

A Body Made Divine: *ὁ δαίμων* and *ὁ θεός* in Euripides' *Bacchae*

The first instances of *ὁ θεός* and *ὁ δαίμων* in Euripides' *Bacchae* both occur within Dionysos' speech in the prologue. Within the first four lines, Dionysos tells the audience that he has come, transforming out of the form of a god to take on the form of a mortal man, “μορφὴν δ' ἀμείψας ἐκ θεοῦ βροτησίαν” (Eur. *Bac.* 4). In their commentary on the prologue of Euripides' *Bacchae*, William Allan and Laura Swift comment that “no other Euripidean play contains such a radical transformation, and the god's mortal disguise, crucial to the action to come, is stressed again towards the end of his speech” (Allan and Swift 2024, 103). Already in these first introductory lines, there is an interesting focus on Dionysos' body as he refers to the disguise he has taken on, transforming his physical form. In the same introductory speech, Dionysos also refers to himself as *ὁ δαίμων*. In lines 21-22, he states that he has set things dancing elsewhere, and having established his rites, he is manifesting himself as a *δαίμων* among mortal men:

τὰκεῖ χορεύσας καὶ καταστήσας ἐμὰς

τελετάς, ἴν' εἶην ἐμφανῆς δαίμων βροτοῖς. (Eur. *Bac.* 21-22)

By the end of the prologue, Dionysos has been established as both *δαίμων* and *θεός*. However, while *θεός* is used to describe other gods in the play, the use of *δαίμων* in the singular is reserved for Dionysos, suggesting that there is something about the way that *δαίμων* is being used within the play that is tied to some aspect of Dionysos setting him apart from other divinities mentioned. While *δαίμων* can be read as another term for the gods, Jon D. Mikalson notes in *Athenian Popular Religion* that within Greek tragedy, there is a “complex structure in which terms such as ‘god,’ ‘the gods,’ *daimon*, and ‘hero’ move into or apart from one another” (Mikalson 1991, 45).

One hint to the potentially complex relationship between *δαίμων* and *θεός* in the *Bacchae* is the way that Dionysos is not always referred to as *δαίμων*. While *δαίμων* and *θεός* are used seemingly interchangeably in the first half of the play for him, once Dionysos has been revealed as a god fully to Pentheus, he is no longer referred to as *δαίμων*. In a similar vein, he no longer appears on stage in his mortal disguise on the same level as the mortal characters. In his distanced, divine form, he is referred to as *θεός* only, and takes on the physical distance expected of a god in Euripidean tragedy, keeping “separate from mortals,” no longer “shown mingling with them” (Sourvinou-Inwood 2003, 459).

In this paper I argue that within Euripides’ *Bacchae* the term *δαίμων* represents not a general sense of the divine, but a divinity which is grounded in a physical, accessible form. The term *δαίμων* is used to describe the version of Dionysos who walks among mortals, unrecognized by Pentheus as a god. The use of *δαίμων* alongside *θεός* is, I argue, tied to the physical body of Dionysos and his transformation throughout the play as he gains the recognition of his fully-divine status by the city of Thebes. Focusing on textual analysis of the ancient Greek, I will explore the potential connections between the language used to describe Dionysos, the physicality of his form, and his transformation throughout the narrative of the *Bacchae* as one more layer of complexity to the boundary-shifting god.

Initial Bibliography

- Allan, William, and Laura Swift, eds. *Euripides Bacchae*. Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics. Cambridge University Press, 2024.
- Mikalson, Jon D. *Honor Thy Gods: Popular Religion in Greek Tragedy*. University of North Carolina Press, 1991.

Sourvinou-Inwood, Christiane. *Tragedy and Athenian Religion*. Lexington Books, 2003.