THE BACCHAE

Translated by William Arrowsmith
INTRODUCTION TO THE BACCHAE

In 408, at the age of seventy, apparently bitter and broken in spirit, Euripides left Athens for voluntary exile at the court of Archelaus in Macedon; and there, in 406, he died. After his death his three last plays—The Bacchae, Iphigenia at Aulis, and the (lost) Alcestes at Corinth—were brought back to Athens by the dramatist’s son, Euripides the Younger, and produced, winning for their dead author the prize so frequently denied him during his lifetime.

Of itself The Bacchae needs neither apology nor general introduction. It is, clearly and flatly, that unmistakable thing, a masterpiece; a play which, for dramatic turbulence and comprehensiveness and the sheer power of its poetry, is unmatched by any except the very greatest among ancient and modern tragedies. You have to go to the Oedipus Tyrannus or the Agamemnon or Lear to find anything quite like it in range and power, and even then it remains, of course, unique. But like those plays, The Bacchae is finally a mysterious, almost a haunted, work, stalked by divinity and that daemonic power of necessity which for Euripides is the careless source of man’s tragic destiny and moral dignity. Elusive, complex and compelling, the play constantly recedes before one’s grasp, advancing, not retreating, steadily into deeper chaos and larger order, coming finally to rest only god knows where—which is to say, where it matters.

At the very least then The Bacchae requires of its critics gentleness in approaching it and humility in handling; the reader who is not willing to follow where the play, rather than his prejudice, leads him forfeits his quarry. But sophrosune is not a common critical virtue, and despite the critic’s clear warning in the fate of Pentheus, the play has suffered more than most from the violence of its interpreters. Perhaps this was only to be expected; because The Bacchae is concerned with extreme religious experience, it has naturally engaged the liveliest prejudices of its readers. Thus, apart from the pathologies of criticism, we find a long strain of (peculiarly Christianizing) interpretation which insists, against all probability and the whole experience of the play, that The Bacchae is to be understood as a deathbed conversion to the mysteries of Dionysus—Euripides' paeanode, as it were, for a lifetime of outspoken hostility to the Olympian system. In revenge, this absurd view was challenged by an even more absurd one which, by casting Dionysus as a devil and Pentheus as a noble martyr to human enlightenment, turned the play into a nineteenth-century rationalist tract on the evils of religion. Alternatively, the play has been viewed as a stark schematic conflict between any two of a variety of contrasted abstractions apparently symbolized by Pentheus and Dionysus: reason vs. the irrational; aristocratic skepticism vs. popular piety; civilized order and routine vs. the eruptive force of nature and life. What, in my opinion, vitiates these interpretations is that they are all, or nearly all, incomplete perceptions masking as the whole thing. And like all partial perceptions or half-truths, these are maintained by rejecting whatever in the experience of the play cannot accommodate them; in this way the true power that stalks the play has mostly been expelled or shrouded in a fresh and imposed chaos. Taken in their ensemble, however, these partial perceptions help to round out the whole. For look at the play again and surely what one sees is neither a rationalist tract nor Euripides’ dying confession to Olympus but a play which is moved by profoundly religious feeling and which also happens to display Euripides’ familiar hostility to received religion. The inconsistency is only apparent; for in the nature of god as it is defined by the action of the play, the contradictions vanish. Or so I see it. And yet there is more there too.

A few cautions will perhaps be in order. The subject of The Bacchae is a (dimmly) historical event, the invasion of Hellas by the rites of Dionysus, while the story of Pentheus is Euripides’ re-enactment of a myth which doubtlessly embodied Dionysiac ritual.1 Despite this, The Bacchae is neither a study of Dionysiac cultus nor a cautionary essay on the effects of religious hysteria; nor, for that matter, however faithfully it may present the hieros logos or sacred myth of Dionysiac ritual, is it best read as an anthropological passion-play of the mystical scapegoat or the Year-Daimon. Dionysiac religion is the field on which the action of the play takes place, not what

1 The story of Pentheus provided the subject of several ancient tragedies, including a trilogy by Aeschylus.
it is deeply about, and although the play requires a reasonable knowledge about the phenomena of religious ecstasy we call Dionysiac, for the most part it supplies the necessary information and dictates the meaning of its own terms. If we understand that the rewards of the Dionysiac life are here and now, that the frenzied dances of the god are direct manifestations of ecstatic possession, and that the Bacchante, by eating the flesh of the man or animal who temporarily incarnates the god, comes to partake of his divinity, we are in a position to understand the play. One should also perhaps be aware that the view of Dionysiac worship presented by this play is a special one, clearly shaped by the dramatist's needs and modified accordingly; indeed he elaborately warns his fifth-century contemporaries that they must not confound their own experience of Dionysiac worship with that of the play. Thus, for example, against the suspicions of his contemporaries that the Dionysiac mountain-rites were frequently orgiastic in the modern sense of that word, Euripides insists that his Bacchae are chaste, and this must be taken as final for the play. Elsewhere he deliberately intrudes anachronism, allowing Teiresias to describe Dionysus pretty much as the fifth century knew his worship: its human sacrifices purged away, its wildness tamed by being fused with Olympian worship and set under state supervision. Beyond this, one should, of course, be aware of the intentional ritual irony that underlies the death of Pentheus—he dies as a scapegoat and a living substitute for the god he rejects. This, however, is an irony of the play, not its meaning, and it is overshadowed by the greatest irony of them all—that this terrible indictment of the anthropomorphic Dionysus that The Bacchae makes should have been acted out in the hieros logos of the god and presented in the Theater of Dionysus.

Like a number of other Euripidean plays, The Bacchae tends to converge about a single central controlling moral term whose meaning is constantly invoked by the action and at the same time altered by it, modified and refreshed under dramatic pressure. This key term is the concept of sophia (and its opposite, amathia). Constantly thrown up by the action, informing it and guiding it, sophia is crucial to the play; but since it is impossible to convey its range of meaning by a single English equivalent, the reader should know what is involved when it occurs. At its broadest, sophia is roughly translatable by the English concept of "wisdom"; sophia, that is, is primarily a moral rather than an intellectual skill, based upon experience and expressed in significant judgment. But in the Greek—and nowhere more strongly than in the choruses of this play—it implies a firm awareness of one's own nature and therefore of one's place in the scheme of things. In other words, it presupposes self-knowledge, an acceptance of those necessities that compose the limits of human fate; by contrast, the man of amathia acts out of a kind of unteachable, ungovernable ignorance of himself and his necessities; he is prone to violence, harshness, and brutality. Thus, in the eyes of the Chorus, Pentheus forfeits any claim to sophia because he wantonly, violently, refuses to accept the necessity that Dionysus incarnates: he is, in other words, amathēs.

Below the level of this broad sense of sophia, however, the range of meaning in the Greek word is extremely wide. For if sophia means what we mean by wisdom, it is also skill, craft, cleverness, know-how, cunning, smartness, and the specific craft of expediency (in this sense exactly matching one of the commoner uses of the English word "wise"). And so the play exhibits the spectrum of these various sophiae classified roughly in terms of the characters, their pretensions and what others think of them. Thus Teiresias possesses the narrow professional sophia (i.e., skill, expertise) of the sage and seer, and also shares with Cadmus the more general "wisdom" of ripe old age and long experience. In the Chorus' eyes, Pentheus' sophia is that of (mere) cleverness: the quick, articulate, argumentative, shallow cleverness of the trained sophist or "professional intellectual." And finally, lowest of all, there is the knowing animal cunning of the practiced hunter, the cool eye and feline skill of Dionysus stalking his intended victim. Elsewhere the Chorus distinguishes something called to sophon which it contrasts unfavorably with high sophia; and I think we must understand this to be something like a rubric for the lower sophiae or whatever in them con-

[The image contains a page from a book with text discussing the concept of sophia in Euripides' Bacchae. The text is a continuation of the previous discussion, focusing on the nature of sophia and its application in the play.]
tributes to compose the sense of “worldly wisdom,” a calculating, shrewd, even opportunistic, skill of the worldly and ambitious, which blinds its possessor to the good that comes—to the Chorus’ way of thinking—from acceptance here and now. But over the surface of these meanings of *sophia* the action plays endlessly, testing one *sophia* against another, matching opponents in a steady rage of exposure that in the end inverts all roles and pretensions and leaves the stage, desolate and bleak, to the suffering survivors confronted with the inexorable, pitiless necessity that Dionysus is. We witness, that is a life and death struggle between rival shapes of *sophia* in the course of which each claimant betrays the thing he stands for: Pentheus’ cleverness foundering terribly upon the force he refuses to accept; the *sophia* of the Dionysiac quest nakedly revealed as sheer animal cunning and brutality. We witness, in short, *sophia* becoming *amathia*. There, in *amathia*, the god and his victim meet.

Dramatically, the core of the play is an exquisitely constructed confrontation between the two major opponents, the young god Dionysus and the young man Pentheus. The contrasting itself seems almost schematic: the athletic Pentheus pitted against the languid god; traditional Greek dress contrasted with the outlandish Asiatic livery of the Bacchante; the angry, impetuous, heavy-handed young man as against the smiling, soft-spoken, feline effortlessness of Dionysus; the self-ignorant man confronted with the humanized shape of his necessity. Below the contrasts run the resemblances, for these young rivals, we need to remember, are first cousins and they share a family likeness. Thus each is deeply jealous of his own *personal* honor and ruthless in enmity; each is intolerant of opposition to his will. The god, of course, in the end prevails, but the drama of the god’s gradual usurpation of his victim depends for its effectiveness and irony upon our understanding of the initial confrontation. For it is by playing upon Pentheus’ vulnerability, his deep ignorance of his own nature, that the god is able to possess him, humiliate him and finally to destroy him. For Dionysus, the motives of humiliation and revenge are crucial; and Dionysus is a supreme artist in exact poetic vengeance. Thus, point for point, each of Pentheus’ threats, insults, and outrages is revenged with ironic and ferocious precision as Pentheus goes off, waving his thrysus, tricked out in woman’s robes and a fawn-skin, to his death on the mountain as the sacrificial surrogate of the god. We see in his costume and madness not merely his complete humiliation but the total loss of identity the change implies. And so the reversal is complete, the hunter become the hunted and the hunted the hunter.

If we consider Pentheus in isolation, it should be immediately apparent that his is not the stuff of which tragic heroes are made. Nor, for that matter, is he a convincing candidate to symbolize reason against the Dionysiac irrational. He is, in fact, a deeply unreasonable man, intemperate in anger and utterly unconvinced by reasonable evidence. Around him cluster almost all the harsh words of the Greek moral vocabulary: he is violent, stubborn, self-willed, arbitrary, impatient of tradition and custom, impious, unruly, and immoderate. At times he evinces the traits of a stock tragedy-tyrant, loud with threats and bluster, prone to confuse the meaning of subject with slave. But so, I think, he must be shown in order to be presented for what he is: ignorant of himself and his nature, profoundly *amathes*. Yet as he makes his entrance, breathing fury against the Maenads, I think we are meant to be struck by his extreme youth. Just how old he is, Euripides does not tell us; but since he is presented for what he is: ignorant of himself and his nature, profoundly *amathes*. Yet as he makes his entrance, breathing fury against the Maenads, I think we are meant to be struck by his extreme youth. And this youth seems to me dramatically important, helping to qualify Pentheus’ prurient sexual imagination (for the voyeurism which in a grown man would be overtly pathological is at most an obsessive and morbid curiosity in a boy) and later serving to enlist our sympathies sharply on the side of the boy-victim of a ruthless god. Pentheus’ *hybris*, of course, remains, for ignorance of one’s identity and necessities is finally no excuse. And yet, in the Greek view of things, extreme youth should help to extenuate the offense. For the young are naturally susceptible to *hybris*, that simple overflow of the dangerous pride (or the suppressed strength) of the flesh and spirit into outrage and violence; and, being susceptible, they merit both understanding and lenience. *Sophia*, after all, is not a young man’s virtue, and though necessity may be inflexible, our humanity is not. How-
ever much Pentheus' conduct may outrage sympathy, his youth and utter human helplessness before the awful shape of his necessity are addressed directly to our understanding and compassion.

But Pentheus is something more than a mere personification of suppressed necessity, and his hybris has social as well as sexual roots. At least it seems to me that Euripides has taken elaborate pains to show in Pentheus the proud iconoclastic innovator, rebelling against tradition, outside of the community's nomos (custom as law), and disdainful of any power above man. Ranged against him are Cadmus, Teiresias, and the Chorus, who all alike appeal to the massive authority of tradition and folk-belief and constantly invoke against the scoffer the full force of dikē (custom incarnate as justice) and sophrosunē (very roughly, humility). Thus in flat ominous opposition to Pentheus' lonely arrogance of the "exceptional" (perissos) individual, superior and contemptuous, defying the community's nomos in the name of his own self-will, is set the chorus' tyrannous tradition: "Beyond the old beliefs, no thought, no act shall go" (II. 891–92). We have, that is, a head-on collision between those who, for all their piety, represent the full-blown tyranny of popular custom and conforming tradition and the arrogant exemplar of the ruthlessly antitraditional mind. Both sides are alike in the cruel and bigoted violence with which they meet opposition and the sophrosunē and dikē which they variously claim mock their pretensions and implicitly condemn their conduct. If in the end the conduct of the Chorus and Dionysus outrage our sympathies and enlist them on Pentheus' behalf, it is because, in the nature of things, the amathia of a man is less heinous than that of a god. But both are amatheis, Pentheus and Dionysus alike. Beyond this point certainty is impossible. But I suspect that the play employs Dionysus and Pentheus and the conflict between them as a bitter image of Athens and Hellas terribly divided between the forces that, for Euripides, more than anything else destroyed them: on the one side, the conservative tradition in its extreme corruption, disguising avarice for power with the fair professions of the traditional aretai, meeting all opposition with the terrible tyranny of popular piety, and disclosing in its actions the callousness and refined cruelty of civilized barba-

rism; on the other side, the exceptional individual, selfish and egotistical, impatient of tradition and public welfare alike, stubborn, demagogic, and equally brutal in action. This interpretation, however, should not be pressed; if it is there at all, it is tenuously, suggestively there, informing the terms of a social conflict between Pentheus and Dionysus' followers which is otherwise unexplained.

Dionysus himself is a difficult figure only, I think, because he is so clearly a transitional one, a figure which under dramatic pressure is in the process of becoming something quite different from what he was at the outset. What the divinity of Dionysus represents, however, should be clear enough from the play: the incarnate life-force itself, the uncontrollable chaotic eruption of nature in individuals and cities; the thrust of the sap in the tree and the blood in the veins, the "force that through the green fuse drives the flower." As such, he is amoral, neither good nor bad, a necessity capable of blessing those who (like the Asian Bacchantes) accept him, and of destroying or maddening those who (like Pentheus) deny him. Like any necessity, he is ambiguous, raw power: his thyrsus spurs honey for the bands of the blessed but becomes a killing weapon when turned against the scoffer. But to the question, Is Dionysus a traditional "Olympian" deity or is he the amoral and daemonic personification of the force he represents? the answer, I think, is clearly that he is, at different times, both. If he begins the play as a conventional, anthropomorphic deity of the Homeric type, endowed with human virtues and human passions, he undergoes a progress which more and more forces him into the shape of the amoral necessity he represents and which culminates in his final epiphany as a pitiless, daemonic, necessitous power. In the withering of his traditional sophia through the dramatic demonstration that his only sophia is the cunning of the hunter, his traditional divinity also withers. For divinity divested of morality becomes daemonic (not devilish but the reality of awful, inscrutable, careless power), like Dionysus here. Just so, in the Hippolytus, we can see coming into focus beneath the lineaments of the Olympian Aphrodite the inexorable, amoral face of the narrowly sexual necessity of man and nature. It needs, however, to be insisted that these personified necessities of the Euripidean stage are
not mere naturalistic psychological symbols. They are precisely daimones, the great powers that stalk the world, real with a terrible reality, the source of man's very condition, the necessities which determine his life. And if the feelings stirred by what is limited before the unlimited are religious, then man's attitude toward these daimones is religious, the veneration and awe the fated must feel before the great gods of existence: Death, Life, Sex, Grief, Joy. Sophia accepts because it is a wisdom of experience, based on awe learned of both joy and bitter suffering.

Grouped about Dionysus and Pentheus, variously informing their struggle or suffering its consequences, stand the other characters of the play—Teiresias, Cadmus, Agave, and the Chorus of Asian Bacchantes. Of these Agave has been put here almost entirely to suffer, and the very extremity and brutality of what she suffers is unmistakably intended to expose the brutal ferocity of Dionysus. For it is in her person and through her words as she moves from the terrible irony of her triumphal entrance to one of the cruelest (and finest) recognition scenes in tragedy that the balance of sympathies shifts decisively against Dionysus, exposing him for what he is: this, she cries ecstatically, holding up the head of her dismembered son, is the quarry of the chase, the great Dionysiac hunt for "those great, those manifest, those certain goals, achieving which our lives are blest." Where Pentheus' passion ends, hers begins, even more terrible than his, driving us relentlessly on to the true epiphany of the god.

What god, we want to know, no matter what provocation, could make a mother dismember her son and still retain his sophia? And the answer, of course, is: no god but necessity, which is not wise and, though divine, has no altars.

Teiresias and Cadmus, however, are more problematic. Each, as we have seen, claims a distinctive sophia and yet they fail to convince us. In part, this is due to the deliberate pathos and incongruity of their entrance: two doddering old men in fawn-skins off to the dances on the mountain. But although they hover on the edge of comedy, they are not funny but pathetic: two incongruous, shrewd old mummers of ecstasy. For they are not, we soon discover, among the number of those who dance in the sheer conviction of delight, their bodies possessed and compelled by the inward god—though they would like to convince both us and each other that they are so possessed. They dance in shrewd expedience, Cadmus realistically aware of the value of having a god in the family, Teiresias sensing the future greatness of the new religion and the opportunities for priestly expertise. Piously, self-righteously, they go through the motions of accepting their necessity; but if elated at first by their role and costume, they make their exit in a state of near exhaustion, propping each other up and limping off, a long way from ecstasy.

And there is irony again, of course, when Teiresias, affecting the role of staunch traditionalist, lectures Pentheus on the nature of Dionysus with the pedantic etymologizing zeal of a professional sophist. But their function here is to occupy the mean of worldly wisdom (to sophon) between the sophia claimed by the Chorus and the anathia of Pentheus. They are trimmers and compromisers, true men of the mean, set in sharp contrast to Pentheus, who, contemptuous of any compromise, temperamentally inhabits extreme positions. As such they round out the range of attitudes which center on Dionysus: the utter possessed madness of the Theban women on the mountain which is typified by Agave; the calmer, more reflective worship of the Chorus of Asian Bacchae; the worldly compromising temper of the two old men, and the passionate and sweeping denial of the god by Pentheus.

The Chorus here deserves mention also, all the more since its role as Bacchante has necessarily been modified by its choral and dramatic functions. For it is from their lips—impressively confirmed and amplified by the two messengers—that we get what is so crucial to the play, the full poetic resonance of the Dionysiac life; in the sweep and beauty of their language we are meant to feel what Dionysus means for suffering mortality, the direct eruption of deity in blessing and miracle. Dionysus, as we have seen, is ambivalent: "most terrible, and yet most gentle, to mankind." The exodus of the play emphasizes the terrible aspect of the god, and so it is important for dramatic balance that the gentle side of Dionysus be given the fullest possible statement. Moreover, we can believe the Chorus, for, unlike the Maenads on the mountain, the Bacchantes of the Chorus are not
possessed. A divinity, true, moves in their words, but less as a chaotic
dwildness than as a controlled and passionate conviction. Indeed, at
times these foreign women seem to be surprisingly Hellenized and
their sentiments indistinguishable from those of a standard tragic
chorus. They tend to alternate, that is, between a feverish (Asiatic)
hymning of the god and slow, reflective, traditional (Greek) gnomes
on the nature of divinity and the dangers of disobedience. This
duality may derive from their double role as dramatic Chorus and
followers of Dionysus, or it may be that Euripides is anxious to set
before us an image of that controlled Dionysiac experience with
which the fifth century was familiar. For by means of this anach­
ronism, he can, without deeply violating dramatic consistency,
show the point at which the convinced (but not possessed) Bac­
chantes can separate her humanity from the god. Just this, of course,
takes place at the end of the play, and its importance should not be
minimized. For, despite their having danced for joy at the death of
Pentheus, the Chorus, when finally confronted by Agave bearing
Pentheus' head on her thyrsus, is moved to unmistakable horror and
pity. In their feelings, they clearly separate themselves from the god
with whom they have hitherto identified themselves completely.
Bacchantes they may be, the scene seems to say, but they are human
first. Against Dionysus who shows himself utterly inflexible and
ruthless to the end, their reaction is decisive. And the tone of pity
sets the stage for the all-important exodus.

For what we see in the exodus is, I think, the discovery of com­
passion, and in this the exodus of The Bacchae follows good Eurip­
idean precedent. One thinks of the Hippolytus (so much like The
Bacchae in so many ways) where, under the yoke of another inflex­
able necessity, compassion and understanding flower between The­
scus and the dying Hippolytus; or of Heracles and the same discovery
of love and need between the anguished hero and his friend and his
father in the face of the bleak necessity of a careless, ruthless heaven.
So here, beneath the inexorable harshness of that necessity called
Dionysus, out of their anguish and suffering, Agave and Cadmus
discover compassion, the pity that is born from shared suffering. In
this they declare their humanity and a moral dignity which heaven,
CHARACTERS

Dionysus (also called Bromius, Evius, and Bacchus)
Chorus of Asian Bacchae (followers of Dionysus)
Teiresias
Cadmus
Pentheus
Attendant
First Messenger
Second Messenger
Agave
Coryphaeus (chorus leader)

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,
ingling, 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:
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;
*I 156*
—You on the streets!
—You on the roads!
—Let every mouth be hushed. Let no ill-omened words profane your tongues.
—Make way! Fall back!
—Make way! Fall back!
—Hush.
—For now I raise the old, old hymn to Dionysus.
—Blessèd, blessed 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, blessed 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,
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! _Evoht!_

—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, _Evoht!—_
  _On, Bacchae!_
  _On, Bacchae!_
Follow, glory of golden Tmolus,
hymning god
with a rumble of drums,

«EURIPIDES»

with a cry, _Evoht! 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 incongruously 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?

_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

«THE BACCHAE»
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?

Expound 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.
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 Autonoë, 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.)

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.)

Ah a,
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 glibness 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
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,

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.
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 fillets 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.
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, unwisdom—
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 outrange 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
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.

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

(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
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?

Dionysus

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

Pentheus

I know the place.

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?
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: No: 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: Talk sense to a fool and he calls you foolish.

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

Dionysus: Foreigners everywhere now dance for Dionysus.

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.
Euripides

Dionysus

My hair is holy.
My curls belong to god.

(Pentheus shears away the god’s curls.)

Dionysus

You take it. It belongs to Dionysus.

(Pentheus takes the thyrsus.)

Dionysus

You

Second, you will surrender your wand.

Pentheus

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

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

Where is he?

Dionysus

With me. Your blasphemies have made you blind.

Pentheus (to attendants)

Seize him. He is mocking me and Thebes.

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.

Pentheus

I am Pentheus, the son of Echion and Agave.

Dionysus

Pentheus: you shall repent that name.

Pentheus

Off with him.

Dionysus

I go, though not to suffer, since that cannot be. But Dionysus whom you outrage by your acts,
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 river,
child of Achelous' 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 swear,
by Dionysus' wine,
someday you shall come to know
the name of Bromius!

—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?

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, fording the race
where Axios runs, bringing his Maenads
whirling over Lydia,
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?
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 solicitude 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
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 panting 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.

(Why, what do you have to say for yourself? How did you escape? Answer me. Your anger walks too heavily. Tread lightly here. Don't you remember? Someone, I said, would set me free. But who? Who is this mysterious someone? A splendid contribution, that. You disparage the gift that is his chiefest glory. [If I catch him here, he will not escape my anger.] I shall order every gate in every tower to be bolted tight. And so? Could not a god hurdle your city walls? 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.
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 Iacchus! 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,

and scraps smeared with blood hung 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,
untied. 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.)
Coryphaeus

I tremble
to speak the words of freedom before the tyrant.
But let the truth be told: there is no god
greater than Dionysus.

Pentheus

Like a blazing fire
this Bacchic violence spreads. It comes too close.
We are disgraced, humiliated in the eyes
of Hellas. This is no time for hesitation.

(He turns to an attendant.)

You there. Go down quickly to the Electran gates
and order out all heavy-armored infantry;
call up the fastest troops among our cavalry,
the mobile squadrons and the archers. We march
against the Bacchae! Affairs are out of hand
when we tamely endure such conduct in our women.

(Exit attendant.)

Dionysus

Pentheus, you do not hear, or else you disregard
my words of warning. You have done me wrong,
and yet, in spite of that, I warn you once
again: do not take arms against a god.
Stay quiet here. Bromius will not let you
drive his women from their revels on the mountain.

Pentheus

Don't you lecture me. You escaped from prison.
Or shall I punish you again?

Dionysus

If I were you,
I would offer him a sacrifice, not rage
and kick against necessity, a man defying
god.
Penheus
Bring my armor, someone. And you stop talking.

(Penheus strides toward the left, but when he is almost
offstage, Dionysus calls imperiously to him.)

Dionysus
Wait!
Would you like to see their revels on the mountain?

Penheus
I would pay a great sum to see that sight.

Dionysus
Why are you so passionately curious?

Penheus
Of course
I'd be sorry to see them drunk—

Dionysus
But for all your sorrow,
you'd like very much to see them?

Penheus
Yes, very much.
I could crouch beneath the fir trees, out of sight.

Dionysus
But if you try to hide, they may track you down.

Penheus
Your point is well taken. I will go openly.

Dionysus
Shall I lead you there now? Are you ready to go?

Penheus
The sooner the better. The loss of even a moment
would be disappointing now.

Dionysus
First, however,
you must dress yourself in women's clothes.

Penheus
What?
You want me, a man, to wear a woman's dress. But why?

Dionysus
If they knew you were a man, they would kill you instantly.

Penheus
True. You are an old hand at cunning, I see.

Dionysus
Dionysus taught me everything I know.

Penheus
Your advice is to the point. What I fail to see
is what we do.

Dionysus
I shall go inside with you
and help you dress.

Penheus
Dress? In a woman's dress,
you mean? I would die of shame.

Dionysus
Very well.
Then you no longer hanker to see the Maenads?

Penheus
What is this costume I must wear?

Dionysus
I shall set a wig with long curls.
**EURIPIDES**

**Pentheus**
And then?

**Dionysus**
Next, robes to your feet and a net for your hair.

**Pentheus**
Yes? Go on.

**Dionysus**
Then a thyrsus for your hand and a skin of dappled fawn.

**Pentheus**
I could not bear it. I cannot bring myself to dress in women’s clothes.

**Dionysus**
Then you must fight the Bacchae. That means bloodshed.

**Pentheus**
Right. First we must go and reconnoitre.

**Dionysus**
Surely a wiser course than that of hunting bad with worse.

**Pentheus**
But how can we pass through the city without being seen?

**Dionysus**
We shall take deserted streets. I will lead the way.

**Pentheus**
Any way you like, provided those women of Bacchus don’t jeer at me. First, however, I shall ponder your advice, whether to go or not.

**Dionysus**
Do as you please. I am ready, whatever you decide.

**Pentheus**
Yes.

Either I shall march with my army to the mountain or act on your advice.

*(Exit Pentheus into the palace.)*

**Dionysus**
Women, our prey now thrashes in the net we threw. He shall see the Bacchae and pay the price with death.

O Dionysus, now action rests with you. And you are near. Punish this man. But first distract his wits; bewilder him with madness. For sane of mind this man would never wear a woman’s dress; but obsess his soul and he will not refuse. After those threats with which he was so fierce, I want him made the laughingstock of Thebes, paraded through the streets, a woman.

Now I shall go and costume Pentheus in the clothes which he must wear to Hades when he dies, butchered by the hands of his mother. He shall come to know Dionysus, son of Zeus, consummate god, most terrible, and yet most gentle, to mankind.

*(Exit Dionysus into the palace.)*

**Chorus**
—When shall I dance once more with bare feet the all-night dances, tossing my head for joy in the damp air, in the dew, as a running fawn might frisk for the green joy of the wide fields,
free from fear of the hunt,
free from the circling beaters
and the nets of woven mesh
and the hunters hallooing on
their yelping packs? And then, hard pressed,
she sprints with the quickness of wind,
bounding over the marsh, leaping
to frisk, leaping for joy,
gay with the green of the leaves,
to dance for joy in the forest,
to dance where the darkness is deepest,
where no man is.

—What is wisdom? What gift of the gods
is held in honor like this:
to hold your hand victorious
over the heads of those you hate?
Honor is precious forever.

—Slow but unmistakable
the might of the gods moves on.
It punishes that man,
infatuate of soul
and hardened in his pride,
who disregards the gods.
The gods are crafty:
they lie in ambush
a long step of time
to hunt the unholy.
Beyond the old beliefs,
no thought, no act shall go.
Small, small is the cost
to believe in this:
whatever is god is strong;
whatever long time has sanctioned,
that is a law forever;
the law tradition makes
is the law of nature.

—What is wisdom? What gift of the gods
is held in honor like this:
to hold your hand victorious
over the heads of those you hate?
Honor is precious forever.

—Blessed is he who escapes a storm at sea,
who comes home to his harbor.

—Blessed is he who emerges from under affliction.

—In various ways one man outraces another in the
race for wealth and power.

—Ten thousand men possess ten thousand hopes.

—A few bear fruit in happiness; the others go awry.

—But he who garners day by day the good of life,
he is happiest. Blessed is he.

(Re-enter Dionysus from the palace. At the threshold
he turns and calls back to Pentheus.)

Dionysus

Pentheus if you are still so curious to see
forbidden sights, so bent on evil still,
come out. Let us see you in your woman's dress,
disguised in Maenad clothes so you may go and spy
upon your mother and her company.

(Enter Pentheus from the palace. He wears a long linen dress
which partially conceals his faun-skin. He carries a thyrsus
in his hand; on his head he wears a wig with long blond
curls bound by a snood. He is dazed and completely in
the power of the god who has now possessed him.)

Why,
you look exactly like one of the daughters of Cadmus.

Pentheus

I seem to see two suns blazing in the heavens.
And now two Thebes, two cities, and each
with seven gates. And you—you are a bull
who walks before me there. Horns have sprouted from your head. Have you always been a beast? But now I see a bull.

Dionysus

It is the god you see. Though hostile formerly, he now declares a truce and goes with us. You see what you could not when you were blind.

Pentheus (coyly primping)

Do I look like anyone?
Like Ino or my mother Agave?

Dionysus

So much alike I almost might be seeing one of them. But look: one of your curls has come loose from under the snood where I tucked it.

Pentheus

It must have worked loose when I was dancing for joy and shaking my head.

Dionysus

Then let me be your maid and tuck it back. Hold still.

Pentheus

Arrange it. I am in your hands completely.

(Dionysus tucks the curl back under the snood.)

Dionysus

And now your strap has slipped. Yes, and your robe hangs askew at the ankles.

Pentheus (bending backward to look)

I think so.
At least on my right leg. But on the left the hem lies straight.

Dionysus

You will think me the best of friends when you see to your surprise how chaste the Bacchae are.

Pentheus

But to be a real Bacchante, should I hold the wand in my right hand? Or this way?

Dionysus

In your right hand. And raise it as you raise your right foot. I commend your change of heart.

Pentheus

Could I lift Cithaeron up, do you think? Should the cliffs, Bacchae and all?

Dionysus

If you wanted. Your mind was once unsound, but now you think as sane men do.

Pentheus

Should we take crowbars with us? Or should I put my shoulder to the cliffs and heave them up?

Dionysus

What? And destroy the haunts of the nymphs, the holy groves where Pan plays his woodland pipe?

Pentheus

You are right. In any case, women should not be mastered by brute strength. I will hide myself beneath the firs instead.

Dionysus

You will find all the ambush you deserve, creeping up to spy on the Maenads.
Think.

I can see them already, there among the bushes,
mating like birds, caught in the toils of love.

Exactly. This is your mission: you go to watch.
You may surprise them—or they may surprise you.

Then lead me through the very heart of Thebes,
since I, alone of all this city, dare to go.

You and you alone will suffer for your city.
A great ordeal awaits you. But you are worthy
of your fate. I shall lead you safely there;
someone else shall bring you back.

Yes, my mother.

An example to all men.

It is for that I go.

You will be carried home—

O luxury!

cradled in your mother's arms.

You will spoil me.

I mean to spoil you.
Against the unassailable he runs, with rage obsessed. Headlong he runs to death.
For death the gods exact, curbing by that bit the mouths of men. They humble us with death that we remember what we are who are not god, but men. We run to death. Wherefore, I say, accept, accept: humility is wise; humility is blest.

But what the world calls wise I do not want. Elsewhere the chase. I hunt another game, those great, those manifest, those certain goals, achieving which, our mortal lives are blest.

Let these things be the quarry of my chase: purity; humility; an unrebellious soul, accepting all. Let me go the customary way, the timeless, honored, beaten path of those who walk with reverence and awe beneath the sons of heaven.

—O Justice, principle of order, spirit of custom, come! Be manifest; reveal yourself with a sword! Stab through the throat that godless man, the mocker who goes, flouting custom and outraging god! O Justice, destroy the evil earth-born spawn of Echion!

—O Dionysus, reveal yourself a bull! Be manifest, a snake with darting heads, a lion breathing fire! O Bacchus, come! Come with your smile! Cast your noose about this man who hunts your Bacchae! Bring him down, trampled underfoot by the murderous herd of your Maenads!

(Enter a messenger from Cithaeron.)

Messenger
How prosperous in Hellas these halls once were, this house founded by Cadmus, the stranger from Sidon who sowed the dragon seed in the land of the snake!

Coryphaeus
I am a slave and nothing more, yet even so I mourn the fortunes of this fallen house.

Coryphaeus
Is there news of the Bacchae?

What is it?

Message
This is my news:

Pentheus, the son of Echion, is dead.

Coryphaeus
All hail to Bromius! Our god is a great god!

Message
What is this you say, women? You dare to rejoice at these disasters which destroy this house?

Coryphaeus
I am no Greek. I hail my god in my own way. No longer need I shrink with fear of prison.

Message
If you suppose this city is so short of men—

Coryphaeus
Dionysus, Dionysus, not Thebes, has power over me.

Message
Your feelings might be forgiven, then. But this, this exultation in disaster—it is not right.

Coryphaeus
Tell us how the mocker died. How was he killed?
Messenger

There were three of us in all: Pentheus and I, attending my master, and that stranger who volunteered his services as guide. Leaving behind us the last outlying farms of Thebes, we forded the Asopus and struck into the barren scrubland of Cithaeron.

There in a grassy glen we halted, unmoving, silent, without a word, so we might see but not be seen. From that vantage, in a hollow cut from the sheer rock of the cliffs, a place where water ran and the pines grew dense with shade, we saw the Maenads sitting, their hands busily moving at their happy tasks. Some wound the stalks of their tattered wands with tendrils of fresh ivy; others, frisking like fillies newly freed from the painted bridles, chanted in Bacchic songs, responsively.

But Pentheus—unhappy man—could not quite see the companies of women. "Stranger," he said, "from where I stand, I cannot see these counterfeited Maenads. But if I climbed that towering fir that overhangs the banks, then I could see their shameless orgies better."

And now the stranger worked a miracle. Reaching for the highest branch of a great fir, he bent it down, down, down to the dark earth, till it was curved the way a taut bow bends or like a rim of wood when forced about the circle of a wheel. Like that he forced that mountain fir down to the ground. No mortal could have done it. Then he seated Pentheus at the highest tip and with his hands let the trunk rise straightly up, slowly and gently, lest it throw its rider. And the tree rose, towering to heaven, with my master huddled at the top. And now the Maenads saw him more clearly than he saw them. But barely had they seen, when the stranger vanished and there came a great voice out of heaven—Dionysus', it must have been—crying: "Women, I bring you the man who has mocked at you and me and at our holy mysteries. Take vengeance upon him." And as he spoke a flash of awful fire burned earth and heaven. The high air hushed, and along the forest glen the leaves hung still; you could hear no cry of beasts.

But barely had they seen, when the stranger vanished and there came a great voice out of heaven—Dionysus', it must have been—crying: "Women, I bring you the man who has mocked at you and me and at our holy mysteries. Take vengeance upon him." And as he spoke a flash of awful fire burned earth and heaven. The high air hushed, and along the forest glen the leaves hung still; you could hear no cry of beasts.

The Bacchae heard that voice but missed its words, and leaping up, they stared, peering everywhere. Again that voice. And now they knew his cry, the clear command of god. And breaking loose like startled doves, through grove and torrent, over jagged rocks, they flew, their feet maddened by the breath of god. And when they saw my master perching in his tree, they climbed a great stone that towered opposite his perch and showered him with stones and javelins of fir, while the others hurled their wands. And yet they missed their target, poor Pentheus in his perch, barely out of reach of their eager hands, treed, unable to escape. Finally they splintered branches from the oaks and with those bars of wood tried to lever up the tree by prying at the roots. But every effort failed. Then Agave cried out: "Maenads, make a circle about the trunk and grip it with your hands. Unless we take this climbing beast, he will reveal the secrets of the god." With that, thousands of hands tore the fir tree from the earth, and down, down from his high perch fell Pentheus, tumbling to the ground, sobbing and screaming as he fell, for he knew his end was near. His own mother, like a priestess with her victim, fell upon him first. But snatching off his wig and snood...
so she would recognize his face, he touched her cheeks, screaming, "No, no, Mother! I am Pentheus, your own son, the child you bore to Echion! Pity me, spare me, Mother! I have done a wrong, but do not kill your own son for my offense."

But she was foaming at the mouth, and her crazed eyes rolling with frenzy. She was mad, stark mad, possessed by Bacchus. Ignoring his cries of pity, she seized his left arm at the wrist; then, planting her foot upon his chest, she pulled, wrenching away the arm at the shoulder—not by her own strength, for the god had put inhuman power in her hands.

Ino, meanwhile, on the other side, was scratching off his flesh. Then Autonoë and the whole horde of Bacchae swarmed upon him. Shouts everywhere, he screaming with what little breath was left, they shrieking in triumph. One tore off an arm, another a foot still warm in its shoe. His ribs were clawed clean of flesh and every hand was smeared with blood as they played ball with scraps of Pentheus' body.

The pitiful remains lie scattered, one piece among the sharp rocks, others lying lost among the leaves in the depths of the forest. His mother, picking up his head, impaled it on her wand. She seems to think it is some mountain lion's head which she carries in triumph through the thick of Cithaeron. Leaving her sisters at the Maenad dances, she is coming here, gloating over her grisly prize. She calls upon Bacchus: he is her "fellow-huntsman," "comrade of the chase, crowned with victory." But all the victory she carries home is her own grief.

Now, before Agave returns, let me leave this scene of sorrow. Humility,

a sense of reverence before the sons of heaven—of all the prizes that a mortal man might win, these, I say, are wisest; these are best.

Chorus

We dance to the glory of Bacchus! We dance to the death of Pentheus, the death of the spawn of the dragon! He dressed in woman's dress; he took the lovely thyrsus; it waved him down to death, led by a bull to Hades. Hail, Bacchae! Hail, women of Thebes! Your victory is fair, fair the prize, this famous prize of grief! Glorious the game! To fold your child in your arms, streaming with his blood!

Coryphaeus

But look: there comes Pentheus' mother, Agave, running wild-eyed toward the palace.

welcomes to the reveling band of the god of joy!

(Enter Agave with other Bacchantes. She is covered with blood and carries the head of Pentheus impaled upon her thyrsus.)

Agave

Bacchae of Asia—

Chorus

Speak, speak.

Agave

We bring this branch to the palace, this fresh-cut spray from the mountains. Happy was the hunting.
Chorus
I see.
I welcome our fellow-reveler of god.

Agave
The whelp of a wild mountain lion,
and snared by me without a noose.
Look, look at the prize I bring.

Chorus
Where was he caught?

Agave
On Cithaeron—

Chorus
On Cithaeron?

Agave
Our prize was killed.

Chorus
Who killed him?

Agave
I struck him first.
The Maenads call me "Agave the blest."

Chorus
And then?

Agave
Cadmus’—

Chorus
Cadmus’?

Agave
Daughters.
After me, they reached the prey.
After me. Happy was the hunting.
Chorus
Extraordinary catch.

Agave
Extraordinary skill.

Chorus
You are proud?

Agave
Proud and happy.
I have won the trophy of the chase,
a great prize, manifest to all.

Coryphaeus
Then, poor woman, show the citizens of Thebes
this great prize, this trophy you have won
in the hunt.

(Agave proudly exhibits her thyrsus with the head
of Pentheus impaled upon the point.)

Agave
You citizens of this towered city,
men of Thebes, behold the trophy of your women's
hunting! This is the quarry of our chase, taken
not with nets nor spears of bronze but by the white
and delicate hands of women. What are they worth,
your boasted now and all that uselessness
your armor is, since we, with our bare hands,
captured this quarry and tore its bleeding body
limb from limb?

—But where is my father Cadmus?
He should come. And my son. Where is Pentheus?
Fetch him. I will have him set his ladder up
against the wall and, there upon the beam,
ail the head of this wild lion I have killed
as a trophy of my hunt.

(Enter Cadmus, followed by attendants who bear upon
a bier the dismembered body of Pentheus.)

Cadmus
Follow me, attendants.
Bear your dreadful burden in and set it down,
there before the palace.

(The attendants set down the bier.)

This was Pentheus
whose body, after long and weary searchings
I painfully assembled from Cithaeron's glens
where it lay, scattered in shreds, dismembered
throughout the forest, no two pieces
in a single place.

Old Teiresias and I
had returned to Thebes from the orgies on the mountain
before I learned of this atrocious crime
my daughters did. And so I hurried back
to the mountain to recover the body of this boy
murdered by the Maenads. There among the oaks
I found Aristaeus' wife, the mother of Actaeon,
Autonoë, and with her Ino, both
still stung with madness. But Agave, they said,
was on her way to Thebes, still possessed.
And what they said was true, for there she is,
and not a happy sight.

Agave
Now, Father,
yours can be the proudest boast of living men.
For you are now the father of the bravest daughters
in the world. All of your daughters are brave,
but I above the rest. I have left my shuttle
at the loom; I raised my sight to higher things—
to hunting animals with my bare hands.

You see?
Here in my hands I hold the quarry of my chase,
a trophy for our house. Take it, Father, take it.
Glory in my kill and invite your friends to share
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the feast of triumph. For you are blest, Father, by this great deed I have done.

Cadmus

This is a grief so great it knows no size. I cannot look.

This is the awful murder your hands have done.

This, this is the noble victim you have slaughtered to the gods. And to share a feast like this you now invite all Thebes and me?

O gods, how terribly I pity you and then myself.

Justly—too, too justly—has lord Bromius, this god of our own blood, destroyed us all, every one.

Agave

How scowling and crabbed is old age in men. I hope my son takes after his mother and wins, as she has done, the laurels of the chase when he goes hunting with the younger men of Thebes. But all my son can do is quarrel with god. He should be scolded, Father, and you are the one who should scold him. Yes, someone call him out so he can see his mother's triumph.

Cadmus

Enough. No more. When you realize the horror you have done, you shall suffer terribly. But if with luck your present madness lasts until you die, you will seem to have, not having, happiness.

Agave

Why do you reproach me? Is there something wrong?

Cadmus

First raise your eyes to the heavens.
Cadmus
And whose head do you hold in your hands?

Agave (averting her eyes)
A lion’s head—or so the hunters told me.

Cadmus
Look directly at it. Just a quick glance.

Agave
What is it? What am I holding in my hands?

Cadmus
Look more closely still. Study it carefully.

Agave
No! O gods, I see the greatest grief there is.

Cadmus
Does it look like a lion now?

Agave
No, no. It is—Pentheus’ head—I hold—

Cadmus
And mourned by me before you ever knew.

Agave
But who killed him?
Why am I holding him?

Cadmus
O savage truth, what a time to come!

Agave
But who killed him?

Cadmus
You and your sisters.

Agave
You killed him.

But where was he killed?

Cadmus
He was killed on Cithaeron, there where the hounds tore Actaeon to pieces.

Agave
But why? Why had Pentheus gone to Cithaeron?

Cadmus
He went to your revels to mock the god.

Agave
But we—what were we doing on the mountain?

Cadmus
The whole city was possessed.

Agave
Dionysus has destroyed us all.

Cadmus
You outraged him. You denied that he was truly god.

Agave
Father, where is my poor boy’s body now?

Cadmus
You were mad.

Agave
Now, now I see:
Dionysus has destroyed us all.

Cadmus
You outraged him.

Agave
Father, where is my poor boy’s body now?

Cadmus
There it is. I gathered the pieces with great difficulty.
Agave
Is his body entire? Has he been laid out well?

Cadmus
[All but the head. The rest is mutilated horribly.]

Agave
But why should Penthæus suffer for my crime?

Cadmus
He, like you, blasphemed the god. And so the god has brought us all to ruin at one blow, you, your sisters, and this boy. All our house the god as utterly destroyed and, with it, me. For I have no sons left, no male heir; and I have lived only to see this boy, this branch of your own body, most horribly and foully killed.

(He turns and addresses the corpse.)

To you my house looked up.
Child, you were the stay of my house; you were my daughter’s son. Of you this city stood in awe.

——No one who once had seen your face dared outrage the old man, or if he did, you punished him.

Now I must go, a banished and dishonored man—I, Cadmus the great, who sowed the soldiery of Thebes and harvested a great harvest. My son, dearest to me of all men—for even dead, I count you still the man I love the most—never again will your hand touch my chin; no more, child, will you hug me and call me “Grandfather” and say, “Who is wronging you? Does anyone trouble you or vex your heart, old man? Tell me, Grandfather, and I will punish him.”

No, now there is grief for me; the mourning for you; pity for your mother; and for her sisters, sorrow.

If there is still any mortal man who despises or defies the gods, let him look on this boy’s death and believe in the gods.

Coryphaeus
Cadmus, I pity you. Your daughter’s son has died as he deserved, and yet his death bears hard on you.

[At this point there is a break in the manuscript of nearly fifty lines. The following speeches of Agave and Coryphaeus and the first part of Dionysus’ speech have been conjecturally reconstructed from fragments and later material which made use of the Bacchae. Lines which can plausibly be assigned to the lacuna are otherwise not indicated. My own inventions are designed, not to complete the speeches, but to effect a transition between the fragments, and are bracketed. For fuller comment, see the Appendix.—Trans.]

Agave
O Father, now you can see how everything has changed. I am in anguish now, tormented, who walked in triumph minutes past, exulting in my kill.

——I bear the curse of my son’s blood. Upon these hands I hold him to my breast? O gods, what dirge can I sing [that there might be] a dirge [for every] broken limb?

Where is a shroud to cover up his corpse?
O my child, what hands will give you proper care unless with my own hands I lift my curse?
(She lifts up one of Pentheus' limbs and asks the help of Cadmus in piecing the body together. She mourns each piece separately before replacing it on the bier. See Appendix.)

Come, Father. We must restore his head to this unhappy boy. As best we can, we shall make him whole again.

—O dearest, dearest face!

Pretty boyish mouth! Now with this veil I shroud your head, gathering with loving care these mangled bloody limbs, this flesh I brought to birth.

Coryphaeus
Let this scene teach those [who see these things:
Dionysus is the son] of Zeus.

(Above the palace Dionysus appears in epiphany.)

Dionysus

[I am Dionysus,
the son of Zeus, returned to Thebes, revealed,
a god to men.] But the men [of Thebes] blasphemed me. They slandered me; they said I came of mortal man, and not content with speaking blasphemies, [they dared to threaten my person with violence.] These crimes this people whom I cherished well did from malice to their benefactor. Therefore, I now disclose the sufferings in store for them. Like [enemies], they shall be driven from this city to other lands; there, submitting to the yoke of slavery, they shall wear out wretched lives, captives of war, enduring much indignity.

(He turns to the corpse of Pentheus.)

This man has found the death which he deserved, torn to pieces among the jagged rocks.
You are my witnesses: he came with outrage;

he attempted to chain my hands, abusing me [and doing what he should least of all have done.] And therefore he has rightly perished by the hands of those who should the least of all have murdered him. What he suffers, he suffers justly.

Upon you, Agave, and on your sisters I pronounce this doom: you shall leave this city in expiation of the murder you have done. You are unclean, and it would be a sacrilege that murderers should remain at peace beside the graves [of those whom they have killed].

(He turns to Cadmus.)

Next I shall disclose the trials which await this man. You, Cadmus, shall be changed to a serpent, and your wife, the child of Ares, immortal Harmonia, shall undergo your doom, a serpent too. With her, it is your fate to go a journey in a car drawn on by oxen, leading behind you a great barbarian host. For thus decrees the oracle of Zeus. With a host so huge its numbers cannot be counted, you shall ravage many cities; but when your army plunders the shrine of Apollo, its homecoming shall be perilous and hard. Yet in the end the god Ares shall save Harmonia and you and bring you both to live among the blest.

So say I, born of no mortal father, Dionysus, true son of Zeus. If then, when you would not, you had muzzled your madness, you should have an ally now in the son of Zeus.

Cadmus
We implore you, Dionysus. We have done wrong.
Too late. When there was time, you did not know me.

We have learned. But your sentence is too harsh.

I am a god. I was blasphemed by you.

Gods should be exempt from human passions.

Long ago my father Zeus ordained these things.

It is fated, Father. We must go.

Why then delay?

Child, to what a dreadful end have we all come, you and your wretched sisters and my unhappy self. An old man, I must go to lead a stranger among barbarian peoples, doomed to lead against Hellas a motley foreign army. Transformed to serpents, I and my wife, Harmonia, the child of Ares, we must command spearsmen against the tombs and shrines of Hellas. Never shall my sufferings end; not even over Acheron shall I have peace.

O Father, 
to be banished, to live without you!
Cadmus

Farewell to you, unhappy child.
Fare well. But you shall find your faring hard.

(Exit Cadmus.)

Agave

Lead me, guides, where my sisters wait,
poor sisters of my exile. Let me go
where I shall never see Cithaeron more,
where that accursed hill may not see me,
where I shall find no trace of thyrsus!
That I leave to other Bacchae.

(Exit Agave with attendants.)

Chorus

The gods have many shapes.
The gods bring many things
to their accomplishment.
And what was most expected
has not been accomplished.
But god has found his way
for what no man expected.
So ends the play.
EURIPIDES · V

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By Richmond Lattimore