Bacchae

EURIPIDES

c. 480–406 BC

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Βάκχαι

Translated from the Greek with AI (Claude) and edited



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Bacchae · Euripides (c. 480–406 BC)

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INTRODUCTION

The god Dionysus comes home to Thebes, the city of his mother Semele, disguised as a mortal stranger from the East. Thebes has denied that he is a god at all. To punish it he has driven its women mad and sent them to the mountains as his worshippers, and he has brought his own followers with him: the Bacchae, women from Asia who form the chorus.

The young king Pentheus, Dionysus' cousin, is determined to stamp out the new cult, which he sees as drunken disorder and a cover for sex. His grandfather Cadmus and the prophet Teiresias, two old men in fawnskins, urge him to give way. He arrests the stranger instead. What follows is a contest between a man who wants to control everything and a god who cannot be controlled.

Written in Macedonia near the end of Euripides' life and staged in Athens after his death in 406 BC, the Bacchae is the only surviving tragedy about the god in whose honor tragedies were performed. Its choral songs of ecstasy and its terrible ending have fascinated readers from Nietzsche onward.

Bacchae

Before the royal palace at Thebes.
Dionysus returns to the city that has denied him.

PROLOGUE

Dionysus, disguised as a mortal stranger, comes to Thebes to punish the city for denying his divinity.

DIONYSUS [1] I have come to this land of the Thebans. I am the son of Zeus, Dionysus, whom Cadmus' daughter Semele once bore, delivered by the fire of the lightning. I have exchanged a god's form for a mortal's, and here I am at the streams of Dirce and the waters of Ismenus. I see my mother's tomb, the lightning-struck woman's, here near the palace, and the ruins of her house, smoldering with the still-living flame of Zeus' fire: Hera's undying outrage against my mother. I praise Cadmus, who has made this ground untrodden, a sanctuary for his daughter. And I have covered it all around with the green clusters of the vine.[1] [13] I have left the gold-rich fields of the Lydians and Phrygians and the sun-beaten plains of the Persians. I have passed through the walled towns of Bactria, the wintry land of the Medes, Arabia the Blest, and all of Asia that lies along the salt sea, whose fine-towered cities are full of Greeks and foreigners mixed together. Now I have come to this, the first Greek city, after setting up my dances and establishing my mysteries there, so that I might be a god made manifest to mortals. [23] Thebes is the first city of this Greek land that I have roused to the ritual cry. I

1 Hera, jealous of Zeus' affair, led Semele to ask Zeus to come to her in his full glory. His lightning killed her while she was pregnant with Dionysus.

fastened the fawnskin to their bodies and put the thyrsus into their hands, the ivy-shafted weapon. I did it because my mother's sisters, the last people who should have, kept saying that Dionysus was not the son of Zeus. Semele, they said, had been seduced by some mortal and pinned the blame for her bed on Zeus. It was a trick of Cadmus', and that, they crowed, was why Zeus killed her: because she lied about her marriage. So I have stung those very sisters out of their homes with madness. They live on the mountain now, out of their minds.[2] 34 I have forced them to wear the gear of my rites. And every woman of Cadmus' people, the whole female seed of them, I have driven mad and out of their homes. Mingled with Cadmus' daughters, they sit under the green firs on roofless rocks. This city must learn, whether it wants to or not, that it is uninitiated in my Bacchic rites. And I must speak in defense of my mother Semele by appearing to mortals as the god she bore to Zeus. Now Cadmus has handed his honors and his power to Pentheus, his daughter's son, who fights against the god in me. He thrusts me away from the libations and never mentions me in his prayers. 47 For that, I will show him and all the Thebans that I was born a god. Once I have set things right here, I will move on to another land and reveal myself there. But if the city of Thebes grows angry and tries to bring the Bacchae down from the mountain by force of arms, I will lead my maenads into battle against them. That is why I have changed my form for a mortal one and transformed my appearance into a man's. But you, women who left Tmolus, Lydia's bulwark, my band, whom I brought from foreign lands to sit beside me and travel with me: take up the drums that are native to the city of the Phrygians, the invention of Mother Rhea and myself. Come around this royal palace of Pentheus and beat them, so that the city of Cadmus can see.[3] 62 As for me, I will go to the Bacchae in the glens of Cithaeron, where they are, and join in their dances.

2 The thyrsus, carried by Dionysus' worshippers, is a fennel stalk tipped with ivy.
3 Tmolus is a mountain in Lydia, in western Asia Minor. Rhea, mother of Zeus, was identified with the Phrygian mother goddess Cybele.

PARODOS

The chorus of Asian women sings of Dionysus' birth and the joys of his worship on the mountains.

CHORUS

64 From the land of Asia,
leaving holy Tmolus behind, I rush on
for Bromius ... sweet labor,
toil that is easy toil,
crying euhoi to Bacchus.
Who is in the road? Who is in the road? Who
is in the halls? Let him stand aside, and let every mouth
be hushed and holy,
for I will hymn Dionysus
in the songs ordained of old.
Blessed is he who, happy man,
knowing the mysteries of the gods,
keeps his life pure
and joins his soul to the band,
dancing for Bacchus in the mountains
with holy purifications;
who keeps, as is right, the rites
of the Great Mother Cybele,
shakes the thyrsus high,
and, crowned with ivy,
serves Dionysus.[4]

4 Bromius, "the Roarer," is one of Dionysus' names.

83 Go, Bacchae, go, Bacchae,
bring Bromius, god and son of a god,
Dionysus, home
from the Phrygian mountains into the broad
streets of Greece, bring Bromius!
Once, in the forced pangs
of labor,
as Zeus' thunder flew,
his mother cast him
from her womb and bore him,
and left her life
at the lightning's stroke.
At once Zeus, son of Cronus,
took him into chambers of birth:
he hid him in his thigh
and fastened it shut
with golden pins, concealed from Hera.
And when the Fates had brought him to term,
he bore the bull-horned god
and crowned him with crowns
of snakes. That is why the thyrsus-bearing
maenads wind the snakes they catch
around their hair.

Thebes, nurse of Semele,
crown yourself with ivy!
Burst out, burst out with green
bryony and its lovely berries,
and turn Bacchic
with boughs of oak or fir!
Fringe your robes of dappled fawnskin
with tufts of white-haired wool,
and handle the violent fennel wands
with holiness! Soon the whole land will dance,
when Bromius leads his bands
to the mountain, to the mountain, where there waits
the crowd of women,
driven from their looms and shuttles,
stung to frenzy by Dionysus.
Chamber of the Curetes,
holy haunts of Crete
where Zeus was born,
where in the caves the triple-crested Corybantes
invented for me
this circle of stretched hide![5]

5 The Curetes guarded the infant Zeus in a cave on Crete, drowning his cries with the clash of their arms. The Corybantes were similar dancing attendants of Cybele.

126 And in their Bacchic frenzy they blended it
with the high-strung, sweet-crying breath
of Phrygian pipes, and placed it in Mother Rhea's
hands, to beat time for the Bacchae's cries of euhoi.
From the Mother goddess the raving Satyrs
won it for themselves,
and joined it to the dances
of the festivals held every second year,
in which Dionysus delights.
He is sweet on the mountains, when
out of the running bands
he drops to the ground, wearing
the holy garment of fawnskin, hunting
the blood of the slaughtered goat, the joy of raw flesh,
rushing to the mountains of Phrygia, of Lydia.

142 Bromius leads the dance: euhoi!
The ground flows with milk, flows with wine, flows with the
nectar
of bees, and there is smoke like Syrian frankincense.
The Bacchic god, holding
the pine torch's blazing flame
on his fennel wand, darts out,
with running and dancing rousing the stragglers,
stirring them on with his cries,
tossing his soft curls to the sky.

151 And among the cries of euhoi he roars out
these words: "Go, Bacchae,
go, Bacchae,
splendor of Tmolus that flows with gold,
sing Dionysus
to the deep-roaring drums,
glorying in the god of euhoi with euhoi
in Phrygian shouts and cries,
when the sweet-sounding
holy pipe roars out its holy play,
keeping time with those who roam
to the mountain, to the mountain!" And then, in delight,
like a foal beside its grazing mother,
the Bacchant lifts her swift foot and leaps.

FIRST EPISODE

Cadmus and Teiresias prepare to dance for the god; Pentheus mocks them and orders the stranger's arrest.

TEIRESIAS 170 Who's at the gates? Call Cadmus out of the house, Agenor's son, who left the city of Sidon and built the towers of this town of Thebes. Someone go in and tell him Teiresias is looking for him. He knows himself what I've come about, and what I agreed with him, an old man with a still older one: to fasten up our thyrsi, wear fawnskins, and crown our heads with shoots of ivy.[6]

CADMUS 178 My dearest friend, I was inside the house, and I knew your voice the moment I heard it, the wise voice of a wise man. Here I am, ready, wearing this gear of the god's. He is my own daughter's son, Dionysus, who has shown himself to men as a god, and we must make him great, as far as it's in our power. Where should we dance? Where should we plant our feet and shake our gray heads? Show me the way, Teiresias, old man to old man; you're the wise one. I could never tire, night or day, of

6 Teiresias is the blind prophet of Thebes, a servant of Apollo.

beating the ground with the thyrsus. We've forgotten, happily, that we're old.

TEIRESIAS [189] Then you feel the same way I do. I'm young again too, and I'll try my hand at dancing.

CADMUS [191] Then shouldn't we take a carriage to the mountain?

TEIRESIAS [192] But then the god wouldn't be honored in the same way.

CADMUS [193] I'll lead you like a child, then, old man leading old man.

TEIRESIAS [194] The god will guide the two of us there without any effort.

CADMUS [195] Will we be the only ones in the city dancing for Bacchus?

TEIRESIAS [196] Yes, because we're the only ones thinking straight. The rest are not.

CADMUS [197] We're taking too long. Here, hold on to my hand.

TEIRESIAS [198] There. Take it, and link your hand with mine.

CADMUS [199] I don't look down on the gods. I was born a mortal.

TEIRESIAS [200] We don't try to be clever with the gods. The traditions of our fathers, which we have held for as long as time itself, will never be overthrown by any argument, not even if cleverness has been devised by the sharpest minds. Someone will say I have no shame about my age, going off to dance with ivy on my head. But the god has made no distinction about whether the young should dance or the old. He wants honor from everyone alike, and to be exalted without anyone being singled out.

CADMUS [210] Since you can't see this daylight, Teiresias, I'll be your spokesman and tell you what's happening. Here's Pentheus, Echion's son, to whom I've given power over the land,

hurrying toward the house. How agitated he is! What new thing will he tell us?[7]

PENTHEUS [215] I happened to be away from the country, and I hear about strange new troubles in the city. Our women have left their homes for sham Bacchic rites. They're rushing about the shadowy mountains, honoring this new god Dionysus, whoever he is, with dances. Full wine-bowls stand in the middle of their gatherings, and one here, one there, they slink off to lonely spots to serve the beds of men. The pretext, if you please, is that they're maenads making sacrifice, but they put Aphrodite ahead of Bacchus. The ones I've caught are being kept by servants in the public prison, their hands in chains. [228] The ones who are still out there I'll hunt down from the mountain: Ino, and Agave, who bore me to Echion, and Actaeon's mother, Autonoe, I mean. I'll fit them into iron nets and put a stop to this criminal frenzy soon enough. And they say some stranger has arrived, a sorcerer, a spell-singer from the land of Lydia, with fragrant golden curls and a wine-flushed face, the charms of Aphrodite in his eyes. He spends his days and nights with young women, dangling his mysteries of euhoi in front of them. If I catch him under this roof, I'll stop him beating his thyrsus and tossing his hair. I'll cut his head clean off his body. [242] He's the one who says Dionysus is a god. He's the one who says he was once sewn into Zeus' thigh, when in fact he was burnt to ashes by the blaze of the lightning, together with his mother, because she lied about a marriage with Zeus. Doesn't that deserve the terrible noose, such outrage on outrage, whoever this stranger is? But here's another marvel. I see Teiresias, the reader of portents, in dappled fawnskins, and my mother's father, what a joke, playing the Bacchant with a fennel wand. I'm ashamed, Father, to see the two of you so old and with no sense. Won't you shake off that ivy? Won't you let your hand go free of the thyrsus, my mother's father? [255] You talked him into this, Teiresias. Once again you

7 Echion was one of the Sown Men, the warriors who sprang from the dragon's teeth that Cadmus sowed when he founded Thebes.

want to bring a new god in among men, so you can watch the birds and collect fees for burnt offerings. If your gray old age didn't protect you, you'd be sitting in chains among the Bacchae for introducing wicked rites. Where women get the gleam of the grape at a feast, I tell you, there's nothing healthy left in those rites.

CHORUS 263 What impiety! Stranger, have you no respect for the gods, or for Cadmus, who sowed the earth-born crop? You are Echion's son. Will you shame your own family?

TEIRESIAS 266 When a wise man has a good starting point for his argument, speaking well is no great task. You have a nimble tongue, as if you had sense, but there's no sense in what you say. A bold man with power and a gift for speaking makes a bad citizen if he has no sense. This new god you laugh at: I couldn't begin to describe how great he will be throughout Greece. For there are two things, young man, that come first for humankind. One is the goddess Demeter. 276 She is Earth; call her by whichever name you like. She nourishes mortals with dry food. But the one who came after, her counterpart, Semele's son, discovered the liquid drink of the grape and brought it to mortals. It frees miserable mortals from their grief when they're filled with the stream of the vine. It gives them sleep and forgetfulness of each day's troubles; there is no other cure for suffering. He is a god, and he himself is poured out to the gods in libation, so that through him humankind has its blessings. 286 And you laugh at him, at the story that he was sewn into Zeus' thigh? I'll teach you what a fine story it is. When Zeus snatched him out of the lightning's fire and brought the baby up to Olympus, Hera wanted to throw him, a god, out of heaven. But Zeus devised a countermove, as only a god could. He broke off a piece of the sky that encircles the earth, made it into a Dionysus, and handed it over as a hostage against Hera's quarrels. In time people came to say he was raised in Zeus' thigh. They changed the word, because once, a god, he served as hostage to the god-

dess Hera, and so they put the story together.[8] 298 And this god is a prophet. Bacchic frenzy and madness carry great powers of prophecy: when the god enters the body in full force, he makes the frenzied tell the future. He has also taken over a share of Ares' domain. An army in arms and drawn up in its ranks can be scattered by panic before it touches a spear, and that too is a madness that comes from Dionysus. You will see him yet on the rocks of Delphi as well, leaping with pine torches over the twin-peaked plateau, brandishing and shaking the Bacchic branch, great throughout Greece. Come, Pentheus, listen to me. 310 Don't be so sure that rule is what gives men power. And if you have an opinion, but your opinion is sick, don't imagine that you've any sense. Welcome the god into the land, pour him libations, dance for Bacchus, and crown your head. It isn't Dionysus who will force women to be chaste where love is concerned. Chastity is in their nature, always and in everything. That's what you should be looking at: even in the Bacchic revels, a chaste woman won't be corrupted. 319 You see? You're pleased when crowds stand at the gates and the city glorifies the name of Pentheus. He too, I think, enjoys being honored. So Cadmus, whom you laugh at, and I will crown ourselves with ivy and dance, a gray-haired pair, but dance we must, all the same. Your words won't persuade me to fight against the god. You are mad, most cruelly mad. No drug could ever cure you, and yet it's not without drugs that you're sick.

CHORUS 328 Old man, your words bring no shame on Phoebus, and in honoring Bromius, a great god, you show good sense.

CADMUS 330 My child, Teiresias has given you good advice. Live with us, not outside our customs. Right now you're flying about; you think, but your thinking is nothing. Even if this god isn't a god, as you say, call him one anyway. Tell a fine lie, that he's Semele's son, so she'll be thought to have borne a god, and honor will come to us and our whole family. You've seen the

8 The explanation rests on a pun: in Greek, *mēros* means "thigh" and *homēros* means "hostage."

miserable fate of Actaeon: the flesh-eating hounds he had raised tore him apart in the meadows, because he boasted that he was a better hunter than Artemis. Don't let that happen to you. Come here, let me crown your head with ivy. Join us in honoring the god.

PENTHEUS 343 Keep your hands off me! Go off and be a Bacchant, and don't wipe your foolishness off on me. But this teacher of your folly, him I'll make pay. Someone go, quickly, to the seat where he watches his birds. Heave it up with crowbars and turn it over, mix everything up, top to bottom, and throw his ribbons to the winds and storms. Doing that will sting him most. And the rest of you, go through the city and track down this stranger who looks like a woman who's bringing a new disease to our women and defiling their beds. If you catch him, bring him here in chains, so he can be stoned to death as he deserves, after seeing his Bacchic revels turn bitter in Thebes.

TEIRESIAS 358 You poor fool, you don't know where your words have taken you. You're mad now; even before, you were out of your mind. Let's go, Cadmus, and pray, both for him, savage as he is, and for the city, that the god will do nothing drastic. Come, follow me with your ivy staff. Try to hold me up, and I'll do the same for you. It would be shameful for two old men to fall. But never mind. We must serve Bacchus, the son of Zeus. And take care, Cadmus, that Pentheus doesn't bring grief into your house. I don't say this by prophecy, but from the facts: a fool speaks folly.[9]

9 Teiresias puns on the name Pentheus and *penthos*, "grief."

FIRST STASIMON

The chorus condemns Pentheus' outrage and praises the quiet life, the simple people, and the gift of wine.

CHORUS

Holiness, queen of the gods,
Holiness, you who over the earth
bear your golden wing,
do you hear what Pentheus says?
Do you hear his unholy
outrage against Bromius,
Semele's son, the god who is first
of the blessed ones
at feasts of lovely garlands?
This is his domain:
to join the dancing bands,
to laugh to the pipe,
to put an end to cares,
whenever the gleam of the grape
comes to the banquet of the gods,
and at ivy-crowned festivals
the wine-bowl wraps men in sleep.

386 Of unbridled mouths
and lawless folly
the end is disaster.
But the life of quiet
and of thinking straight
stays unshaken
and holds houses together. Far off though they are,
dwelling in the upper air,
the heavenly ones see
what mortals do.
Cleverness is not wisdom,
nor is thinking thoughts too big for mortals.
Life is short, and in that span
whoever chases great things
may lose what he has.
These are the ways of madmen,
to my mind, of men who plan badly.

402 If only I could come to Cyprus,
island of Aphrodite,
where the Loves who charm the mind
live among mortals,
and to the rainless land
made fruitful by the hundred-mouthed
streams of the foreign river!
And where is Pieria, fairest of all,
seat of the Muses,
the holy slope of Olympus?
Take me there, Bromius, Bromius,
god of euhoi who leads the Bacchic throng!
There are the Graces, there is Desire,
there it is right for the Bacchae to hold their rites.
The god, the son of Zeus,
delights in festivity,
and loves Peace, the giver of wealth,
the goddess who nurtures the young.[10]

421 Equally to the rich
and to the poorer man
he has given the painless joy of wine.
But he hates the man who does not care for this:
by daylight and through the friendly nights
to live out a happy life.
It is wise to keep one's heart and mind
away from men who go too far.
Whatever the many, the simpler folk,
believe and practice, that I would accept.

SECOND EPISODE

The captured stranger is brought before Pentheus, who questions him, cuts his hair, and locks him in the stables.

SERVANT 434 Pentheus, here we are. We've caught the prey you sent us after, and we didn't set out for nothing. This beast was

tame with us. He didn't try to run away; he held out his hands, quite willingly. He didn't turn pale or lose the wine-dark color of his cheeks. He laughed, and told us to tie him up and lead him off, and he waited, making my job easy. [441] I was embarrassed, and I said, "Stranger, I'm not taking you of my own free will. It's on the orders of Pentheus, who sent me." And the Bacchae you locked up, the ones you rounded up and put in chains in the public prison: they're gone, set loose, off to the meadows, leaping about and calling on Bromius as their god. The fetters on their feet came undone by themselves, and the bolts slid back from the doors without a mortal hand. [449] This man has come to Thebes full of wonders. The rest is up to you.

PENTHEUS [451] You're madder than he is! He's in the net; he isn't quick enough to get away from me. Well, stranger, your body isn't bad-looking, for women at least, which is what you've come to Thebes for. Your hair is long, so you're no wrestler, and it pours down beside your cheek, full of desire. And you keep your skin white on purpose, out of the sun's rays, in the shade, hunting Aphrodite with your beauty. First, then, tell me who you are and where you come from.

DIONYSUS [461] There's no boasting in it; that's easy to say. You've heard of flowery Tmolus, I suppose.

PENTHEUS [463] I know it. It rings the city of Sardis.

DIONYSUS [464] That's where I come from. Lydia is my homeland.

PENTHEUS [465] And where do these rites come from that you're bringing into Greece?

DIONYSUS [466] Dionysus initiated me, the son of Zeus.

PENTHEUS [467] Is there some Zeus over there who fathers new gods?

DIONYSUS [468] No. The same one who joined Semele in marriage here.

PENTHEUS [469] Did he compel you in the night, or face to face?

---

10 The "foreign river" is usually taken to be the Nile.

DIONYSUS 470 Face to face, seeing me as I saw him. And he gave me the rites.

PENTHEUS 471 These rites of yours: what form do they take?

DIONYSUS 472 Mortals who aren't Bacchants may not know.

PENTHEUS 473 And what good do they do the people who sacrifice?

DIONYSUS 474 It isn't lawful for you to hear. But they're worth knowing.

PENTHEUS 475 You've faked that nicely, to make me want to hear.

DIONYSUS 476 The god's rites hate anyone who practices impiety.

PENTHEUS 477 You say you saw the god clearly. What was he like?

DIONYSUS 478 Whatever he wished. I had no say in that.

PENTHEUS 479 Another neat dodge, and saying nothing at all.

DIONYSUS 480 Speak wisely to an ignorant man, and you'll seem to have lost your wits.

PENTHEUS 481 Is this the first place you've come to, bringing the god?

DIONYSUS 482 Every foreign people dances these rites.

PENTHEUS 483 Yes, because they have far less sense than Greeks.

DIONYSUS 484 Better, in this respect at least. Their customs are just different.

PENTHEUS 485 Do you perform your rites by night or by day?

DIONYSUS 486 Mostly by night. Darkness has a kind of solemnity.

PENTHEUS 487 Where women are concerned, that's treacherous and rotten.

DIONYSUS 488 Anyone who looks for shameful things can find them by day too.

PENTHEUS 489 You'll have to pay for your vicious sophistries.

DIONYSUS 490 And you for your ignorance, and your impiety toward the god.

PENTHEUS 491 How bold our Bacchus is! And he's had some practice at arguing.

DIONYSUS 492 Tell me what I'm to suffer. What terrible thing will you do to me?

PENTHEUS 493 First, I'll cut off those pretty curls of yours.

DIONYSUS 494 My hair is holy. I'm growing it for the god.

PENTHEUS 495 Next, hand over that thyrsus.

DIONYSUS 496 Take it from me yourself. This is Dionysus' thyrsus I carry.

PENTHEUS 497 And we'll keep your body locked up indoors.

DIONYSUS 498 The god himself will set me free, whenever I want.

PENTHEUS 499 Yes—when you stand among your Bacchae and call him.

DIONYSUS 500 Even now he's close by, watching what's being done to me.

PENTHEUS 501 Really? Where is he? My eyes can't see him.

DIONYSUS 502 Right here with me. You can't see him because you're impious yourself.

PENTHEUS 503 Seize him. He's treating me and Thebes with contempt.

DIONYSUS 504 I tell you not to bind me—a sane man speaking to men who aren't.

PENTHEUS 505 And I tell them to bind you. I have more authority than you.

DIONYSUS 506 You don't know what life you're living. You no longer see who you are.

PENTHEUS 507 Pentheus, son of Agave, and of Echion, my father.

DIONYSUS 508 You have just the name for misfortune.

PENTHEUS 509 Go! Shut him up near the horses' stalls, so he can look at the gloomy dark. Dance there! As for these women you've brought with you, your accomplices in mischief, we'll either sell them off or stop their hands from this thudding and beating on hide and keep them as slaves at my looms.

DIONYSUS 515 I'll go. What isn't fated, I can't be made to suffer. But I promise you: Dionysus, the god you say doesn't exist, will come after you to make you pay for these outrages. In wronging us, it's him you're putting in chains.

SECOND STASIMON

The chorus recalls Dionysus' birth by Dirce, denounces Pentheus, and calls on the god to come.

CHORUS

519 ...
Daughter of Achelous,
lady Dirce, lovely maiden,
once in your springs
you received the child of Zeus,
when Zeus his father snatched him
out of the deathless fire
into his thigh, and cried out:
"Go, Dithyrambus,
enter this male womb of mine.
I reveal you to Thebes, Bacchic one,
to be called by this name."
But you, blessed Dirce,
push me away
when I bring my garlanded bands
to your banks.[11]

11 Dirce is a spring at Thebes, here a nymph, daughter of the river-god Achelous; Dithyrambus is a title of Dionysus.

Why do you spurn me? Why run from me?
Yet—I swear by the clustered grapes,
the gift of Dionysus' vine—
yet you will come to care for Bromius.
What rage, what rage
he shows, earthborn,
sprung from the serpent's race,
Pentheus, whom earthborn Echion
fathered long ago:
a wild-eyed monster, no mortal man,
but murderous, like a giant
pitted against the gods.
Soon he'll bind me in nooses,
me, who belong to Bromius;
already he holds my fellow-worshipper
inside his house,
hidden in a dark prison.

Do you see this, son of Zeus,
Dionysus—your spokeswomen
struggling in the grip of force?
Come, lord, down from Olympus,
shaking your gold-gleaming thyrsus,
and check the arrogance of this murderous man.
Where are you now, Dionysus?
On Nysa, nurse of wild beasts,
leading your bands with the thyrsus?
Or on the Corycian peaks?
Perhaps in the thick-wooded
recesses of Olympus, where
Orpheus once, playing his lyre,
drew the trees together with his songs,
drew together the wild beasts.

565 Blessed Pieria,
the god of euhoi honors you; he will come
to dance with his Bacchic revels,
and crossing the swift-flowing Axius
he will lead his whirling maenads,
crossing the river Lydias too,
the giver of wealth and happiness to mortals,
the father who, I've heard,
enriches a land of fine horses
with his loveliest waters.

THIRD EPISODE

Dionysus escapes the palace; a herdsman reports the maenads' wonders; Pentheus agrees to spy on them in women's clothes.

DIONYSUS

576 Ho!
Hear me, hear my voice,
ho, Bacchae! Ho, Bacchae!

CHORUS 579 Who is it, where does it come from, this cry of the god of euhoi that calls me?

DIONYSUS 580 Ho! Ho! I call again, / I, Semele's son, the son of Zeus.

CHORUS

582 Ho! Ho! Master, master,
come now to our band,
Bromius, Bromius!
Lady Earthquake, shake the floor of the world!
Ah! Ah!
Soon Pentheus' palace
will be shaken apart and fall.
Dionysus is in the palace—
worship him! We worship him, oh!
Look, the stone lintels on the pillars
are splitting apart.
Bromius will raise his triumph cry inside these walls.

DIONYSUS 594 Kindle the blazing torch of the thunderbolt! / Burn, burn down Pentheus' house!

CHORUS

596 Ah! Ah!
Don't you see the fire, don't you make it out,
around Semele's holy tomb,
the flame that Zeus' thunderbolt
left there long ago?
Throw yourselves to the ground, throw down
your trembling bodies, maenads!
For our lord, the son of Zeus,
is coming at this house
and turning it upside down.

DIONYSUS 604 Foreign women, are you so struck with terror that you've fallen to the ground? You felt Bacchus shaking Pentheus' house apart, it seems. Come, get up, take heart, and stop that trembling in your flesh.

CHORUS 608 Oh, greatest light of our joyful Bacchic revels, how glad I am to see you! I was so alone, so forsaken.

DIONYSUS 610 Did you lose heart when I was being taken in, thinking I would fall into Pentheus' dark dungeon?

CHORUS 612 How could I not? Who would protect me if anything happened to you? But how did you get free, when you'd fallen into the hands of an unholy man?

DIONYSUS 614 I rescued myself—easily, without any effort.

CHORUS 615 Didn't he tie your hands with knotted ropes?

DIONYSUS 616 That's just where I made a fool of him. He thought he was tying me up, but he never touched me or laid a hand on me; he was feeding on hopes. In the stable where he took me and shut me in, he found a bull, and he threw nooses around its knees and hooves, panting with rage, sweat dripping from his body, biting his lips, while I sat quietly close by and watched. Meanwhile Bacchus came and shook the house, and kindled fire on his mother's tomb. When Pentheus saw it, he thought the palace was burning and rushed this way and that, ordering his slaves to bring water. Every slave was at work, laboring for nothing. 627 Then he dropped this task, thinking I'd escaped, and rushed inside, snatching up a dark sword. And then Bromius—so it seems to me; I'm only giving you my impression—made a phantom in the courtyard. Pentheus charged at it, rushing and stabbing at the bright air, as if he were slaughtering me. On top of this, Bacchus does him further damage: he's smashed the house to the ground. It's all in ruins: he has seen my chains turn out very bitter for him. Worn out, he's dropped his sword and collapsed. A mere man, he dared to do battle with a god. I walked calmly out of the house and have come to you, without giving Pentheus a thought. 638 But it seems to me—at any rate there's a boot tramping indoors—he'll be out front any moment. What will he say after all this, I wonder? I'll handle him easily, even if he comes out breathing fury. A wise man should practice a sensible good temper.

PENTHEUS 642 I've been terribly treated! The stranger has escaped me, the man who just now was held fast in chains. What's this? What's this? Here's the man! What is this? How do you come to be out here in front of my house, outside?

DIONYSUS [647] Stop where you are. Put a quieter foot beneath your anger.

PENTHEUS [648] How did you escape your chains and get out here?

DIONYSUS [649] Didn't I say—or didn't you hear—that someone would set me free?

PENTHEUS [650] Who? You're forever bringing in strange new stories.

DIONYSUS [651] The one who grows the clustering vine for mortals.

PENTHEUS [652] That's a fine thing to throw in Dionysus' face!
[654] I order every tower all around the walls to be shut.

DIONYSUS [655] Why? Don't gods get over walls too?

PENTHEUS Wise, so wise—except where you ought to be wise.

DIONYSUS [656] Where it matters most, that's where I was born wise. But first listen to this man and learn what he has to say; he's come from the mountain with news for you. We'll wait for you here; we won't run away.

MESSENGER [660] Pentheus, ruler of this land of Thebes, I've come from Cithaeron, where the bright flurries of white snow never let up.

PENTHEUS [663] And what urgent news have you come to bring?

MESSENGER [664] I've seen the frenzied Bacchae, who were stung to frenzy and went darting out of this land on their white legs, and I've come to tell you and the city, my lord, what terrible things they're doing, things beyond any wonder. But first I want to hear whether I should tell you frankly what's going on there, or trim my words. I'm afraid of how quick your temper is, my lord, how sharp your anger, how all too royal your nature.

PENTHEUS [672] Speak. You won't be punished by me, whatever you say. One shouldn't be angry with people who are doing what's right. The more terrible the things you tell me about the

Bacchae, the heavier the punishment we'll lay on this man, who taught the women their tricks.

MESSENGER 677 Our grazing herds of cattle were just climbing up toward the ridge, at the hour when the sun sends out its rays to warm the earth. And I see three bands of women dancers. Autonoe led one, your mother Agave the second, and Ino the third. They were all asleep, their bodies relaxed. Some leaned their backs against the foliage of a fir; others rested their heads on oak leaves on the ground, lying where they'd happened to fall —modestly, not as you say, drunk from the mixing bowl and the sound of the pipe, giddily hunting Aphrodite through the woods. 689 Your mother stood up in the middle of the Bacchae and raised the sacred cry to rouse their bodies from sleep, when she heard the lowing of our horned cattle. They threw off the fresh sleep from their eyes and sprang upright, a marvel of good order to see, young women and old, and girls still unmarried. First they let their hair fall loose over their shoulders, and those whose knots had come undone pulled up their fawnskins, and they belted the dappled hides with snakes that licked their cheeks. Some held a gazelle in their arms, or wild wolf cubs, and gave them white milk—the new mothers who had left their babies behind and whose breasts were still swollen. And they put on garlands of ivy, of oak, and of flowering bindweed. 704 One took a thyrsus and struck it against a rock, and out of it leaps a dewy stream of water. Another drove her fennel wand into the ground, and there the god sent up a spring of wine. Those who wanted the white drink scratched the earth with their fingertips and had streams of milk, and from their ivy-twined thyrsi dripped sweet streams of honey. So if you'd been there and seen this, you'd have approached with prayers the god you now condemn. We cowherds and shepherds gathered together, arguing with each other, comparing our accounts of the terrible, wondrous things they were doing. 717 Then someone who'd knocked around town and had a way with words said to us all, "You who live on the holy mountain slopes, shall we hunt down Pentheus' mother Agave, bring her back from her Bacchic revels, and do

our king a favor?" We thought he had a point, and we hid ourselves in ambush among the leafy bushes. At the appointed hour the women began to wave their thyrsi for the revels, calling with one voice on Iacchus, the son of Zeus, Bromius. The whole mountain joined in the frenzy, the wild beasts too, and nothing stood still as they ran. [728] Agave happens to come leaping near me, and I jumped out, wanting to grab her, leaving the thicket where we'd been hiding. She shouted, "My running hounds, these men are hunting us! Follow me, follow, armed with your thyrsi in your hands!" So we ran and escaped being torn apart by the Bacchae. But they went for our heifers grazing on the grass, with no iron in their hands. You'd have seen one woman holding a young calf with full udders, bellowing, in her two hands, while others tore heifers to pieces. [740] You'd have seen ribs or a cloven hoof hurled up and down, and pieces hanging from the firs, dripping, smeared with blood. Bulls that had been arrogant, their rage gathering in their horns, were tripped up and their bodies brought crashing to the ground, dragged down by countless young women's hands. Their coats of flesh were stripped off faster than you could close your royal eyelids. [748] They sweep off like birds rising in flight over the plains stretched out below, along the streams of the Asopus, which yield the Thebans their rich crop of grain. And Hysiae and Erythrae, which lie beneath Cithaeron's ridge, they fell on like an enemy army and turned everything upside down. They snatched children from the houses. Whatever they put on their shoulders stayed on without being tied and didn't fall to the dark ground—not bronze, not iron. On their hair they carried fire, and it didn't burn them. The villagers, furious at being plundered by the Bacchae, ran for their weapons. [760] And then came the terrible sight, my lord. The men's pointed spears drew no blood, but the women hurled their thyrsi from their hands and wounded them and put them to flight—women routing men, not without some god's help. Then they went back to where they'd started, to the very springs the god had sent up for them. They washed off the blood, and the snakes licked the drops from

their cheeks and cleaned their skin. So, master, receive this god, whoever he is, into this city. He is great in other ways, and they also say of him, so I hear, that he gave mortals the vine that puts an end to grief. [773] And without wine there's no more Aphrodite, or any other pleasure left for people.

CHORUS [775] I'm afraid to speak freely to the king, but it shall be said all the same: Dionysus is second to none of the gods.

PENTHEUS [778] This outrage of the Bacchae is already blazing up close at hand like a fire, a great disgrace in the eyes of the Greeks. We mustn't hesitate. Go to the Electran Gates. Order all the shield-bearers to muster, and the riders of swift-footed horses, and all who brandish light shields and pluck bowstrings with their hands. We're going to march against the Bacchae. This is past all bearing, if we're to suffer what we're suffering at the hands of women.

DIONYSUS [787] You hear what I say, Pentheus, and still you won't listen. Though you've treated me badly, all the same I tell you: you shouldn't take up arms against a god. Keep quiet. Bromius won't put up with you driving the Bacchae from mountains that ring with their cries.

PENTHEUS [792] Don't lecture me! You've escaped from your chains—won't you be content with that? Or shall I turn punishment back on you?

DIONYSUS [794] I'd sooner sacrifice to him than rage and kick against the goads, a mortal against a god.

PENTHEUS [796] I'll sacrifice, all right—women's blood, as they deserve, plenty of it, spilled in the glens of Cithaeron.

DIONYSUS [798] You'll all run away. And what a disgrace, turning your hammered bronze shields away from the Bacchae's thyrsi.

PENTHEUS [800] I'm tangled up with an impossible stranger. Whatever's done to him, whatever he does, he won't keep quiet.

DIONYSUS [802] My good man, it's still possible to set this right.

PENTHEUS [803] By doing what? Being a slave to my own slaves?

DIONYSUS [804] I'll bring the women here, without weapons.

PENTHEUS [805] Oh no. Now you're plotting some trick against me.

DIONYSUS [806] What sort of trick, if I want to save you by my arts?

PENTHEUS [807] You've all agreed on this together, so you can dance for Bacchus forever.

DIONYSUS [808] Yes, I did make an agreement—with the god, you can be sure of that.

PENTHEUS [809] Bring my armor out here! And you, stop talking.

DIONYSUS [810] Ah! Would you like to see them sitting together on the mountain?

PENTHEUS [812] Very much. I'd pay a vast weight of gold for that.

DIONYSUS [813] Why? How did you fall into such a great desire for this?

PENTHEUS [814] It would pain me to see them drunk.

DIONYSUS [815] And yet you'd enjoy seeing what pains you?

PENTHEUS [816] Yes, believe me—sitting quietly under the firs.

DIONYSUS [817] But they'll track you down, even if you go in secret.

PENTHEUS [818] Openly, then. You're right about that.

DIONYSUS [819] So shall I lead you? Will you set out on the road?

PENTHEUS [820] Lead me as fast as you can. I begrudge you every moment.

DIONYSUS [821] Then put on a dress of fine linen.

PENTHEUS [822] What's this? Am I to stop being a man and join the women?

DIONYSUS [823] So they don't kill you, if you're seen there as a man.

PENTHEUS [824] Well said. You're a wise one, and have been all along.

DIONYSUS [825] Dionysus taught me this.

PENTHEUS [826] Then how can your advice best be carried out?

DIONYSUS [827] I'll go into the house and dress you myself.

PENTHEUS [828] Dress me how? Like a woman? But I'd be ashamed.

DIONYSUS [829] Aren't you eager to watch the maenads anymore?

PENTHEUS [830] And what costume do you say you'll put on me?

DIONYSUS [831] First I'll let long hair stream down from your head.

PENTHEUS [832] And the second item of my outfit—what's that?

DIONYSUS [833] A dress down to your feet. And on your head there'll be a headband.

PENTHEUS [834] And will you add anything else for me besides?

DIONYSUS [835] A thyrsus in your hand, yes, and a dappled fawn-skin.

PENTHEUS [836] I couldn't put on women's clothes.

DIONYSUS [837] But you'll shed blood if you go to war with the Bacchae.

PENTHEUS [838] True. I should go and scout first.

DIONYSUS [839] Wiser, anyway, than hunting down trouble with trouble.

PENTHEUS [840] And how will I get through town without Cadmus' people seeing me?

DIONYSUS [841] We'll take empty streets. I'll lead the way.

PENTHEUS [842] Anything's better than letting the Bacchae laugh at me. I'll go into the house and decide what's best.

DIONYSUS [844] As you like. On my side, everything's ready.

PENTHEUS [845] I'll go in. Either I'll march out under arms, or I'll follow your advice.

DIONYSUS [848] Women, the man is walking into the net. He'll come to the Bacchae, and there he'll pay the penalty with his death. Dionysus, now it's your work—you're not far off. Let's punish him. First, drive him out of his wits; fill him with a giddy madness. In his right mind he'll never be willing to put on women's clothes, but driven out of his senses he'll put them on. [854] I want him to be the laughingstock of Thebes, led through town dressed as a woman, after all those threats that made him so fearsome. Now I'll go and fit Pentheus with the finery he'll take with him to Hades, slaughtered by his mother's hands. He'll come to know Dionysus, son of Zeus, who is, in the end, a god most terrible—and to mortals most gentle.

THIRD STASIMON

The chorus sings of a fawn escaping the hunt and of the slow but sure justice of the gods.

CHORUS

862 Shall I ever, in the all-night dances,
set my white foot down
in Bacchic frenzy, tossing my head back
into the dewy air,
like a fawn at play
in the green delights of a meadow,
when she has escaped the fearful hunt,
slipped past the watchers
and over the well-woven nets,
while the huntsman with his shouts
urges on his racing hounds,
and straining, swift as a storm wind,
she bounds over the plain
along the river, delighting
in places empty of men
and in the young shoots of the shadowy wood?
What is the clever thing? What gift from the gods
is finer among mortals
than to hold a stronger hand
over the heads of one's enemies?

881 What is fine is always dear.
It moves slowly, but all the same
the power of the gods
is sure. It sets straight
those mortals who honor senselessness
and, in their mad conceit,
do not exalt the gods' ways.
Cunningly the gods conceal
the long stride of time
and hunt down the unholy man.
For one must never think
or practice anything above the laws.
It costs little to believe
that this has power:
whatever the divine may be,
and what over long ages
has always been lawful, and is so by nature.

897 What is the clever thing? What gift from the gods
is finer among mortals
than to hold a stronger hand
over the heads of one's enemies?
What is fine is always dear.
Happy the man who has escaped a storm at sea
and reached harbor;
happy the man who has risen above his troubles.
In one way or another, one man outstrips another
in wealth and power.
Countless are the hopes
still held by countless people: some
end in prosperity
for mortals, others come to nothing.

910 But the one whose life is happy / day by day—him I call blessed.

FOURTH EPISODE

Pentheus, now deranged, appears dressed as a maenad and is led off to the mountain.

DIONYSUS 912 You there, so eager to see what you shouldn't, so keen on what no one should be keen on: Pentheus, I mean you. Come out in front of the house and let me see you dressed as a woman, a raving Bacchant, ready to spy on your mother and her company. You look just like one of Cadmus' daughters.

PENTHEUS 918 Look, I seem to see two suns, and two Thebes, the seven-gated city twice over. And you seem to be a bull walking ahead of me, with horns grown out of your head. Were you an animal all along? You've certainly turned into a bull.

DIONYSUS 923 The god is walking with us. He wasn't kindly before, but he's made his peace with us. Now you see what you ought to see.

PENTHEUS 925 So what do I look like? Don't I stand just the way Ino stands, or Agave, my own mother?

DIONYSUS 927 Looking at you, I seem to see them in person. But this curl has slipped out of place. It's not the way I tucked it under your headband.

PENTHEUS 930 I was tossing my head forward and back indoors, dancing like a Bacchant, and I shook it loose.

DIONYSUS 932 Well, I'm the one whose job it is to look after you, so I'll put it back in place. Come, hold your head up.

PENTHEUS 934 There. You arrange me. I'm all yours now.

DIONYSUS 935 And your girdle's loose, and the pleats of your dress don't hang evenly below your ankles.

PENTHEUS 937 I think so too, by the right foot at least. On this side, though, the dress hangs straight down to the heel.

DIONYSUS 939 I expect you'll count me first among your friends when you see the Bacchae, against all your expectations, behaving chastely.

PENTHEUS [941] Shall I look more like a Bacchant if I hold the thyrsus in my right hand, or in this one?

DIONYSUS [943] In the right, and you must raise it in time with your right foot. I commend you for leaving your old mind behind.

PENTHEUS [945] Do you think I could carry the glens of Cithaeron on my shoulders, Bacchae and all?

DIONYSUS [947] You could if you wanted to. Your mind wasn't healthy before, but now it's exactly as it should be.

PENTHEUS [949] Should we bring crowbars? Or shall I tear it up with my bare hands, putting my shoulder or my arm under the peaks?

DIONYSUS [951] Don't you go destroying the shrines of the Nymphs and the haunts of Pan, where he plays his pipes.

PENTHEUS [953] You're right. Women aren't to be beaten by force. I'll hide myself among the pines.

DIONYSUS [955] You'll be hidden in just the hiding place where you ought to be hidden, coming as a cunning spy on the maenads.

PENTHEUS [957] You know, I can picture them in the thickets like birds, caught in the sweetest snares of lovemaking.

DIONYSUS [959] Isn't that the very thing you're being sent to watch for? Maybe you'll catch them, unless you're caught first.

PENTHEUS [961] Take me right through the middle of Thebes. I'm the only man among them who dares to do this.

DIONYSUS [963] You alone carry the burden for this city, you alone. And so the trials that had to come are waiting for you. Follow me. I'll be your escort and see you safely there. Someone else will bring you back from there—

PENTHEUS [966] Yes, the one who bore me.

DIONYSUS [967] —for everyone to see.

PENTHEUS That's what I'm going for.

DIONYSUS 968 You'll come back carried—

PENTHEUS In luxury, you mean.

DIONYSUS 969 —in your mother's arms.

PENTHEUS You'll make me soft and spoiled.

DIONYSUS 970 Spoiled, yes, in a certain way.

PENTHEUS Well, I'm only getting what I deserve.

DIONYSUS 971 You're a fearsome man, fearsome, and it's a fearsome ordeal you're going to, so you'll find a glory that towers up to heaven. Stretch out your hands, Agave, and you, her sisters, daughters of Cadmus! I'm bringing this young man to a great contest, and the victors will be Bromius and I. The rest the event itself will show.

FOURTH STASIMON

The chorus calls on the hounds of Madness and on justice to strike Pentheus down.

CHORUS

977 Go, swift hounds of Madness, go to the mountain,
where Cadmus' daughters keep their band,
and sting them into fury
against the man in women's mimicking dress,
the maenads' ... raving spy.
His mother will be the first to see him
from a smooth rock or a crag
lying in wait, and she'll cry out to the maenads:
"Who is this man of Cadmus' people
who comes hunting the mountain-runners,
to the mountain, to the mountain he has come, he has
come, you Bacchae?"

988 "Who gave him birth?
He was not born of women's blood;
he is the offspring of some lioness,
or of the Libyan Gorgons."
Let justice come for all to see, let her come with a sword,
slaying, piercing through the throat
the godless, lawless, unjust
earthborn son of Echion!
With unjust judgment and lawless rage
against your rites, Bacchus, and your mother's,
with maddened heart
and frantic spirit he sets out
to conquer by force the unconquerable.

1002 A sensible mind that offers mortals no excuses
in matters that concern the gods,
a mind that knows it is mortal: that makes a life without
grief.
Cleverness I don't begrudge;
my joy is in hunting
other things, great and always plain to see,
that guide life toward what is fine:
from day into night to be pure and reverent,
and, casting out customs that stray beyond justice,
to honor the gods.
Let justice come for all to see, let her come with a sword,
slaying, piercing through the throat
the godless, lawless, unjust
earthborn son of Echion!

1017 Show yourself as a bull, or a many-headed
serpent to behold, or a lion
blazing with fire to see!
Come, Bacchus, with laughing face
throw your noose around the hunter of the Bacchae
as he falls beneath the deadly
herd of maenads.

FIFTH EPISODE

A second messenger tells how the maenads, led by Agave, tore Pentheus apart.

SECOND MESSENGER 1024 House that was once so fortunate throughout Greece, house of the old man from Sidon who sowed the earthborn crop of the serpent-dragon in the soil: how I grieve for you! I'm only a slave, but still. Good slaves feel their masters' misfortunes as their own.[12]

CHORUS 1029 What is it? Have you news from the Bacchae?

SECOND MESSENGER 1030 Pentheus is dead, the son of Echion.

CHORUS 1031 Lord Bromius! You show yourself a great god!

SECOND MESSENGER 1032 What are you saying? What was that? Are you glad, lady, that my masters have met with disaster?

CHORUS

1034 A stranger, I cry euhoi
in foreign songs;
no longer do I cower in fear of chains.

SECOND MESSENGER 1036 Do you take Thebes to be so short of men ...?

CHORUS 1037 Dionysus, Dionysus, not Thebes, / has power over me.

SECOND MESSENGER 1039 It's forgivable in you. Still, ladies, it isn't right to rejoice over horrors once they've been done.

CHORUS 1041 Tell me, say it: what was the fate he died by, / the unjust man who contrived injustice?

SECOND MESSENGER 1043 When we had left behind the farmsteads of this Theban land and crossed the streams of the Asopus, we began climbing into the rocky heights of Cithaeron: Pentheus and I (I was following my master), and the stranger

12 Cadmus came to Thebes from Sidon, in Phoenicia.

who was guiding us to the spectacle. First we settled in a grassy glade, keeping our feet and our tongues silent, so that we could see without being seen. There was a ravine with cliffs all around, soaked with streams and shaded by pines, and there the maenads were sitting, their hands busy with pleasant tasks. 1054 Some of them were crowning a thyrsus that had lost its ivy, making it leafy again. Others, like fillies let loose from their painted yokes, were singing a Bacchic song back and forth to one another. But poor Pentheus, who couldn't see the crowd of women, said this: "Stranger, from where we're standing my eyes can't reach the maenads as I'd like. But if I climbed a mound, or a pine tree with a tall neck, I could get a proper view of the maenads' shameful doings." Then and there I saw the stranger do something marvelous. He took hold of the sky-high top branch of a pine and pulled it down, down, down to the black earth. 1066 It curved like a bow, or like a rounded wheel when its rim is traced out by a compass sweeping around. So the stranger drew the mountain bough down with his hands and bent it to the earth, doing work no mortal could do. He set Pentheus on the pine branches and let the trunk slide up straight through his hands, gently, taking care it wouldn't throw him off. Up it towered, straight into the open sky, with my master sitting on its back. He was seen by the maenads more than he saw them. 1076 No sooner was he visible, perched up there, than the stranger could no longer be seen, and out of the sky a voice (Dionysus, one would guess) cried out: "Young women, I bring you the man who makes a mockery of you and me and my rites. Now take your revenge on him!" And as he spoke these words, a light of awesome fire was fixed between heaven and earth. The sky fell silent; the leaves of the grassy glade were silent; you would not have heard a single animal cry. 1086 The women, who hadn't clearly caught the sound, stood up straight and looked all around. He called again. And when Cadmus' daughters recognized the clear command of Bacchus, they rushed off, as fast on their feet as doves, running at full stretch: his mother Agave, and her sisters, and all the Bacchae. Through the torrent-filled

glen and over the crags they leapt, maddened by the breath of the god. When they saw my master sitting in the pine, they first climbed a rock that rose opposite like a tower and hurled stones at him with all their strength, and he was pelted with pine branches. 1099 Others hurled their thyrsi through the air at Pentheus, a pitiful target, but they couldn't reach him. The poor man sat higher than their eagerness could reach, trapped and helpless. At last they splintered off oak branches, smashing them down as a thunderbolt would, and tried to tear up the roots with these levers that had no iron in them. When they couldn't bring their efforts to an end, Agave said: "Come, maenads, stand in a circle and take hold of the trunk, so we can catch the climbing beast and stop him from reporting the god's secret dances." And they set countless hands to the pine and tore it out of the earth. 1111 From his seat high up, Pentheus came crashing down from the heights to the ground, with endless cries of pain; he knew he was close to disaster. His mother began the slaughter first, as its priestess, and fell on him. He tore the headband from his hair so that poor Agave would recognize him and not kill him, and touching her cheek he said, "Mother, it's me, your son Pentheus, whom you bore in Echion's house! Pity me, Mother, and don't kill your son for my mistakes!" 1122 But she was foaming at the mouth and rolling her eyes all around, not thinking as she ought to think. She was in the grip of Bacchus, and he couldn't persuade her. She seized his left arm in both of hers, set her foot against the poor wretch's ribs, and tore his shoulder out. It wasn't her own strength: the god made it easy for her hands. Ino set to work on the other side, ripping his flesh, and Autonoe and the whole crowd of Bacchae pressed in. It was all one cry together: he groaning with all the breath he had left, and they shrieking in triumph. One carried off an arm, another a foot, boot and all. His ribs were stripped bare by their tearing, and every one of them, her hands bloodied, was tossing Pentheus' flesh about like a ball. 1137 His body lies scattered, part under rugged rocks, part in the deep foliage of the woods: no easy thing to search out. And his wretched head, which his

mother happened to get into her hands, she has fixed on the tip of her thyrsus, and she carries it like a mountain lion's through the middle of Cithaeron, leaving her sisters among the maenads' dances. She's coming inside these walls, exulting in her ill-fated catch, calling on Bacchus, her fellow huntsman, her partner in the hunt, the glorious victor. The victory she wins is tears. 1148 As for me, I'll get myself out of the way of this disaster before Agave reaches the house. Self-control and reverence for what belongs to the gods are the finest things; and I think that for mortals who make use of them, they are also the wisest possession.

FIFTH STASIMON

The chorus celebrates Pentheus' death and the bloody victory of his mother.

CHORUS

1153 Let us dance for Bacchus,
let us cry aloud the disaster
of Pentheus, the serpent's offspring,
who put on women's clothing
and took the fennel wand, Hades' sure pledge,
the fine thyrsus,
with a bull to lead him into disaster.
Bacchae of Cadmus' city,
you have turned your glorious song of victory
into lament, into tears.
A fine contest: to throw around your child
a hand dripping with his blood.

EXODOS

Agave returns with her son's head, comes to her senses, and Dionysus sends the family into exile.

CHORUS 1165 But here I see Pentheus' mother, Agave, rushing toward the house with wildly rolling eyes. Welcome the revel band of the god of euhoi!

AGAVE 1168 Bacchae of Asia!

CHORUS ... Why are you rousing me? Oh!

AGAVE

1169 We bring from the mountain
a fresh-cut tendril to the house,
a blessed catch.

CHORUS 1172 I see, and I'll welcome you as a fellow reveler.

AGAVE

1173 I caught this one without a noose,
... a young lion,
as you can see.

CHORUS 1176 Where in the wilds?

AGAVE 1177 Cithaeron—

CHORUS Cithaeron what?

AGAVE 1178 —killed him.

CHORUS 1179 Who struck him first?

AGAVE The prize is mine.

CHORUS 1180 Blessed Agave—

AGAVE that's what they call me in the bands.

CHORUS 1181 Who else?

AGAVE Cadmus'—

CHORUS Cadmus' what?

AGAVE

—daughters,
after me, after me,
laid hands on this beast. A lucky hunt!
Come now, share the feast.

CHORUS 1184 Share what, poor wretch that I am?

AGAVE

He's a young bullock: just now
his cheek, under his crest of soft, thick hair,
is coming into bloom.

CHORUS Yes, with that mane he looks like a wild beast of the fields.

AGAVE

Bacchus the huntsman,
clever, cleverly launched
the maenads at this beast.

CHORUS Yes, our lord is a hunter.

AGAVE Do you praise me?

CHORUS Praise what?

AGAVE Soon Cadmus' people—

CHORUS and your son Pentheus, his mother—

AGAVE will praise,

CHORUS for taking this catch—

AGAVE this lion of a catch,

CHORUS extraordinary—

AGAVE extraordinarily.

CHORUS Are you proud?

AGAVE

I rejoice
in great things, great things,
plain to see, achieved in this hunt.

CHORUS Then show the citizens, poor woman, your victorious catch, the one you've brought back with you.

AGAVE You who live in this city of fine towers in the land of Thebes, come and see this catch, the beast we daughters of Cadmus hunted down: not with the thonged javelins of the Thessali-

ans, not with nets, but with the fingertips of our white arms. After this, should men go on boasting for nothing and buying weapons from the spear-makers? We caught this one with our bare hands, and we tore the beast limb from limb. Where's my father, the old man? Let him come here. And my son Pentheus, where is he? Let him take a sturdy ladder and set it against the house, so he can nail up on the triglyphs this head of the lion I've hunted and brought home.[13]

CADMUS 1216 Follow me, servants, carrying the wretched weight of Pentheus. Follow me to the front of the house. Here is his body; I bring it after endless searching and hard toil. I found it in the glens of Cithaeron, torn to pieces, no two parts lying in the same place, scattered through woods where it was hard to find. Someone told me about my daughters' dreadful deeds when I had already come back inside the walls into the city, with old Teiresias, from the Bacchae. 1225 So I turned back to the mountain, and I'm bringing home the boy the maenads killed. I saw Autonoe, who bore Actaeon to Aristaeus long ago, and Ino with her, still in the oak thickets, the poor women, stung by frenzy. But someone told me that Agave was coming here with dancing Bacchic steps, and what I heard was true. 1232 For I see her there, and it's no happy sight.

AGAVE 1233 Father, you can make the greatest boast there is: you fathered by far the finest daughters of all mortals. All of us, I mean, but me above all. I left my shuttle at the loom and have gone on to greater things: hunting wild beasts with my bare hands. And I'm carrying in my arms, as you see, this prize of valor I've won, to hang on your house. Here, Father, take it in your hands. Be proud of my catch and invite your friends to a feast. You're blessed, blessed, now that we've done such things.

CADMUS 1244 Grief beyond measure, grief no eye can bear: murder done by your wretched hands! A fine victim you've struck down for the gods, and now you invite Thebes and me to

13 Triglyphs are the carved blocks in the frieze above a building's columns, where hunters hung their trophies.

the feast. Oh, no, for your misery first, and then for mine! The god, lord Bromius, has destroyed us justly, yes, but too far, and he was born of our own house.

AGAVE 1251 How crabby old age makes people, how sullen-eyed! I wish my son were a good hunter and took after his mother's ways when he goes out with the young men of Thebes to hunt wild beasts. But all he's good for is fighting against the god. He needs a talking-to, Father, and you're the one to give it. Will someone call him here into my sight, so he can see me in my happiness?

CADMUS 1259 Ah, ah. When you understand what you've done, you will suffer terrible pain. But if you stay to the very end in the state you're in now, you won't be fortunate, but you won't feel unfortunate.

AGAVE 1263 What isn't right here? What's painful?

CADMUS 1264 First, turn your eyes up to the sky here.

AGAVE 1265 There. Why did you tell me to look at it?

CADMUS 1266 Is it still the same, or does it look changed to you?

AGAVE 1267 Brighter than before, and clearer.

CADMUS 1268 And this fluttering excitement: is it still in your soul?

AGAVE 1269 I don't know what you mean by that. But somehow I'm coming to my senses, turned away from my former mind.

CADMUS 1271 Could you listen to me, then, and answer clearly?

AGAVE 1272 Yes. I've forgotten what we were saying before, Father.

CADMUS 1273 What house did you go to when you married?

AGAVE 1274 You gave me to Echion, one of the Sown Men, as they call them.

CADMUS 1275 And what son was born to your husband in that house?

AGAVE 1276 Pentheus, born of my union with his father.

CADMUS [1277] Then whose face is that you're holding in your arms?

AGAVE [1278] A lion's, or so the women hunting with me said.

CADMUS [1279] Now look at it properly. It takes only a moment to look.

AGAVE [1280] What? What am I looking at? What is this I'm carrying in my hands?

CADMUS [1281] Look at it closely and understand it more clearly.

AGAVE [1282] I see the greatest grief, oh, I'm so wretched.

CADMUS [1283] It doesn't look like a lion to you, does it?

AGAVE [1284] No. It's Pentheus' head I'm holding, wretch that I am.

CADMUS [1285] Yes, drenched in blood before you knew him.

AGAVE [1286] Who killed him? How did he come into my hands?

CADMUS [1287] Cruel truth, how ill-timed your coming!

AGAVE [1288] Tell me. My heart is leaping at what's coming.

CADMUS [1289] You killed him, you and your sisters.

AGAVE [1290] Where did he die? At home? Or where?

CADMUS [1291] Where the hounds once tore Actaeon apart.

AGAVE [1292] But why did he go to Cithaeron, poor wretch?

CADMUS [1293] He went there to mock the god and your Bacchic rites.

AGAVE [1294] And we—how did we end up there?

CADMUS [1295] You were mad. The whole city was possessed by Bacchus.

AGAVE [1296] Dionysus destroyed us. Now I understand.

CADMUS [1297] Yes, because you insulted him. You wouldn't believe he was a god.

AGAVE [1298] And my son's beloved body, Father, where is it?

CADMUS [1299] Here. I'm bringing it, and it wasn't easy to search out.

AGAVE 1300 Is it all fitted together properly, limb to limb? ...
1302 But what share did Pentheus have in my folly?

CADMUS 1303 He became like you: he didn't revere the god. So the god bound you all together in one ruin, you and him, to destroy the house, and me. I have no sons of my own, and now I see this young shoot of your womb, poor woman, dead in the most shameful, most horrible way. You, my child, were the one through whom the house looked up again; you held my palace together, my daughter's son, and you were a terror to the city. No one would dare insult the old man once he saw you, for you made them pay what they deserved. 1313 Now I'll be thrown out of my house in disgrace, I, Cadmus the great, who sowed the Theban race and reaped that finest of harvests. Dearest of men (for even though you're gone, you'll still be counted among those dearest to me, child), you'll never again touch this beard with your hand, never again put your arms around me, calling me your mother's father, child, and saying: "Who's wronging you, who's dishonoring you, old man? Who's troubling your heart and causing you pain? Tell me, so I can punish whoever wrongs you, Father." 1323 But now I'm miserable, and you are wretched, your mother is pitiful, and her sisters are wretched. If there is anyone who looks down on the gods, let him look at this man's death and believe in the gods.

CHORUS 1327 I grieve for you, Cadmus. Your daughter's son has his punishment: deserved, but painful for you.

AGAVE 1329 Father, you see how completely my life has been overturned ... ...

DIONYSUS 1330 ... ... You will be changed into a serpent, and your wife will be turned into a beast and take on the shape of a snake: Harmonia, Ares' daughter, whom you married though you were mortal. As Zeus' oracle says, you will drive an oxcart with your wife, at the head of foreign peoples. With an army beyond counting you will sack many cities; but when they plunder the oracle of Loxias, they will have a miserable journey home. Ares, though, will rescue you and Harmonia and settle you to live in

the land of the blessed. I tell you this as the son not of a mortal father but of Zeus: I, Dionysus. If you had learned self-control back when you refused it, you would be happy now, with the son of Zeus as your ally.[14]

AGAVE 1344 Dionysus, we beg you: we have done wrong.

DIONYSUS 1345 You've come to know me too late. When you should have, you didn't.

AGAVE 1346 We've realized that. But you're pursuing us too far.

DIONYSUS 1347 Yes, because I, a god, was insulted by you.

AGAVE 1348 Gods ought not to be like mortals in their anger.

DIONYSUS 1349 Zeus my father decreed all this long ago.

AGAVE 1350 Oh, no. It's decided, old man: miserable exile.

DIONYSUS 1351 Then why do you delay what has to be?

CADMUS 1352 Child, what a terrible disaster we've come to: you, poor woman, and your sisters, and your son, and I, wretched me! I'll go to live among foreign peoples, an old man in a strange land. And there's still an oracle that I'll lead a mixed foreign army against Greece. And my wife, Harmonia, Ares' daughter, I'll lead, a serpent leading her in the form of a savage serpent, against the altars and tombs of Greece, at the head of spearmen. I, wretched man, will never rest from troubles; not even when I've sailed down the Acheron will I find peace.[15]

AGAVE 1363 Father, and I'll be parted from you and go into exile.

CADMUS 1364 Why do you throw your arms around me, my poor child, like a young bird clinging to an old gray swan, a useless drone?

AGAVE 1366 Where can I turn, driven out of my homeland?

CADMUS 1367 I don't know, child. Your father is a poor helper now.

14 Loxias is a title of Apollo, whose oracle was at Delphi. Harmonia, daughter of Ares and Aphrodite, was Cadmus' wife.
15 The Acheron is a river of the underworld, crossed by the dead.

AGAVE

Farewell, my home; farewell, city
of my fathers. I leave you in misfortune,
an exile from my chamber.

CADMUS Go now, my child, to Aristaeus'—

AGAVE I'm losing you, Father.

CADMUS And I you, child, / and I have wept for your sisters.

AGAVE

Terrible is the outrage
that lord Dionysus
has brought upon your house.

DIONYSUS Yes, for I suffered terribly at your hands, / my name left unhonored in Thebes.

AGAVE Fare well, my father.

CADMUS Fare well, my poor / daughter, though faring well will come hard to you.

AGAVE

Take me, escorts, to where
I'll find my sisters, my pitiful companions in exile.
May I go where
foul Cithaeron will never see me,
nor I set eyes on Cithaeron,
nor anywhere a thyrsus is dedicated to remind me.
Let other Bacchae care for such things.

CHORUS

Many are the shapes of what the gods send,
and many things the gods bring about beyond hope.
What was expected was not fulfilled,
and for the unexpected the god found a way.
So this matter has turned out.