

Dionysiac Spectacle and Role-Playing in Plutarch's *Crassus*

In the closing scene of Plutarch's *Crassus*, an actor performing Euripides' *Bacchae* before the Parthian king snatches up Crassus' severed head and declaims the lines which Agave recites over dead Pentheus. The biographer thus embellishes the historical facts of Crassus' ill-fated Parthian campaign of 53 B.C. with what is likely to be a fictitious episode in order to evoke the traditionally affinitive images of Dionysiac cult, theatre, and tragedy (Kerényi 1976:315-330). Commentators on this *Vita* have made only passing attempts to investigate the Dionysiac imagery in its finale, nor has much notice been given to the Dionysiac overtones of the *Bellum Spartacium* in the first half of the *Crassus*. At most, it has been dismissed as an echo of a lost tradition which once associated Spartacus with the Bacchic sphere (Braund 1993, Zadorojniy 1997). Yet it is remarkable that of all the ancient accounts of the revolt of Spartacus and the death of Crassus that have come down to us, Plutarch's alone endows the two historical episodes with Dionysiac imagery. This paper investigates the implications of the Dionysiac undercurrent in the *Crassus* by comparing it with the explicit Dionysiac imagery in Plutarch's *Antony*.

Throughout his career Antony engages in role-playing, styling himself both as Hercules and as Dionysus (*Ant.* 4.1-2; 60.2-3). While the divine costumes go well with his military glory and authority in eastern lands (*Ant.* 24.3-6), in the aftermath of Actium he is abandoned by Dionysus (*Ant.* 75.3-4) and it becomes clear that role-laying—particularly in his association with Cleopatra (*Ant.* 26.1-3)—has led him to ruin. Plutarch seems to suggest that, as the god of masks, of *dissemblance*, Dionysus is treacherous even towards his own protégés.

In the *Crassus* a similar, though more subtle, scenario can be traced. The lives of both Crassus and his main opponent, Spartacus, consist, in effect, of role-playing. As the leader of a revolt Spartacus is a fighter, but as a *gladiator* he is the (en-) actor of combat as a *spectacle* in the arena—his persona, as that of any thespian, is cleft into his indigenous “I” and the role he performs. Hence

his contradictory character: unlike the monochromatically ruthless Spartacus of Florus (2.8) or Appian (*Civil Wars* 1.14.117), Plutarch's hero is split into the barbaric and the Hellenized, the threatening and the mild, the sacred and the helpless. At a first glance, Crassus stands in direct opposition to Spartacus: described as the representative of Roman integrity and order (*Crass.* 2), Crassus is a most logical opponent to the riotous, Bacchic (*Crass.* 8.3, 8.4, 9.2, 10.6-7) slaves. Yet he, just as Spartacus, is engaged in role-playing: Plutarch portrays Crassus as a mediocre strategist who continuously strives to be a military genius on par with Caesar and Pompey (*Crass.* 27). Focused on being *someone other than himself*, he too is split between his "I" and the assumed role. The theatrical connotations of Crassus' attempts to rival Pompey and Caesar become explicit in his posthumous mock-triumph when the Parthians parade about his double costumed in female garb (*Crass.* 32).

Just as he is ruinous for Antony, Dionysus proves destructive for both his avatar, Spartacus, and for his Pentheus-like opponent, Crassus. Failing to achieve a balance between his "civilized" nature and the pressure of the "barbaric" force which he represents, Spartacus cannot cross the Alps on time and suffers defeat (*Crass.* 8). Similarly, Crassus is a complete military failure in Parthia. In the *Crassus*, as in *Antony*, Dionysus is an ambiguous behind-the-scenes force which, inspiring friend and foe to histrionic action, leads them from ambitions and glory to ruin.

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