

The Appearance of the Gods in the *Dionysiaca* of Nonnus

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THE VISUAL APPROACH to its subject matter, both in the emphasis on ἐνάργεια (the capacity of a text to reveal itself as visible and visual)¹ and in the importance of iconographic details,² is a characteristic trait of the *Dionysiaca* by Nonnus of Panopolis. Being a Christian³ and probably having a (partly) Christian audience,⁴ Nonnus constructed his poem out of literary tradition and literary exegesis, leaving no room for references to pagan cult and how worship influenced the lives of the pagan faithful.⁵ This could have led to a lack of

¹ On *enargeia* see G. Zanker, “*Enargeia* in the Ancient Criticism of Poetry,” *RhM* 124 (1981) 297–311. On its importance in late-antique poetry (Nonnus included), see L. Miguélez Cavero, *Poems in Context: Greek Poetry in the Egyptian Thebaid 200–600 AD* (Berlin/New York 2008) 135–138, 283–286.

² On their importance in the poem see F. Vian, *Nonnos de Panopolis, Les Dionysiaques* I (Paris 1976) 16–17; G. Agosti, “Immagini e poesia nella Tarda Antichità. Per uno studio dell’estetica visuale della poesia greca fra III e IV sec. d.C.,” in L. Cristani (ed.), *Incontri Triestini di Filologia Classica* IV (Trieste 2006) 351–374, at 361. For Nonnus’ *Paraphrase* see G. Agosti, *Nonno di Panopoli, Parafrasi del Vangelo di San Giovanni, Canto V* (Florence 2003) 109–110, 127–130.

³ On Nonnus’ Christianity see F. Vian, “Théogamies et sotériologie dans les *Dionysiaques* de Nonnos,” *JSAV* (1994) 197–233, at 222 ff.; W. Liebeschuetz, “The Use of Pagan Mythology in the Christian Empire with Particular Reference to the *Dionysiaca* of Nonnus,” in P. Allen and E. Jeffreys (eds.), *The Sixth Century. End or Beginning?* (Brisbane 1996) 75–91.

⁴ P. Chuvin, “Nonnos de Panopolis entre paganisme et christianisme,” *BAGB* (1986) 387–396, at 394; Agosti, *Parafrasi* 100.

⁵ See F. Vian, “Les cultes païens dans les *Dionysiaques* de Nonnos: étude de vocabulaire,” *REA* 15 (1988) 399–410; “Préludes cosmiques dans les

visual plasticity that would have been in conflict with Nonnus' stylistic search for ἐνάργεια, but the gods of the *Dionysiaca* are characterised by their physical appearance, in particular their attributes, the description of which also contributes to the vividness of the narrative.

This paper aims to evaluate the contribution of iconography to the poem, exploring how artistic and literary references are interwoven to construct the images of the gods. I shall also examine Nonnus' humorous attitude towards the appearance of Dionysus and the other gods and its possible Christian bias. Finally, I will show how the thematic use of the images of the gods serves to dismantle the masculine appearance of male divinities and to reinforce traditional gender roles.

1. *The figure of Dionysus: mutual influence of literary and artistic images*

The *Dionysiaca* offers a chronological treatment of Dionysus, starting with his ancestors (Books 1–5), the encounter of his parents and his birth (6–9), and his childhood and adolescence (10–12). The main body of the poem (13–48) deals with his journey into adulthood through war and love and concludes with a hasty narration of Dionysus' ascent to Olympus (48.974–978). The construction of his evolving personality relies heavily on the description of his appearance, especially his attributes. Nonnus gives his audience a foretaste of Bacchus' character before his birth, when his father, Zeus, prophesies (7.100–102):⁶

καὶ θεὸς ἡμερίδων, ἐπικείμενον οἴνοπι κισσῷ
ὥς στέφος ἐρπηστήρα περὶ πλοκάμοισιν ἐλίξας,
σῆμα τεῆς θεότητος ἔχων ὀφιώδεα μίτρον...

And, god of the vines, winding round your locks as a garland a reptile laid upon the bright ivy, having a serpent-coronet as a sign of your divinity...

His mother, Semele, when pregnant, adorns herself with the

⁶ *Dionysiaques de Nonnos de Panopolis*," *Prometheus* 19 (1993) 39–52, and *JSw* (1994) 197–233.

⁶ Greek text F. Vian et al., *Nonnos de Panopolis, Les Dionysiaques I–XIX* (Paris 1976–2006); English translation adapted from W. H. D. Rouse et al., *Nonnos, Dionysiaca* (Cambridge 1940).

same attributes (8.8–12). When he is born, Dionysus is immediately crowned with ivy and snakes⁷ and given the instruments of the mysteries to play with (9.113–119, 128–129). He wears the fawn-skin (9.126) and soon develops a liking for lions, panthers, and similar beasts, which he yokes to his chariot.⁸ Only when his adult appearance is completed with the vine wreaths after the discovery of wine (12.154–155, 193–195) do we know that we have reached the end of the preliminary stages of the poem. Thereafter his usual means of transport will be a chariot drawn by panthers and lions and driven by Maron or a satyr.⁹

The appearance of Nonnus' adult Dionysus (e.g. 14.233–246) matches his contemporary images: his longish hair,¹⁰ in which vines and ivy are often intertwined, is a characteristic feature; his shoes¹¹ and the horn with self-pouring wine which is seen in artistic representations are also mentioned.¹² This image is related to the long literary tradition going back to Euripides' *Bacchae*.¹³ Euripidean influence surfaces in the

⁷ 9.11–15, 27, 120–124, 129–131; 13.139–141; 42.140.

⁸ 9.159–160, 171–179, 184–192. Ampelus imitates Dionysus' adolescent appearance: 11.58–65.

⁹ 18.10–12, 47–51; 20.107–108; 43.23–28. Cf. 14.269, 18.334, 23.125–127, 24.110, 36.56–57, 48.1. Compare A. Stauffer, *Textiles d'Égypte de la collection Bouvier* (Bern 1991) 101–102, no. 25; L. Foucher, "Le Char de Dionysos," in H. Stern and M. Le Glay (eds.), *La Mosaïque gréco-romaine II* (Paris 1975) 55–61.

¹⁰ 10.173–174; 17.187; 30.253; 31.3. Cf. Eur. *Bacch.* 150, 235, 455–456, 493–494.

¹¹ 18.200, 20.228–229.

¹² 12.203, 360–362; 17.110–112; 20.293–295. Compare Paus. 8.31.4; the 4th-c. Dionysiac hanging in the Abegg-Stiftung (S. Schrenk, *Textilien des Mittelmeerraumes aus spätantiker bis frühislamischer Zeit* [Riggisberg 2004] 26–34, cat. no. 1); A. Lorquin, *Les Tissus coptes au musée national du Moyen Âge – Thermes de Cluny* (Paris 1992) 88–95, nos. 22, 23; P. du Bourguet, *Musée National du Louvre. Catalogue des étoffes coptes* (Paris 1964) 74, 152, nos. B24, D88; Ch. Augé et al., "Dionysos (in periphéria orientali)," *LIMC* 3.1 (1986) 514–531, at 515–516, and nos. 42, 44, 81–84, 94.

¹³ As analysed by B. Gerlaud, *Nonnos de Panopolis, Les Dionysiaques VI* (Paris 1994) 8; F. Tissoni, *Nonno di Panopoli, I Canti di Penteo* (Florence 1998) 66–71. Compare Philostr. *Imag.* 1.15.2; Philostr. *Iun. Imag.* 8.34.

theriomorphic presentation of the god as a bull, a lion, or a serpent,¹⁴ and when he appears as lord of the beasts, either hunting or sending them to battle.¹⁵

The *Dionysiaca* is also the poem of the Bacchic people, who share the same attributes as their god.¹⁶ Nonnus' presentation of the Bacchic entourage is a literary magnification of the schemes used in depictions of the Dionysiac triumph. Artists worked with a number of figures (Dionysus—sometimes in the company of Ariadne, Silenus, satyrs, maenads, Pan, centaurs, wild animals, and Indian captives), holding a number of attributes (craters, wineskins, the thyrsus, Bacchic instruments such as the cymbals and the double flute), arranged using different combinations to best suit the available space.¹⁷ The formulae of the Dionysiac triumph were especially prominent in second- and third-century sarcophagi,¹⁸ from which they were later adapted to mosaics¹⁹ and textiles,²⁰ becoming a very popular

¹⁴ The metamorphoses of Dionysus are narrated in *Dion.* 36.292–353, 40.40–54; he is a bull in 33.1–3 and pretends to be a bull in 45.239–265, 332–334. Compare Eur. *Bacch.* 99–102, 434–436, 618–621, 920–922, 1017–1019, 1159. See C. Gasparri, “Dionysos,” *LIMC* 3.1 (1986) 414–514, at 414–416.

¹⁵ See Book 9 on his first encounters with panthers and lions; 36.184–197 is an example of the role of the beasts in a battle. Dionysus is described as a hunter in Eur. *Bacch.* 1189–1192.

¹⁶ So already the prologue: 1.11–12, 34–37, 39. Descriptions of the Bacchic *komos*: 14.17–227, 250–265; 17.8–31; 18.47–61; 21.184–199; 23.122–161, 192–214; 24.102–142; 27.221–240; 28.7–34; 34.128–150. Similar descriptions: Philostr. *Imag.* 2.3; Philostr. *Iun. Imag.* 16; Callistr. *Imag.* 1, 2, 12; *Anth.Gr.* 16.115–116.

¹⁷ C. Kondoleon, *Domestic and Divine: Roman Mosaics in the House of Dionysos* (Ithaca 1994) 191–221.

¹⁸ F. Matz, *Die dionysischen Sarkophage I–IV* (Berlin 1968–1975); P. Zanker and B. C. Erwald, *Mit Mythen leben. Die Bilderwelt der römischen Sarkophage* (Munich 2004) 135–167.

¹⁹ K. Dunbabin, “The Triumph of Dionysus on Mosaics in North Africa,” *PBSR* 39 (1971) 52–65; D. Levi, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements* (Princeton/London 1947) I 91–104, 244–248; J. Balty, *La Mosaique de Sarrin (Osrhoène)* (Paris 1990) 5–9; Augé et al., *LIMC* 3.1 (1986), nos. 129–132.

²⁰ The “voile d’Antinoé” (Antinoopolis, 4th c., Louvre, Dep. Egypt. Ant. inv. 11102: M.-H. Rutschowskaya, *Coptic Fabrics* [Paris 1990] 28–29; L.

motif in Late Antiquity. This meant that the learned viewer was aware both of artistic and literary motifs and of how they influenced each other: descriptions of the *thiasos* would recall artistic images, and Dionysiac mosaics and tapestries would be embellished in the imagination of Nonnus' reader by the *Dionysiaca*. Fragments of the imaginary Bacchic world of the *Dionysiaca* appeared on mosaics and textiles and in other literary works, but Nonnus brought them all together in his own style and the massive scale of the *Dionysiaca* made them difficult to forget. Any subsequent text or image related to Dionysus would immediately prompt comparison with Nonnus' poem.

However, the *Dionysiaca* cannot be reduced to a mere cycle of images, even though the artistic cycle of Dionysus included the most popular scenes of his life.²¹ For instance, in the upper register of a fourth-century veil from Antinoopolis,²² we see Semele, lying on her couch, struck by a thunderbolt in the presence of a winged Zeus (the scene resembles the Annunciation).²³ The first bath of Dionysus follows, with Semele again on her couch, surrounded by her attendants;²⁴ Hera

Török, *Transfigurations of Hellenism. Aspects of Late Antique Art in Egypt* [Leiden/Boston 2005] 283–284; the Dionysiac hanging from the Abegg-Stiftung, on which see Schrenk, *Textilien* no. 1; fragments of another 4th-c. tapestry in the Abegg Stiftung (inv. 1637), the Museum of Fine Arts of Boston (1973.290), and Cleveland Museum of Art (inv. 75.6), on which see Török, *Transfigurations* 235–236. Fifteen panels depicting Dionysus' life in a hall in Sepphoris (early 3rd c. A.D.) provide a means of comparison: E. Netzer and Z. Weiss, *Zippori* (Jerusalem 1994) 34–39.

²¹ Athen. 200B; Paus. 1.20.3; Longus *Daphnis* 4.3.2; Philostr. *Imag.* 1.14, 15, 18, 19, 25.

²² Rutschowskaya, *Coptic Fabrics* 28–29, 82. Compare Philostr. *Imag.* 1.14 (Semele).

²³ See e.g. a 5th/6th-c. printed linen cloth of the Nativity, possibly from Achmim, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (inv. 1103–1900): Rutschowskaya, *Coptic Fabrics* 128, 132–133.

²⁴ Compare the 4th-c. mosaic of the house of Aion (Nea Paphos): W. A. Daszewski, *Dionysos der Erlöser: griechische Mythen im spätantiken Cypern* (Mainz am Rhein 1985) 35–38, fig. 3, pls. 17–18. Also two 2nd-c. sarcophagi of the Childhood of Dionysus and Dionysus' Indian Triumph (Baltimore, The Walters Art Museum, inv. 23.33 and 23.31). Analysis and pictures in P. Kragelund et al., *The Licinian Tomb: Fact or Fiction?* (Copenhagen 2003), cat.

attacks Silenus, who holds Dionysus, and a figure dressed as Ares may represent Envy inciting Hera's hatred.²⁵ The ways of literary creation in the *Dionysiaca* are different and so the courtship of Semele, the intrigues of Hera (incited by Envy), and the first birth of the god appear in Book 8, while his first bath is not mentioned at all.²⁶ Artistic images are only ancillary to the literary design of the micro- and macro-structures of the *Dionysiaca*.

A good test of the mutual influence of artistic and literary models is Pentheus' death (46.210–218):

ἀμφὶ δὲ μιν δασπλήτες ἐπερρώοντο γυναῖκες
 χερσὶν ὁμοζήλοισι· κυλινδομένου δὲ κονίη
 ἢ μὲν ὀπισθιδίους πόδας εἴρυσεν, ἢ δὲ λαβοῦσα
 δεξιτερὴν προθέλυμον ἀνέσπασεν, Ἀυτονόη δὲ
 λαίην ἀντερούεσκε· παραπλαγχθείσα δὲ μήτηρ
 στήθει παιδὸς ἔπηξεν ἕδον πόδα, κεκλιμένου δὲ
 αὐχένα τολμήεντι διέθρισεν ὄξει θύρσῳ·
 καὶ φονίῳ ταχύγουνος ἀνέδραμε χάσματι λύσσης,
 αἱματόεν δὲ κάρηγον ἀτεροπεί δείκνυε Κάδμῳ.

But the terrible women attacked him with one accord; as he rolled in the dust, one pulled on his legs, one seized his right arm and wrenched it out at the joint, Autonoe dragged opposite at the left; his deluded mother set her foot on his chest, and cut through that neck as he lay with daring sharp thyrsus—then ran nimbleknee with frenzied joy in his murder, and displayed the bloody head to unwelcoming Cadmus.

In lines 210–216, the position of each attacker around the central character makes it easier to visualise the account: a

nos. 19 and 22.

²⁵ This is reminiscent of *Dion.* 8.34–46: Envy, taking the shape of Ares, provokes Hera's and Athena's hatred of Dionysus.

²⁶ This is an interesting omission: the bath after the birth was a common scene in the imagery of any person of means in Late Antiquity (e.g. Claud. *Cons.Stil.* 2.345–347), and that included Dionysus. It was also introduced into the Christian cycle of Jesus, though it is not in the Gospels: V. Juhel, "Le bain de l'Enfant-Jésus. Des origines à la fin du douzième siècle," *CahArch* 39 (1991) 111–132, at 111–114. The identification of one of the scenes of the Mary Silk from the Abegg Stiftung as the bath of the infant Jesus is now debated: Schrenk, *Textilien* 188–189.

Bacchante at Pentheus' feet, a second woman on his right, Autonoe on his left, and his mother setting a foot on his chest. Nonnus recreates the depictions of the killing of Pentheus, in which he usually appeared at the centre of the image surrounded by his killers, with Agave dragging at his hair and raising a thyrsus just before beheading him.²⁷ Lines 217–218 recall the images of Agave in Bacchic frenzy (her head is flung backwards in an unnatural movement) holding her son's severed head.²⁸ The appeal to common motifs of the readers' visual memory also serves to highlight the subsequent insertion of new elements, such as Dionysus calming the mourning of Pentheus' family with wine (356–368).

Artistic references are used to enliven and enrich specific details, but the mood of the passage is Euripidean, with lines 210–216 rewriting the *sparagmos* in *Bacch.* 1122–1139.²⁹ In general the whole of the Pentheid (Books 44–46) displays a Euripidean flavour.³⁰ Nonnus builds a narrative flow in which several elements resound in the readers' literary memory, but also in their artistic retina.³¹ Iconographic details are handy, because given their familiarity to readers, they make a visual impression quickly,³² but they are only ancillary to literature: *pepaideumenoi* were expected to produce their own lines, not their own works of art. In fact, though some knowledge of artistic matters was desirable,³³ the elite displayed a certain disdain towards non-

²⁷ J. Bazant and G. Berger-Doer, "Pentheus," *LIMC* 7.1 (1994) 306–317, nos. 28, 32, 33, 34, 35, 38.

²⁸ Bazant and Berger-Doer, *LIMC* 7.1 (1994) nos. 50–66.

²⁹ See B. Simon, *Nonnos de Panopolis, Les Dionysiaques XVI* (Paris 2004) 243 (notes ad loc.); Tissoni, *Nonno* 326–327.

³⁰ See Simon, *Nonnos XVI* 130–132; Tissoni, *Nonno* 66–71.

³¹ Compare Philostr. *Imag.* 1.18, analysed by J. Elsner, "Philostratus Visualizes the Tragic," in C. Kraus et al. (eds.), *Visualizing the Tragic: Drama, Myth, and Ritual in Greek Art and Literature* (Oxford 2007) 309–337, at 313–318.

³² G. Sauron, "Discours symbolique et fonction décorative à Rome à l'époque augustéenne," *MEFRA* 94 (1982) 699–713, at 701–705; A. Rousselle, "Images as Education in the Roman Empire," in Y. L. Too (ed.), *Education in Greek and Roman Antiquity* (Leiden 2001) 372–403, at 385.

³³ See Rousselle, in *Education* 372–403; R. Leader-Newby, *Silver and Society in Late Antiquity* (Aldershot 2004) 123–171; J. Elsner, *Roman Eyes. Visuality and*

literary cultural expressions.³⁴

2. *Mocking Dionysus' appearance*

The narrator of the *Dionysiaca* adopts a pro-Dionysiac pose, apparently taking the god and his pursuits in earnest, but “allows” other characters to show how ridiculous the god and his troops look. An outsider’s view usually contrasts with the more official image presented by the narrator:

(i) Bacchus and the Bassarids dress for battle (14.228–270, 338–385) ~ the drunken Indians mistakenly attack animals and plants thinking them part of the Bacchic army: Dionysus is (i.e. looks like) a bull; Pan is a goat; a satyr, a bull; a Bassarid, a deer; Bacchus’ tresses are the tendrils of a tree (15.25–51).

(ii) Attack of the Bacchic army (17.136–171) ~ Orontes comments on the ridiculous image of an army charging with vegetables, commanded by a man who tosses his locks like a woman (180–190).

(iii) The Bacchic army, including Botrys and his entourage, begins to move (20.101–128) ~ Iris contrasts the ridiculous Bacchantes with the authentic fighting women, the Amazons (196–204).

(iv) Bacchus prepares to meet Lycurgus (20.289–303) ~ Lycurgus imagines himself dealing with the spoils of the Bacchic army and giving Dionysus’ feminine dress to Aphrodite (222–232).

(v) Description of the satyr Pherespondus (21.200–210) ~ Deriades makes fun of his hybrid shape (216–226) and threatens to use him as a fan because of his long ears (269–273).

Other characters also use Dionysus’ appearance to ridicule him: Deriades (39.53–61), Poseidon (43.172–178), Pentheus (45.85–94), an anonymous Argive (47.520–526), Perseus (47.594–598).³⁵ The general impression that his weapons and

Subjectivity in Art and Text (Princeton 2007) 51–62.

³⁴ It has been claimed that mythological decoration on mosaics, silverware, and textiles aimed to display the *paideia* of the owner (and his membership of the learned elite) by suggesting the relationship of the images with literary myths: K. Dunbabin, *Mosaics of the Greek and Roman World* (Cambridge 1999) 101, 115–116, 143, 150; Leader-Newby, *Silver and Society* 123–171; Török, *Transfigurations* 245–259, 274.

³⁵ Compare Ovid *Met.* 3.511–733 (episodes of Pentheus and the pirates), not mentioning the ridiculous aspect of the god.

garments, which scarcely cover his limbs (43.173–174), are appropriate not for a man or a god but for a woman,³⁶ is never contested. That is to say, Dionysus' weapons are acquitted of the charge of ineffectiveness each time he and his troops win a battle,³⁷ but never in the poem is their ridiculous aspect contradicted. For instance, in 45.66–94 Pentheus criticises Dionysus' appearance; Tiresias in answer defends Dionysus, arguing in favour of his divinity and his efficiency in defeating the pirates and giant Alpus (45.105–215), but he never addresses the accusation of the god's lack of a respectable appearance.³⁸

To add to this, the narrator does not always maintain his pseudo-solemn pretence, and some episodes are particularly surreal and sardonic.³⁹ Thus, after the easy defeat of the Indians, inebriated after drinking from the Astacid lake, which has been turned into wine, Dionysus gives a hyperbolic grand speech (15.119–131). The subsequent description of the Bacchic army binding the drunken defeated with serpents and flower girdles (15.132–168) reminds one of a fancy party with a fantastic theme. Something similar happens with the Bacchic army's crossing of the Hydaspes in impossible vessels (23.122–161, 196–214). Also, Dionysus is presented tiptoeing towards a sleeping maiden in his high-heeled buskins, making love to her with them on, and then leaving.⁴⁰

³⁶ In fact he is sometimes described as a woman: e.g. 31.2–3.

³⁷ The war against the Indians is presented as a confrontation between the Bacchic gear (fawn-skin, vine clusters, thyrsus, buskins, cymbals) and the conventional weapons of the Indians (spear, axe, sword, arrows, shield, corselet, greaves): 27.204–215, 231–241; 28.7–34; 29.193–255; 30.13–37; 36.144–156, 259–270. Something similar happens in the naval contest for Beroe: 43.18–28, 70–142, 149–171.

³⁸ In fact, part of Dionysus' revenge is getting Pentheus to dress as a Bacchante (46.108–124), adopting an extreme version of the god's bizarre look.

³⁹ A few examples can be read in D. Gigli, "Il Perseo nonniano. Osservazioni per uno studio dell'ironia nelle Dionisiache," *Prometheus* 7 (1981) 177–188, at 185–187.

⁴⁰ 16.265–266 καὶ δολοεῖς Διόνυσος ἀδουπήτοισι κοθόρνοις / εἰς γάμον ἄσφοφος εἶρε ποδῶν τεχνήμονι παλμῶ, 341–342 καὶ τελέσας φιλότητα καὶ εἰνοδίης πόθον εὐνής / ἀφράστῳ Διόνυσος ἀνηώρητο πεδίλῳ. Compare Lucian *Dial.D.* 19 (11), Selene telling how she joins Endymion in his sleep.

The conclusion follows that though Dionysus wins the war against the Indians and is accepted on Mount Olympus (48.974–978), he is not a respectable, reliable divinity. At least, he does not look like one, and outer appearance was supposed to mirror personality: badly dressed individuals were an easy prey for invectives.⁴¹ A well-studied case is that of emperors, who risked to be dubbed “bad emperors” or “usurpers” if they failed to wear the appropriate costumes for each occasion and to perform accordingly.⁴² Also, a primary quality of the image of the good emperor was virility (hence the association with Zeus/Jupiter and Ares/Mars), with bad ones represented as effeminate Hellenistic kings, with Dionysiac accoutrements.⁴³ Nonnus does not rescue Dionysus from a connection with such a negative paradigm. Though Bacchus’ androgyny is entirely traditional,⁴⁴ the poet could have enhanced the warlike masculinity of his protagonist, but to the contrary he exposes him and also degrades Zeus’ and Ares’ virile appearance (see below).

The closest parallel to Nonnus’ approach is provided by Lucian, who often reflects on the unsuitability of the gods’ behaviour and appearance and on the incoherence of mythical traditions.⁴⁵ His models are Democritus, who laughs at the

⁴¹ On the topics of invective, see W. Süß, *Studien zur älteren griechischen Rhetorik* (Leipzig/Berlin 1910) 247–254.

⁴² See S. Hales, “Men are Mars, Women are Venus: Divine Costumes in Imperial Rome,” and M. Harlow, “Dress in the *Historia Augusta*: the Role of Dress in Historical Narrative,” in L. Cleland et al. (eds.), *The Clothed Body in the Ancient World* (Oxford 2005) 131–142, and 143–153 at 145–149.

⁴³ Cf. Hales, in *The Clothed Body* 134–136.

⁴⁴ See M. Jameson, “The Asexuality of Dionysus,” in T. H. Carpenter and C. A. Faraone (eds.), *Masks of Dionysus* (Ithaca/London 1993) 44–64.

⁴⁵ See esp. *Iupp. Conf.*, *Iupp. Trag.*, *Sacr.*, *Dear. Iudic.*, *Deor. Conc.*, *Dial. D.*, generally reducing *ad absurdum* the power of the gods: they are under the rule of the Fates, enslaved, fall in love, lie, display inappropriate behaviour, and do not care about humans at all. The similarity between Nonnus and Lucian was suggested by F. Vian, “Mythologie scolaire et mythologie erudite dans les ‘Dionysiaques’ de Nonnos,” *Prometheus* 4 (1978) 157–172, at 166–167. Compare Claudian’s presentation of the pagan gods as impotent and dependent on human initiative: C. Schindler, “Claudians ‘pagane’ Götter. Tradition und Innovation in der spätantiken Panegyrik,” *Gymnasium* 115 (2008) 331–345.

ignorance of the faithful, and Heraclitus, who deplores their folly (*Sacr.* 15), though Democritean elements are far more visible. Lucian is keen to comment on how the gods are attached to their statues, and so vulnerable to attacks and robbery.⁴⁶ In *Bacch.* 1–4, *Deor.Conc.* 4–5, and *Dial.D.* 22 (18), several impartial characters⁴⁷ criticise the appalling garb and dissolute pursuits of Dionysus and his army and find them worthy only of derision.⁴⁸ Though *Bacch.* and *Dial.D.* insist that their appearance does not reduce their effectiveness, this reflection does not make them less ridiculous, and Momus says that the mere sight of the gods causes humanity to lose respect for them (*Deor.Conc.* 5). Lucian is not concerned with idolatry and the epistemological issue of the untrustworthiness of figurative representations of the divine. The undignified appearance of the gods was a common argument in non-Christian philosophical condemnations of image worship,⁴⁹ but Lucian's objective seems to have been to entertain an educated audience, who as a rule did not take myths literally.⁵⁰

As in the case of Lucian, Nonnus' exploitation of a mythological vulgate of school use (therefore widely known)⁵¹ would

⁴⁶ *Iupp.Trag.* 7–12, 33; *Sacr.* 11; *Deor.Conc.* 12, 18; *Pro imag.* 23; *Tox.* 2–3. Compare Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 71 (*Mor.* 378D).

⁴⁷ *Bacch.* 1–4: description of Bacchus and his army through the eyes of foreigners, Indian scouts; *Deor.Conc.* 2: Momus prides himself on his frankness; in *Dial.D.* 22 (18) Hera may hold a grudge against Dionysus, but she is concerned about the impact of Bacchus' image on that of Zeus.

⁴⁸ *Bacch.* 3 ταῦτα οἱ Ἴνδοι καὶ ὁ βασιλεὺς αὐτῶν ἀκούοντες ἐγέλων; *Deor.Conc.* 5 εἶτα θαυμάζομεν εἰ καταφρονοῦσιν ἡμῶν οἱ ἄνθρωποι ὀρώντες οὕτω γελοίους θεοὺς καὶ τεραστίους; ... ταῦτα οὐχ ὕβρις ὑμῖν δοκεῖ καὶ παροιμία καὶ γέλως;

⁴⁹ Pagan authors criticised the anthropomorphic conceptions of the divine (e.g. genealogies, human emotions, and appearance of the gods), the figurative representations of the gods, and the cult of images: J.-C. Freddouille, "Götzendienst," *RAC* 11 (1981) 828–895, at 831–846.

⁵⁰ J. Hall, *Lucian's Satire* (New York 1981) 194–220, esp. 205–206.

⁵¹ Nonnus does not simply paraphrase basic mythographic narratives, but combines them with local traditions and uses the scholia of other authors: see Vian, *Prometheus* 4 (1978) 157–172; P. Chuvin, *Mythologie et géographie dionisiaques. Recherches sur l'œuvre de Nonnos de Panopolis* (Clermont-Ferrand 1991). J. Bompaire, *Lucien écrivain* (Paris 1958) 191–203, speaks of a poetically-

have guaranteed the open laughter from the public at the sight of Dionysus' unsuitable appearance. Nonnus drew a clear line between these mythological games, the fictionality of which was emphasised by the constant use of vocabulary related to falsehood and delusion,⁵² and his real beliefs: in his *Paraphrase*, he opts for a seriously theological approach to the Gospel of John.⁵³ A further point should be made here, however, about the possibility of Nonnus presenting a Christian-biased approach to pagan images: when he ridicules Dionysus' appearance, is he showing a Christian's view of an androgynous god adorned with natural elements and leaving aside the cultic and theological connotations of the attributes?

It was inevitable that Christian authors should criticise the undignified appearance of pagan gods. A good instance is Clement of Alexandria, whose main allegations against the gods are their incontinence (*Protr.* 2.32–33), human emotions, and bodily needs (2.36); their immorality is reflected in the appearance of their images (4.57.1–3). Clement's, Lucian's, and Nonnus' arguments about the appearance of the gods are similar, probably because all three draw on the rhetorical tradition of refutation (ἀνασκευή) of myths.⁵⁴ For Clement it has been suggested that he depended on treatises refuting the poets' impious treatment of the pagan gods.⁵⁵ Nonnus relied on mythological catalogues with similar contents,⁵⁶ but did not

originated mythic *koine*, from which Lucian draws his schematic presentation of the gods to build his parodies and comic games.

⁵² The frequency of the vocabulary of delusion (δόλος, μίμημα, νόθος, ψεύδομαι), shape, colour, and transformation (εἶδος, εἰκόν, μορφή, δέμας, μίμημα, τύπος/ἀντίτυπος, ποικίλος, δαίδαλος, σικτός), can be verified in W. Peek, *Lexikon zu den Dionysiaka des Nonnos I–IV* (Hildesheim 1968–1975) s.vv. See already J. Lindsay, *Leisure and Pleasure in Roman Egypt* (London 1965) 379–395.

⁵³ See e.g. Agosti, *Parafraasi* 52–70.

⁵⁴ Theon *Prog.* 76.7–78.14 (analysis in M. Patillon and G. Bolognesi, *Aelius Théon: Progymnasmata* [Paris 1997] XCIII–XCVII), Hermog. *Prog.* 5, Aphth. *Prog.* 5, Nic. *Prog.* 29.7–35.4 Felten.

⁵⁵ N. Zeegers-Vander Vorst, *Les Citations des poètes grecs chez les Apologistes chrétiens du II^e siècle* (Louvain 1972) 73–79.

⁵⁶ Vian, *Prometheus* 4 (1978) 169.

adopt the aggressive mood of the Christian apologists, most likely because disorderly aggressiveness was considered indecorous among the educated.⁵⁷

Despite the parallels between the figures of Christ and Dionysus,⁵⁸ Nonnus consistently avoids presenting Dionysus as a divinity alternative to or concurrent with Christ, in all probability to avoid jeopardising the divinity of the latter.⁵⁹ The poet's aim was to amuse his learned Christian audience with the adventures of a pagan god, emphasising that his topic was completely fantastic and did not mean to interfere with their Christian beliefs. However, one image seems to have been neutral enough for him: Dionysus carries fawns and tigers around his neck (9.172–174):

ποικίλον ἠώρησεν ἐπ' αὐχένι νεβρὸν αἰείρων·
καὶ θρασὺν αἰολόνωτον ἔχων τετανυσμένον ὄμφῳ
τίγριν ἄνω κούφιζε μετάρσιον ἔκτοθι δεσμοῦ.

he would lift ... the dappled fawn and carry it over his neck; he would hold lightly aloft stretched on his shoulders a bold fell-striped tiger unshackled.

The theme can be traced back to Euripides *Bacch.* 755–756, and the good shepherd was a popular representation of *philanthropia* in both Christian and pagan contexts.⁶⁰ The notion is blamelessly classical, but we may wonder whether it encouraged Christian readers to reflect on the parallels and differences between Dionysus and Christ.⁶¹

⁵⁷ G. Agosti, “Late Antique Iambics and *Iambikè Idéa*,” in A. Cavarzere et al. (eds.), *Iambic Ideas* (Lanham 2001) 219–255, at 224–227.

⁵⁸ Tissoni, *Nonno* 71–79; D. Gigli Piccardi, *Nonno di Panopoli, Le Dionisiache (Canti I–XII)* I (Milan 2003) 50 ff.

⁵⁹ Vian, *J.Sav* (1994) 222 ff.; Simon, *Nonnos* 133–134. Compare Clement's prohibition in his *Protrepticus*: F. Jourdan, “Dionysos dans le *Protreptique* de Clément d'Alexandrie. Initiations dionysiaques et mystères chrétiens,” *RHR* 223 (2006) 265–282, at 276–282.

⁶⁰ G. Chrétien, *Nonnos de Panopolis, Les Dionysiaques* IV (Paris 1985) 115–116 (on 9.174). On the evolution of the image from pagan *philanthropia* to the Christian Good Shepherd, see N. Himmelmann, *Über Hirten-Genre in der antiken Kunst* (Opladen 1980).

⁶¹ Two similar cases: unborn Dionysus leaps in his mother's womb when

3. *Deconstructing masculine prototypes*

The images of Dionysus stand along side those of the other gods, and together they create the fantastic world of the *Dionysiaca*. As secondary characters, the other gods are presented in their full, mature form, not expected to evolve, and are defined in keeping with standard iconographic features, such as their weapons or instruments of their trade, their means of transport, and the members of their entourage. These common images construct the background for the literary stage,⁶² and because they are easily grasped, they work as notional descriptions. According to Hollander, these “conjure up an image describing some things about it and ignoring a multitude of others which ... we might assume were supplied by any reader who knew what images ... looked like.”⁶³ Divine constructions act as behavioural prototypes, images of masculinity and femininity, from which attentive readers derive conclusions to go beyond the iconographic.

We have seen that Dionysus’ androgyny does not fit into any masculine mould, and Nonnus works further in dismantling also the apparent masculinity of other male deities.⁶⁴ Thus, Ares is presented with all the appropriate masculine pageantry, carrying weapons.⁶⁵ He is called lord of war,⁶⁶ and his violent

he hears shepherds’ music (8.28 συνεσκήτησε), just as John the Baptist leaps in Elizabeth’s womb on hearing Mary (Lk 1:41 ἐσκήτησεν). Dionysus turning water into wine (14.411–437) is reminiscent of the miracle in Canaan: see Gerlaud, *Nonnos de Panopolis* VI 19–21.

⁶² See N. G. Slater, “Passion and Petrification: The Gaze in Apuleius,” *CP* 93 (1989) 18–48, at 19.

⁶³ J. Hollander, “The Poetics of *Ekphrasis*,” *Word and Image* 4 (1988) 209–219, at 209.

⁶⁴ I shall leave Apollo and Hephaestus aside because they play lesser roles in the *Dionysiaca*.

⁶⁵ 2.309; 5.577–578; 18.288; 21.63, 150, 320; 28.40; 35.331; 36.14–15. That is why he is χάλκεος in 4.399, 7.105, 16.174, 25.157, 31.263, 34.116, 46.227. Compare images of Ares: Ch. Augé, “Ares (in peripheria orientali),” in *LIMC* 2.1 (1984) 493–498, nos. 9–11, 14, 18–21.

⁶⁶ 2.310, 604; 4.52; 21.11; 34.62; 43.1. He teaches the art of war and begins the battle: 14.126–128, 17.136, 32.162–164, 34.125–127.

appearance is often mentioned;⁶⁷ he is accompanied by the primeval forces of war, mainly Rout and Terror (29.364–370), just as on the shields of Achilles (*Il.* 18.516, 535) and Heracles ([Hes.] *Aspis* 144–160). His very traditional weapons and masculinity are contrasted with Dionysus' lack of both, but while Dionysus finally succeeds in defeating the Indians (38.1–40.100) and ascends to Mount Olympus (48.974–978), Ares is shown unarmed and naked in his embrace with Aphrodite (5.581–585, 35.160–185).⁶⁸ His defeat in love is paralleled with that of his alter ego, the powerful Indian warrior Morrheus, whose weapons are of no use when faced with the beautiful Bacchante Chalcomede.⁶⁹ Ares' defeat is approached from a visual angle: his warlike paraphernalia are his only source of virility, and, being detachable, fall off at the sight of beauty and even at the mere mention of it.⁷⁰ The notion was imaged and can be appreciated in a fourth-century mosaic from Shahba-Philippopolis, where naked Ares contemplates Aphrodite.⁷¹

Zeus' case is even more cogent, because, as Dionysus' father, he provides the true measure of his son's personality.⁷² As a suitable father for Bacchus, Zeus carries powerful attributes,

⁶⁷ θούρος in 4.52, 417; 5.82; 8.133, 164; 29.124; 33.162; 38.200; βαρύμητις 4.417, 8.133, 30.2; ἄγχιος 25.344, 34.326; θεομός 29.364; μενέχαρμος 20.363; ὠκύς 29.347. See also the descriptions of other warlike characters: 13.416–418; 20.149–150, 166–169, 286–288; 21.63–65; 28.118–122, 154–157; 33.155–156; 37.756–757, 763–764; 39.78–79; 48.226–230.

⁶⁸ This follows along the lines of traditional critique of Ares as described in *Od.* 8.266–366.

⁶⁹ Morrheus is described as triumphant (32.210–220) and then defeated by love (33.315; 34.324–326; 35.112–114, 146–147). The defeat of weapons by love appears also in 25.154–160, 29.39–44, 36.257–272.

⁷⁰ In 29.325–381 Ares is told in a dream that Aphrodite has succumbed to Hephaestus and immediately leaves the battlefield, taking his spear with him in case he needs to fight for Aphrodite.

⁷¹ J. Balty, *Mosaïques antiques de Syrie* (Brussels 1977) 58–65; G. Agosti, “Due note sulla convenienza di Omero,” in A. Marcone (ed.), *Società e cultura in età tardoantica* (Florence 2004) 38–57.

⁷² On Zeus' roles in the *Dion.* see P. Kuhlmann, “Zeus in den *Dionysiaka* des Nonnos: die Demontage einer epischen Götterfigur,” *RhM* 142 (1999) 392–417, at 395–396. Compare Luc. *Dial.D.* 22 (18).

such as the sceptre, lightning, and thunder,⁷³ and his power is represented by his entourage when he goes into battle (2.414–427): warlike forces (Ares, Rout, Terror, Enyo) and celestial elements (tempests, time, winds, lightning, thunder) obey him. This apparently confident image is brought low because to defeat the massive but gullible Typhoeus, who has stolen his thunderbolt, Zeus begs Cadmus and Eros for help (1.377–409) and needs to be comforted by Victory before the final battle (2.205–239).⁷⁴ Indeed, he finally kills the giant (2.553–563), but only with human and divine help and having been assured of his victory in advance, a model for his son's poor performance in the Indian war.⁷⁵ Dionysus does not even inherit his father's ability to succeed quickly, which means that we have to read many books before he defeats the Indians (the war begins in Book 13 and only finishes in Book 40).

Zeus is not a mature lover either, and a brief fancy with a woman or boy is enough for him to degrade himself to an animal shape: he approaches Europa as a bull (1.46–144, 321–362), Persephone in the shape of a snake (5.568–569, 6.155–161), Danae as golden rain,⁷⁶ Aegina⁷⁷ and Ganymede (25.429–441) as an eagle, Antiope as a satyr.⁷⁸ With each of

⁷³ Zeus appears as a weather god, carrying lightning and thunder, especially in the Typhonomachy (Books 1–2): 1.148–156; 2.3–5, 364–367, 403, 409, 436–438, 478–507; 5.616–618; 8.266–285.

⁷⁴ A good parallel for Nonnus' weak Zeus is provided by Luc. *Iupp. Trag.* Compare the description of Zeus at Olympia in Paus. 5.11.1, where he sits in a throne made of gold and ivory and carries a Victory in his right hand and in his left a sceptre on which an eagle sits. In the *Dion.* Victory is not in his control.

⁷⁵ In Books 13–14 it is Rhea who summons the troops; in the first battle (14.269–15.168) the Indians are defeated because they are drunk after drinking from the river whose water Dionysus has turned into wine; Dionysus flees in the episode of Lycurgus (20.142–21.199); he spends Books 31–35 mad under the influence of Hera and away from the battle, while his troops are defeated.

⁷⁶ 8.136–140, 258–260, 294, 302; 16.65–68; 25.114–116, 121; 46.30; 47.516–519, 544–545.

⁷⁷ 13.201–203, 16.56–59, 24.77–82, 33.297–299, 39.169–170.

⁷⁸ 16.242–243, 31.216–218, 33.301–303.

them he adopts only one shape,⁷⁹ but he undergoes several metamorphoses for Semele (7.319–333), hinting at Dionysus' changing nature and lack of shame in love. Far from being an exotic image, Zeus in animal shape for the sake of love is seen as shameful and inappropriate. For instance, when he carries Europa on his back assuming the form of a bull, Athena blushes at the sight (1.83–85) and Hera mocks him, suggesting that someone may catch him and put him to the plough (324–343). Again we have to avoid here the temptation of reading a Christian attack on the immorality of the pagan gods,⁸⁰ and rather compare Nonnus to Lucian, whose characters several times deride Zeus and feel ashamed for his demeaning metamorphoses.⁸¹

This deconstructed image of Zeus provides a faulty model for his son, who is an even worse lover than he is. Thus, while Zeus quickly gets his lover and abandons him/her, succeeding in conceiving mighty sons, Dionysus leaves behind a trail of suffering and of unfulfilled relationships: Ampelus dies (Books 10–12); he rapes Nicaea only because she accidentally drinks of a river of wine (15–16); he gives way to Poseidon in their contest for Beroe (41–43); his wife Ariadne is soon petrified by Perseus (47.665–666—though she is then accepted on Olympus, 700–704); he kills Pallene's father, sleeps with her, and then leaves (48.90–240); he rapes Aura, who after giving birth to twins cannibalises one and leaps into a river (48.238–973).

The images of Dionysus, Ares, and Zeus coincide in highlighting the unsuitability of Olympic male gods for any serious role, along the lines of traditional critique to the gods. There is however a sensible masculine role, that of Hermes, who helps Zeus protect Dionysus and backs his attempts to have Dio-

⁷⁹ Nonnus also offers catalogues of Zeus' divine (5.619–621) and human liaisons (7.117–135, 32.63–72), related to a long-standing (para-)literary tradition: see *Il.* 14.317 ff.; *P.Mil.Vogl.* III 126; *Ps.-Clem. Recogn.* 10.21–23, *Hom.* 5.13–14. In *Dion.* 7.117–135 Nonnus alters the usual pattern (names of the woman/goddess, the man/god, and their children), mentioning the bride's name and Zeus' shape during the courtship.

⁸⁰ Cf. Liebeschuetz, in *The Sixth Century* 77.

⁸¹ *Luc. Prom.* 17; *Sacr.* 5; *Deor.Conc.* 7; *Dial.D.* 6 (2), 8 (5).2, 20 (12).1.

nysus' divinity recognised by the gods. He uses his attributes, the rod⁸² and the wings attached to his sandals,⁸³ in crucial missions: the rod administers sleep (5.116–117, 35.233–235) and represents Hermes as a peacemaker (36.108) or a messenger (18.320–322), and he also uses it to kill Argos (13.25–27). All these elements are part of the basic mythology learned by young students on reading Homer (e.g. *Il.* 24.340–344). However, Hermes appears several times carrying baby Dionysus in the crook of his arm,⁸⁴ which conjures up the Hermes *paidophoros*, often represented in sculptures and mosaics.⁸⁵ Again, Nonnus draws on a simple artistic image to illuminate the literary background.

Hermes' role as a saviour and protector brings him close enough to Christ for his figure and related formulae to be used in the construction of Christ in the *Paraphrase*.⁸⁶ A Christian reader would make the connection between the two and realise Dionysus' deficiencies when he is compared with Hermes and Christ. The fact that Hermes is the only divinity who is not ridiculed in the *Dionysica* may in fact be related to the proximity of his imagery to Christ's: Nonnus would avoid the risk of undermining the Saviour's divine image, because it had been under constant attack by pagan polemicists.⁸⁷

⁸² 5.130, 574–575; 7.104; 36.11. On Hermes in the *Dion.* see M.-Ch. Fayant, "Hermes dans les *Dionysiaques* de Nonnos de Panopolis," *REG* 111 (1998) 145–159.

⁸³ 3.373, 433; 9.52, 92–93, 155–156; 24.86; 26.283; 47.673.

⁸⁴ 9.16–18 *καί μιν ἔσω Δρακάνοιο λεχώιον ἀμφὶ κολώνην / πήχει κολπωθέντι λαβῶν Μαΐηος Ἑρμῆς / ἠερόθεν πεπότητο* ("Hermes Maia's son received him near the birth-place hill of Dracanon, and holding him in the crook of his arm flew through the air"). Also 9.26, 53–54, 137–138. Hermes also carries Dionysus after his first birth (8.405–406).

⁸⁵ G. Siebert, "Hermes," *LIMC* 5.1 (1993) 285–387, nos. 391–401. Cf. the bath of Dionysus in the House of Aion, on which see Daszewski, *Dionysos der Erlöser*, pl. 17; Antioch, Bath D, Room 3, Hermes and Dionysus, on which see S. Campbell, *The Mosaics of Antioch* (Toronto 1988) 16–17, pl. 64.

⁸⁶ D. Accorinti, "Hermes e Cristo in Nonno," *Prometheus* 21 (1995) 24–32; Fayant, *REG* 111 (1998) 158–159; Agosti, *Parafraresi* 338–346.

⁸⁷ Jourdan, *RHR* 223 (2006) 281. Alchemical associations are not a factor in the favourable treatment of Hermes: the main traits of the personality of

No Olympic male deity appears prepared to direct the universe. They simply hold no strength behind the façade built by their attributes: Dionysus is womanish, Ares loses courage together with his weapons, Zeus is a mere hothead. Hermes certainly affords a more reasonable image of masculinity, but he shows no personal ambitions. Olympus is deprived of guidance, but Nonnus carefully tiptoes around the vacant throne, avoiding any link with Christ or God, because his Christian audience could have found it offensive. Like Lucian, he has created a mythological fantasy with a comic slant, and iconography helps the reader to visualise what is described and to laugh at it. Nonnus seems to have left all his serious intentions for his *Paraphrase*.

4. *Supporting traditional models of femininity*

Goddesses are treated in a similar way, with a focus on prototypical appearance, but they pay a price for their gender. While Dionysus is admitted into heaven despite his attire and behaviour, goddesses (and women) are punished when they fail to conform to their gender roles. Pagan and Christian authors agree in their criticism: according to both Lucian (*Deor. Conc.* 8) and Clement (*Protr.* 2.33.7–8), adulterous behaviour is more censurable in goddesses than in their male counterparts.

The best candidate for the archetypal woman is Aphrodite. At first sight, there is nothing special about her image in the *Dionysiaca*: golden as in the Homeric poems,⁸⁸ her attribute is the *cestus*,⁸⁹ and she is often related to the sea (*Venus marina*)⁹⁰

the god come from the mainstream tradition and, though Nonnus attributes to him some “Hermetic” characteristics that were part of the image of the god in his time, he does so without special emphasis. In fact he deprives him of one of the main aspects of Hermes-Thoth, that of inventor, in favour of Cadmus (4.259–306). See Fayant, *REG* 111 (1998) 156–159.

⁸⁸ χρύση in 13.358, 19.44, 34.119, 42.417, 47.653 (cf. e.g. *Il.* 3.64, 5.427). Nonnus misses the opportunity of mocking her supposed golden nature: contrast Luc. *Iupp. Trag.* 10.

⁸⁹ 4.67–69, 32.2–3, 41.103–105, 42.369–370, 48.690–691. Compare Luc. *Dear. Iudic.* 10.

⁹⁰ ἄλως θυγάτηρ Ἀφροδίτη in 4.118, 33.328, 42.469; θαλασσαίη 2.103, 4.239, 6.308, 7.229, 13.62, 33.72, 39.263; βρύχιος 1.87, 41.99, 43.424;

and the production of perfumes and ointments (31.202–208, 33.4–10). Her sphere of action is embodied in the members of her entourage, all of them personifications of love, desire, and the feminine interpretation of the good life:⁹¹ Eros (33.143–147, 41.400–406), Adonis (41.4–9, 48.267–272), the Graces (31.202–208, 33.4–10), the Seasons (41.183–184), and some abstract entities such as Charis, Peitho, and Pothos (33.110–113).

Aphrodite's power is fully revealed in the naked beauty of all women,⁹² because their triumph is hers. Thus, when the Bacchante Chalcomede seduces the Indian warrior Morrheus by exposing her body (34.159, 277–280; 35.106–108) and gets him to abandon battle and weapons for her (35.98–159), Aphrodite teases Ares because her champion has defeated his (35.160–184). The cliché that the naked body of a woman is stronger than any weapons (esp. 35.21–34, 160–184), and the many scenes of voyeurism presenting the male gaze subjugated to a (partly) naked woman or goddess,⁹³ make then particular sense as expressions of feminine power.

The exhibitionism of the female body exposed to the male gaze and Nonnus' obsession with nakedness do not contradict his Christian beliefs: Christians were aware of the dangers of

εἰς ἀλήν 33.382; 34.53; 42.456, 496; birth of Aphrodite 13.439–443, 41.97–118; birth of Eros 41.129–142; birth of Beroe 41.155–184, 212–229. Compare Apuleius *Met.* 4.31 (Aphrodite and her marine *thiasos*).

⁹¹ For artistic depictions of Aphrodite and her entourage, see several mosaics: Antioch, Atrium House, “Aphrodite and Adonis” (Campbell, *Mosaics of Antioch* 20, pl. 71); Madaba, Church of the Virgin Mary, Hippolytus Hall (6th c.), Aphrodite and Adonis with their court, including Agroikis, three Graces, and six Erotes (M. Piccirillo, *The Mosaics of Jordan* [Amman 1993] 51–55). On sarcophagi, see M. Koortbojian, *Myth, Meaning, and Memory on Roman Sarcophagi* (Berkeley 1995) 23–62; D. Grassinger, *Die mythologischen Sarkophage I* (Berlin 1999) 70–90.

⁹² Compare the Venus-like women of the *Golden Ass*: see Elsner, *Roman Eyes* 293–295.

⁹³ 1.525–533; 5.304–315, 476–488, 586–601; 7.171–279; 15.221–236; 16.5–18; 34.273–280; 35.21–78, 103–108; 38.116–129; 42.40–97, 447–455; 48.108–171. On voyeurism in the *Dion.* see R. C. Schmiel, “The Story of Aura,” *Hermes* 121 (1993) 470–483, at 480–483; R. F. Newbold, “Curiosity and Exposure in Nonnus,” *GRBS* 48 (2008) 71–94, at 75–80.

naked Aphrodite (cf. Clem. Alex. *Protr.* 4.50), but this did not prevent them from depicting her nudity.⁹⁴ In fact, reducing female influence to the physical attraction of nakedness confines women to being only objects of male desire. Nonnus emphasises the erotic appeal, desirability, and beauty of women⁹⁵ and puts their incursions into masculine action under surveillance: all intentions to display personal power or initiative are severely punished. Certainly, the *Dionysiaca* is full of violent warrior Bacchantes (e.g. 14.338–385), but their strength comes from Bacchus' *mania* and when the god disappears they are completely dispirited and powerless (34.162–248). Their only defence is their beauty (35.21–78), the same weapon used by Chalcomede.⁹⁶

Women are also discouraged from taking new roles. Nonnus images this notion by denying Aphrodite access to new attributes in the story of weaving Aphrodite (24.237–329): trying to work at Athena's loom, she only produces a misshapen fabric; she provokes Athena's anger for usurping her sphere of activity, and the laughter of the other gods. The golden goddess then gives up and attends again to humanity, which in her absence suffered the lack of generative activity.

A similar conservative reduction is applied by Nonnus to the images of Artemis and Hera. The former illustrates the prototype of the proud virgin,⁹⁷ fond of hunting and a friend to

⁹⁴ On nudity in Coptic art see L. del Francia et al., "Mythological Subjects in Coptic Art," *Coptic Encyclopedia* 6 (1991) 1750–1768, and Elsner, *Roman Eyes* 214–220. In his *Epithalamium of Honorius and Maria* Claudian describes Venus' toilette without mentioning her nakedness (*Carm.* 10.99–126), but she is naked in *Carm.* 31.28, 109–112.

⁹⁵ Cf. S. Muth, "Eine Kultur zwischen Veränderung und Stagnation. Zum Umgang mit den Mythenbildern im spätantiken Haus," in F. A. Bauer and N. Zimmermann (eds.), *Epochenwandel? Kunst und Kultur zwischen Antike und Mittelalter* (Mainz am Rhein 2001) 95–116, at 95–108, on the popularity of scenes depicting the erotic interaction of the sexes, with the figures displaying the different roles of women and men.

⁹⁶ On the metaphor of the weapons of beauty see D. Gigli Piccardi, *Metafora e poetica in Nonno di Panopoli* (Florence 1985) 57–63.

⁹⁷ 5.306; 15.179, 422; 16.149–151; 36.59, 248; 48.862. Compare Libanius *Decl.* 5.

beasts.⁹⁸ Nonnus' descriptions seem to follow the type called Artemis Laphria (after Paus. 4.31.7–10, 7.18.8–13):⁹⁹ a young huntress, dressed in a short *chiton*,¹⁰⁰ wearing her characteristic shoes (ἐνδορομίδες),¹⁰¹ carrying a bow and a quiver, and sometimes escorted by a dog.¹⁰² Her chariot is drawn by stags.¹⁰³

Artemis and her human counterparts Nicaea and Aura¹⁰⁴ look masculine in their pursuits and weapons, but Nonnus finds ways of dismantling their masculine appearance. Nicaea (16.263–291) and Aura (48.621–651) are both deprived of their maidenhood by Dionysus, which should be enough to feminise them.¹⁰⁵ This works with Nicaea, who, after the initial distress (16.343–392), abandons the masculine setting of the mountains and becomes the mother of Dionysus' first child (393–402), the final step to transform her into a genuine woman. On the contrary, Aura is unable to accept her new status: after being raped, she rearranges her clothing as if she were still a virgin (658–660), seeks masculine revenge in killing men and attacking Aphrodite's temple (661–698), and goes back to hunting in the forest (699–700). When her pregnancy becomes obvious, Artemis taunts her because of her new feminine appearance

⁹⁸ 5.433, 525–526; 11.343; 16.128; 32.110–118; 33.126; 36.10, 28–78; 46.221–224; 48.302, 415. Athena does not belong to the same paradigm, because though she is a virgin (2.106, 210; 3.111; 16.31, 149–154; 22.312; 47.365, 415–418; 48.411) and has warlike abilities and inclinations (20.53–60; 24.284; 26.2; 27.62–66, 290–291, 301; 30.291–292, 297; 31.244; 39.78), she conforms to the feminine ideal as the patron of weaving (5.562–6.205, 24.237–329). Also she is presented breastfeeding Iacchus (48.951–957).

⁹⁹ L. Kahil, "Artemis," *LIMC* 2.1 (1984) 618–753, nos. 191–209.

¹⁰⁰ 47.289–290; 48.316 = 339 ἀναστείλασα χιτώνα, 373–374.

¹⁰¹ 16.107, 181–182 (with 265–266); 36.49–50.

¹⁰² 36.51–52; 44.297–300; 48.331–334.

¹⁰³ 11.344; 15.189; 20.70–71; 36.55; 48.299, 450. For this motif see Kahil, *LIMC* 2.1 (1984), nos. 1200–1203.

¹⁰⁴ Both are described as human copies of Artemis: Nicaea, 15.169–203; 16.125–130, 149–154, 166–168; Aura, 48.243–245, 248, 720–722.

¹⁰⁵ The parallels between the two episodes have been thoroughly studied: Schmiel, *Hermes* 121 (1993) 470–483; Gerlaud, *Nonnos de Panopolis* VI 102–107; J. L. Lightfoot, "The Bonds of Cypris: Nonnus' Aura," *GRBS* 39 (1998) 293–306.

and calls on her to abandon her hunting weapons and become a mother (749–785),¹⁰⁶ but Aura goes to the mountains and tries to hinder labour (786–810). She finally gives birth to twins (851–855) and tries to get them killed by beasts, in the end cannibalising one of them and committing suicide afterwards (910–935). Even in the river where she seeks death, she cannot escape her female image, since she is turned into a fountain, with her breasts perpetually casting out streams of water (935–942), a reminder of her strange maternity.

Nicaea and Aura are physically transformed into women, but such a procedure cannot be applied to Artemis.¹⁰⁷ Instead, Nonnus neutralises her masculine appearance when Aura sees her naked and comments that the goddess' rotund breasts and rosy cheeks do not suit a maiden's appearance, but Aphrodite's (48.335–369). Aura is raped by Dionysus in punishment for her impious words, but nobody takes time to refute them—not surprisingly, for the representations of Artemis share many characteristics with those of Aphrodite.¹⁰⁸ To complete the deconstruction, Artemis is defeated in combat by a matron, Hera, when her virginal arrows are of no use against Hera when she brandishes her husband's weapons (36.48–78).

As to Hera, she lacks her particular attributes,¹⁰⁹ but her

¹⁰⁶ Also, Nicaea reappears to explain to Aura how she had to give up her hunting/virginity and become a loom-working mother (48.811–828). Artemis derides Aura in two other speeches: 48.829–847, 856–865.

¹⁰⁷ But see Hera's mockery of the virginity of Artemis in Luc. *Dial.D.* 18 (16).2.

¹⁰⁸ E.g., in the scenes of Artemis at her toilette she is shown carefully protecting her body (5.311–315; 48.335–340, 347–348, 373–374) in what seems to be a literary translation of the “crouching Artemis,” the same pudic gesture as the “Venus pudica” and kneeling Venus. On Artemis see Kahil, *LIMC* 2.1 (1984), nos. 1394, 1411–1412; E. Simon et al., “Artemis/Diana,” *LIMC* 2.1 (1984) 792–855, nos. 328–335; Balty, *Mosaïques antiques de Syrie* 20–23, nos. 5–6. On Aphrodite see M.-O. Jentel, “Aphrodite (in periphèria orientali),” *LIMC* 2.1 (1984) 154–166, nos. 10–37, 182–195; E. Schmidt, “Venus,” *LIMC* 8.1 (1997) 192–230, nos. 109–132, 244–245; V. Platt, “Viewing, Desiring, Believing: Confronting the Divine in a Pompeian House,” *Art History* 25 (2002) 87–112, at 96–101.

¹⁰⁹ Her golden throne is mentioned only twice: 2.599 = 5.134 χρυσόθρονος Ἥρη. She also lacks a weapon of her own, though she is sometimes

vengeful splenetic character casts her figure in the mould of the vicious step-mother.¹¹⁰ Her chief ambition is to keep Dionysus off of Mount Olympus, mainly by hindering his victory over the Indians, even though this means usurping her husband's authority. To achieve this, she presents herself to Zeus as an erotic bait, seduces him, and makes him sleep (32.38–97). While he is distracted, Megaera instils madness into Dionysus (32.98–150), and his troops, now without guidance, are massacred by the Indians (32.151 ff.).

Hera succeeds because she wisely exploits her feminine attributes. When she is getting ready to meet Zeus (32.10–37),¹¹¹ Nonnus stresses her womanliness, focusing on the symbols of seduction: perfume, precious stones, myrtle, Aphrodite's *cestus*, and the robe Hera was wearing when Zeus first approached her.¹¹² Hera's action against Dionysus is counteracted by Chalcomede in the following books (33–35), where the beautiful Bacchante neutralises the Indian leader Morrheus by using her charms. Despite their dazzling appearance, both Chalcomede and Hera achieve only temporary success in distracting Morrheus and Zeus from the battle. Feminine seductive powers cannot fully overcome masculine pursuits: Morrheus goes back to battle (36.427 ff.) and Zeus wakes and instantly regains control of the war and of his wife (35.262 ff.). Morrheus and Zeus are far from invincible and in fact bring ridicule upon themselves (see above), but Nonnus puts war back into their hands:

warlike in nature (20.220–221, 344, 346, 361–362; 36.28–46; 47.555, 607–611), and her way of moving is simply described as quick (ὄκλυπέδιλος in 9.139, 14.303; see also 23.118–119; 31.75–76, 199) while other gods are granted a special means of transport. She borrows her husband's sceptre (42.472–474) and Aphrodite's *cestus*: she is called Ζυγίη in 4.322, 31.186, 32.56–57, 47.415–416. See also 31.280–282. Contrast the clear description in Paus. 2.17.4.

¹¹⁰ Contrast Demeter, adorned with cereals (6.6–7), and anxious mother of Persephone (6.1–144).

¹¹¹ After *Il.* 14.166–188; see F. Vian, *Nonnos de Panopolis, Les Dionysiaques* X (Paris 1997) 76–78.

¹¹² Nevertheless, note that her success is attributed by the narrator to the action of Aphrodite's girdle (32.38–40) and by Zeus himself to Hera's being in charge of marriage and procreation (73–75).

Chalcomede disappears after fulfilling the role of helping the Bacchic army, and Hera is brought to order.

Zeus reduces his wife to the role of mother, forcing her to suckle Dionysus and to anoint him with her milk, thus granting him immortality and healing his madness (35.298–340). As a reward for her good behaviour, he places in the sky an image of her milk, the Milky Way (308–311). Much has been said about the portrayal of Hera as a *kourotrophos* goddess.¹¹³ Nonnus explicitly appeals to the Greek tradition in which Hera granted immortality to Zeus' children, especially Hermes and Heracles, by suckling them,¹¹⁴ but concurrent images of Isis and the Virgin Mary could have been evoked in Nonnus' contemporary audience.¹¹⁵ Leaving aside the thorny theological and iconographic questions,¹¹⁶ reducing Hera's power to a maternal image divests her (and by extension all women) of her many other possible areas of influence.

Aura, Artemis, and Hera are all punished through their breasts. Aura's and Hera's forced maternities are imaged with the former's breasts turned into a fountain and the catasterism of the latter's milk. In the narrative of Nicaea no similar image is presented, but she is equally made a mother. In the case of Artemis there is no explicit maternity, but her breasts are said to be similar to those of a mature woman. Whatever we might think of a psychoanalytical view of the insistence on the breast,¹¹⁷ Nonnus makes it the ultimate attribute of women. In

¹¹³ See H. Frangoulis, *Nonnos de Panopolis, Les Dionysiaques XII* (Paris 2006) 34–41; G. Agosti, *Nonno di Panopoli: Le Dionisiache (Canti XXV–XXXIX)* (Milan 2004) 596–597; W. Deonna, *Deux études de symbolisme religieux* (Brussels 1955) 15–31. Dionysus has been suckled by Rhea (1.18–21, 9.153–154, 45.98, 46.12–13, 47.621–622), the river nymphs (9.29–31), and Ino (9.96–110).

¹¹⁴ See *Dion.* 9.232–234, analysed in Chrétien, *Nonnos de Panopolis* IV 121 n. to 9.232–234; Deonna, *Deux études* 15–20.

¹¹⁵ See Frangoulis, *Nonnos de Panopolis* XII 37–38; D. Gigli Piccardi, “Nonno e l’Egitto,” *Prometheus* 24 (1998) 61–82, 161–181, at 161–163.

¹¹⁶ For a brief introduction see Th. F. Mathews and N. Muller, “Isis and Mary in Early Icons,” in M. Vassilaki (ed.), *Images of the Mother of God* (Aldershot/Burlington 2005) 3–11.

¹¹⁷ See R. F. Newbold, “Breasts and Milk in Nonnus’ *Dionysiaca*,” *CW* 94 (2000/2001) 11–24.

reducing feminine power to the erotic and nutritive appeal of this part of their bodies, he is not making any religious statement, only siding with the contemporary gender values and approaching them visually.

In fact, similar notions surface in the contemporary Christian world. The Coptic Mary *Galaktotrophousa*, which would seem to illustrate the Child's dependence on his mother and therefore Mary's power, has been explained as a metaphor for the Eucharist:¹¹⁸ Christ is not drinking Mary's milk (after all she was a virgin), but the *Logos*, the word of God, provided by his father. This emphasises Christ's divinity, fully dependent on his father, while his mother is seen as completely secondary.

5. *Conclusions*

The general statement that iconography contributes visually to the *Dionysiaca* merits several nuances. Nonnus certainly draws on iconographic motifs to construct the evolving personality of Dionysus and depict the figures of the rest of the gods. Their images enhance the visuality of the poem, both in the general construction (the evolution of the figure of Dionysus illustrates the passage of time and the development of the plot) and in making self-contained episodes alive. The audience would also realise the ancillary nature of visual details, always governed by literary tradition.

The attention to the appearance of the gods as embodiment of their characters also has several implications for the general understanding of the poem. The humorous approach towards the iconography of the gods is used to dismantle their ostensible power, especially in the case of Dionysus and other male deities. With it Nonnus provides his readers with many opportunities for laughter at the expense of ridiculous images. At the same time, he carefully avoids any notion, be it a comparison with Christ or any delicate matter treated by the apologists, which could upset Christian sensibilities.

¹¹⁸ E. S. Bolman, "The Enigmatic Coptic Galaktotrophousa and the Cult of the Virgin Mary in Egypt," in Vassilaki, *Images of the Mother of God* 13–22. Compare *Dion.* 41.212–220, where Astraea suckles baby Beroe to transmit to her all her legal knowledge.

While the male deities are only victims of sarcasm because of their appearance, goddesses are treated differently. Those of them who reject their conventional image as mothers and erotic subjects and try to replace it with masculine pursuits and to wield their own power are punished without mercy. Traditional femininity is celebrated, and women and goddesses see themselves confined to the erotic and nutritional interpretations of their breasts.¹¹⁹

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