

“The Blessings of Madness”

Dionysos, Madness, and Scholarship

Fritz Graf

Nonnos of Panopolis, a poet still to be better known to literary scholars and professional mythologists alike, dedicates almost the first quarter of his lengthy epic poem on the exploits of the god Dionysos, the *Dionysiaka*, to the life of his hero and his Theban ancestors before he has him set out on his first defining undertaking, the conquest of India¹. In Nonnos’ story, Dionysos spent most of his youth in the mountains of Phrygia, with the Mountain Mother, Rhea-Kybele; she introduced him, among other things, to chariotceering (with lions instead of horses) and to hunting, the two skills he needed most for his perplexing military career. It seems surprisingly appropriate to think of young Dionysos as another Achilles, brought up in the cave of Chiron, but now with the close and almost homoerotic relationship between Dionysos and Ampelos, on which Nonnos dwells at some surprising length².

The entire narration deserves much more analysis than I can give it in this context; it is an intriguing piece of narrative that invites a revision of the initiatory pattern in myth and its narrative reception and transformation. In what follows, however, I will confine myself to one detail of this narration only, its earlier history, and its implications for the understanding of Dionysos.

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The reason, according to Nonnos, why Dionysos was brought up in the forests of the Phrygian mountains was a concern for his safety. Twice, angry Hera sent madness to whoever cared for the baby god. First Hermes brought the new-born baby to the daughters of the river-god Lamos in Cilicia who served as his nurses; but Hera struck them with a murderous rage, and Hermes could save him from

1 The excellent Budé Edition is slowly growing (presently 38 out of 48 books are available); two good introductions are Pierre Chauvin, *Mythologie et géographie dionysiaques. Recherches sur l'oeuvre de Nonnos de Panopolis* (Clermont-Ferrand: ADOSA, 1991), and Robert Shorrock, *The Challenge of Epic. Allusive Engagement in The Dionysiaca of Nonnos*, Mnemosyne Suppl. 210 (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

2 Nonnos, *Dionysiaca* 9.25 – 12.397.

Blessings Of Madness

Richard Kostelanetz



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