

Euripides  
Bacchae



Translated by Ian Johnston

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by

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## Translator's Note

The translator would like to acknowledge the valuable help of E. R. Dodds' edition of and commentary on the *Bacchae* (Oxford, 1960).

Note that the normal line numbers refer to this text and the ones in square brackets refer to the lines in the Greek text. There is an important gap of 50 lines or more in Euripides' manuscript between lines 1329 and 1330 of the Greek text. The content of the missing lines is fairly well known, so this translation has attempted to provide a reconstructed text for the missing portion (lines 1645 to 1699 of the English text). That reconstructed text appears between square brackets. For a brief account of the missing material see Dodds p. 234.

For a brief interpretative introduction to *The Bacchae* consult the follow link on the Internet: [http://www.mala.bc.ca/~johnstoi/euripides/Bacchae\\_Introduction.htm](http://www.mala.bc.ca/~johnstoi/euripides/Bacchae_Introduction.htm)

## A Note on the Author

Euripides (born c. 484 in Athens) wrote a number of plays and won first prize in the competition for tragedy five times. The majority of these works have not survived. It is clear from comments in other works (especially in the plays of Aristophanes) that Euripides was a controversial figure in Athens. In 408 he moved from Athens to Macedonia and died the following year, allegedly torn apart by a pack of hunting dogs. *The Bacchae*, one of his last plays, was not performed during his lifetime.

## Bacchae

### Dramatis Personae

DIONYSUS: divine son of Zeus and Semele.

TIRESIAS: an old blind prophet.

CADMUS: grandfather of both Dionysus and Pentheus, an old man.

PENTHEUS: young king of Thebes, grandson of Cadmus, cousin of Dionysus.

AGAVE: mother of Pentheus, daughter of Cadmus, sister of Semele.

FIRST MESSENGER: a cattle herder.

SECOND MESSENGER: an attendant on Pentheus.

CHORUS OF BACCHAE: worshippers of Dionysus who have followed him from Asia, also called Maenads or Bacchantes.

SOLDIERS and ATTENDANTS around Pentheus.

*[The action takes place in front of the royal palace of Thebes. Enter DIONYSUS]*

DIONYSUS

I've arrived here in the land of Thebes,  
I, Dionysus, son of Zeus, born to him  
from Semele, Cadmus' daughter, delivered  
by a fiery midwife—Zeus' lightning flash.<sup>1</sup>  
Yes, I've changed my form from god to human,  
appearing here at these streams of Dirce,  
the waters of Ismenus. I see my mother's tomb—  
for she was wiped out by that lightning bolt.

<sup>1</sup>Semele, Cadmus' daughter and Dionysus' mother, had an affair with Zeus. Hera, Zeus' wife, tricked Zeus into destroying Semele with a lightning bolt. Zeus took Dionysus and concealed him in his thigh to hide him from Hera.

It's there, by the palace, with that rubble, 10  
 the remnants of her house, still smoldering  
 from Zeus' living fire—Hera's undying outrage  
 against my mother. But I praise Cadmus. [10]  
 He's made his daughter's shrine a sacred place.  
 I have myself completely covered it  
 with leafy shoots of grape-bearing vines.  
 I've left the fabulously wealthy East,  
 lands of Lydians and Phrygians,  
 Persia's sun-drenched plains, walled towns in Bactria.  
 I've moved across the bleak lands of the Medes,  
 through rich Arabia, all Asian lands, 20  
 along the salt-sea coast, through those cities  
 with their beautifully constructed towers,  
 full of barbarians and Greeks all intermingled.  
 Now I've come to Thebes, city of Greeks, [20]  
 only after I've set those eastern lands  
 dancing in the mysteries I established,  
 making known to men my own divinity.  
 Thebes is the first city of the Greeks  
 where I've roused people to shout out my cries,  
 with this deerskin draped around my body, 30  
 this ivy spear, a thyrsus, in my hand.<sup>1</sup>  
 For my mother's sisters have acted badly,  
 something they, of all people, should avoid.  
 They stated aloud that I, Dionysus,  
 was no child of Zeus, claiming Semele,  
 once she was pregnant by some mortal man,  
 attributed her bad luck in bed to Zeus,  
 a story made up (they said) to trick Cadmus. [30]  
 Those sisters state that's why Zeus killed her,  
 because she lied about the man she'd slept with. 40

<sup>1</sup>A thyrsus (pl. thyrsoi) is a hollow plant stalk, usually decorated with ivy, and carried as a symbol of Dionysus in the dancing celebrations (where it can acquire magical powers).

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So I've driven those women from their homes  
 in a frenzy—they now live in the mountains,  
 out of their minds. I've made them put on costumes,  
 outfits appropriate for my mysteries.  
 All Theban offspring—or, at least, all women—  
 I've driven in a crazed fit from their homes.  
 Now they sit out there among the rocks,  
 underneath green pine trees, no roof overhead,  
 Cadmus' daughters in their company as well.  
 For this city has to learn, though against its will, 50  
 that it has yet to be initiated  
 into my Dionysian rites. Here I plead [40]  
 the cause of my own mother, Semele,  
 appearing as a god to mortal men,  
 the one she bore to Zeus. Now Cadmus,  
 the old king, has just transferred his power,  
 his royal authority, to Pentheus,  
 his daughter's son, who, in my case at least,  
 fights against the gods, prohibiting me  
 all sacrificial offerings. When he prays, 60  
 he chooses to ignore me. For this neglect  
 I'll demonstrate to him, to all in Thebes,  
 that I was born a god. Once these things here  
 have been made right, I'll move on somewhere else,  
 to some other land, revealing who I am.  
 But if Thebans in this city, in their anger, [50]  
 try to make those Bacchic women leave,  
 to drive them from the mountains forcibly,  
 then I, commander of these Maenads,  
 will fight them.<sup>1</sup> That's why I've transformed myself, 70  
 assumed a mortal shape, altered my looks,  
 so I resemble any human being.

<sup>1</sup>The Maenads, who make up the Chorus in the play, are the female followers of Dionysus, who have come with him from the east, from Phrygia in Asia Minor.

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*[Enter the Chorus of Bacchae, dressed in ritual deerskin, carrying small drums like tambourines]*

But you there, you women who've left Tmolus,  
backbone of Lydia, my band of worshippers,  
whom I've led here from barbarian lands,  
my comrades on the road and when we rest,  
take up your drums, those instruments of yours  
from Phrygian cities, first invented  
by mother Rhea and myself.<sup>1</sup> Move round here,  
beat those drums by Pentheus' palace,  
let Cadmus' city see you, while I go,  
in person, to the clefts of Mount Cithaeron,  
to my Bacchae, to join their dancing.

80 [60]

*[Exit Dionysus]*

CHORUS *[singing and dancing]*

FIRST VOICE

From Asia, from sacred Tmolus  
I've come to dance,  
to move swiftly in my dance—  
for Bromius—  
sweet and easy task,  
to cry out in celebration,  
hailing great god Bacchus.<sup>2</sup>

90

SECOND VOICE

Who's in the street? Who's there? Who?  
Let him stay inside  
out of our way.  
Let every mouth be pure,

[70]

<sup>1</sup>Rhea is Zeus' mother. The drums referred to are like tambourines. Tmolus is a river in Asia Minor.

<sup>2</sup>Bromius and Bacchus are alternative names for Dionysus.

completely holy,  
speak no profanities.  
In my hymn I celebrate  
our old eternal custom,  
hailing Dionysus.

### THIRD VOICE

O, blessed is the man, 100  
the fortunate man who knows  
the rituals of the gods,  
who leads a pious life,  
whose spirit merges  
with these Bacchic celebrations,  
frenzied dancing in the mountains,  
our purifying rites—  
one who reveres these mysteries  
from Cybele, our great mother,  
who, waving the thyrsus, 110 [80]  
forehead crowned with ivy,  
serves Dionysus.<sup>1</sup>

### FOURTH VOICE

On Bacchae! Bacchae, move!  
Bring home Bromius, our god,  
son of god, great Dionysus,  
from Phrygian mountains  
to spacious roads of Greece—  
Hail Bromius!

### FIFTH VOICE

His mother dropped him early,  
as her womb, in forceful birth pangs, 120  
was struck by Zeus' flying lightning bolt, [90]  
a blast which took her life.  
Then Zeus, son of Cronos,

<sup>1</sup>Cybele is an eastern mother goddess.

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at once hid him away  
in a secret birthing chamber,  
buried in his thigh,  
shut in with golden clasps,  
concealed from Hera.

#### SIXTH VOICE

Fates made him perfect.  
Then Zeus gave birth to him, 130 [100]  
the god with ox's horns,  
crowned with wreaths of snakes—  
that's why the Maenads  
twist in their hair  
wild snakes they capture.

#### SEVENTH VOICE

O Thebes, nursemaid of Semele,  
put on your ivy crown,  
flaunt your green yew,  
flaunt its sweet fruit!  
Consecrate yourselves to Bacchus, 140  
with stems of oak or fir, [110]  
Dress yourselves in spotted fawn skins,  
trimmed with white sheep's wool.  
As you wave your thyrsus,  
revere the violence it contains.  
All the earth will dance at once.  
Whoever leads our dancing—  
that one is Bromius!  
To the mountain, to the mountain,  
where the pack of women waits, 150  
all stung to frenzied madness  
to leave their weaving shuttles,  
goaded on by Dionysus.

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## EIGHTH VOICE

O you dark chambers of the Curetes, [120]  
you sacred caves in Crete,  
birthplace of Zeus,  
where the Corybantes in their caves,  
men with triple helmets, made for me  
this circle of stretched hide.<sup>1</sup>  
In their wild ecstatic dancing, 160  
they mixed this drum beat  
with the sweet seductive tones  
of flutes from Phrygia,  
then gave it to mother Rhea  
to beat time for the Bacchae,  
when they sang in ecstasy.  
Nearby, orgiastic satyrs, [130]  
in ritual worship of the mother goddess,  
took that drum, then brought it  
into their biennial dance, 170  
bringing joy to Dionysus.

## NINTH VOICE

He's welcome in the mountains,  
when he sinks down to the ground,  
after the running dance,  
wrapped in holy deerskin,  
hunting the goat's blood,  
blood of the slain beast,  
devouring its raw flesh with joy,  
rushing off into the mountains,  
in Phrygia, in Lydia, 180 [140]  
leading the dance—

<sup>1</sup>The Curetes and Corybantes are attendants on the goddess Cybele. They banged their drums to drown out the cries of the infant Zeus, whom Rhea was hiding in a cave on Crete to protect him from his father Cronos.

Bromius—Evoë! <sup>1</sup>

ALL

The land flows with milk,  
the land flows with wine,  
the land flows with honey from the bees.  
He holds the torch up high,  
our leader, the Bacchic One,  
blazing flame of pine,  
sweet smoke like Syrian incense,  
trailing from his thyrsus. 190  
As he dances, he runs,  
here and there,  
rousing the stragglers,  
stirring them with his cries,  
thick hair rippling in the breeze. [150]  
Among the Maenads' shouts  
his voice reverberates:  
"On Bacchants, on!  
With the glitter of Tmolus,  
which flows with gold, 200  
chant songs to Dionysus,  
to the loud beat of our drums.  
Celebrate the god of joy  
with your own joy,  
with Phrygian cries and shouts!  
When sweet sacred pipes [160]  
play out their rhythmic holy song,  
in time to the dancing wanderers,  
then to the mountains,  
on, on to the mountains." 210  
Then the bacchanalian woman  
is filled with total joy—  
like a foal in pasture

<sup>2</sup>Evoë is a cry of celebration in the Bacchic rituals.

right beside her mother—  
her swift feet skip in playful dance.

*[Enter Tiresias, a very old blind man, dressed in clothing appropriate for the Dionysian ritual. He goes up to the palace door and knocks very aggressively]*

TIRESIAS *[shouting]*

Where's the servant on the door? You in there, [170]  
tell Cadmus to get himself out of the house,  
Agenor's lad, who came here from Sidon,  
then put up the towers of this Theban town.<sup>1</sup>  
Go tell him Tiresias is waiting for him. 220  
He knows well enough why I've come for him.  
I'm an old man, and he's even older,  
but we've agreed make ourselves a thyrsus,  
to put on fawn skins and crown our heads  
with garlands of these ivy branches.

*[Enter Cadmus from the palace, a very old man, also dressed in clothing appropriate for the Dionysian ritual]*

CADMUS

My dearest friend,  
I was inside the house. I heard your voice.  
I recognized it—the voice of a man truly wise.  
So I've come equipped with all this god stuff. [180]  
We must sing his praise, as much as we can,  
for this Dionysus, well, he's my daughter's child. 230  
Now he's revealed himself a god to men.  
Where must I go and dance? Where do I get  
to move my feet and shake my old gray head?  
You must guide me, Tiresias, one old man  
leading another, for you're the expert here.

<sup>1</sup>Sidon, in Asia Minor, as these lines inform us, was the place where the Theban royal family originated.

O, I'll never tire of waving this thyrsus,  
day and night, striking the ground. What rapture!  
Now we can forget that we're old men.

TIRESIAS

You feel the same way I do, then.  
For I'm young and going to try the dancing.

240 [190]

CADMUS

Shall we go up the mountain in a chariot?

TIRESIAS

The god would not then get complete respect.

CADMUS

So I'll be your nursemaid—one old man  
will take charge of another one?

TIRESIAS

The god himself  
will get us to the place without our efforts.

CADMUS

Of all the city are we the only ones  
who'll dance to honour Bacchus?

TIRESIAS

Yes, indeed,  
for we're the only ones whose minds are clear.  
As for the others, well, their thinking's wrong.

CADMUS

We should not wait too long. Take my hand.

250

TIRESIAS [*holding out his hand*]

Here. Take it—make a pair of it and yours.

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CADMUS

I'm a mortal, so I don't mock the gods.

TIRESIAS

To the gods we mortals are all ignorant. [200]  
Those old traditions from our ancestors,  
the ones we've had as long as time itself,  
no argument will ever overthrow,  
in spite of subtleties sharp minds invent.  
Will someone say I disrespect old age,  
if I intend to dance with ivy on my head?  
Not so, for the god makes no distinctions— 260  
whether the dancing is for young or old.  
He wants to gather honours from us all,  
to be praised communally, without division.

CADMUS

Since you're blind to daylight, Tiresias, [210]  
I'll be your seer, tell you what's going on—  
Pentheus, that child of Echion, the one  
to whom I handed over power in this land,  
he's coming here, to the house. He's in a rush.  
He looks so flustered. What news will he bring?

*[Enter Pentheus, with some armed attendants. At first he does not notice Cadmus and Tiresias, not until he calls attention to them]*

PENTHEUS

It so happens I've been away from Thebes, 270  
but I hear about disgusting things going on,  
here in the city—women leaving home  
to go to silly Bacchic rituals,  
cavorting there in mountain shadows,  
with dances honouring some upstart god,  
this Dionysus, whoever he may be. Mixing bowls [220]  
in the middle of their meetings filled with wine,

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they creep off one by one to lonely spots  
 to have sex with men, claiming they're Maenads  
 busy worshipping. But they rank Aphrodite, 280  
 goddess of sexual desire, ahead of Bacchus.  
 All the ones I've caught, my servants guard  
 in our public prison, their hands chained up.  
 All those who're still away I will chase down,  
 hunt them from the mountains—that includes  
 Agave, who bore me to Echion, Ino,  
 and Autonoe, Actaeon's mother.<sup>1</sup> [230]

Once I've clamped them all in iron fetters,  
 I'll quickly end this perverse nastiness,  
 this Bacchic celebration. People say 290  
 some stranger has arrived, some wizard,  
 a conjurer from the land of Lydia,  
 with sweet-smelling hair in golden ringlets  
 and Aphrodite's charms in wine-dark eyes.  
 He hangs around the young girls day and night,  
 dangling in front of them his joyful mysteries.  
 If I catch him in this city, I'll stop him.  
 He'll make no more clatter with his thyrsus, [240]

or wave his hair around. I'll chop off his head,  
 slice it right from his body. This man claims 300  
 that Dionysus is a god, alleging  
 that once upon a time he was sewn up,  
 stitched inside Zeus' thigh—but Dionysus  
 was burned to death, along with Semele,  
 in that lightning strike, because she'd lied.  
 She maintained that she'd had sex with Zeus.  
 All this surely merits harsh punishment,  
 death by hanging. Whoever this stranger is,  
 his insolence is an insult to me.

<sup>1</sup>Actaeon, son of Autonoe and Aristaeus, offended the goddess Artemis (the reasons vary from one version of his story to another). The goddess had him destroyed by his own hunting dogs. See line 420 below.

*[Pentheus notices Cadmus and Tiresias for the first time]*

Well, here's something totally astounding! 310  
I see Tiresias, our soothsayer, all dressed up  
in dappled fawn skins—my mother's father, too! [250]  
This is ridiculous. To take a thyrsus  
and prance around like this. *[To Cadmus]* You sir,  
I don't like to see such arrant foolishness  
from your old age. Why not throw out that ivy?  
And, grandfather, why not let that thyrsus go?

*[Turning to address Tiresias]*

Tiresias, you're the one who's put him up to this.  
You want to bring in some new god for men,  
so you'll be able to inspect more birds, 320  
and from his sacrifices make more money.  
If your gray old age did not protect you,  
you'd sit in chains with all the Bacchae  
for such a ceremonial perversion. [260]  
Whenever women at some banquet  
start to take pleasure in the gleaming wine,  
I say there's nothing healthy in their worship.

CHORUS LEADER

That's impiety! O stranger,  
have you no reverence for the gods, for Cadmus,  
who sowed that crop of men born from the earth?<sup>1</sup> 330  
You're a child of Echion—do you wish  
to bring your own family into disrepute?

TIRESIAS

When a man of wisdom has good occasion  
to speak out and takes the opportunity,

<sup>1</sup>According to legend, Cadmus killed a dragon and sowed its teeth into the earth. They grew out of the soil as armed warriors. See line 1270 below.

it's not that hard to give an excellent speech.  
 You've got a quick tongue and seem intelligent,  
 but your words don't make any sense at all.  
 A fluent orator whose power comes [270]  
 from self-assurance and from nothing else  
 makes a bad citizen, for he lacks sense. 340  
 This man, this new god, whom you ridicule—  
 it's impossible for me to tell you  
 just how great he'll be in all of Greece.  
 Young man, among human beings two things  
 stand out preeminent, of highest rank.  
 Goddess Demeter is one—she's the earth  
 (though you can call her any name you wish),  
 and she feeds mortal people cereal grains.  
 The other one came later, born of Semele—  
 he brought with him liquor from the grape, 350  
 something to match the bread from Demeter.  
 He introduced it among mortal men.  
 When they can drink up what streams off the vine,  
 unhappy mortals are released from pain. [280]  
 It grants them sleep, allows them to forget  
 their daily troubles. Apart from wine,  
 there is no cure for human hardship.  
 He, being a god, is poured out to the gods,  
 so human beings receive fine benefits  
 as gifts from him. And yet you mock him. Why? 360  
 Because he was sewn into Zeus thigh?  
 Well, I'll show you how this all makes sense.  
 When Zeus grabbed him from the lightning flame,  
 he brought him to Olympus as a god.  
 But Hera wished to throw him out of heaven. [290]  
 So Zeus, in a manner worthy of a god,  
 came up with a cunning counter plan.  
 From the sky which flows around the earth,  
 Zeus broke off a piece, shaped it like Dionysus,

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then gave that to Hera, as a hostage. 370  
The real child he sent to nymphs to raise,  
thus saving him from Hera's jealousy.  
Over time people mixed up "sky" and "thigh,"  
saying he'd come from Zeus's thigh, changing words,  
because he, a god, had once been hostage  
to goddess Hera. So they made up the tale.  
This god's a prophet, too, for in his rites—  
the Bacchic celebrations and the madness—  
a huge prophetic power is unleashed.  
When the god fully enters human bodies, 380 [300]  
he makes those possessed by frenzy prophets.  
They speak of what will come in future days.  
He also shares the work of war god Ares.  
For there are times an army all drawn up,  
its weapons ready, can shake with terror,  
before any man has set hand to his spear.  
Such madness comes from Dionysus.  
Some day you'll see him on those rocks at Delphi,  
leaping with torches on the higher slopes,  
way up there between two mountain peaks, 390  
waving and shaking his Bacchic wand,  
a great power in Greece. Trust me, Pentheus.  
Don't be too confident a sovereign's force  
controls men. If something seems right to you, [310]  
but your mind's diseased, don't think that's wisdom.  
So welcome this god into your country.  
Pour libations to him, then celebrate  
these Bacchic rites with garlands on your head.  
On women, where Aphrodite is concerned,  
Dionysus will not enforce restraint— 400  
such modesty you must seek in nature,  
where it already dwells. For any woman  
whose character is chaste won't be defiled  
by Bacchic revelry. Don't you see that?

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When there are many people at your gates,  
you're happy. The city shouts your praise.  
It celebrates the name of Pentheus. [320]  
The god, too, I think, derives great pleasure  
from being honoured. And so Cadmus,  
whom you mock, and I will crown our heads 410  
with ivy and will join the ritual,  
an old gray team, but still we have to dance.  
Your words will not turn me against the god,  
for you are mad, under a cruel delusion.  
No drug can heal that ailment—in fact,  
some drug has caused it.

CHORUS LEADER

Old man,  
you've not disgraced Apollo with your words,  
and by honouring this Dionysus,  
a great god, you show your moderation.

CADMUS

My child, Tiresias has given you 420 [330]  
some good advice. You should live among us,  
not outside traditions. At this point,  
you're flying around—thinking, but not clearly.  
For if, as you claim, this man is not a god,  
why not call him one? Why not tell a lie,  
a really good one? Then it will seem  
that some god has been born to Semele.  
We—and all our family—will win honour.  
Remember the dismal fate of Actaeon—  
torn to pieces in some mountain forest 430  
by blood-thirsty dogs he'd raised himself.  
He'd boasted he was better in the hunt [340]  
than Artemis. Don't suffer the same fate.  
Come here. Let me crown your head with ivy.  
Join us in giving honour to this god.

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PENTHEUS

Keep your hands off me! Be off with you—  
go to these Bacchic rituals of yours.  
But don't infect me with your madness.  
As for the one who in this foolishness  
has been your teacher, I'll bring him to justice. 440

*[To his attendants]*

One of you, go quickly to where this man,  
Tiresias, has that seat of his, the place  
where he inspects his birds. Take some levers,  
knock it down. Demolish it completely.  
Turn the whole place upside down—all of it.  
Let his holy ribbons fly off in the winds. [350]  
That way I'll really do him damage.  
You others—go to the city, scour it  
to capture this effeminate stranger,  
who corrupts our women with a new disease, 450  
and thus infects our beds. If you get him,  
tie him up and bring him here for judgment,  
a death by stoning. That way he'll see  
his rites in Thebes come to a bitter end.

*[Exit Pentheus into the palace]*

TIRESIAS

You unhappy man, you've no idea  
just what it is you're saying. You've gone mad!  
Even before now you weren't in your right mind.  
Let's be off, Cadmus. We'll pray to the god [360]  
on Pentheus' behalf, though he's a savage,  
and for the city, too, so he won't harm it. 460  
Come with me—bring the ivy-covered staff.  
See if you can help support my body.  
I'll do the same for you. It would be shameful

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if two old men collapsed. No matter—  
for we must serve Bacchus, son of Zeus.  
But you, Cadmus, you should be more careful,  
or Pentheus will bring trouble in your home.  
I'm not saying this as a prophecy,  
but on the basis of what's going on.  
A man who's mad tends to utter madness.

470

*[Exit Tiresias and Cadmus together on their way to the mountains]*

## CHORUS

Holiness, queen of the gods, [370]  
Holiness, sweeping over earth  
on wings of gold,  
do you hear what Pentheus says?  
Do you hear the profanities he utters,  
the insults against Bromius,  
child of Semele, chief god  
among all blessed gods,  
for those who wear their lovely garlands  
in a spirit of harmonious joy? 480  
This is his special office,  
to lead men together in the dance,  
to make them laugh as the flute plays, [380]  
to bring all sorrows to an end,  
at the god's sacrificial feast,  
when the gleaming liquid grapes arrive,  
when the wine bowl casts its sleep  
on ivy-covered feasting men.

Unbridled tongues and lawless folly  
come to an end only in disaster. 490  
A peaceful life of wisdom [390]  
maintains tranquillity.  
It keeps the home united.  
Though gods live in the sky,

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from far away in heaven  
they gaze upon the deeds of men.  
But being clever isn't wisdom.  
And thinking deeply about things  
isn't suitable for mortal men.  
Our life is brief—that's why 500  
the man who chases greatness  
fails to grasp what's near at hand.  
That's what madmen do, [400]  
men who've lost their wits.  
That's what I believe.

Would I might go to Cyprus,  
island of Aphrodite,  
where the Erotes,  
bewitching goddesses of love,  
soothe the hearts of humankind, 510  
or to Paphos, rich and fertile,  
not with rain, but with the waters  
of a hundred flowing mouths  
of a strange and foreign river.  
O Bromius, Bromius,  
inspired god who leads the Bacchae,  
lead me away to lovely Peira, [410]  
where Muses dwell,  
or to Olympus' sacred slopes,  
where Graces live, Desire, too, 520  
where it's lawful and appropriate  
to celebrate our rites with Bacchus.

This god, the son of Zeus,  
rejoices in our banquets.  
He adores the goddess Peace,  
and she brings riches with her [420]  
and nourishes the young.  
The god gives his wine equally,

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sharing with rich and poor alike.

It takes away all sorrow.

530

But he hates the man who doesn't care

to live his life in happiness,

by day and through the friendly nights.

From those who deny such common things

he removes intelligence,

their knowledge of true wisdom.

So I take this as my rule—

follow what common people think—

[430]

do what most men do.

*[Enter a group of soldiers, bringing Dionysus with his arms tied up.  
Pentheus enters from the palace]*

SOLDIER

Pentheus, we're here because we've caught the prey

540

you sent us out to catch. Yes, our attempts

have proved successful. The beast you see here

was tame with us. He didn't try to run.

No, he surrendered willingly enough,

without turning pale or changing colour

on those wine dark cheeks. He even laughed at us,

inviting us to tie him up and lead him off.

[440]

He stood still, making it easier for me

to take him in. It was awkward, so I said,

"Stranger, I don't want to lead you off,

550

but I'm under orders here from Pentheus,

who sent me." And there's something else—

those Bacchic women you locked up, the ones

you took in chains into the public prison—

they've all escaped. They're gone—playing around

in some meadow, calling out to Bromius,

summoning their god. Chains fell off their feet,

just dropping on their own. Keys opened doors

not turned by human hands. This man here

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has come to Thebes full of amazing tricks. 560  
But now the rest of this affair is up to you. [450]

*[Soldier hands chained Dionysus over to Pentheus, who moves up close to Dionysus, inspecting him carefully]*

PENTHEUS

Untie his hands. I've got him in my nets.  
He's not fast enough to get away from me.

*[Soldiers remove the chains from Dionysus' hands. Pentheus moves in closer]*

Well, stranger, I see this body of yours  
is not unsuitable for women's pleasure—  
that's why you've come to Thebes. As for your hair,  
it's long, which suggests that you're no wrestler.  
It flows across your cheeks That's most seductive.  
You've a white skin, too. You've looked after it,  
avoiding the sun's rays by staying in the shade, 570  
while with your beauty you chase Aphrodite.  
But first tell me something of your family. [460]

DIONYSUS

That's easy enough, though I'm not boasting.  
You've heard of the Tmolus, where flowers grow.

PENTHEUS

I know it. It's around the town of Sardis.

DIONYSUS

I'm from there. My home land is Lydia.

PENTHEUS

Why do you bring these rituals to Greece?

DIONYSUS

Dionysus sent me—the son of Zeus.

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PENTHEUS

Is there some Zeus there who creates new gods?

DIONYSUS

No. It's the same Zeus who wed Semele right here. 580

PENTHEUS

Did this Zeus overpower you at night,  
in your dreams? Or were your eyes wide open?

DIONYSUS

I saw him—he saw me. He handed me [470]  
the sacred rituals.

PENTHEUS

Tell me what they're like,  
these rituals of yours.

DIONYSUS

That information  
cannot be passed on to men like you,  
those uninitiated in the rites of Bacchus.

PENTHEUS

Do they benefit those who sacrifice?

DIONYSUS

They're worth knowing, but you're not allowed to hear.

PENTHEUS

You've avoided that question skilfully, 590  
making me want to hear an answer.

DIONYSUS

The rituals are no friend of any man  
who's hostile to the gods.

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PENTHEUS

And deceive the women. It's all corrupt!

DIONYSUS

One can do shameful things in daylight, too.

PENTHEUS

You must be punished for these evil games.

DIONYSUS

You, too—for foolishness, impiety  
towards the god.

610

[490]

PENTHEUS

How brash this Bacchant is!  
How well prepared in using language!

DIONYSUS

What punishment am I to suffer?  
What harsh penalties will you inflict?

PENTHEUS

First, I'll cut off this delicate hair of yours.

DIONYSUS

My hair is sacred. I grow it for the god.

PENTHEUS

And give me that thyrsus in your hand.

DIONYSUS

This wand I carry is the god's, not mine.  
You'll have to seize it from me for yourself.

PENTHEUS

We'll lock your body up inside, in prison.

620

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DIONYSUS

The god will personally set me free,  
whenever I so choose.

PENTHEUS

That only works  
if you call him while among the Bacchae.

DIONYSUS

He sees my suffering now—and from near by.

[500]

PENTHEUS

Where is he then? My eyes don't see him.

DIONYSUS

He's where I am. You can't see him,  
because you don't believe.

PENTHEUS [*to his attendants*]

Seize him.  
He's insulting Thebes and me as well.

DIONYSUS

I warn you—you shouldn't tie me up.  
I've got my wits about me. You've lost yours.

630

PENTHEUS

But I'm more powerful than you,  
so I'll have you put in chains.

DIONYSUS

You're quite ignorant  
of why you live, what you do, and who you are.

PENTHEUS

I am Pentheus, son of Agave and Echion.

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DIONYSUS

A suitable name. It suggests misfortune.<sup>1</sup>

PENTHEUS *[to his soldiers]*

Go now.

Lock him up—in the adjoining stables.

That way he'll see nothing but the darkness. [510]

There you can dance. As for all those women,  
those partners in crime you brought along with you,  
we'll sell them off or keep them here as slaves, 640  
working our looms, once we've stopped their hands  
beating those drum skins, making all that noise.

*[Exit Pentheus into the palace, leaving Dionysus with the soldiers]*

DIONYSUS

I'll go, then. For I won't have to suffer  
what won't occur. But you can be sure of this—  
Dionysus, whom you claim does not exist,  
will go after you for retribution  
after all your insolence. He's the one  
you put in chains when you treat me unjustly.

*[The soldiers lead Dionysus away to an area beside the palace]*

CHORUS

O Sacred Dirce, blessed maiden,  
daughter of Achelous, 650 [520]  
your streams once received  
the new-born child of Zeus,  
when his father snatched him  
from those immortal fires,  
then hid him in his thigh,  
crying out these words,  
“Go, Dithyrambus,

<sup>1</sup>The name Pentheus is linked to the Greek word for *suffering* or *misfortune*.

enter my male womb.  
 I'll make you known as Bacchus  
 to all those in Thebes, 660  
 who'll invoke you with that name."  
 But you, O sacred Dirce, [530]  
 why do you resist me,  
 my garland-bearing company,  
 along your river banks?  
 Why push me away?  
 Why seek to flee from me?  
 I tell you, you'll find joy  
 in grape-filled vines from Dionysus.  
 They'll make you love him. 670

What rage, what rage  
 shows up in that earth-bound race  
 of Pentheus, born to Echion, [540]  
 an earth-bound mortal.  
 He's descended from a snake,  
 that Pentheus, a savage beast,  
 not a normal mortal man,  
 but some bloody monster  
 who fights against the gods.  
 He'll soon bind me in chains, 680  
 as a worshipper of Bacchus.  
 Already he holds in his house  
 my fellow Bacchic revelers,  
 hidden there in some dark cell.  
 Do you see, Dionysus,  
 child of Zeus, your followers [550]  
 fighting their oppression?  
 Come down, my lord,  
 down from Olympus,  
 wave your golden thyrsus, 690  
 to cut short the profanities

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of this blood-thirsty man.

Where on Mount Nysa,  
which nourishes wild beasts,  
where on the Corcyrean heights,  
where do you wave your thyrsus  
over your worshippers,  
O Dionysus?  
Perhaps in those thick woods [560]  
of Mount Olympus, 700  
where Orpheus once played his lyre,  
brought trees together with his songs,  
collecting wild beasts round him.  
O blessed Peiria,  
whom Dionysus loves—  
he'll come to set you dancing  
in the Bacchic celebrations.  
He'll cross the foaming Axius,  
lead his whirling Maenads on, [570]  
leaving behind the river Lydias 710  
which enriches mortal men,  
and which, they say, acts as a father,  
nourishing with many lovely streams  
a land where horses flourish.

*[The soldiers move in to round up the chorus of Bacchae. As they do so, the ground begins to shake, thunder sounds, lightning flashes, and the entire palace starts to break apart]*

DIONYSUS *[shouting from within]*

Io! Hear me, hear me as I call you.

Io! Bacchae! Io Bacchae!

CHORUS *[a confusion of different voices]*

Who's that? Who is it? It's Dionysus' voice!

It's calling me. But from what direction?

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DIONYSUS *[from within]*

Io! Io! I'm calling out again—  
the son of Semele, a child of Zeus!

[580]

720

CHORUS

Io! Io! Lord and master!  
Come join our company,  
Bromius, O Bromius!

DIONYSUS *[from within]*

Sacred lord of earthquakes, shake this ground.

*[The earthquake tremors resume]*

CHORUS VOICE 1

Ai! Soon Pentheus' palace  
will be shaken into rubble.

CHORUS VOICE 2

Dionysus is in the house—revere him.

CHORUS VOICE 3

We revere him, we revere him.

[590]

CHORUS VOICE 4

You see those stone lintels on the pillars—  
they're splitting up. It's Bromius calling,  
shouting to us from inside the walls.

730

DIONYSUS *[from within]*

Let fiery lightning strike right now—  
burn Pentheus' palace—consume it all!

CHORUS VOICE 5

Look! Don't you see the fire—  
there by the sacred tomb of Semele!

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The flame left by that thunderbolt from Zeus,  
when the lightning flash destroyed her,  
all that time ago. O Maenads—  
throw your bodies on the ground, down, down, [600]  
for our master, Zeus' son, moves now 740  
against the palace—to demolish it.

*[Enter Dionysus, bursting through the palace front doors, free of all chains, smiling and supremely confident.]*

DIONYSUS

Ah, my barbarian Asian women,  
Do you lie prostrate on the ground with fear?  
It seems you feel Dionysus' power,  
as he rattles Pentheus' palace.  
Get up now. Be brave. And stop your trembling.

CHORUS LEADER

How happy I am to see you—  
Our greatest light in all the joyful dancing.  
We felt alone and totally abandoned.

DIONYSUS

Did you feel despair when I was sent away, 750 [610]  
cast down in Pentheus' gloomy dungeon?

CHORUS LEADER

How could I not? Who'll protect me  
if you run into trouble? But tell me,  
how did you escape that ungodly man?

DIONYSUS

No trouble. I saved myself with ease.

CHORUS LEADER

But didn't he bind up your hands up in chains?

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## DIONYSUS

In this business I was playing with him—  
he thought he was tying me up, the fool!  
He didn't even touch or handle me,  
he was so busy feeding his desires.

760

In that stable where he went to tie me up,  
he found a bull. He threw the iron fetters  
around its knees and hooves. As he did so,  
he kept panting in his rage, dripping sweat

[620]

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## A Note on the Translator

Ian Johnston was born in Valparaiso, Chile, educated at McGill, Bristol, and Toronto universities, and taught for many years in the British Columbia college and university-college system. He is now retired and lives in Nanaimo, British Columbia.

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# Euripides Bacchae

## Translated by Ian Johnston

Euripides' *Bacchae*, the last of the surviving Greek tragedies, was not performed during the lifetime of the playwright. Its first production took place a year later (in 405 BC) in the annual competition for tragic drama, where it won first prize. It has remained one of the best-known and most frequently performed Greek tragedies ever since, one of the greatest works of classical Greek culture.

The *Bacchae* holds up a desparate view of human experience, a vision that led Aristotle to call Euripides "the most tragic of the poets." Here the royal power in the polis, respresented by the young king of Thebes, Pentheus, is quite incapable of dealing with a political crisis in an effective way, and the god who has initiated the crisis, Dionysus, a son of Zeus and a cousin of Pentheus, displays a selfish, arrognant, and unforgiving malice which leads him to destroy in the most horrific way the oldest human royal family in Greek legend because he believes he has been insulted by the citizens of Thebes. Whatever hopes men entertain for a peaceful harmony between the gods who rule the world and the human beings who live in it are here exposed as futile and cruel delusions.

### About the Translator



Ian Johnston was born in Valparaiso, Chile, and educated in Canada and England. He has a BSc from McGill in Geology and Chemistry, a BA from Bristol in English and Greek, and an MA from Toronto in English. For many years he taught as a college and university-college instructor in British Columbia teaching English, Classics and Liberal Studies. He is the author of *The Ironies of War: An Introduction to Homer's Iliad*. His translation of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* have recently been

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