

INTRODUCTION

Euripides wrote *The Bacchae* in the last years of his life during a self-imposed exile in Macedon. It was produced in Athens after his death, which occurred in 406 B.C., and won a posthumous first prize.

Dionysus himself speaks a most explicit prologue, setting forth the facts of his case, and the action proceeds from this point along clearly drawn lines. The reader needs no summary. But a few comments may help. Dionysus, on stage as a mortal, is a new god fighting for recognition as a god in the city of his birth, which should be the first to recognize him and has rejected him. If he is the acknowledged son of Zeus and Semele, he would be at least heroic; in this case he is divine. If Zeus is not his father, he is a bastard founding and an impostor. Through madness and slaughter he punishes his doubting kinsmen and is established as a god at the end.

The actual drama is played out as a struggle between two young men, Dionysus and his cousin Pentheus, master of Thebes. Above and beyond the individuals, even the god, is what Dionysus stands for, not wine only, but a new kind of religion. Accepted, it means pious devotion; resisted, it will still force its way in, as madness. The devout Bacchae of the Chorus have accepted; the mad women in the hills have had Bacchism forced on them. Pentheus is defeated by invasion from within, and his integrity has surrendered to the power of Dionysus before he goes to his death. The utterances of the Chorus constantly go beyond the immediate issues of the action, to celebrate a new religious feeling, open to the will of all human beings, barbarians as well as Hellenes, the weak, poor, and unlettered as well as the strong, rich, and wise. These choral odes, the wildest and most original to be found in Euripides, do somewhat to relieve the horrors in a story of vengeance and brutal punishment.

NOTE

The text of this translation is the Oxford text of Gilbert Murray, supplemented by the brilliant commentary of E. R. Dodds.

The Bacchae
by Euripides

CHARACTERS

Dionysus (also called Bromius, Erius, and Bacchus)

Chorus of Asian Bacchae (followers of Dionysus)

Teiresias

Cadmus

Pentheus

Attendant

First Messenger

Second Messenger

Agave

Coryphaeus (chorus leader)

For Anne and George

ex voto

XAIPETE

THE BACCHAE

SCENE: Before the royal palace at Thebes. On the left is the way to Cithaeron; on the right, to the city. In the center of the orchestra stands, still smoking, the vine-covered tomb of Semele, mother of Dionysus.

Enter Dionysus. He is of soft, even effeminate, appearance. His face is beardless; he is dressed in a fawn-skin and carries a thyrsus (i.e., a stalk of fennel tipped with ivy leaves). On his head he wears a wreath of ivy, and his long blond curls ripple down over his shoulders. Throughout the play he wears a smiling mask.

Dionysus

I am Dionysus, the son of Zeus, come back to Thebes, this land where I was born. My mother was Cadmus' daughter, Semele by name, midwived by fire, delivered by the lightning's blast.

And here I stand, a god incognito, disguised as man, beside the stream of Dirce and the waters of Ismenus. There before the palace I see my lightning-married mother's grave, and there upon the ruins of her shattered house the living fire of Zeus still smolders on in deathless witness of Hera's violence and rage against my mother. But Cadmus wins my praise: he has made this tomb a shrine, sacred to my mother. It was I who screened her grave with the green of the clustering vine.

Far behind me lie those golden-rivered lands, Lydia and Phrygia, where my journeying began. Overland I went, across the steppes of Persia where the sun strikes hotly down, through Bactrian fastness and the grim waste of Media. Thence to rich Arabia I came;

and so, along all Asia's swarming littoral
of towered cities where Greeks and foreign nations,
mingling, live, my progress made. There
I taught my dances to the feet of living men,
establishing my mysteries and rites
that I might be revealed on earth for what I am:
a god.

And thence to Thebes.

This city, first
in Hellas, now shrills and echoes to my women's cries,
their ecstasy of joy. Here in Thebes
I bound the fawn-skin to the women's flesh and armed
their hands with shafts of ivy. For I have come
to refute that slander spoken by my mother's sisters—
those who least had right to slander her.
They said that Dionysus was no son of Zeus,
but Semele had slept beside a man in love
and fathered off her shame on Zeus—a fraud, they sneered,
contrived by Cadmus to protect his daughter's name.
They said she lied, and Zeus in anger at that lie
blasted her with lightning.

Because of that offense
I have stung them with frenzy, hounded them from home
up to the mountains where they wander, crazed of mind,
and compelled to wear my orgies' livery.
Every woman in Thebes—but the women only—
I drove from home, mad. There they sit,
rich and poor alike, even the daughters of Cadmus,
beneath the silver firs on the roofless rocks.
Like it or not, this city must learn its lesson:
it lacks initiation in my mysteries;
that I shall vindicate my mother Semele
and stand revealed to mortal eyes as the god
she bore to Zeus.

Cadmus the king has abdicated,
leaving his throne and power to his grandson Pentheus;

who now revolts against divinity, in me;
thrusts me from his offerings; forgets my name
in his prayers. Therefore I shall prove to him
and every man in Thebes that I am god
indeed. And when my worship is established here,
and all is well, then I shall go my way
and be revealed to other men in other lands.
But if the men of Thebes attempt to force
my Bacchae from the mountainside by threat of arms,
I shall marshal my Maenads and take the field.
To these ends I have laid my deity aside
and go disguised as man.

(He wheels and calls offstage.)

On, my women,
women who worship me, women whom I led
out of Asia where Timolus heaves its rampart
over Lydia!

On, comrades of my progress here!
Come, and with your native Phrygian drum—
Rhea's drum and mine—pound at the palace doors
of Pentheus! Let the city of Thebes behold you,
while I return among Cithaeron's forest glens
where my Bacchae wait and join their whirling dances.

(Exit Dionysus as the Chorus of Asian Bacchae comes
dancing in from the right. They are dressed in
fawn-skins, crowned with ivy, and carry
thyrsi, timbrels, and flutes.)

Chorus

Out of the land of Asia,
down from holy Timolus,
speeding the service of god,
for Bromius we come!
Hard are the labors of god;
hard, but his service is sweet.
Sweet to serve, sweet to cry:

Bacchus! Evehé!

—You on the streets!

—You on the roads!

—Make way!

—Let every mouth be hushed. Let no ill-omened words
profane our tongues.

—Make way! Fall back!

—Hush.

—For now I raise the old, old hymn to Dionysus.

—Blessèd, blessèd are those who know the mysteries of god.

—Blessèd is he who hallows his life in the worship of god,

he whom the spirit of god possesseth, who is one

with those who belong to the holy body of god.

—Blessèd are the dancers and those who are purified,

who dance on the hill in the holy dance of god.

—Blessèd are they who keep the rite of Cybele the Mother.

—Blessèd are the thyrsus-bearers, those who wield in their hands

the holy wand of god.

—Blessèd are those who wear the crown of the ivy of god.

—Blessèd, blessèd are they: Dionysus is their god!

—On, Bacchae, on, you Bacchae,

bear your god in triumph home!

Bear on the god, son of god,

escort your Dionysus home!

Bear him down from Phrygian hill,

attend him through the streets of Hellas!

—So his mother bore him once

in labor bitter; lightning-struck,

forced by fire that flared from Zeus,

consumed, she died, untimely torn,

in childbed dead by blow of light!

Of light the son was born!

—Zeus it was who saved his son;

with speed outrunning mortal eye,

bore him to a private place,
bound the boy with clasps of gold;

in his thigh as in a womb,

concealed his son from Hera's eyes.

—And when the weaving Fates fulfilled the time,

the bull-horned god was born of Zeus. In joy

he crowned his son, set serpents on his head—

wherefrom, in piety, descends to us

the Maenad's writhing crown, her *chevelure* of snakes.

—O Thebes, nurse of Semele,

crown your hair with ivy!

Grow green with bryony!

Redden with berries! O city,

with boughs of oak and fir,

come dance the dance of god!

Fringe your skins of dappled fawn

with tufts of twisted wool!

Handle with holy care

the violent wand of god!

And let the dance begin!

He is Bromius who runs

to the mountain!

to the mountain!

where the throng of women waits,

driven from shuttle and loom,

possessed by Dionysus!

—And I praise the holies of Crete,

the caves of the dancing Curetes,

there where Zeus was born,

where helmed in triple tier

around the primal drum

the Corybantes danced. They,

they were the first of all

whose whirling feet kept time

to the strict beat of the taut hide
and the squeal of the wailing flute.
Then from them to Rhea's hands
the holy drum was handed down;
but, stolen by the raving Satyrs,
fell at last to me and now
accompanies the dance
which every other year
celebrates your name:

Dionysus!

—He is sweet upon the mountains. He drops to the earth
from the running packs.
He wears the holy fawn-skin. He hunts the wild goat
and kills it.
He delights in the raw flesh.
He runs to the mountains of Phrygia, to the mountains
of Lydia he runs!
He is Bromius who leads us! *Evohé!*

—With milk the earth flows! It flows with wine!
It runs with the nectar of bees!

—Like frankincense in its fragrance
is the blaze of the torch he bears.
Flames float out from his trailing wand
as he runs, as he dances,
kindling the stragglers,
spurring with cries,
and his long curls stream to the wind!

—And he cries, as they cry, *Evohé!*—
On, Bacchae!
On, Bacchae!
Follow, glory of golden Tmolus,
hymning-god
with a rumble of drums,

with a cry, *Evohé!* to the Evian god,
with a cry of Phrygian cries,
when the holy flute like honey plays
the sacred song of those who go
to the mountain!

to the mountain!

—Then, in ecstasy, like a colt-by-its-grazing-mother,
the Bacchante runs with flying feet, she leaps!

(The Chorus remains grouped in two semicircles about the
orchestra as Teiresias makes his entrance. He is in-
congruously dressed in the bacchant's fawn-skin
and is crowned with ivy. Old and blind,
he uses his thyrsus to tap his way.)

Teiresias

Ho there, who keeps the gates?

Summon Cadmus—
Cadmus, Agenor's son, the stranger from Sidon
who built the towers of our Thebes.

Go, someone.

Say Teiresias wants him. He will know what errand
brings me, that agreement, age with age, we made
to deck our wands, to dress in skins of fawn
and crown our heads with ivy.

(Enter Cadmus from the palace. Dressed in Dionysiac
costume and bent almost double with age, he is an
incongruous and pathetic figure.)

Cadmus

My old friend,

I knew it must be you when I heard your summons.
For there's a wisdom in his voice that makes
the man of wisdom known.

But here I am,

dressed in the costume of the god, prepared to go.
Insofar as we are able, Teiresias, we must

do honor to this god, for he was born my daughter's son, who has been revealed to men, the god, Dionysus.

Where shall we go, where shall we tread the dance, tossing our white heads in the dances of god?

Expond to me, Teiresias.
For in such matters you are wise.

Surely
I could dance night and day, untiringly beating the earth with my thyrsus! And how sweet it is to forget my old age.

Teiresias
It is the same with me.
I too feel young, young enough to dance.

Cadmus
Good. Shall we take our chariots to the mountain?
Teiresias
Walking would be better. It shows more honor to the god.

Cadmus
So be it. I shall lead, my old age conducting yours.

Teiresias
The god will guide us there with no effort on our part.

Cadmus
Are we the only men who will dance for Bacchus?

Teiresias
They are all blind.
Only we can see.

Cadmus
But we delay too long.
Here, take my arm.

Teiresias
Link my hand in yours.

Cadmus
I am a man, nothing more. I do not scoff at heaven.

Teiresias
We do not trifle with divinity.
No, we are the heirs of customs and traditions hallowed by age and handed down to us by our fathers. No quibbling logic can topple them, whatever subtleties this clever age invents.
People may say: "Aren't you ashamed? At your age, going dancing, wreathing your head with ivy?"
Well, I am *not* ashamed. Did the god declare that just the young or just the old should dance? No, he desires his honor from all mankind.
He wants no one excluded from his worship.

Cadmus
Because you cannot see, Teiresias, let me be interpreter for you this once. Here comes the man to whom I left my throne, Echion's son, Pentheus, hastening toward the palace. He seems excited and disturbed. Yes, listen to him.

(Enter Pentheus from the right. He is a young man of athletic build, dressed in traditional Greek dress; like Dionysus, he is beardless. He enters excitedly, talking to the attendants who accompany him.)

Pentheus
I happened to be away, out of the city, but reports reached me of some strange mischief here,

stories of our women leaving home to frisk
in mock ecstasies among the thickets on the mountain,
dancing in honor of the latest divinity,
a certain Dionysus, whoever he may be!
In their midst stand bowls brimming with wine.
And then, one by one, the women wander off
to hidden nooks where they serve the lusts of men.
Priestesses of Bacchus they claim they are,
but it's really Aphrodite they adore.
I have captured some of them; my jailers
have locked them away in the safety of our prison.
Those who run at large shall be hunted down
out of the mountains like the animals they are—
yes, my own mother Agave, and Ino
and Autonoe, the mother of Actaeon.

In no time at all I shall have them trapped
in iron nets and stop this obscene disorder.

I am also told a foreigner has come to Thebes
from Lydia, one of those charlatan magicians,
with long yellow curls smelling of perfumes,
with flushed cheeks and the spells of Aphrodite
in his eyes. His days and nights he spends
with women and girls, dangling before them the joys
of initiation in his mysteries.

But let me bring him underneath that roof
and I'll stop his pounding with his wand and tossing
his head. By god, I'll have his head cut off!
And *this* is the man who claims that Dionysus
is a god and was sewn into the thigh of Zeus,
when, in point of fact, that same blast of lightning
consumed him and his mother both for her lie
that she had lain with Zeus in love. Whoever
this stranger is, aren't such impostures,
such unruliness, worthy of hanging?

(For the first time he sees Teiresias and
Cadmus in their Dionysiac costumes.)

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What!

But this is incredible! Teiresias the seer
tricked out in a dappled fawn-skin!

And you,
you, my own grandfather, playing at the bacchant
with a wand!

Sir, I shrink to see your old age
so foolish. Shake that ivy off, grandfather!
Now drop that wand. Drop it, I say.

(He wheels on Teiresias.)

Aha,

I see: this is *your* doing, Teiresias.

Yes, you want still another god revealed to men
so you can pocket the profits from burnt offerings
and bird-watching. By heaven, only your age
restrains me now from sending you to prison
with those Bacchic women for importing here to Thebes
these filthy mysteries. When once you see
the glint of wine shining at the feasts of women,
then you may be sure the festival is rotten.

Coryphaeus

What blasphemy! Stranger, have you no respect
for heaven? For Cadmus who sowed the dragon teeth?
Will the son of Echion disgrace his house?

Teiresias

Give a wise man an honest brief to plead
and his eloquence is no remarkable achievement.
But you are glib; your phrases come rolling out
smoothly on the tongue, as though your words were wise
instead of foolish. The man whose gibbness flows
from his conceit of speech declares the thing he is:
a worthless and a stupid citizen.

I tell you,

this god whom you ridicule shall someday have

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enormous power and prestige throughout Hellas. Mankind, young man, possesses two supreme blessings. First of these is the goddess Demeter, or Earth— whichever name you choose to call her by. It was she who gave to man his nourishment of grain. But after her there came the son of Semele, who matched her present by inventing liquid wine as his gift to man. For filled with that good gift, suffering mankind forgets its grief; from it comes sleep; with it oblivion of the troubles of the day. There is no other medicine for misery. And when we pour libations to the gods, we pour the god of wine himself that through his intercession man may win the favor of heaven.

You sneer, do you, at that story that Dionysus was sewed into the thigh of Zeus? Let me teach you what that really means. When Zeus rescued from the thunderbolt his infant son, he brought him to Olympus. Hera, however, plotted at heart to hurl the child from heaven.

Like the god he is, Zeus countered her. Breaking off a tiny fragment of that ether which surrounds the world, he molded from it a dummy Dionysus.

This he showed to Hera, but with time men garbled the word and said that Dionysus had been sewed into the thigh of Zeus. This was their story, whereas, in fact, Zeus showed the dummy to Hera and gave it as a hostage for his son.

Moreover, this is a god of prophecy. His worshippers, like madmen, are endowed with mantic powers. For when the god enters the body of a man he fills him with the breath of prophecy.

Besides,

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he has usurped even the functions of warlike Ares. Thus, at times, you see an army mustered under arms stricken with panic before it lifts a spear. This panic comes from Dionysus.

Someday

you shall even see him bounding with his torches among the crags at Delphi, leaping the pastures that stretch between the peaks, whirling and waving his thyrsus: great throughout Hellas.

Mark my words,

Pentheus. Do not be so certain that power is what matters in the life of man; do not mistake for wisdom the fantasies of your sick mind. Welcome the god to Thebes; crown your head; pour him libations and join his revels.

Dionysus does not, I admit, *compel* a woman to be chaste. Always and in every case it is her character and nature that keeps a woman chaste. But even in the rites of Dionysus, the chaste woman will not be corrupted.

Think:

you are pleased when men stand outside your doors and the city glorifies the name of Pentheus. And so the god: he too delights in glory.

But Cadmus and I, whom you ridicule, will crown our heads with ivy and join the dances of the god— an ancient foolish pair perhaps, but dance we must. Nothing you have said would make me change my mind or flout the will of heaven. You are mad, grievously mad, beyond the power of any drugs to cure, for you are drugged with madness.

Coryphaeus

Apollo would approve your words.

Wisely you honor Bromius: a great god.

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Cadmus

My boy,

Teiresias advises well. Your home is here with us, with our customs and traditions, not outside, alone. Your mind is distracted now, and what you think is sheer delirium.

Even if this Dionysus is no god, as you assert, persuade yourself that he is. The fiction is a noble one, for Semele will seem to be the mother of a god, and this confers no small distinction on our family.

You saw

that dreadful death your cousin Actaeon died when those man-eating hounds he had raised himself savaged him and tore his body limb from limb because he boasted that his prowess in the hunt surpassed the skill of Artemis.

Do not let his fate be yours.

Here, let me wreath your head with leaves of ivy. Then come with us and glorify the god.

Pentheus

Take your hands off me! Go worship your Bacchus, but do not wipe your madness off on me. By god, I'll make him pay, the man who taught you this folly of yours.

(*He turns to his attendants.*)

Go, someone, this instant, to the place where this prophet prophesies. Pry it up with crowbars, heave it over, upside down; demolish everything you see. Throw his fillers out to wind and weather. That will provoke him more than anything. As for the rest of you, go and scour the city for that effeminate stranger, the man who infects our women with this strange disease and pollutes our beds.

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And when you take him, clap him in chains and march him here. He shall die as he deserves— by being stoned to death. He shall come to rue his metrymaking here in Thebes.

(*Exeunt attendants.*)

Teiresias

Reckless fool, you do not know the consequences of your words. You talked madness before, but this is raving lunacy!

Cadmus, let us go and pray

for this raving fool and for this city too, pray to the god that no awful vengeance strike from heaven.

Take your staff and follow me.

Support me with your hands, and I shall help you too lest we stumble and fall, a sight of shame, two old men together.

But go we must,

acknowledging the service that we owe to god, Bacchus, the son of Zeus.

And yet take care

lest someday your house repent of Pentheus in its sufferings. I speak not prophecy but fact. The words of fools finish in folly.

(*Exeunt Teiresias and Cadmus. Pentheus retires into the palace.*)

Chorus

—Holiness, queen of heaven,
Holiness on golden wing
who hover over earth,
do you hear what Pentheus says?

Do you hear his blasphemy
against the prince of the blessed,
the god of garlands and banquets,

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Bromius, Semele's son?
 These blessings he gave:
 laughter to the flute
 and the loosing of cares
 when the shining wine is spilled
 at the feast of the gods,
 and the wine-bowl casts its sleep
 on feasters crowned with ivy.

—A tongue without reins,
 defiance, un wisdom—
 their end is disaster.
 But the life of quiet good,
 the wisdom that accepts—
 these abide unshaken,
 preserving, sustaining
 the houses of men.
 Far in the air of heaven,
 the sons of heaven live.
 But they watch the lives of men.
 And what passes for wisdom is not;
 unwise are those who aspire,
 who outrage the limits of man.
 Briefly, we live. Briefly,
 then die. Wherefore, I say,
 he who hunts a glory, he who tracks
 some boundless, superhuman dream,
 may lose his harvest here and now
 and garner death. Such men are mad,
 their counsels evil.

—O let me come to Cyprus,
 island of Aphrodite,
 homes of the loves that cast
 their spells on the hearts of men!
 Or Paphos where the hundred-
 mouthed barbarian river

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brings ripeness without rain!
 To Pieria, haunt of the Muses,
 and the holy hill of Olympus!
 O Bromius, leader, god of joy,
 Bromius, take me there!
 There the lovely Graces go,
 and there Desire, and there
 the right is mine to worship
 as I please.

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—The deity, the son of Zeus,
 in feast, in festival, delights.
 He loves the goddess Peace,
 generous of good,
 preserver of the young.

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To rich and poor he gives
 the simple gift of wine,
 the gladness of the grape.
 But him who scoffs he hates,
 and him who mocks his life,
 the happiness of those
 for whom the day is blessed
 but doubly blessed the night;
 whose simple wisdom shuns the thoughts
 of proud, uncommon men and all
 their god-encroaching dreams.
 But what the common people do,
 the things that simple men believe,
 I too believe and do.

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(As Pentheus reappears from the palace,
 enter from the left several attendants
 leading Dionysus captive.)

Attendant

Pentheus, here we are: not empty-handed either.
 We captured the quarry you sent us out to catch.
 But our prey here was tame: refused to run

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or hide, held out his hands as willing as you please, completely unafraid. His ruddy cheeks were flushed as though with wine, and he stood there smiling, making no objection when we roped his hands and marched him here. It made me feel ashamed.

"Listen, stranger," I said, "I am not to blame. We act under orders from Pentheus. He ordered your arrest."

As for those women you clapped in chains and sent to the dungeon, they're gone, clean away, went skipping off to the fields crying on their god Bromius. The chains on their legs snapped apart by themselves. Untouched by any human hand, the doors swung wide, opening of their own accord. Sir, this stranger who has come to Thebes is full of many miracles. I know no more than that. The rest is your affair.

Pentheus

Untie his hands.

We have him in our net. He may be quick, but he cannot escape us now, I think.

(While the servants untie Dionysus' hands, Pentheus attentively scrutinizes his prisoner. Then the servants step back, leaving Pentheus and Dionysus face to face.)

So,

you are attractive, stranger, at least to women—which explains, I think, your presence here in Thebes. Your curls are long. You do not wrestle, I take it. And what fair skin you have—you must take care of it—no daylight complexion; no, it comes from the night when you hunt Aphrodite with your beauty.

Now then,

who are you and from where?

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Dionysus

It is nothing to boast of and easily told. You have heard, I suppose, of Mount Timolus and her flowers?

Pentheus

I know the place.

It rings the city of Sardis.

Dionysus

I come from there.

My country is Lydia.

Pentheus

Who is this god whose worship you have imported into Hellas?

Dionysus

Dionysus, the son of Zeus.

He initiated me.

Pentheus

You have some local Zeus who spawns new gods?

Dionysus

He is the same as yours—the Zeus who married Semele.

Pentheus

How did you see him?

In a dream or face to face?

Dionysus

Face to face.

He gave me his rites.

Pentheus

What form do they take, these mysteries of yours?

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Dionysus

It is forbidden
to tell the uninitiate.

Pentheus

Tell me the benefits
that those who know your mysteries enjoy.

Dionysus

I am forbidden to say. But they are worth knowing.

Pentheus

Your answers are designed to make me curious.

Dionysus

our mysteries abhor an unbelieving man.

Pentheus

You say you saw the god. What form did he assume?

Dionysus

Whatever form he wished. The choice was his,
not mine.

Pentheus

You evade the question.

Dionysus

and he calls you foolish.
Talk sense to a fool

Pentheus

Have you introduced your rites
in other-cities too? Or is Thebes the first?

Dionysus

Foreigners everywhere now dance for Dionysus.

No:

Pentheus

They are more ignorant than Greeks.

Dionysus

In this matter
they are not. Customs differ.

Pentheus

Do you hold your rites
during the day or night?

Dionysus

Mostly by night.
The darkness is well suited to devotion.

Pentheus

Better suited to lechery and seducing women.

Dionysus

You can find debauchery by daylight too.

Pentheus

You shall regret these clever answers.

Dionysus

And you,
your stupid blasphemies.

Pentheus

What a bold bacchant!
You wrestle well—when it comes to words.

Dionysus

Tell me,
what punishment do you propose?

Pentheus

First of all,
I shall cut off your girlish curls.

Dionysus

My curls belong to god.

My hair is holy.

(Pentheus shears away the god's curls.)

Pentheus

your wand.

Second, you will surrender

Dionysus

You take it. It belongs to Dionysus.

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Pentheus

Last, I shall place you under guard and confine you in the palace.

(Pentheus takes the thyrsus.)

Dionysus

The god himself will set me free whenever I wish.

Pentheus

You will be with your women in prison when you call on him for help.

Dionysus

He is here now and sees what I endure from you.

Pentheus

I cannot see him.

Where is he?

Dionysus

With me. Your blasphemies have made you blind.

Pentheus (to attendants)

Seize him. He is mocking me and Thebes.

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Dionysus

I give you sober warning, fools: place no chains on me.

Pentheus

But I say: chain him.

And I am the stronger here.

Dionysus

You do not know the limits of your strength. You do not know what you do. You do not know who you are.

505

Pentheus

I am Pentheus, the son of Echion and Agave.

Dionysus

Pentheus: you shall repent that name.

Pentheus

Off with him.

Chain his hands; lock him in the stables by the palace.

Since he desires the darkness, give him what he wants.

Let him dance down there in the dark.

510

(As the attendants bind Dionysus' hands, the Chorus beats on its drums with increasing agitation as though to emphasize the sacrifice.)

Pentheus

I cannot see him.

As for these women,

your accomplices in making trouble here,

I shall have them sold as slaves or put to work

at my looms. That will silence their drums.

(Exit Pentheus.)

Dionysus

I go,

though not to suffer, since that cannot be.

But Dionysus whom you outrage by your acts,

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« 215 »

who you deny is god, will call you to account.
When you set chains on me, you manacle the god.

(*Exeunt attendants with Dionysus captive.*)

Chorus

—O Dirce, holy rivet,
child of Achelôus' water,

yours the springs that welcomed once
divinity, the son of Zeus!

For Zeus the father snatched his son
from deathless flame, crying:

Dithyrambus, come!

Enter my male womb.

*I name you Bacchus and to Thebes
proclaim you by that name.*

But now, O blessed Dirce,

you banish me when to your banks I come,
crowned with ivy, bringing revels.

O Dirce, why am I rejected?

By the clustered grapes I sweat,

by Dionysus' wine,

someday you shall come to know
the name of *Bronius!*

—With fury, with fury, he rages,

Pentheus, son of Echion,

born of the breed of Earth,

spawned by the dragon, whelped by Earth!

Inhuman, a rabid beast,

a giant in wildness raging,

storming, defying the children of heaven.

He has threatened me with bonds

though my body is bound to god.

He cages my comrades with chains;

he has cast them in prison darkness.

O lord, son of Zeus, do you see?

« 216 »

O Dionysus, do you see
how in shackles we are held
unbreakably, in the bonds of oppressors?

Descend from Olympus, lord!

Come, whirl your wand of gold

and quell with death this beast of blood

—whose violence abuses man and god

outrageously.

—O lord, where do you wave your wand

among the running companies of god?

There on Nysa, mother of beasts?

There on the ridges of Corycia?

Or there among the forests of Olympus

where Orpheus fingered his lyre

and mustered with music the trees,

mustered the wilderness beasts?

O Pieria, you are blessed!

Evius honors you. He comes to dance,

bringing his Bacchae, forging the race

where *Axios* runs, bringing his *Maenads*

whirling over *Lydias*,

generous father of rivers

and famed for his lovely waters

that fatten a land of good horses.

(*Thunder and lightning. The earth trembles.*)

The Chorus is crazed with fear.)

Dionysus (from within)

Ho!

Hear me! Ho, Bacchae!

Ho, Bacchae! Hear my cry!

Chorus

Who cries?

Who calls me with that cry

of Evius? Where are you, lord?

« 217 »

Dionysus

Ho! Again I cry—
the son of Zeus and Semele!

Chorus

O lord, lord Bromius!
Bromius, come to us now!

Dionysus

Let the earthquake come! Shatter the floor of the world!

Chorus

—Look there, how the palace of Pentheus totters.
—Look, the palace is collapsing!
—Dionysus is within. Adore him!
—We adore him!
—Look there!

—Above the pillars, how the great stones
gape and crack!

—Listen. Bromius cries his victory!

Dionysus

Launch the blazing thunderbolt of god! O lightnings,
come! Consume with flame the palace of Pentheus!

(A burst of lightning flares across the façade of the palace
and tongues of flame spurt up from the tomb of
Semele. Then a great crash of thunder.)

Chorus

Ah,
look how the fire leaps up
on the holy tomb of Semele,
the flame of Zeus of Thunders,
his lightnings, still alive,
blazing where they fell!
Down, Maenads,
fall to the ground in awe! He walks
among the ruins he has made!

He has brought the high house low!
He comes, our god, the son of Zeus!

(The Chorus falls to the ground in oriental fashion, bowing
their heads in the direction of the palace. A hush
then Dionysus appears, lightly picking his way
among the rubble. Calm and smiling still,
he speaks to the Chorus with a soliloquy
inude approaching banter.)

Dionysus

What, women of Asia? Were you so overcome with fright
you fell to the ground? I think then you must have seen
how Bacchus jostled the palace of Pentheus. But come, rise.
Do not be afraid.

Coryphaeus

O greatest light of our holy revels,
how glad I am to see your face! Without you I was lost.

Dionysus

Did you despair when they led me away to cast me down
in the darkness of Pentheus' prison?

Coryphaeus

What else could I do?
Where would I turn for help if something happened to you?
But how did you escape that godless man?

Dionysus

No effort was required.
With ease.

Coryphaeus

But the manacles on your wrists?

Dionysus

There I, in turn, humiliated him, outrage for outrage.
He seemed to think that he was chaining me but never once

so much as touched my hands. He fed on his desires. Inside the stable he intended as my jail, instead of me, he found a bull and tried to rope its knees and hooves. He was panning desperately, biting his lips with his teeth, his whole body drenched with sweat, while I sat nearby, quietly watching. But at that moment Bacchus came, shook the palace and touched his mother's grave with tongues of fire. Imagining the palace was in flames,

Pentheus went rushing here and there, shouting to his slaves to bring him water. Every hand was put to work: in vain. Then, afraid I might escape, he suddenly stopped short, drew his sword and rushed to the palace. There, it seems, Bromius had made a shape, a phantom which resembled me, within the court. Bursting in, Pentheus thrust and stabbed at that thing of gleaming air as though he thought it me. And then, once again, the god humiliated him.

He razed the palace to the ground where it lies, shattered in utter ruin—his reward for my imprisonment. At that bitter sight, Pentheus dropped his sword, exhausted by the struggle. A man, a man, and nothing more, yet he presumed to wage a war with god.

For my part,
I left the palace quietly and made my way outside.

For Pentheus I care nothing.

But judging from the sound of tramping feet inside the court, I think our man will soon be here. What, I wonder, will he have to say? But let him bluster. I shall not be touched to rage. Wise men know constraint: our passions are controlled.

(Enter Pentheus, stamping heavily, from the ruined palace.)

Pentheus

But this is mortifying. That stranger, that man I clapped in irons, has escaped.

(He catches sight of Dionysus.)

What! You?
Well, what do you have to say for yourself?
How did you escape? Answer me.

Dionysus

Your anger walks too heavily. Tread lightly here.

Pentheus

How did you escape?

Dionysus

Don't you remember?
Someone, I said, would set me free.

Pentheus

But who? Who is this mysterious someone?
Someone?

Dionysus

[He who makes the grape grow its clusters for mankind.]

Pentheus

A splendid contribution, that.

Dionysus

You disparage the gift that is his chiefest glory.

Pentheus

[If I catch him here, he will not escape my anger.]
I shall order every gate in every tower to be bolted tight.

Dionysus

And so? Could not a god hurdle your city walls?

Pentheus

You are clever—very—but not where it counts.

Dionysus

Where it counts the most,
there I am clever.

(Enter a messenger, a herdsman from Mount Cithaeron.)

But hear this messenger
who brings you news from the mountain of Cithaeron.
We shall remain where we are. Do not fear:
we will not run away.

Messenger

Pentheus, king of Thebes,
I come from Cithaeron where the gleaming flakes of snow
fall on and on forever—

Pentheus

Get to the point.
What is your message, man?

Messenger

Sir, I have seen
the holy Maenads, the women who ran barefoot
and crazy from the city, and I wanted to report
to you and Thebes what weird fantastic things,
what miracles and more than miracles,
these women do—But-may I speak freely—
in my own way and words, or make it short?
I fear the harsh impatience of your nature, sire,
too kingly and too quick to anger.

Pentheus

Speak freely.
You have my promise: I shall not punish you.
Displeasure with a man who speaks the truth is wrong.
However, the more terrible this tale of yours,
that-much more terrible will be the punishment
I impose upon that man who taught our womenfolk
this strange new magic.

Messenger

About that hour
when the sun lets loose its light to warm the earth,
our grazing herds of cows had just begun to climb
the path along the mountain ridge. Suddenly
I saw three companies of dancing women,
one led by Auronoë, the second captained
by your mother Agave, while I no-led-the-third.
There they lay in the deep sleep of exhaustion,
some resting on boughs of fir, others sleeping—
where they fell, here and there among the oak leaves—
but all modestly and soberly, not, as you think,
drunk with wine, nor wandering, led astray
by the music of the flute, to hunt their Aphrodite
through the woods.

But your mother heard the lowing
of our hornèd herds, and springing to her feet,
gave a great cry to waken them from sleep.
And they too, rubbing the bloom of soft sleep
from their eyes, rose up lightly and straight—
a lovely sight to see: all as one,
the old women and the young and the unmarried girls.
First they let their hair fall loose, down
over their shoulders, and those whose straps had slipped
fastened their skins of fawn with writhing snakes
that licked their cheeks. Breasts swollen with milk,
new mothers who had left their babies behind at home
nested gazelles and young wolves in their arms,
suckling them. Then they crowned their hair with leaves,
ivy and oak and flowering bryony. One woman
struck her thyrsus against a rock and a fountain
of cool water came bubbling up. Another drove
her fennel in the ground, and where it struck the earth,
at the touch of god, a spring of wine poured out.
Those who wanted milk scratched at the soil
with bare fingers and the white milk came welling up.

Pure honey spurted, streaming, from their wands.
If you had been there and seen these wonders for yourself,
you would have gone down on your knees and prayed
to the god you now deny.

 We cowherds and shepherds
gathered in small groups, wondering and arguing
among ourselves at these fantastic things.

 the awful miracles those women did.

But then a city fellow with the knack of words
rose to his feet and said: "All you who live
upon the pastures of the mountain, what do you say?
Shall we earn a little favor with King Pentheus
by hunting his mother Agave out of the revels?"
Falling in with his suggestion, we withdrew
and set ourselves in ambush, hidden by the leaves
among the undergrowth. Then at a signal
all the Bacchae whirled their wands for the revels
to begin. With one voice they cried aloud:
"O Iachus! Son of Zeus!" "O Bromius!" they cried
until the beasts and all the mountain seemed
wild with divinity. And when they ran,
everything ran with them.

 It happened, however,
that Agave ran near the ambush where I lay
concealed. Leaping up, I tried to seize her,
but she gave a cry: "Hounds who run with me,
men are hunting us down! Follow, follow me!
Use your wands for weapons."

 At this we fled
and barely missed being torn to pieces by the women.
Unarmed, they swooped down upon the herds of cattle
grazing there on the green of the meadow. And then
you could have seen a single woman with bare hands
tear a fat calf, still bellowing with fright,
in two, while others clawed the heifers to pieces.
There were ribs and cloven hooves scattered everywhere,

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and scraps smeared with blood bung from the fir trees.
And bulls, their raging fury gathered in their horns,
lowered their heads to charge, then fell, stumbling
to the earth, pulled down by hordes of women
and stripped of flesh and skin more quickly, sire,
than you could blink your royal eyes. Then,
carried up by their own speed, they flew like birds
across the spreading fields along Asopus' stream
where most of all the ground is good for harvesting.

Like invaders they swooped on Hysiae
and on Erythrae in the foothills of Cithaeron.
Everything in sight they pillaged and destroyed.
They snatched the children from their homes. And when
they piled their plunder on their backs, it stayed in place,
united. Nothing, neither bronze nor iron,
fell to the dark earth. Flames flickered
in their curls and did not burn them. Then the villagers,
furious at what the women did, took to arms.

And there, sire, was something terrible to see.
For the men's spears were pointed and sharp, and yet
drew no blood, whereas the wands the women threw
inflicted wounds. And then the men ran,
routed by women! Some god, I say, was with them.
The Bacchae then returned where they had started,
by the springs the god had made, and washed their hands
while the snakes licked away the drops of blood
that dabbled their cheeks.

 Whoever this god may be,
sire, welcome him to Thebes. For he is great
in many other ways as well. It was he,
or so they say, who gave to mortal men
the gift of lovely wine by which our suffering
is stopped. And if there is no god of wine,
there is no love, no Aphrodite either,
nor other pleasure left to men.

(Exit messenger.)

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