

Noisy Frogs and Musical Initiates: Dionysos as a Listener in *Frogs*

The two choruses of *Frogs* have often been compared, and strong Dionysiac elements have been recognized in both. Dionysos reacts differently to each one, however, antagonistically engaging the frogs but eagerly listening to the initiates' call for Iakchos. The sound imposed on Dionysos by the frogs elicits annoyance and a competitive spirit. Conversely, Dionysos desires to hear the initiates, eavesdrops on them, enjoys what he hears, and is moved to respond. This paper will explore what these very different reactions indicate about the nature of Dionysiac sound.

Almost all ancient texts mentioning Dionysos indicate, either by epithet or fuller description, that he was a noisy god who delighted in jubilant and often chaotic sound. Its characteristic components include flutes, cymbals, drums, and shouting. I argue that the Dionysiac hymn of the Frog Chorus is aligned with this traditional noisiness, thus presenting the audience with the humorous scenario of Dionysos reacting unfavorably to his own noise.

Euripides' *Bacchae* provides the fullest extant treatment of Dionysiac sound and an individual's fictional reaction to it. Pentheus initially threatens to silence Dionysos and his cult (*Bacchae* 239-241; 511-514), but his attempts to assert control over the situation result in him being tricked into participation and complicity. The Messenger reports that, as Pentheus was dying, "it was all one common noise – he groaning as long as his breath held out, and the women howling in triumph" (*Bacchae* 1131-1133). While there are no dire consequences for Dionysos in *Frogs*, his actions follow the same pattern as Pentheus' – he attempts to silence the frogs, engages with them, and is unwittingly drawn into their performance (*Frogs* 240; 257-262). Both *Bacchae* and *Frogs* present Dionysiac sound as aggravating, pervasive, and ultimately alluring.

The joke in *Frogs* is twofold: Dionysiac sound is implicitly annoying, and Dionysos himself is now being subjected to the irritation he and his followers have inflicted upon others in the past.

Dionysos reacts to the Initiate Chorus from another perspective. His attentive listening and desire to play and dance (*Frogs* 418) can be interpreted as a parody of a god's reaction to a cletic hymn. The initiates' desire for a divine audience is fulfilled by an eavesdropping buffoonish Dionysos who is quite taken by their song. The joke continues with the superficially serious chorus, who invokes Dionysos by the cultic title Iakchos, failing to recognize him as their most attentive listener. In what can be understood as a parodic (and failed) epiphany, Dionysos' assertion of his true identity in line 631 goes unheeded. He later confirms his identity offstage. He never recognizes himself in the initiates' hymn, and they do not recognize him as their god. Despite this disconnect, however, Dionysos is captivated and moved by their song. The hymn is a success.

The two choruses of *Frogs* were likely composed of the same individuals. It has even been postulated that the audience perceived them as a single chorus, costumed the same way throughout (Ford 2011). Even if this was not the case, it is unlikely that Dionysos' judgment of the choral songs reflects a real difference in musical quality between them. It may be, as some have suggested, that the songs simply differed in musical style (Campbell 1984; Ford 2011). Another possibility is that Dionysos was characterized inconsistently for the sake of humor. I suggest, however, that another explanation lies in how the fundamental soundmaker-audience relationship is configured. For those within the group – whether god or willing participant – Dionysiac sound is a welcome component of worship and revelry. When this same type of sound is imposed on outsiders, however, it becomes a discordant noise that threatens to ensnare them in its chaotic rhythms. The Dionysos of *Frogs* humorously demonstrates both possibilities.

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