

Dionysus, Revenge, and the Woman in the Burkha

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Most Americans would probably agree that the dominant visual image of the new millennium is the flaming collapse of the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City on 9/11/2001. I invite you to consider another one: the Muslim woman wearing the burkha, covered so completely that we can barely even see her eyes.ⁱ She can hardly see where she is going, and it must certainly be difficult for her to speak clearly. She appears to be trapped physically, economically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Yet the privileged white male, ten thousand miles away, observing her image on carefully edited cable television or gazing at her photo in *National Geographic* or *Time*, is equally limited, equally unable to see clearly. His dispassionate attention requires that she carry his unacknowledged feminine half. Veiled, "Oriental" or dark-skinned women have always functioned for him as symbols of the Other. There is always a hint of danger, because, as anthropologist John Jervis writes, a constant theme in Western literature is the "idea that 'woman' somehow embodies a powerful secret—that woman both *is* mystery, and yet is also the *key* to mystery."ⁱⁱ It would seem, beyond the patriarchal interpretation, that the men who keep "their women" so well hidden are acknowledging this mystery at some level. They are unable to hold something so

immense and powerful in themselves, but they know that it must remain hidden within a ritual container—a Holy of Holies. They have literalized that container in the burkha.

If the distant white male perceives the woman behind the burkha as possessing the secret to life, she (like the Great Mother herself) can only do so through having the secret to death as well. Because he doesn't know what she is thinking—he never asks—he is mystified. If he gazed at her image long enough, what else might he feel: pity, empathy... or terror? He doesn't know if she carries anything under her robe. Is it a tool of her vengeance: a gun, a knife, a bomb, a *vagina dentata* (the mythic South American image of the terrifying feminine)?

Or is she concealing something he *needs*—food, nourishment, a map of his emotions, a bare breast, a warm body to hold him while he cries? A divine child waiting to be born? The path *home*, to his deepest self? As a typically uninitiated male, he is unsure of his own purpose and status, and he is still connected to this woman in ways he can only dimly comprehend. Camille Paglia observes, “The agon of male identity springs from men’s humiliating sense of dependence upon women. It is women who control the emotional and sexual realms, and men know it.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Does he fear and resent the paradoxical power she wields? If so, does that resentment help justify his maltreatment of her? Does he sense some connection to his fears (or hopes) of impending apocalypse (from the Greek: to *lift the veil*)? If he confronted the notion of apocalypse, would he fear the end of time—linear time—because that might mark the beginning of—or a return to—*her* time? Will she kill him for revenge, or will she bless him and set him free? Is this why Attorney General John Ashcroft spent \$8,000 in early 2002 to drape a veil over the nude statue of “The Spirit

of Justice” at the Justice Department before announcing further impositions on civil liberties? Or why Colin Powell demanded that a veil be draped over the copy of Picasso’s great anti-war painting *Guernica* at the United Nations before he would stand before it and announce the beginning of the invasion of Iraq?

As without so as within. The mechanics of repression and of the inevitable return of the repressed work in society the same as they do in the psyche. *All* energies, peoples, classes, ethnic groups, and modes of being which have been suppressed by the dominant mechanical, militaristic, and consumerist mythologies of our age await their time of revenge. The return of the repressed also includes the eruption of rage against the West throughout the Muslim world, although, ironically, Muslim fundamentalists perceive modernism as a threat to their own patriarchal systems. To them, however, modern popular culture is also a constant reminder of the colonial brutality that oppressed their ancestors and which they continue to endure.

To fundamentalists of any stripe, consumer culture is a constant threat and temptation from the archetypal realm: the Loosener himself—*Dionysus Lusios*, who is always inviting the women to drop their veils, raise their skirts, declare their “virgin” (*complete in themselves*) independence, and take their own vengeance. This god of paradox and extremes, of passion and masks, of ecstatic joy and terrifying destructiveness, of tragic drama and of madness—is, in our culture of Apollonian reason and technological control, another image of the Other.

Consider that white male, gazing patronizingly at the image of the woman behind the burkha. If we were to imagine him as the boy-king Pentheus (in *The Bacchae*, by Euripides),

alone on the mountain among the mad women, and the woman as his mother, Agave, would she recognize him? Or, having been driven mad by Dionysus, would she mistake him in her delusion for a lion and savagely tear him apart, as she does in the play? Would this be the vengeful return of the repressed?

What do we mean by “vengeance”? In story after story we hear of the punishment or revenge that the gods—especially Dionysus—exact upon humans. Psychologically, we may consider the urge to take literal revenge to be a form of inflation, or mythologically, as identification with the deity, who alone is presumed to have the right to enact retribution.^{iv} A common theme in myth is the vengeance that a god or goddess demands because a mortal didn’t perform appropriate sacrifices, or worse, openly ignored or opposed that deity. In one legend, the Athenians didn’t receive the statue of Dionysus with appropriate respect when it was first brought to the city. Angered, the god sent an affliction on the genitals of the men. They were cured only when they duly honored him by fashioning great phalluses for use in his worship. After that education in proper respect the Athenian Empire required its colonies to send phalluses (along with tribute) as part of the annual celebrations of the City Dionysia. When an archetypal energy is not approached or invoked with respect and appropriate ritual, when it is not acknowledged fully—on its own terms—misfortune results. If this state of affairs is extended over time, the consequences can be tragic, because that which has been repressed will return in time. Dionysus is the one god who is killed and dismembered, but he always returns from the underworld, and he always exacts retribution.

We are told in all sacred texts and stories that God(s) alone may take vengeance. Who are these gods? Are they so fragile and insecure, so childlike, that mythology allows them

such immature behavior? Well, *yes*, since the Greeks created the Olympians in their own image. If, however, we think of them less as unconcerned, or as impulsive, narcissistic superheroes with thunderbolts, and more as participants in a cosmic ritual of *telos*, or purpose, we can reframe the question of why they do what they do into: “*What do they want from us?*” Then, etymology may help. The word vengeance stems from the Latin *vindicare*, which means to claim, show authority, avenge, and curiously, to *set free*. What if we were to think of the vengeance of Dionysus as the setting free, the releasing, through some form of symbolic death, of a soul (or a city, or a nation) caught in the webs of *maya*—illusion, ego-identification, literalization, or distraction from its true purpose? Aggression toward others is almost always such a distraction, as signs at anti-war demonstrations acknowledged before the invasion of Iraq began: “Weapons of Mass Distraction!”

Thinking polytheistically, we remember that Dionysus is both the mature, bearded faithful husband of Ariadne and the soft, beardless, rounded, sexually ambiguous adolescent who just wants to be seen and accepted. But as an Olympian God, he has the right and the power to *demand* that we pay attention; he alone determines the consequences of our refusal to do so.

We must beware the tendency to slide easily into literalization so as to pin the ambiguity into a comfortable belief system, thus avoiding the confrontation with deeper mysteries. In speaking of the burkha as a symbol of the oppression of women, I am not singling out Muslim culture. The equivalent of the burkha in fashion-obsessed America (where a woman still can't be too rich or too thin) is “size six:” the absurd and nearly unattainable ideal of fitting a mature woman (Demeter?) into the undeveloped body of an adolescent (Persephone?) Ultimately, the burkha evokes the

persona behind which we all hide—some by choice and some by necessity. When we look carefully at many fashion advertisements we are as likely to see disdain, even hatred, in her eyes as we are to see charm.

Perhaps time will determine that another, related picture will become known as the dominant image of the millennium. The most compelling one emerged from the prisoner abuse scandals at Abu Ghraib: the hooded Iraqi prisoner standing on a bucket with his arms outstretched and electrodes attached. The image has almost unlimited metaphorical meaning: the crucified Christ, the Ku Klux Klan, the dark clothes evoking something of the Christian's Satan, the complex meaning of the Christmas tree, even the ancient form of *Dionysus Melanaigis* (Dionysus of the black goat-skin).^v Throughout the Muslim world, however—and by now we can assume that *every* Muslim male in the world has seen it—it has another meaning. The male prisoner is *veiled*: perhaps even more than the other prisoners who are photographed naked, he (and by extension, all Iraqi, all Muslim, all Third World men) is being associated with the shameful image of the woman behind the burkha. He is being *feminized*, as Dionysus feminizes Pentheus by dressing him in woman's clothes just prior to leading him out of Thebes toward his death at the hands of the mad women.^{vi} In American street terminology, he is being "bitch-slapped," condemned to the lowest rung on the hierarchy of patriarchal values. Down there, among the women, he is almost invisible, except as object. Pentheus, the hyper-masculine authority figure, will go to his death dressed as his own shadow, a *maenad*, a woman unable to control her emotions.

That which has been repressed and condemned to irrelevancy—whether as woman, as pagan god, or as the dark-skinned population of the Third World—has been

trying to attract the attention of the Pentheuses of the world for a long time, and it is slowly building in rage. Here another image from *The Bacchae* is relevant: the moment, precisely at the halfway point of the play, when Dionysus causes the massive towers of Thebes to collapse into rubble. Perhaps our own modern drama of American innocence and military dominance of the world is also at the halfway point.

The Abu Ghraib image reinforces to the entire Muslim community the fact that America still refuses to *see* them—a billion people!—except as the most diminished Other. Is it any wonder that organized resistance, *vengeance*—including the videotaped executions of westerners that screamed, *Look at Us! We, the Others, are yourself!*—increased dramatically after the publication of the Abu Ghraib photos?

The woman behind the burkha may be the Great Mother herself. She conceals more than we can imagine. She has all the time in the world (after all, Time—*Chronos*—is her grandson). Calmly and sadly, she observes her children in their collective madness and calls them home: to this date, over 6,000 Americans (including the 9/11 victims) and well over a million Iraqis, Palestinians, Israelis, Lebanese, and Afghans.

Look to the play itself, which can serve as a model for both the healing potential of the psyche as well as a warning to the rulers of empires. Dionysus, the unruly and disrespectful stranger who had arrived from the east, had cast a spell over the women of Thebes, causing them to leave the city and run wild and ecstatic in the mountains. King Pentheus, whose own mother was among the mad and liberated women, tried everything he could think of to contain and control this invasion of The Other, this seeping of unacceptable values through the boundaries of the self. But Dionysus calmly escaped from the jail Pentheus had cast him

into, causing those great masculine towers to collapse. Pentheus, unable to perceive the gift – the loosening of consciousness that the god of wine offers – could respond only with escalating threats and bluster. We can almost hear him bragging, like George W. Bush, “*Bring ‘em on!*” The Puritan mind is obsessed with images of transgression. Eventually, the god seized upon the voyeurism that lay just below the King’s aggressive, macho personality, casting his spell and convincing him to go and discreetly observe the *maenads* amid their wild rituals.

In the end, Pentheus was isolated on a mountaintop, high in a tree, far from the ground and surrounded by raving, vengeful women bent on his destruction. Things might have been different. Dionysus – as the return of the repressed – turns violent only when we ignore his invitation to drop our rigid armoring, re-inhabit our bodies and accept our essential oneness with the Others of the world. Prior to the point of no return, the ever-patient Dionysus had told Pentheus, “*Friend, you can still save the situation.*”^{vii}

NOTES

1 Suggested by mythologist Hendrika De Vries at Pacifica Graduate Institute, April, 2002

2 John Jervis. *Transgressing The Modern* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999, p. 125).

3 Camille Paglia. *Sex, Art and American Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1992, p. 24).

4 Edward Edinger. *Ego and Archetype* (New York: Penguin Books, 1973, p.14).

5 Carl Kerényi. *Dionysus: Archetypal Image of Indestructible Life* (Princeton Univ. Press, 1976, pb 1996, p. 163).

6 Euripides. *The Bacchae*, *The Complete Greek Tragedies – Euripides V*, trans. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959, pb 1968).

7 *Ibid*, line 802

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