

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

The George Eliot Review

English, Department of

1994

Tito, Dionysus and Apollo: an Examination of Tito Melema in Romola

Lesley Gordon

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Gordon, Lesley, "Tito, Dionysus and Apollo: an Examination of Tito Melema in Romola" (1994). *The George Eliot Review*. 224.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/224>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The George Eliot Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Lesley Gordon

TITO, DIONYSUS AND APOLLO: an Examination of Tito Melema in *Romola*

Greek myth is significant throughout George Eliot's work, and is especially important in the characterization of Tito Melema.¹ A particular identification with Dionysus or Bacchus begins early in the novel when Nello, after remarking that the newcomer seems to have come 'straight from Olympus' (Ch.2, 71),² later finds that he resembles a young Bacchus or an Apollo (Ch.4, 87). Further, the term 'the stranger', a common appellation of the god in the ancient world, where he was regarded as a foreigner from over the sea, comes when this stranger in Florence is frequently so called, often by the narrator, throughout the first three chapters; indeed, the very first chapter is entitled 'The Shipwrecked Stranger'. Even a year later, Bernardo still thinks of him as 'the young Greek stranger' (Ch.19, 248). Early in the novel again, a Bacchic association with the Via de' Bardi, presaged through an allusion to Nonnus's *Dionysiaca* (Ch.5, 94), is confirmed when *Romola*, expecting this new scholar to be middle-aged or elderly, is confronted with the handsome young Tito: her surprise 'could not have been greater if the stranger had worn a panther-skin and carried a thyrsus' (Ch.6, 105). The panther-skin and thyrsus were traditional attributes of Bacchus; and Tito is once again 'the stranger'. This parallel with Dionysus is maintained by Tito's self-identification with the god through the portrait on the triptych, through his use of a recognized epithet of Bacchus when he calls himself *Romola's* 'Care-Dispeller' (Ch.20, 263)³ and through the purple and red tunic he wears for his betrothal, reminiscent as it is of the multi-coloured garment associated with the god, reddish-purple in particular being one of the Bacchic colours. Further, in an allusion to the yoking of a lion and a boar to a chariot during the wooing of Alcestis (Ch.13, 186), there is a reminder of the Dionysian chariot, traditionally also drawn by wild beasts, and Bacchus is yet again recalled when Piero di Cosimo thinks of the young man as 'my Bacco trionfante' (Ch.25, 297) and when, in the Rucellai Gardens, Tito sings a Bacchic chorus (Ch.39, 420).

In addition, Dionysus's traditional appearance - young, handsome, almost effeminate in looks, beardless, and with long flowing locks - is also that of Tito. He has youth, beauty, and thick curly hair, and he soon becomes clean-shaven when Nello shaves off his beard (Ch.3, 75). Attention is also drawn to the effeminacy of Tito's good looks through Nello's remark that 'the outline of your lip and chin is as clear as a maiden's' (Ch.3, 80) and when Tito himself comments that, beardless, he will to the short-sighted have 'a perilous resemblance to a maiden of eighteen in the guise of hose and jerkin' (Ch.3, 81). Yet at the same time, in assuring him that 'Your proportions are not those of a maiden' (Ch.3, 81), the barber asserts Tito/Bacchus's essential masculinity.

The ambiguity revealed through this almost hermaphrodite quality has a more sinister aspect. In referring to it, George Eliot ignored those mid-nineteenth-century commentators who saw in Dionysus only the genial god of wine; instead, she portrayed in Tito the 'most terrible, yet most gentle' god of Euripides's *The Bacchae* (1.861). One of the ele-

ments in the cult of Dionysus was the mask, by means of which identity could be hidden or transformed; just so, in Tito, one quality masks the other. He has a nature which is 'all gentleness' (Ch.10, 156; Ch.27, 308), and further attractions lie in his Bacchic beauty and charm, and in his vibrant, youthful figure, which parallels the god in his function as 'the productive and intoxicating power of nature, which carries man away from his usual quiet and sober mode of living'.⁴ This latter quality, associated by Romola with 'joy' - for her Tito is 'My joy' (Ch.17, 238) and she hopes to gain from him 'a deep draught of joy' (Ch.17, 240) - is most evocatively described when, as the young woman remembers her brother's death,

Tito's touch and beseeching voice recalled her; and now in the warm sunlight she saw that rich dark beauty which seemed to gather round it all images of joy - purple vines festooned between the elms, the strong corn perfecting itself under the vibrating heat, bright winged creatures hurrying and resting among the flowers, round limbs beating the earth in gladness with cymbals held aloft, light melodies chanted to the thrilling rhythm of strings - all objects and all sounds that tell of Nature revelling in her force. Strange bewildering transition from those pale images of sorrow and death to this bright youthfulness, as of a sungod who knew nothing of night! (Ch.17, 238)

Further, George Eliot knew that, in Theban ritual, Dionysus was a "liberator" ...delivering earth from winter's chain'.⁵ This is exactly the effect Tito has on Romola: by his youth, beauty and vigour, he is 'a wreath of spring' who draws her away from the 'wintry' environment of her father's library to what she expects will be a richer way of life (Ch.6, 105). But this vigour becomes 'most terrible' when, behind the mask, the beauty becomes 'loathsome' (Ch.32, 356). Just as Dionysus annihilates those who will not worship him, as he does Pentheus in *The Bacchae*, so too Tito is a destroyer or a betrayer; and, as a result, Romola's 'deep draught of joy' has its obverse in Baldassarre's 'deep draught' of 'hatred and revenge' (Ch.30, 339). The effect of the treachery is presaged in a refraction of Bacchic worship in the procession of Winged Time, coming, ironically, from the Borgo de' Greci, which Romola and Tito the Greek encounter after their betrothal ceremony (Ch.20, 262). Black and wailing, it is the complete antithesis of the traditional abandon of a cavalcade of Bacchantes, and is an image of what Romola, Bacchus's present worshipper, will become in her nun's habit.

Behind Tito's beauty too is his terror of retribution, presaged in 'the blending of the terrible with the gay' he finds in Piero's portrait of him as a joyous young man with a wine-cup, whose face yet expresses intense fear (Ch.19, 247). In this case, the terror which Dionysus can inspire is turned back upon the Dionysian Tito through his former worshippers, identifiable through their presentation in Bacchic terms. Romola, temporarily optimistic about the future of her failing marriage, calls herself 'a Bacchante possessed by a divine rage' at the departure of the French from Florence (Ch.32, 350), but, almost immediately, finds herself in opposition to her husband because of his sale of her father's library. More especially, there is the avenger Baldassarre. In his voyage to Delos (Ch.6,

107), he resembles the Bacchic worshipper Acoetes in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Bk.3); he is also compared to the wild beasts traditionally associated with Dionysus (e.g. Ch.25, 297; Ch.30, 333; Ch.34, 377); and his amnesia and seeming madness are characteristic of the Bacchic worshipper. Finally, when his faculties are restored, he is said to be like a waking Maenad (Ch.38, 407).

Particular to the Bacchic terror was *sparagmos*, that part of Dionysian worship which consisted of the pursuit and tearing to pieces of animals. In the novel, such a death is recalled through a reference to Actaeon in a passage taken, significantly, from Nonnus's *Dionysiaca* in a quotation from another work (Ch.5, 94), and there is a more precise allusion when, in the Rucellai Gardens, Tito sings a Maenad chorus celebratory of the *sparagmos* of Orpheus. Tito's death is of this kind in that he is indeed almost torn to pieces by a Maenad-like mob, and escapes only to be killed by that other Maenad, Baldassarre.

Tito's equivocal attractions are also expressed through allusions to Apollo, god of the sun and of music. In appearance Apollo, like Bacchus and Tito, was young, handsome, and beardless, with long, flowing hair, and too the word 'bright', which is insistently associated with Tito, is a translation of the god's alternative name of Phoebus. The link is made when Nello finds that his new friend from Olympus, more than Bacchus, is like 'a Phoebus Apollo, for his face is as warm and bright as a midsummer morning' (Ch.4, 87), and the word 'bright' is repeated on many occasions, in the young man's bright face, his bright hair, his bright smile: he is even 'bright in the midst of brightness' (Ch.8, 134). Nello also addresses Tito as 'my Apollino' (Ch.8, 142) and to Romola her lover is 'a sun-god' with the 'new radiance' of dawn (Ch.17, 238). Tito is further likened to Apollo through his gifts as a musician. He plays Nello's lute on his first visit to the shop (Ch.3, 78); his singing causes Nello again to call him 'my Apollino' (Ch.13, 184); and he leads the chorus in the Rucellai Gardens (Ch.39, 420). But, as does Bacchus, Apollo has a dark side, in his function as the archer god, Apollo the Destroyer, whose very name, the ancient Greeks thought, was derived from 'apollumi' 'to destroy'. It is an aspect of the god to which George Eliot refers when, under the heading 'Worship of Apollo' in one of her notebooks, she calls him 'the punishing and avenging god'. By tradition, Apollo's destructive aspects were directed against the wicked and so, finally, the revenge of Apollo incarnate in Tito is, like that of Bacchus, turned upon himself.

One therefore sees in Tito through his portrayal as Bacchus and Apollo aspects of beauty and cruelty. Further, each god represents essential and opposing aspects of the young man. In his scholarship, he is Apollo, god of the intellect, one of whose oracles, according to a note in one of George Eliot's notebooks, was inspired by water; and in his hedonism he is Dionysus, god of the senses, whose oracle, the novelist also noted, was inspired by wine. Such mythic parallels are extended through the representation of Nello's shop. It is, the barber says, 'the focus of Florentine intellect, and in that sense the navel of the earth - as my great predecessor, Burchiello, said of his shop, on the more frivolous pretention that his street of the Calimara was the centre of our city' (Ch.3, 78). 'Il Burchiello' was the nickname of Domenico di Giovanni, a barber-poet of the early fifteenth century, whose premises, like Nello's, were a meeting-place for Florentine intellectuals; and the phrase

'the navel of the earth' (Ch.3, 78; Ch.29, 325) was an ancient epithet of the great temple of Apollo at Delphi, which was regarded as the centre point of the earth. Though the term was so applied by Burchiello to his shop, Nello thinks of his 'navel of the earth' as 'the focus of Florentine intellect' (Ch.3, 78), that is, as a fit temple for the worship of the god of the arts, Apollo. As 'Apollo and the Razor', the shop is 'a fitting haunt of the Muses' (Ch.3, 78), with Nello the barber as the 'priest' (Ch.45, 470), who offers the god the ancient votive offering of shorn hair. Consequently, his customers achieve Apollo's 'sudden illumination of understanding' and 'serene vigour of inspiration' which, Nello claims, come with a clean-shaven chin (Ch.3, 78). In addition, the barber early in the novel gives Tito a mirror, describing it as 'the true nosce teipsum' (Ch.3, 81), 'nosce teipsum' or 'know thyself' being one of the mottoes said to have been on the temple walls. But this masked deity can never truly know himself, in particular because, in accordance with the Greek belief that during the winter Apollo left Delphi in the possession of Dionysus, he comes into this temple as both these gods. Indeed, as was said of Delphi, Dionysus and ancient Athens, Nello's shop brings the 'worship' of the Dionysian Tito into what was traditionally known as 'second Athens', Florence.

A further mythic extension comes through Nello himself, who, as a friend of Tito, is a version of Apollo's friend Hermes, or Mercury. He is called 'mercurial' (Ch.3, 76), and in the inner room of his shop there is a shrine to the god (Ch.3, 78). The parallel lies in particular in Hermes's function as 'the god of the use of speech and eloquence in general' and 'the promoter of social intercourse and of commerce among men'.⁶ Nello is a lengthy and eloquent talker, and his shop is indeed a centre of social intercourse, in which he promotes an interest of Apollo, the arts.

Though, in this novel set in a centre of Renaissance learning, there are numerous mythic allusions expressive of Tito's duplicity, space here forbids an examination of the full range. Most significant, however, are the Bacchic and Apollonian parallels. The unease which the initial persistent references arouse in the reader is justified by the revelation of the presence in Tito of the dark side of these gods, and the hope that this captivating young Greek will disprove the tradition that his whole race is treacherous is eventually dispersed. With his rings and his triptych, he is indeed a Greek bearing gifts.

Notes

1. For a full survey of George Eliot's application of Greek myth to her work, see my Ph.D. thesis, *Concepts from Classical Greek Literature in the Novels of George Eliot* (University of Newcastle upon Tyne, 1989). This essay (and that part of my thesis from which it has been adapted) acknowledges some debt to Felicia Bonaparte's *The Triptych and the Cross* (Harvester Press, 1979) and Joseph Wiesenfarth's *George Eliot's Mythmaking* (Carl Winter, 1977).
2. The references are to the Penguin edition of *Romola*.
3. George Eliot herself refers to Bacchus as the 'Care-dispeller' in an 1856 review.
4. Dionysus is so described in William Smith's *Dictionary of Greek and Roman*

Biography and Mythology (Taylor and Walton, 1844-1849), which was owned by George Eliot.

5. R.W. Mackay, *The Progress of the Intellect*, 2.109 (Williams and Norgate, 1850), a work which George Eliot had reviewed in 1851. The 'liberator' was another of Dionysus's sobriquets. Mackay also refers to the god's 'many-coloured mantle' (2.125), of which mention is made above.
6. See William Smith's *Dictionary*.