

Dionysus arrives in Thebes to challenge its civilised values. But is his alternative better – or far worse?

# BACCHAI

By Euripides

Translated by Andrew Wilson

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For Juliet

BACCHAI  
(The Bacchae)

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## CHARACTERS

DIONYSUS, a god, son of Zeus and Semele

CHORUS of Bacchae, female followers of Dionysus

TEIRESIAS, a blind prophet

CADMUS, an old man, founder and former king of Thebes

PENTHEUS, his grandson, now king of Thebes

A GUARD

A HERDSMAN

A MESSENGER

AGAUË, daughter of Cadmus, and Pentheus' mother

## SCENE

Thebes. The royal palace. A tomb showing signs of fire damage.

*Enter Dionysus. He is an androgynous figure. Although obviously male, his hair is long, his clothes are ambiguous. He is not effeminate, though, and is powerfully attractive. A god who has designed his mortal self to appeal to women!*

## DIONYSUS

I'm back! Dionysus, son of Zeus. Back here in Thebes, where Semele, daughter of Cadmus gave me birth - with a blast of lightning fire as her midwife. I'm in disguise - I may look like a man, but I am in fact the god. And here I am! Beside the rivers of Thebes: the waters of Dirce, and the stream of Ismenus. I'm looking at the grave of my mother, killed by the thunderbolt here outside the palace buildings. Her ashes are still smouldering; Zeus' fire still shows a flame: proof of the undying viciousness of Hera towards my mother. I'm grateful to my grandfather Cadmus, who keeps this place as a sanctuary, his daughter's memorial. I have planted a grapevine to cloak it with greenery - there's fruit already.

This is the first place I've come to in Greece, my first target. Previously I was with the Lydians - their land rich in gold - and the Phrygians, and on the sun-baked plains of Persia. I visited distant settlements in Bactria, and the country of the Medes - terrible weather - and Arabia - that rich and happy land: I travelled all along the coast of Asia, home to many lovely towns where Greeks and non-Greeks live together. Here, in Thebes, I've got them all dancing. I've introduced my rites, to make it clear to men: I am a god.

Thebes is the first place in Greece that I have forced to sing my songs. I've made them wear skins of young deer. I've thrust the thyrsus - my emblem - into their hands. [*He displays his own thyrsus*]. And why? Because my aunts, my mother's sisters - the last women who should have - said that Dionysus was not the son of Zeus, but that Semele got herself pregnant by some man, then blamed her sins on Zeus. According to Cadmus that was why Zeus proclaimed he killed her - because she'd lied about having sex with him.

That's why I've injected these women with madness and driven them out of their houses. They are up on the mountain now - crazed, insane. I forced them to adopt the emblems of my worship - and I've driven all the wives, all the females out of their homes ... and out of their minds. They and Cadmus's daughters live outdoors among the green fir-trees, camping amid the rocks. This city of Thebes must realise, whether it wants to or not, that it is rejecting my rituals, the rituals of Dionysus, and that I am here in the world of men to make my case and defend my mother: I am a god, the child she had with Zeus.

Cadmus is handing over his position as king to his grandson, Pentheus. Pentheus is at war: against me and against religion. He excludes me from state rituals and cuts my name out of his prayers. But I shall prove to him, and to all the people of Thebes that I am a god. When I've set things straight here, I shall move on somewhere else, continuing to promote

myself. But if the city of Thebes is my enemy, and they try to bring the Bacchai - the women I've possessed - back home by force, I'll lead my own army of devotees to meet them. This is why I'm in disguise, a god looking like a man; why I now appear in human form.

Now then, you women from Tmolus, our Lydian stronghold! My loyal band! I led you from your eastern homelands - my supporters, my fans, my missionary force. Get your drums, the instruments I invented, myself and Rhea, now the national sound of the Phrygian peoples. Surround the royal Palace here where Pentheus lives and get drumming! Let Thebes know we are here! Meanwhile I shall go to the mountain, to Kithairon, and join the Bacchai, the fanatics I created, as they dance! *[Exit]*

*The sound of drumming begins distantly, eventually rising to an almost deafening crescendo, as the Chorus of young Asian women erupts on to the stage. The audience, used to performances of tragedy, has never seen or heard anything like this. It is thrilling and shocking.*

#### CHORUS

From the east, out of Asia  
From holy Tmolus I come  
Eager to give sweet service to Bacchus  
Work that is not work  
Shouting the watchword of Bacchus:  
"Euhoi! The god is great!"  
Who's in our way? Who's in our way? Who?  
Stay inside, keep your mouth shut.  
Don't upset the god.  
I sing praises to Bacchus.  
I know the right thing to do  
Always!

Happy he, blessed he who  
Knows how to honour the gods  
Living a life that is pure  
Trained in the way of the faith  
Joining the rave on the mountain  
Ritually cleansed,  
A lawful riot!  
Approved by Cybele,  
Great mother of gods,  
Shaking the thyrsus,  
Head crowned with ivy,  
Worshipping: Dionysus!  
Go Bacchai! Go Bacchai!

Bringing the god, the son of a god: Dionysus!  
From Phrygian mountains  
To cities in Greece  
Where there's space in the streets  
Perfect for dancing: Dionysus!

His mother died.  
Giving him birth.  
In agony. Nothing she could do.  
When the hissing thunderbolt from Zeus smashed into her  
The foetus was ejected from her womb.  
Zeus snatched it up at once  
Secreted it in a womb-like space  
Deep in his thigh,  
The cut sewn up with golden pins  
So Hera wouldn't know.  
When the time came  
Zeus gave birth  
To a god  
With horns  
Like a bull,  
And put a crown on his head,  
A crown of writhing snakes.  
Which is why the Maenads  
Wear the prey they catch  
In their hair.

Thebes, Semele's girlhood home,  
Put on a crown of ivy!  
Deck yourself out with fresh green branches  
Of yew, with its bright-red berries...  
Or oak or pine...  
Forget your worries!  
Join the Bacchic frenzy!  
Dress in the spotted deerskin!  
Drape white fleeces over your head!  
Lose yourself in the god!  
Grab your thyrsus!  
Let yourselves go!  
The whole land will soon be dancing:  
Whoever leads a band is Dionysus!  
To the mountain! To the mountain!  
Where the milling mass of women wait,  
The crazy ones, who've left their looms and spindles,

Forced to by: Dionysus!

My drum! This skin stretched in a circle over the rim  
Was invented for me by the Corybantes  
In the cave in Crete where Zeus was born  
And guarded by the Kouretes  
With their triple-plumed helmets.  
And in their excitement, inspired,  
They added the sweet noise  
Of Phrygian pipes  
And presented this music to Rhea, mother of all:  
The Bacchic beat and melody.  
Nearby the goat-men, Satyrs,  
Celebrating the Mother Goddess  
With wild abandon  
Linked the music with dance:  
Creating the festivals  
Which he loves: Dionysus!

How lovely he is, in the mountains, when exhausted  
By the dancing, he sinks to the ground,  
Wearing the holy deerskin,  
Thirsty for the blood of a slaughtered goat,  
A treat to drink down raw,  
Shouting to the Phrygian mountains,  
Following the leader Dionysus:  
"Euhoi! The god is great!"  
The ground flows with milk, it flows with wine, it flows  
With honey from the bees.  
The man, possessed by Bacchus, lifts up his torch  
Wafting the smoke of smouldering pine  
From his thyrsus, a scent as sweet as Syrian incense.  
He flits between the dancers,  
Coaching the shy ones,  
Cheering them on,  
Tossing his well-groomed hair  
In the breeze.  
But his voice is an echoing roar:  
"Go Bacchai!  
Go Bacchai!  
Show us your pride in your mountain home,  
Tmolus, so richly veined with gold,  
And make music for Dionysus  
With the thundering beat of your drums,



Praise the god of joy with shouts of joy,  
With cheering and noise,  
As the mellow pipes, the holy flutes  
Play holy tunes, sounds to please,  
Reassuring our visitors: to the mountain, to the mountain!"  
While one of the Bacchai shows her delight,  
Like a foal grazing close to her mother  
Pawing the ground, eager to leap up and dance.

*They dance off, and the sound of drums gradually fades.  
A very old blind man is seen tentatively approaching the palace. He knows the way, because he is  
Tiresias, trusted advisor on all religious matters to the royal family.*

TIRESIAS

Porter! Anyone on gate-duty? Fetch Cadmus, son of Agenor, the man who left his  
Phoenician home, and built this city with its famous towers: Thebes. Someone go and tell  
him Tiresias is looking for him. He'll know why I'm here, what we two old fossils - though  
actually he's older than I am - cooked up together. We're going to arm ourselves with  
thyrsuses, dress up in fawn-skins, and put wreaths of ivy shoots on our heads!

CADMUS

My dear old friend! I recognised the voice of wisdom from indoors! Here I am all ready.  
I've got the equipment, all the stuff for the god. He's my grandson, you know, my  
daughter's child. Now Dionysus is revealed to be a god, it's my family duty to promote  
him anyway I can. Where do I have to dance? I must learn the steps, and how to shake my  
head: my hair is grey, but anyhow! Lead the way, Tiresias, we old men must stick  
together. You're the expert, you know the drill. I shan't mind if I have to bang my thyrsus  
on the ground all day - and all night! We'll forget what old crocks we are!

TIRESIAS

Then you feel the same as I do! I feel young! I feel like dancing!

CADMUS

How do we get to the mountain? Where's our transport got to?

TIRESIAS

We're not driving there: that would be disrespectful to the god.

CADMUS

We're both old men - but I'll look after you, like a tutor taking his boy to school.

TIRESIAS

Don't worry - the god will get us there, no problem.

CADMUS

Is it just us who'll be dancing for Dionysus?

TIRESIAS

Just the two of us. We are the only sane ones - everyone else is mad.

CADMUS

I can't wait to get going. Take my hand.

TIRESIAS

Here's mine. What a double act, us two old boys, arm in arm!

CADMUS [*pompously*]

It pays to respect the gods. All men should.

TIRESIAS [*dogmatically*]

One shouldn't try to be too clever where gods are concerned. Traditions handed down, things we learned as boys: no intellectual philosopher can undermine our faith in these. Too much thinking is bad for one. If someone asks me "You, at your age, what on earth are you up to dancing, with an ivy wreath on your head?" I tell him the god has no prejudice against old age: if you want to dance, it doesn't matter if you're old or young. He wants the same respect from everyone. He doesn't single anyone out: no one is special.

CADMUS

You can't see what's going on out here: let me tell you. Pentheus is coming, heading for the palace. He's in a hurry. That's Echion's boy, the one I handed over to. Seems in a bit of a flap: what's up, I wonder?

PENTHEUS

While I was away I heard a rumour, a nasty one, that was going the rounds in Thebes: our women have deserted their homes for so-called 'Bacchic' celebrations, gallivanting in the bushes on the mountainside, prancing about in honour of some new-fangled deity, 'Dionysus' or whatever he calls himself. They tell me great bowls full of wine stand waiting to refresh the dancers, before they slink off one by one into the undergrowth to have sex with men. They claim to be priestesses, these crazy women: but they obviously prefer Aphrodite to Dionysus.

Anyway, all those I've caught are tied up and under guard in the city prison. Those still at large I shall have hunted down and brought back from the mountains: my aunt Ino, Agaue, my mother, and Autonoe, her sister and Actaeon's mother. Once I've got them in chains I'll soon put a stop to this revolting Bacchism.

They say that some foreigner has come here, some quack wizard from Lydia, with blonde curls reeking of scent, face flushed with wine, eyes gleaming with lust. He hangs around the young girls, day and night, tempting them with a "private initiation" into the cult. If he dares show his face here, I'll stop him banging his thyrsus and shaking his hair. I'll cut his head off!

The man claims that Dionysus is a god, who was once sewn up in Zeus' thigh! Dionysus was struck by lightning and incinerated, along with his mother, because she made it up about having sex with Zeus. Whoever the foreigner is, surely, he deserves to hang for spreading this poisonous propaganda?

Hello! Here's another surprise! I see the prophecy-monger dressed up in a spotted deerskin: Tiresias! And my grandfather - laugh out loud - with a thyrsus, all bacchified! I am embarrassed, sir, seeing you act the fool at your age. Wave your thyrsus - wave it goodbye! Let go of it! You are my mother's father!

You put him up to it, Tiresias. You want to bring in a new god so there's more money for you from doing the auspices and performing sacrifices. Only your extreme old age stops me from having you chained up and thrown in jail as a preacher of subversion, with the other Bacchai. Women! Once they get a taste of alcohol, there's nothing religious about what they get up to.

CHORUS LEADER

Blasphemy! Do you have no respect the gods - nor for Cadmus, who sowed the race of men who sprang from earth? Your father, Echion was one: you are a disgrace to your family.

TIRESIAS

Making a good speech is no problem for an intelligent man. You speak fluently: thus one would deduce intelligence. But your words make no sense at all. If you talk nonsense, it

doesn't matter how wonderful a speaker you are. You only do your city harm.

This new deity, whom you make fun of: I can't begin to describe how great He is going to be in Greece. Man has two basic needs, young fellow. Demeter, Earth - whatever you want to call her - nourishes mankind with solid sustenance. Later came the son of Semele, Dionysus, to balance earth's gift. He discovered the liquid juice of the grape and introduced it to the world - a thing which frees suffering mankind from pain. When they are filled with the essence of the vine, it gives them sleep and makes them forget their everyday problems. There is no cure for trouble like it! This "god" is poured out as an offering to the other gods: hence through him all good things come to mankind.

And you make fun of him, for being sewn up in Zeus' thigh? Let me explain the proper meaning. When Zeus rescued him from the lightning fire, the goddess Hera, his wife, was angry and wanted to throw the baby out of heaven. Zeus, to save Dionysus, gave her something he'd made out of air to keep her quiet and said "Thy token. Take this to prove I do what thou willeth". Men were confused when they heard this - mixing up "thy" and "thigh". Hence the myth that he'd been hidden in Zeus' thigh!

This god also has prophetic powers: Dionysus takes over; you lose control; you gain a remarkable power to prophesy: when the god fully enters the body, he makes those so possessed talk of the future. He even encroaches a little on the territory of the war-god, Ares. Fear can sometimes panic an army standing by to fight, without a spear being thrown. This is also a form of possession inspired by Dionysus.

One of these days, you'll see him leaping among the rocks at Delphi in the land of the Twin Peaks, with his torches, waving and shaking his Bacchic emblem - a big thing for all Greece. Take my word for it, Pentheus. Don't be fooled: because you're the ruler you think you can enforce your will: if you are deluded enough to believe this, forget it! Welcome the god to Thebes, pour out a draught of him, put a wreath on your head, and go with Dionysus!

Dionysus is not competing with Aphrodite: he won't compel women to behave themselves. Self-control comes naturally - or not. And of course, no respectable woman will be led astray by following Dionysus.

Look. You enjoy it when crowds of people line the streets and cheer the name of Pentheus: it's the same with Dionysus: he likes to be loved! You mock the way Cadmus and I put ivy-wreaths on our heads and dance, the geriatric duo, but dance we must! You won't get me to join you in your war against the gods. Your type of madness is very serious: there's no medicine you can take to cure it. And you'll go on being sick, unless...

#### CHORUS

You risked offending Apollo with what you said, old man: but you are wise to honour

Dionysus: the god is great!

CADMUS

My boy, the advice Tiresias has given you is good. Stick with us: don't break with tradition. Your mind is all over the place: you are not thinking straight. Even if, as you believe, he is not a god: say he is. A beneficial lie: Semele can be seen as the mother of a god, and the honour reflects on our whole family!

You know the tragic fate of your cousin Actaeon: his own dogs, hand-reared by him, tore him to pieces out in the forest and ate him raw. That was for boasting he was a better hunter than Artemis. Don't let this happen to you. Here: let me help you on with this ivy-wreath. Come with us; help show respect to Dionysus.

PENTHEUS

Keep your hands away from me! Join in the Bacchic madness! Off you go! Just don't contaminate me with your lunacy! But your instructor in folly, he's the one I'm after. Someone go now, quick as you can, go to the place where he does his bird-watching, take crowbars with you and smash it up, turn it upside down, reduce it to rubble. Toss his precious wreaths to the winds and let them blow away. This will really hurt him!

Others of you comb the city and hunt down the stranger - the one who looks like a woman. The one who's infecting our women with this new disease and seducing our wives. If you catch him, bring him here to me in chains, so we can have him stoned to death. A sad end to his Bacchic fun in Thebes!

*Some of Pentheus' attendants run off to search for the stranger.*

TIRESIAS

You poor fool. You have no idea what you are talking about. You were already mad: now you are raving.

Let's go, Cadmus, and pray to the god on this uncivilised man's behalf, and on behalf of the city: pray He does nothing drastic. This way! Keep hold of your ivy stick. Lean on me; and let me lean on you: it would be so embarrassing if two old men fell over! But never mind. We must both be servants of Dionysus, son of Zeus. Let's hope Pentheus does not live up to what his name means: Pentheus, 'the one who suffers'. May he not bring suffering to your family, Cadmus. I'm not talking as a prophet: just looking at the facts. He is a fool, and he talks like a fool.

*Cadmus and Teiresias make their way slowly towards the mountain.*

CHORUS

My goddess, my mistress, holy one!  
Holy one, who flies over the earth with golden wings,  
Did you hear what Pentheus said?  
Did you hear his insults, his blasphemy,  
Against Dionysus, the son of Semele,  
The foremost of gods who bring joy  
To our celebrations and feasts?  
This is his role: teaching us to dance,  
Laugh, play music,  
Forget our cares,  
Whenever refreshment from the grape  
Touches us at a feast of the gods,  
And the wine-bowl's generous draughts  
Hug the men in their ivy-wreaths  
With the embrace of sleep.

Free speech,  
Too much thinking,  
End in tears.  
A modest and  
Self-disciplined life keeps  
Families safe: unshaken  
By storms.  
The gods may seem remote  
In heaven, far away:  
But they watch what mankind does.  
Free thinking  
Is not thinking at all, thinking of things  
Which are not our business.  
Life is short.  
Ambitious men, with big ideas,  
Miss what's important now.  
Such people do not think straight:  
In my opinion,  
They are completely mad.

I want to go to Cyprus  
Isle of Aphrodite,  
The world of the Love Gods  
Who bewitch men's minds,  
To Paphos made lush  
By the raging river  
With a hundred mouths

Where it never rains.  
And beautiful Pieria  
Home of the Muses,  
Foothills of holy Olympus:  
Dionysus! Take me there, Dionysus!  
Inspire us, divine leader!  
There we'll find the Graces, handmaids of Love,  
And Pothos, Desire, pricker-on of Love.  
There the Bacchai  
Are allowed  
To make merry.

The god, the son of Zeus,  
Finds joy in feasting,  
He loves Peace, bringer of wealth,  
The goddess who protects our youth.  
To rich and poor, he gives  
the same delight in wine  
That cures all pain.  
He hates the man who doesn't want  
To spend his days and nights with friends,  
To live a happy life:  
The man whose thoughts and mind  
Are too refined.  
I prefer to choose what ordinary  
Normal people choose.

*One of Pentheus' men comes running on, shouting, followed by others with Dionysus as a prisoner.*

SOLDIER

Pentheus! We're back! We've caught the prey you sent us off to catch. It was no problem at all! The "wild beast" was quite tame: he didn't struggle or try to escape, just surrendered to us of his own free will. He didn't seem scared - no ashen cheeks - he beamed at us, and was laughing while he let us tie him up and arrest him. He just stood there. He made my job very easy. I was rather embarrassed, so I told him: "If it was up to me, I wouldn't be doing this: but it's Pentheus. Orders is orders."

Something else. The Bacchai you had in prison, the ones you'd caught and had chained up in the city gaol: they've gone! They are free, frolicking in the fields and shouting the name of their god, Dionysus! The shackles on their feet simply vanished, the bolts on the doors disappeared: all with no human help! This man has come to our Thebes with a bundle of magic tricks. What you're going to do about it? You need to decide!

PENTHEUS

No need to restrain him. He's been caught. Not even a sprint champion could get away.

But let's have a look at you. Hmm! Quite pretty! If I were a woman, I would certainly find you attractive: it's obvious why you've come here to Thebes. Long hair framing the face, enhancing the lecherous look. Not a man's man. I don't see you in the wrestling ring! Nice makeup. Bit on the pale side? Not an outdoor type, I guess. You don't need a gorgeous tan for making love in the dark.

Enough. Tell me about your family. Who are you?

DIONYSUS

An easy question! Nothing special. Have you ever heard of Tmolus - it's famous for its flowers?

PENTHEUS

I know of it. The mountain round Sardis.

DIONYSUS

That's where I'm from. My homeland is Lydia.

PENTHEUS

Why have you brought this cult of yours to Greece?

DIONYSUS

Dionysus, son of Zeus, inspired me to come.

PENTHEUS

There's some chap there called Zeus, then, who breeds new gods?

DIONYSUS

No! **The** Zeus who married Semele, right here in Thebes!

PENTHEUS [*letting that pass for the moment*]

This "inspiration". Was it at night - in a dream? Or in broad daylight?



DIONYSUS

Face to face. He initiated me.

PENTHEUS

What was it like, this "initiation"?

DIONYSUS

That is a secret only Bacchai are allowed to know.

PENTHEUS

And what's the point of it? Initiation?

DIONYSUS

I'm not allowed to tell you. But if I could, it's something you'd enjoy hearing about!

PENTHEUS

You've whetted my curiosity. I would really like to know.

DIONYSUS

Initiation is not open to infidels and blasphemers.

PENTHEUS

But you are saying that you saw the god close-up: what was he like?

DIONYSUS

What he wanted to be. I had no say in it!

PENTHEUS

Well done for ducking the question! That's not an answer.

DIONYSUS

There's no use in wasting wisdom on an ignoramus. I'd make myself look like a fool!

PENTHEUS

Is this the first place you've brought your "god" to?

DIONYSUS

Everywhere but Greece is dancing, involved in our worship.

PENTHEUS

Yes, because foreigners are more gullible than Greeks.

DIONYSUS

In this they are wiser, in fact. But diff'rent strokes ...

PENTHEUS

**Do** you practise you rights in the dark, or in daylight?

DIONYSUS

Usually at night. Darkness adds to the solemn atmosphere.

PENTHEUS

This makes it unsafe - and dangerous - for women!

DIONYSUS

People can behave badly, even in daylight.

PENTHEUS

I'll make you sorry for twisting the argument.

DIONYSUS

And I'll make you sorry for your ignorance, and blasphemy towards the god.

PENTHEUS

The Bacchist is bold as brass! Quite the politician!

DIONYSUS

What's my punishment then? What awful fate will you inflict on me?

PENTHEUS

First ... I shall give you a haircut. Trim those seductive curls.

DIONYSUS

My hair is holy! I groom it for the god!

PENTHEUS

Next. Give me that stick, your thyrsus.

DIONYSUS

You'll have to take it from me yourself. I carry it for the god.

PENTHEUS

Inside with you. We'll see to you properly, in prison.

DIONYSUS

The god will free me, at a time of my choosing.

PENTHEUS

Whenever you call on him, I dare say, from your cell with the other Bacchai!

DIONYSUS

He is here now. He sees what you are doing to me.

PENTHEUS

Where is he? I can't see him!

DIONYSUS

Right next to me! You can't see him because you are an infidel.

PENTHEUS

Seize him! He insults me; he insults Thebes.

DIONYSUS

I warn you: keep your hands off me. You are the one who has lost control, not me.

PENTHEUS

On the contrary. I am in control. I am stronger than you. Tie him up!

DIONYSUS

You do not know what you are doing, nor who you are, nor why you are alive!

PENTHEUS

I am Pentheus, son of my mother Agaue and my father Echion.

DIONYSUS

You have a sad name. It suits you.

PENTHEUS

Go! Lock him up next to the stables, so he can enjoy the murk and darkness. Make yourself at home! Have a dance! The women you've brought here as your partners in crime ... either I'll sell'em, or keep them as slaves - they can swap their drums and tambourines for looms and spindles.

DIONYSUS

I'm happy to go! I have no wish to suffer more than I have to. But let me tell you: someone will come and repay you for your insults to me - Dionysus, who you claim does not exist! When you put me in chains, you are wronging Him.

CHORUS

River of Thebes, Dirka  
Daughter of mighty Achelous,  
Mistress, purest of streams,

Once in your waters  
You welcomed a baby, the child of Zeus,  
The day his father snatched him up,  
Rescued from the immortal flames,  
Keeping him safe in his thigh.  
This he proclaimed:  
"Come, Twice-born, Dithyrambus,  
Welcome here to my manly womb!  
Twiceborn is the name they shall call you  
When you are famous in Thebes."  
But, River of Thebes, Dirka,  
Holy stream, you refuse  
To have my revels beside you,  
Why do you disown me? Why do you shrink away?  
By the god of the grape,  
By the lord of the vine,  
I promise you will some day  
Be made to care - for Dionysus!

Rage, why this rage?  
Why does Pentheus  
Show such rage?  
His father Echion,  
Grew from the serpent's teeth that were sown in the earth:  
Pentheus was born a vile freak,  
Not human,  
A bloody monster,  
Who wrestles with gods.  
He's coming to put me in chains,  
Although I belong to Dionysus.  
He's already got my friend in his prison  
Hidden away in the dark.  
Do you see what's going on?  
Dionysus, son of Zeus?  
Your followers struggling  
Against superior force?  
Come! Help! Your golden thyrsus at the ready!  
Come down from Olympus!  
Defeat the murderous violence  
Of this man!

Where are you? Are you leading your dancers  
Among the wild creatures on Mount Nysa?  
Dionysus? Or on the peaks of Parnassus?

Perhaps you are among the dense woods  
And secret places on Olympus,  
Where Orpheus once seduced the trees  
And held the animals spellbound  
With music from his lyre?  
Or Pieria, that holy place, revered  
By Dionysus, will He be coming there  
To lead the dancing and inspire the revelry?  
He will cross the raging torrent, the river Axios,  
At the head of his whirling Bacchic dancers,  
Leaving Lydia, our homeland,  
That rich source of wealth and happiness  
For men, they tell us, the land where horses  
Graze in meadows  
Watered by your lovely streams.

DIONYSUS [*his shouts are heard from inside the prison*]

Io! Listen to me! Listen to my voice! Io Bacchai! Io Bacchai!

CHORUS

Who is it? Where is his voice coming from? It is Dionysus! Calling for my help!

DIONYSUS [*within*]

Io! Io! I repeat my call! It is the son of Semele, the son of Zeus!

CHORUS

Io! Io! My lord! My lord! Come and join our band of dancers! Dionysus! Dionysus!

DIONYSUS [*within*]

Goddess of the Earthquake! Make the ground tremble!

*Thunder and lightning.*

CHORUS [*screaming, as individuals*]

Look out! Pentheus' palace is shaking! It's falling!

- Dionysus is inside the building! On your knees!

- I am kneeling!

- The pillars, the roof, they're collapsing!

- I can hear shouts of triumph inside the palace! It's Dionysus!

DIONYSUS [*within*]

Lightning, strike! Flames! Blaze up!  
Burn! Burn! Torch the house of Pentheus!

CHORUS

Look! Look!  
There's a flame! Can you see it? Can you make it out?  
There on Semele's tomb, where Zeus' thunderbolt  
Struck! The afterglow now springs to flaming life!  
Down! Down! Our knees tremble. On the ground!  
This chaos is His work!  
Here in the palace,  
Maenads, our Lord,  
The son of Zeus,  
Has arrived!

DIONYSUS [*appearing suddenly through the smoke. He is the cool stranger once more.*]

Get up! No need for my loyal followers to grovel on the ground!  
It was only Dionysus, shaking the foundations of the house of Pentheus,  
My Asian friends, get up!  
There's nothing to be afraid of, no need to cower and tremble.

CHORUS

Light of our darkness! Great Leader! What joy! Our faith, our dancing -  
We thought we had lost you! And we were lost!

DIONYSUS

Did you really give up hope, when they took me and threw me into Pentheus' dismal  
dungeon?

CHORUS

Naturally! Who was going to protect me, if you came to grief? You were in evil's power.  
How did you escape?

DIONYSUS

By myself. I was my own saviour. It was easy - no effort at all!

CHORUS

But he had you chained up, shackled?

DIONYSUS

I made a fool of him: he thought he had me in chains: in fact, he never laid a finger on me, except in his imagination! In the cowshed where he'd taken me to be locked up, he discovered a bull: he put chains round its legs and hoofs, panting angrily, sweat dripping off his body, biting his lip with the effort. I was sitting a few feet away watching patiently! While this was going on, Dionysus arrived. He caused the earthquake which shook the palace and relit the fire on his mother's tomb. When he saw the smoke, Pentheus thought his palace was on fire. He blundered this way and that, yelling to his slaves to fetch water; the whole household was employed in this futile task.

He soon lost interest in this, however, when it was discovered that I had escaped. He drew his sword and dashed into the building. Then Dionysus, it appeared to me, this is what I think, created a phantom there in the courtyard: Pentheus charged at it, swerving to left and right, and started stabbing at thin air, assuming he was hacking me to death.

And Dionysus caused more havoc. He levelled the palace to the ground. It's just a pile of rubble now: my former prison a bitter sight for Pentheus. He's dropped his sword now. He's got nothing left - he's shattered. A man who dared to take on a god in combat! I just walked out and came to join you here. Pentheus didn't even notice!

I hear his footsteps; I believe he's coming out. Now what will he have to say? He'll be all sound and fury, but I'll handle him. I'll stay calm, like any sensible man would!

PENTHEUS

Catastrophe! The foreigner has got away! Just now he was in my power, in chains!

What the devil?

That's him! What on earth...? How did you get out? How can you be here, right in front of me, in front of my house?

DIONYSUS

Hold on! Keep back! I can see you're angry; but calm down!

PENTHEUS

However did you break free? How come you are parading out here?

DIONYSUS



Didn't you hear me say that someone would set me free?

PENTHEUS

Who? I'd assumed it was one of your many lies!

DIONYSUS

He who grows the luscious grape vine for mankind!

PENTHEUS

And introduced mankind to drunkenness!

DIONYSUS

Dionysus' greatest gift! Not much of an insult.

PENTHEUS [*to his soldiers*]

Close all the city gates! Post men all round the walls!

DIONYSUS

What for? Don't you think gods can jump over walls?

PENTHEUS

OK, Wise guy! Think you're clever? We'll soon see!

DIONYSUS

I am pretty good at the things I need to be good at! But here comes someone: best listen to what he's got to say. He's come from the mountain with some interesting news for you. I shall not run away - I'll be right here with you.

MESSENGER

Pentheus! King of Thebes! I've come here from Kithairon, through a blizzard; there's always snow up on that mountain.

PENTHEUS

But you didn't struggle here to tell me about the weather! What is the news?

MESSENGER

I saw the Bacchai, those women who went streaming out of the city in a fit of madness - ladies who'd never walked anywhere in their lives! I'm here to inform you, sir, and the city of the strange things they're up to - things you'd never believe! But first I want you to reassure me: can I speak freely, or should I say nothing? You've a reputation, sir, if I dare say so, for jumping to conclusions. A king's allowed to, of course, but he shouldn't be too hasty!

PENTHEUS

You will be quite safe. Get on with it! The innocent have nothing to fear. As for the Bacchai, the more dreadful things you can tell me the better. You'll make my case against this man who put the women up to it even stronger.

MESSENGER

The cattle, moving uphill in search of grazing, were just reaching the top, when the sun came out, spreading its warmth. I counted three brigades of female dancers, one led by Autonoe, the second by your mother Agaue, and the third by Ino. All of them were asleep, totally relaxed; some were lying on branches of pine, others nestling their heads into a pile of oak-leaves on the ground, quite naturally, and peacefully. No sign of the debauchery you told us about! No wine-bowls, no drunkenness. No wild flute-music. No sex in the bushes!

The mooing of the cattle woke your mother Agaue up. She was the only one on her feet, but then she gave a shout, the signal for them all to get up. Rubbing their sleepy eyes, they sprang to life, all together, an amazing sight: young women, old women, teenage girls. Next they let their hair down onto their shoulders; if they'd loosened their deer-skins to be more comfortable, they fastened them up again. Round their waists they tied not belts - but snakes! They let the snakes lick their faces! The new mothers who'd left their babies behind cuddled a gazelle or a wolf-cub, letting them take the milk from their swollen breasts. They wore garlands - of ivy, or oak-leaves or flowering bryony. One of them took up her thyrsus and struck a rock with it; out flowed a spring of clear water. Another girl stabbed hers into the ground; the god made a fountain of wine gush out. If any of them felt like a drink of milk, she simply scratched the ground with her finger-tips - and - streams of milk! And honey? It just oozed from their ivy-covered sticks and dripped down. If you'd been there, and seen all this - you would now be a devotee of the god you're busy cursing!

Us herdsmen were joined by the shepherds, and we all had a great confab about what we'd seen: the amazing - and peculiar - things they were up to. One of us, sharp fellow,

educated a bit, had a suggestion: "You old boys know your way around these mountains, how about we go hunting. There'd be a reward in it if we catch Agaue and rescue her from the Bacchai - she's the queen mother after all!" It sounded a great idea to us, so we hid ourselves in the undergrowth to ambush them. Bang on cue, out they came to do their thing, waving their thyrsuses, and shouting out "Dionysus, son of Zeus" at the tops of their voices. The whole mountain seemed to be joining in on the act - the animals included!

Agaue, as it happened, was dancing right by me; so I jumped out from where I was hiding, intending to grab her. She screamed: "Quick! My pack of hounds! These men are hunters. We are their prey! Follow me! Your thyrsuses are weapons - grab them and follow me!"

We ran for it and escaped being torn to pieces by the Bacchai. Our animals, grazing peacefully were less fortunate, when their army attacked. They didn't need proper weapons: you'd have seen one of the women ripping one of my prize heifers in two, with her bare hands while it bellowed in agony! Others were simply tearing the young cows to bits: you'd have seen ribs, hoofs - being tossed back and forth, lumps of flesh caught in the pine-trees, the blood dripping down. As for the bulls, their horns normally so dangerous if you make them angry, well, the girls, dozens of them, swarmed over the beasts and dragged them to the ground. Carcasses were stripped of flesh, sir, faster than you could blink your royal eyes.

They surged to the attack like a flock of rooks stripping the cornfields on the Asopus plain. Then on to Hysiai and Erythrai, villages on the slopes of Mount Kithairon: they were like an enemy invasion force as they poured into them, laying waste to everything in their path. They snatched children from their homes; their plunder - even metal objects - seemed to stick to their shoulders with no need of straps; nothing got dropped. They started fires - carrying the blazing material on their heads: but their hair was not burned! There were some villagers, furious at seeing their property destroyed by the Bacchai, who grabbed weapons to defend themselves. And this you will not believe, sir. Their spears failed to penetrate flesh, while the girls, hurling their thyrsuses, drew blood, and had them on the run. Women beating men! It had to be a god's work.

They went back to where they'd started out from - the springs which the god had made flow for them. They washed their hands to clean off the gore, helped by snakes, who licked their faces, removing any specks of blood from their cheeks.

Whoever this divine force is, sir, welcome him into our city. He has many mighty powers; but he's also given mankind the grape vine - which, so I've heard, can kill pain. And wine is the basis of all human pleasure: with wine, even sex is better!

#### CHORUS

I'm reluctant to tell the king what I think, but I'm going to. Dionysus is a god, and as great

as any!

PENTHEUS

This Bacchic nonsense is spreading like wildfire: a sad reflection on the Greeks. It's a disgrace! But now it's time for action. Quick! Go to the Electran Gate. Tell everyone who has a shield or a decent horse to ride - and even the lower ranks without proper armour, and yes, even the bowmen: fall in for the war on the Bacchai. It is utterly unacceptable to be suffering what we are suffering - at the hands of women!

DIONYSUS

Pentheus! You hear what I have to say, but you take no notice! You have treated me badly, but I am still giving good advice: you must not make war on a god. Calm down! Dionysus will not stand by while you interfere with the Bacchai, their joy in the mountains.

PENTHEUS

I need no advice from you! You should be glad you escaped from my prison. Do want more punishment?

DIONYSUS

No sense in getting angry: just offer him sacrifice, I would! Go with the flow! He's a god, you're a man - you can't fight him!

PENTHEUS

I shall offer a sacrifice - a massive female sacrifice. They shall get what they deserve out there on slopes of Kithairon.

DIONYSUS

It's all of you who'll be running for their lives: what a disgrace, when soldiers' metal shields cannot stand up to girls' thyrsuses!

PENTHEUS

How can I deal with a problem like this fellow? Whatever I say or do he won't stop his witty banter!

DIONYSUS

Your majesty. There could be a solution.

PENTHEUS

Doing what? Do you want me to grovel in my own kingdom?

DIONYSUS

I'll bring the women here - no need for force.

PENTHEUS

Come on! What new trick is this?

DIONYSUS

A trick? Using my skills to rescue you?

PENTHEUS

Something you've arranged with the women, so they can carry on for ever!

DIONYSUS

You are right. I have arranged something. It's true. With the god.

PENTHEUS

Enough of your nonsense. Shut up. Fetch my weapons.

DIONYSUS

Wait! How would you like to see them in their camp in the mountains?

PENTHEUS

Very much! I'd pay good money for that!

DIONYSUS

What makes you so keen?

PENTHEUS

It would disgust me to see them drunk.

DIONYSUS

You still want to see them though, even if it disgusts you?

PENTHEUS

Of course I do. Hidden among the pine-trees!

DIONYSUS

But even if you go incognito, they'll know you're there.

PENTHEUS

So I'll make myself obvious! Good suggestion.

DIONYSUS

Shall I take you, and show you the way?

PENTHEUS

Yes please! And let's get a move on. No time to waste!

DIONYSUS

Just slip into this nice linen dress.

PENTHEUS

What on earth...? A dress? Is this some kind of sex change?

DIONYSUS

It's so they won't kill you, if they see you're a man.

PENTHEUS

Very clever! You've got it all worked out!

DIONYSUS

I had lessons from Dionysus!

PENTHEUS

Your plan is excellent. What has to be done?

DIONYSUS

Follow me inside. I'll dress you up.

PENTHEUS

Dress me? As a woman? I am too embarrassed.

DIONYSUS

No longer so keen to see the Bacchai?

PENTHEUS

Tell me what clothes you're going to dress me in.

DIONYSUS

First, we'll let down your hair and comb it out...

PENTHEUS

And what's the next stage of my beauty treatment?

DIONYSUS

A full-length dress. Then the crowning glory: a headscarf.

PENTHEUS

Is that the lot? Anything else I need?

DIONYSUS

Just a thyrsus and a spotted deerskin.

PENTHEUS

No! Dress in women's clothes? I couldn't do it.

DIONYSUS

There will be carnage if you go into battle with them.

PENTHEUS

You are right. It is essential to gather intelligence first.

DIONYSUS

That's more sensible. No point fighting fire with fire!

PENTHEUS

But people will see me as I walk through Thebes!

DIONYSUS

We'll go by the back streets. I'll show you the way.

PENTHEUS

I can't have the Bacchai laughing at me! Anything is better than that. I'm going inside. I shall think it over and make my decision.

DIONYSUS

Do! I am ready and at your service.

PENTHEUS

I'm going inside. I've two choices. Either I shall go there ... armed and set the troops on them, or ... I'll take your advice. [*He goes into the palace*]

DIONYSUS

The man is heading into our net, the trap we set, my women and I! He shall join the Bacchai and give us satisfaction - with his death! [*He prays, as if to Dionysus*]  
Dionysus! I know you are close by; now it's up to you. Let us devise his punishment together: first take his reason away from him, replace it with the dreamy confusion of madness. As a sane person he'd have no desire to dress in women's clothes: when he loses his mind, he'll put them on. I want the people of Thebes to laugh and jeer at him, as he's led through the city streets looking like a woman. The big man! So much for his threats!



I shall go in and choose the costume for Pentheus to wear when he goes to Hades, butchered by his mother's hands. He shall find out that Dionysus, son of Zeus, is a true god, a sympathetic friend to mankind. But a most potent and terrifying enemy.

*He follows Pentheus into the palace.*

#### CHORUS

Shall I one day join Dionysus' all-night dances?  
My whirling feet pale  
in the moonlight, shaking my head  
till the morning dew begins to fall?  
I'd be like a faun, revelling in  
the fresh green meadow; she's been running  
from the cruel huntsmen; she's escaped  
the close-meshed netting, and the hunt-master  
halloos to call off his hounds.  
She bounds along still, swift as a storm-wind,  
and springs across the levels by the river, overjoyed  
to be where no man is, deep in the woods,  
in the hiding-places where the leafy branches  
bend towards the earth.

"Wisdom?" What is that?  
"Beauty?" Is there a more beautiful gift  
From the gods than power  
To control and crush  
One's enemies?  
That beauty  
I love for ever.

Slow to appear it may be,  
Yet the strength of god  
Is something you can trust.  
It punishes men  
Who worship ignorance,  
Whose crazy notions  
Prevent them from glorifying the gods.  
But gods are clever:  
They take their time,  
To unearth the evildoer.  
Men should not waste time and effort  
Concocting new ways to live.  
Consider the truth of this

(No time or effort needed):  
When it comes to the gods  
What was true in the beginning  
Is true for all time.

"Wisdom?" What is that?  
"Beauty?" Is there a more beautiful gift  
From the gods than power  
To control and crush  
One's enemies?  
That beauty  
I love for ever.

How lucky to survive  
A storm at sea  
And reach harbour safely?  
How lucky to master  
All one's problems.  
When it comes to success in life,  
People compete in all kinds of ways.  
A thousand men have  
A thousand dreams.  
Some are fulfilled  
Some are not.  
But true success comes  
To him who lives  
One day at a time.

*Dionysus comes out again from the palace.*

DIONYSUS

You there! Yes, the one gagging to see what he shouldn't! Desperate to do what he mustn't.  
You, Pentheus! Come on out. Let's have a look at you, all dolled up in your Bacchic finery!  
Kitted out to spy on your mother and her friends. Wow! You're as gorgeous as any of  
Cadmus' daughters.

*Pentheus comes out. He looks like a beautiful woman.*

PENTHEUS

Are my eyes playing tricks? There are two suns I can see, and two seven-gated cities of  
Thebes, and you, you seem to be a bull showing me the way - horns have sprouted on  
your head. Were you always a a bull? I'm sure you've turned into one!

DIONYSUS

The god's in charge. He's your friend now. He's made peace. You are seeing what you should be seeing.

PENTHEUS

How do I look? How's my posture? How do I compare with aunt Ino or my mother?

DIONYSUS

When I look at you it's as if I was actually looking at them! Oh dear, one of your curls has slipped out of place: here, let me tuck it neatly under your bandana.

PENTHEUS

Indoors I was practising shaking my head to and fro - I must have dislodged it in my Bacchic enthusiasm.

DIONYSUS

Don't worry - it's my job to look after you. I'll straighten it. Hold your head up.

PENTHEUS

There! I'm relying on you to make sure I look all right.

DIONYSUS

Your belt needs tightening. And your hemline is awful - the dress must hang evenly across the ankles - like this.

PENTHEUS

I agree, I can see it's wrong - on the right-hand side, anyway. On the left it hangs down to the ankle perfectly!

DIONYSUS

I am your best friend. And I've a surprise for you. You're shall get get a proper view the Bacchai, going about their normal activities.

PENTHEUS

Should I be holding my thyrsus in my right hand? Or would I look more like one of the Bacchai with it in this hand?

DIONYSUS

Yes, in your right. And you must lift it up in time with your right foot. Well done! You are really getting into the part!

PENTHEUS

Could I carry Mount Cithaeron, complete with the Bacchai, on my shoulders?

DIONYSUS

Of course you could, if you wanted to! You weren't in your right mind before; now your thoughts are exactly what they should be.

PENTHEUS

Do we need to take levers? Or shall I just get my shoulder, or my arm under its peaks and heave it up with my hands?

DIONYSUS

No, no! It would be a pity to ruin the home of the Nymphs, or the place where Pan sits playing his music!

PENTHEUS

Point taken. One need not use one's strength to defeat women. I shall hide among the pine-trees.

DIONYSUS

Hide. Find a place to hide and hide there: that's better! The clever plan is to creep up on the Bacchai and spy on them.

PENTHEUS

Yes! I can see them like gamebirds in their love-nests among the bushes, in the undergrowth! They are the game and I am the hunter lying in wait.

DIONYSUS

That's right - that's what you are there for. Perhaps you'll catch them [*aside*] or perhaps they'll catch you!

PENTHEUS

Take me through the centre of Thebes, so the Thebans can see I'm the only one of them man enough to do this!

DIONYSUS

You are the only one who shoulders the city's burden. Only you! Your challenge awaits. The challenge you are destined for. Follow me. I shall see you safely there: another will bring you back.

PENTHEUS

My mother, yes!

DIONYSUS

You'll be the centre of attraction ...

PENTHEUS

That's my ambition!

DIONYSUS

You will be carried home...

PENTHEUS

In luxury!

DIONYSUS

...in your mother's arms.

PENTHEUS

You are spoiling me!

DIONYSUS

Spoiling, yes, a sort of spoiling!

PENTHEUS

I shall get what I deserve, then!

DIONYSUS

Extraordinary, that's what you are, extraordinary! And you are advancing towards your extraordinary destiny! You shall find everlasting and universal fame!

Open your arms, Agaue, and your sisters, you daughters of Cadmus. I am bringing this young man to compete in the Games; but I shall be the winner, with Dionysus beside me. The details, everything, will soon be revealed. [*Exeunt*]

CHORUS

Off, quick, off to the mountain  
You wind-footed hellhounds lusting for blood.  
Quick, to the mountain, where Cadmus' daughters  
Meet to hold their carnival,  
Celebrate their revels.

Bite them, sting them, drive them mad  
Goad them to attack the crazy cross-dressing peeping tom  
Lewd stalker of the Bacchai.

His mother will be the first to spot him  
Lying, prying  
Trying to hide in the scrub, among the rocks.  
She will call out to the Bacchai:

"Bacchai! Who is he? Who is it spying on the mountain-girls, on Cadmus' daughters?  
He's come, to our mountain. He's here, on our mountain.  
Who gave birth to him?  
He's no offspring of a woman's womb, but a lioness's whelping  
Or an African Gorgon's.

Justice, reveal yourself! Unsheathe your sword  
And slice through - and through again -  
the neck of the son of Echion,  
the man with no god, no laws, no justice,  
the man of no woman born,

the man who crawled out from the earth.

Intent on crime, his anger out of control,  
He's planning his attack on your religion, Dionysus,  
And on those who worship you and your mother ,  
An insane notion  
To think he could crush an invincible god  
With armed force!

In matters of religion no excuses are allowed:  
Death corrects disordered minds.  
An individual needs to know his place - as a mortal.  
That way he lives a pain-free life.

I do not despise all knowledge:  
I love to hunt for it:  
But the other things are important - and obvious!  
To live a life aiming for what's beautiful,  
All day long doing what's good,  
Respecting religion,  
Honouring the gods,  
Rejecting ways outside what's right.

Justice, reveal yourself! Unsheathe your sword  
And slice through - and through again -  
the neck of the son of Echion,  
the man with no god, no laws, no justice,  
the man of no woman born,  
the man who crawled out from the earth.

Let us see you!  
As a bull?  
As a snake?  
As a many-headed snake?  
As a lion?  
A lion breathing flame?  
Go Bacchus!  
Laugh when you snare  
The hunter in your net,  
The hunter of the Bacchai  
Laid low, trapped,  
By the death brigade  
By the Bacchai!

A MESSENGER *enters*

This house! Until now, you were famous in Greece,  
A family favoured by the gods. Founded by the old man from Sidon who planted the  
dragon's teeth in this soil, seeds of the race the earth gave birth to. How I pity you!  
I am only a slave - but even so ...

CHORUS

What is it? Do you bring news from the Bacchai?

MESSENGER

Pentheus is dead. Pentheus the son of Echion.

CHORUS

God is great! O lord Dionysus, you show yourself a great god.

MESSENGER

What do you mean? What are you saying? Woman, are you happy at the terrible thing  
that's happened to the king, my master?

CHORUS

He's not my king. I am no Greek. My celebration is in a language you don't understand.  
No more shall I need to cower in fear of prison.

MESSENGER

You'll soon discover Thebes has not gone soft ...

CHORUS

Who cares about Thebes? I take orders from Dionysus, from Dionysus, not Thebes.

MESSENGER

I understand that's the way you women see it, but it is still not right to celebrate a tragedy.

CHORUS

Give me the details. How does an evil man who trades in evil meet his fate?



## MESSENGER

We passed through the built-up streets of Thebes, and out across the river Asopos, and then began our climb towards the peaks of Kithairon. By we I mean Pentheus and myself - I was right behind him - and the foreigner, the one who was our guide to the spectacle.

The first thing we did was take up a position in a grassy gully. We were careful to tread quietly, and not talk, so we could see without being seen. We were in a canyon with torrents pouring down the rocks on each side; pine trees provided shade - and there at their ease were the Bacchai, enjoying the various tasks they'd set their hands to. Some were repairing their damaged thyrsuses, plaiting them with fresh ivy. Others, like young horses released from the shafts of their painted carts, were singing in rival groups, rehearsing their Bacchic chants.

But poor old Pentheus didn't see the crowd of women at all - he had this to say: "My friend, from where we're standing, I see no sign of the bogus worshippers, the 'Bacchai'. Why don't I climb one of the tall pine-trees on the cliff? I'd have a perfect view of their disgusting activities."

Then I saw the foreigner do something incredible. He took hold of the branch of pine-tree high up in the sky, and he bent it, bent it, bent it right down to the brown earth below. It curved into a semi-circle, like a bow being drawn, or like an arc sketched by a pair of compasses, marking the line for cutting out a wheel. So did the foreigner force the tree on the mountainside down to the ground with his bare hands - a feat far beyond the strength of a mortal.

He sat Pentheus among the branches of the pine, then let it go sliding through his hands. It sprang smoothly upwards - he was careful not to unseat him - until it was standing straight again, its top straight up in the air, with my master clinging on there, like a jockey on a horse's back. The Bacchai could see him better than he saw them. He was almost too obvious, sitting up there. The foreigner meanwhile had vanished. Then came a voice from up in the sky - I can only assume it was Dionysus - shouting: "Girls! Here he is, I've put him on show! The man who made fun of you, and me, who mocked our religion. Take your revenge!" And just as he spoke a flash of lightning linked heaven and earth. It was awe-inspiring!

Then ... silence. There was no noise from the wind. Not a single leaf rustled in the wooded valley. No sound of an animal could be heard. The Bacchai stood up and looked around: they were not sure what the voice had said. The voice sounded again, repeating the order. As soon as they recognised the clear instruction from Dionysus, they immediately took off, like a flock of pigeons, a unit, focused, streaming out together - Pentheus' mother Agaue, her sisters, and all the Bacchai. They hurled themselves across the raging torrent, and scrambled up the precipice, possessed by the demonic power of the god. When they

spotted my master perched on his pine-tree, to start with they climbed up an outcrop opposite him, and began throwing rocks, and hurling pine-branches like javelins. Others took potshots at Pentheus, their pathetic target, with their thyrsuses. But they couldn't hit him: the poor fellow, trapped though he was, was too high up. No matter how keen they were, he was out of range of their weapons. They ended up ripping branches from oak-trees and using them as improvised levers - but when this did not work either, Agaue took charge: "Make a circle round the tree and take hold of the trunk. Let's catch this tree-climbing animal and stop him revealing Dionysus' secret rituals. A thousand arms took hold of the pine and uprooted it. Pentheus was a long way up - and it was a long way down. He screamed as he fell. He knew what horror was coming.

His mother, as high priestess, initiated the slaughter. As she flew at him, he tore off his headscarf, thinking that if the wretched Agaue realised who she was she would not kill him. He clutched at her face, shouting: "Mother, it's me! Your son Pentheus. You gave me life in our home, your home with Echion. Mother, please don't kill me. I know I did wrong, but do not kill your own son!"

But she was not thinking like a mother: she was a mad thing, rolling her eyes and foaming at the lips, possessed by Dionysus. His words had no effect. She grabbed his left elbow, and bracing herself with a foot on his chest, ripped out his shoulder. She wouldn't have been strong enough, but the god put power into her arms. Ino worked on his other side, tearing off his flesh, with Autonoe and the whole pack of Bacchai joining in. The noise was overwhelming: he was shrieking as long as he had breath to do so, while they yelled in celebration. One of them was carrying off an arm, another a foot with his shoe still on it. His ribs were being picked bare. Blood drenched the lot of them, as they played with gobbets of Pentheus' flesh, tossing it about as in some hellish ball-game.

His body parts are strewn over a wide area, some among outcrops of rock on the hillside, some concealed among the leafy branches of the forest trees. Finding them will not be easy. His mother, as it happens, got her hands on the head. Horrifically, she's stuck it on the end her thyrsus, like it was a mountain lion's, and is parading with it all over Kithairon, leaving her sisters among the bands of Bacchai.

She's heading this way, to the city, revelling in her revolting success as a hunter, shouting out to Dionysus: "My hunter friend! My partner at the kill! Victorious! Glorious!". But the winner's prize he gives will be her tears.

But as for me, I'm out of here, away before the storm strikes, when Agaue reaches home. It's best - and safest - to know one's place, respect religion and the gods. Those who practise this know it's the wisest thing a man can do.

## CHORUS

Let us up and dance for Dionysus!  
Let us up and shout and celebrate

The shocking fate of Pentheus, serpent's spawn.  
He put on a woman's dress  
He held a thyrsus,  
And so marked himself  
For certain death.  
He chose a bull to lead him  
To disaster.  
You Bacchai, Cadmus' daughters,  
What a vibrant victory you won,  
A victory, though, that ends  
In losers' tears.  
Magnificent sport  
Holding a son's head  
In hands dripping with his blood.

But look, I can see her fast approaching towards the palace,  
Pentheus' mother, Agaue - her swivelling eyes reveal she's still possessed -  
Welcome them, welcome the devotees of the god of joy!

AGAUE

You are Dionysus' girls he chose...

CHORUS

Oh! Why is it you disturb me so?

AGAUE

...in Asia. From the mountains  
I am bringing home  
Just cut  
Spinning round  
A glorious trophy  
From my hunt.

CHORUS

I see it. I welcome you as one of us.

AGAUE

I caught him, all by myself

A savage lioness's  
Young cub  
Look! You can see!

CHORUS

...out in the wilds. Where?

AGAUE

Kithairon...

CHORUS

Kithairon!

AGAUE

...killed him.

CHORUS

Who struck the first blow?

AGAUE

The kill, and the honour are mine.  
The bands of women chant my name:  
"Agaue's been blest!"

CHORUS

Then who was next?

AGAUE

Cadmus's...

CHORUS

Cadmus's?

AGAUE

...daughters. After me! After me  
They got their hands on the beast.  
A great day's hunting!

CHORUS

What's next? What will you do  
With the splendid booty from your hunt?

AGAUE

A meal! Come join me in the feast!

CHORUS

What? Join you? How could you...bring yourself...

AGAUE

A tender young creature. The fur on his head is quite soft, and there's downy new growth spreading over his cheeks.

CHORUS

Yes, his hair does look like a wild animal's ...

AGAUE

Dionysus is a skilled huntsman: he used his skill to steer the Bacchai to this beast.

CHORUS

Yes, our master is a hunter ...

AGAUE

So congratulations?

CHORUS

Congratulations!

AGAUE

Soon the Thebans ...

CHORUS

And Pentheus, your son ...

AGAUE

Will be congratulating his mother, who's caught this lion cub: what a kill!

CHORUS

Beyond words!

AGAUE

Beyond anything ...

CHORUS

The joy?

AGAUE

My happiness - so big, so big my ...

Can't you tell?

What this kill ...

My success ...

Means to me!

CHORUS

Then show the people the trophy you've won, you sad creature.

AGAUE

All you who live in Thebes with its gorgeous towers, people, draw round so you can see our kill, the prey that Cadmus' daughters hunted down. We needed no javelins to throw, no nets, just the strength of our women's arms and our fingers. What's so special about getting fancy hunting stuff from spear-makers - such a waste of time! We caught him and dismembered him with nothing but these our hands!

Where's father? Tell him to come out here: I've something to cheer an old man up! And my son, Pentheus, where is he? I've a job for him: get a ladder and nail this lion's head high up

on the palace walls. My hunting trophy!

*Cadmus, her father, enters with some slaves who are carrying a variety of body-parts, perhaps wrapped in blood-stained rags. A horrific sight to complement the horrific words that we've had to endure.*

CADMUS

This way! Bring the tragic remains of Pentheus here. This way, men, in front of the palace. I've got his body. It was hard to find it, searching in a hundred places, collecting the dismembered bits, scattered all over Kithairon, no two parts together, difficult to spot among the trees.

Yes. Someone told me about my daughters, what they'd dared to do. Old Teiresias and I had just got home from the Bacchic ceremonies, I was already back inside the walls of Thebes. I turned round and went straight back to the mountain. To fetch my son, dead by the Bacchai's hands. I saw Autonoe, mother of Actaeon, wife of Aristaeus, and Ino with her, under the trees, wretched creatures, still crazed. But I heard from someone that Agaue was on her way here, propelled by her madness ... it's true, I can see her. A sight no man should be so unfortunate to see.

AGAUE

Father! Tell everyone! You are free to boast - boast that you are the father of the finest daughters in the world! Finest by far! All of us, but I am the best of the best! I left my weaving, said goodbye to my loom - my journey is to greater things: hunting wild animals with bare hands! Hands that carry this, my prize - look! A trophy to be hung up on your palace wall. Here, father, take it! Invite your friends to dinner, a banquet in honour of my hunting triumph. How happy you are! Blessed by god! My work brings you true happiness!

CADMUS

Grief beyond all..., I cannot look at ..., your ... hands ... murder! That is your work! This splendid victim you've sacrificed - you're inviting me and Thebes to a feast, to dedicate it to the gods? I grieve for your tragedy, and then for my own. Lord Dionysus, born in our house, has destroyed us. We deserved to be punished - but this much?

AGAUE

Old age makes people so grumpy and disagreeable. I wish my boy was a hunter like his mother - and make an effort to join the young men of Thebes out hunting. But all he can do is fight with the gods! You must have a grandfatherly word with him. Why won't someone go and tell him to come here and see how fortunate I am!

CADMUS

O god, o god! When you realise what you've done the pain you feel will be beyond words. If you stay the way you are - wretched though you are, you'll be spared knowing how wretched.

AGAUE

What do you mean 'wretched'? What's wrong? What's the matter?

CADMUS

First, I want you to look up at the sky.

AGAUE

I'm looking. So what?

CADMUS

Is it still the same, or is it different from usual?

AGAUE

It's brighter than before, more heaven-like!

CADMUS

And that feeling of exhilaration - is that still there?

AGAUE

I don't understand what you're saying. But I am becoming sort of aware, I feel a change taking place in my mind.

CADMUS

Could you now listen to me, and answer a question properly?

AGAUE

Yes, father. I can't remember what we were talking about just now ...



CADMUS

When you got married, whose family did you go to?

AGAUE

You gave me to Echion, one of the men who grew from the dragon's teeth you sowed!

CADMUS

Your husband gave you a son. What was his name?

AGAUE

Pentheus. We had him together, his father and I.

CADMUS

Then whose head do you have in your arms?

AGAUE

A lion's. That's what the huntresses said it was.

CADMUS

Look at it again. A quick glance will do.

AGAUE

Ugh! What am I looking at? What have I got in my arms?

CADMUS

Now have a proper look, so there can be no mistake.

AGAUE

Pain is what I see. I am in agony.

CADMUS

It doesn't look like a lion, does it?

AGAUE

No. It's Pentheus' head I'm holding. I am in agony.

CADMUS

You have only just recognised him. We have been in torment for a long time.

AGAUE

Who killed him? How do I come to be holding him?

CADMUS

Unluckily for you it's time to know the truth.

AGAUE

Tell me. My heart is bearing so fast. I must hear what you have to say.

CADMUS

You killed him. You and your sisters.

AGAUE

Where did he die? In the house? Or where?

CADMUS

The place where once dogs tore Actaeon limb from limb.

AGAUE

How did the wretched man end up on Mount Kithairon?

CADMUS

He went to sneer at Dionysus, and your Bacchic ceremonies.

AGAUE

But how did all of us come to be there?

CADMUS

You went mad. The whole city had gone insane under Dionysus' spell.

AGAUE

I realise now. Dionysus destroyed us.

CADMUS

Yes, he was not given due respect. You insulted him. You did not believe he was a god.

AGAUE

Where is the precious body of my son?

CADMUS

I brought it back - difficult though it was to find.

AGAUE

Has it all been decently ... put back together?

CADMUS

Not yet. We just collected what we could.

AGAUE

His dear head ...

*She tenderly places Pentheus' head next to the rest of his body.*

CADMUS

You did the deed. But Pentheus was guilty too.

AGAUE

Pentheus? Why did my insanity infect him as well?

CADMUS [*He's rapidly overcome with self-pity, kneeling beside the body*]

He was the same as you. He showed no respect for the god. Accordingly, Dionysus lumped you all together for the same punishment, you and him, to destroy the family, and myself. I am childless, I have no son, and now I see the fruit of your womb, poor girl, horribly and brutally done to death. He was the one I looked to - you, boy, my daughter's son, were my family's future, to hold it all together, a man whom Thebes respected. Through fear of you, no one was unkind or rude to your old grandfather. You punished anyone who dared.

But now I, Cadmus the Great, who literally sowed the seeds of the Theban people, and reaped a glorious harvest, shall be thrown out homeless and dishonoured.

My darling boy - still my darling though you've passed away - no more will you pull at this beard of mine, and call me "Mummy's Daddy", and ask "Who's not treating you right? Who's calling you names, grandpa? Who's being a nuisance or nasty to you, grandpa? Tell me, so I can punish whoever doesn't treat you right." Now I am a sad wreck, and you are miserable, your mother is in a pitiable state, and our whole family is miserable. If there is anyone who despises the heavenly powers, let him look at this man's fate and believe in the gods. [*It's unclear whether he's referring to Pentheus - or himself!*]

#### CHORUS

I do feel your pain, Cadmus. But your son got exactly what he deserved. Right for him, though tough for you.

#### AGAUE

Father, you see my life turned upside down. I was the daughter of our city's founder, honoured wife of a hero, sprung from the teeth of the dragon you killed, and planted in the soil of Thebes. I was mother to a king. How can I go on living now, after the terrible thing I've done? In Argos once, a queen, who'd killed her husband, was murdered by her son. His fate was foul, to wander exiled hounded by snake-haired Furies. But who will punish me for what I did to my son? I have no other son to avenge his death by killing me as I deserve. A mother who kills her son is the foulest creature in the world.

But somehow, I must do what must be done. No one but I can oversee your funeral. When that is done, I shall wait alone for death. But first I must see to his poor dismembered body.

*She kneels beside the remains brought in by Cadmus. Thy are still covered.*

But am I allowed? Will he permit me? How could I, knowing whose body I hold in my arms, kiss his limbs or clasp him to my breast? What kind of funeral could there be?

#### CADMUS

You are still his mother. It is your right and duty to arrange his burial - though I know how unbearable it will be. Especially when you see the tragic remains that I brought back. Prepare yourself for a sight no one should ever see.

*Cadmus' men uncover the remains of Pentheus*

AGAUE

Ahhhh! But I must look. I must accept the full horror of what I did. I did this - I don't deny my guilt. I and my sisters offended a god, and he punished us. You too, Pentheus, did not believe, and through me he punished you as well. All Thebes must now accept that Dionysus is a mighty god, the son of Zeus.

Our sister Semele was the prettiest of us, but silly too, naive. She claimed she had a secret lover and taunted us. We all dismissed as ludicrous her claim, that she was sleeping with a god - and Zeus at that! But now I know the rumours were the truth. She wasn't killed by Zeus for lying that he slept with her: Hera tricked her, made her ask Zeus to promise he'd give her anything she wanted. Zeus promised: as Hera knew, he cannot undo a promise. The poor girl begged him to make love to her the way he did to Hera, his goddess wife. He had to keep his promise: the king of the gods came to her as lightning from the sky. He destroyed his lover, but saved their child, now revealed to Thebes and all the world as Dithyrambus the Twice-born, Dionysus!

Come, dear father. Let's rest his head properly where it belong and put everything together as accurately as we can. Your dear head, your face ... Let me cover you with this cloth and so no one can see the vile disfigurement, my butchery.

*Agaue and her father kneel beside the body. A servant brings a cloth to drape over it all. Suddenly, with a crash of thunder and a flash of lightning Dionysus appears in his true divine persona above the palace walls. Cadmus and Agaue and their servants cower and run for cover. The Chorus rush forward and chant in triumph.*

CHORUS

Euhoi! The god is great! Euhoi! The god is great!

DIONYSUS

I am Dionysus, son of Zeus. The new god that Semele in death gave birth to here in Thebes. I have come home. When I arrived in Thebes, my worshippers, believers who had followed me from the east around the world, escorted me. Nowhere was I dishonoured and rejected but here - only my own fellow citizens refused to welcome me as a god.

I showed them all the good things I would bring, but still their stinging insults came. I drove the women - all of them - insane, to make sure they'd do to death the king who'd led his citizens' defiance. Rip him apart when I sent him, crazed like them, on his fool's mission to the mountains. To pay him back for mocking me and putting me in chains, I made sure his death was the worst any man could imagine - beheaded and torn to pieces by his mother's bare hands.

You all now know we gods are different from you men. We are immortal and cannot forget the insults of mortal creatures who mock our divinity. Punishment is swift and final. There is no appeal. All Thebes was guilty: their king took punishment on their behalf. His mother and her sisters spread lies about me: there will be a special punishment for them.

Agaue! You and your sisters will leave Thebes at once, for ever. Your presence here pollutes the city. Go, you blood-soaked murderesses; my city will not be clean again till you have gone.

Cadmus! You were a great man once - and will be rewarded, but not yet. You earned your punishment along with all the rest of Thebes. This is what you must suffer: don't dare to question what the gods decide.

You shall be transformed - into a snake. And so shall Harmonia, the wife that you, a mortal though you were, were given by the great god Ares. She too will become an animal - a snake like you. The oracle of Zeus goes on: you, with your wife, shall drive a pair of oxen, leading an army of foreigners, not Greeks. With your vast horde, you shall sack many cities. But when they pillage Apollo's oracle, your army will ensure themselves an unhappy homecoming. But you and Harmonia your wife will be saved by Ares and live as immortals in the land of the blessed ones.

I say this as Dionysus, son not of a mortal, but of Zeus. If, when you refused to, you had chosen to be sensible, you would today have the son of Zeus as a friend and would be happy.

CADMUS *[as he and Agaue sink to their knees in worship and supplication]*

Dionysus, we are on our knees. We have done wrong.

DIONYSUS

Too late! You know me now, but you did not know me when you should have.

CADMUS

Yes, I admit that! But you are punishing us too harshly!

DIONYSUS

Yes, because I am a god and I you humiliated me.

CADMUS

Gods ought not to show the same emotions as mortals do!

DIONYSUS

Long ago my father Zeus agreed to this.

AGAUE [*crying out as if in pain*]

Ahh! It's no use, then. All's been decided. We are exiled from our home.

DIONYSUS

Why are you still here then, since you have no choice?

*Dionysus disappears, as Cadmus and Agaue cling to each other.*

CADMUS

We are all in deep trouble - you, your sisters, and it's especially hard for me. I have to go and live among foreigners, at my age! And then it's foretold I'll attack my homeland with an army of Greeks and foreigners! And as a snake I, with Ares' daughter Harmonia, my wife - she turned into a snake as well - will lead a force to desecrate altars and tombs in Greece! I shall have no ending for my pain: I shall not even cross the rushing waters of Acheron to find peace in death.

AGAUE [*embracing her father*]

Father, I'm going away all on my own without you to help me!

CADMUS

You sad child. What's the point of putting your arms around me? Caring the way a bird, a swan maybe, does for a useless parent who's old and grey?

AGAUE [*She's not really listening, focused on her own suffering*]

Where can I go, expelled from the land that's my home?

CADMUS

I do not know, my child. Your father is no help.

AGAUE

Goodbye, my house. Goodbye, my city where I belong.  
I am leaving you, my family home  
A refugee crushed by fate.

CADMUS

Go then, my darling, perhaps your brother-in-law Aristaeus ...

AGAUE

Father, I feel so sorry for you ...

CADMUS

... as I do for you. My tears are for your sisters, too.

AGAUE

Unspeakable is the ruin Lord Dionysus has brought down on all your family.

CADMUS

Yes, I go on suffering unspeakable things for what you did. My name in Thebes is lost for ever.

AGAUE

Goodbye, father.

CADMUS

Goodbye to you, my poor unhappy daughter. Though nothing's 'good' about your future.

AGAUE [*To some of the Chorus, who have taken it on themselves to see Dionysus' orders are carried out*]

Come, my escort, take me away. My tragic sisters and I shall be refugees together. Let me



go where vile Kithairon will not look down on me, nor I look up to see the mountain. Let there be nothing to remind me of the thyrsus. Let the worship of Dionysus be someone else's fate!

*As a small detachment of the chorus escort Agaue off in one direction to, the rest of the Bacchai shout in triumph as, to intense sound of drums and flutes , they move off back towards the mountain. The music gradually fades to nothing.*

**Andrew Wilson**

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