionysos Eleuthereus and in the distinctly cultic ambience of the City Dionysia reinforces the ritual function of the choral dances in tragedy.

When choruses comment self-referentially on their own performance as dancers Henrichs argues that they do so

> not only in their capacity as characters in the drama but also as performers: while emphasising their choral identity, they temporarily expand their role as dramatic characters. In fact they acquire a more complex dramatic identity as they perceive their choral dance as an emotional reaction to the event onstage and assume a ritual posture which functions as a link between the cultic reality of the City Dionysia and the imaginary religious world of the tragedies.[26]

Henrichs mentions in passing a couple of examples from satyr play which can be compared with the phenomenon that he studies in detail for tragedy,[27] but the comparison can be taken further. A closer look at some

[25] Henrichs (1995) 56–111. [26] Henrichs (1995) 59; cf. Easterling (1993a).
[27] Henrichs (1995) 92, n. 14.

passages might help us to see that here too the choral references have a ritual function, and that there is an understandable logic in making the final play of each set the one in which the performers are most identifiably Dionysiac.[28]

In Sophocles' *Trackers* the satyrs, alarmed and mystified by the sounds that turn out later to be the music of the newly-invented lyre, do a lot of kicking and jumping to rouse up whoever is making the noise (217–20), probably drawing attention with their 'I'll make the ground ring with my jumps and kicks' to the fact that they are performing the special satyr dance, the *sikinnis*.[29] The commotion brings out the nymph Cyllene, who contrasts the row they are making with the proper Dionysiac atmosphere:

> Wild creatures, why have you come rushing so noisily to this green and wooded hill, haunt of wild beasts? What are these tricks? What a change from the way you used to serve your master – when clad in fawnskin and holding high the thyrsus you used to follow along with the nymphs and a crowd of goatherds, singing the holy song as you escorted the god!

This is analogous to *Cyclops* 35ff., where Silenus introduces the satyr chorus by drawing attention to their performance. He has been describing the miserable and degrading life that he and the satyrs live as captives of Polyphemus: he has to sweep out the Cyclops' cave, while the satyrs look after his flocks. And now they are arriving with the sheep: 'What's this? Surely not the same beat of the *sikinnis* – not the beat you used to dance to when you went along to Althaea's place, Bacchus' band of supporters, sexily swaying to the lyre-songs?' This sets the tone for a typical satyrs' entrance, but instead of a cheery, drunken or lecherous song-and-dance we get the Chorus first preoccupied with driving the straying sheep then gloomily contrasting their present state with the true Dionysiac life-style: 'No Bromios here, no choral dancing, no bacchants with their thyrsuses, no rhythm of the drums, no freshly bubbling wine by flowing springs! I'm not on Nysa with the Nymphs, singing "Iacchos! Iacchos!" for Aphrodite, flying after her with the white-footed bacchants as I used to do.'

In each case the action of the play moves towards liberation and ultimate triumph or celebration. In *Cyclops* the satyrs will at last resume the service of their true master Dionysus (709); the ending of *Trackers* is not preserved, but we can guess, from Apollo's promise that Silenus and the satyrs will be

[28] Aristotle, *Poetics* 1449a2–3 says that the (tragic) *poiēsis* in early times was *saturikē* and *orchēstikōtera* 'satyric and more dependent on dance'.
[29] On this dance see Seaford on Eur. *Cyclops* 37. There is a further reference to kicking at Soph. *Trackers* 237.

freed' if they find his lost cattle (164–5), that they are in a typical state of enslavement to the wrong master and are longing to return to Dionysus.

There are other fragments that seem to show the same preoccupation with performance: in a lyric attributed by scholars to Aeschylus' play *Prometheus the Fire-Kindler* the playful references to dancing and singing by nymphs celebrating Prometheus' discovery of fire may well be part of a satyr chorus (fr. 204b Radt, especially vv. 4–5: 'often shall one of the Naiads, hearing me tell this tale, pursue me by the blazing hearth'); and there is a well-known song ascribed to Pratinas, a contemporary of Aeschylus who was celebrated for his satyr plays, which is all about choral dancing and the right kind of musical accompaniment, and is best understood as part of a satyr play on the strength of lines like these:

> Mine, mine is Bromios: it's for me to shout and stamp, racing over the mountains with the Naiads ...[30]

If we now go back to Henrichs' discussion of choral self-referentiality in tragedy we can see more clearly that there is a functional similarity between the choruses of tragedy and of satyr play in the references both make to their own performance. And the implication of this similarity is that the satyr play, by virtue of its placing at the end of the sequence of four plays, its typical plot pattern, and the identity of its chorus, represents the performers ultimately getting nearest to their 'true' cultic role of Dionysus-worshippers.[31]

THE UNIQUENESS OF DIONYSUS

The introduction of a specifically dramatic element into some of the festivals of Dionysus was an event of incalculable significance for Western culture, and thence for the history of culture in general. Not surprisingly, scholars have been attracted by the idea that there must have been something – if only we could put our finger on it – about the way Dionysus was understood by the Athenians of the late sixth and early fifth centuries that would account for this extraordinary happening. But Dionysus, known from the *Homeric Hymns* onwards as a god of outstanding elusiveness, tends to resist scholarly capture. It may be salutary to enumerate his main qualities

[30] *PMG* 1 (708) = Athenaeus XIV 617b–f. This fragment has been variously understood, and its date is disputed. Cf. Campbell (1991) 321–3 for text and bibliography; Zimmermann (1992) 124–5. Another relevant text is the fragment from an Oeneus play, printed by Radt in the *dubia et spuria* of Sophocles (= fr. 1130); cf. Lloyd-Jones (1996) 418–21. Here the satyrs advertise themselvs as skilled in 'songs' (12) and 'dancing' (15).

[31] Could this help to explain why satyr plays are more often represented on vases than tragedies?

and spheres of influence, and to see if any of this evidence will help to elucidate his patronage of drama.

From literature, art, cult titles and records of cult practice it is clear that Dionysus was identified by Athenians as (i) god of wine and wine miracles, who gave them the vine and taught them how to make wine; (ii) god of wild nature, particularly associated with luxuriant plant growth and with some wild animals (lion, snake, bull), and in cult honoured by phallophoric processions displaying the god's power over sexuality; (iii) god of ecstatic possession, characterised by the behaviour of women worshippers taking on the role of maenads; (iv) god of the dance, in company with satyrs and nymphs and/or maenads; (v) god of masking and disguise, often represented on vases by a mask as the object of worship; (vi) god of mystic initiation, who offers his worshippers the possibility of blessing in an afterlife. These categories of course overlap, and all are relevant for a discussion of Dionysus as theatre god. We also have to pay attention to the myths of Dionysus, some of which emphasised his 'otherness', his supposed arrival from outside Greece and the introduction of his rites in the face of opposition from god-fighters like Pentheus and Lycurgus, while others associated his gift of the vine and wine-making with madness and destructiveness as well as with liberation, and another (secret) category told the stories of dismemberment and rebirth that 'explained' the Dionysiac mysteries. Then there is the historical evidence for the development in importance of his festivals as the democracy became firmly established, and the seemingly strong link between the worship of Dionysus and the self-definition of the polis.

Given this wealth of possibly relevant material can we hope to identify what (if anything) made Dionysus uniquely appropriate as god of drama? He was not, after all, the only dancing god, or the only god of ecstatic possession, and not the only one associated with the mask or with mysteries.[32] The best we can do is to set out the considerations that any plausible explanation must take into account.

1. Scholars used to approach tragedy with an interest in origins high on their agenda, undeterred by the fact that the scraps of evidence surviving from antiquity and the Byzantine period are quite untestable as authentic record of the earliest phases in the history of tragedy. Even Aristotle's

[32] Dancing is associated with (e.g.): Pan, Artemis, Apollo; ecstatic possession with Pan and Cybele; masking with Artemis; mysteries with Demeter. Dionysus' powers of self-transformation did not set him apart, either: other divinities from Zeus downwards were believed to have the habit of taking on different disguises and are often so represented in myth. And boundary-crossing was a speciality of Hermes as well as of Dionysus.

famous pronouncements in *Poetics*, which cannot be ignored, can hardly go back to documentary evidence from the late sixth century.[33] And in any case, there is no reason why a complex and continuously developing institution should be best explained in terms of an account of its origins. Theatre was a dynamic phenomenon, and we should expect its ritual, social, political and artistic functions to change rapidly during a period of intense activity and experimentation like the fifth and early fourth centuries.[34]

The plays themselves, supplemented by what we know from titles and fragments of lost plays and from vase-paintings, are always going to be the major source of evidence. Here too it is important not to look for too neat a model. The surviving complete plays (with the probable exception of *Rhesus*; see Ch. 9 below) cover a period of only about seventy years (from 472, the date of *Persians*), representing only a small fraction of the output of those years, and even though the supplementary evidence takes us back a little earlier, as well as onward into later generations,[35] we can hardly expect to construct a perfectly balanced story about the relation between ritual, myth and the changing structures of the polis.[36]

The theory, for example, which makes the sacred history of Dionysus the original subject matter of the plays put on in his honour,[37] is in danger of being too restrictive in this way. Nor is it based on ancient authority.[38] There is plenty of evidence, of course, that the Greeks composed hymns for performance on ritual occasions which celebrated the attributes and achievements of particular gods or told cautionary tales of their wrongful treatment by men (always duly punished), but so far as we know the plays composed

33 For discussion of such evidence as there is see Pickard-Cambridge (1927); Else (1967); Privitera (1991); Csapo and Slater (1995).

34 Cf. Green (1994) 12 and 42; Bierl (1991) 20.

35 Texts in *TrGF* I–IV of fragments of lost plays other than those by Euripides. For Euripides see Nauck²; Austin (1968); Collard, Cropp and Lee (1995).

36 See Seaford (1994) for an ambitious attempt; Griffith (1995) takes a very different view of the political structures.

37 See most recently Seaford (1994) 272.

38 None of the ancient sources discussed by scholars explicitly says that the plots of early tragedies were Dionysiac. The passage from Zenobius (5.40) which discusses the proverb 'Nothing to do with Dionysus' refers explicitly to dithyramb, not tragedy, in giving examples of non-Dionysiac subject-matter, while the Suda entry, which mentions the Peripatetic scholar Chameleon, and so takes us back to an earlier period of scholarship, sketches a gradual process of 'turning to plots and stories [and] no longer making reference to Dionysus'. This seems to imply a contrast between the use of plot and something formally different, such as direct invocation of the god. Cf. Plutarch's wording at *Symp.* 1.1.5, 615a: 'People said "What has this to do with Dionysus?" when Phrynichus and Aeschylus developed tragedy in the direction of plots and sufferings (*muthous kai pathe*).' For the history of the debate see Bierl (1991) 5–17 with n. 13; Silk and Stern (1981) 142–50; Henrichs (1984) 222 n. 35.

for competition at the drama festivals always took their subjects from a wider range of myths than just stories about Dionysus. And even allowing for some original link between drama and dithyramb, as most scholars would accept, there is no reason to see the plays as direct developments from cult hymns to Dionysus or as elaborations of liturgical patterns specifically relating to his worship. As John Herington remarks, 'The more one surveys Attic tragedy *as a whole*, including the titles and fragments of the lost dramas, the more one is struck by the catholicity of the art form, both in content and in tone, especially in its earlier phases.'[39] Even Aeschylus, who was evidently more interested than any other known dramatist in plots directly relating to Dionysus, devoted only about one-tenth of his output to such stories.[40] It is perhaps not irrelevant to draw a contrast with the biblical plays of medieval Europe, where there seems to be a much clearer link, in terms of plot and subject matter, with a liturgical context: these plays typically dramatise a biblical episode to fit a relevant point in the performance of an office, or in a procession, on a particular festival day.[41]

2. The (entirely proper and understandable) search for a detectable logic in Dionysus' association with the theatre has tended to make scholars look for a hermeneutic model which will match the god with what one might loosely call the ideology of Attic drama, in its social, political, psychological and religious aspects. The temptation here, as Henrichs has pointed out, is to use the *Bacchae* as the key text for understanding the Dionysiac in drama, which is liable to be reductive, threatening to 'obscure the regional and functional diversity of Dionysus, and the fundamental difference between his mythical and cultic manifestations',[42] just as exclusive definitions of Dionysus as 'the outsider', 'the Other', the god who confuses boundaries, risk imposing a too abstract pattern on the extremely rich and diverse evidence of the texts.

Perhaps the best model will be a capacious one which allows us to see the interplay[43] between Dionysus' different aspects as providing a particularly

39 Herington (1985) 69.

40 See Herington (1985) 266, nn. 34 and 35, and Bierl (1991) 10–13 for details of plays with Dionysiac plots.

41 See Muir (1995).

42 Henrichs (1990), especially 257–60, 269. Cf. Schlesier (1993) 90–3 for an interesting discussion of the issues raised by recent work. On the important differences between myth and cult see also Buxton (1994) 152–5, and on the difficulty of 'pinning down' Greek gods see Silk and Stern (1981) 167.

43 Cf. Goldhill (1990a) 126–7, who looks for a similarly complex model to express the relation between the ritual events at the City Dionysia and the content of the dramas that followed them; see also Osborne (1993), especially 37, and Zeitlin (1993).

strong stimulus to mimetic performance. If we try to avoid telling a story of *how* or *why* drama developed, and concentrate our attention on what sort of phenomenon it was, we may find many hints in the surviving texts that what was performed was intended specifically for the god and associated in distinctive detail with his worship. As Steven Lonsdale has pointed out in a chapter on Dionysus and the dance, the god is 'present in the particular – in wine, in the siffle of the *aulos*, in the mask, in the dances of the maenads, and in his cult hymn, the dithyramb. The divine shape-shifter is portrayed as *chorēgos* and dancer in poetry, and with great frequency in art, especially on vessels used for storing, mixing, and drinking the god's wine.'[44] For drama, too, this combination of associations must be significant, even if no single aspect can be treated as decisive.

The power of wine both to liberate and to madden is brought out in many ways: in stories like that of *Cyclops* or Sophocles' lost satyr play *Dionysiscus*, on the invention of wine-making, or in more disturbing tales like that of Icarius and Erigone.[45] Whether the effects of the wine are presented as positive or negative or both at once, they must always have been closely linked with the wild state of the Dionysiac performers, itself an ambiguous phenomenon evoking both natural instinct and behaviour and the culture of the city and its rituals. Archilochus, poet of dithyramb, gave the idea a memorable expression: 'I know how to lead off the lovely song of lord Dionysus when my wits are struck by the lightning-bolt of wine' (fr. 120 W).

Wildness, indeed, is always an essential element of these shows for Dionysus, suggested most of all by the appearance of the satyrs, who as Oliver Taplin puts it 'belong in the wild, and are always threatening to turn animal',[46] and by the rest of the *thiasos*, particularly the maenads, who do not appear on stage with such regularity as the satyrs, but powerfully influence the imagery of tragedy. Their state of ecstatic possession is often used as a metaphor for the violent actions and experiences of tragic characters and choruses[47] even in plays with plots in which Dionysus plays no direct part. And the god's own closeness to wild nature was always strongly represented at the Dionysia, both at the city festival and at the Rural Dionysia in the demes, when huge model *phalloi* were carried in procession through the streets by his worshippers[48] – a benign cultic

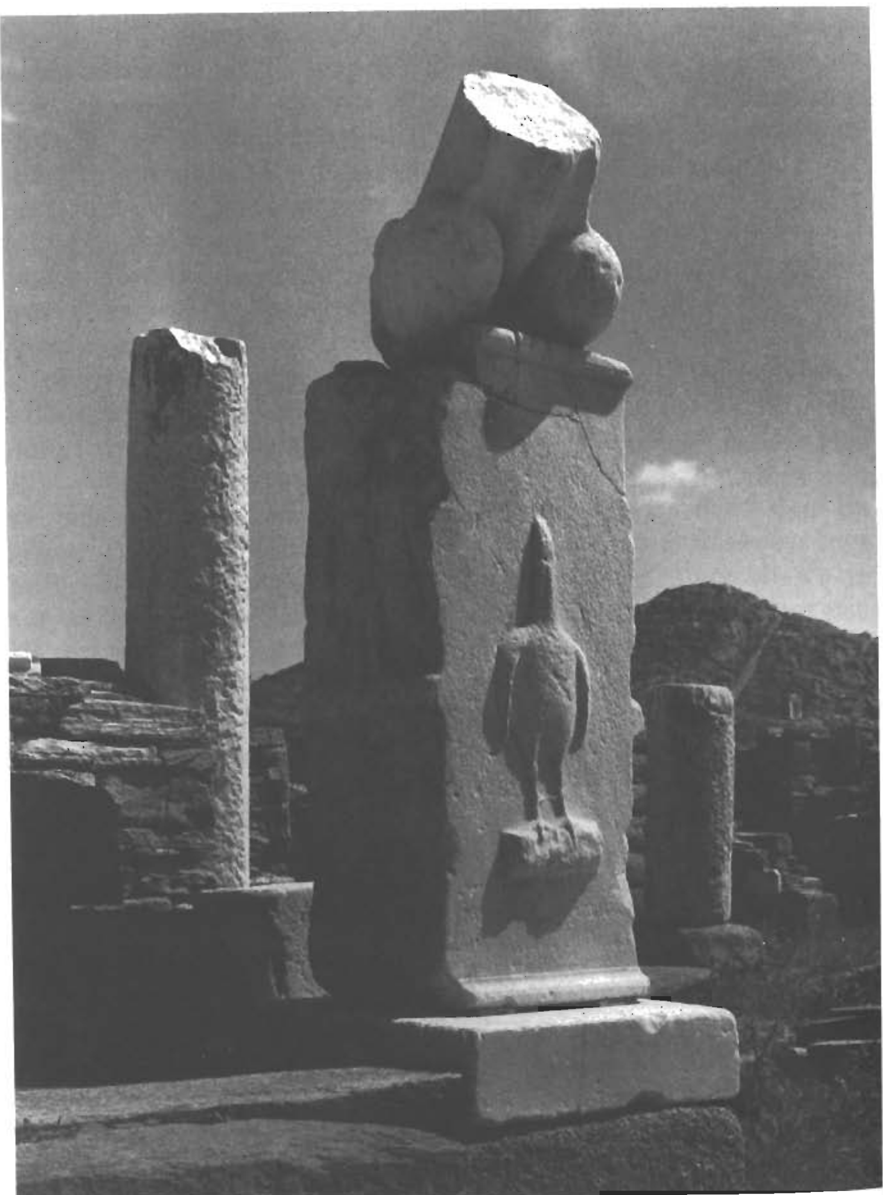
44 Lonsdale (1993) 81; cf. Frontisi-Ducroux (1989) 152.
45 Cf. Seaford (1994) 301–6 for similar stories.
46 In Astley (1991) 461. On other aspects of the wild see e.g. Gould (1987) and Segal (1982).
47 See especially Schlesier (1993), Seaford (1994) 257–62, Henrichs (1994) 57; also Ch. 5 below (p. 106).
48 See Cole (1993).

representation of an element of the god's power that could never be treated as safe or tamed (and cf. [3] from Delos). Dionysus' presence, like that of the other gods, was always potentially dangerous, but his sexuality could be generative[49] as well as violent, just as his madness could be cathartic and conducive of communal participation in the mythical world.

It is an interesting feature of the Dionysiac *thiasos* that the main players, the satyrs and maenads (or nymphs), are not found in the 'real world' in the form that they take in art and drama: the animal ears and tails of the satyrs, and the maenads' characteristic habits, like wearing snakes in their hair, taking part in the *sparagmos* and eating raw flesh,[50] set them apart from ordinary human worshippers, making them ideally suited to mimetic performance and able to carry metaphorical meaning with ease. One way in which they do this is through the blurring of 'normal' social boundaries: for example, the way the satyrs and maenads share the dance is not representative of historical patterns: as Lonsdale has pointed out, there is little evidence for mixed dancing in the traditions of the Greek cities, but the gender demarcations of everyday life are not observed in the choreography of the *thiasos*.[51] Symbolic detachment of this kind gives a particular piquancy to the passage preserved from Aeschylus' *Theoroi* or *Isthmiastae* (*Spectators at the Isthmian Games*) in which satyrs describe 'portraits' of themselves: 'Look and see if this image – this likeness by Daedalus – could be more like me! All it needs is a voice' (fr. 78a Radt). In performance the 'portraits' could only be masks, identical to the ones worn by the chorusmen playing the parts of the satyrs, without which their very existence as satyrs would be impossible. So the reference to these 'images' and 'likenesses' works in the same way as the references to choral dancing, as a reminder of the theatrical and ritual nature of the performance.[52]

The use of the mask, both in the worship of Dionysus – familiar, though still mysterious, from vase-paintings[53] – and in the dramatic competitions, must be one of the most important clues for anyone trying to understand 'the Dionysiac'. But it is an interestingly multivalent and elusive sort of clue. As worn in drama, the mask enables individual performers to assume multiple identities: each actor will play different roles from one drama to the

49 Plutarch (*Moral Essays* 365a) says that the Greeks regard Dionysus as 'lord and master not only of wine but of the whole wet element in nature'; (cf. Eur. *Ba.* 284 for the idea that Dionysus is 'poured out' in libations). Silk and Stern (1981) 172 suggest that we should think of sap, semen and blood as well as of wine.
50 Cf. Henrichs (1978) 121–60 and (1982); Hedreen (1994) 54–8.
51 Lonsdale (1993) 94; cf. Bérard and Bron (1989) 130–5; Seaford (1994) 272.
52 Green (1994) 45–6.
53 On the so-called 'Lenaean' vases see Frontisi-Ducroux (1989), (1991); Seaford (1994) 264–6.



[3] One of two sculptured bases flanking a shrine of Dionysus on Delos, set up to commemorate his *choregia* by the local man Carystius, *c.* 300 BC. Pride of place is given to the relief of a cock, whose phalloid head and neck point upwards to the giant human phallus surmounting the base. The cock symbolised both fighting competitiveness and rampant male sexuality, and hence was thought a peculiarly appropriate Dionysiac symbol.

next, and often enough within a single play, and each chorusman will have four different identities, one for each tragedy and one for the satyr play. So Pentheus is also Agave, and the Furies of *Eumenides* are also satyrs. While the performers take on these different roles the masks themselves, fixed and unchangeable, are a visible reminder to the audience of the fictive nature of the dramatic events.[54] Yet paradoxically the mask in performance may create the illusion of facial movement and fluidity of expression, as viewers have often noticed in modern performances of masked drama. This exciting complexity perhaps helps to explain the reverence that performers evidently felt for their masks, shown, for example by the fact that the masks were dedicated to the god after the performance was over and hung from the temple in his sanctuary. As J. R. Green suggests, there may have been a felt need 'to leave behind with the god in his sanctuary the "otherness" created in his honour, and not to take it out into normal society. The beings represented by the masks were potentially dangerous and disruptive things.'[55]

The influential image of Dionysus as performer with his *thiasos* – leader of the dance, master of disguise, controller of the action – has to be balanced by that of Dionysus as spectator, the supreme *theātēs*[56] for whom the shows are put on. This duality suggests that the drama was felt to have power to generate interactive response between players and audience, and there may be a significant link here with the way the Dionysiac mysteries functioned. It seems to have been important for the achievement of mystic communion that the worshippers should be viewers, *theātai*, of sights forbidden to the uninitiated, and if Dionysus was a model of the viewer, as well as of the power that made possible the mystic experience, one can see how theatre and mysteries might share the same logic.[57] This is very different from tracing the origin or development of the drama from patterns of mystic cult, an approach which would have to explain why Dionysus was so closely associated with theatre while Demeter was not (although Eleusinian mystic practice has been thought to be deeply implicated in the language of some plays).[58]

[54] On the dramatic function of the masks see p. 153 below; also Calame (1986) 141, who stresses the power of the mask in effecting 'not only safe passage from the Same to the Other, but from the Other to the Same as well'; Schlesier (1993) 94–7.

[55] Green (1994) 79. Even in the commercialised culture of contemporary Bali, actors still make offerings to their masks as supernatural powers (*The Times*, 21 June 1995).

[56] Though not, of course, the only one: the gods more generally had a crucial role as spectators; cf. Lonsdale (193) 52–68; Osborne (1993) on their liking for competitive events. Nor was Dionysus the only impresario: cf. the control over the action of a particular play by e.g. Athena in *Ajax* or Aphrodite and Artemis in *Hippolytus*.

[57] Cf. Segal (1982).

[58] Notably the *Oresteia*, for which see Bowie (1993) with earlier bibliography. For Sophocles see Seaford (1994) 395–402.

Scholars these days are much readier to see references in drama to Dionysiac mystery cult, to Dionysus in his association with death and the afterlife and with the means whereby 'salvation' may be achieved. This is thanks to the discovery of evidence for fifth-century initiation with a much wider geographical spread than used to be thought probable.[59] For understanding drama the implications are quite far-reaching, and not just in relation to *Bacchae*, although this is the play that (naturally enough) has attracted most attention. In his recent book Seaford goes some way in the direction of the Nietzschean view that the mystic sufferings of Dionysus are at the centre of tragic patterns of action,[60] but this approach is open to the objection that surviving Attic tragedy is not easily understood in relation to any master plot-pattern (cf. pp. 46–7 above). Maybe we should be content to see the secret story of Dionysus' dismemberment, death and rebirth,[61] and the pattern of mystic initiation for which the story served as *aition*, as one of several powerful myths about the relations between gods and men that offered the dramatists particular scope – subjects which were multivalent enough to be used for the dramatisation of a range of possible issues, political, social, moral or existential, without imposing a narrowly limiting interpretation on any of them.

This last section leads on naturally to larger questions about content. What is the connexion between tragic meditation on violence and suffering, guilt, punishment, mortality, human limitations etc. if what Dionysus is believed to offer is 'salvation' rather than a manifestation of divine power to help and harm? It is not enough to say that tragedy explores one side of the picture and satyr play (and comedy) the other, because there seems to be a more coherent pattern to which they all conform, and to which dithyramb too can be seen to belong. Maybe we should go back to the wisdom of Silenus, the elderly leader or 'father' of the satyrs, the figure used by Plato as an analogy for Socrates. According to the story (which goes back at least to the archaic period; cf. Theognis 425), the rich king Midas caused Silenus to be captured (by being made drunk), and the drunken satyr in response to the question 'What is best?' answered 'Not to be born at all', adding that the second-best, if one has the misfortune to be born, is to go back where one came from as quickly as possible. This insight into mortality and its sorrows is explicitly linked to the drunken old satyr, and the image has the advantage of combining the different strands of Dionysiac thinking that this chapter has briefly reviewed. The satyr is by definition a Dionysiac performer, a leading member of the *thiasos* of the god and therefore a dancer and mask-

59 See Burkert (1987); Bremmer (1994) 84–97.
60 Seaford (1994), especially ch. 8.
61 Cf. Detienne (1979); Burkert (1987).

wearer, who will adopt different disguises. He is also a creature of wild nature with the appetites of the wild, but he is in contact with the god's gift of wine, and it is the power of the wine that enables him to be caught and questioned. His message, it turns out, is not about performance, still less about celebration, but about death.[62] The most radical way to escape mortality and the cycle of change is never to be born; is this perhaps a way of expressing some of the aspirations and anxieties of the mystic initiand, who seeks the rebirth that abolishes death but at the same time knows that death itself has to be experienced? Death never ceased to be a defining feature of tragedy as understood in Greek tradition; it is perhaps not an accident that the presiding deity of the festivals which included tragedy should have had strong connexions with the world of the dead.[63]

All Greek gods resist easy categorisation, but Dionysus' multiform and elusive nature seems to have lent itself to the development of performance traditions of exceptional sophistication and complexity. As time went on, and as the regular instantiation of myth at the dramatic festivals contributed in influential ways to the imaginative life of successive audiences, Dionysus took on a specifically theatrical persona. He had of course been the object of cult and the subject of myth long before drama came into being, but it should not surprise us if the dramatic performances came to be seen as reflecting every aspect of his unique personality – as if he had always been the god of theatre.

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Iconography: Bérard and Bron (1989); C. Gasparri, 'Dionysos', *LIMC* III.1, 414–566 and III.2, 296–456.

62 Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* ch. 3, sees great significance in this story, but he uses it to construct a metaphysical view of Dionysus which is hard to sustain. Cf. Silk and Stern (1981) 148, 178 for a critique, which perhaps draws too sharp a distinction between Silenus and the satyrs.
63 Cf. Heraclitus, fr. 22B15, 27 D–K: 'Dionysus and Hades are the same.' Cf. Segal (1990) 418; but there is no need to take the mystic Dionysus as necessarily 'softening' the meaning of tragic stories.

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