

BACCHAE

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Bacchae by Euripides

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 rendezvous 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.

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.

Themes

Social stability(or instability.) 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.

Sexual freedom 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.