

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Characters in Euripides

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.

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 vales, 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 pretense 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.

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.

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's?

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?