

Euripides  
Bacchae



Translated by Ian Johnston

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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.  
It's there, by the palace, with that rubble,

<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.

the remnants of her house, still smoldering 10  
 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  
 So I've driven those women from their homes  
 in a frenzy—they now live in the mountains,

<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).

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

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.

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

But you there, you women who've left Tmolus,

<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.

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

[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.

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

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

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.

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—  
 Bromius—Evoë!<sup>2</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,

<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.

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

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 Bacchant, 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  
 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.  
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.

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

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.

CADMUS

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

TIRESIAS

To the gods we mortals are all ignorant.  
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—  
whether the dancing is for young or old.  
He wants to gather honours from us all,  
to be praised communally, without division.

[200]

260

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,  
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,

<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.

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.

*[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,  
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]

<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 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,  
 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?  
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.

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  
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,  
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,  
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  
has come to Thebes full of amazing tricks.  
But now the rest of this affair is up to you.

560

[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,  
while with your beauty you chase Aphrodite.  
But first tell me something of your family.

570

[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.

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  
the sacred rituals.

[470]

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



DIONYSUS

Mainly at night. Shadows confer solemnity.

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

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.

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,  
enter my male womb.  
I'll make you known as Bacchus

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

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  
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?

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!  
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,  
for our master, Zeus' son, moves now  
against the palace—to demolish it. [600] 740

*[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?

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]

from his whole body—his teeth gnawed his lip.  
 I watched him, sitting quietly nearby.  
 After a while, Bacchus came and shook the place,  
 setting his mother Semele's tomb on fire.  
 Seeing that, Pentheus thought his palace  
 was burning down. He ran round, here and there, 770  
 yelling to his slaves to bring more water.  
 His servants set to work—and all for nothing!  
 Once I'd escaped, he ended all that work.  
 Seizing a dark sword, he rushed inside the house.  
 Then, it seems to me, but I'm guessing now,  
 Bromius set up out there in the courtyard [630]  
 some phantom image. Pentheus charged it,  
 slashing away at nothing but bright air,  
 thinking he was butchering me. There's more—  
 Bacchus kept hurting him in still more ways. 780  
 He knocked his house down, right to the ground,  
 all shattered. So Pentheus has witnessed  
 a bitter end to my imprisonment.  
 He's dropped his sword, worn out, exhausted,  
 a mere mortal daring to fight a god.  
 So now I've strolled out calmly to you,  
 leaving the house, ignoring Pentheus.  
 Wait! It seems to me I hear marching feet—  
 no doubt he'll come out front here soon enough.  
 What will he say, I wonder, after this? 790  
 Well, I'll deal with him quite gently, [640]  
 even if he comes out breathing up a storm.  
 After all, a wise man ought to keep his temper.

*[Pentheus comes hurriedly out of the palace, accompanied by armed soldiers]*

PENTHEUS

What's happening to me—total disaster!  
 The stranger's gone, and we'd just chained him up.

*[Seeing Dionysus]*

Ah ha! Here is the man—right here.  
What's going on? How did you get out?  
How come you're here, outside my palace?

DIONYSUS

Hold on. Calm down. Don't be so angry.

PENTHEUS

How did you escape your chains and get here? 800

DIONYSUS

Didn't I say someone would release me—  
or did you miss that part?

PENTHEUS

Who was it? [650]  
You're always explaining things in riddles.

DIONYSUS

It was the one who cultivates for men  
the richly clustering vine.

PENTHEUS

Ah, this Dionysus.  
Your words are a lovely insult to your god.

DIONYSUS

He came to Thebes with nothing but good things.

PENTHEUS *[To soldiers]*

Seal off all the towers on my orders—  
all of them around the city.

DIONYSUS

What for?  
Surely a god can make it over any wall? 810

PENTHEUS

You're so wise, except in all those things  
in which you should be wise.

DIONYSUS

I was born wise,  
especially in matters where I need to be.

*[Enter the Messenger, a cattle herder from the hills]*

But first you'd better listen to this man,  
hear what he has to say, for he's come here  
from the mountains to report to you.  
I'll still be here for you. I won't run off.

MESSENGER

Pentheus, ruler of this land of Thebes, [660]  
I've just left Cithaeron, that mountain  
where the sparkling snow never melts away. 820

PENTHEUS

What this important news you've come with?

MESSENGER

I saw those women in their Bacchic revels,  
those sacred screamers, all driven crazy,  
the ones who run barefoot from their homes.  
I came, my lord, to tell you and the city  
the dreadful things they're doing—their actions  
are beyond all wonder. But, my lord,  
first I wish to know if I should tell you,  
openly report what's going on up there,  
or whether I should hold my tongue. 830  
Your mood changes so fast I get afraid— [670]  
your sharp spirit, your all-too-royal temper.

PENTHEUS

Speak on. Whatever you have to report,  
you'll get no punishment at all from me.

It's not right to vent one's anger on the just.  
The more terrible the things you tell me  
about those Bacchic women, the worse  
I'll move against the one who taught them  
all their devious tricks.

MESSENGER

The grazing cattle  
were just moving into upland pastures, 840  
at the hour the sun sends out its beams  
to warm the earth. Right then I saw them—  
three groups of dancing women. One of them [680]  
Autonoe led. Your mother, Agave,  
led the second group, and Ino led the third.<sup>1</sup>  
They were all asleep, bodies quite relaxed,  
some leaning back on leafy boughs of pine,  
others cradling heads on oak-leaf pillows,  
resting on the ground—in all modesty.  
They weren't as you described—all drunk on wine 850  
or on the music of their flutes, hunting  
for Aphrodite in the woods alone.  
Once she heard my horned cattle lowing,  
your mother stood up amid those Bacchae,  
then called them to stir their limbs from sleep.  
They rubbed refreshing sleep out of their eyes, [690]  
and stood up straight there—a marvelous sight,  
to see such an orderly arrangement,  
women young and old and still unmarried girls.  
First, they let their hair loose down their shoulders, 860  
tied up the fawn skins (some had undone the knots  
to loosen up the chords). Then around those skins  
they looped some snakes, who licked the women's cheeks.  
Some held young gazelles or wild wolf cubs  
and fed them on their own white milk, the ones [700]  
who'd left behind at home a new-born child,

<sup>1</sup>Autonoe and Ino are sisters of Pentheus' mother, Agave, hence Pentheus' aunts.

whose breasts were still swollen full of milk.  
 They draped themselves with garlands from oak trees,  
 ivy, and flowering yew. Then one of them,  
 taking a thyrsus, struck a rock with it, 870  
 and water gushed out, fresh as dew. Another,  
 using her thyrsus, scraped the ground. At once,  
 the god sent fountains of wine up from the spot.  
 All those who craved white milk to drink  
 just scratched the earth with their fingertips—  
 it came out in streams. From their ivy wands [710]  
 thick, sweet honey dripped. O, if you'd been there,  
 if you'd seen this, you'd come with reverence  
 to that god whom you criticize so much.  
 Well, we cattle herders and shepherds met 880  
 to discuss and argue with each other  
 about the astonishing things we'd seen.  
 And then a man who'd been in town a bit  
 and had a way with words said to us all,  
 "You men who live in the holy regions  
 of these mountains, how'd you like to hunt down  
 Pentheus' mother, Agave—take her [720]  
 away from these Bacchic celebrations,  
 do the king a favour?" To all of us  
 he seemed to make good sense. So we set up 890  
 an ambush, hiding in the bushes,  
 lying down there. At the appointed time,  
 the women started their Bacchic ritual,  
 brandishing the thyrsus and calling out  
 to the god they cry to, Bromius, Zeus' son.  
 The entire mountain and its wild animals  
 were, like them, in one Bacchic ecstasy.  
 As these women moved, they made all things dance.  
 Agave, by chance, was dancing close to me.  
 Leaving the ambush where I'd been concealed, 900  
 I jumped out, hoping to grab hold of her. [730]  
 But she screamed out, "O my quick hounds,

men are hunting us. Come, follow me.  
 Come on, armed with that thyrsus in your hand.”  
 We ran off, and so escaped being torn apart.  
 But then those Bacchic women, all unarmed,  
 went at the heifers browsing on the turf,  
 using their bare hands. You should have seen one  
 ripping a fat, young, lowing calf apart—  
 others tearing cows in pieces with their hands. 910  
 You could’ve seen ribs and cloven hooves [740]  
 tossed everywhere—some hung up in branches  
 dripping blood and gore. And bulls, proud beasts till then,  
 with angry horns, collapsed there on the ground,  
 dragged down by the hands of a thousand girls.  
 Hides covering their bodies were stripped off  
 faster than you could wink your royal eye.  
 Then, like birds carried up by their own speed,  
 they rushed along the lower level ground,  
 beside Asopus’ streams, that fertile land 920  
 which yields its crops to Thebes. Like fighting troops, [750]  
 they raided Hysiae and Erythrae,  
 below rocky Cithaeron, smashing  
 everything, snatching children from their homes.  
 Whatever they carried on their shoulders,  
 even bronze or iron, never tumbled off  
 onto the dark earth, though nothing was tied down.  
 They carried fire in their hair, but those flames  
 never singed them. Some of the villagers,  
 enraged at being plundered by the Bacchae, 930  
 seized weapons. The sight of what happened next, [760]  
 my lord, was dreadful. For their pointed spears  
 did not draw blood. But when those women  
 threw the thyrsos in their hands, they wounded them  
 and drove them back in flight. The women did this  
 to men, but not without some god’s assistance.  
 Then they went back to where they’d started from,  
 those fountains which the god had made for them.

They washed off the blood. Snakes licked their cheeks,  
cleansing their skin of every drop. My lord, 940  
you must welcome this god into our city,  
whoever he is. He's a mighty god [770]  
in many other ways. The people say,  
so I've heard, he gives to mortal human beings  
that vine which puts an end to human grief.  
Without wine, there's no more Aphrodite—  
or any other pleasure left for men.

CHORUS LEADER

I'm afraid to talk freely before the king,  
but nonetheless I'll speak—this Dionysus  
is not inferior to any god. 950

PENTHEUS

This Dionysian arrogance, like fire,  
keeps flaring up close by—a great insult  
to all the Greeks. We must not hesitate.

*[To one of his armed attendants]*

Go to the Electra Gates. Call out the troops, [780]  
the heavy infantry, all fast cavalry.  
Tell them to muster, along with all those  
who carry shields—all the archers, too,  
the men who pull the bowstring back by hand.  
We'll march out against these Bacchae.  
In this whole business we will lose control, 960  
if we have to put up with what we've suffered  
from these women.

DIONYSUS

You've heard what I had to say,  
Pentheus, but still you're not convinced.  
Though I'm suffering badly at your hands,  
I say you shouldn't go to war against a god.  
You should stay calm. Bromius will not let you [790]

move his Bacchae from their mountains.

PENTHEUS

Don't preach to me! You've got out of prison—  
enjoy that fact. Or shall I punish you some more?

DIONYSUS

I'd sooner make an offering to that god 970  
than in some angry fit kick at his whip—  
a mortal going to battle with a god.

PENTHEUS

I'll sacrifice all right—with a slaughter  
of those women, just as they deserve—  
in the forests on Cithaeron.

DIONYSUS

You'll all run.

What a disgrace! To turn your bronze shields round,  
fleeing the thyrsos of those Bacchic women!

PENTHEUS [*turning to one of his armed attendants, as if to go*]

It's useless trying to argue with this stranger— [800]  
whatever he does or suffers, he won't stay quiet.

DIONYSUS [*calling Pentheus back*]

My lord! There's still a chance to end this calmly. 980

PENTHEUS

By doing what? Should I become a slave  
to my own slaves?

DIONYSUS

I'll bring the women here—  
without the use of any weapons.

PENTHEUS

I don't think so.

You're setting me up for your tricks again.

DIONYSUS

What sort of trick, if I want to save you  
in my own way?

PENTHEUS

You've made some arrangement,  
you and your god, so you can always dance  
your Bacchanalian orgies.

DIONYSUS

Yes, that's true.  
I have made some arrangement with the god.

PENTHEUS [*to one of his armed servants*]

You there, bring me my weapons.

[*to Dionysus*]

And you,  
No more talk! Keep quiet!

990

DIONYSUS

Just a minute!  
How'd you like to see those women out there,  
sitting together in the mountains?

[810]

PENTHEUS

I'd like that.  
Yes, for that I'd pay in gold—and pay a lot.

DIONYSUS

Why is that? Why do you desire it so much?

PENTHEUS

I'd be sorry to see the women drunk.

DIONYSUS

Would you derive pleasure from looking on,  
viewing something you find painful?

PENTHEUS

Yes, I would—  
if I were sitting in the trees in silence.

DIONYSUS

But even if you go there secretly,  
they'll track you down. 1000

PENTHEUS

You're right.  
I'll go there openly.

DIONYSUS

So you're prepared,  
are you, to make the trip? Shall I lead you there?

PENTHEUS

Let's go, and with all speed. I've got time. [820]

DIONYSUS

In that case, you must clothe your body  
in a dress—one made of eastern linen.

PENTHEUS

What! I'm not going up there as a man?  
I've got to change myself into a woman?

DIONYSUS

If they see you as a man, they'll kill you.

PENTHEUS

Right again. You always have the answer. 1010

DIONYSUS

Dionysus taught me all these things.

PENTHEUS

How can I best follow your suggestion?

DIONYSUS

I'll go inside your house and dress you up.

PENTHEUS

What? Dress myself in women's clothing?  
I can't do that—I'd be ashamed to.

DIONYSUS

You're still keen to see the Maenads, aren't you?

PENTHEUS

What sort of clothing do you recommend?  
How should I cover up my body?

[830]

DIONYSUS

I'll fix up a long hair piece for your head.

PENTHEUS

All right. What's the next piece of my outfit?

1020

DIONYSUS

A dress down to your feet—then a headband,  
to fit just here, around your forehead.

PENTHEUS

What else? What other things will you provide?

DIONYSUS

A thyrsus to hold and a dappled fawn skin.

PENTHEUS

No. I can't dress up in women's clothes!

DIONYSUS

But if you go fighting with these Bacchae,  
you'll cause bloodshed.

PENTHEUS

Yes, that's true.

So first, we must go up and spy on them.

DIONYSUS

That's a wiser way to go about this  
than hunting evil by committing evil. 1030

PENTHEUS

But how will I make it through the city  
without the Thebans noticing me? [840]

DIONYSUS

We'll go by deserted streets. I'll take you.

PENTHEUS

Well, anything's easier to accept  
than being made a fool by Bacchic women.  
Let's go in the house. I'll think about what's best.

DIONYSUS

As you wish. Whatever you do, I'm ready.

PENTHEUS

I think I'll go in now. It's a choice  
of going with weapons or taking your advice.

*[Exit Pentheus into the palace. Dionysus turns to face the chorus]*

DIONYSUS

My women! that man's now entangled in our net. 1040  
He'll go to those Bacchae, and there he'll die.  
That will be his punishment. Dionysus,  
you're not far away. Now it's up to you.  
Punish him. First, make sure he goes insane [850]  
with some crazed fantasy. If his mind is strong,  
he'll not agree to put on women's clothes.  
But he'll do it, if you make him mad.  
I want him made the laughing stock of Thebes,  
while I lead him through the city, mincing  
as he moves along dressed as a female, 1050  
after he made himself so terrifying  
with all those earlier threats. Now I'll be off,

to fit Pentheus into the costume  
he'll wear when he goes down to Hades,  
once he's butchered by his mother's hands.  
He'll come to acknowledge Dionysus,  
son of Zeus, born in full divinity, [860]  
most fearful, yet most kind to human beings.

*[Exit Dionysus]*

CHORUS

Oh, when will I be dancing,  
leaping barefoot through the night, 1060  
flinging back my head in ecstasy,  
in the clear, cold, dew-fresh air—  
like a playful fawn  
celebrating its green joy  
across the meadows—  
joy that it's escaped the fearful hunt—  
as she runs beyond the hunters,  
leaping past their woven nets— [870]  
they call out to their hounds  
to chase her with still more speed, 1070  
but she strains every limb,  
racing like a wind storm,  
rejoicing by the river plain,  
in places where no hunters lurk,  
in the green living world  
beneath the shady branches,  
the foliage of the trees.

What is wisdom? What is finer  
than the rights men get from gods—  
to hold their powerful hands 1080  
over the heads of their enemies? [880]  
Ah yes, what's good is always loved.

The power of the gods  
is difficult to stir—

but it's a power we can count on.  
It punishes all mortal men  
who honour their own ruthless wills,  
who, in their fits of madness,  
fail to reverence the gods.  
Gods track down every man 1090  
who scorns their worship,  
using their cunning to conceal  
the enduring steady pace of time. [890]  
For there's no righteousness  
in those who recognize or practice  
what's beyond our customary laws.  
The truth is easy to acknowledge:  
whatever is divine is mighty,  
whatever has been long-established law  
is an eternal natural truth. 1100

What is wisdom? What is finer  
than the rights men get from gods—  
to hold their powerful hands  
over the heads of their enemies? [900]  
Ah yes, what's good is always loved.

Whoever has escaped a storm at sea  
is a happy man in harbour,  
whoever overcomes great hardship  
is likewise another happy man.  
Various men outdo each other 1110  
in wealth, in power,  
in all sorts of ways.  
The hopes of countless men  
are infinite in number.  
Some make men rich;  
some come to nothing.  
So I consider that man blessed  
who lives a happy life [910]  
existing day by day.

*[Enter Dionysus from the palace. He calls back through the open doors]*

DIONYSUS

You who are so desperately eager  
to see those things you should not look upon,  
so keen to chase what you should not pursue—  
I mean you, Pentheus, come out here now,  
outside the palace, where I can see you  
dressed up as a raving Bacchic female,  
to spy upon your mother's company. 1120

*[Enter Pentheus dressed in women's clothing. He moves in a deliberately over-stated female way, enjoying the role]*

DIONYSUS

You look just like one of Cadmus' daughters.

PENTHEUS

Fancy that! I seem to see two suns,  
two images of seven-gated Thebes.  
And you look like a bull leading me out here,  
with those horns growing from your head. 1130 [920]  
Were you once upon a time a beast?  
It's certain now you've changed into a bull.

DIONYSUS

The god walks here. He's made a pact with us.  
Before his attitude was not so kind.  
Now you're seeing just what you ought to see.

PENTHEUS

How do I look? Am I holding myself  
just like Ino or my mother, Agave?

DIONYSUS

When I look at you, I think I see them.  
But here, this strand of hair is out of place. 1140  
It's not under the headband where I fixed it.

PENTHEUS [*demonstrating his dancing steps*]

I must have worked it loose inside the house,  
shaking my head when I moved here and there,  
practising my Bacchanalian dancing.

[930]

DIONYSUS

I'll rearrange it for you. It's only right  
that I should serve you. Straighten up your head.

[*Dionysus begins adjusting Pentheus' hair and clothing*]

PENTHEUS

All right then. You can be my dresser,  
now that I've transformed myself for you.

DIONYSUS

Your girdle's loose. And these pleats in your dress  
are crooked, too, down at your ankle here.

1150

PENTHEUS [*examining the backs of his legs*]

Yes, that seems to be true for my right leg,  
but on this side the dress hangs perfectly,  
down the full length of my limb.

DIONYSUS

Once you see  
those Bacchic women acting modestly,  
once you confront something you don't expect,  
you'll consider me your dearest friend.

[940]

PENTHEUS

This thyrsus—should I hold it in my right hand  
or in my left? Which is more suitable  
in Bacchic celebrations?

DIONYSUS

In your right.  
You must lift your right foot in time with it.

1160

*[Dionysus observes Pentheus trying out the dance step]*

DIONYSUS

Your mind has changed. I applaud you for it.

PENTHEUS

Will I be powerful enough to carry  
the forests of Cithaeron on my shoulders,  
along with all those Bacchic females?

DIONYSUS

If you have desire, you'll have the power.  
Before this your mind was not well adjusted,  
but now it's working in you as it should.

PENTHEUS

Are we going to take some levers with us?  
Or shall I rip the forests up by hand,  
putting arm and shoulder under mountain peaks?

1170 [950]

DIONYSUS

As long as you don't do away with  
those places where the nymphs all congregate,  
where Pan plays his music on his pipes.

PENTHEUS

You mention a good point. I'll use no force  
to get the better of these women.  
I'll conceal myself there in the pine trees.

DIONYSUS

You'll find just the sort of hiding place  
a spy should find who wants to hide himself,  
so he can gaze upon the Maenads.

PENTHEUS

That's good. I can picture them right now,  
in the woods, going at it like rutting birds,  
clutching each other as they make sweet love.

1180

DIONYSUS

Perhaps. That's why you're going—as a guard  
to stop all that. Maybe you'll capture them,  
unless you're captured first.

[960]

PENTHEUS

Lead on—  
through the centre of our land of Thebes.  
I'm the only man in all the city  
who dares to undertake this enterprise.

DIONYSUS

You bear the city's burden by yourself,  
all by yourself. So your work is waiting there,  
the tasks that have been specially set for you.  
Follow me. I'm the guide who'll rescue you.  
When you return, someone else will bring you back.

1190

PENTHEUS

That will be my mother.

DIONYSUS

For everyone  
you'll have become a man to celebrate.

PENTHEUS

That's why I'm going.

DIONYSUS

You'll be carried back . . .

PENTHEUS [*interrupting*]

You're pampering me!

DIONYSUS [*continuing*]

. . . in your mother's arms.

PENTHEUS

You've really made up your mind to spoil me.

DIONYSUS

To spoil you? That's true, but in my own way.

PENTHEUS

Then I'll be off to get what I deserve.

1200 [970]

*[Exit Pentheus]*

DIONYSUS

You fearful, terrifying man—on your way  
to horrific suffering. Well, you'll win  
a towering fame, as high as heaven.  
Hold out your hand to him, Agave,  
you, too, her sisters, Cadmus' daughters.  
I'm leading this young man in your direction,  
for the great confrontation, where I'll triumph—  
I and Bromius. What else will happen  
events will show, as they occur.

*[Exit Dionysus]*

CHORUS

Up now, you hounds of madness,  
go up now into the mountains,  
go where Cadmus' daughters  
keep their company of worshippers,  
goad them into furious revenge  
against that man, that raving spy,  
all dressed up in his women's clothes,  
so keen to glimpse the Maenads.  
His mother will see him first,  
as he spies on them in secret  
from some level rock or crag.  
She'll scream out to her Maenads,  
"Who's the man who's come here,  
to the mountains, to these mountains,  
tracking Cadmean mountain dancers?  
O my Bacchae, who has come?"

1210

[980]

1220

From whom was this man born?  
He's not born of woman's blood—  
he must be some lioness' whelp  
or spawned from Libyan gorgons.” [990]

Let justice manifest itself— 1230  
let justice march, sword in hand,  
to stab him in the throat,  
that godless, lawless man,  
unjust earthborn seed of Echion.

Any man intent on wickedness,  
turning his unlawful rage  
against your rites, O Bacchus,  
against the worship of your mother,  
a man who sets out with an insane mind, [1000]  
his courage founded on a falsehood, 1240  
who seeks to overcome by force  
what simply can't be overcome—  
let death set his intentions straight.  
For a life devoid of grief is one  
which receives without complaint  
whatever comes down from the gods—  
that's how mortals ought to live.  
Wisdom is something I don't envy.  
My joy comes hunting other things  
lofty and plain to everyone. 1250  
They lead man's life to good  
in purity and reverence,  
honouring gods day and night,  
eradicating from our lives  
customs lying beyond what's right. [1010]

Let justice manifest itself—  
let justice march, sword in hand,  
to stab him in the throat,  
that godless, lawless man,

unjust earthborn seed of Echion. 1260

Appear now to our sight, O Bacchus—  
come as a bull or many-headed serpent  
or else some fire-breathing lion.  
Go now, Bacchus, with your smiling face [1020]  
cast your deadly noose upon  
that hunter of the Bacchae,  
as the group of Maenads brings him down.

*[Enter Second Messenger, one of Pentheus' attendants]*

SECOND MESSENGER

How I grieve for this house, in earlier days  
so happy throughout Greece, home of that old man,  
Cadmus from Sidon, who sowed the fields 1270  
to harvest the earth-born crop produced  
from serpent Ophis. How I now lament—  
I know I'm just a slave, but nonetheless . . .

CHORUS

Do you bring us news?  
Has something happened,  
something about the Bacchae?

SECOND MESSENGER

Pentheus, child of Echion, is dead. [1030]

CHORUS

O my lord Bromius,  
Now your divine greatness  
is here made manifest! 1280

SECOND MESSENGER

What are you saying? Why that song?  
Women, how can you now rejoice like this  
for the death of one who was my master?

CHORUS LEADER

We're strangers here in Thebes,  
so we sing out our joy  
in chants from foreign lands.  
No longer need we cower here  
in fear of prisoner's chains.

SECOND MESSENGER

Do you think Thebes lacks sufficient men  
to take care of your punishment? 1290

CHORUS

Dionysus, O Dionysus,  
he's the one with power over me—  
not Thebes.

SECOND MESSENGER

That you may be forgiven, but to cry  
aloud with joy when such disasters come,  
women, that's not something you should do. [1040]

CHORUS

Speak to me, tell all—  
How did death strike him down,  
that unrighteous man,  
that man who acted so unjustly? 1300

SECOND MESSENGER

Once we'd left the settlements of Thebes,  
we went across the river Asopus,  
then started the climb up Mount Cithaeron—  
Pentheus and myself, I following the king.  
The stranger was our guide, scouting the way.  
First, we sat down in a grassy meadow,  
keeping our feet and tongues quite silent,  
so we could see without being noticed. [1050]  
There was a valley there shut in by cliffs.  
Through it refreshing waters flowed, with pines 1310

providing shade. The Maenads sat there,  
 their hands all busy with delightful work—  
 some of them with ivy strands repairing  
 damaged thyrsos, while others sang,  
 chanting Bacchic songs to one another,  
 carefree as fillies freed from harness.  
 Then Pentheus, that unhappy man,  
 not seeing the crowd of women, spoke up,  
 “Stranger, I can’t see from where we’re standing.  
 My eyes can’t glimpse those crafty Maenads. 1320 [1060]  
 But up there, on that hill, a pine tree stands.  
 If I climbed that, I might see those women,  
 and witness the disgraceful things they do.”  
 Then I saw that stranger work a marvel.  
 He seized that pine tree’s topmost branch—  
 it stretched up to heaven—and brought it down,  
 pulling it to the dark earth, bending it  
 as if it were a bow or some curved wheel  
 forced into a circle while staked out with pegs—  
 that’s how the stranger made that tree bend down, 1330  
 forcing the mountain pine to earth by hand,  
 something no mortal man could ever do.  
 He set Pentheus in that pine tree’s branches. [1070]  
 Then his hands released the tree, but slowly,  
 so it stood up straight, being very careful  
 not to shake Pentheus loose. So that pine  
 towered straight up to heaven, with my king  
 perched on its back. Maenads could see him there  
 more easily than he could spy on them.  
 As he was just becoming visible— 1340  
 the stranger had completely disappeared—  
 some voice—I guess it was Dionysus—  
 cried out from the sky, “Young women,  
 I’ve brought you the man who laughed at you, [1080]  
 who ridiculed my rites. Now punish him!”  
 As he shouted this, a dreadful fire arose,

blazing between the earth and heaven.  
 The air was still. In the wooded valley  
 no sound came from the leaves, and all the beasts  
 were silent, too. The women stood up at once. 1350  
 They'd heard the voice, but not distinctly.  
 They gazed around them. Then again the voice  
 shouted his commands. When Cadmus' daughters  
 clearly heard what Dionysus ordered,  
 they rushed out, running as fast as doves, [1090]  
 moving their feet at an amazing speed.  
 His mother Agave with both her sisters  
 and all the Bacchae charged straight through  
 the valley, the torrents, the mountain cliffs,  
 pushed to a god-inspired frenzy. 1360  
 They saw the king there sitting in that pine.  
 First, they scaled a cliff face looming up  
 opposite the tree and started throwing rocks,  
 trying to hurt him. Others threw branches,  
 or hurled their thyrsos through the air at him,  
 sad, miserable Pentheus, their target. [1100]  
 But they didn't hit him. The poor man  
 sat high beyond their frantic cruelty,  
 trapped up there, no way to save his skin.  
 Then, like lightning, they struck oak branches down, 1370  
 trying them as levers to uproot the tree.  
 When these attempts all failed, Agave said,  
 "Come now, make a circle round the tree.  
 Then, Maenads, each of you must seize a branch,  
 so we can catch the climbing beast up there,  
 stop him making our god's secret dances known."  
 Thousands of hands grabbed the tree and pulled.  
 They yanked it from the ground. Pentheus fell, [1110]  
 crashing to earth down from his lofty perch,  
 screaming in distress. He knew well enough 1380  
 something dreadful was about to happen.  
 His priestess mother first began the slaughter.

She hurled herself at him. Pentheus tore off  
 his headband, untying it from his head,  
 so wretched Agave would recognize him,  
 so she wouldn't kill him. Touching her cheek,  
 he cried out, "It's me, mother, Pentheus,  
 your child. You gave birth to me at home,  
 in Echion's house. Pity me, mother— [1120]  
 don't kill your child because I've made mistakes." 1390  
 But Agave was foaming at the mouth,  
 eyes rolling in their sockets, her mind not set  
 on what she ought to think—she didn't listen—  
 she was possessed, in a Bacchic frenzy.  
 She seized his left arm, below the elbow,  
 pushed her foot against the poor man's ribs,  
 then tore his shoulder out. The strength she had—  
 it was not her own. The god put power  
 into those hands of hers. Meanwhile Ino,  
 her sister, went at the other side, 1400  
 ripping off chunks of Pentheus' flesh,  
 while Autonoe and all the Bacchae, [1130]  
 the whole crowd of them, attacked as well,  
 all of them howling out together.  
 As long as Pentheus was still alive,  
 he kept on screaming. The women cried in triumph—  
 one brandished an arm, another held a foot—  
 complete with hunting boot—the women's nails  
 tore his ribs apart. Their hands grew bloody,  
 tossing bits of flesh back and forth, for fun. 1410  
 His body parts lie scattered everywhere—  
 some under rough rocks, some in the forest,  
 deep in the trees. They're difficult to find.  
 As for the poor victim's head, his mother [1140]  
 stumbled on it. Her hands picked it up,  
 then stuck it on a thyrsus, at the tip.  
 Now she carries it around Cithaeron,  
 as though it were some wild lion's head.

She's left her sisters dancing with the Maenads.  
She's coming here, inside these very walls, 1420  
showing off with pride her ill-fated prey,  
calling out to her fellow hunter, Bacchus,  
her companion in the chase, the winner,  
the glorious victor. By serving him,  
in her great triumph she wins only tears.  
As for me, I'm leaving this disaster,  
before Agave gets back home again.  
The best thing is to keep one's mind controlled, [1150]  
and worship all that comes down from the gods.  
That, in my view, is the wisest custom, 1430  
for those who can conduct their lives that way.

*[Exit Messenger]*

CHORUS

Let's dance to honour Bacchus,  
Let's shout to celebrate what's happened here,  
happened to Pentheus,  
child of the serpent,  
who put on women's clothes,  
who took up the beautiful and blessed thyrsus—  
his certain death,  
disaster brought on by the bull.  
You Bacchic women 1440 [1160]  
descended from old Cadmus,  
you've won glorious victory,  
one which ends in tears,  
which ends in lamentation.  
A noble undertaking this,  
to drench one's hands in blood,  
life blood dripping from one's only son.

CHORUS LEADER

Wait! I see Agave, Pentheus' mother,  
on her way home, her eyes transfixed.

Let's now welcome her,  
the happy revels of our god of joy!

1450

*[Enter Agave, cradling the head of Pentheus]*

AGAVE

Asian Bacchae . . .

CHORUS

Why do you appeal to me?

AGAVE *[displaying the head]*

From the mountains I've brought home  
this ivy tendril freshly cut.  
We've had a blessed hunt.

[1170]

CHORUS

I see it.  
As your fellow dancer, I'll accept it.

AGAVE

I caught this young lion without a trap,  
as you can see.

CHORUS

What desert was he in?

AGAVE

Cithaeron.

CHORUS

On Cithaeron?

AGAVE

Cithaeron killed him.

CHORUS

Who struck him down?

1460

AGAVE

The honour of the first blow goes to me.  
In the dancing I'm called blessed Agave.

[1180]

CHORUS

Who else?

AGAVE

Well, from Cadmus . . .

CHORUS

From Cadmus what?

AGAVE

His other children laid hands on the beast,  
but after me—only after I did first.  
We've had good hunting. So come, share our feast.

CHORUS

What? You want me to eat that with you?  
O you unhappy woman!

AGAVE

This is a young bull. Look at this cheek  
It's just growing downy under the crop  
of his soft hair.

1470

CHORUS

His hair makes him resemble  
some wild beast.

AGAVE

Bacchus is a clever huntsman—  
he wisely set his Maenads on this beast.

[1190]

CHORUS

Yes, our master is indeed a hunter.

AGAVE

Have you any praise for me?

CHORUS

I praise you.

AGAVE

Soon all Cadmus' people . . .

CHORUS

. . . and Pentheus, your son, as well.

AGAVE

. . . will celebrate his mother, who caught the beast,  
just like a lion.

CHORUS

It's a strange trophy.

AGAVE

And strangely captured, too.

CHORUS

You're proud of what you've done?

AGAVE

Yes, I'm delighted. Great things I've done—  
great things on this hunt, clear for all to see.

1480

CHORUS

Well then, you most unfortunate woman,  
show off your hunting prize, your sign of victory,  
to all the citizens.

[1200]

AGAVE [*addressing everyone*]

All of you here,  
all you living in the land of Thebes,  
in this city with its splendid walls,  
come see this wild beast we hunted down—  
daughters of Cadmus—not with thonged spears,  
Thessalian javelins, or by using nets,  
but with our own white hands, our finger tips.

1490

After this, why should huntsmen boast aloud,  
when no one needs the implements they use?  
We caught this beast by hand, tore it apart— [1210]  
with our own hands. But where's my father?  
He should come here. And where's Pentheus?  
Where is my son? He should take a ladder,  
set it against the house, fix this lion's head  
way up there, high on the palace front.  
I've captured it and brought it home with me.

*[Enter Cadmus and attendants, carrying parts of Pentheus' body]*

CADMUS

Follow me, all those of you who carry 1500  
some part of wretched Pentheus. You slaves,  
come here, right by the house.

*[They place the bits of Pentheus' body together in a chest front of the palace]*

I'm worn out.  
So many searches—but I picked up the body.  
I came across it in the rocky clefts  
on Mount Cithaeron, ripped to pieces, [1220]  
no parts lying together in one place.  
It was in the woods—difficult to search.  
Someone told me what my daughter's done,  
those horrific acts, once I came back,  
returning here with old Tiresias, 1510  
inside the city walls, back from the Bacchae.  
So I climbed the mountains once again.  
Now I bring home this child the Maenads killed.  
I saw Autonoe, who once bore  
Actaeon to Aristaeus—and Ino,  
she was with her there, in the forest,  
both still possessed, quite mad, poor creatures.  
Someone said Agave was coming here, [1230]  
still doing her Bacchic dance. He spoke the truth,

for I see her there—what a wretched sight!

1520

AGAVE

Father, now you can be truly proud.  
Among all living men you've produced  
by far the finest daughters. I'm talking  
of all of us, but especially of myself.  
I've left behind my shuttle and my loom,  
and risen to great things, catching wild beasts  
with my bare hands. Now I've captured him,  
I'm holding in my arms the finest trophy,  
as you can see, bringing it back home to you,  
so it may hang here.

*[offering him Pentheus' head]*

Take this, father

1530 [1240]

let your hands welcome it. Be proud of it,  
of what I've caught. Summon all your friends—  
have a banquet, for you are blessed indeed,  
blessed your daughters have achieved these things.

CADMUS

This grief's beyond measure, beyond endurance.  
With these hands of yours you've murdered him.  
You strike down this sacrificial victim,  
this offering to the gods, then invite me,  
and all of Thebes, to share a banquet.  
Alas—first for your sorrow, then my own.  
Lord god Bromius, born into this family,  
has destroyed us, acting out his justice,  
but too much so.

1540

[1250]

AGAVE

Why such scowling eyes?  
How sorrowful and solemn old men become.  
As for my son, I hope he's a fine huntsman,  
who copies his mother's hunting style,

when he rides out with young men of Thebes  
chasing after creatures in the wild.

The only thing he seems capable of doing  
is fighting with the gods. It's up to you,  
father, to reprimand him for it.

1550

Who'll call him here into my sight,  
so he can see my good luck for himself?

CADMUS

Alas! Alas! What dreadful pain you'll feel  
when you recognize what you've just done.  
If you stay forever in your present state,  
you'll be unfortunate, but you won't feel  
as if you're suffering unhappiness.

[1260]

AGAVE

But what in all this is wrong or painful?

CADMUS

First, raise your eyes. Look up into the sky.

1560

AGAVE

All right. But why tell me to look up there?

CADMUS

Does the sky still seem the same to you,  
or has it changed?

AGAVE

It seems, well . . . brighter . . .  
more illuminated than it was before.

CADMUS

And your inner spirit—is it still shaking?

AGAVE

I don't understand what it is you're asking.  
But my mind is starting to clear somehow.  
It's changing . . . it's not what it was before.

[1270]

CADMUS

Can you hear me? Can you answer clearly?

AGAVE

Yes. But, father, what we discussed before,  
I've quite forgotten.

1570

CADMUS

Then tell me this—  
to whose house did you come when you got married?

AGAVE

You gave me to Echion, who, men say,  
was one of those who grew from seeds you cast.

CADMUS

In that house you bore your husband a child.  
What was his name?

AGAVE

His name was Pentheus.  
I conceived him with his father.

CADMUS

Well then,  
this head your hands are holding—whose is it?

AGAVE

It's a lion's. That's what the hunters said.

CADMUS

Inspect it carefully. You can do that  
without much effort.

1580

AGAVE [*inspecting the head*]

What is this?  
What am I looking at? What am I holding?

[1280]

CADMUS

Look at it. You'll understand more clearly.

AGAVE

What I see fills me with horrific pain . . .  
such agony . . .

CADMUS

Does it still seem to you  
to be a lion's head?

AGAVE

No. It's appalling—  
this head I'm holding belongs to Pentheus.

CADMUS

Yes, that's right. I was lamenting his fate  
before you recognized him.

AGAVE

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

CADMUS

Harsh truth—  
how you come to light at the wrong moment!

1590

AGAVE

Tell me. My heart is pounding in me  
to hear what you're about to say.

CADMUS

You killed him—  
you and your sisters.

AGAVE

Where was he killed?  
At home? In what sort of place?

[1290]

CADMUS

He was killed  
where dogs once made a common meal of Actaeon.

AGAVE

Why did this poor man go to Cithaeron?

CADMUS

He went there to ridicule the god  
and you for celebrating Dionysus.

AGAVE

But how did we happen to be up there?

CADMUS

You were insane—the entire city  
was in a Bacchic madness.

1600

AGAVE

Now I see.  
Dionysus has destroyed us all.

CADMUS

He took offense at being insulted.  
You did not consider him a god.

AGAVE

Father, where's the body of my dearest son?

CADMUS

I had trouble tracking down the body.  
I brought back what I found.

AGAVE

Are all his limbs laid out  
just as they should be? And Pentheus,  
what part did he play in my madness?

[1300]

CADMUS

Like you, he was irreverent to the god.  
That's why the god linked you and him together  
in the same disaster—thus destroying  
the house and me, for I've no children left,

1610

now I see this offspring of your womb,  
you unhappy woman, cruelly butchered  
in the most shameful way. He was the one  
who brought new vision to our family.

*[Addressing the remains of Pentheus]*

My child, you upheld the honour of our house,  
my daughter's son. You were feared in Thebes. [1310]  
No one who saw you ever would insult me, 1620  
though I was old, for you would then inflict  
fit punishment. Now the mighty Cadmus,  
the man who sowed and later harvested  
the most splendid crop—the Theban people—  
will be an exile, banished from his home,  
a dishonoured man. Dearest of men,  
even though, my child, you're alive no more,  
I count you among those closest to me.  
You won't be touching my cheek any more,  
holding me in your arms, and calling me 1630  
“grandfather,” as you ask me, “Old man,  
who's injuring or dishonouring you? [1320]  
Who upsets your heart with any pain?  
Tell me, father, so I can punish him—  
anyone who treats you in an unjust way.”  
Now you're in this horrifying state,  
I'm in misery, your mother's pitiful,  
and all your relatives are in despair.  
If there's a man who disrespects the gods,  
let him think about how this man perished— 1640  
then he should develop faith in them.

CHORUS LEADER

I'm sorry for you Cadmus—you're in pain.  
But your grandson deserved his punishment.

AGAVE

Father, you see how all has changed for me.<sup>1</sup>  
[From being your royal and honoured daughter,  
the mother of a king, I'm now transformed—  
an abomination, something to fill  
all people's hearts with horror, with disgust—  
the mother who slaughtered her only son,  
who tore him apart, ripping out the heart 1650  
from the child who filled her own heart with joy—  
all to honour this god Dionysus.  
But, father, give me your permission now  
to lay out here the body of my son,  
prepare his corpse for proper burial.

CADMUS

That is no easy task to undertake.  
His body, all the parts I could collect,  
lies here, in this chest, not a pretty sight.  
My own eyes can hardly bear to see him.  
But if you think you can endure the work, 1660  
then, my child, begin the appropriate rites.

*[Agave starts taking Pentheus' limbs out of the chest and placing them on the ground in front of her]*

AGAVE

Alas, for my poor son, my only child,  
destroyed by his mother's Bacchic madness.  
How could these hands of mine, which loved him so,  
have torn these limbs apart, ripped out his flesh?  
Here's an arm which has held me all these years,  
growing stronger as he grew into a man,  
his feet . . . O how he used to run to me,  
seeking assurance of his mother's love.  
His face was handsome, on the verge of manhood. 1670

<sup>1</sup>At this point there is an important gap in the manuscript. The reconstructed text, which ends at line 1699, appears between square brackets.

See the soft down still resting on these lips,  
which have kissed me thousands of times or more.  
All this, and all the rest, set here before us.  
O Zeus and all you Olympian gods . . . .

*[She cannot complete the ritual and collapses in grief]*

It makes no sense—it's unendurable.  
How could the god have wished such things on me?

CHORUS LEADER

Lady, you must bear what cannot be borne.  
Your suffering is intense, but the god is just.  
You insulted him in Thebes, showed no respect—  
you've brought the punishment upon yourself.

1680

CHORUS

What is wisdom? What is finer  
than the rights men get from gods—  
to hold their powerful hands  
over the heads of their enemies?  
Ah yes, what's good is always loved.  
So all praise Dionysus,  
praise the dancing god,  
god of our revelry,  
god whose justice is divine,  
whose justice now reveals itself.

1690

*[Enter Dionysus]*

DIONYSUS

Yes, I am Dionysus, son of Zeus.  
You see me now before you as a god.  
You Thebans learned about my powers too late.  
Dishonouring me, you earn the penalty.  
You refused my rites. Now you must leave—  
abandon your city for barbarian lands.  
Agave, too, that polluted creature,

must go into perpetual banishment.  
And Cadmus, you too must endure your lot.]<sup>1</sup>  
Your form will change, so you become a dragon. 1700 [1330]  
Your wife, Harmonia, Ares' daughter,  
whom you, though mortal, took in marriage,  
will be transformed, changing to a snake.  
As Zeus' oracle declares, you and she  
will drive a chariot drawn by heifers.  
You'll rule barbarians. With your armies,  
too large to count, you'll raze many cities.  
Once they despoil Apollo's oracle,  
they'll have a painful journey back again.  
But Ares will guard you and Harmonia. 1710  
In lands of the blessed he'll transform your lives.  
That's what I proclaim—I, Dionysus, [1340]  
born from no mortal father, but from Zeus.  
If you had understood how to behave  
as you should have when you were unwilling,  
you'd now be fortunate, with Zeus' child  
among your allies.

CADMUS

O Dionysus,  
we implore you—we've not acted justly.

DIONYSUS

You learn too late. You were ignorant  
when you should have known.

CADMUS

Now we understand. 1720  
Your actions against us are too severe.

DIONYSUS

I was born a god, and you insulted me.

CADMUS

<sup>1</sup>The reconstructed text inserted to repair the gap in the manuscript ends here.

Angry gods should not act just like humans.

DIONYSUS

My father Zeus willed all this long ago.

AGAVE

Alas, old man, then this must be our fate, [1350]  
a miserable exile.

DIONYSUS

Why then delay?  
Why postpone what necessity requires?

CADMUS

Child, we've stumbled into this disaster,  
this terrible calamity—you and me,  
both in agony—your sisters, too. 1730  
So I'll go out to the barbarians,  
a foreign resident in my old age.  
And then for me there is that oracle  
which says I'll lead a mixed barbarian force  
back into Greece. And I'll bring here with me  
Harmonia, Ares' daughter, my wife.  
I'll have the savage nature of a snake,  
as I lead my soldiers to the altars,  
to the tombs, in Greece. But even then,  
there'll be no end to my wretched sorrows. 1740 [1360]  
I'll never sail the downward plunging Acheron  
and reach some final peace.<sup>1</sup>

AGAVE [*embracing Cadmus*]

Father, I must be exiled without you.

CADMUS

Why do you throw your arms about me,  
my unhappy child, just like some young swan  
protecting an old one—gray and helpless?

<sup>1</sup>The Acheron is one of the principal rivers of the Underworld.

AGAVE

Because I've no idea where to go,  
once I'm banished from my father's land.

CADMUS

Child, I don't know. Your father's not much help.

AGAVE

Farewell, then, to my home. 1750  
Farewell to my native city.  
In my misfortune I abandon you,  
an exile from spaces once my own. [1370]

CADMUS

Go now to Aristaeus' house, my child.<sup>1</sup>

AGAVE

How I grieve for you, my father.

CADMUS

And I grieve for you, my child,  
as I weep for your sisters.

AGAVE

Lord Dionysus has inflicted  
such brutal terror on your house.

DIONYSUS

Yes. For at your hands I suffered, too— 1760  
and dreadfully. For here in Thebes  
my name received no recognition.

AGAVE

Farewell, father.

CADMUS

My most unhappy daughter,  
may you fare well. That will be hard for you. [1380]

<sup>1</sup>Aristeus is the husband of Autonoe and thus Agave's brother-in-law.

AGAVE

Lead on, friends, so I may take my sisters,  
those pitiful women, into exile with me.  
May I go somewhere where cursed Cithaeron  
will never see me, nor my eyes glimpse  
that dreadful mountain, a place far away  
from any sacred thyrsus. Let others  
make Bacchic celebrations their concern.

1770

*[Exit Agave]*

CHORUS

The gods appear in many forms,  
carrying with them unwelcome things.  
What people thought would happen never did.  
What they did not expect, the gods made happen.  
That's what this story has revealed.

*[Exeunt Chorus and Cadmus, leaving on stage the remains of  
Pentheus' body]*

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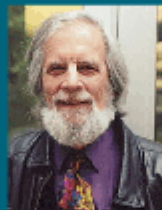
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Euripides  
Bacchae  
Translated by Ian Johnston

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, arrogant, 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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