

Bacchus, the Obstacle-Course God

This paper examines the relationship between the god Bacchus and multi-staged movement. It argues that Bacchus/Dionysus is represented in Greek and Latin literature as moving from station to station, and that his worship necessarily involved a parallel choreography that took his followers on an obstacle-course style journey.

Multi-staged movement figures heavily in the Greek festivals associated with Bacchus. At the Dionysia and the Lenaia, various aspects of the festivals were held at different points over a period of several days (Csapo and Slater 1995; Wilson 2007). In the Greek literary tradition, Dionysus is a traveling god. In Euripides' *Bacchae*, his first word, indeed the first word of the play, is ἦκω, "I have come." The verb ἦκω is marked because it "represents the theme of the play" (Seaford 1996: 149): it is Dionysus' arrival at Thebes, his latest station, that drives the plot action; moreover, the plot as a whole follows a "festival pattern, that is *pompē, thysia, agōn*" (Kavoulaki 1999: 309). Thebes, specifically its disbelieving ruler Pentheus, represents the next obstacle Bacchus must face. After a brief description of the scene at Thebes (1-12), the god catalogs his previous destinations around Asia: all of these places, he declares, he "kicked up heels and established [his] rites" (χορεύσας καὶ καταστήσας ἐμὰς τελετάς, Eur. Bacc. 21-22), thus neutralizing previous obstacles to his worship.

On the Latin side, Bacchic influences abound in Petronius' *Satyricon*, particularly in the account of Trimalchio's dinner-party. This paper proposes a reading of the *Cena Trimalchionis* as a Bacchic experience, evoking the mysteries and rituals surrounding the god's worship. At the home of Trimalchio, a freedman, there is repeated wordplay with *libertas* ("freedom") and Bacchus' alternative name, *Liber*. During dinner (Petr. Sat. 41), Trimalchio shows off a slave, bedecked in grapes, named Dionysus; Trimalchio simulates the boy's manumission by declaring

Dionyse, liber esto (“Be free, Dionysus”) whereupon the boy places a *pilleus* (freedman’s cap) upon his head. Trimalchio himself jokes about having *Liber* as a father (*habere Liberum patrem*), the irony being that Trimalchio, a former slave, was biologically the son of a *servus*, not a *liber*; but, having since joined the cult of Bacchus, he can claim adoption by *Liber*.

Trimalchio’s own upward climb represents both the station-to-station quality of Bacchic worship and another Dionysian theme, rebirth. The wall-painting inside Trimalchio’s house depicts his progression through the stages of a slave’s *cursus honorum* (Petr. *Sat.* 29): he begins as a long-haired slave (*capillatus*) entering Rome with Minerva as his escort (*Minervam...ducente Romam intrabat*); he is then trained in accounting (*rationari didicisset*) and then appointed Treasurer (*dispensator factus esset*). The language of escorting (*ducente*) is particularly significant: it recalls the *deductio in forum*, an institution from the late Republic wherein a young man made his debut into public life. In his own way, Trimalchio is a *novus homo*, or “new man”: his name, Gaius Pompeius Trimalchio Maecenatianus, reflects the process of re-christening a slave underwent when he became free. Trimalchio adopts the commonly-recognized *praenomen* Gaius, thus posturing himself as an ‘average Joe,’ but also the quintessential Roman; his adoptive *nomen gentilicum* and *agnomen*, Pompeius and Maecenatianus respectively, link him to the families of some Very Important People. Like his friend Habinnas, who is both an important-sounding Board Member (*sevir*) and a menial stonecutter (*lapidarius*, *Sat.* 65), Trimalchio represents the birth of a new nobility during the Empire.

The dinner itself mirrors the multi-stage effort of upward climbing. Encolpius and the other guests have to endure the many courses of Trimalchio’s lavish banquet, strenuously working through a *cursus mensarum*. The labyrinthine quality of Trimalchio’s house heightens

the sense of an obstacle-ridden progression. The paper ties this observation about a fictional house with actual wall-paintings found at the Villa of the Mysteries outside of Pompeii: the Bacchic scenes represent a sequence of initiation rituals, stages of which can be viewed at different stations around the room (Hearnshaw 1999).

This association between Bacchus and a mysterious, obstacle-course model of worship can even be seen in modern literature, namely Donna Tartt's bestselling book *A Secret History*, which chronicles a student's induction into a cult-like band of Classics majors at a remote *liberal* arts college.

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