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The Method in the Madness: Dionysus in the Arts of the Modern Era

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This article, derived from my forthcoming book, examines how the irrational was represented through the juxtaposition of Dionysus and Apollo. Ever since Nietzsche's Geburt der Tragödie, *the polarity of the two gods has been codified in Western culture. However, while their discrepancy as opposites has been widely appropriated, little attention has been given to their similarities which can be found in classical art and literature and again from the Renaissance onwards, when Plato's praise of "madness" was rediscovered, and images of Dionysian character were re-produced. This article briefly traces back the roots of Nietzsche's ideas and confronts these with examples from the visual arts. It also re-considers the ancient Dionysus and his transformations across time, investigating which aspects of the god were favoured versus others. Bacchus, "id est vinum" recited a popular formula, but from Michelangelo to Caravaggio and beyond, this was not the only Dionysian guise to be known. While often depicted as a merrymaking god of nature, darker aspects could be chosen. It is the madness and disorder, as well as the reasons for their revelation (or omission) that are explored, in the belief that these provided the sources for Nietzsche's dualistic formulations and many a modern "coniunctio oppositorum".*

Introduction

When investigating Dionysus in the visual arts, two approaches are possible: either a concentration on a single period and theme, with the goal of eviscerating every possible manifestation of the god; or a comprehensive sweep through time. The former has the disadvantage of providing a single lens focus and rendering a partial image of the god; the second loses depth of analysis. Both paths have been taken by different authors, each building on the experience of the predecessor. What hitherto was missing, however, was a study of visual representations that pulled together the strings of Dionysus's many identities and layered meanings. My research, only synthetically anticipated in this article and more fully expounded in my forthcoming book, utilizes both approaches, in the hope of providing a more comprehensive picture of the god and do justice to his multiplicity.

Not one but many *Dionysoi*, can be encountered. Difficult to catch, let alone define, they need to be uncovered in their different areas of origin. In this sense, I take three major directions. First, I explore the ancient Dionysus and his representations in art. I also examine how the all-powerful Greek god, lord of

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nature, divine mysteries, and inspiration, was gradually transformed into the Roman Bacchus and, eventually, into a humanized emblem of wine and drunkenness. Secondly, I wish to identify which aspects of the god were favoured, when and why. In this sense I also investigate the reasons for the transmission (or omission) of his most sinister traits, aware of the fact that in all earlier studies, the dark side of Dionysus was either forgotten or overstated, but never fully integrated with his joyful counterpart. Third, I wish to demonstrate that Nietzsche's Dionysus was not simply the product of the nineteenth-century (as frequently claimed), but rather the result of mistaken identities, partial survivals or distorted interpretations that began much earlier. Indeed, the polarity of the Dionysian and the Apollonian has very distant origins.

Ultimately, I hope to have synthesized the complexity of Dionysus, both ancient and modern, illustrating what aspects were accepted more readily than others and to what extent the equation of Dionysus and Apollo was known or adopted. My aim has been to illustrate how artworks surviving from antiquity could encapsulate various perceptions of Bacchus, and how the Dionysian irrational was expressed in the visual arts of the modern era.

Nietzsche's Dionysus

At Palazzo Massimo in Rome is an over life-size marble statue of an aged and full-bodied man clad in female robes and wearing long hair. The identification with Dionysus Sardanapallos, first proposed after the discovery of the piece in 1928, is unanimously accepted.[1] The statue is a Roman copy after an early Hellenistic original and is known through other ten replicas including one in the British Museum and one in the Vatican. It derives its name from the antique inscription "Sardanapallos" carved on the Vatican exemplar, associating the figure with the Assyrian king of the seventh century BC, famous for his dissolute opulence and feminine attires[2] (Figure 1).

The sculpture then seems to correspond to the stories of the exotic provenance or return of the god from the east. It also echoes a famous description

1. Ludwig Curtius, "Sardanapal", *Archäologisches Jahrbuch* 43 (1928), 281-297; Adriano La Regina, *Museo Nazionale Romano, Palazzo Massimo alle Terme* (Milan: Electa, 1998), 148.

2. Erwin Pochmarski, "Neue Beobachtungen zum Typus Sardanapal", *Österreichische Jahreshefte* no. 50 (1972-75), 41-67, especially 44; Erwin Pochmarski, "Nochmals zum Typus Sardanapal", *Österreichische Jahreshefte* no. 55 (1984), 63-75. Cfr. Hans-Ulrich Cain, *Dionysus, Die Locken lang, ein halbes Weib?* (Munich: Museum für Abgüsse Klassischer Bildwerke, 1988), 54; Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Monumenti Antichi Inediti,* (Rome: Pagliarini, 1767) vol. II, n. 163; Ennio Quirino Visconti, *Il Museo Pio Clementino illustrato e descritto* (Milan: Bettoni, 1818-22 [1794]), vol. II (1819), 257-268, Pl. XLI, first recognized the statue as Dionysus. The inscription on the Vatican piece is disputed and occasionally dated to the 17th century.

of Dionysus written by Lucian in the second century AD, in which the god, dressed as a female, conducted an army of women to conquer India[3] (Figure 2).

Figure 1. *Dionysus "Sardanapallos", First Century AD After a Hellenistic Original of c. 300 BC, Luni Marble, Palazzo Massimo, Rome, H 206 cm*
Source: Palazzo Massimo alle Terme, CC BY-SA 3.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0>, via Wikimedia Commons. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/52/0_Dionysos_Sardanapale_-_Pal._Massimo_alle_Terme.JPG.

3. Henry Watson Fowler and Francis George Fowler, *The Works of Lucian of Samosata* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), 253.

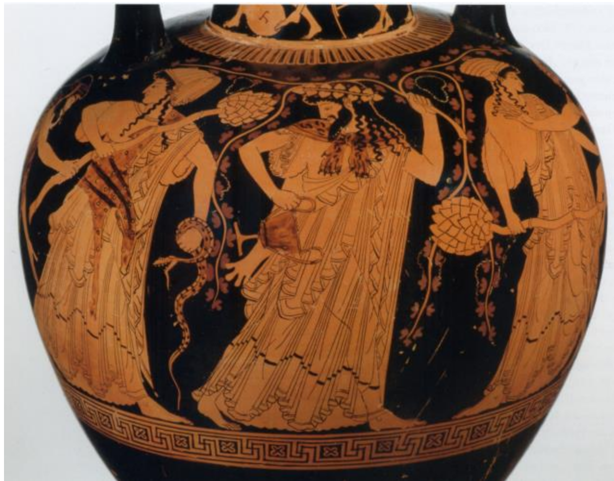

Figure 2. *Dionysus and Maenads, Front Detail of an Amphora Attributed to Kleophrades, c. 490 BC, Clay, Staatliche Antikensammlungen, Munich*
Source: Dionysos: Verwandlung Und Ekstase, Renate Schlesier, Agnes Schwarzmeier, eds. Exhibition Catalogue (Berlin, Pergamonmuseum, 5 November 2008 – 21 June 2009) (Regensburg: Schnell und Steiner, 2008), p. 149, Fig. 3.

Besides its ambiguous iconography the sculpture bears an intriguing historic significance. To commemorate the centenary of Nietzsche's birth, in 1944, the statue was sent to Nazi Germany as a gift from Mussolini (who at the same time was construing his idea of Augustan and Apollonian grandeur in Rome). It was then taken to the Nietzsche Archiv in Weimar where it was to serve as a symbol of the Nietzsche-Dionysus cult conceived by Walter Otto. It remained boxed until 1947, was then transferred to the Pergamon Museum in Berlin, and only returned to Rome in 1991.

In the same room of the museum, another statue, in bronze, presents a youthful Dionysus that is curiously Apollonian. His real identity is only recognizable through the wreath of vine leaves on his head and the *thyrsos* he holds. On the contrary, his nudity, slender body, and hairstyle could easily be mistaken for Apollo's characteristic traits. The statue was found in 1885 in the river Tiber and was created by a classicizing artist for the early imperial entourage.[4] It corresponds to an original at Woburn Abbey and is known through other twenty copies and subsequent variations. Ultimately, however, it harks back to the most famous statue of Dionysus, one that had been created by Praxiteles (fourth century BC) and that, according to Callistratus (third century AD), had best captured the madness (*μανία*) of the god[5] (Figure 3, 3a).

4. Paul Zanker, *Klassizistische Statuen* (Mainz: von Zabern, 1974), 64.

5. Callistratus, *Descriptions*, 8: "the eye was gleaming with fire, in appearance the eye of a man in a frenzy; for the bronze exhibited the Bacchic madness and seemed to be divinely inspired, just as, I think, Praxiteles had the power to infuse into the statue also the Bacchic ecstasy". The statue is referenced in Pliny too (XXXIV.69). See also Andreas Emmerling-Skala, *Bacchus in der Renaissance* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1994), vol. I, 266.

Figure 3 and 3a. *Dionysus, First Century BC, Bronze, Palazzo Massimo, Rome, H 158 cm*
Source: Adriano La Regina, *Museo Nazionale Romano, Palazzo Massimo alle Terme* (Milan: Electa, 1998), p. 146; *Dionysos*, detail, bronze, bone inlay, copper. Photo: *ibid*.

The juxtaposition of the two statues in the same room confronts the visitor with the paradoxical and multifaceted nature of Dionysus. On the one hand he is presented as the god of wine, albeit with a strangely mannered composure more often associated with Apollo. On the other hand, he is represented as licentious, feminine, and somewhat decadent. In fact, as a transvestite. Exhibited as they are and taken together, the two statues evidence the elusive character of Dionysus, and the dualism that has shaped our modern perception ever since Nietzsche's formulation of the Apollo-Dionysus dichotomy. The very fact that the Sardanapallos was intended to be exhibited in the Nietzsche Archiv in Nazi Germany is an irony that reinforces his contradictory ambiguity.

The polarity of Dionysus and Apollo was famously expressed by Friedrich Nietzsche in *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik*, published in 1872 with a dedication to Richard Wagner.[6] However, Nietzsche's ideas had their origins in the poetry of earlier German Romantics such as Schiller, Schlegel, Hölderlin, and, to some extent, even Goethe.[7] It had also been theorized by scholars such as Friedrich Creuzer, Karl Otfried Müller, and Johann Bachofen who first juxtaposed Apollonian clarity and Dionysiac frenzy and similarly characterized the debate between Neoclassicism and Romanticism.[8]

Nietzsche was certainly inspired by these precedents although he emphasized the conflict of the two rather than their similarities. In this respect he was also influenced by the definition of Apollo as the god of order introduced by Johann J. Winckelmann's *Gedanken* on Greek art, that were published in 1755.[9] Winckelmann's well-known praise of Apollo as the expression of rational harmony, "noble simplicity and calm grandeur" finds a counterpart in the exploration of deranged mental states that began with the *Sturm und Drang* and was then fully expressed in nineteenth-century Romanticism (Figure 4).

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6. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, ed. Giorgio Colli (Milan: Adelphi, 2007, first published in Basel, 1872)

7. Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller, *Die Götter Griechenlands* (1788), Karl Wilhelm Friedrich von Schlegel, *Über das Studium der Griechischen Poesie* (1795); J. C. F. von Schlegel, *Rede über die Mythologie* (1967); Friedrich Hölderlin, *Brod und Wein* (1807); Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust II* (1825-26), especially the Helena act, written at the same time as he was translating Euripides' *Bacchae*.

8. Friedrich Creuzer, *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen*, (1819-21); Jacob Burckhardt, *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* (1860), especially ch. III on the re-awakening of Antiquity. See also Giorgio Colli, *La sapienza greca.* (Milan: Adelphi, 1977 and 2007), vol. I, 38.

9. Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Gedanken über die Nachamung der Griechischen Werke*. (Dresden: 1755).

Figure 4. *Apollo Belvedere, Roman Copy of the Second Century AD, After an Original Attributed to Leochares, c. 330 BC, Marble, Vatican Museums, H 220 cm*
Source: ttps://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b9/Apollo_del_Belvedere.jpg Livioandronico2013, CC BY-SA 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>, via Wikimedia Commons.

In Nietzsche's own time the juxtaposition of the two gods was also expressed by his friend Erwin Rohde who insisted on the obscure aspects of Dionysus and his Eastern provenance, pointing out that he originated in Thrace and was therefore not readily accepted in the Greek milieu.[10] This view rested on the Greek diffidence against anything "alien" as exemplified by Euripides's *Bacchae* (405 BC) and the friezes of the Parthenon (447-432 BC), the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus (c. 350 BC) and the Altar of Pergamon (166-156 BC).[11] These indeed must have been considered, for Pergamon had just been excavated (in 1886), while the Parthenon and Halicarnassus friezes were already in the British Museum. Long before Nietzsche, however, the juxtaposition of the two gods had been explored on several occasions in the seventeenth-century and in the Renaissance, yet, in fact, it went back all the way to antiquity.

Dionysus and Apollo in Ancient Greece

Comparisons of the two gods are provided in early Greek inscriptions and later authors such as Callimachus (third century BC), who refers to the two as brothers that were both honoured at Delphi.[12] Similarly, in Plutarch (c. 45-120 AD) we read that at Delphi Dionysus had a role comparable to that of Apollo, since he represented the transformations of nature that were re-enacted by priests through the dismemberment of animals and other rituals symbolical of death and resurrection.[13]

The same correspondence is further expressed by Latin authors of a much later date. In the first book of his *Saturnalia* Macrobius (early fifth century) quotes Aeschylus, Euripides and Aristotle and states that the two gods are one and the same and are both venerated on Mt. Parnassus.[14] Aeschylus indeed had called for

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10. Erwin Rohde, *Psyche, Seelenkult und Unsterblichkeitsglaube der Griechen* (Freiburg and Leipzig: Mohr, 1890/94).

11. The metopes of the Doric (exterior) frieze of the Parthenon (446-440 BC), included the fight of the Olympian gods against the giants, the Athenians against the Amazons, the Lapiths against the Centaurs, and possibly the Sack of Troy. Similar scenes were carved at Halicarnassus and the Great Altar at Pergamon respectively illustrating the Amazonomachy and the Gigantomachy.

12. "And Dionysus too was honoured at Delphi together with Apollo because of the following reason. The Titans gave to Apollo – his brother – the limbs of Dionysus that they had dismembered… And Apollo gathered them near the tripod…." my translation from Giorgio Colli, *La sapienza greca*, vol. I: 211, 4 [B 15].

13. Plutarch, *De E apud Delfos*, 9, 389, A-B, Dario del Corno, ed. (Milan, 1993), 145-146.

14. "What has been said of Apollo may also be taken as said of Bacchus. In fact, Aristotle, the author of the *Theologumena*, positively asserts that Apollo and Bacchus are one and the same divinity… Similarly the Beotians while recognizing that Mount Parnassus is sacred to Apollo, venerate there, at the same time, the Delphic oracle and the

"Apollo, crowned with ivy, the Bacchus, the diviner", and Euripides had followed suit invoking "Oh Bacchus, dominator, friend of the ivy, oh Paean Apollo, expert of the lyre".[15]

Striking equivalents can be found in the visual arts. Pausanias (110-180 AD) tells us that the pediments of the temple of Apollo at Delphi represented on one side Apollo with the Muses, on the other Dionysus with the Bacchae, while several Greek vases illustrate Apollo and Dionysus on opposite faces[16] (Figure 5). As for statues, various Roman derivations from Praxiteles' prototype show a conflation of the two gods and, in later periods, would even be restored with pieces from one or the other (Figure 6).

Figure 5. *Apollo with the Kithara, Dionysus with a Kantharos, Attic Hydria by the Rycroft Painter, Last Quarter of the Sixth Century BC, Clay*, *Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, Hamburg, H 42.5 cm*
Source: Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, Hamburg, Inv. 1917.477, H 42.5 cm. Photo: author's archive.

Caves of Bacchus as being sacred to the same god; wherefore the rites of Apollo and Bacchus are performed on one and the same mountain…. Euripides writes in his *Licymnian* that Apollo and Bacchus are one and the same god [*Apollinem Liberumque unum eundemque deum esse significans*]". Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, P. Vaughan Davis, ed. (London, 1969), 128 (*Saturnalia* I, xviii, 1-6); Cfr. G. Colli, *La sapienza greca* (2007), vol. I, 79, 378.

15. My translation from G. Colli, *ibid*. p. 79, Aeschylus, fr. 86 (Mette), and Euripides, fr. 477 (Nauck) as quoted by Macrobius, *Sat*. I, xviii, 6.

16. Pausanias, X, xix, 4.

Figure 6. *Dionysus, Second Half of the First Century BC, Marble Statuette, Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen, Berlin*
Source: Dionysos, Exh. Cat., Berlin, 2008, *op. cit.*, p. 28, Fig.1.

The clearest expression of the *coniunctio oppositorum* of the two gods we find in Plato. In a well-known passage of the *Phaedrus* Plato (c.428-348 BC) had described four kinds of inspiration that he calls *manìa* and that "set us free from established conventions". They are "the madness of the prophet, which belongs to Phoebus, that of the mystic, belonging to Dionysus, that of the poet, coming from the Muses, and the fourth kind, Love, which is tied to Aphrodite".[17]

To Plato, divine inspiration, most associated with Apollo, is characteristic of Dionysus too and presupposes a condition of "possession" or "intoxication". A few lines earlier in the *Phaedrus* we read that "the greatest blessings can reach us through divine madness, which is given to us as a gift from heaven".[18] And further on in the dialogue Socrates adds that these "benefits" can be received by mortals from the gods only "when they are in a state of frenzy", a state often identified with intoxication from wine.[19] In *Laws* Plato further declares that wine was given to men "so they go mad too" and then exemplifies the concept citing

17. Plato, *Phaedrus* 265b. Plato, *Phaedrus and Letters VII and VIII*, Walter Hamilton, ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 46-48; Eric Robertson Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational.* (Berkeley: University of California, 1951), 64-65.

18. Plato, *Phaedrus* 47.

19. Plato, *Phaedrus* 244.

Homer's mad (*mainomenos*) Dionysus.[20] From Plato's descriptions it appears that while both gods are agents of divine inspiration they can also embody more mysterious and potentially sinister aspects. An echo of these, in the case of Dionysus, is found in the Sardanapallos image, although it has been convincingly demonstrated that the bearded type was rarely shown after the late fifth century BC and was replaced more frequently by the youthful, Apollonian version with a nude, slender body and long hair.

The Theatre and the Art of Liberation

The statues of Dionysus of the later classical period, when he entered the Olympian circle, became more "Apollonian" and composed. Archaic mythologies, on the other hand, had characterized Dionysus as the god of disorder connecting him to violent rites which were rarely accepted within the *polis*. These persisted, albeit muted in concept and purpose, in theatrical representations.[21]

In the many Dionysian festivals connected to the god and the cycles of nature (such as the *Anthesteria* or the later *Dionysia*), the de-structuring potentials of his cult were channelled (and disempowered) into a communal theatrical celebration. The aim, besides the need to express the citizens' unity and values, was the acknowledgement of their instinctual forces and the possibility to release them under control and in particular circumstances.

That these led to the birth of the theatre was recognized from Nietzsche onwards. Rohde, for example, stated that the actor's ability to take on another identity was akin to the transformation operated in the participants of Dionysiac feasts when they entered a state of ecstasy.[22] In experimenting "otherness" one can enter the unknown and exorcize its dangers (Figure 7).

20. Plato, *Laws* VI.672 and VI.773d, as cited in Karl Kerényi, *Dionysus: Archetypal Image of Indestructible Life* (Princeton University Press, 1996 [1976]), 131. Cfr. Homer, Iliad VI, 129, where *Dionysus mainomenos* inspires the madness of Lycurgus.

21. K. Kerényi, *ibid.* demonstrated the original Dionysus to be linked to pre-Homeric myths of the Minoan world, where he is identified with the Minotaur. Only in later versions is he transformed (or humanized) into a more "manageable" figure. While the connection with Crete is presented even by Pausanias, it has ancient roots: Hesiod writes: "Dionysus of the golden hair took as blooming spouse the blonde Ariadne, daughter of Minos, whom he made immortal and without age" (see G. Colli, *La sapienza*… 25-26). In the Homeric epics, Dionysus is only mentioned on four occasions (two of which dealing with wine) and is never associated with the Olympian gods. Cfr. *Iliad* VI.130-140. See Richard Seaford, *Dionysus* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 16, 27.

22. E. Rohde, *Psyche*…. p. 37.

Figure 7. *Attic Pelike with a Flute Player and a Male Actor Dressed as a Maenad, 470-460 BC, Clay, Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen, Berlin*
Source: Dionysos, Exh. Cat., Berlin, 2008, *op. cit*., p. 80, Fig. 1.

The great Dionysia in Athens were dedicated to Dionysus Eleuthereus, (the Liberator), and began with an evening procession of dressed up males who played music, danced and exchanged ritually permitted obscenities. Next was the sacrifice of 300 animals which ended with a lavish banquet.[23] The performances began on the following day with dithyrambic chants followed by the standard three days of the tragic contest. The bloodshed of animals at the beginning was both an offering to the gods and a means to cleanse communal sins. Indeed, the show could only start after the theatre had been purified through the blood of sacrificed pigs. Seen in a wider social context, this was a way to divert a potential violence that had better be directed at scapegoats rather than humans. Today an idea of the *catharsis* effected by such bloodbaths may be gained in the performances staged by Hermann Nitsch.[24]

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23. This was one of the rare occasions for Athenian citizen to consume meat. See Susan Gödde, in *Dionysos: Verwandlung Und Ekstase*, Renate Schlesier, Agnes Schwarzmeier, eds. Exhibition Catalogue, (Regensburg: Schnell und Steiner, 2008), 100.

24. Aristotle states that the tragedy originated from the dithyramb (*De arte poetica*, IV, 1449) which was originally sung to accompany sacrifices. In this sense, the tragedy can be seen as a ritualization, and thus mitigation, of another violent, yet necessary, practice connected with Dionysus. Cfr. René Girard, *La violence et le sacré* (Paris: Grasset, 1972);

The necessity of sacrifice is also found in a variety of stories connected to Dionysus. In the Dionysus-Zagreus myth the god himself as a child is dismembered by the Titans and then re-assembled by his brother Apollo, while in the *Bibliotheca* attributed to Apollodorus of Athens we find the stories of the Argive women who devour their children, the madness of Lycurgus and Agave who kill their own sons, and the transformation into dolphins of the pirates of Naxos[25] (Figures 8-9).

We also find the tragedy of Orpheus, a man endowed with the abilities of a god and punished for the weaknesses of a mortal. Regarded as the counterpart of Apollo, Orpheus charms all creatures with his music yet ultimately is torn apart by maenads by order of the jealous Dionysus. Indeed, he is guilty of assuming control of nature, infringing the conditions imposed by the gods and preferring Apollo to Dionysus. Torn between the two gods and the concepts they represent, Orpheus was invented to encapsulate their conflict and a synthesis of the two (Figure 10).

Figure 8. *Detail from the Neck of a Kalpis with the Death of Pentheus 500-490 BC, Staatliche Museen, Berlin*
Source: ibid. p.104, Fig. 7.

Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans: the Anthropology of ancient Greek sacrificial ritual and myth* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1986); Walter Burkert, *Savage Energies: Lessons of myth and ritual in ancient Greece* (University of Chicago Press, 2001).

25. The *Bibliotheca* was attributed to Apollodorus of Athens (late 2d century BC) but was composed at a much later date (2-3d century AD).

Figure 9. *Dionysus Sailing Amidst Dolphins, "The Ezekias Eye-Cup", Kylix, c. 540-35 BC, Clay, Staatliche Antikensammlungen, Munich*
Source: Dionysos Augenschale des Exekias.jpg, CC BY 2.5, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=2243797.

Figure 10. *The Death of Orpheus, Detail from the Lid of an Attic Lekanis (Cosmetic Bowl), c. 450-425 BC, Clay, Musée du Louvre, Paris*
Source: author's archive.

Perhaps the most immediate example of the disruptive force of Dionysus are the maenads themselves who live in the woods and reject the conventional life of Greek women, habitually secluded in the *gynaeceum* (Figure 11).

Figure 11. *Dancing Maenads, Detail of a Kylix Painted by Makron, c. 480 BC, Clay, Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen, Berlin, Dm 33 cm*
Source: Dionysos, Exh. Cat., Berlin, 2008, *op. cit.*, p. 153, cat. nr.1.

Euripides' *Bacchae*, for instance, are compelled by an irresistible urge to leave their households and follow the invisible force of a stranger that will endow them with mysterious powers. The established order is thus subverted by women who take on the role generally ascribed to men. The same paradoxical ambiguity we find in the god's disguise as a woman by which he enters Thebes in Euripides' tragedy. Dressed up as a vulnerable female he is not recognized as a potentially dangerous foreigner, yet eventually he conquers the city through the hands of its very own women.

Bacchus in Rome

The subversive potentials of the early Dionysus have come down to us mainly through archaic or early classical texts such as Euripides' *Bacchae*. In later traditions, the obscure aspects were subdued or modified and whenever they appear, they were appropriated for specific contexts.

In Republican Rome of the second century BC laws such as the *Senatus Consultum de Bacchanalibus* (186 BC) were passed to curb the danger of Dionysiac mystery cults, yet these survived in the private sphere, as testified by the

decorations of the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii or the frescoes of the Villa Farnesina in Rome (Figures 12-13).

Figure 12. *Sylenus and the Reclining Dionysus, Detail from the Triclinium of the Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii, c. 60-40 BC*
Source: Wolfgang Rieger, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/26/Roman_fresco_Villa_dei_Misteri_Pompeii_008.jpg.

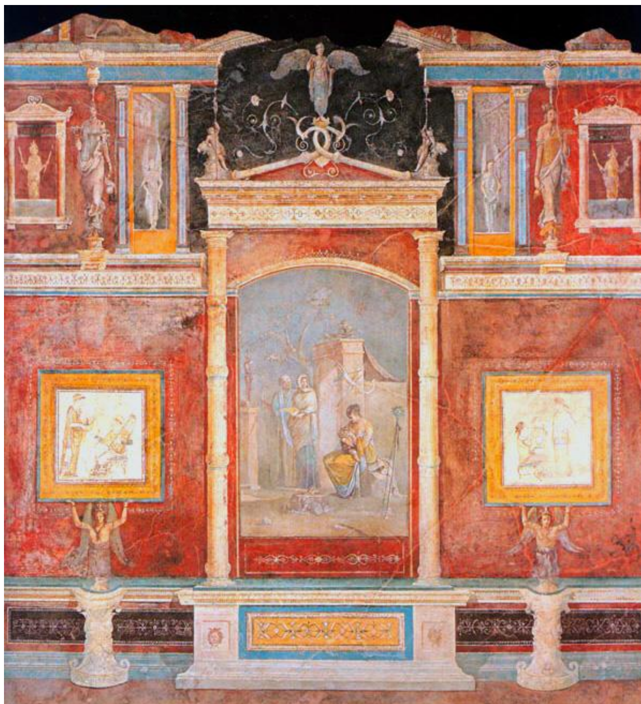

Figure 13. *Frescoes from the Cubiculum B of the Villa Farnesina, ca. 21 BC. In the Centre: Dionysus Nursed by Leucotea, Palazzo Massimo alle Terme, Rome*
Source: Matilde De Angelis d'Ossat, ed., *Scultura antica in Palazzo Altemps: Museo Nazionale Romano* (Milan: Electa, 2003), 227.

Dionysiac iconography also lent itself to the hero image of Hellenistic rulers and Roman generals who, like Dionysus and Alexander the Great, had conquered the East. The most famous case is the embodiment of our two opposites (the Apollonian and the Dionysian) by Octavian Augustus on the one hand and Marc Antony or Pompey on the other at a moment when the Dionysian or Eastern world started to be perceived as a byword of debauchery.[26] However, it may also be noted that while Octavian's public imagery relied on Apollonian aspects, the decorations found in the bedrooms and triclinia of his villas are surprisingly Dionysiac in content.

In the public sphere of the Roman world the mysterious Dionysus, who inspired the rejection of established rules, was increasingly tamed into the "safer" image of the wine drinking Bacchus or the old vegetation god Liber. The term in Latin also means "free", so the god Liber, like the Greek *Eleuthereus*, was thought to liberate men from their cares. While recounted by Latin authors such as Ovid (43 BC - 17/18 AD), the fearsome effects of Dionysian frenzy described in Euripides' *Bacchae* and echoed on Greek vases, find no illustration in the visual arts of ancient Rome, and leave ground to sarcophagi illustrating positive revelries, triumphal processions or the story of Bacchus and Ariadne[27] (Figure 14).

Figure 14. *The "Badminton Sarcophagus", The Four Seasons and the Triumph of Bacchus, c. 270 BC, Marble, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York*
Source: author's archive.

In general terms, the disruptive Dionysus was progressively turned into a more manageable Bacchus, god of wine and merry-making. As such he survived well into the Renaissance and beyond.

26. Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988).

27. The purpose of such themes in funerary contexts has been recently investigated in Paul Zanker, and Björn Christian Ewald *Mit Mythen leben: die Bilderwelt der Römischen Sarkophage* (Munich: Hirmer, 2004).

The Moralized Bacchus of Medieval Times

The "taming" of the Greek Dionysus and his transformation into the Roman Bacchus was accelerated in late Antiquity when the perception of the god came to be heavily influenced by Christian apologists, who dismissed him as a corrupted representative of paganism, dubious communal rites, drunkenness and sexual license, or, on rare occasions, assimilated him into a Christological reading referencing the wine of the Eucharist.[28] Such interpretations paved the way for the moralized Bacchus that was circulated in the later medieval period through the *Ovidius moralizatus* (a Latin prose allegorization of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* by the French Benedictine Pierre Bersuire, c. 1290-1362) or the *Ovide Moralisé* (a French verse paraphrase of the same text written by an unknown author and transmitted through twenty manuscripts).[29] The miniatures illustrating such texts are indicative of the "loss of power" endured by the god. For example, in the Codex Vat. Reg. lat. 1480, fol. 176r (a French manuscript of the *Ovide*, c. 1370/90) Bacchus is shown with huge horns, dressed in a dark dress, and mounted on the back of a dragon-like panther (Figure 15). The nude and positively sensual god of wine that inspired happiness and super-powers, has been turned into a demonic creature suggesting vice. Far from menacing, he ends up ridiculed and reduced to a mere caricature of his former self.

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28 George Sampatakakis, *Bakkhai-Model: The Re-Usage of Euripides' Bakkhai.* Ph.D. thesis (University of London, 2004), 56.

29 The Metamorphoses were among the few classical texts to be circulated well into the Middle Ages. The "*Ovidius moralizatus*" constitutes the 15th book of Bersuire's "Dictionarius, seu reductorium morale" (moralized version) of the widely circulated Encyclopedia compiled around 1240 by Bartholomaeus Anglicus. See A. Emmerling-Skala, *Bacchus…*II, 1022 (on Bersuire) and 791 (on Bartholomaeus Anglicus). On Bersuire see also William Donald Reynolds, *The Ovidius moralizatus of Petrus Berchorius: An Introduction and Translation*. Ph.D. thesis (University of Illinois, 1972).

Figure 15. *Bacchus, from the Ovide Moralisé, France, c. 1370/90, Cod. Vat. Reg. lat. 1480, fol. 176r, Vatican Library, Rome*
Source: A. Emmerling-Skala, *Bacchus*… (1994), *op. cit.*, vol.II, p. 1286, Fig. 20.

Bacchus in the Renaissance

Expunged of any destructive powers, Bacchus re-emerged in the Renaissance, at the time of the general rediscovery of classical antiquity, when he became the symbol of a hedonistic and socially desirable way of life. Significantly, in his *Canti Carnascialeschi*, Lorenzo de' Medici, the very sponsor of the Neoplatonists, described him as a happy drunkard, a character he did not possess in Antiquity.

Dionysian revelries and triumphs along with wine-drinking and merriness became a favorite artistic repertoire in palace interiors, to judge from Titian's Bacchanals for Alfonso D'Este in Ferrara, and Giulio Romano's frescoes at Mantua, to Annibale Carracci's gallery-ceiling at Palazzo Farnese in Rome. What comes out of these images is the fun, not the brutal or disruptive potentials (Figures 16-17).

Figure 16. *Titian, Bacchus and Ariadne, 1523-25, Oil on Canvas, National Gallery, London, 175 x 193 cm*
Source: Wikimedia Commons. By Titian - National Gallery, Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=611549.

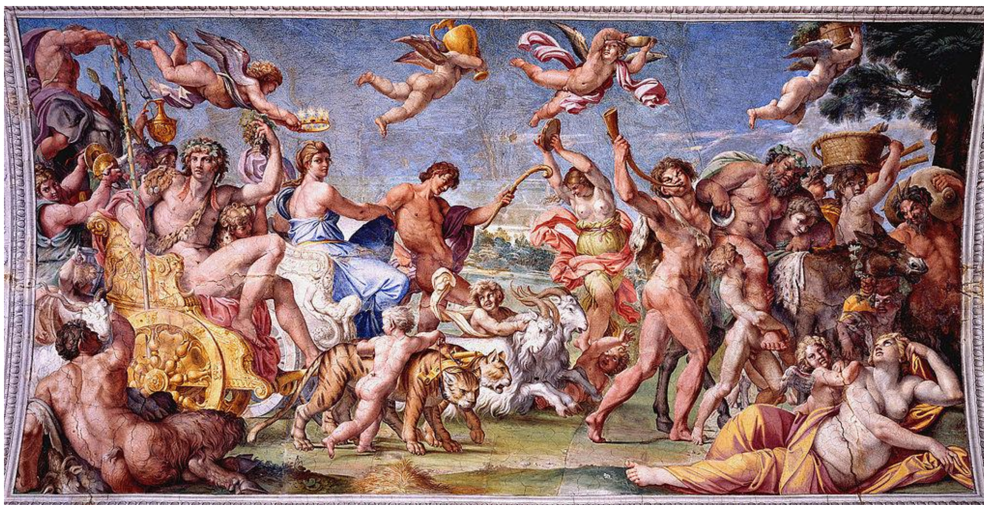

Figure 17. *Annibale Carracci, The Triumph of Bacchus and Ariadne, 1598-1600, Central Fresco, Gallery of the Loves of the Gods, Palazzo Farnese, Rome*
Source: Wikimedia Commons. By Annibale Carracci - Web Gallery of Art: Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=12214597.

Despite being treated at length in Philostratus and Ovid, which were the main mythological sources of the Renaissance, the stories of the maenads, Lycurgus or Pentheus did not become an established artistic subject, and, with few exceptions, they are hardly seen outside illustrated editions of the *Metamorphoses.* Yet the tendency to avoid representations of Dionysus as god of disorder, madness and maenadism did not mean that such subjects were ignored by Renaissance humanists.

As testified by Vincenzo Cartari's dictionary of images of the ancient gods (first published in 1556), Bacchus was known, at least in certain circles, as a "ferocious youth".[30] This was naturally mediated by the rediscovery of classical literature. Lucian's *Dionysus*, for example, was known in humanistic circles from Alberti onwards.[31] A manuscript of the *Dionysiaca*, written by Nonnos of Panopolis in the fifth century, arrived to Florence from Byzantium and was read by Angelo Poliziano (long before it was published in Antwerp in 1569), providing inspiration for the latter's *Fabula di Orfeo* (c. 1480). Most poignantly, Plato's characterization of Dionysus as inspiring madness and, therefore, being identical with Apollo, was widely circulated through the translations of Marsilio Ficino. Particularly appealing to Ficino's Neo-Platonic Academy and the circles of Lorenzo de' Medici, was the *Symposium* (c. 385/370 BC) where Plato had stated: "Truly all of you, have possessed in common the divine madness and Dionysiac rapture of those who love wisdom".[32] Ficino and his associates also adopted Plato's statement, expressed by Socrates in the *Phaedrus*, that "madness (*μανία*) comes from the gods, whereas sober sense (*σωφροσύνης*), is merely human".[33] Folly is therefore more praiseworthy than moderation and self-control, for it is only the *ekstasis*, the loss of self, that allows man to enter a superior realm and acquire supernatural powers. Such concepts were readily adopted in Faustino Perisauli's poem *De triumpho Stultitiae* (written around 1490 and published in 1521) and certainly influenced Erasmus who was in Italy 1505-09 and published in 1511 his *Praise of Folly*, where he affirms that 'man will be outside of himself and…. will share in the Highest Good'.[34]

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30. Vincenzo Cartari, *Le Imagini de i dei de gli antichi.* (Venice: Francesco Marcolini, 1556). The edition I refer to is: G. Auzzas, F. Martignago, M. Pastore Stocchi, P. Rigo (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 1996).

31. Emilio Mattioli, *Luciano e l'Umanesimo* (Naples: Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Storici, 1980).

32. Giorgio Colli, *La sapienza*, vol. I, p.151.

33. Plato, *Phaedrus* 244d.

34. Desiderius Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, ed. John P. Dolan, *The essential Erasmus*. (New York: Meridian, 1964), 172. On ecstatic drunkenness in Erasmus see also Michael Andrew Screech, *Ecstasy and the Praise of Folly* (London: Duckworth, 1980), 35, 105; Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, *Christening Pagan Mysteries: Erasmus in Pursuit of Wisdom*. (Buffalo: Toronto University Press, 1981), 51. On Perisauli's influence on Erasmus see the

To Renaissance humanists, who pursued a synthesis between the classical and Christian traditions, the divinely inspired *manìa* endowed men with artistic creativity and philosophical insight, and additionally elevated the soul to God. In this sense they agreed with Plato that divine inspiration could equally derive from Apollo, the god of the arts, poetry, music and divination, and from Bacchus, the liberator of the spirit, god of wine and nature. The juxtaposition of the two, undoubtedly derived from Plato's *Phaedrus*, is repeatedly stressed by Marsilio Ficino who writes in his *De Triplici Vita* (published in 1489): "Bacchus brings us two things in particular: wine and the odour of wine to renew the spirit, by the daily employment of which the spirit becomes Apollonian and liberated."[35] Ficino even identified himself with Dionysus and dubbed his protégé Pico della Mirandola as 'Apollo'. Indeed, he ends the *De Triplici Vita* exclaiming: "Rise and greet Pico, our Phoebus. I often call him my 'Phoebus' and he likewise calls me 'Dionysus's and "Liber" for we are brothers."[36]

While we cannot postulate that the complex arguments known to Renaissance scholars were the driving force behind the representation of Dionysiac themes for decorative purposes, they may have inspired some famously ambiguous images such as Michelangelo's statue in the Bargello or Caravaggio's paintings. These works are indeed characterized by subtle psychological overtones that step beyond the simple drunkenness of the god and must have derived from learned inputs. Both artists had indeed been exposed to classical culture and humanist speculation, with Michelangelo beginning his career at the court of Lorenzo il Magnifico, and Caravaggio entering the circle of Cardinal Francesco Maria Del Monte.

Michelangelo's Bacchus

Much has been written about Michelangelo's statue and the way it expressed, like no other, the ambivalent characteristics of Dionysus[37] (Figure 18).

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introduction by Alberto Viviani, ed., in Faustino Perisauli, *De Triumpho Stultitiae.* (Florence: Il Fauno, 1963).

35. As quoted in John F. Moffitt, *Caravaggio in Context* (Jefferson, NC and London: Mc Farland, 2004), 126. See also Edgar Wind, *Misteri pagani nel Rinascimento* (Milan: Adelphi, (1999 [1971]), ch. 4, 11, 12.

36. Marsilio Ficino, *Three Books on Life,* Carol V. Kaske, John R. Clark, eds. (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Text Society, 1989), III: 25-26.

37. Important studies include: Michael Hirst, "Michelangelo in Rome: An Altar-piece and the 'Bacchus'", *Burlington Magazine* no. 123 (1981), 581-593; Constance Gibbons Lee, *Gardens and gods: Jacopo Galli, Michelangelo's Bacchus, and their Art Historical Settings*, Ph.D. thesis, Brown University (1981); Paola Barocchi, *Il Bacco di Michelangelo* (Florence: Museo Nazionale del Bargello, 1982); Charles H. Carman, "Michelangelo's Bacchus and divine frenzy", *Source, Notes in the History of Art* no. 2:4 (1981), 6-13; Michael Hirst, Jill Dunkerton,

Swollen, sensual, and tipsy he sways backwards and appears to dance rather than walk. Already Giorgio Vasari in 1550 noted the unique combination of "the vigour of a young male and the round fleshiness of a woman", so wondrous that it "frightened those that were not accustomed to such things".[38] Instructed by the artist, Ascanio Condivi replied in 1553 that the statue, "merry" and "squinting lasciviously as those possessed by the love of wine, corresponded in every particular to the intentions of ancient writers".[39] On the one hand we find his earthbound sensuality, on the other the divine nature and the *manìa* described by Plato or Callistratus and well known to Michelangelo and his earliest protectors.

Making and Meaning. The young Michelangelo. The artist in Rome 1496-1501 (London: National Gallery Publications, 1995); Kathleen Weil-Garris Brandt, Nicholas Penny, Cristina Acidini Luchinat, eds., *La Giovinezza di Michelangelo*, Exhibition Catalogue (Florence: Artificio Skira, 1999); Ralph Lieberman, "Regarding Michelangelo's Bacchus", *Artibus et Historiae* no. 22:43 (2001), 65-74; Luba Freedman, "Michelangelo's Reflections on Bacchus", *ibid*. no. 24:47 (2003), 121-135; Sergio Risaliti, Francesco Vossilla, *Il Bacco di Michelangelo. Il dio della spensieratezza e della condanna* (Florence: Maschietto, 2007); Philippe Morel, "Le "Bacchus" de Michel-Ange: de l'ivresse à la contemplation divine", *Accademia* no. 12 (2010), 51-73; Erin Sutherland Minter, "Discarded deity: the rejection of Michelangelo's Bacchus and the artist's response", *Renaissance studies* no. 28:3 (2014), 443-458.

38. "…una certa mistione di membra maravigliose, e particolarmente avergli dato la sveltezza della gioventù del maschio e la carnosità e tondezza della femmina... ch'era cosa incredibile vedere i pensieri alti, e la maniera difficile con facilissima facilità da lui esercitata, tanto con ispavento di quelli che non erano usi a vedere cose tali, quanto degli usi alle buone, perché le cose, che si vedevano fatte, parevano nulle al paragone delle sue." Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori ed architettori*, (1568) ed. Gaetano Milanesi (Florence: Sansoni, 1906), VII, 150.

39. "… la cui forma e aspetto corrisponde in ogni parte al'intentione delli scrittori antichi. La faccia Lieta, et gli occhi biechi et lascivi, quali sogliono essere quegli, che soverchiamente dall'amor del vino son presi." Ascanio Condivi, V*ita di Michelagnolo Buonarroti raccolta per Ascanio Condivi da la Ripa Transone* (1553), C. Davis ed. (Heidelberg: Universitäts-Bibliothek, 2009, e-book), 20 (11*v*).

Figure 18. *Michelangelo, Bacchus, 1496-97, Marble, Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence, H 184 cm (without base)*
Source: By Michelangelo - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Michelangelo_Bacchus.jpg, Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=3528305.

The patron of the statue was the ambitious Cardinal Raffaele Riario (1461-1521), a nephew of Sixtus IV and papal *Camerlengo*, who in those years was building the grandest palace in Rome (the Cancelleria, later confiscated by Leo X).[40] The construction, near his titular church of San Lorenzo in Damaso on the *Via Papalis*, was financed with twenty thousand gold ducats earned in a night's gambling. Within this context, the commission of a classicizing (yet tipsy) Bacchus from a man who in Rome was second only to the Pope, testifies to the status that antique pieces were acquiring in the courts of the Renaissance, which vied with each other at staging the best collection.

40. The palace was confiscated when Riario, stripped of his properties, was exiled in 1517 on the grounds of an alleged plot against Leo X.

Riario had already purchased Michelangelo's *Sleeping Cupid*, now lost, that the agent Baldassare del Milanese had passed off as an antique worth two hundred gold ducats. Realizing the fraud, the Cardinal was reimbursed but he called Michelangelo to Rome challenging him to produce another statue in competition with ancient masterpieces.[41] Rather than simply prompted by a desire for compensation, the *Bacchus* played a substantial role in Riario's cultural politics. In fact, the audacious Cardinal envisaged a theatrical space for the courtyard of his palace and intended to recreate, within the ambience of Christian Rome, a stage for classical performances under the aegis of Dionysus.[42] Among Riario's friends was the Cardinal Jacopo Sadoleto, whose paraphrase of Plato's *Phaedrus* (starring the young Tommaso Inghirami, future papal librarian) was set in the suburban villa of their banker Jacopo Galli. It was in fact the latter who ultimately obtained Michelangelo's statue.[43]

Far from being a man of poor taste and "little understanding of sculpture" (as Condivi described him long after his death), Riario was sophisticated and demanding enough to face Michelangelo with the challenge of meeting his grand expectations and then to reject the outcome.[44] To please such a patron the *Bacchus* would have required a heavy cultural substratum that a generic copy of an antique would not possess. It is therefore no coincidence that our statue should be charged with allusions to the Bacchic *furor* and the *manìa* so dear to Neoplatonists. Among the literary sources for Michelangelo's rendering may have been Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where the youthful Bacchus is crowned with grapes and ivy and capable of terrifying deeds, or Virgil's *Georgics*, where Bacchus is described as the

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41. The story of the lost Cupid is reported by Condivi and Vasari, see Paola Barocchi, ed., *Giorgio Vasari. La Vita di Michelangelo nelle redazioni del 1550 e del 1568* (Milan: Ricciardi, 1962), I,13; Ascanio Condivi, *Vita di Michelagnolo Buonarroti* (1553), G. Nencioni, M. Hirst, C. Elam, eds. (Florence: SPES, 1998), 17-18. The encounter with Riario and the commission of the Bacchus is recorded in Michelangelo's first letter from Rome, written on 2 July 1496 to Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici (who first had the idea of the fake antique): see Giovanni Poggi, *Il carteggio di Michelangelo* (Florence, 1965-1983), 5 vols., I,1. See also N. Baldini, D. Lodico, A.M. Piras, "Michelangelo a Roma. I rapporti con la famiglia Galli e con Baldassarre Milanese", in Weil-Garris Brandt, Kathleen, Nicholas Penny, Cristina Acidini Luchinat, eds., *La Giovinezza di Michelangelo*, Exhibition Catalogue (Florence: Artificio Skira, 1999, 149-162.

42. S. Risaliti, F. Vossilla, *Il Bacco…* (2007), 14; Christoph L. Frommel, "Raffaele Riario, la Cancelleria, il teatro e il *Baco* di Michelangelo", in Weil-Garris Brandt, et al. *La Giovinezza*… Exh. Cat. (Florence, 1999), 143-148.

43. Howard Hibbard, *Michelangelo* (London: Penguin, 1985), 49-50; Alexander Nagel, *Michelangelo and the Reform of Art* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 102.

44. Condivi, writing on behalf of Michelangelo, had every reason for slandering the Cardinal who not only had rejected the statue, but had also fallen out of favour with Leo X de' Medici, dying in exile in 1521. Michael Hirst, "Michelangelo in Rome…" (1981), 581-593.

"splendour of the world" and "the god of joyous mysteries". Another possible source, as we learn from Condivi, could have been Boccaccio's *Genealogia Deorum*.[45] Even if classical authors were not directly known to the sculptor, they certainly were to Poliziano, who had already acted as thematic advisor for Michelangelo's *Battle of the Centaurs* (1492) and certainly to Riario himself.[46]

Some of the characteristics described in classical literature were also present in the extant antique statues of the god, but these inevitably showed an Apollonian type with long hair and an Olympian countenance that Michelangelo's sculpture does not possess. In fact, he added a vague intoxication hitherto unprecedented, as if he wished to surpass any ancient model and bring the statue to life.[47] With the exception of sarcophagus reliefs, no other image known to the sculptor illustrated the god as swaying (let alone dancing). Michelangelo thus left to posterity a new image of Bacchus whose visual sources, if any, are yet to be found.[48] The statue he produced was a personal interpretation of the subject, albeit mediated by a humanist milieu and literary reminiscences. This is even more striking considering that the *Bacchus* counts among the first large-scale, free-standing statues since Antiquity.

The ambiguity in Michelangelo's rendering is deliberate and goes beyond the drunkenness registered by Condivi but only suggested in the sculpture. In fact, rather than staggering, Michelangelo's *Bacchus* appears to dance. The very fact that the viewer must circle around the statue to experience it to the full, sets the god in motion and reveals more than one side to his character.[49] From one standpoint we see the raised cup, the tilted head and the "lasciviously squinting eyes", from the other the reeling torso, protruding belly and raised leg. The skin of the panther in his left hand and the accompanying Pan nibbling at the grapes

45. See: Ovidio, *Le Metamorfosi*, transl. Guido Paduano (Milan: Mondadori, 2007), 138; the stories of Pentheus and the pirates of Naxos are in book III, 525-730; the story of Orpheus dismembered by the Bacchae is in book XI, 1-84. See also Virgilio, *Georgiche*, transl. Carlo Carena (Turin: UTET, 1971), I.5-6, 152-153; II.1-8, 184-185; Giovanni Boccaccio, *De Genealogia deorum gentilium libri*, ed. Vincenzo Romano (Bari: Laterza, 1951), XXV.

46. Poliziano was also the advisor of Botticelli's *Primavera* (1482) painted for the same Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici who also owned Michelangelo's lost *St John the Baptist* and had an antechamber festooned with histories of Bacchus. See John K. Shearman, "The collections of the younger branch of the Medici", *The Burlington Magazine* no. 117 (1975), 12-27, here 25 n. 40.

47. I disagree with Edgar Wind who, citing Pico, argues that the gods should be represented as filled with the power they dispense. This was not the case with classical statues of Bacchus nor with the god appearing in Euripides's *Bacchae*, for the god is not mad nor drunk himself. Cfr. Edgar Wind, *Pagan mysteries in the Renaissance* (New York: Norton, 1968 [1958]), 178.

48. I refer to my forthcoming book for a full discussion of the visual sources and precedents that Michelangelo would have used.

49. See R. Lieberman, "Regarding …" (2001), 65-73.

are not visible from the viewer's left and are gradually revealed only when changing position.

Entirely different from any of the static classical groups, Michelangelo has manipulated the subject and the statue's *contrapposto* in such a way as to render the *manìa* or *furor* that only the god of "joyous mysteries" could convey.[50] This may also be the reason why the statue was rejected and given to the banker Jacopo Galli: Bacchus is represented in all his potential danger, one that was inappropriate for a cardinal of Riario's visibility. [51]

In the free-standing statues of Antiquity, the god had rarely been shown inebriated or prey to the derangement he instils, even if Callistratus had described Praxiteles' Dionysus as the work that "best captured his madness (*manìa*)". While Praxiteles' original no longer exists, it inspired most of the Dionysoi that have come down to us through Roman copies, but none of these illustrates intoxication. Callistratus's words then referred more to a state of divine inspiration than to alcoholic alteration. On the contrary Michelangelo's *Bacchus* seems to hold a wider range of meanings: the divinity, the inspiration, the ambiguity, the inebriation, the threat. It has no single prototype (nor viewing point) and appears to synthesize concepts drawn from literature.

Besides the unsteady pose and the effeminate body, other elements differ from ancient statues and suggest potential threats: with drilled eyes and a gaping mouth Bacchus looks at his cup as if aware of the dangerous effects of wine.[52] Additionally, unlike the traditional *nebris* or skin of a fawn (symbolic of ritual sacrifice), he holds the pelt of a panther, which may refer to the cruel rites performed in honour of Bacchus, the "ferocious youth" accompanied by panthers that was described by Vincenzo Cartari and earlier mythographers.

Michelangelo's *Bacchus* is a unique representation of the long-forgotten Dionysian dualism, for he is both the god of joy offering the cup of wine and the god of destruction.[53] Allusive of the latter is also the little creature by his side, which, rather than a satyr, seems to be an infant Pan. Similar horned figures with cloven feet had characterized the iconography of the devil in the Middle Ages

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50. R. Lieberman, *ibid*, 67.

51. Different opinions have been voiced: some suggest that the Bacchus was moved to Galli's adjoining property after the hand incidentally broke during the construction of the Cancelleria (S. Risaliti, F. Vossilla, *Il Bacco…* (2007), 47; others follow Condivi and believe the statue to have been carved from the start in Galli's garden, where it was recorded in Heemskerck's drawing. In this case the hand may have been intentionally broken to present the sculpture as antique, only to be re-attached by Michelangelo himself around 1553. Such a view was already voiced by contemporaries like Jean-Jacques Boissard writing in the 1550's (published in 1597). For a fuller discussion see: C. L. Frommel, "Raffaele Riario, la Cancelleria…", in *La Giovinezza…* (Florence, 1999), 143-148; M. Hirst, J. Dunkerton, *Making and meaning…* (1995).

52. Cited from L. Freedman, "Michelangelo's reflections…" (2003), 128.

53. A. Emmerling-Skala, *Bacchus …* (1994), I, 258-259.

and Michelangelo's inclusion, aside of stabilizing the statue, seems to intentionally underline the dehumanizing effect of excessive drinking, one that brings man on the verge of bestiality. As observed by the late Michael Hirst, the artist "transformed an interpretation of languor into one of latent violence", of the kind that had been associated with the Roman *Liber* and feared by the Church fathers.[54] This helps to explain why Michelangelo's *Bacchus* elicited contradictory feelings, prompting the Cardinal to rid himself of the problematic image. Despite his grand palace with an in-house theatre and his avant-garde taste, neither Riario nor the Roman scene were ready for such a revolutionary image, one that remained unparalleled until Caravaggio's paintings of the subject. It cannot be a coincidence that Michelangelo's *Bacchus* was rarely copied or reproduced in small collectible bronzes, as instead was the case with the equivalents by Sansovino or Giambologna.

The "latent violence" that Dionysus instilled in the Bacchae and that led to the dismemberment of Pentheus, Lycurgus and Orpheus, was generally exercised (or inflicted) on mortals. While driving others to madness and drunkenness, rarely does the god appear "mad" or drunk himself. The two most prominent exceptions are Michelangelo's statue, and the god's intoxicated portrayals at the hands of Caravaggio.

Bacchus from Caravaggio to Rubens and Beyond

Merisi's paintings in the Galleria Borghese and in the Uffizi, both dating to the artist's early years in Rome, are arguably the best-known images of Bacchus as god of wine and altered states (Figures 19-20). According to Giovanni Baglione's *Vite de' pittori* of 1642, the so-called *Sick Bacchus* was painted around 1593 when Caravaggio frequented the workshop of Cavalier d'Arpino.[55] The canvas is indeed recorded in the latter's possession in 1607, when it was sequestered by the Apostolic Chamber and handed to Scipione Borghese, nephew of Pope Paul V. The Florentine *Bacchus* is generally dated to 1597, when Caravaggio was under the protection of Cardinal Del Monte, who commissioned

54. Cfr. St. Augustine *City of God* VII.24, as quoted in M. Hirst, J. Dunkerton, *Making and Meaning…* (1995), 33. L. Freedman, "Michelangelo's Reflections…" (2003), 130.

55. Giovanni Baglione, *Le vite de' pittori, scultori et architetti dal pontificato di Gregorio XIII del 1572 in fino a' tempi di papa Urbano VIII nel 1642*, J. Hess, H. Röttgen, eds. (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1995), 136. Giovanni Baglione's chronology is contradicted in Giulio Mancini's *Considerazioni sulla Pittura* (1625) where the painting is dated to the time of Caravaggio's residence with Monsignor Pandolfo Pucci. The title "Bacchino malato" was first given by Roberto Longhi, "Precisazioni nelle gallerie Italiane. I. Galleria Borghese. Michelangelo da Caravaggio", *Vita artistica*, no. 2 (1928), 28-35; see also R. Longhi, *Mostra del Caravaggio e dei Caravaggeschi*, Exhibition Catalogue (Florence: Sansoni, 1951).

the painting as a gift for his friend Ferdinand I de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany.[56]

Figure 19. *Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, Selfportrait as Sick Bacchus, c. 1593-94, Oil on Canvas, Galleria Borghese, Rome, 67 x 53 cm*
Source: Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons (attribution not legally required). https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Caravaggio_-_Autoritratto_in_veste_di_bacco_-_INV_534.jpg.

Figure 20 *Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, Bacchus, 1596-97, oil on canvas, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, 95 x 85 cm*
Source: Caravaggio, Public domain, attraverso Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bacchus_by_Caravaggio_1.jpg.

56. Philippe Morel, "Bacchus malade", *Les bas-fonds du baroque. La Rome du vice et de la misère,* Exhibition Catalogue (Milan: Officina Libraria, 2014), 128-131.

Baglione describes the former piece as a self-portrait of the artist, an identification that is generally accepted even if the iconography eschews traditional prototypes.[57] The pale, almost greenish complexion of the protagonist seems to bear testimony to the ill health of the artist, who worked on the painting before (or after) entering the Hospital of Santa Maria della Consolazione due to a wounded leg.[58] Indeed, the unconventional pose, with one knee bent and the other stretched, may render the way Caravaggio had to sit in order to alleviate his suffering. The facial expression follows suit, with the mouth distorted in a forced smile.

Unlike the common renderings of Bacchus, showing the god as a happy and handsome youth, this version has a double-edged meaning. On the one hand we find the sensuously exposed shoulder, the juicy grapes and lush ivy-wreath that befit the wine-god, on the other there is the unusual nocturnal ambience and the protagonist's state of pain and possible drunkenness. Caravaggio's *Sick Bacchus* is thus characterized as a hybrid creature that is half-god, half-human and reflects the duality of the ancient Dionysus *mainomenos* who, manifested himself in human form and, in Plato's words, had given wine to men "so they go mad too".

The lunar pallor is indeed characteristic of the *furor lunaticus* experienced by those seeking inspiration or drinking excessively and echoes Andrea Alciati's *Emblemata* (1531), where poets are described as pale ("for studying too much") and crowned with ivy.[59] As the artist well knows, and conveys to the viewer with a telling glance, the borderline between inspiration and drunkenness is easy to cross.

In Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*, published in that same year of 1593, grapes and ivy are the attributes of Bacchus, symbolizing indulgence in the senses and amorous passion. In the Christological sense, however, the grapes referenced the wine of the Eucharist and the blood of the Saviour, while the evergreen ivy, hard to eradicate and constantly springing up anew, could be adopted as a symbol of eternal life. The interpretation of Bacchus as an ante-type of Christ had occasionally appeared in patristic texts and was used by Renaissance theologians

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57. …"e fece alcuni quadretti da lui nello specchio ritratti. E il primo fu un Bacco con alcuni grappoli d'uve diverse, con gran diligenza fatte, ma di maniera un poco secca." Kristina Herrmann-Fiore, "Il *Bacchino malato* autoritratto del Caravaggio ed altre figure bacchiche degli artisti", *Quaderni di Palazzo Venezia* no. 6 (1989), 94-134.

58. Maurizio Calvesi, *La Realtà del Caravaggio* (Turin: Einaudi, 1990), 12-14, and Peter Robb, *L'enigma Caravaggio* (Milan: Mondadori, 2001), 44, underline the presence in the Ospedale della Consolazione of patients affected by malaria and other ailments due to poverty. Robb also associates the funereal light and the marble table to mortuary chambers. Rossella Vodret Adamo, *Caravaggio. L'opera completa* (Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana, 2009), 44, suggests the wound in the leg to be inflicted by a kicking horse.

59. Howard Hibbard, *Caravaggio* (Boulder, CO and Oxford: Westview Press, 1985 [1983]), 21; J. F. Moffitt, *Caravaggio in Context…* (2004), 131; P. Morel, "Bacchus malade…" (2014), 130, with the quotation from Alciati: "per lo troppo studio".

such as Giles of Viterbo, working at the papal court of Julius II. I would argue however, that while an allegorical ambiguity is certainly intentional, Caravaggio's self-portrait remains a secular image, one that, despite the pale complexion of the sitter, chiefly conveys sensuality and intoxication.

Similar aspects also characterize the Uffizi *Bacchus* who invites the viewer to drink from his cup and consume the delicious fruit laid out on the table. The realism of the image is such that one even perceives the ripples in the wineglass and the different skin tonality of the sitter's torso and tanned hands. The offer comes from a young, seductive boy with a bare shoulder, blushed cheeks, and a drowsy look. This time, it is not a portrait of Caravaggio himself but rather of his friend, and favourite model, Mario Minniti.[60]

In their physical credibility, Caravaggio's depictions of Bacchus and other half-naked youths, call to mind the famous scene of Trimalchio's banquet narrated in Petronius' *Satyricon*. In passage V.41 we read: "A pretty, little boy came into the room, wearing a wreath of vine leaves and ivy in his hair, *like a little Bacchus, or Father Liber. He did for us a number of imitations of* Bacchus under various forms: as Lynaeus, Bromius, Evius and so on. Then, warbling some of Trimalchio's poetry in a shrill voice, he went around offering the guests grapes from his basket".[61] Such description must have been familiar to cultivated Renaissance audiences and could have been reproduced in Del Monte's household, where banquets involving young boys dressed *all'antica* were frequent.[62]

Grapes indeed also appear in the Florentine *Bacchus*, complementing the youth's seductive appeal, but, as in reality, they are deceptive, for the sweetness of the fruit quickly becomes rotten. Positioned in the foreground, the sinister reminder cannot be overlooked and functions as a *memento mori*, additionally reinforced by the black ribbon held in the boy's right hand. Yet rather than chastising, the painting intends to warn the viewer about the transience of good things and an encouragement to seize the day with its delightful opportunities. The very hand holding the ribbon, for instance, composes a gesture that may

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60. The identification with Mario Minniti is proposed in Christoph L. Frommel, "Caravaggio, Minniti e il Cardinale Francesco Maria del Monte", *Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. La vita e le opere attraverso i documenti: Atti del Convegno internazionale di studi* (Rome: Logart Press, 1996), 18-21. It is also accepted in Helen Langdon, *Caravaggio: a life* (London: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1999), 145.

61. See Avigdor W. G. Posèq, "Caravaggio and the Antique", *Artibus et Historiae* no. 13 (1986), 147-167; see further A.W.G. Posèq, "Bacchic Themes in Caravaggio's Juvenile Works", *Gazette des Beaux Arts* no. 115 (1990), 113-121, especially 114. See also J. F. Moffitt, *Caravaggio in Context* … (2004), 115. For the primary source see Petronius, *The Satyricon*, ed. William Arrowsmith (New York: Mentor, 2014), 49-50.

62. See the Avviso of January 1605, quoted in Francis Haskell, *Patrons and Painters: a Study in the Relations between Italian Art and Society in the Age of the Baroque* (New York: Icon, 1971), 29. On homosexuality in the entourage of Caravaggio's patrons see Creighton E. Gilbert, *Caravaggio and his two Cardinals* (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1995).

have sexual allusions.[63] Along with the fruit and the wineglass, the viewer is thus presented with an offer to join the party before it is too late.[64] Given that the painting was a gift from Del Monte, one might imagine that it expressed an invitation, fictional or real.

The *caveat* inherent in the enjoyment of pleasures to which the Uffizi *Bacchus* invites the spectator, has a different taste in its Roman equivalent. Indeed, the *Sick Bacchus* seems to be inspired by the melancholic mood of the party's aftermath, when the effects of drinking are inevitably felt.[65] Still offering fruit, the Roman Bacchus addresses the viewer with a look that is charged with multiple meanings, reinforced by fact that the image is a self-portrait.

Up to the sixteenth century, when representing themselves, artists rarely used a mythological disguise and if any they would choose Apollo, the god of the arts, rather than Dionysus in his altered state. However, as re-proposed by the Neoplatonists and here by Caravaggio, the wine-god could fuel creativity and inspiration just like his counter-part Apollo. Bacchus could thus be adopted as protector, or an alter-ego, even at times of weakness, when the human body and the fallible mortal nature left the poet (or painter) far removed from Mount Parnassus and the lofty heights of Apollonian perfection.

Despite the critiques, the rejected paintings, and the very nature of his art, distant from counter-reformatory austerities and academic dictates, Caravaggio had a profound impact, contributing to the rise of new themes that explored human weakness. His legacy was picked up by artists like Rubens, who was in Rome in 1602 and again in 1606-1608, or Velázquez, who arrived in 1629-31 and then in 1649. The latter's *Triumph of Bacchus*, painted before he departed from Madrid in 1629, is now in the Prado and is better known as *Los Borrachos* (the Drunkards). Like Caravaggio before, Velázquez combined a realistic depiction of contemporary characters with the mythological presence of the wine-god and a satyr (Figure 21).

Analogous themes of drunkenness, transitioning between myth and reality, were explored by Rubens. His *Drunken Silenus* (1619-25), which hung in his own house and is now in Munich, illustrates the aged satyr staggering along with uncertain steps[66] (Figure 22). As he lurches forward, he is supported by his

63 As illustrated in *Les bas-fonds du baroque…* (2014), nr. 26: 198-199, the index and middle finger bent to hold the thumb, composed the gesture of the *fica* and commonly alluded to the sexual act.

64 The invitation echoes Lorenzo de' Medici's lines from the *Canzona di Bacco*, written a century earlier, albeit on a different, and public, occasion: "Quant'è bella giovinezza / che si fugge tuttavia! / Chi vuol esser lieto, sia / Del doman non c'è certezza..".

65 On the melancholy of the *Sick Bacchus* see H. Hibbard, *Caravaggio* (1983), 272; H. Langdon, *Caravaggio…* (1999), 69-70.

66 The painting originally comprised half-length figures and was later enlarged by Rubens himself. On the Drunken Silenus see: Svetlana Alpers, *The Making of Rubens* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 101-157. The artist produced various paintings on this

mythical companions and a crowd of people, male and female, in modern dress. Utterly intoxicated and inserted in the realm of Rubens' contemporaries, Silenus loses his age-old authority as educator of classical heroes and becomes identifiable with *any* drunkard. The fact that the same image could also be somewhat rejuvenated and adapted to illustrate Bacchus himself, is indicative of the final stages of the god's transformation and disempowerment.

Figure 21. *Diego Velàzquez, Los Borrachos, 1628-29, oil on canvas, Museo del Prado, Madrid, 165 x 225 cm*
Source: Diego Velázquez, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b8/Los_borrachos_o_el_triunfo_de_Baco_1629_Vel%C3%A1zquez.jpg.

subject; among these are the *Bacchanal with the Sleeping Ariadne* in the National Museum in Stockholm and the *Bacchanal* in the Uffizi.

Figure 22. *Pieter Paul Rubens, The Drunken Silenus, 1619-1625, Oil on Wood, Alte Pinakothek, Munich, 212 x 214.5 cm*
Source: Peter Paul Rubens, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. https://upload.Wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/32/Peter_Paul_Rubens_-_The_Drunken_Silenus_-_WGA20297.jpg.

In the *Bacchus with Nymph and Satyr*, painted by Rubens in 1638-1640 and now in the Hermitage, Bacchus has nothing of the handsome Apollonian youth seen in classical prototypes and Renaissance derivations. Turned into a fat and ageing drunkard he is incapable of any reason let alone inspiration. The brutality and terrifying power he had been able to infuse in his followers are gone, for at this point the boundaries to the irrational could no longer be crossed (Figure 23).

Figure 23. *Pieter Paul Rubens, Bacchus, 1638-40, Oil on Canvas Transferred from Panel, Hermitage, St. Petersburg, 91 x 161 cm*
Source: Peter Paul Rubens, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/9f/Peter_Paul_Rubens_-_Bacchus_-_WGA20321.jpg.

Conclusion

In this rapid *excursus* from Antiquity to the Baroque age, I hope to have illustrated some of the ways in which Dionysus was transformed across the centuries. Progressively tamed, the god lost his multi-faceted character and mysterious powers, to become a byword of wine, hedonism, or excess.

In ancient Greece, no other god was as widely venerated or so frequently represented in the visual arts. He and his followers were by far the most common subject in vase painting from the sixth century BC onwards.[67] Greek statues of Dionysus were copied by the Roman conquerors from the second century BC, and in Imperial Rome Dionysian imagery was frequently carved on sarcophagi fronts.

The reason for his ubiquitous appearance is that no other god counted such a physical presence in man's life. Many stories narrate of his epiphanies and often assimilate him to real historic personalities. Thus, he presided over vegetation and wine, and introduced man to the rudiments of agriculture, he was the god of happiness, the triumphant conqueror, and the inspirer. This character he shared with Apollo, whose nature as Olympian god, however, called for distance and perfection. Dionysus, by contrast, was a chthonian deity and therefore more humane than his "brother". Born of a mortal woman, Dionysus could die himself: as a child he was dismembered by the Titans and then re-assembled by Apollo. Yet he was also capable of infusing madness and punishing anyone who dared to resist his will.

Powerful, ambivalent, and dangerous as he was, Dionysus could not be accepted in Rome unless in a subdued and domesticated form. This process initiated when his identification with Liber Pater connected him foremost to nature, detracting attention from the *ekstasis* and the visionary abilities he instilled in the Mysteries (which indeed were forbidden). Although his potentials were still explored in literature, to judge from the poems of Catullus and Horace, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, or Macrobius's *Saturnalia*, the way was paved for his transformation into a tamed Bacchus and his metonymic identification with wine.[68]

In the Middle Ages Bacchus was condemned, moralized, and largely forgotten, if not, occasionally, reconciled with Christian beliefs.[69] Only in the Renaissance did he resurface from the ruins of the past, albeit in a different version. Of his ancient self he sometimes retained his aspects as inspirer, lord of nature, and triumphant hero returning from the East, but most of all was he was seen as a fun-loving wine-god derived from pagan mythology.

67. Cornelia Isler-Kerényi, *Dionysus in archaic Greece*: *an understanding through images* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007), 1.

68. Obvioulsy the passages of such transformation were far more complex than could ever be outlined here; one only needs to consider that between Euripides's *Bacchae* and Nonnos's *Dionysiaca* over 800 years had passed by.

69. Thus, as remarked in Albert Henrichs, "Loss of self, suffering, violence: the modern views of Dionysus from Nietzsche to Girard", *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* no. 88 (1984), 205-240, here 213-14, Dionysus could be seen "either as the Antichrist or as a prefiguration of Christ."

From the medieval devilish creature, that inspired all kinds of debauchery, he was reduced to a light-hearted symbol of pleasure and an appropriate subject to decorate dining rooms and villas.

Although his mysterious powers were known in humanist circles and represented by select artists such as Michelangelo and Caravaggio, the frenzy he could inspire was increasingly moved to the less menacing sphere of satyrs, or half-beasts like Pan. One had to wait for the Romantic age to see the Dionysian *manìa* or *furor*, and the irrational in general, resurrected from the ashes and fully accepted, or even pursued, by Nietzsche and his heirs.

And yet, across time, of all the gods that populated the classical world, it was Dionysus along with his retinue of merry satyrs and bacchantes to maintain the most substantial afterlife.[70] Among the reasons for this persistence is his polymorphous nature and adaptability, and the fact that he remained, more than any other mythological figure, the embodiment of the lust for life and the repository of all projections of human happiness.

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70. Michael Philipp, "Herrschaft und Subversion. Die dionysische Bildwelt von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart", *Dionysus, Rausch und Ekstase,* Exhibition Catalogue (Munich: Hirmer, 2013), 10-23, here 10.

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