

DIDASKALIA 

The Journal for Ancient Performance



photo: P. Winters/Theater of War

*Didaskalia is an electronic journal dedicated to the study of all aspects of ancient Greek and Roman performance.*

# DIDASKALIA

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## About Didaskalia

Didaskalia (διδασκαλία) is the term used since ancient times to describe the work a playwright did to teach his chorus and actors the play. The official records of the dramatic festivals in Athens were the διδασκαλία. *Didaskalia* now furthers the scholarship of the ancient performance.

*Didaskalia* is an English-language, online publication about the performance of Greek and Roman drama, dance, and music. We publish peer-reviewed scholarship on performance and reviews of the professional activity of artists and scholars who work on ancient drama.

We welcome submissions on any aspect of the field. If you would like your work to be reviewed, please write to [editor@didaskalia.net](mailto:editor@didaskalia.net) at least three weeks in advance of the performance date. We also seek interviews with practitioners and opinion pieces. For submission guidelines, go to [didaskalia.net](http://didaskalia.net).

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## Note

*Didaskalia* is an online journal. This print representation of Volume 8 is an inadequate approximation of the web publication at [didaskalia.net](http://didaskalia.net), which includes sound, video, and live hyperlinks.

## The Twice Born and One More: Portraying Dionysus in the *Bacchae*

Jaclyn Dudek

Wayne State University

Euripides' *Bacchae* offers a great deal of flexibility in staging and interpretation because of its mystical and exotic content. In the prominence it gives to illusion, spectacle, and forest setting, it may even be likened to Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*. By taking some cues from one production of Shakespeare's enchanted comedy, we may be able to enhance and perhaps even clarify the more subtle aspects of this ancient tragedy.



Conference Presentation

video: Randolph College  
[youtube.com/watch?v=b-jChIEO8gs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b-jChIEO8gs)

In her productions of *Midsummer*, University of Michigan Residential College Director Kate Mendeloff utilized to great success three actors to play the part of Puck. All three actors were on stage at all times, alternating and interweaving lines as well bodies to create one thoroughly nonhuman entity. The effect highlighted the full range of Puck's personality while also making his character lighting fast, if not omnipresent. Dionysus, who like Puck enjoys several different monikers, occupies a similar but more frightening position in *Bacchae*. This paper explores staging possibilities for a similar tripartite Dionysus, citing textual, mythical, and cult support for this interpretation.

### Hot ice and wondrous strange snow.

As practitioners of ancient drama, we are all familiar with the problem of "schooling the audience" on obscure mythological references. A tripartite Dionysus may be useful in demonstrating some of the complexities of the mythical nexus that might otherwise be lost on a general audience or necessitate copious footnotes in the program. I argue that this staging conceit may enable a director to articulate more precisely the desired themes and tone and allow the audience to get a taste of the vast subtext behind Dionysus and his cult. Similarly, such a staging emphasizes reconciliation of the dual aspects embodied within Dionysus—drunk/sober, comic/tragic, civilized/barbarian—and therefore man's place between these extremes. For purposes of argumentation I will refer this concept as "Trionysus."

### The name's the thing to catch the conscience of the King.

Pentheus is told by the god that he is aptly named for suffering. While ironic on many levels, this comment also betrays the Greek fondness for deriving people's fates from their names, often in a curious way. Yes, Pentheus means pain, but what are the meanings behind the god's titles? First we have three names utilized in the text, each with its own layer of meanings and imagery: Bromius, the "roarer," often described as bull horned; Bacchus, the wine giver; and Dionysus, the Olympian son of Zeus and Semele. Taken together, they represent the attributes of a very "*poikilos theos*" ("complicated god"). Accordingly, each manifestation of the god would be played by a different actor. Let's explore the implications: three names, three manifestations, three ways for Pentheus to get it wrong. The prominence of the god's titles, their repetition within the choruses, and god(s) in the plural running about all reinforce the gross act of impiety on the part of Pentheus, who despite all his learning ignores the overwhelming amount of etymological "proof." In effect, he is not denying one god but three, surely making him a "*theomachus*," a god fighter.

## And neigh, and bark and grunt and roar and burn

Just as Puck can shift his shape to frighten the Rude Mechanicals, Dionysus takes full advantage of deception and disguise to befuddle Pentheus. A “Trionysus” staging is well suited to synchronous mayhem and, depending on the director’s taste, enhances the comedy of more macabre effects. One instance where the text and action thoroughly support such a staging is during Dionysus’ monologue in which he describes the destruction of the palace and his escape from prison. The god refers to himself or to his aspects in the third person, manifesting himself as a great bull, a fire, and as the stranger.

At this same time, Bacchus came and shook the palace and fire ringed my mother’s tomb. Seeing this, Pentheus thought the palace burned and he scampered back and forth, ordering his servants to carry the entire river to the house. . . . Then Bromius created a phantom in the courtyard, my exact copy.

These are not just reiterations of the god’s epithets but his “first names,” as it were. Here we see how the god has “split” himself into his requisite parts as he calls them by name. A second similar example of shape shifting is that described by the chorus:

Reveal yourself like Bull,  
Or Snake with many heads  
Or in the shape of Lion spitting flames,  
Go Bacchus, wild beast.

When Pentheus, leaving the rational safety of the city, enters into a wilderness resplendent with curiosities and mirages, he says that the god appears to grow horns and two suns occupy the sky. Here the dissolution of boundaries between the literal and figurative is made apparent as reality and hallucinations intermingle to reveal the god’s true form. Pentheus sees the stranger grow horns because Bromius *has* horns. If he can see two suns, why not all three aspects of this god?

We may also construct the tripartite character of the god from his divine, transcendent, and mortal forms—from father, son, and holy ghost, as it were. Dionysus’ birth by fire, his rebirth from the father god, and his human avatar as the mysterious stranger have special significance in this play. This more “metaphysical reading” is also substantiated by the mystery cult of Dionysus and the god’s prominence within the Orphic religion, which was popular in Macedonia. According to the Orphic myth, the god Zagreus was killed and eaten by the Titans. His heart was rescued by the Olympians and placed in Semele, who later bore Dionysus. As an alternative to the Olympian concept of death, Orphic philosophy maintains the transmigration of the soul. In Orphic hymns to Dionysus he is referred to as *Triogonos* (the thrice born) and occupies a predominate role as a “dying god” archetype with close associations to the harvest cycle. Euripides may have become familiar with the Orphic conception during his stay at the Macedonian court. Throughout the text, we see a preoccupation with the image of the circle, which could be interpreted as symbolic of the rhythms of nature, the journey of soul, or the god’s own dance.

## Bless thee, for thou art translated

Much study has been devoted to the “masks” of Dionysus in terms of levels of deception. The *Bacchae* is rife with tricks, traps, and disguises both literal and metaphorical, but the interplay between these two realms may be extended to the actors themselves. If a director is attempting a more traditional staging with masks, “Trionysus” could be utilized to heighten the magical and the ambiguous, or merely as a wink to ancient convention. If we take into account the three-actor rule, by which a single character may have been played by multiple actors as the scene dictated, a Trionysus staging could also be used in conjunction with masks allowing for the cycling of actors for each scene. Therefore, in a departure from

Mendeloff's original conception, in which the actors were visible and engaged at all times, *Bacchae's* three actors could change roles in between scenes, as in the ancient conceit, with the benefit of masks to ensure continuity.

My initial rationale for a Trionysus staging was twofold: as one of the tripartite Pucks, I found the division downright fun and an excellent study in ensemble acting, as well as an effective exercise in pure fantastic spectacle and visual interest. However, as I studied the text more closely, I found that this staging moved the plot along and reinforced many of the themes of the play. Whether the concept is used to demonstrate the various personalities or attributes of the god, to underscore mythic archetypes and ritual, or to enhance magical effects, such a staging creates a level of mystery and wonder that is central to the Dionysian experience. We must remember that the power of the play is the god's ability simultaneously to dissolve and then reconstitute order, leaving the audience with a sense of both awe and vulnerability—reminding us, perhaps painfully, *Lord, what fools these mortals be.*