

# Dionysus Reviled: Transgender Visibility and the Pentheus Complex

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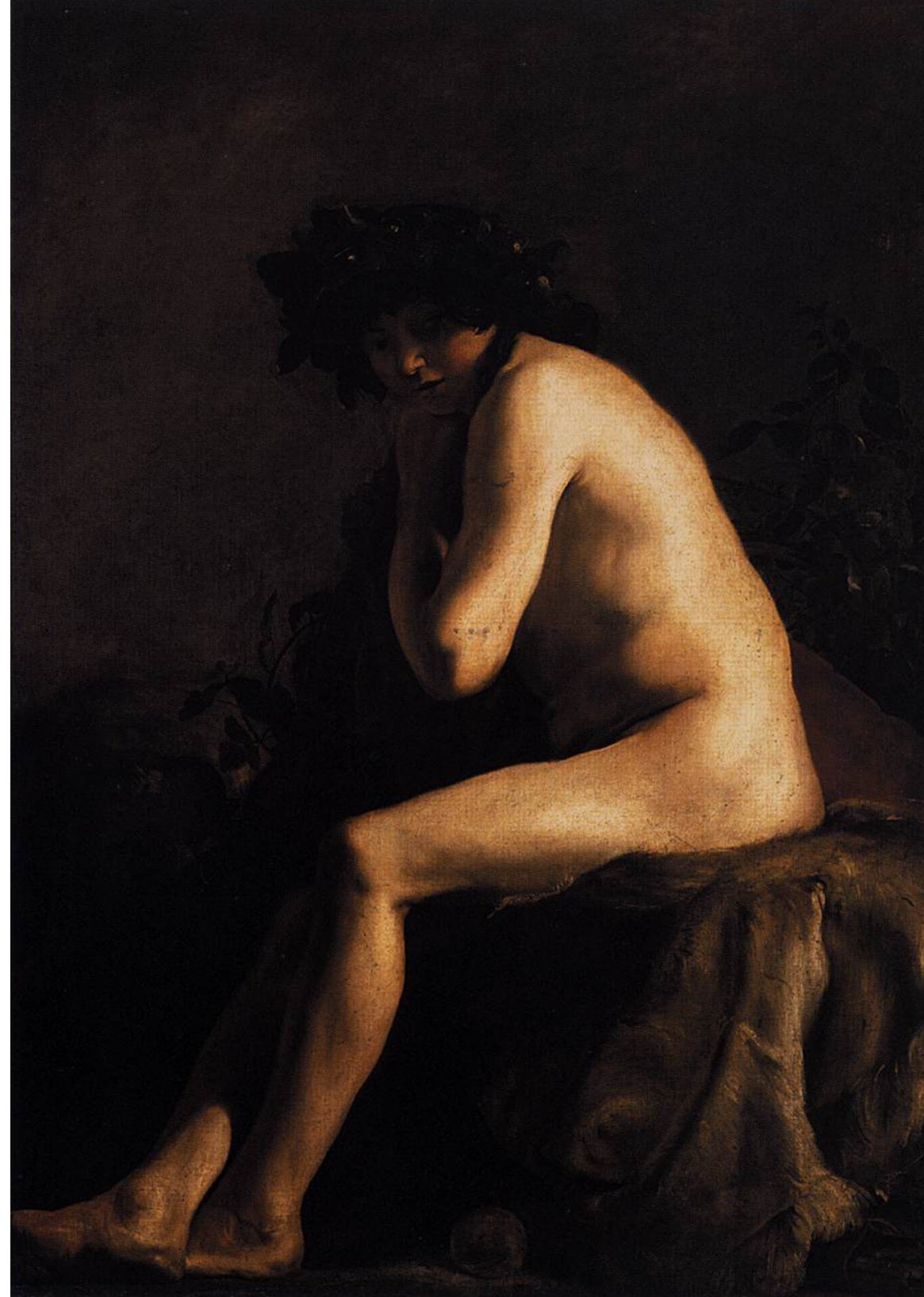
Throughout the world, early cultures have recognized multiple human genders beyond the male-female binary. In North America, historical documentation reflects third and fourth genders among over 150 Native American tribes (Roscoe 7). Many indigenous peoples considered gender-atypical individuals to hold special abilities as healers, religious functionaries, and advisors. Elders took note of children who displayed gender variance, and performed initiation ceremonies to honor them in appropriate social roles for their nature (Williams 24-25). Under the colonizing influence of European Christianity, however, this respect waned as missionaries imposed gender essentialist views upon native peoples (Williams 31). Gender variant individuals were persecuted, and ultimately exterminated, in the name of a monotheistic deity whose followers could conceive of no valid gender models beyond the biblical Adam and Eve.

In the twenty-first century, the visibility of transgender and gender-variant persons seems to be reaching historic levels. Increased media attention has failed, however, to translate into unanimous acceptance. Some physicians refuse to treat transgender patients, and many others lack proper training to do so effectively. Murders of transgender persons, particularly transgender women of color, remain alarmingly common, often missed by the public because news media tends to report victims according to their gender assigned at birth, rather than their proper, self-described gender identity (Schmider par. 8). One Oregon television station's recent social media post regarding the non-binary gender markers on driver's licenses received more than 100 angry comments, disparaging transgender persons as mentally ill and declaring that gender could not exist beyond the male/female binary (KOBI).

As a person who identifies as third gender, neither male nor female, I am well



Image on page 55: *Bacchus* by Paulus Bor. Oil on canvas. Between 1630 and 1635.  
Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.



aware of continued cultural antipathy. While transgender and gender-variant citizens might gain hope from their recent increased visibility, religious and social conservatives have insisted that gender is an inborn phenomenon determined by the shape of a person's external genitalia. This simplistic concept of gender has led to rampant scapegoating, which in turn generates a proliferation of proposed laws that stigmatize transgender persons, threatening their health and limiting their ability to live openly in society (Wise par. 15). The vehement and irrational nature of such actions marks the existence of a cultural complex. Reflecting upon the myth of Dionysus, (also known as Bacchus) specifically as it appears in *The Bacchae* by Euripides (Woodruff), I wish to explore what I call the Pentheus complex—a simultaneous attraction and repulsion toward transgender and gender-variant persons.

### The Nature of Complexes

C. G. Jung described complexes as images within the unconscious psyche that are associated with strong emotions, yet incompatible with our "habitual attitude of consciousness" ("Complex Theory" 96). They have an autonomous nature, capable of unexpectedly overcoming the ego, such that a person caught up in one typically fails to grasp what caused them to act in a manner incongruous with their more conscious motivations. "Complexes are the living units of the unconscious psyche," wrote Jung, "and it is only through them that we are able to deduce its existence and its constitution" ("Complex Theory" 101).

Each complex has an archetypal core. Jung explained archetypes as "primordial types . . . universal images that have existed since the remotest times" ("Archetypes" 5). Archetypes give universal forms and categories to human experience, thus the archetypal core "conveys the essence of meaning of the complex" (Shalit 32). This core is further associated with a cluster of experiences and memories, typically originating with childhood (Shalit 33). A father complex, for example, might surround the archetypal father with a cluster of the individual's impressions from their actual father figure. Thus an individual's father complex may reflect images of authority, protection, and wisdom; or alternatively, cruelty, rigidity, and caprice.

In addition, the complex has a characteristic emotional tone. As Shalit explained, "An autonomous complex is like an infected wound, and when touched, triggered, activated, constellated, we are affected, as evidenced by an exaggerated emotional response; for instance, oversensitivity, feelings of sadness, outbursts of anger or embarrassment, etc." (35). This emotional tone is what causes a complex

to seemingly overcome the ego, leading an individual to behave in ways that are incongruent with their carefully cultivated persona.

While Jung described personal complexes affecting individuals as the building blocks of the unconscious, he also wrote of a collective unconscious, which he allegorized as an imaginary being with "a human experience of one or two million years" ("Basic Postulates" 349). Jung's work laid a foundation for others, including Joseph L. Henderson, to theorize a cultural unconscious, an area of historical memory that lies between the collective unconscious and the manifest pattern of the culture. The cultural unconscious, according to Henderson, includes both conscious and unconscious elements, but draws from archetypal elements (103).

The idea of a cultural unconscious provided, in turn, an opportunity for Thomas Singer to theorize that cultural complexes existed alongside personal complexes (198). According to Singer, cultural complexes share all of the same characteristics of personal complexes. Singer noted that both personal and cultural complexes "function in an involuntary, autonomous fashion and tend to affirm a simplistic point of view that replaces everyday ambiguity with fixed, often self-righteous attitudes to the world" (203). With these words, Singer brings conservative American reaction to transgender persons squarely into the realm of cultural complexes.

### Turning to Dionysus

At the center of any cultural complex lies the urge to protect an archetypal core. Euripides' epic poem, *The Bacchae*, tells the story of Dionysus returning to the city of his birth to publicly lay claim to his divinity (ix). Years earlier, his mother had been impregnated by Zeus, yet her story was doubted (Kerenyi, *Gods* 257). Semele implored Zeus to prove the truthfulness of her tale, but when he revealed himself in glory she was destroyed by his powerful lightning. Zeus rescued Dionysus from his mother's womb, and sewed him into his own thigh until he could be fully formed. As a consequence, the young god was born first from a female, but second from a male. This unusual origin would foreshadow Dionysus' own nature.

Susan Rowland has noted that the archetypes are "androgynous, equally able to manifest feminine, masculine, and even transgender forms" (4). The Dionysian archetype exemplifies this, openly rejecting traditional gender norms. Typically depicted as male, yet notably effeminate in body and manner, Dionysus became the subject of scorn. He was given surnames in reference to his phallus, yet he was simultaneously called "the man without true virility," "the womanish," "the man-





Bacchus in an androgynous form. Roman, Imperial. 2nd century A.D.  
Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

womanly,” and even “the hybrid” in a hermaphroditic sense (Kerenyi, *Gods* 273). As if completely unperturbed by these criticisms, Dionysus appears in various artworks flaunting gendered cultural expectations, wearing feminine clothing and hairstyles . For example, the Louvre Museum houses an unattributed 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE statue of Bacchus/Dionysus taken from the collection of Cardinal Richleau. Despite the appearance of a phallus, the statue emphasizes the god’s long curled locks and feminine curves (“Atlas Database” par. 1). The early Christian apologist, Justin Martyr, condemned the “feminine nature” of Dionysus, including his habit of “decorating himself with cymbals, and garlands, and female attire” (Martyr 281).

By modern standards, Dionysus could be considered non-binary, or gender-fluid, meaning that neither “male” nor “female” categories properly applied when referring to his (or perhaps more properly “their”) gender identity. Indeed, early rituals represented the essence of the god by means of a vertical pole, upon which hung a bearded mask and a woman’s robe, the combination of explicitly masculine and feminine elements (Evans 21). The Dionysian style of consciousness, in this light, includes a distinct disregard for traditional ideas of gender norms and gender identity. The same disregard was manifest among his devotees, whose sacred rites involved men dressing in women’s clothing, and women wearing exaggerated faux phalluses made from red leather (Evans 19). Kerenyi (*Dionysus* 277) noted that according to at least some sources, the rites of Dionysus appear to have involved the castration of male followers.

Returning to Thebes as an adult, the mature Dionysus expected to be received in his glory, yet villagers refused to recognize him, speculating instead that Semele had been destroyed for the blasphemy of her bold paternity claims (Euripides 2). Ultimately, Dionysus was taken captive and led to the local ruler, King Pentheus. Pentheus scoffed at Dionysus’ claims to divinity, while dwelling on the god’s effeminate features to the point of eroticism:

Well, well. Not bad. You’re actually quite good-looking.  
I mean, to women. Of course, that’s why you came to Thebes.  
This long hair of yours—you’re no wrestler, are you—  
These curls along your cheek—oh, they’ll swoon for you—  
And this fine complexion—you had to work on that,  
Staying out of the sun, in the shadows, hunting,  
With your pretty face for sex. Aphrodite’s business. (Euripides 17)

It is this peculiar reaction, both attraction (perhaps arousal?) and revulsion, that leads me to refer to American reactions to transgender persons as a Pentheus complex.

Pentheus' peculiar inventory of Dionysus' physical appearance suggests a cluster of associations, experiences, and memories culturally linked with gender. The king notably excluded Dionysus from typically masculine-gendered roles such as wrestling and working outdoors, due to his long hair and pale skin. Early Christians, as noted earlier, condemned the worship of Dionysus based in part upon his use of clothing and adornments associated with women (Martyr 281). Such condemnations have continued into modern times, even to the point of being enforced by criminal statutes in the United States as late as 2011 ("Arresting Dress" par. 4).

Justin Martyr's criticisms, of course, reflect the profound influence of the Bible on Western culture, an influence which has remained powerful in conservative American culture. The creation story of Genesis, for example, features a binary gendered creation of humanity in the form of Adam and Eve. Highlighting the evidence of this particular myth, anti-LGBT activists have ubiquitously used its model as an argument against both same sex relationships and transgender identities, chanting "Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve." Biblical prohibitions against wearing cross-gender clothing have also been cited by opponents of transgender rights, as arguments that the Judeo-Christian deity condemns transgender persons who choose to socially and/or medically transition.

Beyond ubiquitous gender associations which attach to American life literally from the cradle, additional negative associations have been attached to transgender persons in particular. Prostitution, in the form of survival sex, has long been associated with the transgender community due to difficulties gaining regular employment and shelter. The National Transgender Discrimination Survey, polling 6,400 adults in 2008 and 2009, found that 10.8% of transgender persons had engaged in survival sex (Fitzgerald, et al. 13). While prostitution among transgender persons historically has been a last resort in the face of employment discrimination, its commonality has led to a cultural association, to the point that many transgender women are arrested on suspicion of prostitution, merely for being outside on the streets at night.

Even worse, anti-LGBT activists have historically worked to create an association between their targets and child sexual abuse. Initially, such character smears targeted gay men in order to stigmatize them and limit their public influence, such as California's infamous 1978 Briggs Initiative, which sought to remove gay

teachers from public schools (Milk 245). As gay men and lesbians began to experience greater public acceptance, however, these same tactics were turned against transgender persons, resulting in a flurry of so-called "bathroom bills" designed to limit public facility access to biological sex and/or specified genital configurations.

The fictional nature of such associations is irrelevant to their operation in forming a cultural complex. Whether through simple lack of understanding, or orchestrated campaigns, transgender persons in the United States have typically been associated with sinfulness and/or mental illness. Social media comments illustrate just how vehement those associations are, with words such as "insane," "crazy," "stupid," and "mentally ill" used to describe those who would take advantage of the new government recognitions of gender variance (KOBI).

These legislative persecutions, smear campaigns, and social media epithets display the emotional tone of the Pentheus complex. In Oregon, some commentators pondered leaving the state altogether in response to government recognition of transgender and gender-variant persons. Likewise, discussions of so-called bathroom bills quickly devolve into displays of fear and anger, some even threatening violence in the event that transgender women (derided as "men in dresses") enter female-designated public restrooms.

Part of this extreme emotionality may stem from individuals' own anxiety over having to maintain cultural gender roles. Pentheus' initial meeting with Dionysus is illustrative in this regard. As Martha Nussbaum wrote of Pentheus in her extensive introduction to C. K. Williams' translation of *The Bacchae*:

He mocks the soft, sinuous, feminine form of Dionysus; his long curls, "full of desire," his untanned skin, suggestive of the indoor world of women, his womanly form. For this aspect of the god threatens the hard boundaries between categories on which Pentheus insists. But he himself is drawn in complex ways to that womanly condition—both sexually attracted ("you're not impossible to look at") and drawn through identification and longing. He desires the condition of womanly passivity, even while he scorns it. He desires the dissolution of boundaries, even while he insists on them most firmly. (xxxvii-xxxviii)

Pentheus' simultaneous attraction and revulsion toward Dionysus' beauty mirrors the response of many modern Americans to the gender ambiguity



represented by transgender and gender-variant persons. As Patricia Berry explained, we as humans construct hard gender dichotomies (among others) in order to avoid feelings of inferiority, even while we remain privately enthralled by the violation of such markers (43).

This thrall becomes evident in a greedy public's desire for voyeurism in the face of the sensational. Katie Couric, for example, spoke of being mistakenly caught up in these forces:

When I hosted a daytime talk show ("Katie"—how original!) I did an interview with Carmen Carrera, a trans fashion model. And yes, I asked her a highly offensive question about her "private parts." When the show was being edited to air on a later date, I asked the producers to keep the offensive question in so others could realize, with the help of another guest on that same show—Laverne Cox—how grossly insensitive it was. (par. 2)

In asking one question that many cisgender (i.e. non-transgender) American viewers were curious about, Couric essentially replayed the role of Pentheus. Of note, at least one translator of *The Bacchae* has suggested that Pentheus attempted to manually examine Dionysus' genitals (Evans). In any event, the increasing popularity of pornography involving transgender persons attests to the Pentheus complex with virtually undeniable certainty (Herman par. 8).

### Autonomy of the Pentheus Complex

Much of what I have described represents poor behavior on the part of members of conservative American culture, while under the emotional triggering of the Pentheus complex. As a member of the transgender community, I can attest that a surprising number of anti-transgender statements and legislative efforts are prefaced by the duplicitous phrase, "I have nothing against transgender people, but . . ." For members of the transgender community, the words which follow that phrase inevitably seem to display gross hypocrisy. In reality, however, they demonstrate keenly the autonomous nature of the complex, in that members of the affected culture are speaking and acting in a manner contradicting their more polite persona—the socially acceptable face they wish to show to others.

The Pentheus complex even overcomes celebrity fame, as in the case of

Caitlyn Jenner, who transitioned publicly in 2015 (Bissinger). As a previous Olympic gold medalist in the men's decathlon competition, Jenner had once been lauded as the epitome of masculine success, even featured on cereal box covers as a heroic figure. Although tabloid publications had speculated previously, Jenner's coming out as a transgender woman shocked many Americans. A torrent of cruel jokes ensued, as did a plethora of demands that the International Olympic Committee revoke Jenner's gold medal—demands that the IOC refused (Kaplan par. 2).

Soon, however, famed photographer Annie Leibovitz captured Jenner's image for the cover of *Vanity Fair* magazine (Bissinger), resplendently feminine in a white silk corset. Like Dionysus before her, Jenner was presented to the world gaze and viewed in a matter which evoked Eros. Jenner garnered substantial praise for her bravery and attractive appearance, but not without an element of public revulsion. As one commentator reported, "Celebrities posted transphobic tweets, media outlets ignored their own transgender guidelines, trolls popped up on Twitter, and unchecked paranoia was the rule of the day on Fox News" (Ronan par. 3). An insulting Halloween costume for men, featuring a white corset and wig, was sold to capitalize on mockery of Jenner. Fox News, along with the rest of conservative America, promptly reenacted the role of Pentheus as the cultural complex was triggered on every newsstand and social media website. The examples of this complex are proliferate in the culture, yet it is still largely unconscious.

### Making the Complex Conscious

Complexes are never eliminated, but their destructive impact may be lessened with effort after they are made conscious (Jung, "Complex Theory" 102). In the early myth of Dionysus, the complex ultimately destroyed King Pentheus precisely because he was never able to make conscious his own sense of simultaneous revulsion and arousal. Eager to voyeuristically spy on the women celebrating their rites in Dionysus' honor, King Pentheus' own identity was ultimately clouded, and he was torn to pieces, even by his own mother. The complex overwhelmed his ego, ending in death rather than greater consciousness.

In order to avoid this fate on a cultural level, the Pentheus complex must become conscious within society. In some respects, this has begun as transgender celebrities such as Caitlyn Jenner, Janet Mock, Chaz Bono, and Ruby Rose have openly lived their lives as transgender women, transgender men, and non-binary individuals. Sharing personal stories can eventually reduce the emotional reactions



Detail of *Pentheus torn apart by Agave and Ino*. Attic red-figure lekanis (cosmetics bowl) lid, ca. 450-425 B.C. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

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driven by the complex by means of exposure and familiarity. Just as gay men and lesbians began to break down faulty associations through increased visibility, the transgender community must continue to do the same.

At the same time, the transgender community and its allies must learn to recognize the Pentheus complex, while grasping the underlying associations, experiences, and memories which surround its archetypal core. Pentheus had a positive desire to preserve existing social norms, some of which likely served his people well. It is this motivation that was challenged by Dionysus' beauty, a beauty that directly contravened the established order which Pentheus sought to preserve. Reflexively attributing the reactivity of conservative Americans to personally-targeted hatred may describe a portion of the autonomous complex's manifestation, but it fails to grasp the underlying archetypal forces at work.

### Conclusion

This examination of the Pentheus complex explains the contradictory attraction and revulsion which conservative Americans demonstrate toward transgender and gender-variant persons. By recognizing the mythic underpinnings as they appear in the confrontation between Dionysus and Pentheus, however, all concerned may be more empowered to act according to their higher aspirations. By recognizing the divinity within each person, regardless of their gender identity, perhaps we each may find the flexibility necessary in order to adapt to cultural change.

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<sup>1</sup> Cis-gendered is an individual who identifies as the gender they were assigned at birth.