

THE BACCHAE
By Euripides

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[Scene: The Greek city of Thebes, outside the royal palace.]

PROLOGUE

[Dionysus teleports in and appears, hovering, above the center of the Orchestra. His appearance is that of a young man. He is alone, with the palace behind him, its main doors facing the audience. He speaks directly to the audience]

DIONYSUS: I, Dionysus, son of Zeus,
Have come to Thebes, city of Greeks,
only after I've set the 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,
this ivy spear, a thyrsus, in my hand.
For my mother's sisters have acted badly,
something they, of all people, should avoid.
They boasted 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.
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, that it has yet to be initiated
into my Dionysian rites. Here I plead
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,
he chooses to ignore me. For this neglect

I'll demonstrate to him, to all in Thebes,
that I was born a god.
But if Thebans in this city, in their anger,
try to make those Bacchic women leave,
to drive them from the mountains forcibly,
then I, commander of these Maenads,
will fight them. That's why I've transformed myself,
assumed a mortal shape, altered my looks,
so I resemble any human being.

PARADOS

[Music. Enter the Chorus Leader of the Bacchae, dressed in a ritual deerskin, carrying a small drum like a tambourine. She enters from the SL parados.]

DIONYSUS: But you there:
beat yours drum 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.

[Exit Dionysus, teleporting away to backstage. The Chorus Leader crosses to the center of the orchestra and dances as we hear the Chorus on the audio stream]

FIRST VOICE: Sweet and easy task,
to cry out in celebration,
hailing great god Bacchus.

SECOND VOICE: Let every mouth be pure.
In my hymn I celebrate
our old eternal custom,
hailing Dionysus.

THIRD VOICE: O, blessed is the man,
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.

FIRST VOICE: His mother dropped him early,
as her womb, in forceful birth pangs,
was struck by Zeus' flying lightning bolt,
a blast which took her life.
Then Zeus, son of Cronos,
at once hid him away,
concealed from Hera.

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

THIRD VOICE: O Thebes, nursemaid of Semele,
put on your ivy crown.
Consecrate yourselves to Bacchus.
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.

FIRST VOICE: He's welcome in the mountains,
when he sinks down to the ground,
after the running dance,
hunting the goat's blood,
blood of the slain beast,
devouring its raw flesh with joy,
rushing off into the mountains,
leading the dance—
Bromius—Evoë!

ALL VOICES: Evoë!
The land flows with milk,
the land flows with wine,
the land flows with honey from the bees.
He holds the torch high,
our leader, the Bacchic One,
blazing flame of pine,
sweet smoke like Syrian incense,
trailing from his thyrsus.
As he dances, he runs,
here and there,
rousing the stragglers,
stirring them with his cries.
Among the Maenads' shouts
his voice reverberates:
"On Bacchants, on!"

EPISODE 1

[Enter Tiresias, from the SR parados. He is a very old blind man, dressed in clothing appropriate for the Dionysian ritual. He crosses to the middle door of the skene and knocks very aggressively. The Chorus Leader crosses to the extreme DS edge of the orchestra.]

TIRESIAS: *[shouting]* You in there,
tell Cadmus to get himself out of the house!
Go tell him Tiresias is waiting for him.
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 center door of the skene, 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.
[He crosses to the orchestra]
We must sing his praise, as much as we can.
Dionysus has 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.
Oh, 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: *[Following]* You feel the same way I do, then.
For I'm young and going to try the dancing.

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 honor Bacchus?

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

CADMUS: I'm a mortal, so I don't mock the gods. *[Dances to SL side of orchestra]*

TIRESIAS: 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 honors from us all. *[Dances to SR side of orchestra]*

CADMUS: Since you're blind to daylight, Tiresias,
I'll be your seer, tell you what's going on— *[Looks left]*
Pentheus, the one to whom I handed over power in this land,
he's coming here. He's in a rush. He looks so flustered. *[They stop dancing]*

[Enter Pentheus, with an armed Soldier, from SR parados. Pentheus crosses up the ramp to the second story of the skene; the Soldier lingers by the parados. At first Pentheus does not notice Cadmus and Tiresias, not until he calls attention to them.]

PENTHEUS: It so happens I've been away from Thebes,
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 honoring some upstart god,
this Dionysus, whoever he may be. Mixing bowls
in the middle of their meetings are filled with wine.
They creep off one by one to lonely spots
to have sex with men, claiming they're Maenads
busy worshipping.
All the ones I've caught, my servants guard
in our public prison, their hands chained up.
All those who're still away, I'll chase down,
hunt them from the mountains—that includes
Agave, who bore me.
Once I've clamped them all in iron fetters,
I'll quickly end this perverse nastiness,
this Bacchic celebration. People say
some stranger has arrived, some wizard,
a conjurer—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,
or wave his hair around. I'll chop off his head,
slice it right from his body. This man claims
that Dionysus is a god.
All this surely merits harsh punishment.
Whoever this stranger is, his insolence is an insult to me.
[Noticing Cadmus and Tiresias for the first time]
Well, here's something totally astounding!
I see Tiresias, our soothsayer, all dressed up
in dappled fawn skins—my mother's father, too!
This is ridiculous. To take a thyrsus

and jump 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?
Tiresias, you're the one who's put him up to this.
You want to bring in some new god for men,
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.
Whenever women at some banquet
start to take pleasure in the gleaming wine,
I say there's nothing healthy in their worshipping.

TIRESIAS: 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
from self-assurance and from nothing else
makes a bad citizen, for he lacks sense.
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.
Trust me, Pentheus.
Don't be too confident a sovereign's force
controls men. If something seems right to you,
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. [*Begins to dance again.*]

CADMUS: My child, Tiresias has given you
some good advice. You should live among us,
not outside traditions. At this point,
you're flying around—thinking, but not clearly.
Come here. Let me crown your head with ivy.
Join us in giving honor to this god. [*Steps closer to the skene*]

PENTHEUS: Keep your hands off me!
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.
[*To his soldier*]
You, go quickly to the city, scour it
to capture this effeminate stranger,
who corrupts our women with a new disease,
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 skene. The Soldier exits SR parados.]

TIRESIAS: *[Stops dancing]* 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
on Pentheus' behalf, though he's a savage,
and for the city, too, so he won't harm it.
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.
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.

[Exit Tiresias and Cadmus together through the SL parados. Music, and the Chorus is heard on the stream, as the Chorus Leader crosses the orchestra and dances.]

ODE 1

FIRST VOICE: Do you hear what Pentheus says?
Do you hear the profanities he utters,
the insults against Bromius, chief god
among all blessed gods?
This is his special office,
to lead men together in the dance,
to bring all sorrows to an end,
at the god's sacrificial feast.

SECOND VOICE: Unbridled tongues and lawless folly
come to an end only in disaster.
A peaceful life of wisdom
maintains tranquility.
But being clever isn't wisdom.
Our life is brief—that's why
the man who chases greatness
fails to grasp what's near at hand.
That's what madmen do,
men who've lost their wits.
That's what I believe.

THIRD VOICE: This god, son of Zeus,
rejoices in our banquets.
He adores the goddess Peace,
and she brings riches with her
and nourishes the young.
The god gives his wine equally,
sharing with rich and poor alike.
It takes away all sorrow.

EPISODE 2

[Enter the Soldier, through the SR parados, bringing Dionysus with his arms tied up, to slightly upstage of the center of the orchestra. Pentheus enters from the ground level center door of the skene.]

SOLDIER: Pentheus, I've caught the prey
you sent me out to catch. He didn't try to run.
No, he surrendered willingly enough;
He even laughed at us,
inviting us to tie him up and lead him off.
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.
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.

[Pentheus crosses 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.
[The soldier removes the chains from Dionysus' hands, and steps off to the SR side; Pentheus moves in closer]
Well, stranger, I see this body of yours
is not unsuitable for women's pleasure.
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.
But first tell: Why do you bring these rituals to Greece?

DIONYSUS: Dionysus sent me—the son of Zeus.

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 gave me the sacred rituals.

PENTHEUS: Tell me what they're like, those 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 skillfully, making me want to hear an answer.

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

PENTHEUS: This god of yours, since you saw him clearly, what's he like?

DIONYSUS: He was what he wished to be, not made to order.

PENTHEUS: Again you fluently evade my question, saying nothing whatsoever.

DIONYSUS: Yes, but then a man can seem totally ignorant when speaking to a fool.

PENTHEUS: When you dance these rites, is it at night or during daylight?

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.

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.

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.

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 Soldier] Seize him. He's insulting Thebes and me.

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

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.

PENTHEUS: *[to his soldier]* Go now. Lock him up.
That way he'll see nothing but the darkness.
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,
working our looms, once we've stopped their hands
beating those drum skins, making all that noise.

[Exit Pentheus into the skene, leaving Dionysus with the soldier]

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 soldier crosses to Dionysus and leads him into the SR doorway of the skene. Music, and the Chorus is heard on the stream, as the Chorus Leader crosses the orchestra and dances.]

ODE 2

FIRST VOICE: What rage, what rage
shows up in that earth-bound race
of Pentheus, born to Echion,
an earth-bound mortal.
He'll soon bind me in chains,
as a worshipper of Bacchus.
Already he holds in his house
my fellow Bacchic revelers,
hidden there in some dark cell.

SECOND VOICE: Do you see, Dionysus,
child of Zeus, your followers
fighting their oppression?
Come down, my lord,
down from Olympus,
wave your golden thyrsus,
to cut short the profanities
of this bloodthirsty man.

THIRD VOICE: Perhaps in those thick woods
of Mount Olympus,
where Orpheus once played his lyre,
brought trees together with his songs,
collecting wild beasts round him—
Dionysus will come to set you dancing
in the Bacchic celebrations.

EPISODE 3

[The soldier return through the SR door; suddenly the ground begins to shake, thunder sounds, lightning flashes, and the entire palace starts to break apart. The soldier falls to the ground cowering.]

DIONYSUS: *[shouting from within the palace]*
Io! Hear me, hear me as I call you. Io! Bacchae! Io Bacchae!

CHORUS LEADER:
Who's that? Who is it? It's Dionysus' voice! It's calling me. But from what direction?

DIONYSUS: *[From inside the palace]* Io! Io! I'm calling out again— the son of Semele, a child of Zeus!

CHORUS: Io! Io! Lord and master! Come join our company, Bromius, oh Bromius!

DIONYSUS: *[From inside]* Sacred lord of earthquakes, shake this ground.

[The earthquake tremors resume]

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

SECOND VOICE : Dionysus is in the house—revere him.

THIRD VOICE : We revere him, we revere him.

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

DIONYSUS: *[from inside the palace]* Let fiery lightning strike right now—burn Pentheus' palace—consume it all!

[Fire appears and engulfs the palace.]

SECOND VOICE : Look! Don't you see the fire—Oh Maenads—throw your bodies on the ground, down, down, for our master, Zeus' son, moves now against the palace—to demolish it.

[Dionysus appears, hovering before the skene, free of all chains, smiling and supremely confident.]

DIONYSUS: Ah, my Bacchants, it seems you feel Dionysus' power, as he rattles Pentheus' palace.

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

DIONYSUS: [Flying about] Did you feel despair when I was sent away, 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 your hands up in chains?

DIONYSUS: [*Lands in the orchestra*] 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.
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
from his whole body—his teeth gnawed his lip.
After a while, Bacchus came and shook the place.
Pentheus thought his palace was burning down.
He ran round, here and there,
yelling to his slaves to bring more water.
His servants set to work—and all for nothing!
So now I've strolled out calmly to you,
leaving the house, ignoring Pentheus.
No doubt he'll come out front here soon enough.
What will he say, I wonder, after this?
Well, I'll deal with him quite gently,
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 skene ground level center door*]

PENTHEUS: What's happening to me—total disaster!
The stranger's escaped, and we'd just chained him up.
[*Seeing Dionysus; the Chorus Leader hides behind 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?

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

PENTHEUS: Who was it? 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 the Soldier, who rises]* 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?

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, from the SL parados.]

DIONYSUS: 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. *[Cheats SR, the Chorus Leader retreats DS]*

MESSENGER: *[Bowing, SL]* Pentheus, ruler of this land of Thebes, I've just left Cithaeron, that mountain where the sparkling snow never melts away.

PENTHEUS: What this important news you've come with?

MESSENGER: *[Rises]* 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. 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.
Your mood changes so fast I get afraid—
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.
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: *[steps closer]* The grazing cattle
were just moving into upland pastures.
Right then I saw them—
three groups of dancing women. One of them
Autonoe led. Your mother, Agave,
led the second group, and Ino led the third.
They were all asleep, bodies quite relaxed,
resting on the ground—in all modesty.

They weren't as you described—all drunk on wine
or on the music of their flutes.
Once she heard my horned cattle lowing,
your mother stood up amid those Bacchae,
then called them to stir their limbs from sleep.
They 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.
Then around their fawn 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
who'd left behind at home a newborn child
whose breasts were still swollen full of milk.
Then one of them, taking a thyrsus, struck a rock with it,
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
thick sweet honey dripped. Oh, if you'd been there,
if you'd seen this, you'd come with reverence
to that god whom you criticize so much.
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
away from these Bacchic celebrations,
do the king a favor?" To all of us
he seemed to make good sense. So we set up
an ambush, hiding in the bushes. At the appointed time,
the women started their Bacchic ritual.
The entire mountain and its wild animals
were, like them, in one Bacchic ecstasy.
Agave, by chance, was dancing close to me.
I jumped out, hoping to grab hold of her.
But she screamed out, "Oh, men are hunting us. 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, using their bare hands.
You should have seen one ripping a fat, young calf apart—
others tearing cows in pieces with their hands.
You could've seen ribs and cloven hooves
tossed everywhere—some hung up in branches
dripping blood and gore.
And bulls, proud beasts till then,
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 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,
you must welcome this god into our city,
whoever he is. He's a mighty god in many other ways.

[Bows and exits SL parados. The Chorus Leader steps forward.]

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

PENTHEUS: This Dionysian arrogance, like fire,
keeps flaring up close by. We must not hesitate.
[To his soldier] Go to the Electra Gates. Call out the troops.
We'll march out against these Bacchae.

DIONYSUS: *[Steps closer to Pentheus]* You've heard what I had to say,
Pentheus, but still your not convinced.
I say you shouldn't go to war against a god.
You should stay calm. Bromius will not let you
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 than in some angry fit kick at his whip—a mortal
going to battle with a god.

PENTHEUS: *[to the soldier, starting to cross to the skene]*
It's useless trying to argue with this stranger— whatever he does or suffers, he won't shut up.

DIONYSUS *[calling Pentheus back]* My lord! There's still a chance to end this calmly.

PENTHEUS: *[Stops]* By doing what? Should I become a slave to my own slaves?

DIONYSUS: *[moving up to Pentheus]* How'd you like to gaze upon those women out there, sitting
together in the mountains?

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

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.

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.

DIONYSUS: In that case, you must clothe your body in a dress.

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. How can I best follow your suggestion?

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

PENTHEUS: What? Dress up in a female outfit? 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?

DIONYSUS: I'll fix up a long hairpiece for your head.

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

DIONYSUS: A dress down to your feet—then 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. But how will I make it through the city without the Thebans noticing me?

DIONYSUS: We 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 into the house. I'll think about what's best.

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

[Exit Pentheus into the skene. Dionysus turns to face the audience]

DIONYSUS: My women! that man's now entangled in our net.
He'll go to those Bacchae, and there he'll die.
That will be his punishment.
I want him made the laughing stock of Thebes,
while I lead him through the city, mincing
as he moves along in women's clothing,
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,
most fearful and yet most kind to men.

[Exit Dionysus into the skene central door. Music, and the Chorus is heard on the stream, as the Chorus Leader crosses the orchestra and dances.]

ODE 3

FIRST VOICE: 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.

SECOND VOICE: The power of the gods
is difficult to stir—
but it's a power we can count on.
It punishes all mortal men
who honor their own ruthless wills,
who, in their fits of madness,
fail to reverence the gods.
Gods track down every man
who scorns their worship,
using their cunning to conceal
the enduring steady pace of time.

THIRD VOICE: 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.

EPISODE 4

[Enter Dionysus from the skene. 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,
dressed up as a raving Bacchic female,
to spy upon your mother's company.

[Enter Pentheus, from the skene, dressed in women's clothing. He moves in a deliberately over-stated female way, enjoying the role and crosses to the center of the orchestra.]

DIONYSUS: *[admiringly, as crosses to behind Pentheus]* 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.

DIONYSUS: The god walks here. He's made a pact with us. 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.

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. *[Dionysus observes Pentheus trying out the dance step]* Your mind has changed. I applaud you for it.

PENTHEUS: Lead on—through the center 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. Follow me. I'm the guide who'll rescue you. When you return someone else will bring you back.

PENTHEUS: That will be my mother.

DIONYSUS: You'll be carried back in your mother's arms.

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

[Exit Pentheus through the SL parados]

DIONYSUS: *[speaking in the direction Pentheus has gone, but not speaking to him]* You fearful, terrifying man—on your way to horrific suffering. 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.

[Dionysus vanishes, teleporting away. Music, and the Chorus is heard on the stream, as the Chorus Leader crosses the orchestra and dances.]

ODE 4

FIRST VOICE: 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.

SECOND VOICE: His mother will see him first,
as he spies on them in secret.
She'll scream out to her Maenads,
"Who's the man who's come here,
to the mountains, to these mountains?
Oh my Bacchae, who has come?
From whom was this man born?
He's not born of woman's blood—
he must be some lioness' whelp."

THIRD VOICE: 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.

FIRST VOICE: 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
cast your deadly noose upon
that hunter of the Bacchae,
as the group of Maenads brings him down.

EPISODE 5

[Enter the Soldier from SL parados.]

SOLDIER: How I grieve for this house, in earlier days so happy throughout Greece!

CHORUS LEADER

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

SOLDIER: Pentheus, child of Echion, is dead.

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

SOLDIER: We started the climb up Mount Cithaeron—
Pentheus and myself; the stranger was our guide.
First, we sat down in a grassy meadow,
keeping our feet and tongues quite silent,
so we could see without being noticed.
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.
Then Pentheus, that unhappy man,
not seeing the crowd of women, spoke up,
"Stranger, I can't see from where we're standing.
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—
that's how the stranger made that tree bend down,
forcing the mountain pine to earth by hand,
something no mortal man could ever do.
He set Pentheus in that pine tree's branches.
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—
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,
who ridiculed my rites. Now punish him!"
The air was still. Then the women stood up at once.
They rushed out, running as fast as doves.
His mother Agave with both her sisters

and all the Bacchae charged straight through
the valley, pushed to a god-inspired frenzy.
They saw the king there sitting in that pine.
First, they started throwing rocks,
trying to hurt him. Others threw branches,
or hurled their thyrsos through the air at
sad, miserable Pentheus, their target.
But they didn't hit him.
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,
screaming in distress. He knew well enough
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. Pity me, mother—
don't kill your child because I've made mistakes."
But Agave was foaming at the mouth,
eyes rolling in their sockets—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,
ripping off chunks of Pentheus' flesh,
while Autonoe and all the Bacchae,
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 his flesh back and forth.
His body parts lie scattered everywhere—
some under rough rocks, some in the forest, deep in the trees.
As for the poor victim's head, his mother
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 coming here, inside these very walls,
showing off with pride her ill-fated prey,
calling out to her fellow hunter, Bacchus,
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,
and worship all that comes down from the gods.
That, in my view, is the wisest custom,
for those who can conduct their lives that way.

[Exit Soldier up the center aisle of the Theatron, sitting among the audience.]

ODE 5

CHORUS LEADER: *[Steps to the center of the orchestra.] Let's dance to honor Bacchus!*
[Music begins]
Wait!
[The music stops.]
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! *[She steps down]*

EPISODE 6

[Enter Agave, from SL parados, cradling the head of Pentheus. She walks around to the audience, talking to them.]

AGAVE: Bacchae... *[displaying the head]*
From the mountains I've brought home this ivy tendril freshly cut.
We've had a blessed hunt.
I caught this young lion without a trap, as you can see.
The honor of the first blow goes to me.
In the dancing I'm called blessed 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.
[She stops center of the orchestra]

CHORUS LEADER: What? You want me to eat that with you? Oh you unhappy woman.

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

CHORUS LEADER: His hair makes him resemble some wild beast.

AGAVE: Bacchus is a clever huntsman—he wisely set his Maenads on this beast.
Soon all Cadmus' people will celebrate his mother, who caught the beast.

CHORUS LEADER: 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.

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

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 spears, or javelins, or by using nets;
we caught this beast by hand, tore it apart—with our own hands.
But where's my father? He should come here. *[Steps right]*
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 Tiresias, from SL parados, carrying parts of Pentheus' body. They place the bits of Pentheus' body together in a chest front of the skene, at the tip of the orchestra. Tiresias lingers up left.]

CADMUS:
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, no parts lying together in one place.
It was in the woods—difficult to search.
Someone told me what my daughter'd done, those horrific acts,
Once I'd come back, returning here with old Tiresias,
inside the city walls, back from the Bacchae.
So I climbed the mountains once again.
Now I bring home this child the Maenads killed.
Someone said Agave was coming here,
still doing her Bacchic dance. He spoke the truth,
for I see her there—what a wretched sight!

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

AGAVE: Why such scowling eyes?
How sorrowful and solemn old men become.
As for my son, I hope he's a fine hunter,
who copies his mother's hunting style.
The only thing he seems capable of doing
is fighting with the gods. It's up to you,
father, to reprimand him for it.
Who'll call him here into my sight,
so he can see my good luck for himself?

CADMUS: *[Turns back to her]* 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.

AGAVE: But what in all this is wrong or painful?

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

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 translucent 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.

CADMUS: Can you hear me? Can you answer clearly?

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

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

AGAVE: You gave me to Echion...

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

AGAVE: His name was Pentheus.

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

AGAVE: It's a lion's.

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

AGAVE: [*inspecting the head*] What is this? What am I looking at? What am I holding?

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.

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?

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.

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 the body down. 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?

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,
now I see this offspring of your womb,
you unhappy woman, cruelly butchered
in the most shameful way.

[Addressing the remains of Pentheus]
My child, you upheld the honor of our house,
my daughter's son. You were feared in Thebes.
No one who saw you ever would insult me,
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 dishonored man.
If there's a man who disrespects the gods,
let him think about how this man perished—
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.
From being your royal and honored 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
from the child who filled her own heart with joy—
all to honor 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's 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,
then, my child, begin the appropriate rites.

AGAVE: *[dragging the chest to the center of the orchestra]*
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...oh, how he used to run to me,
seeking assurance of his mother's love.
His face was handsome, on the verge of manhood.
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.
Oh 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: *[crossing to Agave and helping her rise]*
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.

FIRST VOICE: 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.

[Enter Dionysus, deus ex machina, on the top of the skene, with the head of a bull]

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.
Dishonoring 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.
That's what I proclaim—I, Dionysus,
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. Your actions against us are too severe.

DIONYSUS: I was born a god, and you insulted me.

CADMUS: 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, 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.
So I'll go out to the barbarians, a foreign resident in my old age.
But even then, there'll be no end to my wretched sorrows.
I'll never sail the downward plunging Acheron and reach some final peace.

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.

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. Farewell to my native city.
In my misfortune I abandon you, an exile from spaces once my own.
[Turning to Cadmus] 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—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.

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.

[Exit Agave up the aisle to the top of the Theatron; she stands there frozen. Music.]

EXODOS

CHORUS LEADER: 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.

[Cadmus exits SR parados; Tiresias enters the skene by the SL door; the Chorus Leader vanishes, then Dionysus vanishes. Only the chest with the remains Pentheus' body is on stage. A swirl of sparkles flies around it.]

