

# THE BACCHAE

## BY EURIPIDES

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THE GOD DIONYSUS IS THE MAIN CHARACTER IN THE PLAY. IN FACT, 'Bacchae' is the name given to the female worshippers of Dionysus or Bacchus. Dionysus was born in Thebes where the play is set. He was born to Semele, the then king of Thebes' daughter; his name was Cadmus who features in the play as an old man. Cadmus' other daughters are called Autonoe, Ino and Agave – whose son, Pentheus, is now the king of Thrace.

Though his mother was a mortal, Dionysus' father was Zeus. When Zeus impregnated Semele, his wife, Hera, became furiously jealous and disguised herself as Semele's nurse and urged her to make her lover, Zeus, prove his divinity by granting her a wish. Semele made Zeus take an oath that he would grant her any wish and when she wished to see him in divine form, Hera knew that Semele would be destroyed. Under oath, Zeus appeared as god of lightning and a lightning bolt hit Semele and she was burnt alive and prematurely gave birth to Dionysus as a foetus. However, to save his son, Zeus sewed the foetus up in his thigh and after the correct number of months, Dionysus was born from his father's thigh.

Zeus, understanding that he couldn't possibly bring up the baby on Olympus with Hera around, gave Dionysus to his aunt, Ino to bring up. Hera turned Ino's husband mad and he killed their son, Ino was then prosecuted and jumped into the sea with Dionysus and was turned into a sea nymph. After that, Dionysus was rescued by Hermes, the messenger god and was raised by nymphs on Mount Nysa in Asia. When Dionysus grew up, he roamed the east gaining support from those who would believe in him. To those who would accept him as a deity, he punished terribly. "The most terrible and most gentle to mankind," is how he describes himself.

At the beginning of the play, Dionysus says the introductory speech or prologue and explains how he has driven the sisters of Semele, his mother, and the other women in Thebes mad and sent them as Bacchantes onto Mount Cithaeron. This is because, Dionysus' aunts had been spreading rumours that Dionysus was not really a god and that Semele had just slept with some ordinary man and to save her dignity and herself from shame, she said it was Zeus' child. Dionysus and his chorus – who are voluntary Bacchantes – says that if Pentheus does not acknowledge him as a god, he will lead the tranced Bacchant women into battle against Pentheus.

Cadmus, Pentheus and Dionysus' grandfather, and the blind prophet Teiresias have already, voluntarily, submitted to the worship of Dionysus. However their reasons are

very different. As a prophet of the gods, Teiresias believes that it is his duty to follow all the gods and accept them all as well. However, Cadmus believes that it will ring honour upon the royal family to acknowledge Dionysus as a god for he is related to them.

Dionysus has already explained to the audience that he has disguised himself as a priest of himself (Dionysus) and is saying that he is from Lydia.

When Pentheus enters, he tells the audience that he has already arrested some of the Bacchants. Pentheus has said that he has heard about some 'oriental conjurer' a foreigner from Lydia. He is blasphemous when he says that he will capture this dangerous, effeminate priest and cut off his head. When Pentheus sees the old men dressed as Bacchants, he becomes even more outraged and sees it as a loss of dignity for Teiresias and Cadmus to dress so. He claims that Teiresias is a bad influence on his grandfather and is only worshipping Dionysus, as he will get paid more for the extra sacrifices.

Teiresias explains that the myth of Dionysus had been terribly muddled. The words 'token' and 'thigh' were very similar in ancient Greek and that instead of being sewn up into Zeus' thigh, the real baby was put into safety whereas Zeus, out of ether, created a phantom foetus and gave it to Hera to quash her jealousy. Teiresias then goes on to say that the gods of food and wine were very powerful and man depends on them. Therefore Demeter (food) and Dionysus (wine) must be worshipped. Teiresias finishes with a prophecy; he says that Pentheus should use wisdom instead of force towards Dionysus, as the whole of Greece will soon be worshipping him.

Cadmus reminds Pentheus of Actaeon who claimed to be a better hunter than Artemis herself, who, to punish the foolish Actaeon, turned him into a stag and he was devoured by his hounds.

Pentheus dismisses all of the above as lunacy and demands for Teiresias' augury to be destroyed – an act of sacrilege – and for a search party to be sent to find the 'priest of Dionysus' so that he can be brought back to the city and stoned to death.

The guards bring Dionysus to Pentheus and they say that he offered himself for arrest and when he was, the fetters fell off of the imprisoned Bacchants and they have escaped which shows that the priest can make miracles happen. Pentheus comments on the priest's beauty and effeminate features, however, he threatens to cut off his hair, sacred to Dionysus and take away his Thyrsus. He then asks what the secret rites

are of the cult of Dionysus, when the priest says that they happen at night and won't tell him what they are, Pentheus claims that women are committing promiscuity under the cover of night. He then orders that the priest, who claims that Dionysus is next to him, is to be incarcerated. There is then dramatic irony present in Euripides' prose when Dionysus' priest says that when the guards lay their hands on him, they are in fact laying their hands on the god – true as the priest is the god – but of course, Pentheus does not know this but the audience does.

As Pentheus attempts to chain up the priest, he deludes Pentheus who actually is attempting to tie up a bull. He then creates an earthquake, which destroys the palace and makes the flame where his mother dies flare up. Pentheus thinks that the palace is burning and Dionysus creates a phantom of the priest who Pentheus attacks when he is actually attacking sunlight. Dionysus then appears to the chorus who bow before the awesome power of their master. He then explains what he has done when Pentheus arrives and is furious that he has the audacity to appear in front of the palace.

A herdsman then enters explaining that he and the other farm workers had seen the Bacchae drawing milk from the ground and suckling wolves, however when they tried to catch them, the Bacchantes tore up the cattle and then attacked two villages with fire on their heads though they were not burnt and they used their thyrsus' as spears and that the spears the villagers threw, drew no blood. Pentheus decides to retaliate violently but the priest says that attacking would only worsen the situation and that he should handle it peacefully. Pentheus ignores this.

Then the turning point of the play takes place. Dionysus offers to take Pentheus to see the Bacchae. Pentheus is deluded by Dionysus who makes him dress as a Bacchant and then parades him through the city dressed as a woman. This is humiliating for Pentheus though as he is under Dionysus' spell, he cannot register this. This scene is full of dramatic irony, as in his deluded state (he sees two suns, twice seven gates etc) Pentheus does not see the second meaning in what Dionysus says. For example: "you will be borne high," and "I will bring you safely to the place, another shall conduct you back".

When Pentheus and Dionysus arrive where the Bacchae is on Mount Cithaeron, Pentheus complains that he cannot see them acting immorally, so Dionysus pulls down a branch, bending a tree with superhuman strength for Dionysus to climb up. When he was seated on his perch, Dionysus calls to the Bacchantes and shows them the man who mocked him. Led by Agave, Pentheus' mother, the Bacchae tear out the tree and rip Pentheus to shreds. Agave, mistaking her son for a lion (she was foaming at the mouth and her eyes were rolling madly), put his head on top of her thyrsus and returns to the palace. The messenger describes this.

Agave comes on stage now holding the head of her son in her hand and boasts of her catch of a 'lion-cub' with her bare hands. The Chorus mock her. However, her father Cadmus then in stichomythia tells her that it is in fact her son that she killed and the suspense created by stichomythia finally leads Agave to realise that her punishment for not recognising Dionysus was to be the murderess of her own son – filicide. Cadmus then mourns his grandson who has been brought on piece by piece as he and his grandson loved one another very much. In fact Cadmus used to be asked regularly by Pentheus if there was anyone upsetting him and Pentheus would deal with them

on his grandfather's behalf. Cadmus is the only character that the Chorus feel sorry for.

The Deus Ex Machina: Dionysus says that Pentheus' punishment was just and that Agave and her sisters are polluted by the death of Pentheus and are therefore exiled. Cadmus and his wife Harmonia will be exiled too and turned into snakes. In this form they will lead barbarians in wars and desecrate the shrine of Apollo. Then however, Ares, Harmonia's father, will rescue them from this state and grant them immortal life amongst the gods. Cadmus accepts his fate but criticises Dionysus for the harshness of it.

The Chorus end the tragedy by saying that human lives are unpredictable and anything can happen – it is all in the hands of the gods.