

# THE BACCHAE

*Translated by* WILLIAM ARROWSMITH

# THE BACCHAE: INTRODUCTION

## *The Play: Date and Composition*

Euripides' *Bacchae* was first produced posthumously at the Great Dionysian festival in 405 BCE. Euripides had left Athens for Macedonia three years earlier and had died there in 406. *The Bacchae* was staged in his absence by one of his sons (also named Euripides), together with *Iphigenia in Aulis* (preserved) and *Alcmaeon in Corinth* (lost); this tetralogy won first prize for Euripides after his death, an award that he had won only four times during his lifetime.

## *The Myth*

Euripides' *Bacchae* is the only surviving Greek tragedy to focus on a myth concerning Dionysus himself (otherwise known as Bacchus, or Bromius), the god of wine and theater in whose honor all these tragedies were performed. This play dramatizes Dionysus' establishment of his first cult in Greece, in the city of Thebes; it quickly became the classic version of the story. Dionysus had been conceived in Thebes as the son of Zeus by Cadmus' daughter, the mortal woman Semele, but she had been blasted by the god's thunderbolt before she could give birth to the child. The unborn infant Dionysus was rescued by Zeus, and in due course was born from Zeus' thigh; then after growing up he proceeded triumphantly throughout much of Asia, introducing his rites among the various peoples there. Now, accompanied by Asian bacchantes, he has returned to Thebes, where the original ruler, Cadmus, has abdicated in favor of his grandson Pentheus. Semele's sisters, including Pentheus' mother, Agave, are denying her claim that Dionysus was the fruit of her union with a god, and Dionysus has punished them by driving all the women of Thebes mad and sending them in a frenzy out from the city onto the nearby mountain Cithaeron.

It is at this point that the action of the play begins. Dionysus, disguised as a mortal priest of his cult, sets the scene and introduces the action; only the audience knows his true identity. First the Asian bacchantes (the chorus) arrive, and then Cadmus and Teiresias, all of them dedicated in different ways to celebrating this new god's worship. Pentheus rushes in, agitated at the news of the foreigner's arrival, and proceeds to do all he can to suppress the new cult and its representatives, even attempting to lock up the stranger (the disguised Dionysus) in prison and to capture the Theban bacchantes on the mountainside. His efforts fail humiliatingly, yet he still cannot recognize the reality of Dionysus' power, despite being fascinated with the women's activities on Cithaeron. Eventually, at Dionysus' suggestion, Pentheus agrees to disguise himself as a bacchant himself and to go spy upon them. There he ends up being torn to pieces by Agave and the others, who in their crazed state mistake him for a lion. As the play comes to a close, Agave comes to realize what she has done. She and her father, Cadmus, go into exile, in misery, and Dionysus proclaims his future worship throughout Greece.

As early as Homer's *Iliad*, various myths told of the establishment of cults of Dionysus despite bitter human resistance, and of the god's bloody vengeance upon such unbelievers as Pentheus and the Thracian king Lycurgus. Scholars disagree about whether, and if so to what extent, the very earliest Athenian tragedies represented legends involving Dionysus himself. But it is certain that such myths had sometimes been presented in tragedies, now lost, by a number of playwrights before Euripides. Aeschylus composed two tetralogies on Dionysiac themes, a *Lycurgeia* (comprising *Edonians*, *Bassarai* [a term for Thracian bacchantes], *Youths*, and the satyr-play *Lycurgus*) and a Theban tetralogy (including probably *Semele*, *Wool-Carders*, *Pentheus*, and the satyr-play *Nurses*). Lesser known tragedians wrote other plays on the subject: Polyphrasmon a tetralogy on Lycurgus, Xenocles a *Bacchae*, Sophocles' son Iophon a *Bacchae* or *Pentheus*, Spintharos a *Lightning-Struck Semele*, Cleophon a *Bacchae*; and, probably later than Euripides, Chaeremon wrote a *Dionysus*, Carcinus a *Semele*, and Diogenes too a *Semele*. Little or nothing is known about most of these plays, but when fragments or reports have survived, they usually indicate striking affinities with Euripides' play. In particular, the fragments of Aeschylus' *Lycurgeia* show an effeminate Dionysus being captured and

interrogated, the bacchants being imprisoned and miraculously escaping, and the house shaking in a bacchic frenzy. So at least in its general outline and in some of its incidents Euripides' play will not have seemed entirely unusual to its first audience, though some scenes—perhaps especially Teiresias' sophistic lecture on Dionysian religion and the whole gruesome episode of Agave—are likely to have been surprising Euripidean innovations.

What is Euripides' own attitude to the story and characters he has dramatized in *The Bacchae*? Is this play his final declaration of faith in traditional Greek religion, a recantation of the notorious expressions of doubt made by some of the characters in his earlier plays? Or is it a denunciation of the catastrophes to which religious fanaticism can lead? To what extent may we imagine that elements of actual Dionysian ritual are being represented in the scenes of dance, cross-dressing, and collective dismemberment of a victim? Certainly the benefits that Dionysus provides—wine, music, and dance, as well as temporary release from toil and worry, especially for women, laborers, and the socially marginalized—are vividly and eloquently presented, both by the chorus and by several characters in the play. At the same time, the violence and wild behavior of some of the god's crazed worshippers are shocking and disturbing. In the end, the play leaves the audience in no doubt as to the disastrous consequences of rejecting Dionysus, even as it also reminds us of the ambiguous delights—and dangers—of the altered states, disguises, and transgressions of norms that his worship traditionally brings and that theater especially thrives on. To what extent does the play explore the crucial but ambiguous relation of Dionysian drama to politics and the dangers to which a city exposes itself if it refuses to accept tragedy within its walls? In any case, Euripides' decision, in self-imposed exile at the Macedonian court (where tragedy appears by this date to have become almost as popular as in Athens), to compose this play—perhaps his last completed one—for production at the Great Dionysian festival back home in Athens raises questions that have always fascinated not only scholars but also ordinary readers and theatergoers.

### *Transmission and Reception*

The evidence of quotations and allusions among later authors and the survival of at least eight papyri containing fragments of the play indicate that *The Bacchae* was quite popular throughout antiquity. The tragedy is frequently referred to by pagan and Christian writers, and it deeply influenced a number of later works of Greek literature, especially the *Dionysiaca*, a forty-eight-book epic on Dionysus (the longest surviving poem from antiquity) by the early fifth-century CE poet Nonnus, and *The Passion of Christ*, an anonymous Byzantine Christian cento (a poem made up entirely of recycled verses from earlier poetry) which uses many lines from Euripides' tragedy about the experiences of Dionysus (as well as verses from other plays, especially by Aeschylus and Euripides) to tell of Jesus' sufferings and resurrection. So too, in Latin literature Euripides' play seems to have been a model for the Roman tragedians Pacuvius for his *Pentheus* and Accius for his *Bacchae* (whereas Naevius seems in his *Lycurgus* to have gone back to Aeschylus); but unfortunately none of these plays survive.

Directly and indirectly, Euripides' *Bacchae* remained a vital presence not only in ancient schoolrooms but also on ancient stages—one bizarre but striking piece of evidence is an incident at the Parthian court in 53 BCE when an actor dressed as Agave sang her lines “*We bring this branch to the palace, / this fresh-cut tendril from the mountains. / Happy was the hunting*” (1169–71) to general applause while holding the severed head of the defeated Roman general Crassus. And somewhat over a century later the emperor Nero may have sung excerpts from the play while accompanying himself on the kithara. But scholars disagree about whether this tragedy left substantial traces in ancient pictorial art: a number of vases and frescoes depict the death of Pentheus, and scenes of Dionysiac revelry are frequent in all forms of ancient art, including sarcophagi, but it is unclear to what extent these are related directly to Euripides' play.

*The Bacchae* seems to have been selected as one of the ten canonical plays most studied and read in antiquity, but it was probably the very last play in that edition and as a result was more liable to damage, particularly at its ending. In fact, it is transmitted to us only by one manuscript and its copy; the former breaks off about halfway through, at line 755, so for the rest of the play we are dependent upon a single manuscript—and that one has at least one large gap near the end and a couple of smaller ones. Editors

use a combination of different sources—summaries, citations, and allusions from other authors, verses from *The Passion of Christ*, and papyri—to try to fill out that large gap, at least speculatively. Unlike the other plays in the collection of ten, *The Bacchae* does not have any ancient or medieval commentaries.

In modern times, it was not until the end of the eighteenth century that *The Bacchae* began to be regarded as one of the supreme achievements of Greek tragedy, and also as crucial evidence for the religious significance of Dionysus in antiquity. This development began in Germany, with the poets Friedrich Hölderlin (who began, but did not complete, a translation of the play in 1799 and composed a number of poems about Dionysus and Jesus) and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (who translated the whole play starting in 1821); and it culminated there in the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, whose *Birth of Tragedy* (1872) conceived of the Dionysian element as a vital counter to the Apollinian one in ancient Greek and also in contemporary European culture. Thereafter, it is difficult to separate the influence of Euripides from that of Nietzsche, among such authors as Hugo von Hofmannsthal (“Pentheus,” 1904: a dramatic sketch), Robinson Jeffers (“The Women on Cythæron,” 1928, a poem, later retitled “The Humanist’s Tragedy”), Egon Wellesz (*The Bacchantes*, 1931, an opera), Martha Graham (*Three Choric Dances for an Antique Greek Tragedy*, 1933), W. H. Auden (with Chester Kallman, the libretto for Hans Werner Henze’s opera *The Bassarids*, 1966), and Donna Tartt (*The Secret History*, 1992, a novel). Starting in the late 1960s, the play was staged ever more frequently as a celebration of erotic, musical, and hippy vitality, a questioning of traditional masculinity and gender roles, and a condemnation of prudish censoriousness: the production by Richard Schechner and the Living Theater, *Dionysus in ’69*, was a controversial milestone. Other recent notable dramatic versions include Joe Orton’s *The Erpingham Camp* (1966), Nigerian author Wole Soyinka’s *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite* (first staged 1973), and Brad Mays’ staging at the Complex in Los Angeles (1997, filmed 2000). Euripides’ *Bacchae* continues to be one of the most frequently produced and read of all Greek tragedies, one of the most popular—and one of the most perplexing.

# THE BACCHAE

## *Characters*

DIONYSUS (also called Bacchus, Bromius, Dithyrambus, Euhius, and Iacchus)

CHORUS of Asian Bacchae (female followers of Dionysus, also called Bacchants and maenads)

TEIRESIAS, Theban seer

CADMUS, father of Semele (Dionysus' mother) and of Agave

PENTHEUS, king of Thebes

ATTENDANT of Pentheus

FIRST MESSENGER, a shepherd

SECOND MESSENGER, a servant of Pentheus

AGAVE, daughter of Cadmus, mother of Pentheus

*Scene: Pentheus' palace at Thebes. In front of it stands the tomb of Semele.*

*(Enter Dionysus from the side.)*

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,  
5 disguised as man, beside the stream of Dirce

and the waters of Ismenus. There before the  
palace

I see my lightning-blasted 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

10 against my mother. But Cadmus wins my  
praise:

he has made this tomb a shrine, sacred to his  
daughter.

It was I who screened her grave with the  
green  
of the clustering vine.

Far behind me  
lie

the gold-rich lands of Lydia and Phrygia,  
where my journeying began. Overland I went,  
across the steppes of Persia where the sun  
strikes hotly

15 down, through Bactrian fastness and the grim  
waste

of Media. Thence to blessed Arabia I came;  
and so, along all Asia's swarming littoral  
of towered cities where barbarians and  
Greeks,

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 to mortals for what I  
am:



a god.

And thence to Thebes.

20

This city,  
first

in Hellas, now shrills and echoes to my  
women's cries,  
their ecstasy of joy. Here in Thebes

I bound the  
fawnskin to the  
women's flesh  
and armed

25

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 foisted off her shame on Zeus—a fraud,  
they sneered,

30

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 them to wear my ritual

uniform.

35 Every woman in Thebes—but the women  
only—

I drove from home, mad. There they sit,  
all of them, together with the daughters of  
Cadmus,

beneath the silver firs on the roofless rocks.

Like it or not, this city must learn its lesson:  
40 it lacks initiation in my mysteries;  
so 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,

45 who revolts against divinity, in me;  
thrusts me from his offerings; omits my name  
from his prayers. Therefore I shall prove to  
him

and everyone in Thebes that I am god  
indeed. And when my worship is established  
here,

and all is well, then I shall go my way  
50 and be revealed to other men in other lands.

But if the town of Thebes attempts to force  
my Bacchae from the mountainside with  
weapons,

I shall marshal my maenads and take the field.  
To these ends I have laid divinity aside  
and go disguised as man.

*(Calling toward the side.)*

55

On, my women,

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

60

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

*(Exit Dionysus to one side. Enter the Chorus  
of Asian Bacchae from the other.)*

CHORUS [*singing*]

65

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

*Bacchus! Euhoi!*

70

*You on the streets! You on the roads!  
You in the palace! Come out!  
Let every mouth be hushed.  
Let no ill-omened words  
profane your tongues.  
For now I shall raise the old, old hymn to Dionysus.*

STROPHE A

*Blessed, those who know the god's mysteries,<sup>o</sup>  
happy those who sanctify their lives,  
75 whose souls are initiated into the holy company,  
dancing on the mountains the holy dance of the god,  
and those who keep the rites of Cybele the Mother,  
80 and who shake the thyrsus,  
who wear the crown of ivy.  
Dionysus is their god!  
On, Bacchae, on, you Bacchae,  
bring the god, son of god,  
85 bring Bromius home,  
from Phrygian mountains,  
to the broad streets of Hellas—Bromius!*

ANTISTROPHE A

*His mother bore him once in labor bitter;  
90 lightning-struck, forced by fire that flared from Zeus,  
consumed, she died, untimely torn,  
in childbed dead by blow of light!  
95 Zeus it was who saved his son,  
swiftly bore him to a private place,  
concealed his son from Hera's eyes  
in his thigh as in a womb,  
binding it with clasps of gold.  
100 And when the weaving Fates fulfilled the time,  
the bull-horned god was born of Zeus.  
He crowned his son with garlands,  
wherefrom descends to us the maenad's writhing crown,  
wild creatures in our hair.*

STROPHE B

105    *O Thebes, nurse of Semele,*  
         *crown your head with ivy!*  
         *Grow green with bryony!*  
         *Redden with berries! O city,*  
110    *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 at once the whole land shall dance*  
115    *when Bromius leads the holy company*  
         *to the mountain!*  
  
   *to the mountain!*  
  
         *where the throng of women waits,*  
         *driven from shuttle and loom,*  
         *possessed by Dionysus!*

ANTISTROPHE B

120    *And I praise the holies of Crete,*  
         *the caves of the dancing Curetes,*  
         *there where Zeus was born,*  
         *where helmed in triple tier*  
125    *the Corybantes invented this leather drum.*  
         *They were the first of all*  
         *whose whirling feet kept time*  
         *to the strict beat of the taut hide*  
         *and the sweet cry of the Phrygian pipes.*  
         *Then from them to Rhea's hands*

the holy drum was handed down,  
to give the beat for maenads' dances;  
130 and, taken up by the raving satyrs,  
it now accompanies the dance  
which every other year  
celebrates your name:  
Dionysus!

EPODE

135 *He is sweet upon the mountains,  
when he drops to the earth*  
*from the running  
packs.*  
*He wears the holy fawnskin.*  
*He hunts the wild  
goat  
and kills it.*  
*He delights in raw flesh.*  
140 *He runs to the mountains of  
Phrygia, of Lydia,  
Bromius, who leads us!*  
*Euhoi!*  
*With milk the earth  
flows! It flows with  
wine!*  
*It runs with the nectar of  
bees!*  
*Like frankincense in  
its fragrance*  
145 *is the blaze of the torch he  
bears,  
flaming from his trailing*

*fennel wand  
as he runs, as he  
dances,  
kindling the stragglers,  
spurring with cries,  
and his long curls stream to  
the wind!*

150 *And he cries, as they cry,<sup>o</sup>  
“On, Bacchae!  
On, Bacchae!  
Follow, glory of golden  
Tmolus,  
hymning Dionysus  
with a rumble of  
drums,  
with the cry, Euhoi!  
to the Euhoian god,*

*with cries in Phrygian  
melodies,*

160 *when the holy pipe like  
honey plays  
the sacred song for those  
who go  
to the mountain!*

165 *to the mountain!”  
Then, in ecstasy, like a colt by  
its grazing mother;  
the bacchant runs with  
flying feet, she  
leaps!*

*(Enter Teiresias from the side, dressed in the bacchant’s  
fawnskin and ivy crown, and carrying a thyrsus.)*

TEIRESIAS

Ho there, who keeps the gates?

170

Summon Cadmus—

Cadmus, Agenor's son, who came from Sidon  
and built the towers of our Thebes.

Go, someone.

175 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 like Teiresias.)*

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.

So here I  
am,

180 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,<sup>o</sup>  
the god, Dionysus.

Where shall we go, where  
shall we tread the dance, tossing our white-



haired heads

in the dances of the  
god?

185                    Expound to me, Teiresias,  
age to age: for 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.

190                    I too feel young, young enough to  
dance.

CADMUS

Good. Shall we not 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

195                    Are we the only men  
                      who will dance for Bacchus?

TEIRESIAS

                      The others 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 gods.

TEIRESIAS

200                    We do not trifle with divinity.<sup>o</sup>  
                      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,  
205                    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

210     Because you cannot see, Teiresias, let me be  
          interpreter for you this time. Here comes  
          the man to whom I left my throne, Echion's son,  
          Pentheus, hastening toward the palace. He seems  
          excited and disturbed. What is his news?

*(Enter Pentheus from the side.)*

PENTHEUS

215     I happened to be away, out of this land,  
          but I've heard of some strange mischief in the town,  
          stories of our women leaving home to frisk  
          in mock ecstasies among the thickets on the mountain,  
          dancing in honor of the latest divinity,  
220     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,  
225     but it's really Aphrodite they adore.  
          I have captured some of them; my jailers  
          have bound their hands and locked them in 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  
230     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,

235 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 catch him in this land of mine  
240 and I'll stop his pounding with his wand and tossing  
his head. I'll have his head cut off his body!  
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  
245 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?

*(He catches sight of Teiresias and Cadmus.)*

What!

But this is incredible! Teiresias the seer  
tricked out in a dappled fawnskin!

And you,

250 you, my grandfather, playing the bacchant—what a laugh!—  
with a fennel wand!

Sir, I shrink to see your old age  
so foolish. Shake that ivy off, grandfather!  
Now drop that wand. Drop it, I say.

Aha,

255 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  
260 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.

CHORUS LEADER

What blasphemy! Stranger,  
have you no respect  
for the gods? For Cadmus who  
sowed the dragon teeth?  
265 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  
270 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.

275 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 dry food.

But after her there came the son of Semele,  
who matched her present by inventing  
liquid wine

from grapes as his gift to man. For filled  
with juice from vines,

280 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

285 that through his intercession man may win  
the good things of life.

You sneer, do you, at that story  
that Dionysus was sewn 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,  
290 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 earth,  
he molded from it a substitute Dionysus.  
This piece of “sky” he gave to Hera as a  
hostage,  
and thereby saved Dionysus from Hera’s  
hate. With time,  
295 men garbled the word and said that he’d  
been sewn  
into the “thigh” of Zeus. This was their  
story,  
whereas, in fact, Zeus made a fake for Hera  
and gave it as a hostage for his son.

Moreover,  
this is a god of prophecy. His worshippers,  
like maniacs, are endowed with mantic  
powers.  
300 For when the god goes greatly into a man,  
he drives him mad and makes him tell the  
future.

Besides,  
he has usurped even  
some 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.  
305 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,

310 Pentheus. Don't be so sure that domination  
is what matters in the life of man; do not  
mistake  
for wisdom the fantasies of a 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  
315 to be chaste.° Always and in every case  
it is her character and nature that keep°  
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  
320 and the city glorifies the name of Pentheus.  
And so the god: he too delights in honor.  
So Cadmus, whom you ridicule, and I will  
crown  
our heads with ivy and join the dances of  
the god—  
an ancient gray-haired pair perhaps, but  
dance



we must. Nothing you have said would  
make me  
325 change my mind or fight against a god.  
You are mad, grievously mad, beyond the  
power  
of any drugs to cure, for you are drugged  
with madness.

CHORUS LEADER

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

CADMUS

My boy,  
330 Teiresias advises well. Your home is here  
with us, with our customs and traditions, not  
outside, alone. You flit about, and though  
you may be smart, your smartness is all nothing.  
Even if this Dionysus is no god,  
as you assert, persuade yourself that he is.  
335 The falsehood 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 see  
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  
340 because he boasted that his prowess in the hunt surpassed  
the skill of Artemis.

Do not let his fate be yours.  
Here, let me wreath 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.

345 By god, I'll make him pay, the man who taught you  
this folly of yours.

*(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.  
350 Throw his fillets out to wind and weather.  
That will provoke him more than anything.

*(Exit an attendant to one side.)*

As for you others, go and scour the city  
for that effeminate stranger, the man who infects our women  
with this new disease and pollutes their beds.  
355 And if you catch 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.

*(Exit other attendants to the other side.)*

TEIRESIAS

Reckless fool,  
you do not know the meaning of what you say.

You were out of your mind before, but this is raving lunacy!

360                    Cadmus, let us go and pray  
for this crazed fool and for this city too,  
pray to the god that he take no vengeance  
upon us.

                  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.

365                    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  
for its sufferings. I speak not prophecy  
but fact. The words of fools finish in folly.

*(Exit Teiresias and Cadmus to the side.)*

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE A

370    *Holiness, queen of heaven,  
         Holiness on golden wing  
         who fly over the earth,  
         do you hear what Pentheus says?  
         Do you hear his blasphemy*  
375    *against the prince of the blessèd,  
         the god of garlands and banquets,  
         Bromius, Semele's son?  
         These blessings he gave:*

380        *the sacred company's dance and song,*  
          *laughter to the pipe*  
          *and the loosing of cares*  
          *when the shining wine is poured*  
          *at the feast for the gods,*  
385        *and the wine bowl casts its sleep*  
          *on feasters crowned with ivy.*

ANTISTROPHE A

*A tongue without reins,*  
          *defiance, unwisdom—*  
          *their end is disaster.*  
          *But the life of quiet good,*  
390        *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.*  
395        *And what passes for wisdom is not;*  
          *unwise those who outrange mortal limits.*  
          *Briefly, we live. Wherefore*  
          *he who hunts great things*  
          *may lose his harvest here and now.*  
400        *I say: such men are mad,*  
          *their counsels evil.*

STROPHE B

*O let me go to Cyprus,*  
          *island of Aphrodite,*

home of the Loves that cast  
405 their spells on the hearts of men!  
Or Paphos where the hundred-  
mouthed barbarian river  
brings ripeness without rain!  
410 To loveliest Pieria, haunt of the Muses,  
the holy hill of Olympus!  
O Bromius, leader, god of joy,  
Bromius, take me there!  
There the lovely Graces are,  
and there Desire, and there  
415 the bacchantes have the right to worship.

ANTISTROPHE B

The deity, the son of Zeus,  
in feast, in festival, delights.  
He loves the goddess Peace,  
generous of good,  
420 preserver of the young.  
To rich and poor he gives  
the painless delight of wine.  
But him he hates who scoffs  
at the happiness of those  
425 for whom the day is blessed  
and blessed the night;  
whose simple wisdom shuns the thoughts<sup>o</sup>  
of proud, uncommon men.  
430 What the common people  
believe and do,  
I too believe and do.

*(Enter Dionysus from the side, led captive by several attendants.)*

ATTENDANT

Pentheus, here we are; not empty-handed either.  
435 We captured the quarry you sent us out to catch.  
Our prey here was quite tame: refused to run,  
but just held out his hands as willing as you please,  
completely unafraid. His wine-red cheeks were flushed  
and did not pale at all. He stood there smiling,  
440 telling us to rope his hands and march him here.  
That made things easy—and 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 bacchants you clapped in chains  
445 and sent to the prison, 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.  
450 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.

*(The attendants do as instructed.)*

So,

you are attractive, stranger, at least to women—  
which explains, I think, your presence here in Thebes.  
Your curls are long; they fall along your cheeks.  
455 You do not wrestle, I take it. And what fair skin!  
You must take care of it—not in the sun, by night  
when you hunt Aphrodite with your beauty.  
Now then,  
what country do you come from?

DIONYSUS

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

PENTHEUS

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

DIONYSUS

I come from there.  
My country is Lydia.

PENTHEUS

And from where comes  
this cult  
you have imported into  
Hellas?

DIONYSUS

465 Dionysus, the son of Zeus.  
He initiated me.

PENTHEUS

You have some local Zeus there  
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

470                      What form do they take,  
these rituals of yours?

DIONYSUS

It is forbidden  
to tell the uninitiate.

PENTHEUS

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

DIONYSUS

You're not allowed to hear. But they are worth knowing.

PENTHEUS



Your answers are designed to make me curious.

DIONYSUS

475

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

480

Have you introduced  
your rites

in other cities too? Or is Thebes  
the first?

DIONYSUS

Barbarians 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

485                      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

490                      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 some of the god's curls.)*

PENTHEUS

Second, you will surrender  
your wand.

DIONYSUS

495                    *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

500

Where is he?

My eyes don't see him.

DIONYSUS

With me. Your blasphemies

have made you blind.

*(To attendants.)*

PENTHEUS

Seize him. He is mocking me

and Thebes.

DIONYSUS

And I say, Don't chain me up! I am sane  
but you are not.

PENTHEUS

But I say: chain him.

And I'm the ruler here.

DIONYSUS

505

You do not know

what is the life you live.° 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.

510 Since he desires the darkness, give him what he wants.  
Let him dance down there in the dark.

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.

DIONYSUS

515 I go,  
for I won't suffer what I'm not meant to suffer.  
But Dionysus whom you outrage by your acts,  
who you deny is god, will call you to account.  
You mistreat me—but it's he you drag to prison.

*(Exit Pentheus, Dionysus, and attendants into the palace.)*

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE

520 *O Dirce, holy river,  
child of Achelous' water,  
yours the springs that welcomed once  
divinity, the son of Zeus!  
For Zeus his father snatched him in his thigh*  
525 *from deathless flame, crying:*

*Dithyrambus, come!*  
*Enter my male womb.*  
*I name you, Bacchius, and to Thebes*  
*proclaim you by that name.*  
530 *But now, O blessed Dirce,*  
*you spurn me when to your banks I come,*  
*crowned with ivy, bringing revels.*  
*O Dirce, why do you reject me? Why do you flee me?*  
*By the clustered grapes I swear,*  
535 *by Dionysus' wine,*  
*someday you shall come to know*  
*the worship of Bromius!*

ANTISTROPHE

540 *Pentheus, son of Echion,*<sup>o</sup>  
*shows he was born of the breed of Earth,*  
*spawned by the dragon, whelped by Earth,*  
*inhuman, a rabid beast,*  
*a Giant in wildness,*  
*defying the children of heaven.*  
545 *He will fetter me soon,*  
*me, who belong to Bromius!*  
*He cages my comrades with chains;*  
*he has cast them in prison darkness.*  
550 *O lord, son of Zeus, do you see?*  
*O Dionysus, do you see*  
*how your spokesmen are wrestling with compulsion?*  
*Descend from Olympus, lord!*  
*Come, whirl your wand of gold*  
555 *and quell the violence of this murderous man!*

EPODE

*O lord, where do you brandish your wand  
among the holy companies?  
There on Nysa, mother of beasts?  
There on the ridges of Corycia?  
560 Or there among the forests of Olympus  
where Orpheus fingered his lyre  
and mustered with music the trees,  
mustered the wilderness beasts?  
565 O Pieria, you are blessed!  
Euhius honors you. He will come to dance,  
bringing his Bacchae, crossing the swift rivers  
570 Axios and Lydias,  
generous father of wealth  
and famed, I hear, for his lovely waters  
575 that fatten a land of good horses.*

*(In the following scene, sounds of thunder, lightning,  
and earthquake are heard from offstage.)*

DIONYSUS [*singing from within in this lyric interchange with the Chorus,  
who sing in reply*]

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

CHORUS

*Who cries?  
Who calls me with that cry  
of Euhius?*

DIONYSUS

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

CHORUS

*O lord, lord Bromius!  
Bromius, come to our holy company now!*

DIONYSUS

585     *Let the earthquake come! Shatter<sup>o</sup> the floor of the world!*

CHORUS

*Look there, soon the palace of Pentheus will totter.  
Dionysus is within. Adore him!*  
590     *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!*  
595     *Consume with flame the palace of Pentheus!*

CHORUS

*Ah,  
look how the fire leaps up  
on the holy tomb of Semele,  
the flame of Zeus of Thunders,  
his lightnings, still alive!*  
600     *Down, maenads,  
throw to the ground your trembling bodies!  
Our lord attacks this palace,*



*turns it upside down,  
the son of Zeus!*

*(The Chorus falls to the ground in terror and  
veneration. Enter Dionysus from the palace.)*

DIONYSUS [*speaking*]

What's this, women of Asia? So overcome with fright  
605 that you fell to the ground? I think you must have heard  
how Bacchius jostled the palace of Pentheus. But come, rise.°  
Do not be afraid.

CHORUS LEADER

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

DIONYSUS

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

CHORUS LEADER

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

No problem.  
I saved myself with ease.

CHORUS LEADER

615 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 upon his hopes.  
Inside the stable he intended as my jail, instead of me,  
he found a bull and tried to rope its knees and hooves.  
620 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 lit his mother's grave with tongues  
of fire. Imagining the palace was in flames,  
625 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 had escaped, he suddenly stopped short,  
drew his sword and rushed to the palace. There, it seems,  
630 Bromius had made a phantom—at least it seemed to me—  
within the court. Pursuing, Pentheus thrust and stabbed  
at that thing of gleaming air<sup>o</sup> as though he were killing me.  
And then, once again, Bacchus humiliated him.  
He razed the palace to the ground where it lies, shattered  
in utter ruin—his reward for my imprisonment.  
635 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  
640 will soon come out. 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 from the palace.)*

PENTHEUS

What has happened to me is monstrous! That stranger, that man  
I clapped in irons, has escaped.

*(He catches sight of Dionysus.)*

645

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

650

Someone?

But who? The things you say are always strange.

DIONYSUS

He who makes the grape grow its clusters  
for mankind.

PENTHEUS

His chiefest glory is his reproach.°

DIONYSUS

The god himself will come to teach you wisdom.

PENTHEUS

I hereby order every gate in every tower  
to be bolted tight.

*(Exit some attendants to the sides.)*

DIONYSUS

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

PENTHEUS

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

DIONYSUS

Where it counts the most,  
there I am clever.

*(Enter a herdsman as Messenger from the side.)*

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

MESSENGER

660                      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  
665 the holy maenads, the women who ran barefoot  
and crazy from the city, and I wanted to report  
to you and Thebes what strange fantastic things,  
what miracles and more than miracles,  
these women do. But may I speak freely  
of what happened there, or should I trim my words?  
670 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 of justice is not right. °  
However, the more terrible this tale of yours,  
675 that much more terrible will be the punishment  
I impose upon this man who taught our womenfolk  
these strange new skills.

MESSENGER

About that hour  
when the sun sends forth its light to warm  
the earth,  
our grazing herds of cows had just begun

to climb  
the path along the mountain ridge.

Suddenly

680 I saw three companies of women dancers,  
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

685 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 pipe, to hunt their

Aphrodite  
through the woods.

But your  
mother  
heard  
the  
lowing

690 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 deep  
sleep

from their eyes, rose up lightly and straight

—

a lovely sight to see: all together in fine

order,  
the old women and the young and the  
unmarried girls.  
695 First they let their hair fall loose, down  
over their shoulders, and those whose  
fastenings had slipped  
closed up 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  
700 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  
705 of cool water came bubbling up. Another  
drove  
her fennel in the ground, and where it  
struck the earth,  
at the god's touch, a spring of wine poured  
out.  
Those who wanted milk scratched at the  
soil  
710 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'd surely yourself have approached  
with fervent prayers  
the god you now deny.

715 We cowherds and shepherds  
gathered together, wondering and arguing  
among ourselves at these fantastic things,  
the awesome 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?  
720 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. At the appointed  
time  
the bacchants began to shake their wands  
in worship  
of Bacchus. With one voice they cried  
aloud:  
725 "O Iacchus! Son of Zeus!" "O Bromius!"  
they cried  
until the beasts and all the mountain were  
wild with divinity. And when they ran,  
everything ran with them.



It happened, however,  
that Agave ran near the ambush where I  
lay  
730 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 escaped being torn to pieces by  
the women.  
735 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.

740 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  
745 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

750 where the rich soil yields plentiful grain  
for Thebes.

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 see—whatever

755 they piled as plunder on their shoulders  
stayed in place,

untied. Nothing, neither bronze nor iron,  
fell to the dark earth.° They were carrying  
fire

in their hair—it did not burn them. Then  
the villagers,

furious at what the Bacchae did, took to  
arms.

760 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.

765

The women 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  
770 in many ways, but above all 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 to the side.)*

CHORUS LEADER

775

I tremble  
to speak my words in freedom before a tyrant.  
But nonetheless I'll say: there is no god  
greater than Dionysus.

PENTHEUS

780

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.

*(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'll march  
785 against the Bacchae! Affairs are out of hand  
if we tamely endure such conduct in our women.

*(Exit attendant to the side.)*

DIONYSUS

Pentheus, you seem to hear, and yet 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.  
790 Stay quiet here. Bromius will not let you  
drive his women from their worship on the mountains.

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  
795 and kick against necessity, a man defying  
god.

PENTHEUS

I shall give your god the sacrifice  
that he deserves: the blood of those same 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

800                      Impossible to wrestle with this foreigner!  
Whether he's victim or culprit, he won't 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 weapons.

PENTHEUS

This is some trap.

DIONYSUS

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

PENTHEUS

I know.

You and they have agreed to establish your rites forever.

DIONYSUS

True, I've agreed to this—with the god.

PENTHEUS

810 Bring my armor, someone. And you—stop talking!

DIONYSUS

Wait!

Would you like to see them sitting on the mountains?

PENTHEUS

I would pay a lot of gold to see that sight.

DIONYSUS

What? Are you so passionately curious?

PENTHEUS

Of course

I'd be sorry to see them drunk.

DIONYSUS

815 But for all your pain,  
you'd be very glad to see it?

PENTHEUS

Yes, very much.

I could crouch beneath the fir trees, quietly.

DIONYSUS

But if you try to hide, they will 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

820      The sooner the better. I want no delay!

DIONYSUS

Then you must dress yourself in women's clothes.

PENTHEUS

Why?

I'm a man. You want me to become a woman?

DIONYSUS

If they see that you're a man, they'll kill you instantly.

PENTHEUS

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

DIONYSUS

825      Dionysus taught me everything I know.

PENTHEUS

How can we arrange to follow your advice?

DIONYSUS

I'll go inside with you and help you dress.

PENTHEUS

In a woman's dress, you mean? I'd be ashamed.

DIONYSUS

Then you no longer hanker to see the maenads?

PENTHEUS

What is this costume I must wear?

DIONYSUS

830

On your head

I shall make your hair long and luxuriant.

PENTHEUS

And then?

DIONYSUS

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

PENTHEUS

Yes? Go on.

DIONYSUS

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

PENTHEUS

835

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 I pass through the city  
without being seen?

DIONYSUS

840

We shall take deserted streets.

I will lead the way.

PENTHEUS

It's all fine with me,  
provided those women of Bacchus don't jeer at me.  
First, however, I shall ponder your advice,<sup>o</sup>  
whether to go or not.

DIONYSUS

Do as you please.

I am ready, whatever you decide.

PENTHEUS

I'll go in.

845

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

*(Exit Pentheus into the palace.)*

DIONYSUS

Women, our prey is walking  
into 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.  
850 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,  
led through the town in woman's form.

855 But now  
I shall go and costume Pentheus in the clothes  
which he will wear to Hades when he dies, butchered  
by the hands of his mother. He shall come to know  
860 Dionysus, son of Zeus, consummate god,  
most terrible, and yet most gentle, to humankind.

*(Exit Dionysus into the palace.)*

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE

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

870       *freed from fear of the hunt,  
freed 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,*  
875               *leaping for joy by the river,  
joyous at the green of the leaves,  
                  where no man is.*

*What is wisdom? What gift of the gods<sup>o</sup>  
is held in honor like this:  
to hold your hand victorious  
880       over the heads of those you hate?  
Honor is cherished forever.*

ANTISTROPHE

*Slow but unmistakable  
the might of the gods moves.  
It punishes that man  
who honors folly  
885       and with mad conceit  
disregards the gods.  
The gods are crafty:  
they lie in ambush  
a long step of time  
890       to hunt the unholy.  
Beyond the old beliefs,  
no thought, no act shall go.  
Small, small is the cost  
to believe in this:*



*(Enter Pentheus from the palace, dressed as a  
bacchant and carrying a thyrsus.)*

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  
920 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?  
Well, now you have become a bull.

DIONYSUS

The god  
was hostile formerly, but now declares a truce  
and goes with us. You now see what you should.

*(Coyly primping.)*

PENTHEUS

925 How do I look in my getup? Don't I move like Ino?  
Or like my mother Agave?

DIONYSUS

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

PENTHEUS

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

DIONYSUS

Then let me assist you now and tuck it back.  
Hold still.

PENTHEUS

Arrange it. I am in your hands  
completely.

*(Dionysus rearranges Pentheus' hair.)*

DIONYSUS

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

*(Bending backward to look.)*

PENTHEUS

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  
940 when you see to your surprise how chaste the Bacchae are.

PENTHEUS

But to be a real bacchant, 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

945     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?  
950     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 pipes?

PENTHEUS

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

DIONYSUS

955     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.

960 You may surprise them—or they may surprise you.

PENTHEUS

Then lead me through the very heart of Thebes,  
since I'm the only one who's man enough to go.

DIONYSUS

You and you alone will labor for your city.

A great ordeal awaits you, the one that you're allotted  
965 as your fate. I shall lead you safely there;  
someone else shall bring you back ...

PENTHEUS

Yes, my mother.

DIONYSUS

... conspicuous 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

Yes, in a certain way.

PENTHEUS

970

I go to my reward.

DIONYSUS

You are an extraordinary young man, and you go  
to an extraordinary experience. You shall win  
fame high as heaven.

975

Agave, Cadmus' daughters,  
reach out your hands! I bring this young man  
to a great contest, where I shall be the victor,  
I—and Bromius. The rest the event shall show.

*(Exit Dionysus to the side, followed by Pentheus.)*

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE

980

*Run to the mountain, fleet hounds of madness!  
Run, run to the holy company of Cadmus' daughters!  
Sting them against the man in women's clothes,  
the madman who spies on the maenads!*

From behind the rocks, keen-sighted,  
his mother shall see him spying first.  
985 She will cry to the maenads:  
“Who is this who has come  
to the mountains to peer at the mountain revels  
of the women of Thebes?  
Who bore him, Bacchae?  
This man was born of no woman. Some lioness  
990 gave him birth, some Libyan Gorgon!”  
O Justice,  
come! Be manifest; reveal yourself with a sword!  
Stab through the throat that godless, lawless, unjust man,  
995 the earth-born spawn of Echion!

ANTISTROPHE

Uncontrollable, the unbeliever goes,<sup>o</sup>  
in spitting rage, rebellious and amok,  
madly assaulting Bacchus' mysteries and his mother's.  
1000 Against the unassailable he runs, with rage  
obsessed. But death will chastise his ideas.<sup>o</sup>  
To accept the gods, to act as a mortal—  
that is a life free from pain.  
1005 I do not resent wisdom and I rejoice to hunt it.  
But other things are great and clear  
and make life beautiful:  
purity, piety, day into night,  
honoring the gods,  
1010 rejecting customs outside justice.  
O Justice,  
come! Be manifest; reveal yourself with a sword!  
Stab through the throat that godless, lawless, unjust man,

1015        *the earth-born spawn of Echion!*

EPODE

*O Dionysus, reveal yourself a bull! Be manifest,  
a snake with darting heads, a lion breathing fire!  
O Bacchus, go! Go with your smile!  
Cast your deadly noose about this man who hunts*  
1020        *your Bacchae! Make him fall  
to your maenad throng!*

*(Enter from the side a servant of Pentheus as a second Messenger.)*

MESSENGER

How prosperous in Hellas these halls once were,  
1025        this house founded by Cadmus, the old man from Sidon<sup>o</sup>  
who sowed the earth-born crop of the dragon snake!  
I am a slave and nothing more, yet even so  
I mourn the fortunes of this fallen house.<sup>o</sup>

CHORUS LEADER

What is it?

Is there news from the Bacchae?

MESSENGER

This is my news:

1030        Pentheus, the son of Echion, is dead.

CHORUS [*singing and continuing to sing in the following*]

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

MESSENGER

What is this you say, woman? You dare to rejoice

at these disasters which destroy this house?

CHORUS

*I am no Greek. I hail my god  
in barbarian song. No longer need I  
1035 shrink with fear of prison.*

MESSENGER

If you suppose this city is so short of men ...<sup>o</sup>

CHORUS

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

MESSENGER

Your feelings might be forgiven, then. But this,  
1040 your exultation in disaster—it is not right.

CHORUS

*Tell us how that lawless man died.  
How was he killed?*

MESSENGER

There were three of us in all: Pentheus and I,  
attending my master, and that stranger who volunteered  
to guide us to the show. Leaving behind us  
the last outlying farms of Thebes, we forded  
1045 the Asopus and struck into the barren scrubland  
of Cithaeron.

There in a grassy glen we halted,  
unmoving, silent, without a word,  
1050 so we might see but not be seen. From that vantage,

in a steep meadow along 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  
1055 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 we stand,  
1060 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 the great fir,  
1065 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.  
1070 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  
seated at the top. And now the maenads saw him  
1075 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 mocks

1080 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  
1085 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 Bacchius. Breaking loose  
1090 like startled doves,<sup>o</sup> through grove and torrent,  
over rocks, the Bacchae flew, their feet maddened  
by the god’s breath. And when they saw my master  
1095 perching on his tree, they climbed a great rock  
that towered opposite his perch and showered him  
with stones and branches of fir, while the others  
hurled their wands. What grim target practice!  
1100 But they didn’t hit Pentheus, 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  
1105 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  
1110 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  
1115 first. But snatching from his hair the headband  
so poor Agave would recognize and spare him, he said,  
touching her cheeks, “No, Mother! I am Pentheus,  
your own son, the child you bore to Echion!  
1120 Pity me, spare me, Mother! I have done a wrong,  
but do not kill your own son for that offense.”  
But she was foaming at the mouth, and her crazed eyes  
rolled with frenzy. She was mad, stark mad,  
possessed by Bacchus. Ignoring his cries of pity,  
1125 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  
1130 his flesh. Then Autonoë and the whole horde  
of Bacchae swarmed upon him. Shouts everywhere—  
him groaning with what little breath was left,  
them shrieking in triumph. One bore off an arm,  
another a foot still warm in its shoe. His ribs  
1135 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  
among the leaves in the deep woods—not easy  
1140 to search for. 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

1145 over her grisly prize. She calls upon Bacchius:  
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, I shall leave  
this scene of sorrow. Humility,  
1150 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 to the side.)*

CHORUS [*singing*]

*Let us dance to the glory of Bacchius,  
dance to the death of Pentheus,  
1155 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,<sup>o</sup>  
led by a bull to Hades.  
1160 Hail, Bacchae of Thebes!  
Your victory is fair, fair the prize,  
this famous prize of grief, of tears!  
Glorious the game, to fold your child  
in your arms, streaming with his blood!*

*(Enter Agave from the side carrying the head of  
Pentheus impaled upon her thyrsus.)*

CHORUS LEADER

1165 But look: here comes Pentheus’ mother, Agave,



running wild-eyed toward the palace.

Welcome,

welcome to the reveling band of the god of joy!

AGAVE [*singing in this lyric interchange with the Chorus, who sing in reply*]

STROPHE

*Bacchae of Asia ...*

CHORUS

*Tell me.*

AGAVE

...we bring this branch to the palace,  
1170 *this fresh-cut tendril from the mountains.*  
*Happy was the hunting.*

CHORUS

*I see.*

*I welcome our fellow-reveler.*

AGAVE

*The cub of a wild mountain lion,<sup>o</sup>*  
*and snared by me without a noose—*  
1175 *look, look!*

CHORUS

*Where was he caught?*

AGAVE

*Cithaeron ...*

CHORUS

*Cithaeron?*

AGAVE

*... killed him.*

CHORUS

*Who struck him?*

AGAVE

*The first honor is mine.*

1180 *The maenads call me "Agave the blest."*

CHORUS

*And then who?*

AGAVE

*Cadmus' ...*

CHORUS

*Cadmus'?*

AGAVE

*...daughters.*

*After me, they hit the prey.*

*After me. Happy was their hunting.*

ANTISTROPHE

*Share the feast!*

CHORUS

*Share, unhappy woman?*

AGAVE

1185    *See, the cub is young and tender.  
          Beneath the soft mane of hair,  
          the down is blooming on the cheeks.*

CHORUS

*Yes, that mane does look like a wild beast's.*

AGAVE

1190    *Our god is wise. Cunningly, cleverly,  
          Bacchius the hunter lashed the maenads  
          against his prey.*

CHORUS

*Our king is a hunter.*

AGAVE

*Do you praise?*

CHORUS

*Yes, I praise.*

AGAVE

*The men of Thebes soon ...*

CHORUS

*...and Pentheus, your son ...*

AGAVE

1195    *...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.*

CHORUS LEADER [*speaking*]

1200    Then, poor woman, show the citizens of Thebes  
         this great prize, this trophy you have won  
         in the hunt.

AGAVE [*speaking*]

                         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  
1205    not with nets nor Thessalian spears but by  
         the dainty hands of women. What are they  
         worth,  
         your javelins 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?

1210                   But where is my old 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 from the side, with attendants bearing a covered bier.)*

CADMUS

1215                   Follow me, attendants.  
Bear your dreadful burden of Pentheus and set it down  
there before the palace.

*(The attendants do as instructed.)*

Now I bring it,  
this body—after long and weary searchings  
I painfully gathered it from Cithaeron's glens  
where it lay, scattered in shreds, dismembered  
1220 throughout the forest, no two pieces  
in a single place.°

Old Teiresias and I  
had returned to Thebes from the Bacchae on the mountain  
before I learned of this atrocious crime  
my daughters did. And so I hurried back  
1225 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,  
1230 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,  
because you are the father of the bravest daughters  
1235 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, to be nailed up high  
1240 upon its walls. Come Father, take it in your hands.  
Glory in my kill and invite your friends to share  
the feast of triumph. For you are blest, Father,  
by this great deed we have done.

CADMUS

This is a grief<sup>o</sup>  
so great it knows no size. I cannot look.  
1245 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—yes, but excessively has lord Bromius,  
1250 this god of our own blood, destroyed us all,  
every one.

AGAVE

How scowling and crabbed is old age  
in mortals. 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.  
1255 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 here  
so he can see his mother's triumph.

CADMUS

Enough. No more.  
If you realize the horror you have done,  
1260 you shall suffer terribly. But if instead  
your present madness lasts until you die,  
you'll not seem unhappy, but you won't be happy.

AGAVE

Why do you reproach me? Is there something wrong?

CADMUS

First raise your eyes to the heavens.

AGAVE

1265 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?  
1270 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

Yes. I have forgotten  
what we said before, Father.

CADMUS

Who was your husband?

AGAVE

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

CADMUS



1275    What was the name of the child you bore your husband?

AGAVE

Pentheus.

CADMUS

And whose head do you hold in your hands?

AGAVE

A lion's head—or so the hunters told me.

CADMUS

Look directly at it. That's quickly done.

AGAVE

1280    Aah! 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

1285

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

1290

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

1295                      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

1300      Is his body entire? Has he been laid out well?

CADMUS

.....

AGAVE

But how did Pentheus share in my own folly?

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 has utterly destroyed and, with it,  
1305 me. For I have no sons, have no male heir;  
and I have lived only to see this boy,  
this fruit of your own body, most horribly  
and foully killed.

*(To the corpse.)*

To you my house looked up.

Child, you were the stay of my house; you were  
1310 my daughter's son. Of you this city stood in awe.  
No one who once had seen your face dared outrage  
the old man, for if he did, you punished him.  
Now I must go, a banished and dishonored man—  
I, Cadmus the great, who sowed the soldiery  
1315 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  
1320 "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.

1325

If there is still any mortal man  
who despises or defies divinity, let him look  
on this boy's death and believe in the gods.

CHORUS LEADER

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

AGAVE

O Father, now you can see  
how all my life has changed.

..... \* °

*(Addressing Cadmus.)*

DIONYSUS

1330

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 make a journey in a cart drawn on by oxen,  
leading behind you a huge barbarian host.  
For thus decrees the oracle of Zeus.

1335

You shall ravage many cities; but when your army  
plunders the shrine of Apollo, its homecoming  
shall be wretched and hard. Yet in the end  
the god Ares shall save Harmonia and you  
and settle you both in the Land of the Blessed.

1340

So say I, born of no mortal father,

Dionysus, true son of Zeus. If then,  
when you would not, you had muzzled your madness  
and been self-controlled, you'd all be happy now,  
and would have the son of Zeus as your ally.

CADMUS<sup>o</sup>

We implore you, Dionysus. We have done wrong.

DIONYSUS

1345 Too late. You did not know me when you should have.

CADMUS

We have learned. But you punish us too harshly.

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

1350 Why then delay?  
For you must go.

*(Exit Dionysus.)*<sup>o</sup>

Child, to what a dreadful end

have we all<sup>o</sup> come, poor you, your wretched sisters,  
and my unhappy self. An old man, I must go  
1355 to live a stranger among barbarian peoples, doomed  
to lead against Hellas a motley barbarian army.  
Transformed to serpents, I and my wife,  
Harmonia, the child of Ares, we must captain  
spearmen against the tombs and shrines of Hellas.  
1360 Never shall my sufferings end; not even  
in Hades shall I ever have peace.

AGAVE

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

CADMUS

Poor child,  
1365 like a swan embracing its hoary, worn-out father,  
why do you clasp your 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 [*chanting*]

*Farewell, my home! City, farewell.*  
1370 *O bedchamber, banished I go,*  
*in misery, I leave you now.*

CADMUS [*chanting henceforth*]

*Go, poor child, to the burial place<sup>o</sup>  
of Aristaeus' son on Cithaeron.*

AGAVE [*chanting*]

*I pity you, Father.*

CADMUS

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

AGAVE [*singing*]

1375 *Terribly has Dionysus brought<sup>o</sup>  
disaster down upon this house.*

CADMUS<sup>o</sup>

*He was terribly blasphemed by us,  
his name dishonored in Thebes.*

AGAVE [*chanting henceforth*]

*Farewell, Father.*

CADMUS

*Farewell to  
you,  
unhappy  
child.*

1380 *Fare well. But you  
shall find your  
faring hard.*

AGAVE



*Lead me, guides, to where my sisters wait,  
poor sisters of my exile. Let me go  
where I shall never see Cithaeron more,  
1385 where that accursed hill may not see me,<sup>o</sup>  
where I shall find no trace of thyrsus!  
All that I leave to other Bacchae.*

*(Exit Cadmus and Agave to the side with the bier and attendants.)*

CHORUS [*chanting*]

*The gods have many shapes.<sup>o</sup>  
The gods bring many things  
to accomplishment unhoped.  
1390 And what was most expected  
has not been accomplished.  
But god has found his way  
for what no man expected.  
So ends this story.*

## APPENDIX TO THE BACCHAE

This appendix provides Arrowsmith's hypothetical version of the section missing after line 1329.

AGAVE

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.)*

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  
... ..

CHORUS LEADER

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.)*