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Poetics of Repetition in the Frogs in the *Frogs*

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Abstract: A reading of the parodos and the frog chorus of *Frogs* that argues they express a coherent, anthropologically inflected (and Aristophanic) view about the origins and nature of song. It is also argued that what we suppose to be distinct choruses of frogs and initiates are in fact one and the same. This study of comic lyric is a counterpart to my “‘A Song to Match my Song’: Lyric Doubling in Euripides’ *Helen*,” in *Allusion, Authority, and Truth: Critical Perspectives on Greek Poetic and Rhetorical Praxis*, ed. P. Mitsis and C. Tsigalos (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010). See my Academia.edu.

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NOTE: This is a lightly revised version of a talk given at the “International Conference on Greek and Roman Poetics” at Belgrade (4-9 Oct. 2011). I have profited from comments by Euwen Bowie, Nina Braginskaya, Claude Calame, Nikolai Grinster, Richard Hunter, Glenn Most, Ivanna Petrovic, Ian Rutherford and Niall Slater; I thank them all. A fuller and more fully documented version of the argument will appear as “Dionysus’ many names in Frogs” in A Different God? Dionysos and Ancient Polytheism, ed. Renate Schlesier (De Gruyter).

If you are interested in the history of poetics, you are likely to be interested in the history of criticism as well. If you are interested in the history of criticism, you are likely to be interested in Aristophanes’ *Frogs* as an invaluable witness to Athenian criticism in the high classical age. If you are interested in the *Frogs*, you are likely to be interested especially in its second half, the great poetry contest between Aeschylus and Euripides. The first 880 lines of the play or so seem to be mostly foolery as Dionysus and his slave make their way to the underworld.

I propose to focus on passages in the play’s first half, specifically, its first two musical numbers, to show that they imply a coherent, and I think Aristophanic, view about the nature of poetry. This will emerge if we read the texts not in light of the technical and rhetorical criticism that is mocked in the agôn, but in light of fifth-century anthropological speculation into the origins of songs and the cultural institutions they accompanied. The argument is based on close readings, so let us begin. I will start with the *parodos* but will have something to say about the frog chorus as well.

PARODOS

The cue for the parodos is given at v. 312 when Xanthias and Dionysus hear the sound of auloi and smell mystic torches. Heracles had earlier warned them (in 154) that they would encounter initiates in the underworld, and so when the chorus appears chanting "ἱακχ', ὦ ἱακχε, ἱακχ', ὦ ἱακχε, Xanthias infers that "these are they" (Τοῦτ' ἔστ' ἐκεῖνο, 318). Dionysus agrees (321) and they withdraw to watch, to be an audience.

Xanthias' inference is based on the fact that Iakkhos was Dionysus' special epithet for the Eleusinian procession—indeed the parodos of Frogs is the fullest presentation of Iakkhos on the Attic stage, as has been illuminatingly shown in Fritz Graf's analysis of Eleusinian elements in this part of Frogs.¹

Iakkhos is the keynote of the parodos. Of the four hymns the chorus goes on to sing, the first and the last are addressed to him. This focus on Iakkhos is acoustically enforced by repeating his name many times. The first hymn, in cultic ionics, opens by invoking the god as πολυτίμητε, a conventional enough epithet, but the Iakh' ô Iakhe that follows may suggest that his "many honors" will consist in his name being pronounced again and again.

This little strophe is a cletic hymn bidding the god to join their choral dance (χορείαν, 334); and Iakkhos arrives as the antistrophe begins, probably in the form of lighted torches taken up by the chorus (340).² (This symbolic epiphany will be bodied out when Xanthias and Dionysus actually join the chorus in 343 ff.) The praesens deus is greeted with another repetition of his name (341), and the rejuvenated chorus bids him lead out the procession (351-2).

After this song the chorus turns to the audience in an anapestic quasi-parabasis (353-71). They maintain the initiatory atmosphere by beginning with a call for ritual

¹ Fritz Graf, *Eleusis und die orphische Dichtung Athens in vorhellenistischer Zeit* (Berlin, 1974), esp. 40-51.

² Wilson daggers the text at 340 in his OCT, but either ἦκεις or ἦκει seems necessary.

euphêmia and ending with a call for songs appropriate to “this festival and its all night revels” (370-71), upon which follow a hymn to Soteira (372-382) and “another kind of song” (ἐτέρων ὕμνων ιδέαν) to Demeter and her “chaste” rites (385-393). The song cycle is capped with a final hymn in three iambic stanzas urging Iakkhos to follow the pilgrims to “the goddess” (400). Again, the name sounds often: the chorus begins with the same invocation as the first, Ἰακχε ὦ πολυτίμητε at 398 and each of stanzas concludes with a new refrain, “Iakkhos, friend-of-choruses” Ἰακχε φιλοχορευτά (403, repeated at 408 and 413).

Now focusing the parodos on Dionysus in his aspect as Iakkhos is appropriate in a number of ways; as his final epithet φιλοχορευτά, suggests, he is invoked both as the patron of these Initiates’ processional song and as the patron of dramatic choruses generally, for the Aristophanes had slipped in a prayer for victory at the end of his hymn to Demeter (389 ff.). But I have pointed out that Aristophanes harps on the name Iakkhos, and one may ask if there is a reason for the poet’s repeated return to this cry? I think the answer is given at the opening of the last song at 398, where Iakkhos is praised as having “invented the sweetest of festival songs” (μέλος ἐορτῆς / ἥδιστον εὐρών, 398-9). A god’s beneficent inventions (heurein) are commonly praised in hymns, but what aetiological story is alluded to here?

Here we need to take a step back and consider the history of the epithet Iakkhos. It was interesting to Aristophanes, I will suggest, because its sound testified to its history, to the stages by which it evolved from an impulsive shout to divine name.³ The word began as an inarticulate cry, ἰᾶχή, frequently joyous, which was perhaps at first not confined to Dionysus. In Athens, ἰᾶχή became especially associated with the Eleusinian mysteries in

³ On Iakkhos, see esp. Graf (1974) 51-66, Kevin Clinton, *Myth and Cult: the iconography of the Eleusinian mysteries* (Stockholm, 1992) 64-71 and, among older studies, Deubner (1932) 73-4, Foucart (1914) 110-13.

which participants shouted it out repeatedly during the procession from Athens to the sanctuary. In this context, *iakkhe* was at some point reinterpreted as a vocative and thus personified as *Íakkhos*, the tutelary daimon of the procession. In due course *Íakkhos* acquired concrete form: an image of him was carried in the procession by the *Iakhagogos* and his statue was placed beside *Demeter* and *Kore* in a temple at Athens--holding a torch to symbolize the nighttime arrival of the procession at Eleusis. Finally, the appellation *Iakkhos* came to be used by the poets as an epithet of *Dionysus*, like *bakkhos*; as such, the word was metonymically extended to the song typically addressed to him. Graf attributes the *Iakkhos*-*Dionysus* connection to the highly excited atmosphere of the procession, which involved ecstatic dancing and a *pannukhis* on arrival.

When each of these developments from cry to god occurred is unclear. It used to be thought that the daimon *Iakkhos* was not invented until after *Salamis*, for which the main evidence was an anecdote in *Herodotus*.⁴ *Herodotus* (8.65) records an incident he attributes to *Dicaeus*, an exiled Athenian in the service of Persia. Just before the battle of *Salamis*, *Dicaeus* was devastating the *Thriasian* plain with the Spartan *Demaratus* when they saw an enormous cloud of dust heading their way from *Eleusis*, as though 30,000 men were on the march. From this cloud emerged an extraordinary sound, which *Dicaeus*, the Athenian, perceived was the mystical *Iakkhos* cry (τὸν μυστικὸν ἱακχόν). But *Demaratus*, who is unfamiliar with the *Eleusinian* mysteries (ἀδαήμονα), does not understand the utterance (τὸ φθεγγόμενον), and so *Dicaeus* must explain that the “sound you hear is the *Iakkhos* [song] that the Athenians shout out at their festival” for the *Mother* and the *Maid* (καὶ τὴν φωνὴν τῆς ἀκούεις ἐν ταύτῃ τῇ ὀρτῇ ἱακχάζουσι). As

⁴ E. g. Foucart (1914) 110 (“Au temps des guerres médiques, il n’avait pas encore de personnalité. il désignait les chants et les acclamations poussées par le cortège des mystes.”); cf. Kern RE IX (1914) s.v. *Iakkhos*. Clinton (1992) 65 n. 71 takes the fact that no temple to *Iakkhos* has been found at *Eleusis* as a sign that he is a latecomer there.

the Athenians had abandoned Eleusis, Dicaeus reasons that this voice is divine (θεῖον τὸ φθεγγόμενον) and that a god will aid the Athenians and their allies.

Because neither the noun ἱακχος nor verb ἱακχάζουσι has any evident connection with Dionysus here, historians of religion used to argue that Dionysus-Iakkhos had not yet been added to the Eleusinian pantheon. But Graf and others note that about the time Herodotus wrote Sophocles equated Iakkhos and Dionysus in a hymn from the *Antigone* (1153). What I find significant about this passage is that Herodotus emphasizes the incomprehensibility of the Iakkhos cry by focalizing his story through two hearers, one of whom “knows” and another who does not. Therefore, even if personified Iakkhos be very old, there remained an awareness that the roots of his name lay in sheer vociferation. The connection between the god’s name, Iakkhos, and the mystic cry, iakhe, was kept alive by the related verbs iakhô, iakheô, which, like iakhê, usually describe noise, whether the clamor of resounding objects or the inarticulate cries of people in joy or fear. Hence when Dionysus is given this epithet at *Bacchae* 725, Dodds translated “Lord of Cries”

Back to the *Frogs* and the aition in 398, the readiest reason for making Iakkhos the inventor of “the sweetest of festival songs” is that the song of Eleusinian initiates, what Herodotus calls the *mustikos* Iakkhos, was “invented” by Iakkhos in the sense that the god lent his name to the refrain and thence gave form and name to this new joyful song.

With his typical combination of insight and irreverence, Aristophanes turns the historical development from shout to name on its head: he congratulates the personified shout for having invented the song. Coming in the wake of so many invocations of Iakkhos, Aristophanes’ invention suggests what I call a poetics of repetition; a sound like iakhe is repeated as iakh’ ô iakhe, and the repetition is repeated and elaborated until we end up with a song to please a god. The comic poet takes pleasure in reducing a sacred cult song to the barely articulate expostulations of impassioned celebrants.

In fact, I think that Aristophanes, in this reductive mood, traces the Iakkhos song further back, all the way back to the animal realm. And that he used an anthropological approach to do so. This appears if we listen to the parodos while remembering the play's first song, the famous Frog chorus. When Dionysus mounts Charon's boat to cross the great marsh leading to the underworld (181), he is told he will hear (205) extraordinarily beautiful songs. These will come from frog-swans (βατράχων κύκνων, 206) which is oxymoronic, since frogs were no singers: one ancient etymology of "frog" took βάτραχος from "having a harsh call" (παρὰ τὸ βοήν τραχεῖαν ἔχειν).⁵

As Dionysus begins to row across the marsh, the famous refrain arises, Βρεκεκεκεξ κοαξ κοαξ (209). The chorus then identifies itself in a riddling periphrasis, and their astrophic iambo-trochaic song rewards close reading.

Λιμναῖα κρηνῶν τέκνα, 211
ξύναυλον ὕμνων βοὰν
φθεγξώμεθ', εὐγερυν ἑμὰν
ἀοιδάν, κοαξ κοαξ,

Marshy children of springs,
let us raise a call shared with the aulos,
my magnifloquent
song, koax koax

In high Lyric style, these children of marshy springs are called "marshy children of springs", and their croaking is elevated to a kind of song accompanied by the aulos. This unexpected characterization is supported by the novel epithet εὐγερυς in 213, a coinage

⁵ *Etymologicum genuinum* (Orion). Cf. Ar. *Aves* 769-84, Eur. *IT* 1104.

in the Marshes when at sacred Khurtoi time
the drunken revelers thronged my sanctuary.

The song that Dionysius and Xanthos hear in Hades is thus the same one that the frogs used to perform in the world above during the Anthesteria. Khutroi was the last day of the festival when the sanctuary would have been crowded with hung-over celebrants. With his genius for metaphor, Aristophanes envisions the croaking frogs en Limnais as a chorus responding antiphonally to Dionysus' groaning celebrants as they make their way "our sanctuary" (221, κατ' ἐμὸν τέμενος).

The frogs close this first song with their refrain (220), and in what follows insist on it twice more (223, 235). They are implicitly identifying their song with its croaked epithegma, and so when an exasperated Dionysus finally insults them as "nothing but koax" (227), they are happy to accept the characterization:

Εἰκότως γ', ὦ πολλά πράττων
Ἐμέ γὰρ ἔστερξαν εὐλυροί τε Μοῦσαι
καὶ κεροβάτας Πάν, ὁ καλαμόφθογγα παίζων· 230
προσεπιτέρπεται δ' ὁ φορμικτὰς Ἀπόλλων,
ἔνεκα δόνακος, ὃν ὑπολύριον
ἔνυδρον ἐν λίμναις τρέφω.

And fittingly, oh busybody,
for I am beloved by the fair-lyred Muses
and by horn-traveling Pan, who plays on the sounding reed.
Apollo the kitharist also delights in me,
for the sake of the reed, to which lyre's support

I give watery nurture in the marshes.

The marsh frogs are dear to the gods of music because they nurture the reed, which was, at least in olden times, a basic component of both wind and string instruments. The implicit aetiology supports troping croaks as a kind of music. Aristophanes' allusion here is not so much, as some have suggested, to the New Music, as to natural music, for the connections between the musical arts and the natural, material constituents of music-making was a subject of reflection in the fifth century. Euripides tersely expresses some of its paradoxes in a fragment: "the hymn-maker reed nurtured by the river Melas, the wise nightingale of fair-blowing auloi" (556 Nauck/Kannicht: τόν θ' ὑμνοποιὸν δόνα[χ', ὄν ἐκφύει Μέ]λας / ποταμὸς ἀηδὸν' εὐπνόων ἀύλων σοφῆν). The glide between music's roots in physis and in tekhnê is exemplified by Euripides' calling a river reed a "hymn-poet" (humnopoios), and in calling the nightingale, a natural singer, "wise": like the reed-poet, the wise aêdôn embodies both the naturalness and artificiality of song (aoidê), for aêdôn was also a name of the mouthpiece of an aulos (cf. Eur. Fr. 931).

Aristophanes' frog-chorus thus shows us a Dionysiac cult song returned to its source, its krênê, 211; in the marshes, a natural, watery landscape, reeds are musical instruments and animals a chorus. Hence there is a scientific, ethological tenor when Dionysus calls the frogs a "song-loving species" (φιλωδὸν γένος, 240).

The playful erasure of the border between natural and artistic music is also at the heart of the word βόαξ, an important verbal inspiration for Aristophanes' koax that commentators seem not to have noticed: Epicharmus (Fr. 29) and comic poets, including Aristophanes (Fr. 475), attest to boax as the name of a grunting fish. Aristotle says it is the only fish that makes a noise and explains its name onomatopoeically from its call (boa).⁷

⁷ Aristotle fr. 301. Cf. Athenaeus 287a (ὠνομάσθη δὲ παρὰ τὴν βοήν).

The boax and the frogs with their koax are watery animals at the lower border of human speech.

As the frogs go on they remain very much an animal chorus, and frog-behavior is depicted as a watery kind of choreography in 247 ff. Their nimble dance (χορείαν αιώλαν, 247-8) amidst galingale and reeds forecasts the holy chorale of the initiated in (cf. άγνήν, ιεράν ...χορείαν at 334. But the animal chorus stresses its sonority rather than meaningfulness: the last colon of their song is filled with a large onomatopoeic compound, πομφολυγοπαφλάσμασιν, that straddles the gap between language and noise.

It may be clear by now that I want to suggest that the burden of the frogs' refrain, koax koax—which Dionysus picks out as the essence of their song (“nothing but koax,” 227)—forecasts the initiates' iakkh' ô iakkhe in the parodos. Both are Dionysian chants—one a natural sound heard at the Anthesteria and the other an exstastic human cry as Dionysus' avatar lead celebrants to Eleusis—and both have at their core a short guttural phrase redoubled. (It is relevant to recall that birds were thought, by Alcman as well as Aristototele, to be able to sing because they had tongues; and so frog throats may provide sound, but the tongue articulation.) We can observe that at v. 217 the frogs use the verb iakheô for their croaking koax.

The Frogs' musical grunting, echoing from the play's first song to its parodos, suggests that the crude, hungover music for Dionysus in the Marshes during Anthesterion evolved seven months later and became a sacred epiclesis for his initiates at the Eleusinia. The incessant koax koax heard at Dionysus' sanctuary en Limnais is the natural sound from which sprang the Eleusinian song for Dionysus Iakkhos. The inventive Aristophanes etymologizes the ritual refrain as an ennobled croak, as if aware of the fact the fact that the divine epiclesis originated in an excited cry.

For the lyrics opening his play, then, Aristophanes drew on themes that had been invented and aired by such cultural anthropologists as Democritus and Prodicus. In this strongly Dionysian play, he has fun with one of his patron's best known songs by subjecting it to a critical perspective that held that song, like other social institutions, is rooted in nature and can over time progress from lower to higher stages of development. Aristophanes homes in on the song's endlessly repeated refrain and comically invests it with new force by tracing its roots to the watery depths of the material world. The effects of the reduction are complex: on the one hand, it may seem that Dionysus' sacred language is revealed to be at bottom pure nonsense, the pomp of the Eleusinia being a decked-out orgy; on the other hand, there is the suggestion that *ikakhe*, like *koax*, comes from the earth and has its roots in nature not in culture which may go astray. Whatever be song's origins, there is the further suggestion that, when repeated, and repeated in unison, these obscure old syllables can organize a people and create joy.

It seems worth going further and offering a suggestion about the unique doubled chorus this play has. I suggest that the connection between the two songs—the frog's *brekekekex* and the initiates' *iakh' ô iakkhe*—would have been very clear in performance if the two choruses were one and the same. The croaking frogs, which Dionysus only hears but does not see, are revealed when they appear in the *parodos* to be none other than the initiates whom Heracles had predicted. As the scholia note, Heracles only says at 205 that they will hear the frog-swans (*ἄκούσει*); the Frogs are not seen by Dionysus in the rowing scene, a dramaturgical touch also found in *Clouds*. But as the *parodos* begins and the chorus appears changing their earlier iambics for the ionics characteristic of cult song, Xanthias can infer “these are the ones” (*Τούτ' ἔστ' ἐκεῖνο*). The phrase has something of the flavor of an initiate's “aha” experience at the moment of revelation (cf. Plato *Symp.* 210E).

Xanthias' reaction is also a cue to the audience, for it now realizes that the promised Bacchic thiasos are a sublimated version of *rana ridibunda* and its guttural refrain in the marshes. This is perhaps as much a decision about staging the play as about textual interpretation, but I see no reason why the two choruses could not be the same. I am encouraged to see that Andreas Willi has argued for identifying the two choruses, though on very different grounds.⁸

In part, this equation reflects the comic tendency to find humor in reducing the spiritual to the physical. But behind the equivalence we may sense a more philosophical view, an enlightened anthropological approach to the origins of religious institutions such as underlies Teiresias' naturalistic explanation of the cults of Dionysus and Demeter in *Bacchae*. This outlook is extended to other cultural institutions, including the art of song, in a passage from Democritus (154 DK). In a progressivist scenario, Democritus imagines primitive man learning the arts of civilization from various animal species: just as we learned the art of weaving from spiders, so we learned "housebuilding from swallows, and song by imitating the swan and nightingale."⁹ In a relevant contrast with Aristophanes, Democritus traces song to the swan and nightingale, both thought beautiful singers, while the swallow, whose call struck the Greeks as chattering nonsense, teaches not singing but housebuilding. Aristophanes, however, is fond of nonsense language and so mates swans with frogs (at 207) to generate his natural chorus. And of course, this becomes the natural origin of the mumbo-jumbo of cult.

Such progressivist views were widely heard at the time. Prodicus seems to have influenced the discourse on Demeter and Dionysus in *Bacchae*, but Protagoras was of the

⁸ Willi Andreas, « Frösche, Sünder, Initianden: Zu einem Aristophanischen Rätsel », *MH* 65 (2008), p. 193-211.

⁹ Democritus 154 DK (χελιδόνος ἐν οἰκοδομίαι, καὶ τῶν λιγυρῶν, κύκνου καὶ ἀηδόνας, ἐν ὠιδῇι κατὰ μίμησιν). Cf. B 144 DK and Ford (2002) 145-6, with n. 57.

same school, and so too it seems was Diagoras of Melos. Before concluding I return briefly to the beginning of the parodos and Xanthias' recognition of the chorus' identity. At 320 I should read with Sommerstein, "They are singing at any rate the very same Iakkhos-song as Diagoras" (Ἄδουσι γοῦν τὸν Ἰακχὸν ὄνπερ Διαγόρας, 320). Aristarchus I think was right to read the proper name Diagoras here, though Dover's 1993 commentary and Wilson's 2008 OCT follow Apollodorus of Tarsus and print the weaker "through the aroga" (δι' ἀγορᾶς). Dover observes that "there is no doubt that utterance of the name 'Diagoras' on the comic stage in 405 would make the audience think not of lyric poetry but of 'atheism' and outrageous blasphemy," but he rejects mention of Diagoras as "a poor joke and theatrically pointless to say."¹⁰ In the context I have proposed, however, this person seems quite relevant for three reasons. First, Diagoras of Melos was known as a composer of songs for Dionysus, including dithyrambs; secondly, he acquired a reputation as an atheist who showed contempt for the Eleusinian mysteries;¹¹ finally, Epicurus puts Diagoras in the company of Prodicus and Critias as those who ascribed gods to convention, and explained belief in them by etymology, that is by historicizing their names.¹² If Aristophanes presents the iakkos hymn as a sublimated natural cry, it is the kind of thing that could be popularly associated with this scientific dithyrambist and enemy of the mysteries. Such a view is not only historically plausible, but fits the nuance of the Greek of 318-20 which marks Xanthias' logic with the particles pou and goun: Τοῦτ'

¹⁰ Dover (1993) 127-8. Wilson prints "through the Agora" in his OCT at 320, but is unenthusiastic enough about its relevance to record in his apparatus van Leeuwen's suggestion that Xanthias' thought is interrupted here.

¹¹ Schol. Aves 1073. He is mocked as impious in [Lysias] 6.17 of 399, and Socrates is called "Socrates of Melos" in Clouds (830) when he disbelieves in Zeus. He was reportedly outlawed possibly around 415 (Aves 1072-4; Crateros FGrH 342 F 16).

¹² See Obbink (1996) 352-3. Reading "Diagoras" here is strongly argued for by Janko (2001) 6-11 and (1997) 89-90; cf. 88 n. 234 on Frogs.

ἔστ' ἐκεῖν', ὧ δέσποθ'· οἱ μεμνημένοι / ἔνταῦθά που παίζουσιν, οὐς ἔφραξε νῶν. /
Ἄδουσι γοῦν τὸν Ἰακχὸν ὄνπερ Διαγόρας. Simply from hearing iakkh' ô iakkhe, he deduces that the singers are the initiates: “at any rate they are singing the Iakkhos song, the very one that Diagoras sings.”

In closing let us note that the underlying scenario here is the same as that in Herodotus. A pair of witnesses to Iakkhos' chorus fails at first to understand what it hears. In Herodotus, one is an Athenian insider, the other not; in Aristophanes, the insider should be Dionysus, for indeed the chorus is using one of his names; but the hapless god depends on the outsider slave for understanding. In comedy, the slave's eye is penetrating. He infers that “this is that,” he has a revelation. We too have a revelation if we realize that the annual Iakkhos song springs from the same source as the croaking of frogs heard each year in Dionysus' sanctuary.

The parodos of *Frogs*, then, has its own reflections to offer about poetry. Its attention to the insistently sonorous language of cult song explores the limits of articulate speech. One may suspect that the intelligentsia in the audience was ready to regard Dionysus' old cult names as sanctified nonsense. For Aristophanes, they are an opportunity to luxuriate in senselessness. Xanthias could see in the Iakkhos cry the same lesson Aristophanes saw, that beneath all the pomp and pretense of ritual display, the substance of religion was human speech, especially incomprehensible and misunderstood words whose greatest power was in sheer iteration. The exuberant comic poet delighted in the lesson that this name of Dionysus taught, a lesson we may paraphrase from a modern ironic lyricist, Wallace Stevens: like Aristophanes, Stevens saw that, “The imperfect is our paradise”, and he could have been speaking of Dionysus' many names when he added, “in this bitterness, delight . . . Lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds.”