

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

**PENTHEUS***Frederic Will, Ph.D.*Pentheus (in Euripides, *Bacchae*) Closed

**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 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.

**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?