Introduction

Dionysos is a creative, multi-faceted and most transgressive god full of thriving energy and abounding vitality who notoriously resists clear-cut and simple definitions. His dazzling ambiguity fascinates us more than ever in these postmodern times. Like a kaleidoscope he constantly oscillates between manifold manifestations. Therefore it is perhaps most suitable to call him a figure of the Other. However, it is at the same time problematic to emphasize his dissimilarity in an exaggerated fashion since he shares features of otherness with all the other Greeks gods. Yet, as Henk Versnel has argued, Dionysos differs at least in this: he is the first classic god to assume henotheistic traits. Already in Euripides’ Bacchae he is constantly drawn as a god who is unique and claims superiority over the rest of the pantheon. Accordingly, in the Gurob papyrus of early Hellenistic times (P.Gurob 1.23 = OF 578.23b) he is addressed as εἷς Διόνυσος. Other possible features of difference are according to Susanne Gödde: 1. He has a mortal mother, Semele; 2. he is born twice. 3. he experiences death and suffering, whereas other gods are typically immortal; 4. he drives his entourage mad and is himself characterized as manic (μαινόμενος); 5. as he is different people meet him with resistance since he allegedly threatens civic order.


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1 On the role of Dionysos in all three dramatic genres, see Bierl 2011a. On the introduction, see ibid. 315-316 and Bierl 1991, 13-20. On some basic ideas about Dionysos as the personification of the ecstatic performance, see now Bierl in print and Ford 2011. On Dionysos in tragedy, see Bierl 1991; on the chorus, also often in a Dionysiac context, see Bierl 2001. On Dionysos in general, see Henrichs 1982; 1996a, and as a different god, see now the volume by Schlesier 2011.


3 See Versnel 1990; 2011, 40-44.

4 See Gödde 2011, 92-103.

5 On Dionysos as the god of polar oppositions, see Otto 1933; Henrichs 1982, esp. 158 with 233 nn. 193-196; 1990; Bierl 1991, 14-20 and passim.

6 OF 463-465 Bernabé.
Barbarian, civilization–nature, cosmos–chaos, idyll–violence, happiness–suffering, laughing–lament, order–destruction, tranquility–mania, chastity–sexuality, and festivity–ecstasy. Euripides summarizes this tension, marking him δεινότατος, ἀνθρώποισι δ’ ἠπιώτατος (“most terrible, but to the people most gentle and kind”) (Ba. 861), and Plutarch (Ant. 24) later pins the Dionysiac paradox down to the opposition between his epithets ἀγριώνιος and μειλίχιος, later resumed by Friedrich Nietzsche and Walter F. Otto who has defined him as the god of polar oppositions.  

Yet Dionysos stands neither for pure and abstract dualism nor for the frequently quoted coincidentia oppositorum. Rather both sides, understood as energetic forces in dynamic reciprocation, tend to fuse under his influence. Thus, the dichotomies should not be seen as fixed, structural terms but experienced in the cult and myth of a lived religion. Accordingly, Dionysos is not only a wild, violent and destructive power, but also a central polis-god who stabilizes order in the city. Scenarios of violence tend to occur in myth, while phenomena of group cohesion are mostly situated in cult. Moreover, Dionysos is a god on the move and in constant change, and he also exposes others to the transformations seen in the above-mentioned range of categorical oppositions. He abounds in vital energy, making everything grow and sprout. Most of all, he always wishes to be present. Thus, we encounter him as arriving from afar or even from the realm of the dead, and he manifests himself in his manifold forms as an epiphanic god par excellence (ἐπιφανέστατος θεός).  

His main features and areas of responsibility are: 1. wine and inebriation; 2. wild nature, vegetation and animality; 3. madness and ecstasy; 4. underworld and death; 5. mysteries and afterlife; 6. sex, eros and love; 7. dance, music and performance; 8. mask and costume; 9. fiction, imagination, vision and miracle.  

With respect especially to the last three items, Dionysos became the god of theater. The θεά of a procession becomes a θέατρον, where “the coming god” celebrates his arrival and epiphany. Dionysos is a θεατής (spectator), actor and even leader of his chorus of female
maenads and male satyrs who like to sing and dance. Last but not least, his choral thiasos is the mythic model of the dramatic χορός whose members appeal to him to assume notional leadership.

The God of Drama in Performance

In this contribution I wish to focus on the epiphanic and performative aspects of Dionysos. It is my contention that – particularly in the theater – the god manifests himself only in performative terms, in wild cries, the music of the aulos and ecstatic choral movement. Very often, in a phenomenon of reciprocal mania, the maenads or Thyiads, the personifications of ecstatic frenzy, set the god in frantic movement in the same way that he, as their choral leader, is responsible for the choral and multimodal performance of his entourage. This results in the typical fusion and oscillation of perspectives. The god with epithets like Βάκχος, Βακχεύς, Βακχέιος, Βακχέβακχος, ἄρχεβάκχος, Ἰόβακχος, Ἐδιος, Ἐδας, Ἐδσιος, Ἰακχος, Ἐλελεύς, Ιής, Ἰνγίης, Σαβάζιος, Σαβός is often envisioned as the personification of the ecstatic and inarticulate cries delivered in short and iterated combinations, such as bakch-, eua-, eui-, iakch-, ie-, iy-. The lack of propositional meaning entails an instantiation of “poetic function” according to Roman Jakobson. Thus it makes perfect sense that Dionysos, as Dithyrambos, becomes the emblem of the lyric frenzy of meaninglessness, i.e. of choral and lyric poetry.

In a recent article, I interpreted the parodos of Euripides’ Bacchae (64-166) under these performative premises. The epiphanic god’s arrival is acted out and experienced as choral multimediality in an incoming procession (πομπή). Who performs in this fashion is conceived as enthusiastic, full of the god and blessed because the performer’s life fuses with the sacred group, the thiasos (θιασεύεται ψυχάν Ba. 75). The Lydian worshippers praise him in εὐοί-cries, the Euios, the, so to say, divine embodiment of the ecstatic shout (Ba. 157). The maenads project themselves onto Mount Kithairon in a wildly iterated cry ἵτε βάκχαι, ἵτε βάκχαι (83, 152-153) and simultaneously lead the god “from the Phrygian mountains” (Φρυγίων ἐξ ὀρέων 86) into the city of Thebes, i.e. “into Hellas’ broad streets for dancing” (Ἑλλάδος εἰς εὐρυχόρους ἀγυιάς 86-87) (85-87).

14 See Bierl 2011b and 2013. See also Kavoulaki 1999.
In the typical manner of total fusion and reciprocity between performance and space, the territory in which he comes in is often witnessed in a state of frantic dance (αὐτίκα γὰ ράσα χορεύσει Ba. 114). I call this phenomenon performative transference to the natural environment. A similar totalizing effect, the projection of chorality onto nature, countryside or polis space, we witness in the paean of Philodamus, 19-20 (Coll. Alex., p. 166): πᾶσα δ' ὑμνοβρυῆς χόρευ- / ε[ν Δελφῶ]ν ἱερὰ μάκαιρα χώρα ("entirely full of hymns danced the sacred and blessed land of the Delphians"). Once again the group calls on itself to receive Dionysos in a procession in the streets, accompanied by choruses (ἄλλα δέχεσθε Βακχιά- / [σταν] Δι[ό]νυσ[ον, ἐν δ' ἁγαυ-] / αἰς ἁμα συν [χοροίς], ibid., 144-146).

In the famous fifth stasimon of Sophocles’ Antigone (1115-1152) the chorus summons the Dionysiac landscape to send the god once more in a procession to his homeland Thebes. Its patron oversees the streets (ἐπισκοποοῦντ’ ἁγνιάς 1136) where he himself is about to arrive, while shouts of divine and inarticulate words lacking proposition, emit their euai, euoi-sound (ἀμβρότων ἐπέων / εὐαζόντων 1134-1135). The acoustic song and speech elements are seen as active instances that do something, i.e. they utter euie, euie. In their enigmatic meaninglessness the words become divine in the same way that the god embodies the cry. After an extended warm-up where possible routes of arrival are imagined, the chorus is called to have an epiphany, dancing with cathartic foot (μολεῖν καθαρσίῳ ποδὶ (1143), and finally addressing Dionysos-Lakchos as ἰῶ πῦρ πνεόντων / χοράγ’ ἄστρων, νυχίων / φθεγμάτων ἐπίσκοπε (“io, chorus leader of fire breathing stars, overseer of nocturnal cries”, 1146-1148). The choral god is called to appear as chorus leader of both the actual chorus as well as the maenadic-mystic chorus projected simultaneously onto the chorus of stars, as supervisor of the nocturnal voices, particularly of the Lakchos-shouts, which his ecstatic group of Thyiads in Delphi or initiates in Eleusis emit. Thus they call upon Lakchos, the dispenser (τὸν ταμίαν Ἴακχον 1152), who, as controller, becomes the leading figure of the violent movement. And the women, in their madness (μανόμεναι) and all-night (πάννυχοι 1149) long cries, set him in choral movement, by themselves dancing (χορεύουσι 1152).

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17 After Henrichs 1996b, 61 n. 49, I used “pathetic fallacy” for this phenomenon (Bierl 2013, 218), with reference to Copley 1937.
19 See Griffith 1999, 320 ad 1131-1136.
Dionysos is often notionally envisaged as a virtual divine choregos or exarchos, the chorus leader of his wild dancing chorus, which projects its performance onto the natural environment. The pattern is crucial for Euripides’ Bacchae, particularly conspicuous in the parodos. In line 141 he is called exarchos, and numerous passages associate Dionysos with the action of ἄγειν, such as in line 115, or in the choral projections on Mount Olympus (412-413) and on Mount Pieria (566-570) – both are linked with Euios. Dionysos’ epiphany in the palace-miracle (576-603) as an earthquake (585-593, also 605-606) is seen through the performative lens just like the destructive violence in Heracles (HF 867-897). In the latter case, Lyssa, the personification of frenzy, sets Heracles within an ecstatic dance and flute melody, here grotesque and cruel (τάχα σ’ ἐγὼ μᾶλλον χορεύσω καὶ καταυλήσω φόβῳ (HF 871; cf. 879).

Coming back to Bacchae, once again the landscape on Mount Kithairon, in a performative transference, is envisaged as frantically dancing in reciprocal interplay between the worshipers and the god: “After the maenads called, together in a joint cry, Bromios as Iakchos, the son of Zeus, all the mountain joined in bacchic frenzy (πᾶν δὲ συνεβάκχεω’ ὀρος), and the animals, and nothing that lived was not in bacchic movement through running and dancing” (725-727). Iakchos is again the personified cry that sets the entire environment in performative vibration.

In a similar fashion we encounter the pattern in Aristophanes’ Thesmophoriazusae (985-1000) at the end of a song dedicated solely to chorality (953-1000), a passage I have already interpreted in these terms.

āll’ εἶα, πάλλ’, ἀνάστρεφ’ εὐρύθμῳ ποδί, (985)
tόρευε πᾶσαν φόδην· ἣγοῦ δὲ γ’ ὅδ’ αὐτός σύ, κισσοφόρε Βακχεῖε δέσποτ’· ἐγὼ δὲ κόμως σε φιλοχόροισι μέλψω (990)

†εὔιον ὦ Διὸς σὺ Βρόμιε καὶ Σεμέλας παῖ, (991)

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22 See Bierl 2013.
23 On E. HF, see Bierl 1991, 79-89, esp. 85-87, 140-146.
Now come, leap, whirl with rhythmic foot! Turn the whole song! But you yourself be our leader, ivy-bearing Bacchic lord! And we shall honor you in dance and song in chorus-loving komoi. O Euios, Bromios, son of Zeus and Semele, you who delight in choral dances and dance in chorus over the mountains to the lovely hymns of the nymphs, o Euios, Euios, euoi, o Euios! All about you the echo from Kithairon sounds, and the dark-leafed bushy mountains and rocky glens rumble, and spiraling around you in a circle sprouts leafy ivy. (trans. A. Hollmann)

Dionysos is fascinated by the round dance of the “here and now,” while being himself projected onto the Dionysiac landscape of the mountains. After the chorus’ appeal to take over the lead, he dances (ἄναχορεύων 994b) as notional chorus leader among the nymphs, who set him in wild whirling motion with their ecstatic cries of εὔιον εὔιον εὐοῖ, which tend to merge with the god. The ecstatic sound effects of voices, tympana, and aulos resound from the mountains and valleys all around Dionysos (περί σε 1000), who thus also becomes the central ἔξωρχον on the acoustic level. In the end (999-1000), the ivy, highlighted through its association with his epithet κισσοφόρος, is projected onto his cyclic dance. Around Dionysos as imaginary choregos, this sacred plant, just like his musical group, winds in a

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25 This is the transmitted reading for 994a in manuscript R. With Wilson, for reasons of responsion, I adopt Hermann’s conjecture ὦ Εὔι’, Εὔι’, εὐοῖ.
circle (κύκλῳ) and shoots up in spiral form (ἕλικι) as choral performers are notoriously drawn in their whirling motion of a round dance as εἰλίσσοντες.26

Finally let us have a brief look at the parados of the mystai with their famous Ἰακχ’ ὁ Ἰακχέ / Ἰακχ’ ὁ Ἰακχε cry in Aristophanes’ Frogs (316-317).27 Dionysos does not recognize that the allegedly meaningless and inarticulate shout of iterated syllables becomes the god (he is the crystallized personification of it, the divine name understandable only for the initiates), himself, whereas his servant Xanthias solves the enigmatic riddle: τοῦτ’ ἔστ’ ἐκεῖν’, ὁ δὲσποθ’· οἱ μεμυημένοι / ἐνταὐθά ποι παίζουσιν (“This is that, o master, the initiates play and dance somewhere”, 318-319).28 Then the song starts again with the Ἰακχέ-shout.

Ἱακχ’, ὁ πολυτίμητ’ ἐν ἑδράς ἐνθάδε ναιόν, (323-24)
Ἡακχ’, ὁ Ἱακχε, (325)
ἐλθε τὸνδ’ ἀνά λειμώνα χορεύσων
όσιος εἰς θιασώτας,
pολύκαρπον μὲν τινάσσων
peri kratì σῷ βρύονta
στέφανον μύρτων, θρασεῖ δ’ ἐγκατακρούων (330)
pοδὶ τὴν ἀκόλαστον
φιλοπαίγμα τιμήν,
χαρίτων πλεῖστον ἔχουσαν μέρος, ἁγνήν, (333-34)
ἰερὰν ὁσίος μῦσταις χορείαν.

Ἰακχος, here abiding in temples most reverend, Iakchos, O Iakchos, come to dance in this meadow; to your holy mystic bands shake the leafy crown around your head, brimming with myrtle, boldly stomp your feet in time to the wild fun-loving rite, with full share of the Graces, the holy dance, sacred to your mystics. (trans. M. Dillon)

In the hymnos kletikos, the chorus refers one more time to its notional chorus leader Iakchos-Dionysos in a highly self-conscious manner. He is constantly invoked as a dancer

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28 On the initiatory dimension of τοῦτ’ ἔστ’ ἐκεῖν’ in the sense of a “‘aha’ experience” of insight, see Ford 2011, 353, with 348 and 346 (Dikaios’ recognition of the mystic nature of the cry in Hdt. 8.65).
permanently shifting between “function” in the orchestra and dramatic “character.”29 Shaking his head in wild movements, he beats with his foot, the emblem of choral dance, to the worship that is indecent and fun-loving since playing (παίζειν) goes together with dancing (παίζειν is χορεύειν).30 The last word, as apposition to the rite, in emphatic position is choreia (335), the quintessential action of Dionysos. The long parodos self-referentially revolves around the choral activity, the chorus, and παῖσα τε καὶ χορεῦσαι (388, 407).31 In Eleusis Demeter serves as his paredros to preserve and protect the chorus, but Iakchos as Dionysos is the real master, “deviser of our festal song most sweet (μέλος ἑορτῆς ἥδιστον εὑρών)” (398-399).32 He is invoked as a “lover of the dance” (402, 413) to lead the mystic dancers in a procession – of course also an allusion to the renowned Eleusinian procession – onto the dramatic scene of the mystic underworld meadow and the orchestra in the “here and now” (Ἰακχε φιλοχορεωτά, συμπρόπεμπέ με 402, 413; cf. προβάδην ἔξαγ’ 351). In the numerous instances of choral self-reference, the voices of dramatic role merge with the performative function of the chorus and its choregos. When the god of drama does this in comedy, dancing will be mixed with poking fun at people (σκώπτειν 492, 417). Once again – just like in Sophocles’ Antigone 1146-1148 – Iakchos is also “the light-bringing star of the nocturnal rite” (νυκτέρου τελετῆς φωσφόρος ἀστήρ 342), thus the god is envisaged as leader of a projected astral chorus guiding “the youth that makes the chorus” to the mystic meadow, “the flowering marshy ground” (ἐπ’ ἀνθηρὸν ἕλειον / δάπεδον χοροποιόν, …, ἡβην 351-352).

Conclusion

Dionysos is the emblem and personification of exuberant energy and raging performance, which, because of the lack of signification, remains enigmatic and meets with resistance. Those who do understand the ecstatic expressions can abandon themselves and merge in their worship with the god. The god of presence and epiphany can manifest himself only by his wild sign production. This is true, in particular, for drama based on multimodal performance of words, music and choral dance where Dionysos is sometimes summoned to have his epiphany through roaring noise, shrill music by auloi, violent rhythms by tympana and excited dance. We witness a strange whirl of reciprocal interaction between the frantic...

29 See Dover 1993, 57-60, and on the fluidity of choral voices, see Bierl 2001, Index, “Chor/Fluktuation (Ambiguität der Instanzen und Rollen)” (Engl. 2009), passim.
31 On choral self-referentiality, see Henrichs 1994/95, who draws on Bierl 1991, e.g. 35-36, 83-84, 99, 106-107, 129, 155, 164, 190-191, 224 und 242-243 (where he associates Dionysos with self-referential and metatheatrical utterances).
32 On the Eleusinian elements of the parodos, see Graf 1974, 40-51.
performance of followers and their god. In a strict reciprocal χάρις-relation33 his chorus attempts to please and seduce Dionysos through performative behavior suited to him while he takes pleasure in the chorus’ activity. Often he is called to take over as notional choregos, thus driving them even madder. Just as they set him in raging choral motion, so he does with them.

Furthermore, we encounter a strange tendency to project the totalizing feeling onto other mythical choral groups or even onto the cosmos, the stars, onto the entire environment. Under his influence everything fuses. The entirety of nature is envisaged in frenzied motion, the sky, the earth, the land; he stands in the middle and the surrounding objects revolve around him in a circular dance. In the end, Dionysos is nothing more than the underlying substance, the abstraction of ecstatic, inarticulate signs with a lack of proposition that crystallize to strange epikleseis of the god responsible for that extraordinary experience. As a hypostasized expression of ecstatic performance, Dionysos is present for the insider, the initiates – thus his association with mysteries –, whereas for the outsider it is purely insane behavior without any aesthetic meaning.

Bibliography


