

Homeric Hymns to Dionysus

From Martin L. West, editor and translator, *Homeric Hymns, Homeric Apocrypha, Lives of Homer* (Loeb Classical Library, 2003)

Homeric Hymn 1. To Dionysus (pp. 26-31)

This hymn exists only in fragments. It begins as follows:

For some say it was at Drakanos, some on windy Ikaros, some on Naxos, O scion of Zeus, Bull god, and some at Alpheios the deep-swirling river [that Semele conceived and bore you to Zeus whose sport is the thunderbolt], while others, Lord, say that it was at Thebes you were born. All false! The father of gods and men gave you birth far from humankind, to conceal you from white-armed Hera. There is a place Nysa, a mountain most high, burgeoning with forest, in a distant part of Phoenicia, almost at the waters of the Nile. No one crosses there by ship, for it has no harbour where curly-tipped ships can ride: a steep cliff encloses it all round to a great height.

Martin L. West tells us that the complete hymn,

apparently contained the story, well known to poets and vase painters from around 600 BC, of how Dionysus came to be received in Olympus and accepted by Hera. When she gave birth to Hephaestus she was disgusted at the crippled child she had borne and threw him down from heaven into the sea. There he stayed for years with the Nereids, perfecting his engineering skills. Then he sent his mother a fine throne, in which he had incorporated a secret mechanism. When she sat down in it, she found herself trapped. None of the other gods was able to free her. It was clear that Hephaestus had to be induced to come back and undo what he had done. Ares undertook to go and fetch him by force. He went off, but failed to achieve his object, because Hephaestus defended himself with fire, which Ares could not face. Then Dionysus went equipped with wine, made Hephaestus drunk, and brought him back to Olympus in jolly mood, riding on a donkey or mule. He set Hera free, and she rewarded Dionysus by persuading the other Olympians to admit him to their number. (pp. 6-7)

The hymn concludes:

Be propitious, Bull god, women-frenzier! We singers sing of you as we begin and as we end; there is no way to take heed for holy singing while heedless of you.

Homeric Hymn 26. To Dionysus (pp. 206-7)

Of ivy-haired Dionysus the mighty roarer first I sing, Zeus' and glorious Semele's splendid son, whom the lovely-haired nymphs took to their bosoms from his divine father and reared and fostered attentively in Nysa's glens; and he grew according to his father's design in the fragrant cave, numbered among the immortals. After the goddesses had raised him, god of much song, he took to going about the wooded valleys, wreathed with ivy and bay; the nymphs would follow along as he led, and the noise of the revel pervaded the boundless woodland.

So I salute you, Dionysus of the abundant grape clusters: grant that we may come again in happiness at the due time, and time after time for many a year.

Homeric Hymn 7. To Dionysus (pp. 184-89)

Of Dionysus, glorious Semele's son, I will make remembrance: how he appeared by the shore of the barren sea, on a jutting headland, in the likeness of a youth in first manhood; the fine sable locks waved about him, and he had a cloak of crimson about his strong shoulders. Suddenly men from a galley came speeding over the wine-faced-sea, freebooters from Tuscany, led on by an ill doom. When they saw him, they nodded to one another, and at once leapt out, seized him, and set him aboard their ship, exulting, for they reckoned he was the son of a princely line fostered by Zeus. And they meant to bind him in grievous-bonds; but the bonds would not contain him, the osiers fell clear away from his hands and feet, while he sat there smiling with his dark eyes. When the helmsman saw it, he at once cried out to his comrades:

“Madmen, which of the gods is this that you would bind prisoner?—a mighty one, our sturdy ship cannot support him. This is either Zeus, or silverbow Apollo, or Poseidon; he is not like mortal men, but the gods who dwell on Olympus. Come on, let's put him ashore straight away on the dark land. Don't lay hands on him, or he may be angered and raise fierce winds and tempest!”

So he spoke, but the captain rebuked him harshly: “Madman, you watch the wind; help me hoist the sail, catch all the sheets together. Leave this fellow for men to worry about. I fancy he will get to Egypt, or Cyprus, or the Hyperboreans, or beyond, and in the end he'll speak out and tell us his kinsmen and their possessions and who his brothers are, seeing that fortune has thrown him among us.”

With these words he turned to hoist the mast and sail. The wind blew full into the sail, and they tightened the sheets at the sides. But suddenly they began to see miraculous apparitions. First of all, wine gushed out over the dark swift ship, sweet-tasting and fragrant, and there rose a smell ambrosial, and the sailors were all seized with astonishment as they saw it. Then along the top of the sail there spread a vine in both directions, hung with many grape clusters. About the mast dark ivy was winding, all flowering, and pretty berries were out on it; and all the tholes were decorated with garlands. When they saw this, then they did start calling on the helmsman to take the ship to land. But the god became a lion in the ship, a terrible lion in the bows, and he roared loud; and amidships he made a shaggy-maned bear, to signal his power. Up it reared in fury, while the lion at the top of the deck stood glaring fearsomely. They fled to the stern, and about the prudent-hearted helmsman they halted in terror. Without warning the lion sprang forward and seized the captain. The others all leapt out into the sea when they saw it, to avoid an ill doom, and they turned into dolphins. But as for the helmsman, the god took pity on him and held him back, and gave him the highest blessings, saying:

“Be not afraid, good mariner, lief to my heart. I am Dionysus the mighty roarer, born to Cadmus' daughter Semele in union of love with Zeus.”

I salute you, child of fair Semele; there is no way to adorn sweet singing while heedless of you.