

Homeric Hymn (7) to Dionysus

Translated by Gregory Nagy

¹ About Dionysus son of most glorious Semele ² my mind will connect, how it was that he made an appearance [*phainesthai*] by the shore of the barren sea ³ on a prominent headland, looking like a young man ⁴ at the beginning of adolescence. Beautiful were the locks of hair as they waved in the breeze surrounding him. [5] They were the color of deep blue. And a cloak he wore over his strong shoulders, ⁶ color of purple.

Then, all of a sudden, men seen from a ship with fine benches ⁷ —men who were pirates—came into view, as they were sailing over the wine-colored [*oinops*] sea [*pontos*]. ⁸ They were Etruscans. And they were being driven along by a destiny that was bad for them. The moment they saw him [= Dionysus], ⁹ they gave each other a knowing nod, and the very next thing, they were ashore, jumping out of the ship. Quickly they seized him and [10] sat him down inside their ship, happy in their hearts ¹¹ because they thought that he was the son of a line of kings nurtured by the sky god. ¹² That is what they thought he was. And they wanted to tie him up in harsh bondage, ¹³ but the ties of the bonds could not hold him, and the cords made of willow fell off him, all over the place, ¹⁴ falling right off his hands and feet. And he just sat there, smiling, [15] looking on with his deep blue eyes.

Meanwhile the steersman [*kubernētēs*] took note [*noein*], ¹⁶ right away, and he called out to his comrades [*hetairoi*] and said to them: ¹⁷ “What kind of superhuman force [*daimōn*] has possessed you all! What kind of god [*theos*] is this that you have seized and tried to tie up, ¹⁸ powerful as he is? Why, he is too much for the well-built ship to make room for. ¹⁹ You see, he must be either Zeus or Apollo, the one with the silver quiver, [20] or Poseidon. I tell you, he is not like mortal humans, ²¹ he is not like [*eikelos*] them at all. Rather, he is like the gods who have their dwellings in Olympus. ²² So come on, we should let him go, leaving him on the dark earth of the mainland. ²³ Let us do it right away. Do not manhandle him. What if he gets angry ²⁴ and stirs up winds that will make hardship, and a huge whirlwind?” [25] That is how he [= the steersman] spoke.

But the leader of the men reviled him [= the steersman], speaking with hateful words [*mūthos*]: ²⁶ “No, [not we but] you are the one who is possessed by some kind of superhuman force [*daimōn*]. Just [do your work and] watch for the wind [to start blowing from behind, and, once it starts blowing], you start hoisting the sail of the ship ²⁷ and hold on to all the ropes. As for this one [= the unrecognized Dionysus], he will be the concern [*melein*] of my men. ²⁸ I expect he will arrive [with us] in Egypt or maybe in Cyprus ²⁹ or maybe even in the land of the Hyperboreans or beyond. Wherever. In the end, [30] he will tell all: he will come around to saying who are his near and dear ones [*philoī*] and what are all the possessions he has ³¹ and he will tell about his siblings. And that is because a superhuman force [*daimōn*] has put him in our pathway.”

³² Having said this, he [= the leader himself] started hoisting the sail of the ship. ³³

Now a wind came and blew right into the middle of the sail, and the ropes that held it at both ends ³⁴ got all stretched to the limit. Then, right away, there appeared [*phainesthai*] to them things that would make anyone marvel.

[35] Wine. That is what happened first of all. It was all alongside the swift black ship. ³⁶ Sweet to drink, it was splashing around [the ship as if it were inside a cup], smelling good, and the fragrance that rose up ³⁷ was something immortalizing [*ambrosiā*]. The sailors were seized with amazement, all of them, at the sight. ³⁸ And then, all of a sudden, next to the top of the sail on both sides, there reached out ³⁹ a vine—here, and here too—and hanging from it were many [40] clusters of grapes. Around the mast, dark ivy was winding around, ⁴¹ teeming with blossoms. And—a thing of beauty and pleasure [*kharieis*—the berry sprang forth [from the ivy]. ⁴² The benches for rowing now had garlands [*stephanoi*] all over them.

Once they [= the sailors] saw all this, ⁴³ they started shouting at the steersman [*kubernētēs*], urging him ⁴⁴ to sail the ship back to land.

Meanwhile, he [= Dionysus] turned into a lion for them, right there in the ship, [45] looking horrific [*deinos*], at the prow. It roared a mighty roar. Then, in the middle of the ship, ⁴⁶ he [= Dionysus] made a bear, with a shaggy neck. Thus he [= Dionysus] made his signals [*sēmata*] appear [*phainein*]. ⁴⁷ It [= the bear] reared up, raging, while the lion, at the top of the deck, ⁴⁸ glared at them with its horrific looks. The men, terrified, were fleeing toward the stern of the ship, ⁴⁹ crowding around the steersman [*kubernētēs*], the one who had a heart [*thūmos*] that is moderate [*sōphrōn*]. [50] They just stood there, astounded [*ek-plag-entes*].

Then it [= the lion] all of a sudden leapt up ⁵¹ and took hold of the leader of the men, while they were trying to get out, rushing away from the bad destiny that was theirs. ⁵² They all together at the same time leapt out, once they saw what they saw, into the gleaming salt sea. ⁵³ They became dolphins.

As for the steersman [*kubernētēs*] —he [= Dionysus] took pity on him, ⁵⁴ holding him back [from leaping overboard]. He [= Dionysus] caused it to happen that he [= the steersman] became the most blessed [*olbios*] of all men, and he [= Dionysus] spoke for the record this set of words [*mūthos*]: [55] “Have courage, you radiant man, reached by a force that works from far away. You have achieved beauty and pleasure [*kharizesthai*] for my heart [*thūmos*]. ⁵⁶ I am Dionysus, the one with the great thundering sound. The mother who bore me ⁵⁷ was Semele, daughter of Kadmos, and Zeus made love to her.”

⁵⁸ Hail and take pleasure [*khairē*], [O Dionysus,] child of Semele with the beautiful looks. There is no way ⁵⁹ I could have my mind disconnect from you as I put together the beautiful cosmic order [*kosmein*] of my song.