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August, 2008

Nietzsche/Pentheus: The Last Disciple of Dionysus and Queer Fear of the Feminine

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At the very climax of joy there sounds a cry of horror or a yearning lamentation for an irretrievable loss.

The Birth of Tragedy §2

In the philosopher...there is nothing whatever that is impersonal.

Beyond Good and Evil §6

I. Was Nietzsche Gay?

There is a certain subcultural delight amongst Nietzsche scholars in speculating about the late philosopher's sexual proclivities. Having finally left the scandals surrounding a possible affair with his sister and his likely visit to a whorehouse behind, the question du jour regarding Nietzsche's sexuality is whether or not he was "gay" or otherwise homoerotically inclined. Joachim Köhler has recently and definitively pronounced in the affirmative, delivering a ponderous biographical study of Nietzsche that reads even the most innocuous of childhood poetry as veiling the weighty "secret" of "Zarathustra's" homosexuality.¹ In a completely different vein, Eve Sedgwick has suggested that Nietzsche's proliferating textual metaphors of fecundity and procreation offer an unconventional, "sexy thematics" of relations between men (Epistemology 135-6). And, of course, there are the endless rumors regarding Nietzsche's relationship with his fellow fraternity member and fencing buddy at Bonn, Paul Deussen (Hayman 61-64; Köhler 44). Now, while such speculation may seem either tawdry or pointless (or both), such intimations proliferate not (simply) because they are titillating, but also because Nietzsche himself authorizes such scrutiny in his proclamation in Beyond Good and Evil that all great [grosse] philosophy has hitherto been "the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unnoticed memoir" [das Selbstbekenntnis ihres Urhebers und eine Art ungewollter und unvermerkter mémoires] (Jenseits §6, *KS VI* pp. 19-20; trans. emended).² Nietzsche's claim that philosophy is better understood as memoir or unwitting confession means

not only that biography is no longer the privileged domain of knowledge about a historical figure, but also that autobiography and philosophy are not really separate fields of inquiry. If we press these methodological points at the same moment that we also take into account the abundance of discussions surrounding gender, sexuality, sexual difference, and procreation in Nietzsche's texts – subjects that consume large swaths of aphorisms in a number of his major works³ – then far from being mere salacious gossip, the question of Nietzsche's "sexuality" is one he himself puts on the table and invites us to investigate, one that we would be remiss to set aside on grounds of propriety, philosophical or otherwise.

Of course, Nietzsche's writings are not transparently autobiographical, as he makes clear by the unintentional, inadvertent [*ungewollt*] and unremarked [*unvermerkt*] qualifiers he attaches to the kind [*Art*] of memoir they contain. This means that Nietzsche's texts offer insight into Nietzsche neither in the way a standard chronology of his life and work catalogues his movements and publications in an empiricist historical accounting, nor in the way a reliance on letters and diaries produces a biographical compilation of the beliefs and motivations proclaimed there. Rather, Nietzsche's texts invite us to probe them for the unwitting, the inadvertent, and the involuntary – that which Nietzsche "wrote" without his own knowledge, permission, or conscious intention. Given the widespread Euro-American metaphor of the closet to describe hidden homosexual desire⁴ and Nietzsche's inaugural demand that we gain the most from an author when we read not simply between but especially behind the lines, it is no accident that these two discourses – that surrounding Nietzsche's (homo)sexuality and that regarding the methodology of philosophical textual reading – so nicely converge here (cf. Sedgwick). In Nietzsche, both his textuality and his sexuality are unknown secrets to be deciphered from what is explicitly spoken and sanctioned there. Hopefully it is not illegitimate to conclude, then, that consideration of Nietzsche's (homo)sexuality is a subject as defensible as it is pleasurable, one that can be undertaken via scrutiny of his published,

“philosophical” writings just as well as – if not better than – via biographical scrutiny of his letters, notes, and diaries.⁵

While I am interested in contributing to the discussion surrounding Nietzsche’s sexuality, I do wish to resist any ahistoricist reading that might too easily subsume him under a 21st-century notion of gayness,⁶ or embrace him as yet another newly-discovered homosexual forebear in a triumphalist reading of gay history. I also want to resist the easy conclusion that textual expression of homoerotic desire necessarily makes its author homosexual. Of course if one looks long enough, one can certainly find homoerotic passages in Nietzsche’s texts, like the discussion of young men who need to “explode” and the virtue of being a “seducer” [Verführer] of such men in §38 of The Gay Science [Fröhliche KS 3, p. 406].⁷ But the rarity of such remarks and the complexity of Nietzsche’s texts make any straightforward application of these to a conclusion of Nietzsche’s homosexuality simplistic at best. In the aphorism with which I began this paper (Beyond §6), Nietzsche explains that what is revealed in a philosopher’s confession is his “morality” [Moral], a morality that is important because “above all,” it “bears decided and decisive witness to who he is—that is, in what order of rank the innermost drives of his nature stand in relation to one another.” In other words, what philosophy indirectly reveals—through the vehicle of Moral—is the rank ordering of the philosopher’s drives [Trieben]. S/Textual interpretation, then, is (at least) a two-step process, requiring us first to isolate the “morality” being espoused, and then to diagnose the hidden undercurrents of drives (anxiety, desire) that motivate it and find expression there – hardly a linear process. But even supposing the drives announced themselves directly—if Nietzsche were to declare, for example, “I am a homosexual!” [Ich bin Schwul!]⁸—the proper response would still be skepticism, since as he himself insists, “States of consciousness, any faith, considering something true, for example—every psychologist knows this—are fifth-rank matters of complete indifference compared to the value of instincts...” (Antichrist[ian] §39). The drives—or at least the ones that

matter, Nietzsche seems to suggest—are necessarily unspoken. Placing little value on the explicitly avowed, Nietzsche entreats us to be not merely philosophers, but philologists, which requires us “to read well, that is to say, to read slowly, deeply, looking cautiously before and aft, with reservations, with doors left open, with delicate eyes and fingers” (Dawn P§5). Better yet, we should be psychologists, reading “in what has been written so far a symptom of what has so far been kept silent” (Beyond §23). In other words, if what we are after in Nietzsche are his instincts and their rank order, then even the seemingly most straightforward of self-declarations must be treated with caution, and it is he himself who insists that we not take him at his literal word about these.⁸

The problem may simply be the question itself. “Was Nietzsche gay?” seems an unduly limited formulation, a question circumscribed by parameters not simply historical in nature. If we instead widen our lens of scrutiny to a broader sexual and gendered aperture than that of the merely “homosexual,” we notice that Nietzsche’s discussions of sexuality and gender are in fact more varied and certainly more queer than any mere avowal of homosexual desire (an avowal of which we are skeptical in any case, and not simply because such avowals are rare to non-existent). What, in fact, does Nietzsche actually say about sex, gender, and sexuality? A few themes can be isolated: in particular, he disparages heterosexual romantic love, characterizing opposite-sex relations as warfare and enmity. He also consistently sexualizes epistemology, metaphorizing truth as the female body and male philosophers as her pursuers, yet all the while insisting on pregnancy as the signature activity of the redemptive and exclusively male artist-creator. And he repeatedly—although often coyly—praises sexual abstinence and solitude, and with no significant allusion to masturbation. Now, whether or not Nietzsche was gay, he certainly seems a bit queer; the question is, what explains this multiplicity of material and metaphorical sexual imperatives, Nietzsche’s sexual Moral? How might we make sense of Nietzsche’s statements about (his own) gender, sexuality, and sexual desire?⁹

A few answers to these questions emerge when we consider Nietzsche's texts not simply from a queer perspective, but also from a feminist viewpoint. Flouting the unspoken consensus in Nietzsche scholarship that his misogynist remarks on women, gender, and sexual difference are best ignored or else complicated out of meaningful existence,¹⁰ I want to suggest instead that Nietzsche's infrequent homoerotic references and confused identifications with the feminine can be read as symptoms of his own more predominant inability to accept and affirm his own sexual desire, desire that is oriented primarily toward women, not men. It seems to me that Nietzsche's simultaneous warnings about women and yet frequent self-identifications with them are indicative of a basic overall reticence with regard to sexuality in general, and a fear and loathing of femininity in particular. Nietzsche himself crystallizes these themes in his repeated declaration that he is the last disciple of Dionysus, god of sexuality, intoxication, and boundary transgression. While many have made inroads into the interpretation of Dionysus and the Dionysian in Nietzsche's philosophy, most have considered this theme only from a philological or classicist perspective, interrogating the role of tragedy in Nietzsche's thought, or else his attempt to inaugurate a new, tragic age in which Dionysus is a surrogate for the anti-Christ.¹¹ None, however, has considered the sexual and gendered significance of Nietzsche's declarations of himself as a disciple and initiate of this god, a repetition significant in its identification of Nietzsche with the maenadic women with whom he repeatedly warns against any "entanglement." Indeed, Nietzsche's admonitions regarding women, sexuality, and death make clear that he has learned much from Euripides's play The Bacchae, the only sustained portrayal of Dionysus in Greek tragedy. Examination of this play makes clear that the "spectator" whom Nietzsche complains Euripides has brought onto the stage is none other than Nietzsche himself in the personage of Pentheus, the stubborn and hot-headed ruler of Thebes with whom Nietzsche unwittingly identifies. Like Pentheus, Nietzsche too both desires and dreads women, those "maenads who tear to pieces" as they love. Like Pentheus, who literally takes on the

apparel and posture of a woman onstage, the only way Nietzsche can handle this sexual attraction – which is simultaneously an unjustified paranoia and fear of the feminine – is to appropriate the female capacity of pregnancy for himself and other male creators in a lame attempt at sublimation. What both Nietzsche and Pentheus fear and yet desire is precisely what Dionysus offers—an explosion of boundaries that is both gratifying and terrifying, an unmediated experience of sexual life that retains neither sexual difference nor gender hierarchy (which are essentially conflated for these two men).

Pentheus's and Nietzsche's appropriation of the feminine expresses a fear of the destruction of male power and the erosion of sexual difference I call a "queer fear of the feminine." Just as both men take on feminine affectations without thereby being "gay," so too do both don the markers of femininity while nevertheless remaining misogynists. Indeed, both take on a feminine guise only in order to avert the erosion of male domination. As we will see, these feminine performances certainly trouble the sexual and gender norms of their historical contexts – Pentheus delights in dressing up as a woman, a degraded social position ill-befitting a ruler, while Nietzsche valorizes a solitudinous male fecundity that contradicts both the virilized community of men idealized by his age, as well as its corresponding emphasis on the procreative heterosexual nuclear family.¹² These sexual and gendered violations allow us to characterize these men's behavior as in some sense queer. But this queerness does nothing to disrupt gender hierarchy, and its result is a retrenchment of patriarchy, albeit one dressed up in drag. In the conclusion of this paper, I will take up a symptomatic reading of our prevailing interest (scholarly and otherwise) in reading Nietzsche as "gay" (rather than queer and misogynist), and the consequences of this interpretive bent for the "disciplines" of feminism, queer theory, and Anglo-American philosophy.

II. The Anti-Disciple of Dionysus: Pentheus

Before we turn to the question of Nietzsche's sexuality, we must first explore the parallel case of Nietzsche's alter ego, Pentheus, as presented in The Bacchae. The drama is framed by the story of Dionysus – here portrayed as a foreign god – whose divinity has been denied by the ruling house of Thebes. This denial is an even greater affront than the typical mortal snub of divine authority, however, because Dionysus's mother, Semelē, is the daughter of Thebes's patriarch, Cadmus. Now too old to rule, Cadmus has bequeathed the throne to his grandson Pentheus, a brash young man of about 19 who is politically green (and, strictly speaking, Dionysus's cousin). Dionysus has come to Thebes disguised as a human being, determined to gain recognition for himself by instating a Dionysus cult in his mother's city.

Pentheus learns of Dionysus's efforts when he is informed that all of Thebes's women, both married and unmarried, have left the city under Dionysus's spell and are engaged in unspecified Bacchic rituals away on a mountainside, absent male companionship or supervision. Pentheus is enraged at this disruption, perceiving it as a usurpation of his authority and an overturning of the proper male rule over women. Pentheus vows to imprison the stranger and punish the women for their transgressions, making repeated attempts to capture them both. These attempts meet perpetual frustration, however, and culminate in his own, gruesome death at the hands of his mother and the other women on the mountainside.

The Bacchae is a play about boundaries, and the pleasure and agony of their transgression. The dividing lines between sanity and madness, desire and control, male and female, local and foreign are perpetually crossed and run amok throughout the dialogue and action of this play. Dionysus himself epitomizes these transgressions; in Greek mythology he is variously considered the god of intoxication and madness, fertility and growth, masks, and role reversal. The material symbols of his divinity are similarly multivalent: the phallic, ivy-covered thyrsus coupled with a

round wine cup symbolize the fusion of male and female, intoxication and sexuality, in a single divine personage. In this play in particular, Dionysus is presented as an even greater amalgam of opposites than in his standard mythology. As noted already, he is both foreign and local: a member of Thebes's ruling family, Dionysus is nevertheless presented as an outsider, and he and his followers (the Bacchantes of the chorus) are explicitly treated as non-Greeks.¹³ Also particular to this play is Dionysus's presentation as both human and divine (although significantly, only Pentheus is truly blind to this divine status). Most importantly of all, Dionysus is presented as both masculine and feminine. Although clearly a powerful man with an inexplicable ability to enchant the city's women en masse, he is nevertheless of notably feminine appearance. As Pentheus observes repeatedly, Dionysus's hair falls in golden, feminine curls; his hands are smooth, his cheek pale. Dionysus's power, in other words, lacks any physical referent – his smooth hands suggest leisure, his pale cheek an indoor existence; moreover, the women's devotion to him appears (to all but Pentheus, that is) to be oddly asexual.

The entrance of this contradictory character and cult into the city constitutes an enormous problem for Pentheus, who is both drawn to and yet aggravated by this mysterious stranger. Blind to the god's divinity, Pentheus is convinced that, under his influence, Thebes's women are off drinking and having sex with strange men on the mountainside, a telling fantasy he is unable to relinquish despite repeated eyewitness testimony to the contrary. Indeed, for Pentheus violations of the sexual order are violations of the political order, and vice versa. He holds Dionysus's gender ambiguity responsible for his disruption of city life, and believes the women's abandonment of male authority has necessarily resulted in their abandonment of sexual propriety. Pentheus sees these transgressions as violations the city's order and Greek sanity, each of which he believes he is attempting to restore in his demands that Dionysus be imprisoned and the women punished.

As is all too apparent from the play's dialogue, however, it is Pentheus who finds Dionysus's femininity compelling, just as it is Pentheus who wants to engage in a wild sexual orgy with Thebes's women on a mountainside. Holding Dionysus and the women responsible for these desires through unwitting projection, Pentheus seeks to punish the objects of his desire in a misguided attempt at controlling himself. This process of projection and punishment is clearly played out in Pentheus's first attempt at imprisoning Dionysus: as he wrestles the god, Dionysus escapes and substitutes a bull in his place, watching quietly from off to the side as Pentheus struggles with this animal that is simultaneously a symbol of Dionysus and of male virility more generally. While the metaphor is obvious enough, Pentheus reveals his ignorance of this struggle when, upon successfully tying up the bull, he is surprised to find that he has not bound the stranger at all but a barnyard animal. Pentheus's oblivion reveals to the audience what he himself cannot see: his attraction to the powerful, feminine Dionysus, his interest in his own sexual gratification, and the overwhelming threat these desires pose to his sanity and self-control.

By contrast with Pentheus, Dionysus is knowing and utterly self-possessed. He knows who he is – a god, son of Zeus; Greek, son of Semelē. He knows what he wants – that Thebes recognize his paternal divinity and maternal locality. And he knows his own power – that he is capable of bringing his desires to fruition. He even knows about Pentheus – about his dual desire for both the “stranger” and for the Bacchantes. By contrast, Pentheus is a novice in the realms of both power and desire: he is new to the throne, ignorant of his desires, blind to the nature of the supposed threat facing his city, and incapable of enforcing his decrees against it. This impotence is manifested throughout the play in Pentheus's repeated, excessive, and unsuccessful drives to restore the sexual-political order, and demarcated as insanity in its denial of the forces of divinity and fate. The lesson Pentheus learns only too late from Dionysus is that power comes not through self-control, but rather from submission – to both the god and to desire. Indeed, in The Bacchae, self-control is

equated with madness, while indulgence and self-surrender are characterized as sanity. Pentheus's ignorant insistence on control – his inability to yield to desire and the boundary transgression his desires entail – are what lead to his destruction.

Thus it is Dionysus who is in complete control of the play's action from beginning to end. Indeed, in his divinization of sexuality and intoxication, Dionysus is the real ruler of Thebes. His subtle yet undeniable power is made clear in the most delicious of the multiple shared scenes between Pentheus and Dionysus, a scene that is framed by the failure of Pentheus's armies to apprehend the women on the mountainside. Just as the god evaded capture through a supernatural self-transformation, so too have the women been transformed in their secret Dionysian rituals, becoming superabundantly fertile and uncannily strong, capable of repelling Thebes's armies with their bare hands. Less deceived about the nature of this defeat, Pentheus rages against the unnatural and shameful routing of male authority, declaring his intention to murder the Bacchantes. It is precisely at this crucial moment of exposed masculine vulnerability that Dionysus steps in and knowingly takes control of the situation, inquiring of Pentheus: Would you like to see the Bacchantes? Naming Pentheus's desire for him, Dionysus offers a way for Pentheus to recover control while simultaneously indulging himself, knowing full well that Pentheus will say yes even though it comes at a seemingly dreadful price: Pentheus must disguise himself as a woman, since Dionysus's rituals are for women only. Pentheus hesitates repeatedly at these terms, reticent to degrade himself to the status of a woman. Yet Dionysus gently and seductively persuades Pentheus of the propriety of putting on women's clothing; indeed, it becomes clear that the pleasures of being dressed and made up by Dionysus more than overcome Pentheus's anxieties, who comes to relish his feminine attire and self-presentation, practicing his walk and Bacchic dance for Dionysus, vainly adjusting his dress and wig. It is in these deliciously (homo)erotic and genderfuck moments of the play that Pentheus is most calm and at ease – Dionysus remarks multiple times on his “sanity” – and

that Pentheus is most able to see Dionysus, noting to the stranger that now he looks like a bull. While Pentheus is still blind to the god's divinity, he is beginning to recognize the desire that had thus far been hidden from him.

Dressed as a woman, Pentheus demands that Dionysus lead him to the mountainside through the main streets of the city, highlighting not simply his pleasure in feminine attire, but also the development of a new desire: to be seen by others (as taking pleasure) in this attire.¹⁴ Yet just as parading himself through the city in drag renders Pentheus vulnerable to citizens' scrutiny, so too does his indulgence of this desire under Dionysus's wing render him vulnerable to the god's whims, a foreboding situation for one who has thus far (if unwittingly) denied the god's divinity. When they arrive at the mountainside, the two watch from afar, remaining hidden in order to avoid the mortal fate of Pentheus's armies. But Pentheus is dissatisfied with the partiality of his view and, perhaps becoming accustomed to speaking his desires, demands to see everything that is happening. Only too eager to indulge him, Dionysus reaches for the tip of a tall fir tree and bends it down against the earth, allowing Pentheus to climb onto the topmost branches. As Dionysus releases the tree and it springs upright, Pentheus is brought out of hiding and lifted conspicuously into view. The result of this coming-out maneuver, of course, is that in his overwhelming desire to see, Pentheus himself has become all too apparent. The obviously phallic imagery of the erect fir tree rendering Pentheus singularly visible symbolizes his troubled overall relationship with desire: incapable of understanding or hiding it, his misguided attempts at controlling it only makes its specifics that much more obvious to everyone else, leaving him even more beholden to its whims, and more vulnerable to manipulation and attack by its objects.

And this is precisely what happens, for in this moment Dionysus has his revenge. Announcing to the women that he has brought them the source of their misery and violent attack, the women dislodge Pentheus from his perch, uprooting the tree at its base in a symbolic castration

that effectively destroys the male desire and power the erect phallus represents. Pentheus tumbles to the ground, and first at the scene of his fall is his mother, Agavē. There is a moment of deep pathos as a terrified Pentheus entreats her to recognize him as her son, begging her forgiveness for his mistakes. But, mimicking the city's denial of Dionysus's filial ties to Thebes, Agavē too fails to recognize her own offspring. Under the spell of Dionysian intoxication, she instead responds by bracing her foot against Pentheus's ribcage, taking his wrist in both hands, and ripping off his arm at the shoulder socket. The other women join in, ripping Pentheus's body to shreds, some of them playing catch with hunks of his flesh. Here, perhaps, is the orgy of which Pentheus dreamed, though he never imagined he would participate in this way. Yet this end is a fitting one for poor Pentheus, who in his attempt to maintain order and restore categorical distinctions, is torn apart by his own transgressive desires. Refusing to accept the muddying of sexual difference or the undercutting of gender hierarchy Dionysus introduces into Thebes, in adamant denial that these transgressions captivate and excite him, Pentheus is undone by his attempt to maintain a decaying sexual-political order.

However we might describe Pentheus's relationship to Dionysus in the Bacchae, it is clearly not one of discipleship. Indeed, Pentheus is the anti-disciple: he rejects the god, his authority, and his teachings. While no mere mortal can refuse a god their worshipful due in Greek tragedy and emerge unscathed, nevertheless Pentheus's flouting of Dionysus's divinity involves more than mere impiety. For what Pentheus refuses to submit to is not simply Dionysus, but everything Dionysus stands for, whether projected or actual: sexual gratification, lack of control and inhibition, transgression of boundaries, reversal of gender hierarchy, femininity, fertility, and female power. Indeed, virtually all of these are fused in the behavior of Dionysus's female followers:¹⁵ superabundantly nurturing, their power lies in their distinctly womanly capacities of child-bearing and -nurture. They are able to draw water, wine, milk, and honey from the earth merely by

scrabbling their fingers against its surface; women young and old suckle wild animals at their swollen breasts. In these heightened manifestations of maternity, the Bacchae demonstrate their self-sufficiency—they are able to draw sustenance from the earth itself, and are procreatively independent from men in their species-violating maternity. Indeed, what Dionysian worship offers Thebes's women is an experience of not being for men in any way – whether as mothers, subordinates, or sexual objects – an unheard-of experience for the oikos-cloistered women of 4th century Greece. It is only when Pentheus and his armies attempt to re-assert their status and dominant position that the women become violent.¹⁶ Perhaps, then, the women are not so deluded after all in their perception of Pentheus as a “wild animal” who, as Dionysus rightly proclaims, is bent on their misery and violent attack.

The murder of Pentheus can thus be read as the women's destruction of a source and symbol of their subordination and control. For in The Bacchae, femininity and maternity are the sources of power – manhood and military might prove no match for the soft, smooth stranger and his gang of girls. This divine overturning of sexual hierarchy suggests the divinity and power of women and mothers, a recognition refused Dionysus in Thebes's refusal to acknowledge the god as their own.¹⁷ Pentheus's refusal to subordinate himself to Dionysus – which is really his refusal to recognize and accept his own attraction to the feminine – is what leads to his destruction. Fearful not only of women and femininity per se, but of the erosion of gender hierarchy the Dionysian blurring of boundaries entails, Pentheus clamps down on his desires and makes war on their objects. This insanity is Pentheus's divine disrespect; his conflation of the foreign with barbaric practices of religion and sexuality make clear his investment in the patriarchal Greek sexual order. His failure to recognize the divinity/power of women, sexuality, and the Other are what lead to his undoing.¹⁸

III. The Last Disciple of Dionysus: Nietzsche

This is a reading of Pentheus that Nietzsche might sanction. Not only does Nietzsche encourage us to adopt a depth-psychological approach to reading texts, as discussed above. But he also urges a similar approach in reading laws and legal codes which, as bodies of prohibitions, are better understood not as exemplifying the “national character” so much as that which a people find unusual or strange:

What laws betray.—It is a serious mistake to study the penal code of a people as if it gave expression to the national character. The laws do not betray what a people are but rather what seems to them foreign, strange, uncanny, outlandish. The laws refer to the exceptions to the morality of mores, and the severest penalties are provided for what accords with the mores of a neighboring people (Gay §43).

We see this principle performed in Pentheus’s anguished prohibitions throughout The Bacchae. Rather than articulating the traits of Thebans or Greeks, Pentheus’s commands seek rather to outlaw the religious and sexual practices of those deemed “other” in this play, non-Greeks. Of course, as Nietzsche surely knows, the distinction between foreign and familiar is not so cut and dry – exceptions to “the morality of mores” necessarily reveal the mores of one’s own locale as much as another’s, for violations become legible only against the backdrop of an intact if unspoken set of prohibitions (which is why Pentheus’s upset reveals more about him than about either Dionysus or non-Greeks). Nevertheless, Pentheus’s own beliefs regarding gender and sexual appropriateness are never a subject of his own consideration in The Bacchae; rather, he re-iterates over and over again the transgressive status of Dionysus’s divinity and the behavior of the Bacchantes. Pentheus’s penal code can thus be read as revealing that which he finds to be essentially non-Greek: the divine power of women/the feminine, sexual gratification, and gender ambiguity.

In this same aphorism, Nietzsche cites the introduction of the cult of Dionysus into Roman culture as an example of this kind of penal hostility to foreign mores:

Thus the old Romans had the notion that a woman could incur only two mortal sins: adultery and—drinking wine. Old Cato thought that kissing among relatives had been made

part of *mores* only to keep women under control in this matter. The meaning of the kiss? Does she smell of wine? Women caught with wine were actually put to death—certainly not only because women under the influence of alcohol sometimes lose the ability to say No. What the Romans feared above all was the orgiastic and Dionysian cult that afflicted the women of Southern Europe from time to time when wine was still new in Europe: this struck the Romans as a monstrous foreign invasion that overturned the basis of the European sensibility; it seemed treason against Rome, the incorporation of what was foreign (Gay §43; Fröhliche KS 3, pp. 409-410).

Nietzsche says that for the Romans, women caught with wine were put to death at least minimally because the accompanying loss of inhibition might lead to intercourse (i.e., the inability of women to “say No”). But Nietzsche says the Romans were “above all” [vor Allem] afraid of a more ominous possibility: the orgiastic cult of Dionysus that afflicted the women of southern Europe in tandem with alcoholic intoxication. This practice of uninhibited, uncontrolled, and sexually active women offended European sensibilities, and seemed a “monstrous foreign invasion” [eine ungeheuerliche Ausländerei].

This fear of foreignness and its association with “orgies” and women’s sexual uninhibitedness echoes Pentheus’s reaction to Dionysus in The Bacchae. As we know from this play, women stung by Dionysian frenzy are threatening not simply because of their (alleged) sexual activity, but also because they are unpredictably and inexplicably homicidal. Indeed, overlooking the important possibility that Bacchic violence is a defensive reaction to the re-imposition of male domination, what Nietzsche instead learns from this play is that the Bacchant’s murderousness and supposed sexuality are intimately related, for death befalls Pentheus at precisely the moment he approaches the Bacchant in order to satisfy his desire for them. The closer he gets, the more conspicuous he and his desires become; and, rather than being allowed entrance and thus (he hopes) gratification, it is only upon his advance that Pentheus is revealed as an intruder and slaughtered like a wild animal. Nietzsche identifies himself – and the male predicament in general – with Pentheus and Pentheus’s position. Rather than seeing women as actors in their own right, Nietzsche reads

this drama as delineating the clear causal connection between male desire for and pursuit of women, and a gruesome demise at their hands.

We know that Nietzsche learned this lesson in particular because he seamlessly adopts this paranoid and misogynist view of women, sexuality, the bounds of seduction, and the (im)possibility of intercourse to frame his metaphorical representation of “truth” as a woman. Just like the “dogmatists” of modern philosophy whom Nietzsche ridicules, Pentheus too is a hapless suitor who unknowingly and unsuccessfully attempts to woo woman. Like these dogmatists, who disguise their pursuit of truth with names like “disinterestedness” and “objectivity,” Pentheus too is blind to his own desire, preferring to couch his pursuit of women and Dionysus in the “neutral” language of authority, custom, sanity, and law. Pentheus’s insistence on a restoration of the conventional sexual-political order is his will to truth – an insistence on a “natural” order that is decaying and no longer viable. And, just as the modern will to truth culminates in nihilism and self-destruction, so too is Pentheus undone by his pursuit and desire – in his attempt at consummation/control, he is dismembered. This narrative trajectory defines the modern pursuit of truth for Nietzsche and, dramatized as a fruitless sexual seduction of an infertile and dangerous woman, also clearly defines for him gender relations and the (im)possibility of sexual intercourse. If we recall Nietzsche’s assertion that a philosopher’s instinctual ordering is made manifest in the morality he explicitly declares there, then it is fair to suggest that Nietzsche himself draws our attention to his usage of a gendered and sexualized metaphor to capture his critique of the decadence of Western civilization. While Nietzsche’s supposition that truth is a woman can certainly be read as “merely” a philosophical attack on Western epistemology and metaphysics, it is just as clearly and compellingly a kind of revelation of his views of women and sexuality, so much so that I think it is impossible either to separate these out, or to specify one of them as having come “first.”¹⁹ It seems instead that Nietzsche’s epistemology and sexology arise together and function as autobiography, the metaphor

of woman as truth acting as a screen upon which Nietzsche projects his own sexual dramatis personae. It is, like all (his) philosophy, rooted in deep idiosyncrasy, “a desire of the heart that has been filtered and made abstract” (Beyond §5), “an audacious generalization of very narrow, very personal, very human, all too human facts” (Beyond P).

Indeed, Nietzsche’s famous opening query to the Preface of *Beyond Good and Evil* – “Supposing truth is a woman—what?” [Vorausgesetzt, dass die Wahrheit ein Weib ist —, wie? (Jenseits KS 5, p. 11)] is, like so many of Nietzsche’s questions, more than mere supposition, for Nietzsche presents truth as a woman consistently throughout all his published writings (if most prominently in the 1886 works). In this preface, Nietzsche suggests a number of conclusions that follow from such a hypothesis, including among them the possibility that “the gruesome seriousness” [schauerliche Ernst] and “clumsy obtrusiveness” [linkische Zudringlichkeit] with which modern philosophers have “approached truth so far have been awkward and inappropriate methods for winning over a wench” [mit der sie bisher auf die Wahrheit zuzugehen pflegten, ungeschickte und unschickliche Mittel waren, um gerade ein Frauenzimmer für sich einzunehmen; Jenseits KS 5, p. 11; translation emended]. The problem with these philosophers’ approach is that it is dogmatic – unwavering in its pursuit of truth and unyielding in its belief in her existence. This dogmatism is perhaps disarming – Nietzsche calls it a “noble childishness” [edle Kinderei] – and its clumsiness is the result of these wooers’ inexperience (Beyond P). But in practice it means that these seducers of truth are stupid and ignorant, naïvely unaware of the possibility that truth might not exist, or that she may be uninterested in his seductions, or that she may be unavailable for such activity by her very definition. Indeed, they are even unaware of their own desire for her, couching their exceedingly sexual pursuit of her in asexual terms. As Zarathustra explains, modern philosophers are “lechers,” pursuers of truth who look at her with “emasculated leers” (Thus II:15 “On Immaculate Perception”). Unable to resist her and yet unable to conquer her, these dogmatists fail

to realize that not only is “the naked truth, which is surely not hard to come by, that the ‘disinterested’ action is an exceedingly interesting and interested action” (Beyond §220), but also that it is not possible to consummate one’s desire for truth—there is no real “intercourse” with her, no such thing as “objectivity”: “Never yet has truth hung on the arm of the unconditional” (Thus I:12 “On the Flies in the Marketplace”). Seducing themselves to the chase with claims of their own “disinterestedness,” denying the lasciviousness at the root of their courtship, and blind to the impossibility of ever satisfying their desire, modern philosophers are dogmatists insofar as they are ignorant of their own ignorance—they consistently strike out, yet believe every time that they have hit a home run. Thus “Are there not grounds for the suspicion that all philosophers, insofar as they were dogmatists, have been very inexpert about women?” (Beyond P).

Although this metaphor is overwhelmingly sexual, it is clear from what Nietzsche says about truth that she is *never* fully seduced, never “violated” in this way. One reason for this is the “emasculatation” of these philosophers – they’re just not man enough. But there is the additional difficulty that truth is not simply a woman, but in fact the female genitalia, an area of the female body Nietzsche finds particularly repugnant and terrifying. In his most mischievous statement of this proposition, Nietzsche invokes the female body as a metaphor for truth and the female genitals in particular as a metaphor for its horror and vacuity:

Today we consider it a matter of decency not to wish to see everything naked, or to be present at everything, or to understand and “know” everything. “Is it true that God is present everywhere?” a little girl asked her mother; “I think that’s indecent”—a hint for philosophers! One should have more respect for the bashfulness with which nature has hidden behind riddles and iridescent uncertainties. Perhaps truth is a woman who has reasons for not letting us see her reasons? Perhaps her name is—to speak Greek—Baubô? (Gay P§4).²⁰

Nietzsche’s metaphors here are a different way of arguing for one of his most fundamental claims about modernity – describing truth as the feminine genitals is another way of saying that the will to truth ultimately culminates in nihilism: “We no longer believe that truth remains truth when the

veils are withdrawn” (Gay P§4). For on this reading, truth is ultimately a void, a nothingness, a nether region to which even the most adventuresome warrior ought not go: “Not to mention the ‘thing-in-itself,’ the horrendum pudendum of the metaphysicians!” (Twilight 7, §3).²¹

Woman is an apt metaphor for (Nietzsche’s view of) truth because of the contradictory feelings of both desire and repugnance she inspires (in him): she is simultaneously the object of pursuit, and that which her pursuers fear getting too close to. She is the reason Nietzsche gives for divesting modernity of the will to truth, for remaining “superficial—out of profundity” (Gay P§4). We recognize the obvious parallels with Pentheus here, whose desire to know firsthand what is happening on the mountainside is the “emasculated leer” of the dogmatist. Full of unexamined desire for and ignorance of women, Pentheus demands the restoration of sexual-political order through a knowledge and control that are impossible. His insistence on law, order, and sanity are unrecognizable to him as the deeply “interested” passion of sexual desire, and his belief that spying on the women while dressed in drag will unite him with them marks his poor understanding of women and of the (im)possibility of intercourse with them. Finally, it is precisely when he attempts to see everything and satisfy his desire that he is destroyed. His violation of boundaries that should not – and in Nietzsche’s views, cannot – be violated leads to his own annihilation.

At this point, however, Nietzsche’s and Pentheus’s stories diverge. For Nietzsche does not adopt the perspective of The Bacchae uncritically; he has learned a thing or two from Pentheus’s demise. And what he has learned is that, despite the appropriateness of denying one’s sexual desire for women, it is nevertheless foolish to refuse divine recognition of the god. That is why Nietzsche, unlike Pentheus, is an avowed disciple of Dionysus. Unlike Pentheus, Nietzsche is able to recognize the destruction portended by women’s seductive beauty, able (so he says) to control his desires and resist women entirely. But this is because Nietzsche possesses a superior and insightful knowledge of the female sex, acquired through his devotion to Dionysus. As Nietzsche explains,

May I here venture the surmise that I know women? That is part of my Dionysian dowry [Mitgift]. Who knows? Perhaps I am the first psychologist of the eternally feminine. They all love me—an old story—not counting abortive [verunglückten] females, the “emancipated” who lack the stuff for children.—Fortunately, I am not willing to be torn to pieces: the perfect woman tears to pieces when she loves.—I know these charming maenads.—Ah, what a dangerous, creeping, subterranean little beast of prey she is! And yet so agreeable!—A little woman who pursues her revenge would run over fate itself (Ecce “Books” §5; Ecce KS 6, p. 305).

In this passage Nietzsche makes clear that his knowledge of women is not sexual, but psychological. Despite the fact that they “all love” him (excluding those who refuse motherhood), Nietzsche does not fall prey to their seductions, for he knows that their love entails his destruction (since “the perfect woman tears to pieces when she loves”). Nietzsche’s sexual withholding from women, then, is his resistance to being torn to pieces. In a clear allusion to Pentheus, and immediately preceding his suggestion that truth is the female genitals in the preface to The Gay Science, Nietzsche laments that “the will to truth, to ‘truth at any price,’ this youthful madness in the love of truth, have lost their charm for us: for that we are too experienced, too serious, too merry, too burned, too profound. We no longer believe that truth remains truth when the veils are withdrawn; we have lived too much to believe this” (Gay P§4).

Backing away from the “paroxysms of intoxication” that define the Dionysian in The Birth of Tragedy, the mark of Nietzsche’s knowledge and virtue is the ability to withhold, to stand firm against the temptation of those “maenads” which, if possessed, would threaten his very destruction. They may appear peaceful, nurturing, even maternal, but when their privacy is punctured they become homicidal; similarly, when truth’s skirt or veil is lifted and her privacy penetrated, the nothingness of her infinite void is revealed, overcoming man with the horror of nihilism.²² Indeed, it seems intercourse itself constitutes this self-destruction, which may be why Nietzsche says that “Man is a coward, confronted with the Eternal-Feminine” (Case §3). As he explains, “[H]er nature, which is more ‘natural’ than man’s,” is “the genuine, cunning suppleness of a beast of prey, the tiger’s claw under the glove;” faced with “the naïveté of her egoism, her uneducability and inner

wildness, the incomprehensibility, scope, and movement of her desires and virtues—,” man is as helpless before her as he is with tragedy, each of which “tears to pieces as it enchants” (Beyond §239). Woman, then, figured as (and not only when figured as) truth, is death, a true femme fatale, “a touch of morbidezza in fair flesh” (Genealogy III:1).

Of course, what Nietzsche has conspicuously failed to learn from either “Dionysus” or The Bacchae is that the Bacchantes are not sexually active, either with men or one another (that the latter never occurs to either Nietzsche or Pentheus demonstrates the utter solipsism of their beliefs about female sexuality). For both men, wanton Bacchic promiscuity is a male fantasy of women’s ungoverned community with one another. While this fantasy is a transparent desire for their own sexual gratification, it also reveals their fear of the feminine more generally. In Pentheus’s case, he fears the unknown potentialities of female and maternal power, perhaps anxious about the degree to which he himself is both defined by femininity (remember his pleasure in women’s apparel) and also attracted to it, whether in women or men. Nietzsche’s fear of the feminine appears to be the less complex if much more buried fear of actual intercourse, that which he most desires and yet insistently refuses. For both, it is their overall fear of intimate connection with and attachment to women that defines their defensiveness and hostility toward them.

These fears of the feminine are rooted in an overall fear of the erosion of gender hierarchy. For Pentheus, the ascension of the feminine in either a male divinity or through the unsupervised maternal power of Thebes’s women is terrifying not simply because women or maternity per se are terrifying, but because women and maternity are per se subordinate, and their ascension represents an overturning of a hierarchy that has been infused with naturalism. Indeed, it is only on the basis of this hierarchal naturalization and valuation that (male) femininity or female maternity could be read as per se uncanny. The same is true for Nietzsche. He is so concerned to leave women’s bodies covered and untouched because he is afraid of the power over men such a sight or

experience might unleash, generating an uncanny and terrifying reversal of the natural sexual order. In suggesting as much, Nietzsche resuscitates that sacred cow of patriarchal thought that women's power resides in their ability to sexually attract and "hold" a man. But Nietzsche's revulsion has nothing to do with the intrinsic nature of either women or of the female body (of which there is none anyway); rather, these anxieties reveal Nietzsche's own investment in women's sexual subordination and his fear of their terrible ascendance.

IV. Queer Fear of the Feminine

Nietzsche's repeated demand for masculine superficiality suggests just how threatened he felt by women, and by his sexual desire for them, for "Is it not better to fall into the hands of a murderer than into the dreams of a woman in heat?" (Thus I:13 "On Chastity"). Both powerfully drawn to them and yet horribly afraid (of women? of women revealed? of his uncontrollable desire for women? of his uncontrollable desire for women revealed?), Nietzsche took solace in his belief in the loathsomeness of the female body. Indeed, the very suggestion that the one place a philosopher should not go is the female genitals is precisely the kind of content-less bragging in which a dogmatist might engage. Taking up the position as knower and gatekeeper of the most hidden truth of the universe, Nietzsche's warnings to others forbidding entrance to this Bermuda triangle suggest Nietzsche's own prickliness and ignorance of that which he is safeguarding from intrusion.

Now, as noted already, Nietzsche does not think he is ignorant of women; rather, he insists his knowledge of women is his "Dionysian dowry [Mitgift]." I left unremarked an obvious quirk of this self-description; namely, that Nietzsche is presenting himself as Dionysus's daughter in his use of the word "dowry." Moreover, this passage from Ecce Homo culminates a series of references to Dionysus in Nietzsche's 1886 writings in which he associates himself explicitly with the women Bacchantes, taking on the guise of femininity in an unwitting parallel with Pentheus's feminine

performance. It is perhaps well-known that Nietzsche declares himself to be a disciple of Dionysus; rarely noted is the fact that Nietzsche always either equates this discipleship with or transforms it into his status as an “initiate” of this god. The first of these moments, which begin only in 1886, occurs in Nietzsche’s newly-appended preface to The Birth of Tragedy. Here Nietzsche reads the Birth as having given expression to “a strange voice, the disciple of a still ‘unknown God’”. Yet this disciple is also an initiate, for the “soul” that speaks in the Birth “was something like a mystical, almost maenadic soul that stammered with difficulty, a feat of the will, as in a strange tongue, almost undecided whether it should communicate or conceal itself” (Birth P§3; emphasis added).

Nietzsche’s use of “maenadic” reminds us that initiates of Dionysus are women; Nietzsche’s use of it to describe the “soul” that is “speaking” in the Birth makes clear an at least nominal self-affiliation with women on Nietzsche’s part. Elsewhere Nietzsche is more direct, referring to himself as an initiate of Dionysus unqualifiedly.²³ It seems, then, that although Nietzsche (like Pentheus) has reservations about “being” a woman (admitting an unsureness in the 1886 Preface about whether to speak and reveal himself, or remain quiet and hidden), nevertheless this “maenadic soul” does indeed choose to speak – its words are The Birth of Tragedy itself – and in the self-criticism Nietzsche argues that this voice should have gone yet further, embracing fully its maenadic quality: “It should have sung, this ‘new soul’—and not spoken!”

In this same year (1886) Nietzsche will go on to call The Birth of Tragedy his “firstborn,” which he says he offered as a “sacrifice” to Dionysus (Beyond §295). This maternal relationship with one’s work is a recurrent theme in Nietzsche, and offering up his “firstborn” in this sense to the god suggests his profound obedience and submission to this divine authority. Since the time of this sacrifice, Nietzsche says that he has “learned much, all too much, more about the philosophy of this god, and, as I have said, from mouth to mouth—I, the last disciple and initiate of the god Dionysus.” But this pregnancy and this offering will prove to foreshadow a much more significant

transformation: that of Nietzsche into Dionysus himself. In this much-overlooked passage wherein Nietzsche discusses both his initiate status and the god, Nietzsche offers a long and evasive description of a mysterious personage (a stranger?), whose attributes include a mastery in the feminine knowledge of “how to seem.” Nietzsche then interrupts himself, almost as if coming out of a trance, and coyly asks the reader, in a deliberate attempt at seduction, if “I might begin at long last to offer you, my friends, a few tastes of this philosophy, insofar as this is permitted to me?” Now taking on the role of Dionysus (“Would you like to see the Bacchants?”), Nietzsche here attempts a seduction of the reader’s desire akin to that of Dionysus’s control over Pentheus. And the reader must come in close, for what Nietzsche reveals of (his knowledge of) the god can only be spoken “In an undertone, as is fair, for it concerns much that is secret, new, strange, odd, uncanny.” Nietzsche’s revelation of Dionysus in a whisper, from off to the side, only superficially claims to seek to avoid notice, for as with Dionysus’s concealment of Pentheus, we know that discovery is the point of this seclusion.

What Nietzsche actually says about Dionysus is just as telling as the way in which he says it.

He continues,

Even that Dionysus is a philosopher, and that gods, too, thus do philosophy, seems to me to be a novelty that is far from innocuous and might arouse suspicion precisely among philosophers. Among you, my friends, it will not seem so offensive, unless it comes too late and not at the right moment; for today, as I have been told, you no longer like to believe in God and gods. Perhaps I shall also have to carry frankness further in my tale than will always be pleasing to the strict habits of your ears? Certainly the god in question went further, very much further, in dialogues of this sort and was always many steps ahead of me.

Indeed, if it were permitted to follow human custom in according to him many solemn pomp-and-virtue names, I should have to give abundant praise to his explorer and discoverer courage, his daring honesty, truthfulness, and love of wisdom. But such a god has no use whatever for all such venerable junk and pomp. “Keep that,” he would say, “for yourself and your likes and whoever else has need of it! I—have no reason for covering my nakedness.”

One guesses: this type of deity and philosopher is perhaps lacking in shame?

Unlike the men of modernity, in other words, Dionysus is no dogmatist. Rather, he is a

“philosopher” – a lover of wisdom who lacks the clumsiness that defines the modern pursuit of

truth for Nietzsche. His honesty and frankness indicate he is aware of his desire and need not disguise it as “objectivity”; his daring and discoverer courage suggest he is capable of consummation, able to approach truth’s darkest depths without being either repulsed or destroyed. Moreover, in his consummation he remains both whole and securely alone. Fusing the qualities of male pursuer and female pursued into a single divinity, Dionysus reveals and is revealed as both truth and the pursuer of truth, a unity of opposites that is neither an intercourse nor an obliteration. And while Dionysus possesses/is the truth, he is nevertheless shameless (unlike woman, who “has much reason for shame” [Beyond §232]). As Nietzsche says of the Dionysian tragic artist, he is “the one who says Yes to everything questionable, even to the terrible” (Twilight 4, §6). He is both pursuer and pursued, saying Yes to his own question, embracing even the terribleness of nihilism and making it his own.

What is the origin of this uncanny ability to withstand the temptation of truth while simultaneously choosing, sanctioning, and affirming the horror of her that threatens man with his own dismemberment? On this subject, Nietzsche is clear: Dionysus—and the Dionysian man and artist—possesses two distinct characteristics that allow him to undertake such a task. First is his ability to endure suffering, which Nietzsche characterizes as “hardness.” Above all, Nietzsche insists that the master/artist/creator is “hard” [hart] in his steely resistance to pity and pain, and this obvious double-entendre makes clear the exclusively male character of creativity: “The imperative, ‘become hard!’ the most fundamental certainty that all creators are hard, is the distinctive mark of a Dionysian nature” (Ecce “Thus” §8; Ecce KS 6, p. 349). Indeed, not only does the entreaty to “become hard” pervade Nietzsche’s texts,²⁴ but he is never at a loss for metaphorical penis-surrogates to indicate the superabundant potency of this male creator, whether it be his sword, his hammer, his whip, or his stick. The fusion of maleness with power in these phallic symbols draws women to him (as Nietzsche explains, both good and bad women want a stick [Beyond §147]), and

is so apparent that even other men can recognize it (as the magician admits to Zarathustra, “you are hard, wise Zarathustra,” “your stick forces” the “truth out of me” [Thus IV:5(2) (“The Magician”)]).²⁵

The second characteristic that allows Dionysus and the Dionysian man to endure and even embrace nihilism is his capacity to overcome suffering, which Nietzsche metaphorizes as pregnancy and self-birth. As Nietzsche explains, “the desire for destruction, change, and becoming” that is “an expression of an overflowing energy that is pregnant with a future” is Dionysian (Gay §370). Indeed, Nietzsche quite often appropriates childbirth itself for the male gender, or at least the trope of childbirth as standing in for the travails of the philosopher: “To be the child who is newly born, the creator must also want to be the mother who gives birth and the pangs of the birth-giver” (Thus II:2 “On Self-Overcoming”).²⁶ This pregnancy, however, is not preceded by any kind of sexual union or fertilization. As he says,

As for the “chastity” of philosophers, finally, this type of spirit clearly has its fruitfulness somewhere else than in children; perhaps it also has the survival of its name elsewhere, its little immortality... There is nothing in this of chastity from any kind of ascetic scruple or hatred of the senses, just as it is not chastity when an athlete or jockey abstains from women: it is rather the will of their dominating instinct, at least during their periods of great pregnancy. Every artist knows what a harmful effect intercourse has in states of great spiritual tension and preparation; those with the greatest power and the surest instincts do not need to learn this by experience, by unfortunate experience—their “maternal” instinct ruthlessly disposes of all other stores and accumulations of energy, of animal vigor, for the benefit of the evolving work: the greater energy then uses up the lesser (Genealogy III:8).²⁷

Nietzsche thus equates masculine celibacy with immaculate philosophical conception, whereby men are both the “hard” wooers of truth, and the “pregnant” creators who give birth to new truths.

The philosopher-artist is thus not only his own sexual partner, but also his own mother:

That I may one day be ready and ripe in the great noon: as ready and ripe as glowing bronze, clouds pregnant with lightning, and swelling mild udders—ready for myself and my most hidden will: a bow lusting for its arrow, an arrow lusting for its star—a star ready and ripe in its noon, glowing, pierced, enraptured by annihilating sun arrows—a sun itself and an inexorable solar will, ready to annihilate in victory! (Thus III:12[30] “On Old and New Tablets”).²⁸

Indeed, Nietzsche claims this “spiritual” self-birth as both a uniquely masculine ability, and as higher, better, prouder, and stronger than the feminine physiological capacity. Spiritual pregnancy is beyond woman’s capacities; her only hope is that she may give birth to the overman (Thus I:18 “On Little Old and Young Women”).

Like Pentheus, who takes on women’s apparel as part of a project to eventually return women to their subordination in both the oikos and the polis, Nietzsche’s fear of women’s sexual power leads him to appropriate what he views as their only unique capability – pregnancy and birthing – for men, using procreation as a metaphor for celibate male creative activity, eliminating women themselves from the process of (pro)creation altogether. Although in Beyond Good and Evil Nietzsche presents Dionysus as expressing at least conditional love for Ariadne (“Thus he once said: ‘Under certain circumstances I love what is human’—and with this he alluded to Ariadne who was present” [Beyond §295]), by 1888 Dionysus has transformed into a divinity who does not even voice occasional desire for women, and treats Ariadne with a mocking that is also clearly a contempt:

“O Dionysus, divine one, why do you pull me by my ears?” Ariadne once asked her philosophic lover during one of those famous dialogues on Naxos. “I find a kind of humor in your ears, Ariadne: why are they not even longer?” (Twilight 10, §19)

References to long ears in Nietzsche are allusions to asses – both the specific Jesus-surrogate of the Ass Festival in Thus Spoke Zarathustra, and the unconditional braying and foolishness of all modern idols more generally. In this passage, then, Dionysus dismisses Ariadne by intimating that she is foolish, an ass, unworthy of serious partnership. If we recall from the litany recited during the Ass Festival in Zarathustra that a premiere quality of the ass that it always says yes, we are returned once again to the specter of a woman who has lost her ability to say no, and the mortal danger such a woman poses.²⁹

Ultimately, by Twilight of the Idols, Dionysus comes to stand in for all of procreation—sex, sexuality, pregnancy, and birth itself (Twilight 11, §§4-5).³⁰ Although Ariadne’s perpetual yes-saying may perhaps be due to the expert wooing of Dionysus (or the Dionysian man and artist), these men have (un)fortunately lost interest in her. They would rather take on her sexual and procreative powers for themselves. Nietzsche thus appropriates all for the male—hardness, sexuality, and motherhood, summed up in the euphemism of creation: “You creators, you higher men! One is pregnant only with one’s own child” (Thus IV:13(11) “On the Higher Man”). And this is what Dionysus comes to stand for in Nietzsche’s final works – a male affirmation of destruction, death, and change in the wake of his own, autonomous, creative, self-birthing powers. Women and maternal capacities exist only to be appropriated by men, and can only exist as such. Otherwise, they threaten to destroy men and tear them apart.

And, by the time of the 1888 works, Nietzsche casts himself not simply as a disciple or even an initiate of Dionysus, but has become Dionysus himself (as augured already by his seductive questioning in Beyond Good and Evil). In other words, Nietzsche himself is both woman and fertility; intimating his familiarity with the powers of Dionysus’s lover, Nietzsche exclaims, “Who besides me knows what Ariadne is!” (Ecce “Thus” §8). Necessarily, then, he is also the man of exceedingly short ears: “I am the anti-ass par excellence and thus a world-historical monster” (Ecce “Books” §2). In conflating woman-truth with the braying and always Yes-saying ass-idols of modernity which together threaten the destruction of Western civilization, Nietzsche’s declaration of himself as the anti-ass thus marks him also as the antichrist; as he continues: “I am, in Greek, and not only in Greek, the Antichrist.”

Acknowledging that this conglomerative view of Dionysus is a construction, Nietzsche admits that “Before me this transposition of the Dionysian into a philosophical pathos did not exist:

tragic wisdom was lacking.” Making clear that he has always only ever viewed this construction as a reflection and clear expression of himself alone, Nietzsche says

The affirmation of passing away and destroying, which is the decisive feature of a Dionysian philosophy; saying Yes to opposition and war; becoming, along with a radical repudiation of the concept of being—all this is clearly more closely related to me than anything else thought to date (Ecce “Birth” §3).

Reversing the divine-human relationship between the god and himself, Nietzsche suggests rather that *he* is the god and Dionysus the merely mortal. In fact, Dionysus is Nietzsche’s most important creation. Whereas in 1886 Nietzsche saw himself as offering his work as a sacrifice *to* Dionysus, by 1888 Nietzsche claims Dionysus as an offspring, the by-product of Nietzsche’s own, creative activity:

And herewith I again touch that point from which I once went forth: The Birth of Tragedy was my first revaluation of all values. Herewith I again stand on the soil out of which my intention, my ability grows—I, the last disciple of the philosopher Dionysus—I, the teacher of the eternal recurrence (Twilight 11, §5; Götzen-Dämmerung KS 6, p. 160).

Here Nietzsche suggests that the Birth, his first revaluation, is the necessary soil out of which his “intention” [Wollen] and “ability” [Können] grow – his “firstborn” now providing the soil or ground [Boden] that he himself will fertilize in order to birth the Dionysian wisdom of the eternal recurrence. Thus when Nietzsche asks the all-important question that concludes his autobiography, “Have I been understood?—Dionysus versus the Crucified—” (Ecce “Destiny” §9) he is asking if we have fully understood his claim that he himself is Dionysus – the teacher of eternal recurrence, divinely self-sufficient, creatively attempting to bring about the only world-historical redemption that might save modernity from itself. In conflating himself with Dionysus, Nietzsche has accomplished the task recommended to the higher men, the only activity that might save a decadent modernity: he has successfully birthed himself as a Yes-saying spirit, one who affirms even the terrible sight of destruction, and named himself Dionysus.

This is why Nietzsche is the “last” disciple of Dionysus – he himself has birthed and become a god from his own practice of initiation and worship, eliminating the need for a feminine maternity entirely. Unlike Pentheus, whose death as the last anti-disciple of Dionysus constitutes a morbid reminder of the power of the maternal feminine, Nietzsche’s triumph signifies the ascension of a masculine procreativity that usurps the god’s divine rule. Indeed, Nietzsche symbolizes and embodies all aspects of fertility, pregnancy, and birth, rendering the necessity of “actual” procreation superfluous, and eliminating the need for all future disciples in his insistence on autonomous *self*-birth. I hope it is clear, then, that for Nietzsche the redemption of modernity requires the elimination of women altogether. This is what I have called Nietzsche’s (and Pentheus’s) queer fear of the feminine: anxious in the face of the dissolution of gender hierarchy and clearly defined sexual difference, both men compensate by appropriating the feminine to themselves, allowing it to exist only when already possessed and controlled by men. Although both Pentheus and Nietzsche take on the external trappings of femininity – whether through Pentheus’s drag or Nietzsche’s “metaphorical” appropriation of pregnancy – nevertheless this queer re-deployment of gender does not de-stabilize gender hierarchy. It is undertaken neither in a spirit of undermining of gender binarism, nor in a valorizing appropriation of the power or divinity of femininity. It is rather a transgression that upholds the status quo by taking it to its logical conclusion – the elimination of women – even as it seems to undermine its very terms.³¹ It reinforces male domination by re-assigning feminine or inferiorized female qualities and capacities to men, who thereby become the only truly legitimate possessors of such qualities, and which only thereby de-stigmatizes them (Oliver, Womanizing 151-164; “Woman”). The result is a demarcation of women and femininity as intrinsically disordered, creatures allowed to exist only as appendages of previously existing and intact men.

V. “Was Nietzsche Gay?”

To return, then, to the question asked at the outset of this paper – was Nietzsche gay? – I want to suggest that reading Nietzsche’s texts through both a queer and a feminist lens makes clear that there can be no obvious or resounding “yes” to this question. Taking a Nietzschean view of our investment in this particular question, I want to suggest that our fascination with the thesis that Nietzsche might have been gay reveals more about us than it does about him. And, building upon queer theory’s suggestion that gender and sexuality are analytically distinguishable, I want to suggest that our need to make Nietzsche gay stems from a larger inability to see gender deviation in terms of anything besides sexuality or sexual “preference.” In other words, gender deviance is invisible unless it significantly or obviously correlates with sexual deviance, which is always already defined as homosexuality. Thus gender is reduced to a by-product of sexuality, taken as its sign or most obvious expression. So if Nietzsche identifies himself with the feminine or “writes with the hand of woman” (Krell, Derrida), for example, this is summoned by many as additional proof of his homosexuality, but not necessarily of his (gender)queerness. Yet just as Pentheus too may have or express sexual desire for men (in his admiration of Dionysus, for example), this neither makes these men “gay” nor diminishes their sexual attraction to women, about which I think there can be no real controversy. Indeed, I find it much more plausible to understand Nietzsche as a queer of precisely this sort: a man who sometimes identified with women, more rarely experienced homosexual desire, but ultimately fits quite squarely into heteronormative and patriarchal parameters of modern Euro-America, albeit through an unconventionally feminine route.

While I have taken an explicitly feminist approach to reading both Pentheus’s and Nietzsche’s sexual desires in this paper, nevertheless I do not think this can or should exhaust our interpretation of these men’s sexual expressions, for multiple questions remain unasked. What, for example, are we to make of Pentheus’s simultaneous attraction to and pleasure in playing a woman?

Does his desire for women and pleasure in “being” a woman suggest some kind of lesbian erotic? How crucial is Dionysus, ultimately, to the circuit of Pentheus’s desire? In the beginning of the play, when Pentheus remarks on Dionysus’s femininity, Pentheus insists this is what makes Dionysus so attractive to women. But this is clearly projection, for Dionysus’s femininity is what makes him so attractive to Pentheus. In taking on a feminine guise, is Pentheus becoming his own object of desire? Does Dionysus in fact merely facilitate a surfacing of Pentheus’s multi-faceted and conflictual feelings about women and femininity, serving as a mirror upon which Pentheus simply reflects back upon (and desires) himself?

With regard to Nietzsche, we might ask whether his insistence on celibacy and male self-birthing disallows all sexual activity, not just that which involves women. For while Nietzsche’s portrayal of truth as a woman of whom intimate knowledge constitutes nihilism is undeniably misogynist, its foreclosure of heterosexual intercourse also seems to disallow all sorts of queer sexual practices that seem much more in keeping with Nietzsche’s perspectivist epistemology. Indeed, the paradox of having/not having that haunts the emasculated desire of modern philosophy does not exist because, as Nietzsche claims, every true love affair manages to combine sensuality with chastity (Genealogy III:2). It exists rather because truth herself is always unfaithful. Her charms are neither hidden nor singular; as Nietzsche himself argues (albeit in non-sexualized contexts), they are in fact widely available, revealed to many suitors, and never the same, even when shared repeatedly with the same person. But this is because truth herself is not one—she simply cannot be the singular, “eternal” feminine he reactively idealizes. She is rather a multiplicity who never remains the same, about whom “the more eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe” her, “the more complete will our ‘concept’ of” her, “our ‘objectivity,’ be.” Anything less would be, as Nietzsche himself suggests, to “castrate [castriren] the intellect” (Genealogy III:12; Zur Genealogie KS 5, p. 365). More, there is no reason to think that she must remain either heterosexual or stereotypically feminine, or that

philosophers are only ever (“real”) men. A promiscuous and gender-ambiguous polyamory of truth and truth-seekers (akin to the “rendezvous of questions and question marks” that begins Beyond Good and Evil §1) seems a much more appropriate sexual metaphor for Nietzsche’s perspectivist attack on the idealism of Western philosophy.

If nothing else, by interrogating one of the great 19th century German philosophers from a queer *and* feminist framework, I hope to have demonstrated the necessity of both modes of inquiry for “traditional” Anglo-American philosophy, a necessity suggested already by Nietzsche in his assertion that all philosophy is unwitting confession. Obviously, I have taken up this assertion in a manner Nietzsche would likely not have endorsed. But it is clearly a project he authorizes, and in so doing paves the way for the more “confessional” “disciplines” of feminism and queer theory (among others) that he may have otherwise condemned as variants of slave morality. For Nietzsche’s point, of course, is that even Philosophy is neither devoid of nor inseparable from personal confession, and that such self-revelation is neither an objection in itself, nor an unphilosophical activity. Rather, as he says in one of his earliest, unpublished works, “The only thing of interest in a refuted system is the personal element. It alone is what is forever irrefutable” (Philosophy P). Or, as he insists in Beyond Good and Evil, “The degree and kind of a man’s sexuality reach up into the ultimate pinnacle of his spirit” (§75).

¹ See Köhler, Zarathustra’s Secret.

² Where translations have been emended or crucial words relied upon for interpretive purposes, I have included the German text, as cited from the Kritische Studienausgabe edition of Nietzsche’s collected writings. To facilitate ease of reference among multiple editions and translations of Nietzsche’s work, numbers in parentheses refer to aphorism number rather than page number. For On the Genealogy of Morals, Roman numerals indicate essay number; Arabic numerals indicate

aphorism number. For Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Roman numerals indicate part of the text (First, Second, Third, or Fourth); Arabic numerals indicate the section of that part; and Arabic numerals in parentheses indicate the aphorism number of that section, where necessary (e.g., IV:13(2); I have also included the title of the section for contextual and interpretive purposes.) The twelve subdivisions of Twilight of the Idols are indicated by Arabic numerals; where Nietzsche discusses his own texts by chapter in Ecce Homo, the first word of the title will be put in quotation marks (e.g., Ecce “Birth” §1), and the four larger subdivisions of Ecce Homo are indicated by the following abbreviations: “Wise” [“Why I am so Wise”]; “Clever” [“Why I am so Clever”]; “Books” [“Why I Write Such Good Books”]; and “Destiny” [“Why I am a Destiny”]. For all other works, Arabic numerals refer to aphorism number. The letter P indicates that work’s preface.

³ Even if we restrict our focus merely to the question of “woman,” Nietzsche devotes sizable portions of Human, All-Too-Human, The Gay Science, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, and Beyond Good and Evil to this subject alone. After 1886 he stops setting aside separate portions of aphorisms to the “woman question,” but commentary and argument regarding women, gender, and sexual difference figure prominently and undeniably in both the Genealogy and the 1888 works.

⁴ See Ross, Sedgwick, Strongman.

⁵ To claim this is certainly to take a kind of Freudian approach (at least insofar as Freud is a Nietzschean), but this no more demands an unconditional embrace of a hydraulic model of sexuality than it does an exclusive commitment to a “repressive hypothesis” of sexuality as critiqued by Foucault (whom we also recognize as a kind of Nietzschean). Moreover, this approach in no way privileges the reading it offers as the unqualified “truth” of Nietzsche’s life in the way, for example, that Köhler’s study problematically proclaims to do. The very shift of emphasis to the unwitting as revealed in the unwritten renders any test of verification ridiculous – even Nietzsche himself ceases to be a credible witness in this regard. And this lack of verifiability haunts all interpretations,

regardless of approach. The virtues of my own method include not only its explicitly Nietzschean character, but also its structuring assumption that the text/author under consideration necessarily exceeds any of its interpretations, even the ones advanced by its own practitioners.

⁶ As Sedgwick 44-48, 132 cautions; see also Foucault, Halperin, Weeks.

⁷ Sedgwick's enticing readings of various passages in Nietzsche, while both provocative and compelling, nevertheless stretch the text a bit too thin to be fully persuasive in my view.

⁸ This is especially important to remember given Nietzsche's penchant for making self-aggrandizing statements about his impeccable manners, infinite wisdom, and exemplary diagnostic and doctoring skills. What might such seemingly "straightforward" self-declarations unwittingly reveal? Those who mistake Nietzsche for a megalomaniac whose hyperbole foretells the onset of impending dementia seem utterly to miss the point of Nietzsche/an reading.

⁹ I hope it is clear that the parenthetical in this sentence, whether written explicitly or not, is always implied and necessarily included due to Nietzsche's merging of philosophy and autobiography in Beyond §6.

¹⁰ With few exceptions, an unspoken consensus has emerged within Nietzsche scholarship since Kaufmann that Nietzsche's misogynist views on women and gender must either remain undiscussed, or else be defended, excused, or otherwise complicated out of existence. Representative arguments from this substantial literature include Jacques Derrida's famous claim that "There is no such thing as a woman, as a truth in itself of woman in itself. That much, at least, Nietzsche has said" (Éperons 102-3) and Sara Kofman's supplement to this analysis with her argument that there is no woman-as-such in Nietzsche, rather "types" of women, all of whom are historical constructs ("Psychologist"), which thereby stakes a claim for the ultimate "ambivalence" of Nietzsche's "many heterogeneous texts on woman" ("Baubô"; see also Babich 261). Anglo-American Nietzsche interpreters either ignore Nietzsche's remarks on gender altogether or else attempt to re-claim them for a proto-

feminist project; see, e.g., Kathleen Higgins's claiming of Nietzsche in The Gay Science as a "pioneer in gender theory" ("Gender" 130; see also Richardson 192). While the shift toward either deflecting or defending Nietzsche's misogyny constitutes a perhaps necessary corrective to Kaufmann's dogmatic insistence that Nietzsche was merely benighted by the blinders of history when it came to gender, the result of this reactive consensus is that a central component of Nietzsche's thought has been either ignored or rationalized away, and for the same reason that Kaufmann tried to hide it altogether: it is simply too difficult to take Nietzsche's misogyny seriously as a central, animating principle of his thought. A notable exception to this rule is Kelly Oliver's work on gender in Nietzsche, in particular her Womanizing Nietzsche: Philosophy's Relation to the "Feminine." The argument of this paper is crucially indebted to Oliver's groundbreaking feminist scholarship.

¹¹ See Porter, Pfeffer, Silk and Stern, Sallis.

¹² See Mosse.

¹³ Do we here see ancient origins of the modern historiographical production of the Orient that Edward Said documents in Orientalism? The women of the chorus are specified as hailing from Asia; in his opening speech Dionysus says he has returned to Greece after having established cults in what are now modern-day Turkey, Iran, and the Arabian peninsula (where he says Greeks and non-Greeks mingle together unabashedly). This Asiatic derivation is clearly an essential component of his threat to the city; it both signifies and explains Dionysus's otherwise inexplicable femininity and his excessive consortment with women.

¹⁴ The important themes of vision and scrutiny, and their relationship with desire and disclosure recur repeatedly throughout this play – Dionysus watches from afar as Pentheus wrestle the bull, Pentheus wishes to be seen publicly as a woman, Pentheus desires to see the Bacchantes and, with Dionysus, will watch them from afar. Pentheus is blind to Dionysus's divinity, while the blind

prophet Tiresias recognizes the importance of Theban acceptance of Dionysus's new cult into the city. These themes and their connections clearly demand greater analysis and interpretation than I offer here.

¹⁵ With the exception, of course, of sexual gratification – the activity about which Pentheus most fantasizes and deems most worthy of punishment.

¹⁶ Although John Sallis considers the women's simultaneous nurture and violence to be evidence of yet another Dionysian contradiction (47-48), he overlooks the important intrusion of Pentheus or his armies into the all-female context of Bacchic worship, offering a clear explanation for this otherwise seemingly inexplicable reaction. While Sallis misses this reading, Pentheus certainly does not – he very clearly understands what is at stake in these women's communal worship outside the bounds of male-controlled space, and is determined to return them to Thebes and their homes so as to restore the sexual-political order.

¹⁷ There is also a refusal to acknowledge Dionysus's divine maternal origin, for he is the god Zeus birthed from his own thigh. It is no surprise, then, that Dionysus is at best gender-ambiguous – his lineage suggests a mixing up of gender and sexual roles in his birth such that Zeus, king of the gods, imbues the female act of birthing with divine and masculine power.

¹⁸ Orientalism is thus also on display in the political sense in this text, not just the historiographical. Pentheus's projection of sexual excess and depravity onto the Asiatic Dionysus as a justification for his incarceration looks very much like a production of the Orient in order to dominate and control it (Said 3).

¹⁹ To those who might think I am making too much of Nietzsche's metaphors here, I would ask why Nietzsche couches epistemology in gendered and sexual terms at all. Given Nietzsche's critique of language as both essentially metaphorical and an important bulwark of our commitment to an idealist (and therefore false) view of the world, his use of metaphors seems to me crucial – both as

an attempt to draw attention to the metaphorical character of language per se, as well as a specific and targeted attack on the very idealism to which language unwittingly weds us (since Nietzsche relies primarily on bodily and physiological metaphors to explain otherwise nonmaterial ideas, activities, and processes). There is no “in-itself” beneath Nietzsche’s metaphors that contains his “true” philosophical beliefs, just as there is no thing “in-itself” that stands beneath or behind its multiple interpretations. Indeed, the distinction between metaphor and the reality it conveys is a meaningless one for Nietzsche, a concern utterly external to his texts: “The true world—we have abolished. What world has remained? The apparent one perhaps? But no! With the true world we have also abolished the apparent one” (*Twilight* 5). For a marvelous exposition of many of Nietzsche’s physiological metaphors, including digestion, sniffing or “smelling out,” and hearing, see Eric Blondel, Nietzsche, the Body, and Culture.

²⁰ Nietzsche reprints this aphorism in the Epilogue to Nietzsche Contra Wagner, his final work, adding after the first sentence cited, “Tout comprendre—c’est tout mépriser” [“To understand all is to despise all”]. Apparently such allusions are so distasteful he cannot even pronounce them in his own tongue, speaking first Greek, then French. For more allusions to truth as the female genitalia, see Gay §§59, 64, 339; Beyond §§127, 204; Twilight 2, §16.

²¹As Nietzsche claims, “‘The human being under the skin’ is for all lovers a horror and unthinkable, a blasphemy against God and love” (Gay §59). And underneath her skin, woman is nothing at all: “Women are considered profound. Why? Because one never fathoms their depths. Women aren’t even shallow” (*TI* 2, §27)

²² As Henry Staten notes, “What Nietzsche in The Gay Science and Beyond Good and Evil pictures as the absolute desire of the most appropriative man, his ultimate possessiveness, is also that which most threatens a man’s integrity, his self-possession” (164). Sara Kofman prefers to construe this distance as philosophical respect for feminine modesty, a disappointing feminist reading that

preserves both philosophy's maleness and truth's femininity ("Baubô" 195-196). Although Kofman is in some sense right that Nietzsche's pointed barbs regarding women ultimately suggest not simply an ambivalence, but in fact a "deep love" for women (199), her defense of Nietzsche on the charge of misogyny is limited to an oppositional and heteronormative discourse that simply re-reads affirmatively the femininity Nietzsche stigmatizes, and shifts his avowed misogyny onto "metaphysicians" and others with similarly "perverse" or "theological" perspectives. Thus "woman" does not demarcate horror, nihilism, or unpredictable terror because Kofman secures her within a heterosexual order wherein she is valorized for stereotypically (and male-defined) feminine qualities like demureness, modesty, mystery, and beauty (190-191). The concluding salvational discussion of Baubô as equivalent with Dionysus is both tenuous and unpersuasive, particularly as a reading of Nietzsche's psychobiography (196-199); I also think it overlooks the ways in which Nietzsche thinks Dionysus surpasses the feminine precisely through an appropriation of it, a point to be discussed later on. Finally, Kofman simply refuses to acknowledge the ways in which Nietzsche himself adheres to the "theological perversion" he ascribes to metaphysicians, an argument that unjustifiably excepts Nietzsche as documenting their weaknesses rather than (also) exemplifying them himself.

²³ Birth P§4; Beyond §295.

²⁴ Thus II:3 ("On the Pitying"), III:1 ("The Wanderer"), III:12(29) ("On Old and New Tablets"); Beyond §§210, 212, 227; Twilight 12.

²⁵ David Farrell Krell notes that the Magician is actually the first appearance of what is later to become Ariadne in "The Complaint of Ariadne," one of Nietzsche's Dionysian Dithyrambs (15).

²⁶ See also Gay P§3, §72; Thus II:1 "The Child with the Mirror", II:5 "On the Virtuous", II:15 "On Immaculate Perception"; Beyond §206, §248; Genealogy III:8.

²⁷ As Zarathustra tries to explain, “Verily, some are chaste through and through: they are gentler of heart, fonder of laughter, and laugh more than you. They laugh at chastity too and ask, ‘What is chastity? Is chastity not folly? Yet this folly came to us, not we to it. We offered this guest hostel and heart: now it dwells with us—may it stay as long as it will!’ Thus spoke Zarathustra” (I:13 “On Chastity”).

²⁸ This is abundantly necessary insofar as mothers, too, pose a mortal threat to man’s existence – it is Pentheus’s mother, remember, who remorselessly tears him apart.

²⁹ The only “speaking” the ass does in Zarathustra is a braying that sounds eerily like “yes” [Ja], and the litany recites, “He [the ass/God] does not speak, except he always says Yes to the world he created: thus he praises his world. It is his cleverness that does not speak: thus he is rarely found to be wrong”; and “What hidden wisdom it is that he has long ears and only says Yes and never No! Has he not created the world in his own image, namely, as stupid as possible? (Thus IV:17 “The Awakening” §2).

³⁰ In Twilight 11, §4 Nietzsche links life with sexuality, procreation, and birth, praising the Greek consecration of these as holy, and seems momentarily to recognize and recover the role of woman in this cycle and eternal return of life, including her by saying “All this is meant by the word Dionysus.” Yet in the very next aphorism, Nietzsche casts doubt on the role or importance of women in this procreative circle of mysteries under the guise of correcting Aristotle’s view that the tragedy of life demands a discharge of terror and pity. Rather, Nietzsche argues, life’s tragedy requires a going beyond terror and pity, which entails that one become “oneself” the joy of becoming, that one embark on the terrifying task of birthing oneself. A successful self-birth is the achievement of the joy in destroying characteristic of Dionysian affirmation, and is only ever authorized for men in Nietzsche’s terms. For the necessary pre-requisite for such an endeavor is, as the subtitle to Twilight of the Idols suggests, to philosophize with a hammer. We are told how to

do this when Nietzsche bids “The Hammer” “speak” in the conclusive last word to Twilight of the Idols, a re-printing of Thus III:12(29) “On Old and New Tablets” in which Zarathustra lays down the commandment, “become hard!”

³¹ This conclusion is indebted to analysis offered in Kelly Oliver’s scholarship on Nietzsche and her critique of deconstructive readings of “woman” in Nietzsche in particular. See, for example, her critique of Derrida’s appropriation of the hymen (Womanizing, 71-74).

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