THE BACCHAE

Translated by William Arrowsmith

INTRODUCTION TO *THE BACCHAE*

In 408, at the age of seventy, apparently bitter and broken in spirit, Euripides left Athens for voluntary exile at the court of Archelaus in Macedon; and there, in 406, he died. After his death his three last plays—*The Bacchae*, *Iphigenia at Aulis*, and the (lost) *Alcmaeon at Corinth*—were brought back to Athens by the dramatist's son, Euripides the Younger, and produced, winning for their dead author the prize so frequently denied him during his lifetime.

Of itself *The Bacchae* needs neither apology nor general introduction. It is, clearly and flatly, that unmistakable thing, a masterpiece; a play which, for dramatic turbulence and comprehensiveness and the sheer power of its poetry, is unmatched by any except the very greatest among ancient and modern tragedies. You have to go to the *Oedipus Tyrannus* or the *Agamemnon* or *Lear* to find anything quite like it in range and power, and even then it remains, of course, unique. But like those plays, *The Bacchae* is finally a mysterious, almost a haunted, work, stalked by divinity and that daemonic power of necessity which for Euripides is the careless source of man's tragic destiny and moral dignity. Elusive, complex and compelling, the play constantly recedes before one's grasp, advancing, not retreating, steadily into deeper chaos and larger order, coming finally to rest only god knows where—which is to say, where it matters.

At the very least then *The Bacchae* requires of its critics gentleness in approaching it and humility in handling; the reader who is not willing to follow where the play, rather than his prejudice, leads him forfeits his quarry. But *sophrosunē* is not a common critical virtue, and despite the critic's clear warning in the fate of Pentheus, the play has suffered more than most from the violence of its interpreters. Perhaps this was only to be expected; because *The Bacchae* is concerned with extreme religious experience, it has naturally engaged the liveliest prejudices of its readers. Thus, apart from the pathologies of criticism, we find a long strain of (peculiarly Christianizing) interpretation which insists, against all probability and the whole experience of the play, that *The Bacchae* is to be understood as a deathbed conversion to the mysteries of Dionysus—Euripides'

palinode, as it were, for a lifetime of outspoken hostility to the Olympian system. In revenge, this absurd view was challenged by an even absurder one which, by casting Dionysus as a devil and Pentheus as a noble martyr to human enlightenment, turned the play into a nineteenth-century rationalist tract on the evils of religion. Alternatively, the play has been viewed as a stark schematic conflict between any two of a variety of contrasted abstractions apparently symbolized by Pentheus and Dionysus: reason vs. the irrational; aristocratic skepticism vs. popular piety; civilized order and routine vs. the eruptive force of nature and life. What, in my opinion, vitiates these interpretations is that they are all, or nearly all, incomplete perceptions masking as the whole thing. And like all partial perceptions or half-truths, these are maintained by rejecting whatever in the experience of the play cannot accommodate them; in this way the true power that stalks the play has mostly been expelled or shrouded in a fresh and imposed chaos. Taken in their ensemble, however, these partial perceptions help to round out the whole. For look at the play again and surely what one sees is neither a rationalist tract nor Euripides' dying *confiteor* to Olympus but a play which is moved by profoundly religious feeling and which also happens to display Euripides' familiar hostility to received religion. The inconsistency is only apparent; for in the nature of god as it is defined by the action of the play, the contradictions vanish. Or so I see it. And yet there is more there too.

A few cautions will perhaps be in order. The subject of *The Bacchae* is a (dimly) historical event, the invasion of Hellas by the rites of Dionysus, while the story of Pentheus is Euripides' re-enactment of a myth which doubtlessly embodied Dionysiac ritual.[1] Despite this, *The Bacchae* is neither a study of Dionysiac *cultus* nor a cautionary essay on the effects of religious hysteria; nor, for that matter, however faithfully it may present the *hieros logos* or sacred myth of Dionysiac ritual, is it best read as an anthropological passion-play of the mystical scapegoat or the Year-Daimon. Dionysiac religion is the field on which the action of the play takes place, *not* what

[1] The story of Pentheus provided the subject of several ancient tragedies, including a trilogy by Aeschylus.

it is deeply about, and although the play requires a reasonable knowledge about the phenomena of religious ecstasy we call Dionysiac,[2] for the most part it supplies the necessary information and dictates the meaning of its own terms. If we understand that the rewards of the Dionysiac life are here and now, that the frenzied dances of the god are direct manifestations of ecstatic possession, and that the Bacchante, by eating the flesh of the man or animal who temporarily incarnates the god, comes to partake of his divinity, we are in a position to understand the play. One should also perhaps be aware that the view of Dionysiac worship presented by this play is a special one, clearly shaped by the dramatist's needs and modified accordingly; indeed he elaborately warns his fifth-century contemporaries that they must not confound their own experience of Dionysiac worship with that of the play. Thus, for example, against the suspicions of his contemporaries that the Dionysiac mountain-rites were frequently orgiastic in the modern sense of that word, Euripides insists that *his* Bacchae are chaste, and this must be taken as final for the play. Elsewhere he deliberately intrudes anachronism, allowing Teiresias to describe Dionysus pretty much as the fifth century knew his worship: its human sacrifices purged away, its wildness tamed by being fused with Olympian worship and set under state supervision. Beyond this, one should, of course, be aware of the intentional ritual irony that underlies the death of Pentheus—he dies as a scapegoat and a living substitute for the god he rejects. This, however, is an irony of the play, not its meaning, and it is overshadowed by the greatest irony of them all—that this terrible indictment of the anthropomorphic Dionysus that *The Bacchae* makes should have been acted out in the *hieros logos* of the god and presented in the Theater of Dionysus.

Like a number of other Euripidean plays, *The Bacchae* tends to converge about a single central controlling moral term whose meaning is constantly invoked by the action and at the same time altered by it, modified and refreshed under dramatic pressure. This key term is the concept of *sophia* (and its opposite, *amathia*). Constantly

[2] Those interested should consult the Introduction to the Commentary of E. R. Dodds on *The Bacchae* (Oxford, 1944).

thrown up by the action, informing it and guiding it, *sophia* is crucial to the play; but since it is impossible to convey its range of meaning by a single English equivalent, the reader should know what is involved when it occurs. At its broadest, *sophia* is roughly translatable by the English concept of "wisdom"; *sophia*, that is, is primarily a moral rather than an intellectual skill, based upon experience and expressed in significant judgment. But in the Greek—and nowhere more strongly than in the choruses of this play—it implies a firm awareness of one's own nature and therefore of one's place in the scheme of things. In other words, it presupposes self-knowledge, an acceptance of those necessities that compose the limits of human fate; by contrast, the man of *amathia* acts out of a kind of unteachable, ungovernable ignorance of himself and his necessities; he is prone to violence, harshness, and brutality. Thus, in the eyes of the Chorus, Pentheus forfeits any claim to *sophia* because he wantonly, violently, refuses to accept the necessity that Dionysus incarnates: he is, in other words, *amathēs*.

Below the level of this broad sense of *sophia*, however, the range of meaning in the Greek word is extremely wide. For if *sophia* is generically what we mean by wisdom, it is also skill, craft, cleverness, know-how, cunning, smartness, and the specific craft of expedience (in this sense exactly matching one of the commoner uses of the English word "wise"). And so the play exhibits the spectrum of these various *sophiae* classified roughly in terms of the characters, their pretensions and what others think of them. Thus Teiresias possesses the narrow professional *sophia* (i.e., skill, expertise) of the sage and seer, and also shares with Cadmus the more general "wisdom" of ripe old age and long experience. In the Chorus' eyes, Pentheus' *sophia* is that of (mere) cleverness: the quick, articulate, argumentative, shallow cleverness of the trained sophist or "professional intellectual." And finally, lowest of all, there is the knowing animal cunning of the practiced hunter, the cool eye and feline skill of Dionysus stalking his intended victim. Elsewhere the Chorus distinguishes something called *to sophon* which it contrasts unfavorably with high *sophia;* and I think we must understand this to be something like a rubric for the lower *sophiae* or whatever in them con-

tributes to compose the sense of "worldly wisdom," a calculating, shrewd, even opportunistic, skill of the worldly and ambitious, which blinds its possessor to the good that comes—to the Chorus' way of thinking—from acceptance here and now. But over the surface of these meanings of *sophia* the action plays endlessly, testing one *sophia* against another, matching opponents in a steady rage of exposure that in the end inverts all roles and pretensions and leaves the stage, desolate and bleak, to the suffering survivors confronted with the inexorable, pitiless necessity that Dionysus is. We witness, that is, a life and death struggle between rival shapes of *sophia* in the course of which each claimant betrays the thing he stands for: Pentheus' cleverness foundering terribly upon the force he refuses to accept; the *sophia* of the Dionysiac quest nakedly revealed as sheer animal cunning and brutality. We witness, in short, *sophia* becoming *amathia*. There, in *amathia*, the god and his victim meet.

Dramatically, the core of the play is an exquisitely constructed confrontation between the two major opponents, the young god Dionysus and the young man Pentheus. The contrasting itself seems almost schematic: the athletic Pentheus pitted against the languid god; traditional Greek dress contrasted with the outlandish Asiatic livery of the Bacchante; the angry, impetuous, heavy-handed young man as against the smiling, soft-spoken, feline effortlessness of Dionysus; the self-ignorant man confronted with the humanized shape of his necessity. Below the contrasts run the resemblances, for these young rivals, we need to remember, are first cousins and they share a family likeness. Thus each is deeply jealous of his own *personal* honor and ruthless in enmity; each is intolerant of opposition to his will. The god, of course, in the end prevails, but the drama of the god's gradual usurpation of his victim depends for its effectiveness and irony upon our understanding of the initial confrontation. For it is by playing upon Pentheus' vulnerability, his deep ignorance of his own nature, that the god is able to possess him, humiliate him and finally to destroy him. For Dionysus, the motives of humiliation and revenge are crucial; and Dionysus is a supreme artist in exact poetic vengeance. Thus, point for point, each of Pentheus' threats, insults, and outrages is revenged with ironic and ferocious

precision as Pentheus goes off, waving his thyrsus, tricked out in woman's robes and a fawn-skin, to his death on the mountain as the sacrificial surrogate of the god. We see in his costume and madness not merely his complete humiliation but the total loss of identity the change implies. And so the reversal is complete, the hunter become the hunted and the hunted the hunter.

If we consider Pentheus in isolation, it should be immediately apparent that his is not the stuff of which tragic heroes are made. Nor, for that matter, is he a convincing candidate to symbolize reason against the Dionysiac irrational. He is, in fact, a deeply unreasonable man, intemperate in anger and utterly unconvinced by reasonable evidence. Around him cluster almost all the harsh words of the Greek moral vocabulary: he is violent, stubborn, self-willed, arbitrary, impatient of tradition and custom, impious, unruly, and immoderate. At times he evinces the traits of a stock tragedy-tyrant, loud with threats and bluster, prone to confuse the meaning of subject with slave. But so, I think, he must be shown in order to be presented for what he is: ignorant of himself and his nature, profoundly *amathēs*. Yet as he makes his entrance, breathing fury against the Maenads, I think we are meant to be struck by his extreme youth. Just how old he is, Euripides does not tell us; but since he is presented as still a beardless boy at the time of his death (see ll. 1185 ff.), he cannot very well be much more than sixteen or seventeen. And this youth seems to me dramatically important, helping to qualify Pentheus' prurient sexual imagination (for the voyeurism which in a grown man would be overtly pathological is at most an obsessive and morbid curiosity in a boy) and later serving to enlist our sympathies sharply on the side of the boy-victim of a ruthless god. Pentheus' *hybris*, of course, remains, for ignorance of one's identity and necessities is finally no excuse. And yet, in the Greek view of things, extreme youth should help to extenuate the offense. For the young are naturally susceptible to *hybris*, that simple overflow of the dangerous pride (or the suppressed strength) of the flesh and spirit into outrage and violence; and, being susceptible, they merit both understanding and lenience. *Sophia*, after all, is not a young man's virtue, and though necessity may be inflexible, our humanity is not. How-

ever much Pentheus' conduct may outrage sympathy, his youth and utter human helplessness before the awful shape of his necessity are addressed directly to our understanding and compassion.

But Pentheus is something more than a mere personification of suppressed necessity, and his *hybris* has social as well as sexual roots. At least it seems to me that Euripides has taken elaborate pains to show in Pentheus the proud iconoclastic innovator, rebelling against tradition, outside of the community's *nomos* (custom as law), and disdainful of any power above man. Ranged against him are Cadmus, Teiresias, and the Chorus, who all alike appeal to the massive authority of tradition and folk-belief and constantly invoke against the scoffer the full force of *dikē* (custom incarnate as justice) and *sophrosunē* (very roughly, humility). Thus in flat ominous opposition to Pentheus' lonely arrogance of the "exceptional" (*perissos*) individual, superior and contemptuous, defying the community's *nomos* in the name of his own self-will, is set the chorus' tyrannous tradition: "Beyond the old beliefs, no thought, no act shall go" (ll. 891–92). We have, that is, a head-on collision between those who, for all their piety, represent the full-blown tyranny of popular custom and conforming tradition and the arrogant exemplar of the ruthlessly antitraditional mind. Both sides are alike in the cruel and bigoted violence with which they meet opposition and the *sophrosunē* and *dikē* and *sophia* which they variously claim mock their pertensions and implicitly condemn their conduct. If in the end the conduct of the Chorus and Dionysus outrage our sympathies and enlist them on Pentheus' behalf, it is because, in the nature of things, the *amathia* of a man is less heinous than that of a god. But both are *amatheis*, Pentheus and Dionysus alike. Beyond this point certainty is impossible. But I suspect that the play employs Dionysus and Pentheus and the conflict between them as a bitter image of Athens and Hellas terribly divided between the forces that, for Euripides, more than anything else destroyed them: on the one side, the conservative tradition in its extreme corruption, disguising avarice for power with the fair professions of the traditional *aretai*, meeting all opposition with the terrible tyranny of popular piety, and disclosing in its actions the callousness and refined cruelty of civilized barba-

rism; on the other side, the exceptional individual, selfish and egotistical, impatient of tradition and public welfare alike, stubborn, demagogic, and equally brutal in action. This interpretation, however, should not be pressed; if it is there at all, it is tenuously, suggestively there, informing the terms of a social conflict between Pentheus and Dionysus' followers which is otherwise unexplained.

Dionysus himself is a difficult figure only, I think, because he is so clearly a transitional one, a figure which under dramatic pressure is in the process of becoming something quite different from what he was at the outset. What the divinity of Dionysus represents, however, should be clear enough from the play: the incarnate life-force itself, the uncontrollable chaotic eruption of nature in individuals and cities; the thrust of the sap in the tree and the blood in the veins, the "force that through the green fuse drives the flower." As such, he is amoral, neither good nor bad, a necessity capable of blessing those who (like the Asian Bacchantes) accept him, and of destroying or maddening those who (like Pentheus) deny him. Like any necessity, he is ambiguous, raw power: his *thyrsus* spurts honey for the bands of the blessed but becomes a killing weapon when turned against the scoffer. But to the question, Is Dionysus a traditional "Olympian" deity or is he the amoral and daemonic personification of the force he represents? the answer, I think, is clearly that he is, at different times, both. If he begins the play as a conventional, anthropomorphic deity of the Homeric type, endowed with human virtues and human passions, he undergoes a progress which more and more forces him into the shape of the amoral necessity he represents and which culminates in his final epiphany as a pitiless, daemonic, necessitous power. In the withering of his traditional *sophia* through the dramatic demonstration that his only *sophia* is the cunning of the hunter, his traditional divinity also withers. For divinity divested of morality becomes daemonic (not devilish but the reality of awful, inscrutable, careless power), like Dionysus here. Just so, in the *Hippolytus*, we can see coming into focus beneath the lineaments of the Olympian Aphrodite the inexorable, amoral face of the narrowly sexual necessity of man and nature. It needs, however, to be insisted that these personified necessities of the Euripidean stage are

not mere naturalistic psychological symbols. They are precisely *daimones*, the great powers that stalk the world, real with a terrible reality, the source of man's very condition, the necessities which determine his life. And if the feelings stirred by what is limited before the unlimited are religious, then man's attitude toward these *daimones* is religious, the veneration and awe the fated must feel before the great gods of existence: Death, Life, Sex, Grief, Joy. *Sophia* accepts because it is a wisdom of experience, based on awe learned of both joy and bitter suffering.

Grouped about Dionysus and Pentheus, variously informing their struggle or suffering its consequences, stand the other characters of the play—Teiresias, Cadmus, Agave, and the Chorus of Asian Bacchantes. Of these Agave has been put here almost entirely to suffer, and the very extremity and brutality of what she suffers is unmistakably intended to expose the brutal ferocity of Dionysus. For it is in her person and through her words as she moves from the terrible irony of her triumphal entrance to one of the cruelest (and finest) recognition scenes in tragedy that the balance of sympathies shifts decisively against Dionysus, exposing him for what he is; *this*, she cries ecstatically, holding up the head of her dismembered son, is the quarry of the chase, the great Dionysiac hunt for "those great, those manifest, those certain goals, achieving which our lives are blest." Where Pentheus' passion ends, hers begins, even more terrible than his, driving us relentlessly on to the true epiphany of the god. What god, we want to know, no matter what provocation, could make a mother dismember her son and still retain his *sophia?* And the answer, of course, is: no god but necessity, which is not wise and, though divine, has no altars.

Teiresias and Cadmus, however, are more problematic. Each, as we have seen, claims a distinctive *sophia* and yet they fail to convince us. In part, this is due to the deliberate pathos and incongruity of their entrance: two doddering old men in fawn-skins off to the dances on the mountain. But although they hover on the edge of comedy, they are not funny but pathetic: two incongruous, shrewd old mummers of ecstasy. For they are not, we soon discover, among the number of those who dance in the sheer conviction of delight,

their bodies possessed and compelled by the inward god—though they would like to convince both us and each other that they are so possessed. They dance in shrewd expedience, Cadmus realistically aware of the value of having a god in the family, Teiresias sensing the future greatness of the new religion and the opportunities for priestly expertise. Piously, self-righteously, they go through the motions of accepting their necessity; but if elated at first by their role and costume, they make their exit in a state of near exhaustion, propping each other up and limping off, a long way from ecstasy. And there is irony again, of course, when Teiresias, affecting the role of staunch traditionalist, lectures Pentheus on the nature of Dionysus with the pedantic etymologizing zeal of a professional sophist. But their function here is to occupy the mean of worldly wisdom (*to sophon*) between the *sophia* claimed by the Chorus and the *amathia* of Pentheus. They are trimmers and compromisers, true men of the mean, set in sharp contrast to Pentheus, who, contemptuous of any compromise, temperamentally inhabits extreme positions. As such they round out the range of attitudes which center on Dionysus: the utter possessed madness of the Theban women on the mountain which is typified by Agave; the calmer, more reflective worship of the Chorus of Asian Bacchae; the worldly compromising temper of the two old men, and the passionate and sweeping denial of the god by Pentheus.

The Chorus here deserves mention also, all the more since its role as Bacchante has necessarily been modified by its choral and dramatic functions. For it is from their lips—impressively confirmed and amplified by the two messengers—that we get what is so crucial to the play, the full poetic resonance of the Dionysiac life; in the sweep and beauty of their language we are meant to feel what Dionysus means for suffering mortality, the direct eruption of deity in blessing and miracle. Dionysus, as we have seen, is ambivalent: "most terrible, and yet most gentle, to mankind." The exodus of the play emphasizes the terrible aspect of the god, and so it is important for dramatic balance that the gentle side of Dionysus be given the fullest possible statement. Moreover, we can believe the Chorus, for, unlike the Maenads on the mountain, the Bacchantes of the Chorus are not

possessed. A divinity, true, moves in their words, but less as a chaotic wildness than as a controlled and passionate conviction. Indeed, at times these foreign women seem to be surprisingly Hellenized and their sentiments indistinguishable from those of a standard tragic chorus. They tend to alternate, that is, between a feverish (Asiatic) hymning of the god and slow, reflective, traditional (Greek) gnomes on the nature of divinity and the dangers of disobedience. This duality *may* derive from their double role as dramatic Chorus and followers of Dionysus, or it may be that Euripides is anxious to set before us an image of that controlled Dionysiac experience with which the fifth century was familiar. For by means of this anachronism, he can, without deeply violating dramatic consistency, show the point at which the convinced (but not possessed) Bacchante can separate her humanity from the god. Just this, of course, takes place at the end of the play, and its importance should not be minimized. For, despite their having danced for joy at the death of Pentheus, the Chorus, when finally confronted by Agave bearing Pentheus' head on her *thyrsus*, is moved to unmistakable horror and pity. In their feelings, they clearly separate themselves from the god with whom they have hitherto identified themselves completely. Bacchantes they may be, the scene seems to say, but they are human first. Against Dionysus who shows himself utterly inflexible and ruthless to the end, their reaction is decisive. And the tone of pity sets the stage for the all-important exodus.

For what we see in the exodus is, I think, the discovery of compassion, and in this the exodus of *The Bacchae* follows good Euripidean precedent. One thinks of the *Hippolytus* (so much like *The Bacchae* in so many ways) where, under the yoke of another inflexible necessity, compassion and understanding flower between Theseus and the dying Hippolytus; or of *Heracles* and the same discovery of love and need between the anguished hero and his friend and his father in the face of the bleak necessity of a careless, ruthless heaven. So here, beneath the inexorable harshness of that necessity called Dionysus, out of their anguish and suffering, Agave and Cadmus discover compassion, the pity that is born from shared suffering. In this they declare their humanity and a moral dignity which heaven,

lacking those limits which make men suffer *into* dignity and compassion, can never understand or equal. This is their moral victory, the only victory the doomed can claim over the necessities which make them suffer. But it is a great victory; for by accepting their necessities in anguish, they claim the uniquely human skill of *sophia*, the acceptance of necessity and doom which teaches compassion.[3] It is that faith and that fate which, in Euripides, makes man human, not mere god.

The text of my translation is the Oxford text of Gilbert Murray, supplemented by the brilliant commentary of E. R. Dodds.

[3] Cf. Euripides' *Electra*, ll. 294–95, where Orestes states that pity (*to oiktos*) is never found among the *amatheis* but only among the wise (*sophoisi*).

CHARACTERS

Dionysus (also called Bromius, Evius, and Bacchus)

Chorus of Asian Bacchae (followers of Dionysus)

Teiresias

Cadmus

Pentheus

Attendant

First Messenger

Second Messenger

Agave

Coryphaeus (chorus leader)

For Anne and George
ex voto
XAIPETE

THE BACCHAE

SCENE: *Before the royal palace at Thebes. On the left is the way to Cithaeron; on the right, to the city. In the center of the orchestra stands, still smoking, the vine-covered tomb of Semele, mother of Dionysus.*

Enter Dionysus. He is of soft, even effeminate, appearance. His face is beardless; he is dressed in a fawn-skin and carries a thyrsus (i.e., a stalk of fennel tipped with ivy leaves). On his head he wears a wreath of ivy, and his long blond curls ripple down over his shoulders. Throughout the play he wears a smiling mask.

Dionysus

I am Dionysus, the son of Zeus,
come back to Thebes, this land where I was born.
My mother was Cadmus' daughter, Semele by name,
midwived by fire, delivered by the lightning's
blast.
And here I stand, a god incognito,
disguised as man, beside the stream of Dirce
and the waters of Ismenus. There before the palace
I see my lightning-married mother's grave,
and there upon the ruins of her shattered house
the living fire of Zeus still smolders on
in deathless witness of Hera's violence and rage
against my mother. But Cadmus wins my praise:
he has made this tomb a shrine, sacred to my mother.
It was I who screened her grave with the green
of the clustering vine.
Far behind me lie
those golden-rivered lands, Lydia and Phrygia,
where my journeying began. Overland I went,
across the steppes of Persia where the sun strikes hotly
down, through Bactrian fastness and the grim waste
of Media. Thence to rich Arabia I came;

and so, along all Asia's swarming littoral
of towered cities where Greeks and foreign nations,
mingling, live, my progress made. There
I taught my dances to the feet of living men,
establishing my mysteries and rites
that I might be revealed on earth for what I am:
a god.

And thence to Thebes.

This city, first
in Hellas, now shrills and echoes to my women's cries,
their ecstasy of joy. Here in Thebes
I bound the fawn-skin to the women's flesh and armed
their hands with shafts of ivy. For I have come
to refute that slander spoken by my mother's sisters—
those who least had right to slander her.
They said that Dionysus was no son of Zeus,
but Semele had slept beside a man in love
and fathered off her shame on Zeus—a fraud, they sneered,
contrived by Cadmus to protect his daughter's name.
They said she lied, and Zeus in anger at that lie
blasted her with lightning.

Because of that offense
I have stung them with frenzy, hounded them from home
up to the mountains where they wander, crazed of mind,
and compelled to wear my orgies' livery.
Every woman in Thebes—but the women only—
I drove from home, mad. There they sit,
rich and poor alike, even the daughters of Cadmus,
beneath the silver firs on the roofless rocks.
Like it or not, this city must learn its lesson:
it lacks initiation in my mysteries;
that I shall vindicate my mother Semele
and stand revealed to mortal eyes as the god
she bore to Zeus.

Cadmus the king has abdicated,
leaving his throne and power to his grandson Pentheus;

who now revolts against divinity, in *me;*
thrusts *me* from his offerings; forgets *my* name
in his prayers. Therefore I shall *prove* to him
and every man in Thebes that I am god
indeed. And when my worship is established here,
and all is well, then I shall go my way
and be revealed to other men in other lands.
But if the men of Thebes attempt to force
my Bacchae from the mountainside by threat of arms,
I shall marshal my Maenads and take the field.
To these ends I have laid my deity aside
and go disguised as man.

(*He wheels and calls offstage.*)

On, my women,
women who worship me, women whom I led
out of Asia where Tmolus heaves its rampart
over Lydia!

On, comrades of my progress here!
Come, and with your native Phrygian drum—
Rhea's drum and mine—pound at the palace doors
of Pentheus! Let the city of Thebes behold you,
while I return among Cithaeron's forest glens
where my Bacchae wait and join their whirling dances.

(*Exit Dionysus as the Chorus of Asian Bacchae comes dancing in from the right. They are dressed in fawn-skins, crowned with ivy, and carry thyrsi, timbrels, and flutes.*)

Chorus

Out of the land of Asia,
down from holy Tmolus,
speeding the service of god,
for Bromius we come!
Hard are the labors of god;
hard, but his service is sweet.
Sweet to serve, sweet to cry:

Bacchus! *Evohé!*

—You on the streets!
—You on the roads!
—Make way!
—Let every mouth be hushed. Let no ill-omened words
profane your tongues.
—Make way! Fall back!
—Hush.
—For now I raise the old, old hymn to Dionysus.

—Blessèd, blessèd are those who know the mysteries of god.
—Blessèd is he who hallows his life in the worship of god,
he whom the spirit of god possesseth, who is one
with those who belong to the holy body of god.
—Blessèd are the dancers and those who are purified,
who dance on the hill in the holy dance of god.
—Blessèd are they who keep the rite of Cybele the Mother.
—Blessèd are the thyrsus-bearers, those who wield in their hands
the holy wand of god.
—Blessèd are those who wear the crown of the ivy of god.
—Blessèd, blessèd are they: Dionysus is their god!

—On, Bacchae, on, you Bacchae,
bear your god in triumph home!
Bear on the god, son of god,
escort your Dionysus home!
Bear him down from Phrygian hill,
attend him through the streets of Hellas!

—So his mother bore him once
in labor bitter; lightning-struck,
forced by fire that flared from Zeus,
consumed, she died, untimely torn,
in childbed dead by blow of light!
Of light the son was born!

—Zeus it was who saved his son;
with speed outrunning mortal eye,

bore him to a private place,
bound the boy with clasps of gold;
in his thigh as in a womb,
concealed his son from Hera's eyes.

—And when the weaving Fates fulfilled the time,
the bull-horned god was born of Zeus. In joy
he crowned his son, set serpents on his head—
wherefrom, in piety, descends to us
the Maenad's writhing crown, her *chevelure* of snakes.

—O Thebes, nurse of Semele,
crown your hair with ivy!
Grow green with bryony!
Redden with berries! O city,
with boughs of oak and fir,
come dance the dance of god!
Fringe your skins of dappled fawn
with tufts of twisted wool!
Handle with holy care
the violent wand of god!
And let the dance begin!
He is Bromius who runs
to the mountain!
to the mountain!
where the throng of women waits,
driven from shuttle and loom,
possessed by Dionysus!

—And I praise the holies of Crete,
the caves of the dancing Curetes,
there where Zeus was born,
where helmed in triple tier
around the primal drum
the Corybantes danced. They,
they were the first of all
whose whirling feet kept time

to the strict beat of the taut hide
and the squeal of the wailing flute.
Then from them to Rhea's hands
the holy drum was handed down;
but, stolen by the raving Satyrs,
fell at last to me and now
accompanies the dance
which every other year
celebrates your name:
Dionysus!

—He is sweet upon the mountains. He drops to the earth
from the running packs.
He wears the holy fawn-skin. He hunts the wild goat
and kills it.
He delights in the raw flesh.
He runs to the mountains of Phrygia, to the mountains
of Lydia he runs!
He is Bromius who leads us! *Evohé!*

— With milk the earth flows! It flows with wine!
It runs with the nectar of bees!

—Like frankincense in its fragrance
is the blaze of the torch he bears.
Flames float out from his trailing wand
as he runs, as he dances,
kindling the stragglers,
spurring with cries,
and his long curls stream to the wind!

—And he cries, as they cry, *Evohé!*—
On, Bacchae!
On, Bacchae!
Follow, glory of golden Tmolus,
hymning god
with a rumble of drums,

with a cry, *Evohé!* to the Evian god,
with a cry of Phrygian cries,
when the holy flute like honey plays
the sacred song of those who go
to the mountain!
to the mountain!

—Then, in ecstasy, like a colt by its grazing mother,
the Bacchante runs with flying feet, she leaps!

(The Chorus remains grouped in two semicircles about the orchestra as Teiresias makes his entrance. He is incongruously dressed in the bacchant's fawn-skin and is crowned with ivy. Old and blind, he uses his thyrsus to tap his way.)

Teiresias

Ho there, who keeps the gates?
Summon Cadmus—
Cadmus, Agenor's son, the stranger from Sidon
who built the towers of our Thebes.
Go, someone.
Say Teiresias wants him. He will know what errand
brings me, that agreement, age with age, we made
to deck our wands, to dress in skins of fawn
and crown our heads with ivy.

(Enter Cadmus from the palace. Dressed in Dionysiac costume and bent almost double with age, he is an incongruous and pathetic figure.)

Cadmus

My old friend,
I knew it must be you when I heard your summons.
For there's a wisdom in his voice that makes
the man of wisdom known.
But here I am,
dressed in the costume of the god, prepared to go.
Insofar as we are able, Teiresias, we must

do honor to this god, for he was born
my daughter's son, who has been revealed to men,
the god, Dionysus.
Where shall we go, where
shall we tread the dance, tossing our white heads
in the dances of god?
Expound to me, Teiresias.
For in such matters you are wise.
Surely
I could dance night and day, untiringly
beating the earth with my thyrsus! And how sweet it is
to forget my old age.

Teiresias

It is the same with me.
I too feel young, young enough to dance.

Cadmus

Good. Shall we take our chariots to the mountain?

Teiresias

Walking would be better. It shows more honor
to the god.

Cadmus

So be it. I shall lead, my old age
conducting yours.

Teiresias

The god will guide us there
with no effort on our part.

Cadmus

Are we the only men
who will dance for Bacchus?

Teiresias

They are all blind.
Only we can see.

Cadmus

But we delay too long.
Here, take my arm.

Teiresias

Link my hand in yours.

Cadmus

I am a man, nothing more. I do not scoff
at heaven.

Teiresias

We do not trifle with divinity.
No, we are the heirs of customs and traditions
hallowed by age and handed down to us
by our fathers. No quibbling logic can topple *them*,
whatever subtleties this clever age invents.
People may say: "Aren't you ashamed? At your age,
going dancing, wreathing your head with ivy?"
Well, I am *not* ashamed. Did the god declare
that just the young or just the old should dance?
No, he desires his honor from all mankind.
He wants no one excluded from his worship.

Cadmus

Because you cannot see, Teiresias, let me be
interpreter for you this once. Here comes
the man to whom I left my throne, Echion's son,
Pentheus, hastening toward the palace. He seems
excited and disturbed. Yes, listen to him.

(Enter Pentheus from the right. He is a young man of athletic build, dressed in traditional Greek dress; like Dionysus, he is beardless. He enters excitedly, talking to the attendants who accompany him.)

Pentheus

I happened to be away, out of the city,
but reports reached me of some strange mischief here,

stories of our women leaving home to frisk
in mock ecstasies among the thickets on the mountain,
dancing in honor of the latest divinity,
a certain Dionysus, whoever he may be!
In their midst stand bowls brimming with wine.
And then, one by one, the women wander off
to hidden nooks where they serve the lusts of men.
Priestesses of Bacchus they claim they are,
but it's really Aphrodite they adore.
I have captured some of them; my jailers
have locked them away in the safety of our prison.
Those who run at large shall be hunted down
out of the mountains like the animals they are—
yes, my own mother Agave, and Ino
and Autonoë, the mother of Actaeon.
In no time at all I shall have them trapped
in iron nets and stop this obscene disorder.
I am also told a foreigner has come to Thebes
from Lydia, one of those charlatan magicians,
with long yellow curls smelling of perfumes,
with flushed cheeks and the spells of Aphrodite
in his eyes. His days and nights he spends
with women and girls, dangling before them the joys
of initiation in his mysteries.
But let me bring him underneath that roof
and I'll stop his pounding with his wand and tossing
his head. By god, I'll have his head cut off!
And *this* is the man who claims that Dionysus
is a god and was sewn into the thigh of Zeus,
when, in point of fact, that same blast of lightning
consumed him and his mother both for her lie
that she had lain with Zeus in love. Whoever
this stranger is, aren't such impostures,
such unruliness, worthy of hanging?

(*For the first time he sees Teiresias and Cadmus in their Dionysiac costumes.*)

What!
But this is incredible! Teiresias the seer
tricked out in a dappled fawn-skin!
And *you*,
you, my own grandfather, playing at the bacchant
with a wand!
Sir, I shrink to see your old age
so foolish. Shake that ivy off, grandfather!
Now drop that wand. Drop it, I say.
(*He wheels on Teiresias.*)
Aha,
I see: this is *your* doing, Teiresias.
Yes, you want still another god revealed to men
so you can pocket the profits from burnt offerings
and bird-watching. By heaven, only your age
restrains me now from sending you to prison
with those Bacchic women for importing here to Thebes
these filthy mysteries. When once you see
the glint of wine shining at the feasts of women,
then you may be sure the festival is rotten.

Coryphaeus

What blasphemy! Stranger, have you no respect
for heaven? For Cadmus who sowed the dragon teeth?
Will the son of Echion disgrace his house?

Teiresias

Give a wise man an honest brief to plead
and his eloquence is no remarkable achievement.
But you are glib; your phrases come rolling out
smoothly on the tongue, as though your words were wise
instead of foolish. The man whose glibness flows
from his conceit of speech declares the thing he is:
a worthless and a stupid citizen.
I tell you,
this god whom you ridicule shall someday have

enormous power and prestige throughout Hellas.
Mankind, young man, possesses two supreme blessings.
First of these is the goddess Demeter, or Earth—
whichever name you choose to call her by.
It was she who gave to man his nourishment of grain.
But after her there came the son of Semele,
who matched her present by inventing liquid wine
as his gift to man. For filled with that good gift,
suffering mankind forgets its grief; from it
comes sleep; with it oblivion of the troubles
of the day. There is no other medicine
for misery. And when we pour libations
to the gods, we pour the god of wine himself
that through his intercession man may win
the favor of heaven.
You sneer, do you, at that story
that Dionysus was sewed into the thigh of Zeus?
Let me teach you what that really means. When Zeus
rescued from the thunderbolt his infant son,
he brought him to Olympus. Hera, however,
plotted at heart to hurl the child from heaven.
Like the god he is, Zeus countered her. Breaking off
a tiny fragment of that ether which surrounds the world,
he molded from it a dummy Dionysus.
This he *showed* to Hera, but with time men garbled
the word and said that Dionysus had been *sewed*
into the thigh of Zeus. This was their story,
whereas, in fact, Zeus *showed* the dummy to Hera
and gave it as a hostage for his son.
Moreover,
this is a god of prophecy. His worshippers,
like madmen, are endowed with mantic powers.
For when the god enters the body of a man
he fills him with the breath of prophecy.
Besides,

he has usurped even the functions of warlike Ares.
Thus, at times, you see an army mustered under arms
stricken with panic before it lifts a spear.
This panic comes from Dionysus.
Someday
you shall even see him bounding with his torches
among the crags at Delphi, leaping the pastures
that stretch between the peaks, whirling and waving
his thyrsus: great throughout Hellas.
Mark my words,
Pentheus. Do not be so certain that power
is what matters in the life of man; do not mistake
for wisdom the fantasies of your sick mind.
Welcome the god to Thebes; crown your head;
pour him libations and join his revels.
Dionysus does not, I admit, *compel* a woman
to be chaste. Always and in every case
it is her character and nature that keeps
a woman chaste. But even in the rites of Dionysus,
the chaste woman will not be corrupted.
Think:
you are pleased when men stand outside your doors
and the city glorifies the name of Pentheus.
And so the god: he too delights in glory.
But Cadmus and I, whom you ridicule, will crown
our heads with ivy and join the dances of the god—
an ancient foolish pair perhaps, but dance
we must. Nothing you have said would make me
change my mind or flout the will of heaven.
You are mad, grievously mad, beyond the power
of any drugs to cure, for you are drugged
with madness.

Coryphaeus

Apollo would approve your words.
Wisely you honor Bromius: a great god.

Cadmus

My boy,
Teiresias advises well. Your home is here
with us, with our customs and traditions, not
outside, alone. Your mind is distracted now,
and what you think is sheer delirium.
Even if this Dionysus is no god,
as you assert, persuade yourself that he is.
The fiction is a noble one, for Semele will seem
to be the mother of a god, and this confers
no small distinction on our family.
You saw
that dreadful death your cousin Actaeon died
when those man-eating hounds he had raised himself
savaged him and tore his body limb from limb
because he boasted that his prowess in the hunt surpassed
the skill of Artemis.
Do not let his fate be yours.
Here, let me wreathe your head with leaves of ivy.
Then come with us and glorify the god.

Pentheus

Take your hands off me! Go worship your Bacchus,
but do not wipe your madness off on me.
By god, I'll make him pay, the man who taught you
this folly of yours.

(*He turns to his attendants.*)

Go, someone, this instant,
to the place where this prophet prophesies.
Pry it up with crowbars, heave it over,
upside down; demolish everything you see.
Throw his fillets out to wind and weather.
That will provoke him more than anything.
As for the rest of you, go and scour the city
for that effeminate stranger, the man who infects our women
with this strange disease and pollutes our beds.

And when you take him, clap him in chains
and march him here. He shall die as he deserves—
by being stoned to death. He shall come to rue
his merrymaking here in Thebes.

(*Exeunt attendants.*)

Teiresias

Reckless fool,
you do not know the consequences of your words.
You talked madness before, but this is raving
lunacy!
Cadmus, let us go and pray
for this raving fool and for this city too,
pray to the god that no awful vengeance strike
from heaven.
Take your staff and follow me.
Support me with your hands, and I shall help you too
lest we stumble and fall, a sight of shame,
two old men together.
But go we must,
acknowledging the service that we owe to god,
Bacchus, the son of Zeus.
And yet take care
lest someday your house repent of Pentheus
in its sufferings. I speak not prophecy
but fact. The words of fools finish in folly.

(*Exeunt Teiresias and Cadmus. Pentheus retires into the palace.*)

Chorus

—Holiness, queen of heaven,
Holiness on golden wing
who hover over earth,
do you hear what Pentheus says?
Do you hear his blasphemy
against the prince of the blessèd,
the god of garlands and banquets,

Bromius, Semele's son?
These blessings he gave:
laughter to the flute
and the loosing of cares
when the shining wine is spilled
at the feast of the gods,
and the wine-bowl casts its sleep
on feasters crowned with ivy.

—A tongue without reins,
defiance, unwisdom—
their end is disaster.
But the life of quiet good,
the wisdom that accepts—
these abide unshaken,
preserving, sustaining
the houses of men.
Far in the air of heaven,
the sons of heaven live.
But they watch the lives of men.
And what passes for wisdom is not;
unwise are those who aspire,
who outrange the limits of man.
Briefly, we live. Briefly,
then die. Wherefore, I say,
he who hunts a glory, he who tracks
some boundless, superhuman dream,
may lose his harvest here and now
and garner death. Such men are mad,
their counsels evil.

—O let me come to Cyprus,
island of Aphrodite,
homes of the loves that cast
their spells on the hearts of men!
Or Paphos where the hundred-
mouthed barbarian river

brings ripeness without rain!
To Pieria, haunt of the Muses,
and the holy hill of Olympus!
O Bromius, leader, god of joy,
Bromius, take me there!
There the lovely Graces go,
and there Desire, and there
the right is mine to worship
as I please.

—The deity, the son of Zeus,
in feast, in festival, delights.
He loves the goddess Peace,
generous of good,
preserver of the young.
To rich and poor he gives
the simple gift of wine,
the gladness of the grape.
But him who scoffs he hates,
and him who mocks his life,
the happiness of those
for whom the day is blessed
but doubly blessed the night;
whose simple wisdom shuns the thoughts
of proud, uncommon men and all
their god-encroaching dreams.
But what the common people do,
the things that simple men believe,
I too believe and do.

(As Penthus reappears from the palace, enter from the left several attendants leading Dionysus captive.)

Attendant

Pentheus, here we are; not empty-handed either.
We captured the quarry you sent us out to catch.
But our prey here was tame: refused to run

or hide, held out his hands as willing as you please,
completely unafraid. His ruddy cheeks were flushed
as though with wine, and he stood there smiling,
making no objection when we roped his hands
and marched him here. It made me feel ashamed.
"Listen, stranger," I said, "I am not to blame.
We act under orders from Pentheus. He ordered
your arrest."
As for those women you clapped in chains
and sent to the dungeon, they're gone, clean away,
went skipping off to the fields crying on their god
Bromius. The chains on their legs snapped apart
by themselves. Untouched by any human hand,
the doors swung wide, opening of their own accord.
Sir, this stranger who has come to Thebes is full
of many miracles. I know no more than that.
The rest is your affair.

Pentheus

Untie his hands.
We have him in our net. He may be quick,
but he cannot escape us now, I think.

(While the servants untie Dionysus' hands, Pentheus attentively scrutinizes his prisoner. Then the servants step back, leaving Pentheus and Dionysus face to face.)

So,
you *are* attractive, stranger, at least to women—
which explains, I think, your presence here in Thebes.
Your curls are long. You do not wrestle, I take it.
And what fair skin you have—you must take care of it—
no daylight complexion; no, it comes from the night
when you hunt Aphrodite with your beauty.
Now then,
who are you and from where?

Dionysus

It is nothing
to boast of and easily told. You have heard, I suppose,
of Mount Tmolus and her flowers?

Pentheus

I know the place.
It rings the city of Sardis.

Dionysus

I come from there.
My country is Lydia.

Pentheus

Who is this god whose worship
you have imported into Hellas?

Dionysus

Dionysus, the son of Zeus.
He initiated me.

Pentheus

You have some local Zeus
who spawns new gods?

Dionysus

He is the same as yours—
the Zeus who married Semele.

Pentheus

How did you see him?
In a dream or face to face?

Dionysus

Face to face.
He gave me his rites.

Pentheus

What form do they take,
these mysteries of yours?

Dionysus

It is forbidden
to tell the uninitiate.

Pentheus

Tell me the benefits
that those who know your mysteries enjoy.

Dionysus

I am forbidden to say. But they are worth knowing.

Pentheus

Your answers are designed to make me curious.

Dionysus

No:
our mysteries abhor an unbelieving man.

Pentheus

You say you saw the god. What form did he assume?

Dionysus

Whatever form he wished. The choice was his,
not mine.

Pentheus

You evade the question.

Dionysus

Talk sense to a fool
and he calls you foolish.

Pentheus

Have you introduced your rites
in other cities too? Or is Thebes the first?

Dionysus

Foreigners everywhere now dance for Dionysus.

Pentheus

They are more ignorant than Greeks.

Dionysus

In this matter
they are not. Customs differ.

Pentheus

Do you hold your rites
during the day or night?

Dionysus

Mostly by night.
The darkness is well suited to devotion.

Pentheus

Better suited to lechery and seducing women.

Dionysus

You can find debauchery by daylight too.

Pentheus

You shall regret these clever answers.

Dionysus

And you,
your stupid blasphemies.

Pentheus

What a bold bacchant!
You wrestle well—when it comes to words.

Dionysus

Tell me,
what punishment do you propose?

Pentheus

First of all,
I shall cut off your girlish curls.

Dionysus

My hair is holy.
My curls belong to god.

(*Pentheus shears away the god's curls.*)

Pentheus

Second, you will surrender
your wand.

Dionysus

You take it. It belongs to Dionysus.

(*Pentheus takes the thyrsus.*)

Pentheus

Last, I shall place you under guard and confine you
in the palace.

Dionysus

The god himself will set me free
whenever I wish.

Pentheus

You will be with your women in prison
when you call on him for help.

Dionysus

He is here now
and sees what I endure from you.

Pentheus

Where is he?
I cannot see him.

Dionysus

With me. Your blasphemies
have made you blind.

Pentheus (*to attendants*)

Seize him. He is mocking me
and Thebes.

Dionysus

I give you sober warning, fools:
place no chains on *me*.

Pentheus

But *I* say: chain him.
And I am the stronger here.

Dionysus

You do not know
the limits of your strength. You do not know
what you do. You do not know who you are.

Pentheus

I am Pentheus, the son of Echion and Agave.

Dionysus

Pentheus: you shall repent that name.

Pentheus

Off with him.
Chain his hands; lock him in the stables by the palace.
Since he desires the darkness, give him what he wants.
Let him dance down there in the dark.

(*As the attendants bind Dionysus' hands, the Chorus beats on its drums with increasing agitation as though to emphasize the sacrilege.*)

As for these women,
your accomplices in making trouble here,
I shall have them sold as slaves or put to work
at my looms. That will silence their drums.

(*Exit Pentheus.*)

Dionysus

I go,
though not to suffer, since that cannot be.
But Dionysus whom you outrage by your acts,

who you deny is god, will call you to account.
When you set chains on me, you manacle the god.

(*Exeunt attendants with Dionysus captive.*)

Chorus

—O Dirce, holy river,
child of Achelöus' water,
yours the springs that welcomed once
divinity, the son of Zeus!
For Zeus the father snatched his son
from deathless flame, crying:
Dithyrambus, come!
Enter my male womb.
I name you Bacchus and to Thebes
proclaim you by that name.
But now, O blessèd Dirce,
you banish me when to your banks I come,
crowned with ivy, bringing revels.
O Dirce, why am I rejected?
By the clustered grapes I swear,
by Dionysus' wine,
someday you shall come to know
the name of *Bromius!*

—With fury, with fury, he rages,
Pentheus, son of Echion,
born of the breed of Earth,
spawned by the dragon, whelped by Earth!
Inhuman, a rabid beast,
a giant in wildness raging,
storming, defying the children of heaven.
He has threatened me with bonds
though my body is bound to god.
He cages my comrades with chains;
he has cast them in prison darkness.
O lord, son of Zeus, do you see?

O Dionysus, do you see
how in shackles we are held
unbreakably, in the bonds of oppressors?
Descend from Olympus, lord!
Come, whirl your wand of gold
and quell with death this beast of blood
whose violence abuses man and god
outrageously.

—O lord, where do you wave your wand
among the running companies of god?
There on Nysa, mother of beasts?
There on the ridges of Corycia?
Or there among the forests of Olympus
where Orpheus fingered his lyre
and mustered with music the trees,
mustered the wilderness beasts?
O Pieria, you are blessed!
Evius honors you. He comes to dance,
bringing his Bacchae, fording the race
where Axios runs, bringing his Maenads
whirling over Lydias,
generous father of rivers
and famed for his lovely waters
that fatten a land of good horses.

(*Thunder and lightning. The earth trembles. The Chorus is crazed with fear.*)

Dionysus (*from within*)

Ho!
Hear me! Ho, Bacchae!
Ho, Bacchae! Hear my cry!

Chorus

Who cries?
Who calls me with that cry
of Evius? Where are you, lord?

Dionysus

Ho! Again I cry—
the son of Zeus and Semele!

Chorus

O lord, lord Bromius!
Bromius, come to us now!

Dionysus

Let the earthquake come! Shatter the floor of the world!

Chorus

—Look there, how the palace of Pentheus totters.
—Look, the palace is collapsing!
—Dionysus is within. Adore him!
—We adore him!
—Look there!
—Above the pillars, how the great stones
gape and crack!
—Listen. Bromius cries his victory!

Dionysus

Launch the blazing thunderbolt of god! O lightnings,
come! Consume with flame the palace of Pentheus!

(A burst of lightning flares across the façade of the palace and tongues of flame spurt up from the tomb of Semele. Then a great crash of thunder.)

Chorus

Ah,
look how the fire leaps up
on the holy tomb of Semele,
the flame of Zeus of Thunders,
his lightnings, still alive,
blazing where they fell!
Down, Maenads,
fall to the ground in awe! He walks
among the ruins he has made!

He has brought the high house low!
He comes, our god, the son of Zeus!

(The Chorus falls to the ground in oriental fashion, bowing their heads in the direction of the palace. A hush; then Dionysus appears, lightly picking his way among the rubble. Calm and smiling still, he speaks to the Chorus with a solicitude approaching banter.)

Dionysus

What, women of Asia? Were you so overcome with fright
you fell to the ground? I think then you must have seen
how Bacchus jostled the palace of Pentheus. But come, rise.
Do not be afraid.

Coryphaeus

O greatest light of our holy revels,
how glad I am to see your face! Without you I was lost.

Dionysus

Did you despair when they led me away to cast me down
in the darkness of Pentheus' prison?

Coryphaeus

What else could I do?
Where would I turn for help if something happened to you?
But how did you escape that godless man?

Dionysus

With ease.
No effort was required.

Coryphaeus

But the manacles on your wrists?

Dionysus

There I, in turn, humiliated him, outrage for outrage.
He seemed to think that he was chaining me but never once

so much as touched my hands. He fed on his desires.
Inside the stable he intended as my jail, instead of me,
he found a bull and tried to rope its knees and hooves.
He was panting desperately, biting his lips with his teeth,
his whole body drenched with sweat, while I sat nearby,
quietly watching. But at that moment Bacchus came,
shook the palace and touched his mother's grave with tongues
of fire. Imagining the palace was in flames,
Pentheus went rushing here and there, shouting to his slaves
to bring him water. Every hand was put to work: in vain.
Then, afraid I might escape, he suddenly stopped short,
drew his sword and rushed to the palace. There, it seems,
Bromius had made a shape, a phantom which resembled me,
within the court. Bursting in, Pentheus thrust and stabbed
at that thing of gleaming air as though he thought it me.
And then, once again, the god humiliated him.
He razed the palace to the ground where it lies, shattered
in utter ruin—his reward for my imprisonment.
At that bitter sight, Pentheus dropped his sword, exhausted
by the struggle. A man, a man, and nothing more,
yet he presumed to wage a war with god.
For my part,
I left the palace quietly and made my way outside.
For Pentheus I care nothing.
But judging from the sound
of tramping feet inside the court, I think our man
will soon be here. What, I wonder, will he have to say?
But let him bluster. I shall not be touched to rage.
Wise men know constraint: our passions are controlled.

(*Enter Pentheus, stamping heavily, from the ruined palace.*)

Pentheus

But this is mortifying. That stranger, that man
I clapped in irons, has escaped.
(*He catches sight of Dionysus.*)

What! *You?*
Well, what do you have to say for yourself?
How did you escape? Answer me.

Dionysus

Your anger
walks too heavily. Tread lightly here.

Pentheus

How did you escape?

Dionysus

Don't you remember?
Someone, I said, would set me free.

Pentheus

Someone?
But who? Who is this mysterious someone?

Dionysus

[He who makes the grape grow its clusters
for mankind.]

Pentheus

A splendid contribution, that.

Dionysus

You disparage the gift that is his chiefest glory.

Pentheus

[If I catch him here, he will not escape my anger.]
I shall order every gate in every tower
to be bolted tight.

Dionysus

And so? Could not a god
hurdle your city walls?

Pentheus

You are clever—very—
but not where it counts.

Dionysus

Where it counts the most,
there I *am* clever.

(*Enter a messenger, a herdsman from Mount Cithaeron.*)

But hear this messenger
who brings you news from the mountain of Cithaeron.
We shall remain where we are. Do not fear:
we will not run away.

Messenger

Pentheus, king of Thebes,
I come from Cithaeron where the gleaming flakes of snow
fall on and on forever—

Pentheus

Get to the point.
What is your message, man?

Messenger

Sir, I have seen
the holy Maenads, the women who ran barefoot
and crazy from the city, and I wanted to report
to you and Thebes what weird fantastic things,
what miracles and more than miracles,
these women do. But may I speak freely
in my own way and words, or make it short?
I fear the harsh impatience of your nature, sire,
too kingly and too quick to anger.

Pentheus

Speak freely.
You have my promise: I shall not punish you.
Displeasure with a man who speaks the truth is wrong.
However, the more terrible this tale of yours,
that much more terrible will be the punishment
I impose upon that man who taught our womenfolk
this strange new magic.

Messenger

About that hour
when the sun lets loose its light to warm the earth,
our grazing herds of cows had just begun to climb
the path along the mountain ridge. Suddenly
I saw three companies of dancing women,
one led by Autonoë, the second captained
by your mother Agave, while Ino led the third.
There they lay in the deep sleep of exhaustion,
some resting on boughs of fir, others sleeping
where they fell, here and there among the oak leaves—
but all modestly and soberly, not, as you think,
drunk with wine, nor wandering, led astray
by the music of the flute, to hunt their Aphrodite
through the woods.

But your mother heard the lowing
of our hornèd herds, and springing to her feet,
gave a great cry to waken them from sleep.
And they too, rubbing the bloom of soft sleep
from their eyes, rose up lightly and straight—
a lovely sight to see: all as one,
the old women and the young and the unmarried girls.
First they let their hair fall loose, down
over their shoulders, and those whose straps had slipped
fastened their skins of fawn with writhing snakes
that licked their cheeks. Breasts swollen with milk,
new mothers who had left their babies behind at home
nestled gazelles and young wolves in their arms,
suckling them. Then they crowned their hair with leaves,
ivy and oak and flowering bryony. One woman
struck her thyrsus against a rock and a fountain
of cool water came bubbling up. Another drove
her fennel in the ground, and where it struck the earth,
at the touch of god, a spring of wine poured out.
Those who wanted milk scratched at the soil
with bare fingers and the white milk came welling up.

Pure honey spurted, streaming, from their wands.
If you had been there and seen these wonders for yourself,
you would have gone down on your knees and prayed
to the god you now deny.
We cowherds and shepherds
gathered in small groups, wondering and arguing
among ourselves at these fantastic things,
the awful miracles those women did.
But then a city fellow with the knack of words
rose to his feet and said: "All you who live
upon the pastures of the mountain, what do you say?
Shall we earn a little favor with King Pentheus
by hunting his mother Agave out of the revels?"
Falling in with his suggestion, we withdrew
and set ourselves in ambush, hidden by the leaves
among the undergrowth. Then at a signal
all the Bacchae whirled their wands for the revels
to begin. With one voice they cried aloud:
"*O Iacchus! Son of Zeus!*" "*O Bromius!*" they cried
until the beasts and all the mountain seemed
wild with divinity. And when they ran,
everything ran with them.
It happened, however,
that Agave ran near the ambush where I lay
concealed. Leaping up, I tried to seize her,
but she gave a cry: "Hounds who run with me,
men are hunting us down! Follow, follow me!
Use your wands for weapons."
At this we fled
and barely missed being torn to pieces by the women.
Unarmed, they swooped down upon the herds of cattle
grazing there on the green of the meadow. And then
you could have seen a single woman with bare hands
tear a fat calf, still bellowing with fright,
in two, while others clawed the heifers to pieces.
There were ribs and cloven hooves scattered everywhere,

and scraps smeared with blood hung from the fir trees.
And bulls, their raging fury gathered in their horns,
lowered their heads to charge, then fell, stumbling
to the earth, pulled down by hordes of women
and stripped of flesh and skin more quickly, sire,
than you could blink your royal eyes. Then,
carried up by their own speed, they flew like birds
across the spreading fields along Asopus' stream
where most of all the ground is good for harvesting.
Like invaders they swooped on Hysiae
and on Erythrae in the foothills of Cithaeron.
Everything in sight they pillaged and destroyed.
They snatched the children from their homes. And when
they piled their plunder on their backs, it stayed in place,
untied. Nothing, neither bronze nor iron,
fell to the dark earth. Flames flickered
in their curls and did not burn them. Then the villagers,
furious at what the women did, took to arms.
And *there*, sire, was something terrible to see.
For the men's spears were pointed and sharp, and yet
drew no blood, whereas the wands the women threw
inflicted wounds. And then the men *ran*,
routed by women! Some god, I say, was with them.
The Bacchae then returned where they had started,
by the springs the god had made, and washed their hands
while the snakes licked away the drops of blood
that dabbled their cheeks.
Whoever this god may be,
sire, welcome him to Thebes. For he is great
in many other ways as well. It was he,
or so they say, who gave to mortal men
the gift of lovely wine by which our suffering
is stopped. And if there is no god of wine,
there is no love, no Aphrodite either,
nor other pleasure left to men.

(*Exit messenger.*)

Coryphaeus

I tremble
to speak the words of freedom before the tyrant.
But let the truth be told: there is no god
greater than Dionysus.

Pentheus

Like a blazing fire
this Bacchic violence spreads. It comes too close.
We are disgraced, humiliated in the eyes
of Hellas. This is no time for hesitation.

(*He turns to an attendant.*)

You there. Go down quickly to the Electran gates
and order out all heavy-armored infantry;
call up the fastest troops among our cavalry,
the mobile squadrons and the archers. We march
against the Bacchae! Affairs are out of hand
when we tamely endure such conduct in our women.

(*Exit attendant.*)

Dionysus

Pentheus, you do not hear, or else you disregard
my words of warning. You have done me wrong,
and yet, in spite of that, I warn you once
again: do not take arms against a god.
Stay quiet here. Bromius will not let you
drive his women from their revels on the mountain.

Pentheus

Don't you lecture me. You escaped from prison.
Or shall I punish you again?

Dionysus

If I were you,
I would offer him a sacrifice, not rage
and kick against necessity, a man defying
god.

Pentheus

I shall give your god the sacrifice
that he deserves. His victims will be his women.
I shall make a great slaughter in the woods of Cithaeron.

Dionysus

You will all be routed, shamefully defeated,
when their wands of ivy turn back your shields
of bronze.

Pentheus

It is hopeless to wrestle with this man.
Nothing on earth will make him hold his tongue.

Dionysus

Friend,
you can still save the situation.

Pentheus

How?
By accepting orders from my own slaves?

Dionysus

No.
I undertake to lead the women back to Thebes.
Without bloodshed.

Pentheus

This is some trap.

Dionysus

A trap?
How so, if I save you by my own devices?

Pentheus

I know.
You and they have conspired to establish your rites
forever.

Dionysus

True, I *have* conspired—with god.

Pentheus

Bring my armor, someone. And *you* stop talking.

(Pentheus strides toward the left, but when he is almost offstage, Dionysus calls imperiously to him.)

Dionysus

Wait!
Would you like to *see* their revels on the mountain?

Pentheus

I would pay a great sum to see that sight.

Dionysus

Why are you so passionately curious?

Pentheus

Of course
I'd be sorry to see them drunk—

Dionysus

But for all your sorrow,
you'd like very much to see them?

Pentheus

Yes, very much.
I could crouch beneath the fir trees, out of sight.

Dionysus

But if you try to hide, they may track you down.

Pentheus

Your point is well taken. I will go openly.

Dionysus

Shall I lead you there now? Are you ready to go?

Pentheus

The sooner the better. The loss of even a moment
would be disappointing now.

Dionysus

First, however,
you must dress yourself in women's clothes.

Pentheus

What?
You want *me*, a man, to wear a woman's dress. But why?

Dionysus

If they knew you were a man, they would kill you instantly.

Pentheus

True. You are an old hand at cunning, I see.

Dionysus

Dionysus taught me everything I know.

Pentheus

Your advice is to the point. What I fail to see
is what we do.

Dionysus

I shall go inside with you
and help you dress.

Pentheus

Dress? In a *woman's* dress,
you mean? I would die of shame.

Dionysus

Very well.
Then you no longer hanker to see the Maenads?

Pentheus

What is this costume I must wear?

Dionysus

On your head
I shall set a wig with long curls.

Pentheus

And then?

Dionysus

Next, robes to your feet and a net for your hair.

Pentheus

Yes? Go on.

Dionysus

Then a thyrsus for your hand
and a skin of dappled fawn.

Pentheus

I could not bear it.
I *cannot* bring myself to dress in women's clothes.

Dionysus

Then you must fight the Bacchae. That means bloodshed

Pentheus

Right. First we must go and reconnoiter.

Dionysus

Surely a wiser course than that of hunting bad
with worse.

Pentheus

But how can we pass through the city
without being seen?

Dionysus

We shall take deserted streets.
I will lead the way.

Pentheus

Any way you like,
provided those women of Bacchus don't jeer at me.
First, however, I shall ponder your advice,
whether to go or not.

Dionysus

Do as you please.
I am ready, whatever you decide.

Pentheus

Yes.
Either I shall march with my army to the mountain
or act on your advice.

(*Exit Pentheus into the palace.*)

Dionysus

Women, our prey now thrashes
in the net we threw. He shall see the Bacchae
and pay the price with death.
O Dionysus,
now action rests with you. And you are near.
Punish this man. But first distract his wits;
bewilder him with madness. For sane of mind
this man would never wear a woman's dress;
but obsess his soul and he will not refuse.
After those threats with which he was so fierce,
I want him made the laughingstock of Thebes,
paraded through the streets, a woman.
Now
I shall go and costume Pentheus in the clothes
which he must wear to Hades when he dies, butchered
by the hands of his mother. He shall come to know
Dionysus, son of Zeus, consummate god,
most terrible, and yet most gentle, to mankind.

(*Exit Dionysus into the palace.*)

Chorus

—When shall I dance once more
with bare feet the all-night dances,
tossing my head for joy
in the damp air, in the dew,
as a running fawn might frisk
for the green joy of the wide fields,

free from fear of the hunt,
free from the circling beaters
and the nets of woven mesh
and the hunters hallooing on
their yelping packs? And then, hard pressed,
she sprints with the quickness of wind,
bounding over the marsh, leaping
to frisk, leaping for joy,
gay with the green of the leaves,
to dance for joy in the forest,
to dance where the darkness is deepest,
where no man is.

—What is wisdom? What gift of the gods
is held in honor like this:
to hold your hand victorious
over the heads of those you hate?
Honor is precious forever.

—Slow but unmistakable
the might of the gods moves on.
It punishes that man,
infatuate of soul
and hardened in his pride,
who disregards the gods.
The gods are crafty:
they lie in ambush
a long step of time
to hunt the unholy.
Beyond the old beliefs,
no thought, no act shall go.
Small, small is the cost
to believe in this:
whatever is god is strong;
whatever long time has sanctioned,
that is a law forever;
the law tradition makes
is the law of nature.

—What is wisdom? What gift of the gods
is held in honor like this:
to hold your hand victorious
over the heads of those you hate?
Honor is precious forever.

—Blessèd is he who escapes a storm at sea,
who comes home to his harbor.
—Blessèd is he who emerges from under affliction.
—In various ways one man outraces another in the
race for wealth and power.
—Ten thousand men possess ten thousand hopes.
—A few bear fruit in happiness; the others go awry.
—But he who garners day by day the good of life,
he is happiest. Blessèd is he.

(Re-enter Dionysus from the palace. At the threshold he turns and calls back to Pentheus.)

Dionysus

Pentheus if you are still so curious to see
forbidden sights, so bent on evil still,
come out. Let us see you in your woman's dress,
disguised in Maenad clothes so you may go and spy
upon your mother and her company.

(Enter Pentheus from the palace. He wears a long linen dress which partially conceals his fawn-skin. He carries a thyrsus in his hand; on his head he wears a wig with long blond curls bound by a snood. He is dazed and completely in the power of the god who has now possessed him.)

Why,
you look exactly like one of the daughters of Cadmus.

Pentheus

I seem to see two suns blazing in the heavens.
And now two Thebes, two cities, and each
with seven gates. And you—you are a bull

who walks before me there. Horns have sprouted
from your head. Have you always been a beast?
But now I see a bull.

Dionysus

It is the god you see.
Though hostile formerly, he now declares a truce
and goes with us. You see what you could not
when you were blind.

Pentheus (coyly primping)

Do I look like anyone?
Like Ino or my mother Agave?

Dionysus

So much alike
I almost might be seeing one of them. But look:
one of your curls has come loose from under the snood
where I tucked it.

Pentheus

It must have worked loose
when I was dancing for joy and shaking my head.

Dionysus

Then let me be your maid and tuck it back.
Hold still.

Pentheus

Arrange it. I am in your hands
completely.

(Dionysus tucks the curl back under the snood.)

Dionysus

And now your strap has slipped. Yes,
and your robe hangs askew at the ankles.

Pentheus (bending backward to look)

I think so.
At least on my right leg. But on the left the hem
lies straight.

Dionysus

You will think me the best of friends
when you see to your surprise how chaste the Bacchae are.

Pentheus

But to be a real Bacchante, should I hold
the wand in my right hand? Or this way?

Dionysus

No.
In your right hand. And raise it as you raise
your right foot. I commend your change of heart.

Pentheus

Could I lift Cithaeron up, do you think?
Shoulder the cliffs, Bacchae and all?

Dionysus

If you wanted.
Your mind was once unsound, but now you think
as sane men do.

Pentheus

Should we take crowbars with us?
Or should I put my shoulder to the cliffs
and heave them up?

Dionysus

What? And destroy the haunts
of the nymphs, the holy groves where Pan plays
his woodland pipe?

Pentheus

You are right. In any case,
women should not be mastered by brute strength.
I will hide myself beneath the firs instead.

Dionysus

You will find all the ambush you deserve,
creeping up to spy on the Maenads.

Pentheus

Think.

I can see them already, there among the bushes,
mating like birds, caught in the toils of love.

Dionysus

Exactly. This is your mission: you go to watch.
You may surprise them—or they may surprise you.

Pentheus

Then lead me through the very heart of Thebes,
since I, alone of all this city, dare to go.

Dionysus

You and you alone will suffer for your city.
A great ordeal awaits you. But you are worthy
of your fate. I shall lead you safely there;
someone else shall bring you back.

Pentheus

Yes, my mother.

Dionysus

An example to all men.

Pentheus

It is for that I go.

Dionysus

You will be carried home—

Pentheus

O luxury!

Dionysus

cradled in your mother's arms.

Pentheus

You will spoil me.

Dionysus

I *mean* to spoil you.

Pentheus

I go to my reward.

Dionysus

You are an extraordinary young man, and you go
to an extraordinary experience. You shall win
a glory towering to heaven and usurping
god's.

(*Exit Pentheus.*)

Agave and you daughters of Cadmus,
reach out your hands! I bring this young man
to a great ordeal. The victor? Bromius.
Bromius—and I. The rest the event shall show.

(*Exit Dionysus.*)

Chorus

—Run to the mountain, fleet hounds of madness!
Run, run to the revels of Cadmus' daughters!
Sting them against the man in women's clothes,
the madman who spies on the Maenads, who peers
from behind the rocks, who spies from a vantage!
His mother shall see him first. She will cry
to the Maenads: "Who is this spy who has come
to the mountains to peer at the mountain-revels
of the women of Thebes? What bore him, Bacchae?
This man was born of no woman. Some lioness
gave him birth, some one of the Libyan gorgons!"

—O Justice, principle of order, spirit of custom,
come! Be manifest; reveal yourself with a sword!
Stab through the throat that godless man,
the mocker who goes, flouting custom and outraging god!
O Justice, stab the evil earth-born spawn of Echion!

—Uncontrollable, the unbeliever goes,
in spitting rage, rebellious and amok,
madly assaulting the mysteries of god,
profaning the rites of the mother of god.

Against the unassailable he runs, with rage
obsessed. Headlong he runs to death.
For death the gods exact, curbing by that bit
the mouths of men. They humble us with death
that we remember what we are who are not god,
but men. We run to death. Wherefore, I say,
accept, accept:
humility is wise; humility is blest.
But what the world calls wise I do not want.
Elsewhere the chase. I hunt another game,
those great, those manifest, those certain goals,
achieving which, our mortal lives are blest.
Let these things be the quarry of my chase:
purity; humility; an unrebellious soul,
accepting all. Let me go the customary way,
the timeless, honored, beaten path of those who walk
with reverence and awe beneath the sons of heaven.

—O Justice, principle of order, spirit of custom,
come! Be manifest; reveal yourself with a sword!
Stab through the throat that godless man,
the mocker who goes, flouting custom and outraging god!
O Justice, destroy the evil earth-born sprawn of Echion!

—O Dionysus, reveal yourself a bull! Be manifest,
a snake with darting heads, a lion breathing fire!
O Bacchus, come! Come with your smile!
Cast your noose about this man who hunts
your Bacchae! Bring him down, trampled
underfoot by the murderous herd of your Maenads!

(Enter a messenger from Cithaeron.)

Messenger

How prosperous in Hellas these halls once were,
this house founded by Cadmus, the stranger from Sidon
who sowed the dragon seed in the land of the snake!

I am a slave and nothing more, yet even so
I mourn the fortunes of this fallen house.

Coryphaeus

What is it?
Is there news of the Bacchae?

Messenger

This is my news:
Pentheus, the son of Echion, is dead.

Coryphaeus

All hail to Bromius! Our god is a great god!

Messenger

What is this you say, women? You dare to rejoice
at these disasters which destroy this house?

Coryphaeus

I am no Greek. I hail my god
in my own way. No longer need I
shrink with fear of prison.

Messenger

If you suppose this city is so short of men—

Coryphaeus

Dionysus, Dionysus, not Thebes,
has power over me.

Messenger

Your feelings might be forgiven, then. But this,
this exultation in disaster—it is not right.

Coryphaeus

Tell us how the mocker died.
How was he killed?

Messenger

There were three of us in all: Pentheus and I,
attending my master, and that stranger who volunteered
his services as guide. Leaving behind us
the last outlying farms of Thebes, we forded
the Asopus and struck into the barren scrubland
of Cithaeron.

There in a grassy glen we halted,
unmoving, silent, without a word,
so we might see but not be seen. From that vantage,
in a hollow cut from the sheer rock of the cliffs,
a place where water ran and the pines grew dense
with shade, we saw the Maenads sitting, their hands
busily moving at their happy tasks. Some
wound the stalks of their tattered wands with tendrils
of fresh ivy; others, frisking like fillies
newly freed from the painted bridles, chanted
in Bacchic songs, responsively.

But Pentheus—
unhappy man—could not quite see the companies
of women. "Stranger," he said, "from where I stand,
I cannot see these counterfeited Maenads.
But if I climbed that towering fir that overhangs
the banks, then I could see their shameless orgies
better."

And now the stranger worked a miracle.
Reaching for the highest branch of a great fir,
he bent it down, down, down to the dark earth,
till it was curved the way a taut bow bends
or like a rim of wood when forced about the circle
of a wheel. Like that he forced that mountain fir
down to the ground. No mortal could have done it.
Then he seated Pentheus at the highest tip
and with his hands let the trunk rise straightly up,
slowly and gently, lest it throw its rider.
And the tree rose, towering to heaven, with my master

huddled at the top. And now the Maenads saw him
more clearly than he saw them. But barely had they seen,
when the stranger vanished and there came a great voice
out of heaven—Dionysus', it must have been—
crying: "Women, I bring you the man who has mocked
at you and me and at our holy mysteries.
Take vengeance upon him." And as he spoke
a flash of awful fire bound earth and heaven.
The high air hushed, and along the forest glen
the leaves hung still; you could hear no cry of beasts.
The Bacchae heard that voice but missed its words,
and leaping up, they stared, peering everywhere.
Again that voice. And now they knew his cry,
the clear command of god. And breaking loose
like startled doves, through grove and torrent,
over jagged rocks, they flew, their feet maddened
by the breath of god. And when they saw my master
perching in his tree, they climbed a great stone
that towered opposite his perch and showered him
with stones and javelins of fir, while the others
hurled their wands. And yet they missed their target,
poor Pentheus in his perch, barely out of reach
of their eager hands, treed, unable to escape.
Finally they splintered branches from the oaks
and with those bars of wood tried to lever up the tree
by prying at the roots. But every effort failed.
Then Agave cried out: "Maenads, make a circle
about the trunk and grip it with your hands.
Unless we take this climbing beast, he will reveal
the secrets of the god." With that, thousands of hands
tore the fir tree from the earth, and down, down
from his high perch fell Pentheus, tumbling
to the ground, sobbing and screaming as he fell,
for he knew his end was near. His own mother,
like a priestess with her victim, fell upon him
first. But snatching off his wig and snood

so she would recognize his face, he touched her cheeks,
screaming, "*No, no, Mother! I am Pentheus,*
your own son, the child you bore to Echion!
Pity me, spare me, Mother! I have done a wrong,
but do not kill your own son for my offense."
But she was foaming at the mouth, and her crazed eyes
rolling with frenzy. She was mad, stark mad,
possessed by Bacchus. Ignoring his cries of pity,
she seized his left arm at the wrist; then, planting
her foot upon his chest, she pulled, wrenching away
the arm at the shoulder—not by her own strength,
for the god had put inhuman power in her hands.
Ino, meanwhile, on the other side, was scratching off
his flesh. Then Autonoë and the whole horde
of Bacchae swarmed upon him. Shouts everywhere,
he screaming with what little breath was left,
they shrieking in triumph. One tore off an arm,
another a foot still warm in its shoe. His ribs
were clawed clean of flesh and every hand
was smeared with blood as they played ball with scraps
of Pentheus' body.

The pitiful remains lie scattered,
one piece among the sharp rocks, others
lying lost among the leaves in the depths
of the forest. His mother, picking up his head,
impaled it on her wand. She seems to think it is
some mountain lion's head which she carries in triumph
through the thick of Cithaeron. Leaving her sisters
at the Maenad dances, she is coming here, gloating
over her grisly prize. She calls upon Bacchus:
he is her "fellow-huntsman," "comrade of the chase,
crowned with victory." But all the victory
she carries home is her own grief.

Now,
before Agave returns, let me leave
this scene of sorrow. Humility,

a sense of reverence before the sons of heaven—
of all the prizes that a mortal man might win,
these, I say, are wisest; these are best.

(*Exit Messenger.*)

Chorus

—We dance to the glory of Bacchus!
We dance to the death of Pentheus,
the death of the spawn of the dragon!
He dressed in woman's dress;
he took the lovely thyrsus;
it waved him down to death,
led by a bull to Hades.
Hail, Bacchae! Hail, women of Thebes!
Your victory is fair, fair the prize,
this famous prize of grief!
Glorious the game! To fold your child
in your arms, streaming with his blood!

Coryphaeus

But look: there comes Pentheus' mother, Agave,
running wild-eyed toward the palace.
—Welcome,
welcome to the reveling band of the god of joy!

(*Enter Agave with other Bacchantes. She is covered with blood and carries the head of Pentheus impaled upon her thyrsus.*)

Agave

Bacchae of Asia—

Chorus

Speak, speak.

Agave

We bring this branch to the palace,
this fresh-cut spray from the mountains.
Happy was the hunting.

Chorus

I see.
I welcome our fellow-reveler of god.

Agave

The whelp of a wild mountain lion,
and snared by me without a noose.
Look, look at the prize I bring.

Chorus

Where was he caught?

Agave

On Cithaeron—

Chorus

On Cithaeron?

Agave

Our prize was killed.

Chorus

Who killed him?

Agave

I struck him first.
The Maenads call me "Agave the blest."

Chorus

And then?

Agave

Cadmus'—

Chorus

Cadmus'?

Agave

Daughters.
After me, they reached the prey.
After me. Happy was the hunting.

Chorus

Happy indeed.

Agave

Then share my glory,
share the feast.

Chorus

Share, unhappy woman?

Agave

See, the whelp is young and tender.
Beneath the soft mane of its hair,
the down is blooming on the cheeks.

Chorus

With that mane he *looks* a beast.

Agave

Our god is wise. Cunningly, cleverly,
Bacchus the hunter lashed the Maenads
against his prey.

Chorus

Our king is a hunter.

Agave

You praise me now?

Chorus

I praise you.

Agave

The men of Thebes—

Chorus

And Pentheus, your son?

Agave

Will praise his mother. She caught
a great quarry, this lion's cub.

Chorus

Extraordinary catch.

Agave

Extraordinary skill.

Chorus

You are proud?

Agave

Proud and happy.
I have won the trophy of the chase,
a great prize, manifest to all.

Coryphaeus

Then, poor woman, show the citizens of Thebes
this great prize, this trophy you have won
in the hunt.

(Agave proudly exhibits her thyrsus with the head of Pentheus impaled upon the point.)

Agave

You citizens of this towered city,
men of Thebes, behold the trophy of your women's
hunting! *This* is the quarry of our chase, taken
not with nets nor spears of bronze but by the white
and delicate hands of women. What are they worth,
your boastings now and all that uselessness
your armor is, since we, with our bare hands,
captured this quarry and tore its bleeding body
limb from limb?
—But where is my father Cadmus?
He should come. And my son. Where is Pentheus?
Fetch him. I will have him set his ladder up
against the wall and, there upon the beam,
nail the head of this wild lion I have killed
as a trophy of my hunt.

(Enter Cadmus, followed by attendants who bear upon a bier the dismembered body of Pentheus.)

Cadmus

Follow me, attendants.
Bear your dreadful burden in and set it down,
there before the palace.

(The attendants set down the bier.)

This was Pentheus
whose body, after long and weary searchings
I painfully assembled from Cithaeron's glens
where it lay, scattered in shreads, dismembered
throughout the forest, no two pieces
in a single place.
Old Teiresias and I
had returned to Thebes from the orgies on the mountain
before I learned of this atrocious crime
my daughters did. And so I hurried back
to the mountain to recover the body of this boy
murdered by the Maenads. There among the oaks
I found Aristaeus' wife, the mother of Actaeon,
Autonoë, and with her Ino, both
still stung with madness. But Agave, they said,
was on her way to Thebes, still possessed.
And what they said was true, for there she is,
and not a happy sight.

Agave

Now, Father,
yours can be the proudest boast of living men.
For you are now the father of the bravest daughters
in the world. All of your daughters are brave,
but I above the rest. I have left my shuttle
at the loom; I raised my sight to higher things—
to hunting animals with my bare hands.
You see?
Here in my hands I hold the quarry of my chase,
a trophy for our house. Take it, Father, take it.
Glory in my kill and invite your friends to share

the feast of triumph. For you are blest, Father,
by this great deed I have done.

Cadmus

This is a grief
so great it knows no size. I cannot look.
This is the awful murder your hands have done.
This, this is the noble victim you have slaughtered
to the gods. And to share a feast like this
you now invite all Thebes and me?
O gods,
how terribly I pity you and then myself.
Justly—too, too justly—has lord Bromius,
this god of our own blood, destroyed us all,
every one.

Agave

How scowling and crabbed is old age
in men. I hope my son takes after his mother
and wins, as she has done, the laurels of the chase
when he goes hunting with the younger men of Thebes.
But all my son can do is quarrel with god.
He should be scolded, Father, and you are the one
who should scold him. Yes, someone call him out
so he can see his mother's triumph.

Cadmus

Enough. No more.
When you realize the horror you have done,
you shall suffer terribly. But if with luck
your present madness lasts until you die,
you will seem to have, not having, happiness.

Agave

Why do you reproach me? Is there something wrong?

Cadmus

First raise your eyes to the heavens.

Agave

There.
But why?

Cadmus

Does it look the same as it did before?
Or has it changed?

Agave

It seems—somehow—clearer,
brighter than it was before.

Cadmus

Do you still feel
the same flurry inside you?

Agave

The same—flurry?
No, I feel—somehow—calmer. I feel as though—
my mind were somehow—changing.

Cadmus

Can you still hear me?
Can you answer clearly?

Agave

No. I have forgotten
what we were saying, Father.

Cadmus

Who was your husband?

Agave

Echion—a man, they said, born of the dragon seed.

Cadmus

What was the name of the child you bore your husband?

Agave

Pentheus.

Cadmus
And whose head do you hold in your hands?

Agave (averting her eyes)
A lion's head—or so the hunters told me.

Cadmus
Look directly at it. Just a quick glance.

Agave
What is it? What am I holding in my hands?

Cadmus
Look more closely still. Study it carefully.

Agave
No! O gods, I see the greatest grief there is.

Cadmus
Does it look like a lion now?

Agave
No, no. It is—
Pentheus' head—I hold—

Cadmus
And mourned by me
before you ever knew.

Agave
But *who* killed him?
Why am *I* holding him?

Cadmus
O savage truth,
what a time to come!

Agave
For god's sake, speak.
My heart is beating with terror.

Cadmus
You killed him.
You and your sisters.

Agave
But where was he killed?
Here at home? Where?

Cadmus
He was killed on Cithaeron,
there where the hounds tore Actaeon to pieces.

Agave
But why? Why had Pentheus gone to Cithaeron?

Cadmus
He went to your revels to mock the god.

Agave
But *we*—
what were we doing on the mountain?

Cadmus
You were mad.
The whole city was possessed.

Agave
Now, now I see:
Dionysus has destroyed us all.

Cadmus
You outraged him.
You denied that he was truly god.

Agave
Father,
where is my poor boy's body now?

Cadmus
There it is.
I gathered the pieces with great difficulty.

Agave

Is his body entire? Has he been laid out well?

Cadmus

[All but the head. The rest is mutilated horribly.]

Agave

But why should Pentheus suffer for my crime?

Cadmus

He, like you, blasphemed the god. And so
the god has brought us all to ruin at one blow,
you, your sisters, and this boy. All our house
the god as utterly destroyed and, with it,
me. For I have no sons left, no male heir;
and I have lived only to see this boy,
this branch of your own body, most horribly
and foully killed.

(*He turns and addresses the corpse.*)

—To you my house looked up.
Child, you were the stay of my house; you were
my daughter's son. Of you this city stood in awe.
No one who once had seen your face dared outrage
the old man, or if he did, you punished him.
Now I must go, a banished and dishonored man—
I, Cadmus the great, who sowed the soldiery
of Thebes and harvested a great harvest. My son,
dearest to me of all men—for even dead,
I count you still the man I love the most—
never again will your hand touch my chin;
no more, child, will you hug me and call me
"Grandfather" and say, "Who is wronging you?
Does anyone trouble you or vex your heart, old man?
Tell me, Grandfather, and I will punish him."
No, now there is grief for me; the mourning

for you; pity for your mother; and for her sisters,
sorrow.
If there is still any mortal man
who despises or defies the gods, let him look
on this boy's death and believe in the gods.

Coryphaeus

Cadmus, I pity you. Your daughter's son
has died as he deserved, and yet his death
bears hard on you.

[*At this point there is a break in the manuscript of nearly fifty lines. The following speeches of Agave and Coryphaeus and the first part of Dionysus' speech have been conjecturally reconstructed from fragments and later material which made use of the Bacchae. Lines which can plausibly be assigned to the lacuna are otherwise not indicated. My own inventions are designed, not to complete the speeches, but to effect a transition between the fragments, and are bracketed. For fuller comment, see the Appendix.*—TRANS.]

Agave

O Father, now you can see
how everything has changed. I am in anguish now,
tormented, who walked in triumph minutes past,
exulting in my kill. And that prize I carried home
with such pride was my own curse. Upon these hands
I bear the curse of my son's blood. How then
with these accursed hands may I touch his body?
How can I, accursed with such a curse, hold him
to my breast? O gods, what dirge can I sing
[that there might be] a dirge [for every]
broken limb?

. . . . . .

Where is a shroud to cover up his corpse?
O my child, what hands will give you proper care
unless with my own hands I lift my curse?

(*She lifts up one of Pentheus' limbs and asks the help of Cadmus in piecing the body together. She mourns each piece separately before replacing it on the bier.* See Appendix.)

Come, Father. We must restore his head
to this unhappy boy. As best we can, we shall make
him whole again.
—O dearest, dearest face!
Pretty boyish mouth! Now with this veil
I shroud your head, gathering with loving care
these mangled bloody limbs, this flesh I brought
to birth

. . . . . .

Coryphaeus

Let this scene teach those [who see these things:
Dionysus is the son] of Zeus.

(*Above the palace Dionysus appears in epiphany.*)

Dionysus

[I am Dionysus,
the son of Zeus, returned to Thebes, revealed,
a god to men.] But the men [of Thebes] blasphemed me.
They slandered me; they said I came of mortal man,
and not content with speaking blasphemies,
[they dared to threaten my person with violence.]
These crimes this people whom I cherished well
did from malice to their benefactor. Therefore,
I now disclose the sufferings in store for them.
Like [enemies], they shall be driven from this city
to other lands; there, submitting to the yoke
of slavery, they shall wear out wretched lives,
captives of war, enduring much indignity.

(*He turns to the corpse of Pentheus.*)

This man has found the death which he deserved,
torn to pieces among the jagged rocks.
You are my witnesses: he came with outrage;

he attempted to chain my hands, abusing me
[and doing what he should least of all have done.]
And therefore he has rightly perished by the hands
of those who should the least of all have murdered him.
What he suffers, he suffers justly.
Upon you,
Agave, and on your sisters I pronounce this doom:
you shall leave this city in expiation
of the murder you have done. You are unclean,
and it would be a sacrilege that murderers
should remain at peace beside the graves [of those
whom they have killed].

(*He turns to Cadmus.*)

. . . . . .

Next I shall disclose the trials
which await this man. You, Cadmus, shall be changed
to a serpent, and your wife, the child of Ares,
immortal Harmonia, shall undergo your doom,
a serpent too. With her, it is your fate
to go a journey in a car drawn on by oxen,
leading behind you a great barbarian host.
For thus decrees the oracle of Zeus.
With a host so huge its numbers cannot be counted,
you shall ravage many cities; but when your army
plunders the shrine of Apollo, its homecoming
shall be perilous and hard. Yet in the end
the god Ares shall save Harmonia and you
and bring you both to live among the blest.
So say I, born of no mortal father,
Dionysus, true son of Zeus. If then,
when you would not, you had muzzled your madness,
you should have an ally now in the son of Zeus.

Cadmus

We implore you, Dionysus. We have done wrong.

Dionysus

Too late. When there was time, you did not know me.

Cadmus

We have learned. But your sentence is too harsh.

Dionysus

I am a god. I was blasphemed by you.

Cadmus

Gods should be exempt from human passions.

Dionysus

Long ago my father Zeus ordained these things.

Agave

It is fated, Father. We must go.

Dionysus

Why then delay?
For you must go.

Cadmus

Child, to what a dreadful end
have we all come, you and your wretched sisters
and my unhappy self. An old man, I must go
to live a stranger among barbarian peoples, doomed
to lead against Hellas a motley foreign army.
Transformed to serpents, I and my wife,
Harmonia, the child of Ares, we must captain
spearsmen against the tombs and shrines of Hellas.
Never shall my sufferings end; not even
over Acheron shall I have peace.

Agave (embracing Cadmus)

O Father,
to be banished, to live without you!

Cadmus

Poor child,
like a white swan warding its weak old father,
why do you clasp those white arms about my neck?

Agave

But banished! Where shall I go?

Cadmus

I do not know,
my child. Your father can no longer help you.

Agave

Farewell, my home! City, farewell.
O bridal bed, banished I go,
in misery, I leave you now.

Cadmus

Go, poor child, seek shelter in Aristaeus' house.

Agave

I pity you, Father.

Cadmus

And I pity you, my child,
and I grieve for your poor sisters. I pity them.

Agave

Terribly has Dionysus brought
disaster down upon this house.

Dionysus

I was terribly blasphemed,
my name dishonored in Thebes.

Agave

Farewell, Father.

Cadmus

Farewell to you, unhappy child.
Fare well. But you shall find your faring hard.

(*Exit Cadmus.*)

Agave

Lead me, guides, where my sisters wait,
poor sisters of my exile. Let me go
where I shall never see Cithaeron more,
where that accursed hill may not see me,
where I shall find no trace of thyrsus!
That I leave to other Bacchae.

(*Exit Agave with attendants.*)

Chorus

The gods have many shapes.
The gods bring many things
to their accomplishment.
And what was most expected
has not been accomplished.
But god has found his way
for what no man expected.
So ends the play.

APPENDIX TO *THE BACCHAE*

THE COMPLETE GREEK TRAGEDIES

Edited by David Grene and Richmond Lattimore

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