

'What do we learn about the character of Dionysus from the Bacchae?'
(including plan)

Right from the start of the play Dionysus is shown as an important character; he opens the play and explains to the audience who he is. He explains that he is son of Semele and son of Zeus; he mentions his birth as well so immediately we are introduced to a god who is obviously powerful and important. He has come to initiate his worship in Thebes and we can see that he is a very determined character who will get what he wants

We can see by the way he wholeheartedly said he has driven his mother's sisters mad that he is possibly a cruel and relentless god who punishes those who defy him and his worship, so we can see that he is on a mission to show punishment when he says "This city must earn its lesson". We can see that already by the opening of the play he is a powerful and punishing god and therefore harsh. "I will lead my maenads into battle" shows he is willing to become aggressive if Thebes does not worship him.

When he is brought in to talk to Pentheus he speaks completely in riddles which to the audience gives huge dramatic irony and it also shows he is clever by playing with words and he knows that Pentheus will not understand so he is humouring himself while Pentheus tries to figure out what he means, but as we can see everything Dionysus says, Pentheus so naively does not catch on.

He is manipulative and seems to thoroughly enjoy the fact that Pentheus is so confused, he plays with Pentheus' head and makes him believe he sees a bull and the palace on fire and it shows he is mean and cruel hearted because he is enjoying his suffering. Then we see him luring Pentheus because he wants to use his childlike and vulnerable state to trick him and go to see the bacchantes, so to gain his trust Dionysus seems somehow to have hypnotised him in order to punish him. This again shows his cruel state of mind because Pentheus is defenceless and cannot help what he does and sees from here onwards.

He persuades Pentheus to dress as a woman so the women do not recognise him immediately and he controls what he does by convincing him that he will be fine and they are going to enjoy their trip. So he is clearly controlling and persuasive which promotes his clever mind. He appears very vindictive in his punishing Dionysus and has gone further than embarrassment and revealing what Pentheus is, he has converted him back to a childish state and therefore Dionysus has full control over trust and actions.

Being a god he already has ultimate ranking over humans, this makes us question why he appears to be enjoying Pentheus' suffering so much and whether he really should enjoy it this much, he makes his own hypnotised mother rip apart her hypnotised son and this shows a very unforgiving nature. "You shall ride home ...in your own mother's arms." This is dreadful irony which shows a remorseless side of Dionysus, he enjoys teasing Pentheus.

▲ At the beginning of the play he was a powerful and respected god and we learn through punishment that he is clever but manipulative and clearly vindictive; he does not behave like a god generally would and he displays shocking behaviour by the end of the play.

The play opens with the god Dionysus, these questions are useful for planning

Lines 1-22

Where is Dionysus?

He is outside the royal palace on the citadel of Thebes.

Who are his parents?

Zeus and Semele

In your own words, explain the reference to the 'lightning-flame'.

Zeus kills Semele with a lightning bolt and snatches Dionysus from her womb.

What has happened to Dionysus' appearance?

He is disguised as mortal so he can go to Dirce's stream and the waters of Ismenus.

Where is Dionysus standing?

By his mother's tomb

What does Dionysus think of Cadmus and why does he think this?

He approves of him because he made the tomb where his daughter is, a holy place

List the places Dionysus has visited.

Lydia's fields, Persia, Bactria's, Medes, Arabia and Asia.

Why has he come to Greece?

So he can show them his divinity and have them worship him. He is the god of song and dance too –so they dance.

Lines 23-31

What has Dionysus done to the women of Thebes?

He has dressed them in fawn skins and shown them his ivy-bound spear and driven them into a frenzy

What did Dionysus' mother's sisters do?

Told him they refused to believe he was a god and that Hera was jealous of Semele so Zeus killed her.

Lines 32-43

Describe what Dionysus has done to the women of Thebes noting any word that describes their emotions.

He 'spurred them to madness' and their 'wits have deserted them'. He drives

them to a 'Frenzy' and has them leave their homes and go to the mountains to worship him.

Lines 44-end

Who is king of Thebes?

Pentheus

Why is Dionysus 'cross' with him?

He does not count him as a god either and does not include him in worship or prayer.

What does Dionysus intend to do?

He intends on proving to him and everyone in Thebes that he is a true god.

What does Dionysus instruct the chorus to do?

Play their kettledrums in front of the palace to show them he has power and followers.

Where does he decide to go?

to the Cithaeron's glens to join the dances with the Bacchants.