BACCHAE

Translation and notes by Stephen Esposito

CHARACTERS

AGAVE, mother of Pentheus, leader of the Theban Bacchae
Cadmus, grandfather of Pentheus and Dionysus; father of Agave; founder and former king of Thebes
chorus, fifteen Bacchae (frenzied female worshippers of Dionysus) from Lydia (in Asia Minor); also called “maenads” (mad-women)
Dionysus, (= “The Stranger”): son of immortal Zeus and mortal Semele; first cousin of Pentheus; appears both as a god (1-63 and 1329-51) and as a human, i.e. as the disguised Lydian “Stranger” (434-518, 604-861, 912-976)
messenger #1, herdsman from Thebes
messenger #2, slave of Pentheus
Pentheus, son of Agave and Echion; first cousin of Dionysus; successor to his grandfather Cadmus as king of Thebes; probably 18-20 years old
soldier, one of Pentheus’ guards
tiresias, blind old prophet of Thebes

Setting: The time is the heroic past before the Trojan War, in the third generation after the founding of Thebes. The scene is the palace of King Pentheus on the acropolis of seven-gated Thebes, one of the most powerful cities of Mycenean Greece. Thebes was also a center of Dionysiac cult and a chief city of Boeotia (“Cow-land”), a region of central Greece; the city was dominated to the south by Mt. Cithaeron, some ten miles away.

The wooden facade of Pentheus’ palace forms the back-drop at center stage and shows several Doric columns supporting an entablature (591, 1214). To one side is a fenced-in, vine-covered sanctuary containing the tomb of Semele (Dionysus’ mother) and the smouldering ruins of her house (7-12).

prologue

Enter Dionysus, stage left, disguised as an exotic young holy man from Asia; he carries a thyrsus, he wears a smiling mask, faunskin cloak and ivy wreath.

Dionysus

i have come to this land of Thebes as the son of Zeus.
Dionysus is my name. Semele, the daughter of Cadmus,

1 thrysus: A long, light fennel-stalk crowned with a bundle of ivy.
gave me birth after being forced into labor by fiery lightning.
Exchanging my divinity for human form I have arrived
at Dirce’s streams and the waters of Ismenus.⁵
I see the tomb of my thunder-struck mother here
near the palace and the fallen ruins of her house
smouldering with the still living flames of Zeus’ blast,
a memorial of Hera’s undying hybris against my mother.
I praise Cadmus who keeps this ground untrodden,
a shrine for his daughter. But it was I who covered her sanctuary
all around with the grape-vine’s clustering foliage.
After leaving the gold-rich fields of the Lydians
and Phrygians, I moved on to Persia’s sun-parched plateaux
and Bactra’s walls and the bleak land
of the Medes⁶ and opulent Arabia
and all of Asia Minor whose parts hug the salty sea
with beautifully-towered cities
full of Greeks and barbarians mixed together.
I first came to this Greek city
only after I had roused to dancing all those Asian lands
and established my rites there so that I might be seen by mortals as a god.
It was this very Thebes, of all the Greek lands, that I first incited
to female shrieks of ecstasy, wrapping her in fawnskins,
putting into her hands the thyrsus, my ivy javelin.
I did this because my mother’s sisters, of all people, denied that I, Dionysus, was begotten from Zeus. Semele, they say, was seduced by some mortal but then, by Cadmus’ clever contrivance, she charged the error of her bed to Zeus. For this reason, because Semele had lied about her union with the god, her three sisters sneered that Zeus had killed her.
To punish that slander I myself stung those same sisters, hounding them from their homes with fits of frenzy so that now, knocked out of their senses, they make their homes on Mt. Cithaeron.⁶

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I forced them to wear the vestments of my mysteries
and the entire female seed of Cadmeians, all who were women,
I drove from their homes in madness. Mingled together
with Cadmus’ daughters, the women of Thebes sit beneath green firs
on roofless rocks. For this city must learn well,
even if it doesn’t want to learn, that it is still uninitiated in my bacchic rites.
I must vindicate my mother Semele
by revealing myself to mortals as the god whom she bore to Zeus.
Cadmus, then, has passed the power and privileges of his monarchy
to the son of his daughter Agave. But that one, Pentheus,
ights against the gods by fighting against me. He thrusts me away
from his libations and mentions me nowhere in his prayers.
For this reason I shall show him and all the Thebans
that I am a god. After setting matters here in order
I will move on to another land, revealing myself there too.
But if the city of Thebans, with wrath and weapons,
seeks to drive the Bacchae down from the mountain
I will wage war on the city, marshalling my army of maenads.⁷
For this reason I have changed my appearance to a mortal one
and transformed my shape into the nature of a man.

Dionysus turns and addresses the entering chorus; they show no sign of hearing him.

Hail, my sisterhood of worshippers, you who left Mt. Tmolus,⁸ bulwark of Lydia, women I wooed from foreign lands.
Comrades in rest, companions of the road,
raise up those drums native to Phrygia’s cities,
the invention of mother Rhea⁹ and myself.
Surround this royal house of Pentheus!
Strike your drums so that Cadmus’ city may come to see!
Meanwhile I shall hasten to the folds of Mt. Cithaeron
to join the choral dances of my Theban Bacchae.

Exit Dionysus, stage left, towards Cithaeron; enter Chorus, orchestra left,

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⁵ Dirce and Ismenus: The two small rivers of Thebes. Dionysus was washed in the waters of Dirce at the time of his birth (cp. 519-22).
⁶ Hera: Zeus’ seventh and permanent wife. She was bitterly jealous of her husband’s frequent affairs. For an example of Hera’s jealousy, see Heracles 840 and 1308-10.
⁷ Medes: Inhabitants of Media (Asia), southwest of the Caspian Sea.
⁸ Semele’s sisters (= Dionysus’ aunts): Agave, Autonoe, and Ino.
⁹ 32-37 Dionysus’ opening act of war: This begins the play’s action. All Thebes’ women are driven into a frenzy and onto the mountain. The play, then, takes place in a city without women (except for the chorus of Asian maenads in the orchestra) until Agave’s entry at 1168.
¹⁰ Cithaeron: A mountain sacred to Dionysus, ten miles south of Thebes.

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⁵² Maenads (“frenzied women”) are the same as Bacchae (“female devotees of Bacchus”), though the term maenads (occurring mainly in the play’s second half) highlights their frenzy.
⁵⁵ “Sisterhood of worshippers”: Thiasos is the religious term for cult groups devoted to Dionysus.
⁵⁶ Tmolus: Mountain in Asia Minor, sacred (64) to Dionysus.
⁵⁹ Rhea: A Greek goddess (a Titan, sister and wife of Kronos, and mother of Zeus) who is here identified with the Asiatic goddess Cybele, the great Mother Goddess of Phrygia in Asia Minor.
wearing dresses, faunskins and (probably) turbans. Each bacchant carries a tambourine-like drum.

**CHORAL ENTRANCE SONG**

**PRELUDE**

From the land of Asia I hasten, leaving behind Tmolus, sacred mountain, swift in my sweet toiling for Bromios the Roaring God°

wearied but not wearied,
praising Bacchus, crying out "euoi."°
Who is in the street, in the street?°
Who is in the palace? Let him come outside to watch.
Let everyone keep their lips pure in holy silence.° I shall forever sing in Dionysus' honor the hymns that custom has prescribed.

**HYMN TO DIONYSUS**

**STROPHÉ 1**

O blessed is he who, happy in his heart,° knows the initiation rites of the gods,° purifies his life and joins his soul to the cult group,° dancing on the mountains, with holy purifications celebrating the Bacchic rituals.
O blessed the man who dutifully observes the mysteries of the Great Mother, Cybele.°
Swinging high the thyrsus and crowned in ivy°

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**FIRST CHORAL SONG (64-169):** The chorus of fifteen Asiatic Bacchae now enters the orchestra. The young, vigorous women, in their maenadic costumes and masks, sing and dance excitedly to the music of a reed-piper.

65 *Bromios* ("the Roarer"): A cult name of Dionysus (22x in the *Bacchae*).
67 "Euoik": An exclamation of joy used in the cult of Dionysus to praise the god.
68 "Who is in the street, in the street?" is one of this song's three cultic formulas (cp. 83, 152; 116, 165).
70 Reverential silence customarily preceded ritual acts such as this "cultic" entrance by the chorus.

72-77 **Prerequisites for Dionysiac happiness:** a) knowledge of the mysteries; b) living a pure life; c) initiation into the *thiasos*; d) participation in the mountain rituals honoring Dionysus.
73 Knowledge of the Dionysiac mysteries was secret except to initiates.
75 **Joining one's soul (psyche) to the cult group (thiasos):** refers to the soul's union with god or to a loss of the self as a result of the merging of individual with group consciousness as physical exhaustion is translated into physical well-being.
79 Cybele: An Asiatic goddess worshipped in Asia Minor as the 'Great Mother' of all living things.
81 Ivy: Being "ever-green" ivy symbolized the vine god's vigor and vitality.

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he serves Dionysus.
Onward you Bacchae, onward Bacchae,° escort the roaring Bromios home,
a god and the son of a god! Escort him down from the Phrygian mountains into Greece's wide-wayed streets, streets wide for dancing, Bromios the Roaring God!

**ANTIPHÓSTROPHÉ 1**

At that time when Dionysus' mother was pregnant° Zeus' thunder flew down forcing her into the pangs of labor.
She thrust the child from her womb prematurely and was herself slain by the bolt of lightning.
Immediately Zeus, the son of Cronus, received the baby in his own birth chambers concealing it in his thigh.
Stitching his leg back together with golden clasps he hid the infant from Hera.
When the Fates ordained it° Zeus gave birth to a bull-horned god and crowned him with crowns of snakes.
This is why maenads fling round in their hair beast-eating snakes, the spoil of their hunting.

**STROPHÉ 2**

O Thebes, nurse of Semele, crown yourself with ivy!
Abound, abound with rich berry-laden evergreen creepers!
Rave with bacchic frenzy carrying your branches of oak or fir!
Crown your garments of dappled deerskin with the fleece of white wool!
Make the violent fennel-wands holy all round°

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83 Another ritual cry, like "Who is in the street?" (68); it recurs at 152-53.
88-98 Zeus' two male pregnancies: Besides giving birth to Dionysus from his thigh, Zeus gave birth to Athena from his head.
99 The Fates: The three spinning sisters who regulated each individual's life.
113 **Potential violence of the thyrsus:** Of this paradoxical sentence Dodds (82) writes: "The startling conjunction of holiness and violence (hybris) expresses the dual aspect of Dionysiac ritual as an act of controlled violence in which dangerous natural forces are subdued to a religious purpose. The thyrsus is the vehicle of these forces; its touch can work beneficent miracles (704 ff.), but can also inflict injury (762)...."
Immediately the whole land will dance
whenever the roaring Bromios leads the bands of revellers
to the mountain, to the mountain
where the female mob waits
driven away from their looms and shuttles
stung by the goad of Dionysus.

**Antistrophe 2**

O secret chamber of the Kouretes,
and holy haunts of Crete,
haunts where Zeus was born,
where in their caves the triple-crested Korybantes
invented for me this cylinder
covered with tightly stretched hide.
During the intense bacchic dancing they mixed its sound
with the sweet-humming breath of Phrygian reed-pipes
putting the drum into Mother Rhea’s hands
to beat out time for the joyous cries of the Bacchae.
From the divine Mother the frenzied Satyrs
won the instrument for themselves
and joined it to the dances
of the biennial festivals
in which Dionysus delights.

**Epode**

Sweet is the pleasure the god brings us in the mountains
when from the running revellers
he falls to the ground clad in his sacred fawnskin. Hunting
the blood of slaughtered goats for the joy of devouring raw flesh
he rushes through the mountains of Lydia, of Phrygia.
Hail to the Roaring God, Bromios our leader! Euoi!
The ground flows with milk,
flows with wine,
flows with the nectar of bees.
The Bacchic One, lifting high
the bright-burning flame of the pine-torch,
like the smoke of Syrian frankincense,
springs up and rushes along with his wand of fennel.
Running and dancing he incites any wanderers,
shakes them with shouts of joy
tossing his luxuriant locks to the wind.
Amidst the cries of “euoi” he roars out:
“Onward you Bacchae,
Onward Bacchae,
glittering pride of gold-flowing Mt. Tmolus.
Sing and dance for Dionysus
as the rumbling drums roar!
Glorify him joyously!
“Euoi, euoi!” Yes, sing out
your Phrygian incantations.
As the holy flute
roars holy hymns,
glorify him, maenads,
as you climb
to the mountain,
to the mountain!”
Sweetly rejoicing, then,
like a filly grazing with her mother,
the bacchant leaps
swift and nimble on her feet.

**Act I**

Enter Tiresias slowly and without escort, stage right; he wears a white mask and is
dressed like a bacchant, carrying a thyrsus and sporting a fawnskin cloak.

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116 Mountain as the place for the activity of the Maenads: ‘To the mountain, to the mountain’ is another cultic formula (cp. 68, 83); it recurs at 165, 977, 987.
120 Kouretes: The male devotees of Rhea Cybele; similarly the Korybantes of line 123.
130 Satyrs: Immortal fertility spirits of the wild who were hybrids of man and beast.
134 Every other year at Delphi, in the uplands of Mt. Parnassus, a night festival in mid-winter was held in which women danced under torch-light in honor of Dionysus.
135-39 The three key elements of Dionysiac ritual: a) going to the mountain to dance (oreibasia), which took place only in the winter; b) tearing-to-pieces an animal’s body (sparagmos); c) devouring the animal’s raw flesh (omo-phagia).
144 “The Bacchic One” is Dionysus himself.
154 ‘Gold-flowing Mt. Tmolus’ refers to the gold dust carried down Tmolus into the Pactolus, a tributary of the Hermus River in central Asia Minor.
ACT I (170-369): Thebes’ two most prominent authorities, the old “believers” Tiresias and Cadmus (city seer and city founder), encounter the young sceptic Pentheus (king). Act I sets the stage for the main event, the fierce power struggle of Acts II, III, and IV (434-976). The two outer scenes (170-214 = 45 lines, 330-369 = 40 lines) frame the longer center episode (215-329 = 115 lines) which features the contest between the young prince and Apollo’s blind old prophet.
TIRESIAS (knocking at the palace door)

Who is at the gates? Call Cadmus from the palace, Agenor's son, who, after leaving the city of Sidon, fenced this citadel of Thebes with ramparts.

The door opens and a servant appears.

Let someone go and announce that Tiresias is looking for him. He knows why I have come and what arrangements I have made. Though I'm an old man and he still older, we will twine together thyrsi and wear fawnskin cloaks and crown our heads with shoots of ivy.

Enter Cadmus from the palace, also dressed like a bacchant.

CADMUS

O dearest friend, how delighted I was to hear the wise voice of a wise man when I was in the palace.

I have come prepared, wearing these trappings of the god. As vigorously as we can we must exalt Dionysus to greatness since he is my daughter's son [who has revealed himself as a god among men.]

Where must we go to dance?

Where ply our feet?

Where shake our grey heads?

Old man to old man, instruct me, Tiresias. You're the expert. I won't tire, day or night, striking the ground with my thyrsus.

Gladly we've forgotten that we're old men.

TIRESIAS

Then you experience the same excitement I do. For I, too, feel young and will try to dance.

CADMUS

Then shall we not take a chariot to the mountain?

TIRESIAS

But if we don't go on foot, the god wouldn't be honored in the same way.

CADMUS

Shall I lead you, one old man guiding another, like a tutor does a child?

TIRESIAS

Then you experience the same excitement I do.°

For I, too, feel young and will try to dance.

CADMUS

Then shall we not take a chariot to the mountain?

TIRESIAS

But if we don't go on foot, the god wouldn't be honored in the same way.

CADMUS

Shall I lead you, one old man guiding another, like a tutor does a child?

TIRESIAS

The god will lead us there without toil.

CADMUS

And will we be the only men in the city to dance in honor of Bacchus?

TIRESIAS

Yes, since only we reason well. The rest are fools!

CADMUS (finally yielding)

We're tarrying too long. Come on, take hold of my hand.

TIRESIAS (stretching out his hand)

Here, then. Let's join hands so we make a pair.

CADMUS

Since I'm a mortal, I'll not despise the gods.

TIRESIAS (taking Cadmus' hand)

We don't use clever subtleties on the gods. For there is no argument that throws down the ancestral traditions, those we received from our fathers, possessions as old as time itself. No, not even the cleverness schemed up by the sharpest minds!

CADMUS

Will someone say that I show no respect for old age just because I intend to dance all decked out in ivy wreaths?

TIRESIAS

No! For the god has not determined whether it is the young or the old who must dance. On the contrary, he wishes to receive honors in common from everyone counting nobody out in his desire to be exalted.

Enter Pentheus, stage left, in a hurry; he is dressed in his royal robes and attended by guards.°

CADMUS

Since you can't see this light of day, Tiresias, my words will proclaim for you what is going on. Here comes Pentheus, Echion's son, running towards the house. It is to him that I have entrusted the power of this land. How flustered he is! What calamity, I wonder, will he report?

PENTHEUS° (at first not noticing Cadmus and Tiresias)

While I happened to be out of the country

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171 Sidon: A major port city of Phoenicia (modern Syria) ruled by Agenor.

189-214 Opening dialogue of Tiresias and Cadmus. The point here is “to exhibit a Dionysiac miracle of rejuvenation: by the magic of the god they are filled for a time with ‘a mysterious strength and exaltation’... If the old men are filled with power, it should be because they are filled with faith. But Cadmus at least is not filled with faith, only with a timid worldliness. His real creed is ‘the solidarity of the family.’” (Dodds 90)

215 Pentheus' age: About 18-20 years; he is “a young man” at 274, 974.

215-62 Pentheus' monologue as a second prologue, “a counter-manifesto to the first (prologue) - having heard the god's programme of action, we now listen to man's.” (Dodds 97)
I heard about strange new evils throughout the city—
that our women have abandoned their homes
for the sham revelries of Bacchus
frisking about on the dark-shadowed mountains
honoring with their dances the latest god, Dionysus, whoever he is. 220
They’ve set up their mixing bowls brimming with wine
amidst their cult gatherings and each lady slinks off in a different
direction
to some secluded wilderness to service the lusts of men.
They pretend to be maenads performing sacrifices
but in reality they rank Aphrodite’s pleasures before Bacchus!
I’ve shackled with chains all those I captured
and thrown them into the public jails where my soldiers keep guard.
And all those who remain at large, I’ll hunt down from the mountains 230
[Ino and Agave, who bore me to Echion,
and Actaeon’s mother, I mean Autonoe.]
After fastening them tight in nets of iron
I’ll put a stop quickly to their destructive bacchic revelry.
They say, too, that some stranger has come here
a quack dealer in spells from the land of Lydia
his long locks and golden curls all sweet-smelling
his cheeks dark as wine, his eyes full of Aphrodite’s charms.
Day and night he surrounds himself with young girls
alluring them with his mysteries of joy.
But if I capture him within this land
I’ll put a stop to his beating the thyrus and tossing his hair.
In fact I’ll cut his head right off his body!
This is the guy who claims that Dionysus is a god.
Indeed he claims that Dionysus was once sewn into Zeus’ thigh.
The truth is that Dionysus was incinerated by fiery lightning
along with his mother Semele because she had lied about her union
with Zeus. Aren’t these terrible slanders worthy of hanging? 245
What outrageous acts of hybris this stranger commits, whoever he is!

Pentheus, as he turns to enter the palace, finally notices Cadmus and Tiresias.

But here’s another wonder. I see the sign-reader,
Tiresias, outfitted in dappled fawnskins
and my own mother’s father. How completely laughable,
revelling about with his thyrus like a bacchant!
I am ashamed, sir, to see your old age so devoid of common sense.
Won’t you shake off that ivy!

228 Pentheus as a hunter: The image is frequent (e.g. 839, 871, 960, 1022).
No other medicine alleviates human suffering. Dionysus, being a god, is poured out as a libation to the gods so that it is through him that men receive blessings. Furthermore, why do you laugh at him and the story that he was sewn into Zeus’ thigh? I’ll teach you how elegant this is. When Zeus snatched the infant from the fiery thunderbolt and carried him up to Mt. Olympus as a god, Hera wanted to throw the child out of heaven.

But Zeus contrived a counter-scheme such as only a god could devise. Breaking off a part of the sky that encircles the earth he fashioned one piece into a dummy Dionysus. Using this as an offering of peace Zeus palmed off the dummy as the real thing to Hera, thus pacifying her hostility. Over time humans, changing the word sky, have come to say that he was sown in Zeus’ thigh.

This story was invented because people couldn’t believe that Dionysus, a god, had once been held hostage to Hera, a goddess. This god is a mantic prophet too. For Bacich revelry and mania produce much mantic power: whenever this god comes into the body in full force he makes the frenzied foretell the future.

He also shares some of Ares’ bellicose spirit; for fear and mania spread panic through a marching militia dispersing the battle before it ever even touches the spear: this, too, comes from Dionysus.

One day you will even see him on the cliffs of Delphi bounding with pine torches across the plateau between Parnassus’ twin peaks brandishing and shaking his Bacchic wand. He shall be made mighty throughout Greece. So obey me, Pentheus. Don’t be so sure that force is what dominates human affairs nor if you have an opinion but that opinion is sick, imagine that your opinion

makes you somehow wise. Accept the god into this land and pour libations to him!

Become a bacchant and crown your head with a wreath!

It is not Dionysus who will force women to be self-controlled in Aphrodite’s realm. No, their chastity resides in their nature. [Self-control in all things always depends on character.]

Just consider the facts. For even in the revelries of Bacchus the self-controlled woman, at least, will not be corrupted.

You see how you rejoice whenever the crowds gather at the palace gates and the city glorifies the name of Pentheus. Dionysus too, I am sure, takes delight in receiving honor. So I, for one, and Cadmus, whom your laughter mocks, both of us will crown ourselves with ivy and dance, a grey-haired old pair. But still we must dance. Nor will I fight against the gods because I’ve been pressured by your words. For you are most painfully mad so that neither with drugs nor without them could you cure your disease.

**CHORUS LEADER**

Old man, you do not shame Apollo by your words. Indeed, by honoring the great god Bromios, you reveal your wisdom.

**CADMUS**

My son, Tiresias has advised you well. Live with us rather than outside the law. For now you flutter about and think without thinking well. Even if this god does not exist, as you claim, let him be considered a god in your eyes. Lie for a good cause, say that he is Semele’s child. In this way she might seem to have given birth to a god and honor might accrue to our entire family.

You see the horrific death of Actaeon, how the dogs he bred ripped him to pieces and ate his raw flesh after he boasted in the mountain meadows

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294 Tiresias appears as a kind of ‘theological sophist.’ His string of puns here (“piece...peace, sky...thigh”) is the most remarkable etymological argument in the 350 year span of archaic and classical Greek literature (Stanford 175). Despite Tiresias’ claim (200) that he is not using cleverness (σοφία) on the gods, he does present himself as the worst sort of sophist, combining a certain religious conservatism with a flare for relativism that was so popular in the late fifth century.

299 Tiresias again makes an etymological connection, this time between ‘madness’ (mania) and “mantic” (mantis, “seer”). The mantic “sees” because he is driven mad by some higher power.

314-18 **Dionysus as beyond good and evil?** Tiresias is responding to Pentheus’ charge (at 222-25) of the maenads’ sexual immorality. As Dodds (111) observes, “Dionysus is not immoral; he is non-moral—morality is irrelevant to religion of the Dionysiac type...”

315 **What determines human ethics?** “It is physis [personal character], not nomos [social convention] that determines conduct... Here once more Tiresias speaks the language of the fifth century and thinks in terms popularized by the Sophistic movement.” (Dodds 111).

336 It is family pride, not truth, that motivates Cadmus, thus calling to mind Plato’s observation: “There are many who carry the thrysus but few who are devotees of Bacchus.” (Phaedo 69c)
that he was better than Artemis at hunting with hounds. Don’t let that happen to you.

Holding an ivy wreath out for Pentheus.

Come here. Let me crown you with ivy. Join us in giving honor to the god.

PENTHEUS (pulling back quickly)

Get your hand away from me! Go play the revelling bacchant but don’t wipe that folly of yours off on me!
I’m going to punish this teacher of your mindlessness.

Turning to his attendants.

Guard, off quickly!
Go to the seat where this seer here reads his birds.
Tear it up with crowbars.
Turn the whole place upside down!
Toss his sacred woolen wreaths to the blowing winds.
Then he’ll really feel my sting!

Exit a guard down one of the side-ramps.

And you other guards, go up through the city and track down this effeminate looking stranger who brings a new disease to the women and dishonors their beds.
And if you capture him, lead him here in chains so that he’s brought to justice by being stoned to death and sees a bitter bacchic revelry in Thebes!

Exit other guards down the other side-ramp.

TIRSIAS

O wretched man, how ignorant you are of what you’re saying!
Now you’re completely mad whereas before you had only momentarily lost your mind.
Let’s go, Cadmus, and on behalf of this man, even though he is savage, and on behalf of the city, let us beseech the god to do nothing sinister.
Come with me and bring your ivy staff.
You try to support my body and I’ll try to support yours.
It is a shameful thing for two old men to fall.

337-40 Actaeon as a negative role model: Actaeon is the paradigm of the hunter who becomes the hunted on account of his hybris. Actaeon boasted that he was a better hunter than Artemis, goddess of hunting. For this offense Artemis transformed the young man into a stag. He was then torn apart by his own hounds who did not recognize their master. Actaeon was Pentheus’ first cousin.

356 First Pentheus threatened decapitation (240-41), then hanging (246), now stoning (356-57).

Still, let come what may, since we must be slaves to Bacchus, Zeus’ son. But beware, Cadmus, lest Pentheus bring the pain pent up in his name into your house. I don’t say this by any prophetic skill but rather on account of the facts. For Pentheus is a fool and says foolish things.

Exit Cadmus and Tiresias, stage left, propping one another, using their thyrsi as canes, heading off to Mt. Cithaeron; Pentheus stays on stage.

CHORUS OF ASIAN BACCHAE

STROPHE 1

O Holiness, queen of the gods!
O Holiness, as you make your way on golden wings across the earth, do you hear these words of Pentheus?
Do you hear his hybris, blaspheming Bromios, Semele’s son, he who is first among the blessed divinities at the banquets decked with bright bouquets?
For Dionysus has the power to join in the Bacchic dances of the cult group, to laugh as the reed-pipe sings,
to put an end to anxieties whenever the liquid joy of the clustered grapes visits the feasts of the gods, whenever the goblet casts sleep over men during the ivy-wreathed festivities.

ANTISTROPHE 1

Misfortune is the result of unbridled mouths and lawless folly.
The tranquil life and prudent thinking remain untossed by storms and hold the house together.
For although the dwellers of heaven

367 Meaning of Pentheus’ name: Pentheus as bringer of penthos, “pain.” This is Tiresias’ third and most charged pun on Pentheus’ name as “Man of Pain.”
SECOND CHORAL SONG (370-433): One of Euripides’ most famous escape prayers; it responds to the preceding action by denouncing Pentheus’ impiety and appealing to the spirit of Reverence.
370 “Holiness” (Hosia), apparently a cult word, is invoked as the opposite of Pentheus’ hybris.
386-91 The chorus is alluding to the present quarrel between Pentheus and his grandfather Cadmus.
390 Tranquility and prudence: The two key Dionysiac virtues for the chorus.
inhabit the upper sky far away,  
still they look down on human affairs.  
So cleverness is not wisdom\(^a\)  
nor is it wise to think thoughts unfit for mortals.\(^a\)  
Life is short. Given such brevity  
who would pursue ambitious ends  
and lose what lies at hand?  
These, in my opinion at least,  
are the ways of madmen and evil counsellors.

**STROPHE 2**

If only I could go to Cyprus  
island of Aphrodite\(^b\)  
home of the Love gods  
those erotic bewitchers of mortal minds  
inhabitants of Paphos\(^c\)  
which the hundred mouths  
of a foreign river\(^c\)  
fertilize without rain!  
If only I could go to exquisite Pieria\(^c\)  
home of the Muses\(^a\)  
sacred slope of Olympus\(^a\)  
Take me there, Bromios, roaring spirit  
who leads the Bacchic throng amid shouts of joy.  
There the Graces live, and there Desire.\(^a\)  
And there it is lawful for the Bacchae to celebrate your mysteries.  

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395 The clever sophist’s wisdom is folly: From the chorus’ point of view Pentheus’ “cleverness” (to sopton) is the opposite of their own Dionysiac “wisdom” (sophia), which consists of reasoning well.

396 Nothing in excess: Violators of this adage inevitably suffer.

403 Cyprus: birthplace of Aphrodite, goddess of sexuality, who was born from Cronus’ severed penis.


408-9 The “foreign river” that fertilizes Paphos is the Nile.

410 Pieria: The Muses’ birthplace, a hilly area of Macedonia near Mt. Olympus.

411 Muses: The nine daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne (Memory), goddesses of music and the arts. This connected them with Dionysus, god of music and theater. One tradition says they nursed baby Dionysus.

412 Olympus: a mountain range on the coast of Thessaly.

414 Graces (Charites): three daughters of Zeus who personified life’s joys and all the pleasures of domain of Dionysus, with whom their cult was long associated.

**ANTISTROPHE 2**

The god who is the son of Zeus  
delights in festivities  
and loves Peace, the goddess  
who bestows bliss and nourishes youths.\(^a\)  
In equal measure he has given  
to the rich and the humble\(^a\)  
so that mankind now possesses wine,  
bringer of joy, banisher of care.

He hates the man whose concern is not this —  
by day and by friendly night\(^b\)  
to live to the end a life of blessedness.  
It is wise to keep one’s heart and mind  
at a distance from men of excess.

Whatever beliefs the common folk  
have come to adopt and still practice,  
these I would accept.

**ACT II\(^c\)**

Enter Soldier, stage left, with several guards leading the captured Stranger (Dionysus disguised); his hands are bound.

**SOLDIER**

Pentheus, we stand before you having captured this prey  
after which you sent us; our mission has been accomplished.

We found this wild beast tame. He didn’t try to escape  
but gave his hands to us willingly.

He didn’t even turn pale or change his wine-flushed complexion.

Rather, laughing, he bid us to bind and carry him off.

He even stood still so as to make my task easy.

Feeling ashamed I said to him: “Stranger, not willingly  
do I arrest you but by the orders of Pentheus who sent me.”

Now as for the Theban Bacchae whom you shut up  
and seized and bound in chains at the public jail,\(^b\)

419 Peace (Eirene) is associated with Dionysus because she, too, enriches human life.

421 Dionysus as the democratic god par excellence: He gives wine to all.

425 Night is “friendly” because Dionysus’ mysteries are celebrated mostly in nocturnal darkness (485-86).


444 The reference is to the Theban maenads whom Pentheus had jailed at 226-27.
those women are gone, let loose and skipping off,
off to the mountain meadows, calling out to Bromios as their god.
The chains, of their own accord, came loose from the women’s feet
and the keys unlocked the jailhouse doors without a human hand.
This man has come here to Thebes full of many miracles;\(^1\)
but what happens next must be your concern, not mine.

**Pentheus (To his guards)**
Release this man’s hands. Now that he’s in my net
he won’t be swift enough to escape me.

*The guards remove the chains.*

Well, stranger, your body is indeed quite shapely, at least
for enticing the women. And that’s why you came to Thebes, isn’t it?
Those long side-curls of yours show for sure you’re no wrestler,
rippling down your cheeks, infected with desire.
And you keep your skin white by deliberate contrivance,
not exposed to the sun’s rays but protected by the shade,
hunting Aphrodite’s pleasures with your beauty.
First, then, tell me who you are and from what family.

**The Stranger**
I have no hesitation about this. It’s easy to tell.
Surely you’ve heard of the flowering mountains of Tmolus.

**Pentheus**
I have. They circle round the city of Sardis.\(^2\)

**The Stranger**
I am from there and Lydia is my fatherland.

**Pentheus**
And from what source do you bring these rites to Greece?

**The Stranger**
Dionysus himself, the son of Zeus, sent me.

**Pentheus**
And does some local Zeus exist there, one who begets new gods?

**The Stranger**
No, we have the same Zeus who yoked Semele here in Thebes.

---

449 Bacchae as a miracle play: Tiresias had attempted to prove Dionysus’ existence by using rational arguments (272-318). Pentheus rejected them. Now he will be confronted with a series of miracles, first physical (449; cp. 667, 693, 716), then psychological, which present a different (i.e. non-rational) kind of proof of Dionysus’ existence. The effect of the miracles on Pentheus is summarized by Dionysus at 787.

463 Sardis: Capital of Lydia (in Asia Minor) and a famous seat of Cybele’s worship.

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470 The Stranger’s initiation into Dionysus’ rites: In this face to face encounter the initiate becomes a virtual mirror of the god, an incarnate visual double, which indeed, as we know, the Stranger is.

476 Impiety is a charge made three times (490, 502) by the Stranger against Pentheus. In 399 B.C. the same accusation was brought against Socrates and led to his death (Plato Apology 35d).
THE STRANGER
In this case, at least, they’re wise though their customs are different.

PENTHEUS
Do you celebrate these sacred rites at night or in the day? 485

THE STRANGER
At night mostly, since darkness induces devotion.

PENTHEUS
No, darkness is devious and corruptions women.

THE STRANGER
Even in the day someone could devise shameful deeds.

PENTHEUS
You’ll pay a penalty for your evil sophistries.

THE STRANGER
And you for your ignorance and impiety toward the god. 490

PENTHEUS
How bold this bacchus! 5 What a gymnast with words!

THE STRANGER
Tell me what I must suffer. What terrible deed you will inflict on me?

PENTHEUS
First I’ll cut off those luxurious curls of yours.

THE STRANGER
My hair is sacred. I’m grooming it for the god.

PENTHEUS
And furthermore, hand over that thyrsus you’re holding. 495

THE STRANGER
If you want it, you take it. This wand I carry belongs to Dionysus.

PENTHEUS (apparently backing off the challenge)
And we'll lock you up in prison.

THE STRANGER
The god himself will set me free whenever I wish.

PENTHEUS
Yes, when you call him, that is, from your jail cell beside the other Bacchae!

THE STRANGER
Even now he is nearby and sees what I am suffering. 500

PENTHEUS
Well, where? To my eyes, at least, he’s invisible.

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506 Limits of knowledge: Dionysus’ riddle-like accusation recalls the all-too-accurate jab of the seer Tiresias at another proud Theban king: “Though you have eyes, you see neither where you are in evil nor where you live nor with whom you share your house!” (Oedipus the King 412)

507 Pentheus’ blindness: The literalness of his response (i.e. giving his own name and his parents’) underscores the king’s striking ignorance of what he is doing (by binding the Stranger) and of who he is as a man (by thinking he has power over the Stranger).
Chorus of Asian Bacchae

**Strophe 1**

Hail, daughter of Acheul,\(^9\)
 venerable Dirce,\(^5\) happy maiden,
 since you once washed Zeus’ infant son
 in your streams
 when Zeus, his sire, snatched him
 from the undying flame and hid the child
 in his own thigh, shouting out
 “Go, Dithyrambus,\(^9\)
 enter this male womb of mine.
 I hereby reveal you to Thebes, Bacchic child,
 where you shall be called Dithyrambus from the manner of your
 birth.”

But you, O blessed Dirce, reject me
 though you have my ivy-crowned
 bands of revellers on your banks.
 Why do you spurn me? Why do you flee?
 Yet one day soon — I swear by the grape-clustering
 delights of Dionysus’ vine —
 one day soon you will take heed of Bromios.

**Antistrophe 1**

Pentheus reveals
 his earth-born descent,
 sprung from the serpent,
 Pentheus whom earth-born Echion,
 the Snake-Man, begot
 as a fierce-faced monster
 not a mortal man
 but like a murderer Giant who wrestles the gods.\(^9\)

**Third Choral Song** (519-75): Reacts to the preceding action and registers the
growing wrath of the Bacchae at Pentheus and his threat to imprison them (which
could not be carried out since stage conventions virtually dictated that the chorus
remain in the orchestra). Dionysus’ wilder aspects, which had been largely ignored
in the first two odes, begin to emerge here.

519 Acheul: A large river in west central Greece.
520 Dirce: The small river in the western quarter of Thebes.
526 “Dithyrambus”\(^9\): A sacred name for Dionysus. The dithyramb was Dionysus’ spe-
cial song, performed by choruses at revelries of wine, music, and wild abandon-
ment.
544 The chorus compare Pentheus’ earth-born descent to the chthonic descent of the
giants who fought against the Olympian gods. Like the monstrous Giants, Pentheus
is a symbol of hybris.

Soon he will bind me,
 Bromios’ servant, in a noose.
 Already he detains my fellow-reveller
 inside the palace
 hidden in a dark prison.
 Son of Zeus, Dionysus,
 do you see this, how your proclaimers
 struggle against oppression?
 Come down from Mt. Olympus, lord,
 brandishing your golden thyrsus!
 Restrain the hybris of this murderous man!

**Epode**

Where, then, on beast-nourishing Mt. Nysa,\(^5\)
 are you, Dionysus, leading with your thyrsus
 the revelling bands?
 Or where on the Cercycean peaks of Mt. Parnassus?\(^5\)
 Or perhaps in the thickly-wooded lairs
 of Mt. Olympus where once
 Orpheus playing the lyre
 gathered together the trees with his music,
 gathered together the wild animals?
 O blessed Pieria,
 Euios\(^5\) worships you and will come
to dance together with bacchic revelries.
 He will lead his whirling maenads
 after crossing the swift-flowing Axios
 and the river Lydias, father of happiness
 and bestower of prosperity to mortals.\(^5\)
 It is Lydias’ sparkling waters,
 so I’ve heard, which fertilize
 that land and make it famed for horses.\(^5\)

556 Nysa: A mystical mountain that traveled wherever the god’s cult did.
559 Parnassus: A mountain near the Gulf of Corinth, towering over Delphi.
561-64 Orpheus’ magical music. This famous Thracian singer enthralled both the ani-
mate and inanimate worlds. Like Dionysus, he brought joy and unity.
566 Euios is a ritual name for Dionysus; see 67n.
572 Axios and Lydias: two Macedonian rivers running into the Thermaic Gulf in the
northwest Aegean Sea.
575 Macedonia was famous for breeding fine horses.
ACT III°

The stage is completely empty and silent. Suddenly from offstage:

THE VOICE (of Dionysus)

Io! Hear my voice, hear it!°
Io Bacchae, io Bacchae!

CHORUS LEADER (in the orchestra)

Who is here, who is it?
From where does the voice of Euios summon me?

THE VOICE

Io! Again I speak,
the son of Semele, the son of Zeus!

CHORUS LEADER

Io! Master, master!
Come into our revelling band,
O Bromios, Bromios!

THE VOICE

Shake the very foundation of this world, august Goddess
of Earthquakes!

CHORUS LEADER

Ah, ah!
Look how quickly Pentheus' palace
will be shaken to its fall!
Dionysus is in the palace.
Worship him!

PART OF THE CHORUS (in response)

We worship him.

Didn't you see the stone lintels reeling, breaking apart

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ACT III (576-861): Structural and thematic center of the Bacchae. Three main parts: a) 'palace miracles' (576-641); b) first messenger scene (660-786); c) tempting of Pentheus (787-861). The famous first episode contains a series of supernatural events which constitute the 'palace miracles': a) the earthquake which shakes the palace (583-93, 623); b) Pentheus' hallucinations about the bull, the burning palace, and the light (615-31); c) the blazing of Zeus' lightning at Semele's tomb (594-99, 623-24); d) the (off-stage) collapse of the stable in which Dionysus had been jailed (633-34).

576 Voice of god: "Nowhere else in Greek tragedy is a god heard calling from off-stage, let alone accompanied by thunder and lightning." (Taplin 120)

576-603 Lyric Dialogue #1: The Bacchae features three sung dialogues (cp. 1024-42, 1168-99). All three immediately follow a choral ode and are intensely emotional sequences which alternate between an actor singing from the stage and the chorus (or chorus-leader) singing from the orchestra. Here the theme is Dionysus' liberation of his band of maenadic worshippers from Pentheus.

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592-93 Was the earthquake represented on stage? Given the simplicity of fifth century stage mechanisms, this scene was probably meant to be conjured in the mind's eye.

609 Choral reaction to the liberation of the Stranger. The Bacchae move from fear (604), trembling (607), loneliness (609) and despair (610) — all the result of the earthquake and fire at Semele's tomb — to joy (609) at seeing the great light (608) which they identify with the god. Their experience of the initiation-like ritual into the Dionysiac mysteries stands in stark contrast to Pentheus' experience at 616ff.
Enter Pentheus from the palace, panting heavily.

Pentheus
I have suffered terribly! The stranger has escapes me even though I had just forced him into chains.
Hey! Hey!
He is right here. What is this?

Turning to the Stranger.

What are you doing in front of my house? How did you get outside?

The Stranger
Slow down. Calm your anger.

Pentheus
How did you escape those chains? How did you get out here?

The Stranger
Didn’t I say, or didn’t you hear — that someone will set me free?

Pentheus
Who? The answers you give are always strange.

The Stranger
He who grows the rich-clustering vine for mortals.

Pentheus
..........[one or several lines missing]

The Stranger
Look, now you’ve insulted Dionysus for what he’s right to be proud of.

Pentheus [turning to his guards]

I command you to lock every gate in the encircling rampart!

Exit two guards, one down each side-ramp.

The Stranger
But why? Don’t gods scale even walls?

Pentheus
Clever, very clever indeed, except in what you should be clever!

The Stranger
In whatever I must be especially clever, in that I am indeed naturally so. First, however, listen to this messenger here and learn from him.

616-37 Pentheus’ failed initiation into the Dionysiac mysteries: The king’s ordeals as he tries to tie up the bull resemble those of the initiand.
618 Bull imagery recurs at 100, 920, 1017, 1159; Dionysus is god of the bull. Compare the frightening appurtenance of the bull (symbol of male sexuality) at Hippolytus 1214.
626 They labored in vain; the house was not on fire; Pentheus only thought so.
630 Why does Pentheus mistake ‘a light’ for his prisoner? Because in ancient initiation ritual the mystic light appearing in the (Hades-like) darkness seems to have been identified with the god himself. So here Pentheus rushes from the dark house to the courtyard where he sees the light created by the god, which light he mistakes for a man—just as he mistook the bull for a man at 619-22. This young king “embodies not only the ordeals of the initiand, but also, as the god’s enemy, the negation of the desired ritual process. He rejects and attacks even the light in the darkness, and persists in his hostile and confused ignorance.” (Seaford 1981, 256-57)
640 For the third time in this speech Dionysus’ calmness is contrasted with Pentheus’ tempestuousness.
He has come from the mountains to bring you news. Don’t worry. We will stay right here; we won’t try to escape.

Enter the first messenger, a herdsman from Mt. Cithaeron, hastily from stage left.

**MESSANGER #1**

Pentheus, ruler of this Theban land, I have come from Mt. Cithaeron where the bright shafts of white snow fell incessantly.

**PENTHEUS**

What message have you come to deliver with such urgency?

**MESSANGER #1**

I have just seen the august Bacchae. Stung with frenzy they shot forth from this land bare-footed. I have come desiring to tell you and the city, my lord, what strange feats they do, greater than miracles. But I want to know whether I can speak freely to you about what happened there or whether I must reef in my report. For I fear the swiftness of your mind, my lord; it is quick to anger and too much that of a king.

**PENTHEUS**

Speak openly since you won’t be punished by me no matter what your story. [It isn’t fitting to be angry with just men.] The more frightening account of the Bacchae the more severe will be the punishment of the man who taught his wiles to those women.

**MESSANGER #1**

Our herds of young cattle were just climbing towards the upland pastures. As the sun let loose its rays to warm the earth I see three bands of female choruses. Autonoe was the leader of one group, your mother Agave of another, and Ino of a third. They were all sound asleep, relaxed in their bodies, some leaning their backs on fir-tree foliage, others resting their heads on oak leaves, scattered on the ground haphazardly but modestly and not, as you claim, drunk with wine and flute music, and hunting down Aphrodite’s delights on solo missions in the forest.

Then your mother, standing up amidst the Bacchae, shouted a ritual cry and roused their bodies from sleep after she had heard the bellowing of my horned oxen. Throwing off the fresh sleep from their eyes they sprang to their feet, a miracle of discipline to behold, women young and old, and girls still unmarried. First they let their hair flow loose onto their shoulders and tied up their fawnskins — those whose knot fastenings had come undone — and bound tight the dappled hides with snakes that licked their cheeks. Some, holding in their arms a fawn or wild wolf cubs, offered them white milk — those who had just given birth and whose breasts were still swollen, having left their new-born at home. They crowned themselves with wreaths of ivy and oak and flowering evergreen creepers. One woman, taking her thyrsus, struck it against a rock and from it a spring of fresh water leaks out. Another struck her fennel wand against the ground and for this woman the god sent forth a stream of wine. As many as had a desire for white drink, scraping through the earth with their sharp fingers they got springing jets of milk. And from the ivy thyrsi sweet streams of honey dripped.

So that if you had been present to see these things, the very god you now censure you would have pursued with prayers.

We came together, cowherds and shepherds, to wrangle with one another in our accounts [debating their uncanny and miraculous deeds.]

Then some wanderer from the city with a knack for words spoke to us all:

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658 Dionysus as director within the play: “How does Dionysus know that this is a messenger from the mountains? The hint is sown that Dionysus himself has ‘arranged’ this messenger-speech as an opportunity for Pentheus to see the truth, in fact one of a series of opportunities.” (Taplin 57)

677-774 First Messenger speech: Laden with an air of mystery, it describes the magical powers of the Theban Bacchae on the mountain. Its main purpose is to persuade Pentheus to accept Dionysus and his female devotees (769-74).

687 Pentheus had made his claims about the drunkenness and lechery of the Bacchae at 221-25 (cp. 236-38); the messenger will correct Pentheus again at 712-13.

694 These are the women whom Dionysus had earlier (35-38) driven mad and onto Mt. Cithaeron.

704-11 Dionysus as god of liquid nature: “Dionysus is a miraculous wine-maker and his power is transmitted to those possessed by him when they wield his magic rod.” (Dodds 163). The miracle of water, wine, milk, and honey was foreshadowed at 141-43.
“O you who dwell in the holy uplands
of the mountains, do you wish to hunt Agave,
Pentheus’ mother, out from her bacchic revelry
and gain the king’s favor?”

His suggestion seemed reasonable
so we lay in ambush in the thickets, concealing ourselves
in the foliage. At the appointed hour each woman
began to wave her thyrsus in the bacchic dancing,
calling out with multitudinous voice on Bromios as “Iacchus,”
Lord of Cries, the son of Zeus. The whole mountain
and all its wild creatures
joined the Bacchic revelry and everything was roused to running.

Agave happens to jump close by me
and I leapt out hoping to seize her,
deserting the thicket where I was hiding myself.

But she shrieked:
“O my running hounds,
we are being hunted by these men here. Follow me!
Follow me, armed like soldiers with your thyrsi at hand!”

Only by fleeing did we avoid
being torn to pieces by the Bacchae;
but they attacked our grazing calves and not with swords in their hands.
You could have seen one of them, apart from the others, mauling with
both hands
a young heifer with swelling udders, bellowing all the while;
and other women were ripping apart mature cows, shredding them up.
You could have seen ribs or a cleft hoof
being tossed up and down. Hanging from the fir trees
the ribs and hooves dripped bloody gore.
Bulls previously aggressive and tossing their horns in rage
now tumbled to the ground, their bodies dragged down
by the myriad hands of young women.

Their garments of flesh were ripped off
faster than you could have winked your royal eyes.
Like birds the women rose, racing in rapid flight
over the outstretched plains where Thebes’ fruitful crop grows
along the streams of the Asopus river.

Attacking Hysiae and Erythrae, nested in the low hill country of Cithaeron,
like enemy soldiers they scattered things in every direction,
turning it all upside down. They snatched children from their homes.
And whatever they carried on their shoulders
was held fast without being fastened and didn’t fall [to the black earth,
not bronze, not iron.] On their locks of hair
they carried fire but it did not burn them. And the villagers,
angered at being plundered by the Bacchae, took to arms.
That was indeed a dreadful spectacle to behold, my lord.
For the men’s sharp-pointed spears drew no blood from the maenads,
neither bronze nor iron [...], but the women, hurling thyrsi from their hands,
were wounding the villagers and turning them to flight.

Women routed men, though not without some god’s help.
Back to that spot whence they had set out the Bacchae returned,
I mean to the very streams that the god had made spring up for them.
They washed off the blood while the snakes with their tongues
were licking from their skin the drops on their cheeks.

So this god — whoever he is — receive him, master,
into our city since in other matters, too, they say
he is great but especially in this, so I hear,
because he gave to mortals the vine that stops pain.
If there were no more wine, then there is no more Aphrodite
nor any other pleasure for mankind.

Exit messenger, stage left.

CHORUS LEADER

I am afraid to speak freely to the tyrant
but still it shall be said once and for all.
Dionysus is inferior to none of the gods!

PENTHEUS

Already it blazes up nearby like fire,
this insolent hybris of the Bacchae, a huge humiliation to Greeks.
But I must not hesitate.

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725 Iacchus: A mystic name of Dionysus at Athens and Eleusis.
735 “Being torn to pieces” (sparagmos): The appearance of this important noun here (735, 739) foreshadows a much more gruesome sparagmos (cp. 1127, 1135, 1220).
750 Asopus: A small river in Boeotia originating on Cithaeron near Plataea and flowing into the Gulf of Euboea.
751 Hysiae and Erythrae: Boeotian villages in the Asopus river valley.
763 Thrysus as offensive weapon: Once an instrument of worship, it here becomes an instrument of war. This duality expresses well the ambiguity of Dionysus’ cult as practiced by the maenads.
769 The messenger’s third and final warning to Pentheus to accept the god.
780 Effect of messenger speech on Pentheus: It shifts his wrath to the Theban maenads whereas before it was focused on the Stranger (674-76).
Turning to an attendant.

You there, go to the Electran gates.
Order all the shield-bearing foot-soldiers
and riders of swift-footed horses to meet me there.
Call up my light infantry, too, and the archers.
We’re going to march against the Bacchae
since this is too much to bear, that we suffer
what we suffer at the hands of women.⁵

Exit attendant, stage right.

THE STRANGER

You do not obey me at all, Pentheus, even though you have heard my
words.⁵
I have suffered badly at your hands
but still I say you ought not take up arms against a god.
Keep calm. Bromios will not endure any attempts to drive
his Bacchae
from the mountains that ring out with cries of joy for him.

PENTHEUS

Don’t lecture me! Since you’ve escaped despite being bound
won’t you guard your freedom? Or shall I punish you again?

THE STRANGER

I would sacrifice to him rather than rage on,⁶
kicking against the pricks, a man at war with god.

PENTHEUS

Yes, I’ll sacrifice but it will be the women’s slaughter.⁶ That’s what they
deserve.
I’ll stir up plenty of it in the valleys of Cithaeron.

THE STRANGER

You will be the ones fleeing, each and every one of you. And what a
disgrace,
to turn your bronze-forged shields before the wands of women.

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786 Humiliation by women: A common fear of males in tragedy (Antigone 484-85). It is
Pentheus’ masculine pride that provokes his call to arms.

787 The Stranger’s various “proofs” of Dionysus’ divinity: Thus far Pentheus remains
unpersuaded. At 789-809 the Stranger presents one last chance by offering to bring
the maenads peacefully from Cithaeron to Thebes.

794 Perils of anger: Pentheus is being warned about the dangers of his anger (thumos).
Earlier the messenger had feared the suddenness of Pentheus’ thumos (671). This
problem of reason being blinded by emotion occurs elsewhere in Euripides. It
is mainly because of her fierce thumos that Medea murders her two sons (Medea
1079-80).

796 It will indeed be “the women’s slaughter,” but by them, not of them (see 1114).

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PENTHEUS

Troublesome indeed is this stranger with whom we’re entangled.
Whether tied up or not, he just won’t keep quiet.

THE STRANGER

Sir, it is still possible to arrange these things well.⁶

PENTHEUS

By doing what? Being a slave to my slaves?

THE STRANGER

I’ll bring the women here without using the force of weapons.

PENTHEUS

Alas! Now you’re devising some trick against me!

THE STRANGER

What sort of trick, if I want to save you by my wiles?

PENTHEUS

You’ve made this compact with the Bacchae so you can revel with them
forever.

THE STRANGER

I have indeed made a compact — you can be sure of that — but it is with
the god.

PENTHEUS (turning to one of his guards)

You there, bring my weapons out here.⁶

Exit guard into palace; Pentheus turns to the Stranger.

And you, stop talking!

THE STRANGER

Ah!⁶

Do you want to see those women sitting together in the mountains?⁶

PENTHEUS

Indeed I would. I’d give a vast weight of gold for that.

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802 Is Dionysus’ offer to resolve the conflict genuine or a sinister mockery? If genuine,
it emphasizes Pentheus’ stubbornness.

809 Pentheus, frustrated, breaks off negotiations and again turns to force as a solution
(similarly 503, 653).

810 “Ah”. The play’s “monosyllabic turning point” (Taplin 158). This uncanny moment
marks the beginning of the end for Pentheus who now comes under the god’s
power and loses much of his ability to reason. Pentheus’ obstinacy has forced Dio-
nyus to shift gears and, as line 811 indicates, to initiate a new strategy, outlined
more fully at 847-61.

811-48 Dionysus’ new plan: He initiates now a second “device” to prove his divinity; the
first (driving the Theban women into a frenzy) has failed to convince Pentheus.
The second will be to punish Pentheus by driving him into a frenzy. The scheme
has two parts: a) getting Pentheus to go to the mountain and look at the maenads
(811, 819); b) agreeing to lead Pentheus to the mountain, if he will dress up as a
maenad (821 ff).
The Stranger  
But why have you fallen into so great a passion for seeing them?°

Pentheus  
I would be pained to see them drunk with wine.

The Stranger  
But still you would see with pleasure things that are bitter to you?  815

Pentheus  
Certainly I would — but in silence and sitting under the fir trees.

The Stranger  
But they will track you down even if you go secretly.

Pentheus  
Good point. I’d better go openly.

The Stranger  
Shall we lead you then? Will you really venture on the journey?

Pentheus  
Lead me as quickly as possible. I begrudge the time you’re wasting.  820

The Stranger  
Then put on this long dress of fine oriental linen.

Pentheus  
What are you saying? Instead of being a man shall I join the ranks of women?

The Stranger  
Yes. I fear they would kill you if you were seen as a man there.°

Pentheus  
Another good point. You’re a pretty clever fellow and have been right along.°

The Stranger  
Dionysus instructed us fully in these matters.  825

Pentheus  
How could your advice be successfully carried out?

The Stranger  
I myself will dress you up once we’ve gone into the house.

Pentheus  
In what kind of costume? A woman’s? But I would be ashamed.

813 Pentheus’ passion to see the maenads: The word for “passion” here is eros, the strongest Greek noun for sexual desire.
823-24 Why does Pentheus disguise himself as a woman? Here the primary reason is physical safety; he must look like a maenad lest he be killed.
824 Pentheus’ sudden change of mind: In the space of just fourteen verses (811-824) the Stranger virtually transforms Pentheus from a man into a woman.

833 The headband, associated with Lydia and usually worn by women to bind their hair, consisted of a piece of cloth wrapped around the head. It seems to have been part of Dionysiac ritual dress, possibly a sign of dedication to the god’s service. (Dodds 177)
838 Pentheus’ change of mind: Pentheus had intended to spill the blood of the Bacchae (796, 809) but now he will spy on them instead. As Seaord (1996, 215) notes, “it is psychologically apt that it is by a military intention that Pentheus overcomes his reluctance to wear female dress.”
PENTHEUS

[Hold on!] I’ll do the deciding about what seems best.

THE STRANGER

Very well. Whatever you decide, my course of action is prepared.

PENTHEUS

I think I’ll go in. For either I will march with weapons or I’ll obey your advice.

Exit Pentheus into palace.

THE STRANGER

Women, the man stands within the cast of our net.
He will come to the Bacchae and pay the penalty of death!
Dionysus, now the deed is yours — for you are not far off.
Let us punish him! First put him outside his mind.
Instill a light-headed frenzy. Since, if he reasons well,
he definitely won’t be willing to dress in a woman’s costume.
But if he drives off the road of reason, he will dress up.
I want the Thebans to mock him as we parade him through the city in his dainty disguise,
after those terrifying threats of his.
I’ll go and dress Pentheus up in the very adornments he’ll wear to Hades after being slain by his mother’s hands.
He will come to know Dionysus, the son of Zeus, that he is, in the ritual of initiation, a god most terrifying,
but for mankind a god most gentle.

Exit the Stranger into the palace.

845  Pentheus’ third and final threat to take by force the maenads on Mt. Cithaeron.
847-61  Thematic prologue to second half of play. This fifteen line speech summarizes the god’s plan of revenge — a plan that will drive the rest of the action.
854  Laughter as a weapon: Greek “shame culture” dictated that one man’s victory came at another’s expense. Being mocked meant “losing face” and was to be avoided at all costs.
855  Pentheus’ female disguise: Why does he cross-dress? For reasons of safety (821-23) and because transvestism is a well-known feature of initiation rites, depriving the initiand of his previous identity so he can assume a new one.
856  Earlier Pentheus had mocked Dionysus’ “girlish shape” (353); now Dionysus returns the favor, mocking Pentheus’ “womanly shape.”
860  The terror of Dionysus in ritual initiation. Dionysus is for mankind “most gentle” but for his initiands “most terrifying” because they must undergo the terrors of ritual death that preceded the spiritual rebirth of the Dionysiac mysteries. [I have translated the important and controversial phrase en telei in 860 as “in the ritual of initiation.” (Seaford 1996, 217)].
860-61  The god’s elusive doubleness: This powerful conclusion to Act III underscores the god’s frightening ambiguity (i.e., gentility and terror).

CHORUS OF ASIAN BACCHAE

STROPHE 1

Shall I ever move
my white feet in the all-night dances
breaking forth into Bacchic frenzy
tossing my neck back
into the night’s dewy air
like a fawn sporting amid the green delights of the meadow
when it has escaped the fearful hunt
eluding the ring of watchmen
beyond their well-woven nets
as the shouting hunter
incites his speedy hounds?
Swift as a storm-wind the fawn toils, races,
bounds toward the plain alongside the river
delighting in the wilderness devoid of men
delight ing in the young shoots of the leaf-shaded forest.

REFRAIN

What good is mere cleverness? Or, rather, what god-given gift
brings more honor to mortals
than to hold the hand of mastery
over the head of the enemy?
Whatever is honorable is dear always.

ANTISTROPHE 1

It starts out slowly
but still the strength of the gods
is trustworthy. And it punishes
those mortals who honor foolish arrogance
and those who, in the madness

FOURTH CHORAL SONG (862-911): This passionate ode expresses the chorus’ restored hope that, as a result of the palace miracles, they will be free to honor Dionysus without fear of Pentheus, who must be punished. The hymn separates the Stranger’s preceding prediction of victory from the victory itself.
879-80  The head of the enemy: Foreshadows Pentheus’ fate and also alludes to the main tenet of Greek moral thought, namely “to help one’s friends and harm one’s enemies.”
881  “What is honorable is dear always.” An old proverb; here it bitterly affirms the validity of Dionysus’ vengeance on Pentheus. The chorus’ delight in this revenge becomes ever stronger as the play proceeds (cf. 991-96 = 1011-16, 1020-23, 1156-68). For a different version of what is honorable see 1150-52.
of their opinions, do not extol things divine.
The gods cunningly conceal
the long foot of time
and hunt down the impious man.
One must never, in thought and deed, rise above the laws.
For it is a light expense to believe
that these things have power: first, the divine, whatever that may be; and second, the laws which the long stretch of time has codified forever and which are grounded in nature.

REFRAIN
What good is mere cleverness? Or, rather, what god-given gift brings more honor to mortals
than to hold the hand of mastery
over the head of the enemy?
Whatever is honorable is dear always.

EPHEDE
Happy the man who escapes
the storm at sea and reaches harbor.
Happy, too, is he who overcomes
his toils. And in different ways one man
surpasses another in prosperity and power.
Besides, countless are the hopes
of countless men. Some of those hopes
end in prosperity for mortals, others vanish.
But I count him blessed whose life,
from day to day, is happy.

ACT IV°

Enter the Stranger from the palace.

THE STRANGER
You there — the one eager to see what you ought not to see and seeking things not to be sought, I mean you Pentheus — come out in front of the house. Be seen by me wearing your costume of a woman, a maenad, a bacchant, spying on your mother and her troop.

Enter Pentheus from the palace; his new costume resembles the Stranger's.

Well, you look very much like one of Cadmus' daughters.

PENTHEUS
And truly I seem to myself to see two suns and a double Thebes, that fortress of seven mouths.
And you seem to be a bull leading us in front and horns seem to have sprouted on your head.
But where you a beast before? Because certainly you are a bull now.

THE STRANGER
The god accompanies me. Although initially ill-disposed he is in alliance with us. So now, at last, you see what you ought to see.

ACT IV, mirror of Act II: In Act II (434-518 = 85 lines) the Stranger (physically bound) is ushered in and out by Pentheus. Act IV (912-76 = 65 lines) reverses the situation of Act II; now Pentheus (mentally bound) is ushered in and out by the Stranger. Act IV can be divided structurally according to the several manifestations of Pentheus' delusion, moving from the physical (the changed perceptions of his eyes) to the psychological (the changed perceptions of his mind).

912: Why does Dionysus enter before Pentheus? "It is dramatically more effective but also because he is acting as his mystagogue," i.e. his initiator into the Dionysiac mysteries. (Seaford 1996, 223)

912: Pentheus as "Peeping Tom"? To describe him as such (Dodds xliii) is to suggest that his behavior is sexually perverted. That is too strong.

915 The physical resemblance between the Stranger and Pentheus. Both have long hair (235, 455, 493; 831), both look like maenads (491; 835-36, 915), and both carry a thyrsus (495, 835, 941). All of which means that Pentheus looks like his mother too.

917 Clothes and power: Pentheus' act of disrobing divests him not only of his regalia but symbolizes the physical dissolution of his kingship and the psychological dissolution of his identity.

918-19 Two suns and two cities: Why does Pentheus see two suns and two seven-gated cities of Thebes? At least two reasons, one physical, one religious. Dionysus has sent "a light-headed frenzy" (851) upon him which may well have caused distorted vision. Furthermore, Pentheus, as a new initiand into the Dionysiac cult group (thiasos), is assuming a new identity.

924 An allusion to 502 where the Stranger told Pentheus that his impiety prevented his seeing Dionysus.
PENTHEUS  
How do I look, then? Don’t I carry myself like Ino\textsuperscript{8}  
or like Agave, my mother?  

THE STRANGER  
Seeing you I seem to see those very women.  
But this braid of hair here is out of place,  
ot as I had arranged it under your headband.

PENTHEUS  
While I was inside the palace I shook my head forward\textsuperscript{9}  
and shook it back, revelling like a bacchant, and jostled it out of place.

THE STRANGER  
Well, we’ll set it back in place since it is our concern  
to serve you. Now, then, straighten up your head.

PENTHEUS  
There — you fix it since I give myself up to you.

THE STRANGER  
Your girdle, too, is loose and the pleats of your dress  
hang crooked below your ankles.

PENTHEUS  
Yes, at least around the right foot they do indeed seem out of order.\textsuperscript{9}  

Checking over his shoulder at the situation in the rear.

But on the left side my dress holds straight along the heel.

THE STRANGER  
Surely you will consider me the first of your friends  
when, contrary to expectation, you see the Bacchae chaste and sober.  

PENTHEUS  
Will I look more like a bacchant if I hold the thyrsus  
in my right hand or here, in my left?

THE STRANGER  
You must lift it in your right hand to keep time with the right foot.  
I congratulate you that you’ve changed your mind.

925-44 Transvestite scene as meta-theater (i.e. theater concious of itself as theater). The costume items mentioned at 830–36 are now being proudly worn by Pentheus as instructed by his fashion designer. Wolff (1982, 263) notes that Dionysus “plays the part, within his play, of the play’s director making backstage preparations and conducting a rehearsal. The theatrical process itself...has become part of the play’s subject. This is a mark of a late, self-conscious stage in the history of an art form.”

930-33 These lines reverse the situation of 492-94 where it was Dionysus’ hair that was the center of attention.

937-38 Tragic comedy. The sight of the maenads’ arch-enemy, himself dressed as a maenad intently adjusting his feminine costume, has a comic element.

945-55 The repetition “hidden...hiding...hiding” highlights the secretive nature of Pentheus’ activity and foreshadows the ominous events at this “hiding” place.

948-56 Pentheus returns to his notion of the maenads as obsessed with sex (cp. 223).

967-69 Pentheus will indeed be conspicuous. See 1139-43.
Pentheus
For this very reason I am going.

The Stranger
You will be carried home.

Pentheus
You mean in the lap of luxury.°

The Stranger
You will indeed be in your mother’s arms.

Pentheus
You’ll actually force me to be broken by pampering!

The Stranger
And what a pampering it will be!

Pentheus
I am taking hold of what I deserve.

The Stranger
You are wondrous, wondrous and you are going to wondrous sufferings so that you will find your fame towering as high as heaven.

Turning toward distant Cithaeron to address the Bacchae there.
Stretch out your hands, Agave, and you, her sisters, daughters of Cadmus. I am leading young man here into a great contest and the victor will be myself and Bromios.°

The event itself will show the rest.°

The Stranger escorts Pentheus off, stage left, towards Cithaeron.

Chorus of Asian Bacchae°

Strophe 1
Go forth, swift hounds of Frenzy,° go to the mountain where the daughters of Cadmus convene their congregation.

968 Pentheus proudly imagines he will be carried home in a chariot.
975 The distinction between the Stranger and Dionysus is dissolved here. The expression “the victor will be” is emphatically singular and so points to just one victor. This indicates that “the fiction that the Stranger and Dionysus are different entities, which they still were at line 849, has finally been given up.” (Rijksbaron 123; Seaford 1996, 227).
976 “The tying of the plot is now complete, the untying about to begin.” (Dodds 197) See Aristotle Poetics 1455 b24-32.

FIFTH CHORAL SONG (977-1023): Inspired by the Stranger’s preceding words, this excited song of revenge covers an imagined interval of many hours—the time needed for the disastrous offstage action to transpire (i.e. Pentheus’ ten mile trip to Cithaeron, his death, and the messenger’s return to Thebes).
977 The goddess Frenzy (lyssa): The chorus here picks up the Stranger’s injunction to them at 851 about frenzy (lyssa).

Refrain
Let justice go openly!
Let sword-bearing justice go forth,
slaying him
right through the throat—
the godless, lawless, unjust,
earth-born offspring of Echion.

Antistrophe 1
Since he, with unjust thought and unlawful rage concerning your secret rites, Bacchus, and those of your mother,
sets forth with a maddened mind and insane purpose
believing he will overpower by force the unconquerable,
that is to say, sensible judgment.

But death is hesitating where divine things are concerned
and to behave as a mortal entails a life free of pain.

I do not begrudge cleverness. But I rejoice
in hunting down these other things that are great and manifest
— for they lead a man’s life towards the good—
namely to be pure and reverent throughout the day and
into the night and, by rejecting customs
outside the sphere of justice, to honor the gods.

980 Gorgons: three monstrous sisters with snakes in their hair (like the Bacchae). Their gaze turned any lookers to stone. Medusa, the most famous Gorgon, suffered a fate similar to Pentheus, i.e. decapitation.
Refrain

Let justice go openly!
Let sword-bearing justice go forth,
slaying him
right through the throat —
the godless, lawless, unjust,
earth-born offspring of Echion.

Epode

Appear as a bull
or a many-headed snake
or a fire-blazing lion to behold.
Go, Bacchus, beast, and with a laughing face
cast the noose of death
on the hunter of the Bacchae
as he falls under the herd of maenads.

ACT V

Enter Messenger #2, stage left; he is Pentheus’ personal attendant.

MESSENGER #2

O house, you that once were fortunate throughout Greece,
[hause of the old man from Sidon who sowed in the soil
the earth-born crop of the serpent-dragon]
how I lament for you!
Though I am only a slave, still I lament.

CHORUS LEADER

What is the matter? Have you some news to reveal from the Bacchae?

MESSENGER #2

Pentheus is dead — the son of Echion, his father.

CHORUS LEADER (singing)

O lord Bromios, you have revealed yourself a mighty god!

MESSENGER #2

What do you mean? Why do you say this? Do you truly rejoice,
woman, in the misfortunes of one who was my master?

CHORUS LEADER

I am a foreigner. I cry “euoi” in ecstasy with my barbarian songs.
No longer do I cower under the fear of chains.

Act V (1024-1152) has two sections: a) 1024-1042 = lyric dialogue #2 = announcement of, and choral reaction to, Pentheus’ death; b) 1043-1152 = narrative description of Pentheus’ death at hands of Bacchae.

1025 The old man from Sidon, capital of Phoenicia, is Cadmus.

1043-1152 SECOND MESSENGER SPEECH (110 lines): In the first messenger speech (677-774) a herdsman (714) had described the miracles of the Theban Bacchae on Mt. Cithaeron, including the tearing apart (sparagmos) of bulls. In the present speech one of Pentheus’ slaves (1028, 1046), who was apparently on stage with Pentheus earlier (cp. 1043-47) and departed with him and the Stranger at 965-76, describes the tearing apart of his master.

1044 The Asopus River separated Thebes from Mt. Cithaeron (cp. 750n.).

1047 Pentheus as Olympic victor: The messenger refers to the Cithaeron mission as a theoria (“a viewing”), i.e. a sending of state ambassadors to the games. In this part of the play Pentheus is thought of as thebes’ champion competitor (963), her ace horse jockey (1074, 1108) who is going to a contest (agon, 964) to achieve fame (kleos, 972). But Dionysus, his official escort (pompos, 965, 1047), will end up as “the triumphant victor” (1146). (Leinihs 172-75)

1050 This messenger, like the first one, emphasizes three times (1050, 1063, 1077) that he was an eye-witness to the events he is reporting.
But the wretched Pentheus, not seeing the mob of women, spoke the following words:

“Stranger, from where we stand
my eyes cannot discern the maenads in their sick frenzy.
But on the banks of the ravine, by climbing a high-necked fir,
I could see more clearly the shameless deeds of the maenads.”

Just then I see miraculous deeds from the stranger.
Seizing hold of the sky-high branch of a fir tree,
he kept tugging, tugging, tugging it down to the black ground. 1065
The fir was arched like a bow being strung
or like a bulging wheel being chiselled on a revolving lathe.
In this way the stranger, tugging on this mountain branch
with both hands, was bending it to the earth, doing deeds not mortal.
And seating Pentheus on the fir’s branches
he lets the sapling go straight up through his hands
without shaking it, taking care not to throw the rider.
High up into the high sky the fir towered,9
my master saddled on its back. 9
But rather than seeing the maenads from above he was seen by them.
For he was just becoming visible on his lofty perch
when the stranger completely vanished from sight
and some voice from the air— I would guess Dionysus’ — shouted out:

“Young women, I bring him
who made you and me and my holy rites
a laughing-stock. But take revenge on him!”

And while he was speaking these words
a light of holy fire was towering up between heaven and earth.
The high air fell silent, and silent, too, were the leaves
of the forest meadow; nor could you hear the cry of beasts.
Not hearing the voice clearly with their ears
the Bacchae bolted straight up and cast their heads about.
Again he commanded them. And when the daughters of Cadmus

recognized clearly the command of Bacchus they darted forth
with the speed of a dove [their swift feet impetuously
- carrying them — 1060
his mother Agave and her kindred sisters] and all the Bacchae.
They were leaping through the valleys
swollen by winter torrents and over jagged cliffs,
frenzied by the god’s breath. 9
But when they saw my master sitting on the fir tree
first they kept hurling hard-hitting stones at him,5
climbing upon a rock that towered on the opposite ravine
and he was bombarded by their javelins of fir.
Others sent their thyrsi through the air at Pentheus.
Theirs was a cruel targeting but they missed the mark.
For the poor wretch sat too high, beyond the reach
of their zeal, though still captive to helplessness.
Finally, blasting some branches of oak with the force of a thunderbolt,
the Bacchae set about tearing up the tree’s roots with these unforged
levers.
But when they failed to accomplish the goals of their toiling
Agave spoke:

“Come, stand round in a circle, maenads,
and let each of us take hold of a branch
so we can capture the mounted beast 9
lest he report the god’s secret dances.”

And the women put a thousand hands to the fir tree and tore it
out of the earth. High up Pentheus sat and from that height
he falls, crashing to the ground with a thousand wailing cries.
He understood that he was near evil.
It was his own mother who first, as sacred priestess, began the
slaughter
and falls upon him. He threw the headband from his hair
hoping that the wretched Agave, recognizing her son, might not kill him.
Touching her cheek, he spoke:

“It is I, mother, your son
Penteus to whom you gave birth in the house of Echion.
Take pity, mother, and do not,
because of my errors, kill your son.”

But Agave, toasting at the mouth and rolling her protruding eyeballs, not thinking what she ought to think, was held fast by the Bacchic god nor was Penteus persuading her. Seizing his left arm with her forearms and pressing her foot against the doomed man’s ribs she tore off his shoulder, not by her own strength — no, the god gave a special ease to her hands. Iph using the job, tearing off his other shoulder, ripping pieces of flesh while Autonoe and the entire mob of Bacchae continued to press upon him. Every kind of shout was mingled together, and for as long as he had breath he screamed in pain while the maenads were crying out in triumph. One was carrying an arm,

another a foot still in its hunting boot. The ribs were laid bare by the tearing apart. All the women, with blood-spattered hands were playing ball with Penteus’ flesh.

His body lies scattered, one part beneath rugged rocks, another in the thick foliage of the forest, not easily sought out. But the pitiful head, the very one which his mother just then happened to take with her hands, she impales on the tip of her thyrsus and carries it, as if it were the head of a mountain lion, through the middle of Cithaeron, leaving behind her sisters in the choruses of dancing maenads.

Rejoicing in her ill-fated prey she comes inside these city walls

1121: Penteus’ recognition of the truth? For the first time he confesses to “errors” but what he means, beyond the fact of his physical danger, is unclear.

1122: Agave’s foaming mouth and protruding eyeballs: Well-known symptoms of abnormal mental states and, in particular, of epilepsy. Mother becomes like son to the degree that she confuses “what she ought to think” just as Penteus had confused “what he ought to see” (924).

1141: Impaling of Penteus’ head: The second climax of this speech, even more harrowing than the first (cp. 1114). “Euripides creates a Penteus who is transformed visually into a symbol of Dionysus. Penteus becomes the thyrsus of the god: first he is crowned with long hair and a mitra [headband], then he himself crowns the tip of a fir tree raised by the maenads on the mountain, and finally he becomes the literal crown of the thyrsus carried by his mother.” (Kalke 410)

1142: Penteus’ head as that of a lion (another one of Dionysus’ animal manifestations): Such is Agave’s consistent perception: 1196, 1215, 1278; cp. 1142, 1183, 1210, 1237.

calling upon the Bacchic god as her ‘fellow huntsman,’ her ‘comrade in the chase,’ the ‘triumphant victor’ in whose honor she carries off tears as a victory-prize.

So I will depart out of the way of this disaster before Agave returns to the palace. Moderation and reverence for things divine, this is the best course. And it is also, I think, the wisest possession for those mortals who use it.°

Exit Messenger #2, stage right.

CHORUS OF ASIAN BACCHAE°

Let us lift up our feet and dance for Bacchus! Let us lift up our voices and shout for the doom of Penteus, descendant of the serpent.

He took the clothes of a woman° and the fennel-rod fashioned into a beautiful thyrsus, a sure warranty of death in Hades, having a bull as his leader to doom.°

Cadmean Bacchae, you have made your victory hymn renowned, but it ends in a dirge of wailing, of tears. A fine contest — to plunge your hands in the blood of your child so that they drip with his blood!

1150-52 Moral of messenger’s story: “Moderation and piety toward the gods are man’s wisest possessions.” This traditional but powerful platitude restates the answer to the crucial question asked by the chorus twice earlier (877-81 = 897-901) about the nature of wisdom. (Dodds 219)

SIXTH CHORAL ODE (1153-64): A celebration of Penteus’ death and Agave’s homecoming, as if she was a victor returning from the Olympic games (1160). It is the play’s only apotactic ode (a single stanza with no metrically responding counterpart) and is sung in an excited meter. This last ode is the play’s shortest because “as the action hurries to its climax there is time only for a brief song of triumph.... The opening words suggest a joyful accompanying dance; but as the thoughts of the singers turn from Penteus to Agave horror, if not pity, creeps in. The last lines prepare the audience for what their eyes must now meet.” (Dodds 219; cp. Leinieks 278)

1156-58 Hades and Dionysus: By dressing like the maenads and taking up their main instrument, the thyrsus, Penteus assured his own death (cp. 857-59, 1141). The irony, then, is that what should have been Penteus’ means of initiation into Dionysus’ cult group has become instead his means of initiation into Hades’ house. Hence the apparent opposites, Hades (death) and Dionysus (exuberant life) turn out to be one and the same.

1159 The chorus is referring to Penteus’ vision of Dionysus as a bull at 920-22.
EXODUS

CHORUS LEADER (interrupting the song, addressing her companions)
Stop! I see Pentheus' mother, Agave,
rushing toward the house, her eyes rolling wildly.
Receive this revealer of the god of ecstasy!

Enter Agave alone, stage left, excitedly dancing (cp. 1230-31) in her maenad costume;
she carries Pentheus' blood-stained head (i.e. mask) atop her thyrsus.

LYRIC DIALOGUE

STROPHE 1

AGAVE
Asian Bacchae...

CHORUS LEADER
Why do you call out on me, woman?

AGAVE
We bring from the mountains to the palace
a freshly cut tendril,
a blessed prey!

CHORUS LEADER
I see it and will accept you as a fellow-reveller.

AGAVE
I captured him without any snares,
this young whelp [of a mountain lion]
as you can see for yourself.

CHORUS LEADER
Where in the wilderness did you capture him?

AGAVE
Cithaeron...

CHORUS LEADER
Cithaeron?

AGAVE
...slaughtered him.

EXODOS ("a going out," with reference to the chorus' departure, as at the end of most
Greek tragedies). This epilogue presents the play's tragic "reversal" which Aristotle
defined as "a change of the action to its opposite...which must conform to probability or necessity." (Poetics 1452a 22-24). That reversal had been foreshadowed at
1147 where the messenger told of "she who carries off tears as a victory-prize."

1168-99 Lyric Dialogue #3: (cp. 576-603, 1024-42). The singing here continues the swift
and excited choreography of the preceding song. There are two stanzas which
respond to one another metrically: strophe (1168-83): chorus asks Agave about her
hunting of a lion cub (= Pentheus) on Cithaeron; antistrophe (1184-99): Agave, in her
frenzy, invites the chorus to share in a feast of her "catch."

BACCHAE

CHORUS LEADER
Who was the woman who struck him?

AGAVE
First honors belong to me.

'‘Blessed Agave’ is what the worshippers call me."

CHORUS LEADER
Who else struck him?

AGAVE
Cadmus'...

CHORUS LEADER
Cadmus' what?

AGAVE
His daughters,
but only after me. Only after me did they lay their hands
on this beast here. Lucky indeed is this catch!

ANTISTROPE 1

AGAVE (gently caressing Pentheus' head)
Share in the feast, then.

CHORUS LEADER
What? Am I to share in this, wretched woman?

AGAVE
The bull is still young:

beneath his crest of soft hair
his cheeks are just now blooming with down.

CHORUS LEADER
Yes, with his mane he resembles a beast of the wild country.

AGAVE
The Bacchic god, being a clever hunter,
cleverly urged his maenads
against this beast.

1180 One of the play's most bitter ironies—that Agave should call herself "blessed"
(makri) when she is carrying the head of Pentheus whose name ("Man of Pain")
means the opposite of "blessed."

1184 Agave as amnibel: She still thinks Pentheus' head is the head of a lion, hence she
suggests feasting on it. The idea of eating Pentheus' remains raw (= omophagia, see 135-
39.) repels even Dionysus' most ardent worshippers. Animals might eat humans, as
did Actaeon's dogs (see 337-41n.), but humans eating humans goes beyond the pale.
Agave, in her delusion, ignores their reaction of pity (cp. 1200-1). She will reiterate
her invitation to Cadmus at 1242 and will receive a similar response.

1185 Agave's changing perception of Pentheus: Her most consistent delusion is that he is
a young lion (1142, 1196, 1215, 1278); at 1170 he seems like a shoot of ivy; here, at
1185, a young bull.
CHORUS LEADER
For our king is a hunter.

AGAVE
Do you praise me?

CHORUS LEADER
I do praise you.

AGAVE
And soon the Cadmeans...

CHORUS LEADER
and your son Pentheus, too, ...

AGAVE
will praise his mother
for capturing this lion-like prey.

CHORUS LEADER
So extraordinary a catch!

AGAVE
Caught in such an extraordinary way!

CHORUS LEADER
Do you exult in him?

AGAVE
I do indeed rejoice
since, in capturing this prey, I have accomplished
a great deed, a great deed for all to see.

CHORUS LEADER
Show, then, poor wretch, show to the citizens the prey
that brought you victory and that now you have brought to us.

AGAVE
O you dwellers of Thebes, city of beautiful ramparts,
come so you can see this prey of a beast that we,
the daughters of Cadmus, have hunted down
not with thonged Thessalian javelins,
not with nets, but with the sharp white blades
of our hands. So who would brag
that he owns the weapons of spear-makers? They are useless!
With our very own hands we captured this one here
and piece by piece tore to shreds the limbs of the beast.

Where is my father, the old man? Let him come near!
And Pentheus, my son, where is he? Let him take and raise
a sturdy ladder against the palace

BACCHAE
so he can climb up and nail to the triglyphs
this lion's head that I have hunted and brought here.

Enter Cadmus, stage left, followed down the side entry ramp by a slow procession of mute pallbearers carrying a bier with the covered remains of Pentheus' corpse.

CADMUS
Follow me as you carry the sad weight of Pentheus.
Follow me, attendants, in front of the house.
I bring this body here after toiling in a thousand searches,
having found him in the folds of Cithaeron,
torn to pieces, [taking] not one limb in the same part
of the ground [lying in that impenetrable forest].

For I heard from someone the daring deeds of my daughters
just as I got back inside the city walls.
With the old man, Tiresias, I was returning from the Bacchae.
So I bent my way back to the mountain
where I recovered the child slain by the maenads.
I saw Autonoe, who once mothered Actaeon to Aristeus,
and Ino with her, still in the thickets,
poor wretches, and still stung with madness.
But the other, Agave, was said to be returning home
with the frenzied step of a Bacchic dancer. Nor was this idle gossip
since I see her now and she is not a happy sight.

AGAVE (who has, by now, taken Pentheus' head from her thyrsus and cradles it in her arms)
Father, now you can boast most proudly
that you, of all mortals, have sown by far the best daughters.
I mean all your daughters but especially me.
For it was I who left behind the spindles at the loom
to come to greater tasks, the hunting of wild beasts with my own hands.

1214 Triglyph: a slightly projecting, three-grooved rectangular block occurring at regular intervals in a Doric frieze; between each triglyph was a plain square area called a metope.

1216 Cadmus' entrance answers Agave's question (1211). His final words before his last previous exit (369) had been a warning to Pentheus lest he suffer Actaeon's fate of being ripped apart by his own hounds (338-41). Now, ironically, Cadmus must relate how Pentheus has been ripped apart by his own mother.

1224 Earlier Cadmus had accompanied Tiresias to Mt. Cithaeron to celebrate Bacchus' rites (cp. 360 ff.).

1227 Aristeus was the son of Apollo and the nymph Cyrene.

1226-37 Sex role reversal: Agave abandons her domestic role (as weaver; cp. 118) in the house (the female's normal place in Greek society) to pursue the "greater task" of being a hunter in the wild.
I carry here in my arms, as you see, this prize of valor
that I captured to be hung up as a dedication
in your house. Receive it, father, in your hands! 1240

Offering the head to him.
Rejoice in the spoils I captured in the hunt!
Invite your friends to a feast! For you are blessed,
blessed by the deeds we have done!

Cadmus
[O sorrow beyond measure nor able to see.
Murder — that’s what you’ve done with those pitiable hands.]
A fine victim is this you have struck down as a sacrifice for the gods.
And now you invite this Thebes here and me to a feast.
Alas the pain of these evils, first yours, then mine.
How the god has destroyed us — justly, yes, but too severely
given that lord Bromios was born within our family. 1245

Agave
How crabbed is old age for men!
How it scowls in the eyes!
Would that my son were a skilled hunter, resembling the ways
of his mother whenever he joined the young Theban men
and aimed at the beasts! But all that boy can do
is fight against the gods. He must be scolded, father, by you.
Who will call him here before me
so that he might see my blessed state?

Cadmus
Alas, alas! When you come to your senses and realize
what you have done you will feel pain, terrible pain.
But if you remain forever in your present state
you will imagine yourself fortunate, though in reality you are most
unfortunate.

Agave
But in all this, what is not well? What is so painful?

Cadmus
First turn your eyes this way, up toward the sky.
Agave (looking skyward)
There. But why did you advise me to look at the sky?

Cadmus
Does it still appear the same to you or has it undergone a change?

Agave
It is brighter than before and more translucent.

Cadmus
Is this fluttering sensation still in your soul?

Agave
I don’t understand your question. But somehow...
(pausing for a moment)
somehow I am coming to my senses, changed from my previous state of
mind.

Cadmus
Could you, then, hear a question? And could you answer it clearly?

Agave
Yes, but I have completely forgotten what we just said, father.

Cadmus
To whose house did you come when you got married?

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

Cadmus
And who in this house is the son of your husband?

Agave
Pentheus, by my union with his father.

Cadmus
Well then, whose face do you hold folded in your arms?

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1238-40 Pentheus’ death as an animal sacrifice: The climax of a long series of details in the
play’s second half which suggest that Euripides saw Pentheus’ death as following the
pattern of a Greek animal sacrifice.

1250 As the son of Semele, Dionysus was Cadmus’ grandson.

1263-1300 Famous “psychotherapy scene” and its historical importance: The alternating
single line dialogue allows Cadmus, by the healing art of persuasion, to coax his
daughter out of her delusion. Here we have “an important document in the history
of human culture...the first surviving account of an insight-and-recall oriented
psychotherapy....Such an innovation is the natural consequence of the basic outlook
of a poet who...systematically substituted psychological explanations of human
motivation for traditionally supernatural ones.” (Devereux 42)

1273-84 Role of memory in Agave’s recognition: “Cadmus skillfully leads up to the ana-
gnorisis (recognition), appealing to the older memories that have not been repressed.
She remembers her husband? Her son? Then at 1277 he shoots the crucial question
at her. With averted eyes she answers ‘A lion’s—or so they told me in the hunt.’
Gently but relentlessly he forces her from this last refuge: ‘Come, you must look
properly: it is only a moment’s effort.’ Then she knows; but she will not or cannot
speak the name until he drags it from her. The whole dialogue is magnificently
imagined.” (Dodds 230)

1277 The word for “face” here (prosopon) might also mean “mask”; it is Pentheus’ mask,
of course, that Agave is carrying. The mother’s dance with her son’s severed head,
her ritual rejoicing over her “bestial” victim, must have been a shocking spectacle
for Euripides’ audience.
AGAVE
A lion’s head — at least that’s what the women hunters told me.

CADMUS
Look again, straight at it. The toil of looking is brief.

AGAVE
Ah! What do I see? What is this I am carrying in my hands?

CADMUS
Look again closely so you can learn more clearly.

AGAVE
I see the greatest pain, wretched woman that I am.

CADMUS
Surely it doesn’t resemble a lion, does it?

AGAVE
No. Wretch that I am, this is Pentheus’ head that I am holding.10

CADMUS
Much lamented by me long before you recognized him.

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

CADMUS
Cruel truth, how untimely is your presence!9

AGAVE
Speak! How my heart leaps in fear about what is coming.

CADMUS
You killed him, you and your sisters.

AGAVE
But where did he die? In the house? Tell me, where?

CADMUS
In the very place where the hounds once tore Actaeon to pieces.8

AGAVE
Why did he go to Cithaeron, this doomed boy?

CADMUS
He went to mock the god and your Bacchic rites.

AGAVE
And in what manner did we get there?

1282-84 Agave’s moment of truth: She finally realizes that the head she holds does not belong to a lion. Her recognition induces her to begin to ask the questions, thereby switching roles with Cadmus.

1287 The first and only time in the play that the word “truth” (aletheia) occurs.

1291 Actaeon, the son of Autonoë, was Pentheus’ first cousin; 337-40n.
Your blood-stained and furrowed limbs
and parts I cover with new shrouds,
and your ribs, too, all pierced and bloody.

AGAVE
And what share had Pentheus in my folly?

CADMUS
He proved himself like all of you, showing no reverence to the god.
Therefore the god joined everyone together in one ruin,
all of you and Pentheus here, so as to destroy my house and me.
And I am indeed destroyed since I was born childless, without any male
offspring. 1305
So now, wretched woman, I look upon this young shoot of your womb,
he who has been slain so shamefully and so evilly.
Through him the house was recovering its sight.°

Turning to Pentheus’ corpse.°

It was you, child, who held my palace together, you, my daughter’s son,
who were such a terror to the city. No one was willing
to commit hybris against the old man, at least not in your presence;
for you would have exacted the proper penalty.
But now I will be thrown out of my palace, dishonored,
Cadmus the great who sowed the race of the Thebans
and reaped a most beautiful harvest.
O most beloved of men — for though you are dead
still you will be counted, child, among those I love most —
no more will you touch this chin of mine with your hand,
no more will you call me “grandfather” as you embrace me, son —
no more will you ask,
“Who wrongs you, old man, who dishonors you?
Who upsets your heart and causes you pain?
Speak up so I can punish whoever wrongs you, father.”
But now I am wretched and you are miserable
and your mother pitiful and your sisters miserable.
So if there is anyone who disdains the gods
let him look at the death of this man here and let him believe that gods
exist.°

1308 Since Cadmus had no sons (1305), his grandson was the only hope for the future,
his shining light.
1309-22 Cadmus’ funerary oration: “Cadmus’ lament is almost a parody of a funeral oration.
It is delivered in private rather than in public and has more praise for Pentheus’
domestic than civic actions... Nor does Cadmus mention the traditional topic of
fame or lasting memory.” (Segal 1994, 16)
1326 Pentheus had refused to believe any of Dionysus’ series of proofs of his existence.
In retribution the god has made the death of the unbeliever himself the crowning
proof of his divinity.

CHORUS LEADER
I am pained by your fate, Cadmus. But your grandson,
he has received just punishment, though painful to you.

AGAVE
Father, since you see how greatly my fortunes have changed
and how wretched I am who exulted proudly just moments ago,
what hands, child, will bury you?
Would that I had not taken my own pollution into my own hands!°

CADMUS
Take courage. Though the labor is painful
be assured that I will carry Pentheus’ furrowed and blood-stained limbs
from this place and give them a proper burial.

[Enter Dionysus as a god atop the palace roof.°]

DIONYSUS°
Whoever of mortals has seen these things
let him be taught very well:
Zeus is the one who sowed the god Dionysus.
In light of the deeds done,
know clearly that he is a god....
The Cadmeians spoke indecent words about me
that [Semele] was born from some mortal; all of them said this
[but Pentheus here is especially culpable.]
And it was not enough for me to be treated with hybris in these things alone
[but he himself, though a mortal, stood against us.]
He tried to chain and abuse me.
[And then, mounted on disaster, he went to the mountain
and dared to spy upon the secret rites of the maenads.]
Accordingly he died at the hands of those who least of all should have murdered
him.

Text in italics. Again, as at 1301 ff., the text has been reconstructed from various sources.
The reconstructed portions are printed here in italics. Brackets indicate lines that
have been made up by C. Willink for the purpose of suggesting the kind of verse
that would have made sense in the particular context.

Dionysus’ epiphany: For the first time the god appears in his divine form (deus ex machina,
“god out of the machine”). Earlier he was, like a Homeric god, disguised. The ancient
hypothesis (plot summary) is our main evidence for the missing part of the god’s
speech: “Dionysus, having appeared, announced [initiation rituals?] to everyone.
To each one he made clear what would happen in deeds so that he would not be
depressed in words as a man by one of those outside [Dionysiac religion].”

Dionysus’ physical appearance: The actor probably did not change his mask; no firm
evidence exists for mask changing. Costume changing is also not common. It
would be the place of his entry (i.e. atop the palace) which would immediately
signal that ‘the Stranger’ was now revealing himself as a god.
when you chose otherwise, you would now be happy and have the son of Zeus as an ally.

**Cadmus**

Dionysus, we beg you, we have wronged you.

**Dionysus**

You were late to understand us. When you ought to have known us, you did not.

**Cadmus**

We have realized our mistakes now. But your punishment is too severe.

**Dionysus**

Yes, but I am a god and was treated with hybris by you.

**Cadmus**

Gods ought not be like mortals in their passions.

**Dionysus**

Long ago Zeus, my father, assented to these things.

**Agave**

Alas, old man, it has been decreed — miserable exile.

**Dionysus**

Why, then, do you delay what necessity mandates?

Dionysus probably disappears from the palace roof at this point.

**Cadmus**

O child, what a dreadful evil we have come to, all of us — you in your misery, and your sisters, and I in my misery. I will arrive among foreigners.
as an old and alien settler. And still for me there is an oracle
that I must lead into Greece a motley army of foreigners.
Against the altars and tombs of the Greeks
I will lead Harmonia, Ares’ daughter and my wife —
both of us as savage snakes — and I will lead the way
with my troop of spearmen. Nor will I have any respite from evils,
miserable man that I am, nor will I come to peace and quiet
when I sail across the downward-plunging Acheron.\textsuperscript{6}

\textbf{Agave (embracing Cadmus)}
O father, I will go into exile and be deprived of you.

\textbf{Cadmus}
Why do you embrace me with your hands, wretched child,
like a swan protecting its white-haired, helpless drone of a parent? \textsuperscript{1365}

\textbf{Agave}
Where shall I turn after having been banished from my fatherland?

\textbf{Cadmus}
I do not know, child. Your father is a weak ally.

\textbf{Agave}\textsuperscript{6}
Farewell, O palace, farewell, O city of my fathers.
I leave you in misfortune
an exile from my own bed-chambers.

\textbf{Cadmus}
Go, then, child, to Aristaeus’ [house...]
\textit{[one line is missing from the text]}

\textbf{Agave (slowly beginning to exit)}
I mourn for you, father.

\textbf{Cadmus}
And I mourn for you, child,
and I weep for your sisters.

\textbf{Agave}
For lord Dionysus has brought
this terrible brutality
into your house.

\textbf{Cadmus}
Yes, because he suffered terribly at your hands:
his name received no honor in Thebes.\textsuperscript{6}

\textsuperscript{1360} Acheron (literally = “flowing with sorrow”): a river in northwest Greece said to flow into the underworld.

\textsuperscript{1365} The meter changes to marching anapests, appropriate for departures.

\textsuperscript{1375} This theme of being punished for not honoring the god is emphasized by Cadmus throughout the end of the play; but he also stresses the excessiveness of the god’s punishment.

\textbf{Agave}
Farewell, my father.

\textbf{Cadmus}
Farewell, my sorrowing daughter,
though only with difficulty could you fare well.

\textbf{Agave}
Escort me, O friends, to where we will gather
my sisters, companions in exile and in sadness.
May I go to where
neither polluted Cithaeron [can see me]
nor I polluted Cithaeron,
nor where any memorial of the thyrsus is dedicated.
Let these — Cithaeron and the thyrsus — be the care of other Bacchae.\textsuperscript{6}

\textit{Exit Cadmus and his attendants, stage right, carrying the bier of Pentheus; exit Agave, stage left, into exile.}\textsuperscript{6}

\textbf{Chorus}
Many are the shapes of divinity,
many the things the gods accomplish against our expectation.
What seems probable is not brought to pass,
whereas for the improbable god finds a way.
Such was the outcome of this story.\textsuperscript{6}

\textsuperscript{1380} Future maenadism at Thebes will be left to others. Agave’s rejection of Dionysus and his devotees could not be more emphatic and in this final rejection she carries on the spirit of her son.

\textit{“The play ends with the heavy departures, in opposite directions, of Cadmus, the heroic founder of a great city, and of Agave, daughter and mother of kings—departures away from the palace, scene of their greatness, and off into the empty, friendless outside. One only has to contrast the end of lon. We see here the dispersal of a great house, a house great enough to breed a god: so dangerous is it to be mortal kin to the immortals. Thus Euripides uses the necessary clearance of the stage to demonstrate the frailty of human exaltation.” (Taplin 56-57)}

\textsuperscript{1385} Are these final five lines genuine? Scholars are sharply divided. If they are spurious, the chorus could have exited silently after 1387 or even after 1351, with their god Dionysus, if (as seems probable) he exited then. (Seaford 1996, 258)