

# BACCHAE

## Euripides

**Overview** Euripides; *Bacchae* (405 B.C.) comes over as the most modern of ancient Greek plays, concerned, as it is, with abnormal psychology and with powerful repressed forces in society. The god Dionysus appears at the outset of the play, explaining to the citizens of Thebes his own lineage, and the potent message he brings to the women-citizens, who are under the thumb of a patriarchy, and restricted in their fields of expression. The message of the god is subversive, especially to the orderly management of the (patriarchic) state, and in this case to the thinking of Pentheus, ruler of Thebes. Openness to emotions, freedom of sexual longing, dancing and wine joy are the self-realizations offered by Dionysus, and in entrapping Pentheus, into a desire to participate in these rites, he lures the ruler into a brutal sacrificial death trap.

The ruler of Athens, Pentheus, has heard disconcerting rumors of nocturnal orgies among the women, the respectable women no less, of his city state, and he is concerned—or is the word *eager*—to find out for himself what is happening. The results of his own investigations—his own *sparagmos*, or being torn apart—touch us deeply and alarmingly, and ring many bells in a society increasingly haunted by the specter of its own neurotic foundations.

### Story

The *Bacchae* of Euripides (composed 405 B.C.E.) opens in front of the palace of the ruler of Thebes. There Dionysus is explaining the reasons for his visit to the city, and in particular justifying his contention that he was born from an immortal mother. Thanks to the contrary opinions of the women of Thebes, about his divine birth, Dionysus has taken it on himself to drive the women of Thebes mad. He is assailing them with a new cult, of himself as the son of Zeus. He is luring them into the mountains, to observe his dangerous rituals, which are tearing the city apart.

As Dionysus exits, to return with the chorus to his mountain rites, Teiresias—the archetypal prophet and seer of Greek myth—appears at the palace doors to discuss with Cadmus—the founder of Thebes. Their topic is a rendez vous with Dionysus and the wild women in the mountains, but as they talk they are interrupted by Pentheus, Cadmus' grandson and the current ruler of Thebes. Aware that they are discussing the 'foreigner,' Pentheus' derogatory term for the interloper god Dionysus, Pentheus orders that Dionysus should be imprisoned and brought to justice, for serious disturbance of the peace.

The disguised Dionysus is bound, taken to the king's stables, but soon sets fire to the palace, and is about to confront Pentheus, when a herdsman appears, down from the mountains, to report 'strange happenings' among the cult women—love orgies, snakes in their hair, honey oozing from their wands. The herdsman and his friends have tried capturing one of the women, Pentheus' mother, but find themselves suddenly attacked by the group of women, who tear apart the cattle with their hands, plundering nearby villages. At this point Dionysus, still in disguise, persuades Pentheus that the best move is to spy on the maenads, the wild women, while wearing women's clothing—to avoid detection.

Pentheus accepts this suggestion, which seems to provide a way to understand the foreign invaders. He agrees to put on fawnskins, and to carry the thyrsus, like the women maenads, and yet, in making this concession to the god, Pentheus already seems in process of losing his wits. He sees two suns in the sky, and even notes horns growing out through Dionysus' mortal disguise.

At this point a messenger appears, to report what happened when Pentheus went further into the mountains to observe the women. He wanted to climb the highest tree, as a vantage point, and Dionysus

helped the ruler make his way to that eminence. But as soon as Pentheus was perched, at treetop level, Dionysus called on his followers to 'look at the guy in the tree. This was too much for the maenads, especially for Agave, Pentheus' mother, who led the pack; they forced Pentheus down from the tree, tore his limbs apart, and ripped off his head.

After this message has been relayed, Agave herself arrives on stage, holding her son's head. She is shocked when her father, Cadmus, shrinks back in horror before the head—she is still in her hallucinatory state—but by the play's end she comes to realize what horrors she has been trapped in. Agave and her sisters are sent into exile, while Dionysus turns Cadmus and his wife into serpents.

## Themes

**Stability** Dionysus, in the play, represents the height of social disorder; freedom to enjoy the vine, destruction of sexual repression, and indifference to protocol or rank.

**License** Dionysus and his cultists have proceeded to give the women license to fulfill their sexuality. He authorizes even Pentheus, par excellence the social square, to manifest his excitement at cross dressing.

**Violence** The violent dismemberment both of the herdsman's cattle, and of Pentheus himself, testify to the wild power latent in the spirit of Dionysus.

## Characters

**Dionysus** is a god—he stresses his divine lineage—but always a wild card in the Olympian pantheon. He brings with him the cult of the vine, the orgiastic, and the socially hard to control.

**Pentheus** is the voyeuristic ruler of Thebes, who is fascinated by Dionysus and his cult, and who ends up a bloody victim of this 'eastern foreigner.'

**Cadmus** Is the grandfather of Pentheus, and the founder of the house of Thebes. Though aged and experienced, he too, like the old prophet Teiresias, is drawn to the world of the maenad.

**Agave**, the mother of Pentheus, is one of the most ardent followers of Dionysus, and ultimately the murderer of her son Pentheus.

## MAIN CHARACTERS

**DIONYSUS** (emotional)

**Character** Dionysus is from first appearance cool and superior, a pretty boy to the man on the street, perhaps, but an exotic charmer—golden hair, curly locks—to the women of the traditional city-states he visits, periodically inciting outbreaks of nocturnal frenzy, and **deep emotional release**. In his relationship with Pentheus, a man of order, control and tradition, Dionysus is quick spoken, sardonic, and (often hiddenly) jeering, a set of traits he embodies in the facile way he destroys the prison Pentheus has attempted to confine him in. In the larger picture, Dionysus may 'represent' the whole passionate, irrational need of the human spirit, while Pentheus, his counter, is all about order and control.

**Parallels** Dionysus is uniquely goading: the quick spoken, quick silver, wittily penetrating antagonist, and in these traits he reminds us of two devastatingly sharp literary antagonists: Mephisto, in Goethe's *Faust*, and Teiresias in Sophocles' *Oedipus*. Each of those figures is a taunter, like Dionysus, and eventually forces his antagonist out into the open where he brings destruction or destroys himself. Mephisto mocks Faust's studiousness, and draws him out into the world of his desires—which will in the end be destructive. Teiresias continually mocks Oedipus' vain expressions of self-confidence, the upshot of which is that Teiresias makes us see that only Oedipus fails to understand the truth about himself.

## Illustrative moments

**Proud** The play opens with the arrival of the god Dionysus before the people of the city state of Thebes. He proclaims, to the people of Thebes, and to Pentheus, the ruler of Thebes and a cousin of Dionysus himself, 'behold, God's son is come into the land...!' Eager to avenge himself for slander, which implied that he was not the son of Zeus, Dionysus aggressively announces his coming, like a Messiah. We must imagine the curly locked stranger from the East, flaunting his brilliance, and directly threatening the social order overseen by Pentheus, the macho control leader, the repressor par excellence of the emotional side of the citizenry. The people of Thebes are the first to witness the head on clash of valets, between the two personalities, and they quickly realize that the clash involves the deepest conflicts within themselves.

**Menacing** Pentheus meets Dionysus' vaunts with stubborn rejection, proclaiming before the assembled Theban people: 'thy doom is fixed, for false pretence corrupting Thebes.' (He is thinking of the rumors that Dionysus brings with him disorder and immorality, an excess of base emotions.) Dionysus replies, with a cool that characterizes him: 'not mine, but thine, the doom, for dense blindness of heart, and for blaspheming god...' This kind of dialogue, between the two force-figures who dominate the play, invariably concludes with Dionysus scoring the winning point. His menace never springs from brute force, but rather from a kind of transcending of his opponent, and talking as it were in the language of the gods. Which it is.

**Quicksilver** Just as it is impossible to get the last word on Dionysus, in dialogue, so it is impossible to imprison him—for he is as uncapturable as quicksilver. Pentheus has him imprisoned in a stable, with his chains attached to the hooves of a raging bull, but the god manages easily to break his chains, to set fire to his prison, and to jeer at his captor—'and now his sword is fallen and he is worn out and wan.' Just at the moment of this escape news is arriving, from shepherds on the hills, of the rapid fire spread of women's feverish orgies in the mountains, and the audience gasps at the evidently unstoppable power of the invading god.

**Seductive** Dionysus has from his arrival been mocking the effeminacy of his rival, Pentheus, and vaunting his own power. When finally Pentheus yields, to his desire to see the women's mountain orgies, Dionysus leads him out of the city into the hills. Dionysus commands Pentheus to take shelter and to await Dionysus himself, who will attend to 'arraying the head of state' in women's clothes—so that he will be able to observe the rites. Pentheus responds with a shocked cross-dresser desire, protesting against the behavior, repressing the emotions he so obviously feels, but intrigued and prurient. Little can we imagine, at this point, that the trap into which Dionysus draws the ruler will also lead to his ritual annihilation.

## Discussion questions

The German thinker Friedrich Nietzsche felt that the human self embraces both a principle of **emotional** wildness and passion (the Dionysian) and a principle of order (he called it the Apollonian, for the god Apollo). Do you think that the *Bacchae* is a commentary on that perception of Nietzsche?

Of what significance is it that Pentheus' own mother is one of the leaders of the women's orgies? What is her ultimate role in tearing her son to pieces?

Where do Euripides' own sympathies lie in this play? Does he pity and even respect the plight of Pentheus—the sacrificed mainstay of public order? Does he, Euripides, feel worried about the freeing of repressed emotions in society?

PENTHEUS (Closed)

**Character** Pentheus is ruler of Athens, but fictionalized by Euripides at the end of a turbulent political-social century, which had seen various rulers and many profound dramatic explorations (Oedipus; Creon; Jason; Agamemnon) of what ruling consists of, and of its special perils (hidden self-destruction; fixation

on the status quo; infidelity and perfidy; stubborn machismo). Pentheus' voyeuristic leanings, and his embedded readiness for a self-destruction at the hands of the women he is 'investigating,' generate in him that kind of ruler-complex instability we could easily exemplify from the banner headlines of our own historical moment.

**Parallels** Homer draws a portrait, in the *Iliad*, of a semi-divine, semi-mortal hero, Achilles, who is a master of the sulk. When Agamemnon takes away Achilles' girl prize, at the outset of the epic, Achilles concedes but withdraws into himself. He will not emerge again until his lover, Patroclus, has entered the fray on his behalf, and been killed—as a representative of Achilles. Here is the parallel between Achilles and Pentheus. Each needs to be psycho-socially engaged in the world by a fascination with the dangerous margins of his own sexuality. Each knows that yielding to that inner provocation is going too close to the attractive death-impulse—the short beautiful life of Achilles, the offering of self to immolation by Pentheus.

### Illustrative moments

**Rumors** Pentheus, as the play opens, announces that he has been hearing rumors of the arrival, in his city-state community, of a 'gold faced stranger,' in fact it is the god Dionysus, who is causing turmoil in his region, stirring up the passions of the women, and—already in other parts of the Greek world—leading group expeditions out into the countryside where orgies take place. Something of a Creon--the man of state order part excellence from Sophocles' *Antigone*—Pentheus is highly contemptuous of these disorderly developments. He feels an impending threat to his rule, but at the same time a fascination with this 'stranger god' and his followers.

**Imprisoner** Driven by increasing reports, of tempestuous night orgies, on the part of Dionysus and his female cult followers, Pentheus decides that he must imprison the 'gold faced stranger,' the pretty boy—as he sees it—who is inciting passions and 'full expressions of sexual fulfillment'—and accordingly he has the god chained and thrown into a makeshift prison. He accompanies the imprisoning with multiple contemptuous aspersions against the pretty god with the curly locks, the man-woman type who has 'surely never been a wrestler'; mr softy with the 'winsome cheeks.' Pentheus' fury rises as he realizes that both his own mother, and his aunts, have been channeled into the new cult.

**Impotence** Despite his efforts, Pentheus—the ultimately frustrated bourgeois—finds it impossible to keep Dionysus jailed; this ultimate free spirit burns down his prison and returns to his followers, multiplying their numbers and fervor. Within his own palace Pentheus is feeling pressure to see for himself, and with that in mind he lets himself be dressed up in a Maenad (orgy-prone female sectarian) and led out into the night and the countryside to see what the famous orgies look like. It needs to be added in, here, that as he prepares for this adventure, Pentheus finds himself increasingly fascinated about the population he is about to encounter.

**Destruction** The orgiastic women lead Pentheus out into their dancing and playing ground—shepherd rumor suggests that wine drinking and sexual freedom were major ingredients of the 'orgies'—and there Pentheus is induced (cross dressing by the way) to climb up into a tree where he can watch the orgies. Once up there, voyeur par excellence, he is spotted from the ground, recognized as a treasonous male spy above all, torn down from his perch and torn apart, in a ritual *sparagmos*, a sacrificial offering to the very god he had attempted to imprison. His mother, active in the efforts to tear him apart (his identity unknown to her), is equally ardent in the effort to patch him up again.

### Discussion questions

Does the power released by Feminism, in the past century in the West, make you think of the needs and powers of Dionysus' Bacchantes in Euripides' *Bacchae*?

Does Euripides' attention to 'psychological issues' build on the insights of earlier Greek drama? On insights into literary characters like Medea the vengeful, Ajax the inwardly wounded, or Agamemnon torn between daughter-sacrifice and military prowess?

What kind of counter-roles, to one another, do Dionysus and Pentheus play? Does Dionysus require Pentheus in order to exhibit his own power?