

Dionysus: God in Motion

The Greek god Dionysus is a notoriously complex deity characterized by seemingly contradictory traits. Nonetheless, one oft-overlooked but internally consistent set of traits revolves around Dionysus' role as a god of motion, both literal and figurative. In this paper, I discuss the ways in which Dionysus exemplifies this characteristic while inspiring his followers to do the same.

The story of Dionysus' birth and youth involves an unusual amount of movement even for an up-and-coming Greek god. Born to Semele in Thebes, he is sewn into Zeus' thigh (presumably involving a trip back to Olympus) and then taken to the mythical Mount Nysa to be raised by nymphs (Seaford 2006). While ancient Greek poets and mythographers never agreed on where Mount Nysa was located, nearly all sources put its location far away from Thebes, usually to the south and east. As a young deity, Dionysus wandered across Asia and even as far afield as India before finally making his way back to Greece in a triumphal procession, as told in the prologue to the *Bacchae*. Dionysus' motion was not just spatial but cultural: by growing up in a land foreign to Greece and partaking in so many cultures of Asia from youth, he was considered evermore by his Greek worshipers as a "foreign" god, even while at the same time he was given an autochthonous birth story. Followers who wished to become more like Dionysus would have been forced to consider the necessity of cultivating a diverse perspective, something which would properly include travel in order to see as much of the world as Dionysus did even as a youth.

The rituals conducted to worship Dionysus famously involved motion in order to get outside of urban areas and commune with nature in the forests and hills of Greece. Worshipers were called to leave their comfort zones behind as they sought to empty themselves and be filled with the god. Here, too, motion is directly tied to Dionysus, but in this case it is motion that his human followers must embody as they follow in his footsteps. This motion is not just spatial but also experiential; worshipers are encouraged to drink wine (the essence of Dionysus) in order to leave their own

senses (a kind of motion) and allow Dionysus to move in. Still on the move, Dionysus migrates into each worshiper just as he once migrated back to Greece to spread the message of his worship.

Finally, Dionysus was widely known as the deity who presided over the stage, whether drama or comedy. Ancient Greek plays would of course involve the motion of actors and the chorus around the stage, but also embodied the characteristic of motion in a more fundamental and quintessentially Dionysian way. Much as his everyday followers would drink wine to move out of their own heads and allow the god to move in, actors would leave their own personalities behind and take on the role of another on stage. This “psychic motion”, more even than physical motion, was diagnostic of the god.

Dionysus was a god of motion, but his motion was not of the banal kind. It was motion with a purpose: to become transformed by the experience, to open new worlds of understanding. As such, it is no surprise that multicultural travel, consuming wine, and acting were three of the arenas most associated with this complex deity.

Bibliography

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