The Bacchae

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF EURIPIDES

Euripides was the son of Mnesarchus, and thought to be from a fairly cultured and well-off family. As well as an aptitude for poetry and theater, Euripides was a talented athlete and painter. He married twice and had three sons. Though little biographical detail is known about his life, Euripides is thought to have been tutored by Protagoras, who was an agnostic (someone who believes that nothing is knowable of god or gods), which was unusual for the time. Euripides was associated with the sophists, a group of scholars and teachers whose primary values were skepticism, intellectual skill, and persuasive reasoning. Euripides was a lifelong friend of Socrates, and both men were criticized in their time as being intellectually indulgent. Euripides wrote around 90 plays in his time as a dramatist and poet, though only 19 of his works have survived. In ancient Greece, the tragedy was a venerated art form—though not without its critics—and Euripides' plays were often entered into state-funded competitions as part of dramatic festivals. Despite his prolific nature and his posthumous reputation, Euripides won first prize in these competitions a mere five times. Euripides is said to have left Athens in 408 to live and write in Macedonia, having fallen out of favor in Greece and opting to exile himself rather than risk execution like his friend Socrates. Euripides was famous in his own day and has exerted a considerable influence on theater ever since.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

For all its reputation as a time of civilization and democracy, ancient Greece was also a frequently tempestuous place. The Peloponnesian war, a conflict between the two leading city-states of ancient Greece, Athens and Sparta, was dragging on. Though he spent most of his life writing for performances in Athens, Euripides is said to have written *The Bacchae* in Macedonia, where he lived in self-imposed exile at the invitation of Archelaus, the Macedonian King. Macedonia frequently warred with Athens, though Euripides' lived there during a lull in conflict. The importance of festivals in ancient Greece can't be overstated, and they frequently centered on the worship of the gods. The "Dionysia" was a drama festival held during Spring, which placed tragedy at the forefront of its numerous theatrical performances.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Euripides is usually categorized as one of the three foremost tragic poets of ancient Greece, along with Aeschylus and Sophocles—though the other two won more competitions at the prestigious City Dionysia festival than Euripides did. Euripides is generally considered ahead of his time, giving more prominent—and thought-provoking—dramatic attention to slaves, women, and children than some of his contemporaries. In addition to *The Bacchae*, Euripedes wrote *The Trojan Women*, *Hippolytus*, and *Medea*. The influence of Protagoras, Euripides' agnostic mentor, shows in Euripides portrayal of the gods as complicated, ambiguous figures—clearly visible in his last play, *The Bacchae*, which centers on the god Dionysus. *The Bacchae* had a great influence on Latin literature. Its reputation in the modern era as a powerful and provocative work was greatly enhanced by the central role it plays in Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, which is chiefly concerned with the morality and philosophy of Dionysus.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Bacchae*
- **When Written:** Before 410 BC
- **Where Written:** Macedonia
- **When Published:** First performed in 405 BC
- **Literary Period:** Ancient Greek Tragedy
- **Genre:** Greek Tragedy
- **Setting:** Thebes, Greece
- **Climax:** Entranced by the god Dionysus, Agave murders her son, King Pentheus, thinking him to be a lion.
- **Antagonist:** Pentheus

EXTRA CREDIT

Posthumous Award. *The Bacchae* was first performed because of the efforts of Euripides' son, who organized the play's (winning) entry into the "Dionysia" theater festival after his father's death.

Greek Gods and Fried Chicken. Euripides' play has lent itself well to a varied range of interpretations and re-writes—a recent play performed in London, *Dennis of Penge*, reinvents Dionysus as the owner of a south London fried chicken shop.

PLOT SUMMARY

Dionysus, Greek god of wine, fertility, ritual madness, and ecstasy returns to his hometown of Thebes, having sent the women of Asia wild with his religion. He explains that he's here to avenge his mother, Semele, who he feels was wronged by her sisters and is being disrespected by the current king of Thebes,

Dionysus' cousin Pentheus. Dionysus tells his backstory: Semele's lover was Zeus, king of the gods, and their relationship made Zeus' wife, Hera, jealous. She tricked Semele into asking Zeus to reveal himself in his true form, a dangerous lightning storm that fatally struck Semele. Zeus then stitched Dionysus, his unborn son, into his thigh for protection. Dionysus is angry that Semele's sisters and Pentheus cast doubt on this story, suggesting it was invented by Cadmus, the sisters' father and Dionysus and Pentheus' grandfather, in order to save face over Semele's embarrassing affair with a mortal. Accordingly, Dionysus wants to exact revenge and prove his godliness in doing so.

Dionysus is accompanied by a band of his hedonistic female followers, the Bacchae, and has converted the Theban women into Bacchae too, including his aunts, Ino, Autonoe, and Agave, Pentheus' mother. These new converts are up on Mount Cithaeron, indulging in Dionysian rituals of drunkenness and sexual liberation. Meanwhile, Dionysus has cunningly taken on human form, disguised as a priest of his own religion.

Cadmus, the previous ruler of Thebes, and Tiresias, an elderly blind prophet, want to pay tribute to Dionysus, and dress up in fawn-skin and carry **thyrsi**, tall rods wrapped in ivy and topped with pine cones. At this moment, Pentheus arrives back in Thebes, having been out of the country for a few days. He openly scorns Dionysus, doubting his godliness, and ridicules Cadmus and Tiresias for wanting to worship him. He promises to put an end to the Dionysian priest's fraudulent magic, vowing to imprison and behead him. The two old men warn Pentheus that he risks bringing tragedy upon himself by disobeying a god.

Pentheus orders his guards to capture the priest (Dionysus in disguise), who gives himself up willingly. The king interrogates his prisoner, evidently intrigued by his attractive physical appearance, before becoming frustrated at Dionysus' evasiveness. Pentheus cuts off Dionysus' **hair** and snatches his thyrsus from him, and instructs his guards to imprison Dionysus in the **palace**. The chorus (a group of Bacchae that functions as a commentary to the play's events) calls for Dionysus, who uses his powers to create an earthquake and fire that quickly bring the palace crashing down. Dionysus explains to the chorus that Pentheus hadn't actually imprisoned him, but a bull, and that the king had tried to stab him, but instead just thrusted pointlessly at the shadows.

Pentheus exits the palace, only to see Dionysus (still disguised as the priest) bafflingly standing right in front of him. A herdsman arrives, recounting a terrible tale of the Bacchae on the mountain. He says he saw the Bacchae, led by Agave, Ino, and Autonoe, relaxing among the fir trees, using their thyrsi to draw milk, wine, and honey from the ground. Not only that, but the women seemed to be nursing wild animals at their breasts. Seeing this, the herdsman had thought to help the king by ensnaring Agave and bringing her back to the palace. However, the Bacchae spotted the herdsman and his accomplices and quickly turned on them; when the men escaped, the women then turned on some nearby cattle and tore them apart limb from limb. Still enraged, the Bacchae swooped on nearby villages, snatching children and pillaging houses. When the villagers fought back, the Bacchae's thyrsi ripped open their flesh. The herdsman ends his tale by warning Pentheus that, "whoever this god may be," he is clearly so powerful that he ought to be welcomed to Thebes.

Pentheus is evidently intrigued by the herdsman's tale; Dionysus (as the priest) plays on this by asking Pentheus if he would like the chance to spy on the Bacchae and observe their frightening behavior up close. Surprisingly, the king is desperate to do so; Dionysus tells him that the best way is for Pentheus to dress as a woman so that the Bacchae won't attack him like they did the herdsman. Pentheus agrees to cross-dress and goes into the palace ruins to put on his outfit, which Dionysus helps him with. When they return, Pentheus clearly revels in his new identity, asking Dionysus how he looks as a woman and wanting to make sure every part of the outfit is just right. As they head towards the mountain together, the chorus calls on the "swift hounds of madness" to bring about Pentheus' death.

The second messenger appears on stage, bringing terrible news of Pentheus' death. He recounts how Dionysus bent down the trunk of a tall fir tree and sat Pentheus atop it so the King could get a better view of the Bacchae. Once Pentheus was trapped on the top of the tree, Dionysus called out to his followers from the sky to attack the mortal who "mocked" him; Pentheus, like the cattle earlier, was literally torn apart in a gory and brutal attack led by his own mother, who failed to recognize him despite his desperate attempts to reveal his true identity.

Back at the palace, the chorus sings the praises of Pentheus' gruesome death. Agave returns, parading Pentheus' head on top her thyrsus. She thinks she has killed a mountain lion and boasts to Cadmus, her father, of her hunting prowess. He beckons her to stare at the sky, which seems to shake the madness from her mind. She looks at the Pentheus' head and realizes her terrible mistake, though she remembers nothing of the murder. Dionysus appears, taunting Agave and Cadmus and admonishing them for not worshipping him as he feels he deserves. He then delivers Cadmus' fate: the old man and his wife, Harmonia, are to be turned into snakes and destined to return to Greece as barbarian invaders (though eventually they'll be brought to the "Land of the Blessed"). Dionysus leaves, and Cadmus and Agave bid a tragic farewell to one another. They exit the stage in opposite directions, signaling the destruction of their royal household. The chorus has the last word, telling the audience that gods behave in unexpected ways, "and that is what has happened here today."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Dionysus – Dionysus, the protagonist of the play, is the Greek god of wine, fertility, ritual madness, and theater. He inspires the kind of devotion in his followers, the Bacchae, that Pentheus can only dream of as king. Dionysus has returned to his hometown of Thebes to avenge the death and dishonoring of his mother, Semele, who was the lover of the king of the gods, Zeus. Furthermore, Dionysus is determined to prove his godliness and does so in the cruelest way—by manipulating events to bring about the death of his cousin, King Pentheus, at the hands of his own mother, Agave, who is lost in Dionysian ritual. As a god, Dionysus is able to shape shift. In his human form, he takes on the character of Dionysian priest with beautiful long **hair**. His powers don't stop there—at one point he conjures an earthquake and fire to bring down the **palace** of Thebes, symbolically dismantling King Pentheus' power. Throughout the play, Dionysus is morally ambiguous, seemingly reveling in disrupting the status quo and bringing irrationality to the mortal world. Interestingly, he's also the only Greek god who had a mortal parent.

Pentheus – Pentheus, the antagonist of the play, is the naïve king of Thebes and Dionysus' cousin. He stubbornly refuses to worship Dionysus—or even to believe in his godliness—and tries to impose his authoritarian might on Dionysus' female followers, known as the Bacchae. Pentheus tries to play the role of strong patriarch, but shows himself to be impetuous and ill-equipped for leadership. Though he professes his disgust for the hedonistic revelry of the Bacchae, Pentheus admits to Dionysus (disguised as a priest) that the women's behavior intrigues him. Accordingly, Dionysus exploits these latent fantasies and tricks Pentheus into dressing as a woman in order to spy on the Bacchae. Caught in the frenzy of Dionysian ritual, Pentheus' mother, Agave, then brutally attacks Pentheus. Desperately trying to reveal his true identity, mighty King Pentheus is swiftly reduced to the status of a small, scared boy pleading with his mother.

Cadmus – Cadmus is the father of Semele, Agave, Ino and Autonoe; the grandfather of Dionysus and Pentheus; and the former king of Thebes. Due to his old age, he gave his kingship to Pentheus. Cadmus differs from Pentheus in that he believes the Thebans ought to worship Dionysus *just in case* he is a god, not because he's necessarily an especially devout believer. Furthermore, he thinks association with a god would bring prestige to the family name. At the end of the play, Cadmus heartbreakingly reveals to Agave that she has killed her own son, and tries to piece together Pentheus' severed body parts. At Dionysus' order, Cadmus is banished with his wife, Hermia. They are to be transformed into snakes, and must eventually return to Greece leading a horde of barbarians. Although they will attack the wrong shrine, the gods will deliver them from danger and bring them to the "Land of the Blessed."

Agave – The most tragic figure in the play, Agave is Pentheus' mother and Cadmus's daughter. She is entranced by Dionysus and becomes one of his followers, known as the Bacchae. The herdsman witnesses her killing and eating animals raw, and using her **thyrsus** to draw milk, honey, and wine from the ground. Dionysus embroils her in his plot for revenge because she was one of the sisters who doubted the truth of Semele's story (that she had been the lover of the supreme god Zeus). Accordingly, Dionysus uses his power over Agave to make her commit the ultimate tragic act—the murder of her own son. Even after the murder, she's deluded, thinking she has bravely killed a mountain lion and deserves to be celebrated. Cadmus makes her realize the terrible deed she has done, and Agave leaves the stage into her own exile, knowing her life is irreparably ruined.

Tiresias – Tiresias is a common character in Greek literature. He is elderly and blind, but was granted "second sight"—the ability to make accurate prophecy—as compensation for his blindness. In *The Bacchae*, he warns of the importance of paying tribute to the gods and is dressed up in Dionysian garb during his one appearance in the play. Pentheus fails to heed his warning, thereby making Tiresias' prediction of tragedy come true.

The Herdsman – The herdsman is the first messenger in the play, and gives a firsthand account of the frenzied behavior of the Bacchae, Dionysus' female followers. Having spotted Agave, Pentheus' mother, in the mountains, the herdsman had tried to be useful to the king by ensnaring her and bringing her back to the **palace**. However, his plan went terribly wrong, inciting a violent rampage by the Bacchae in which they ripped apart cattle with their bare hands, snatched children, and pillaged houses in nearby villages.

The Second Messenger – The second messenger arrives near the end of the play to bring news of Pentheus' grisly death at the hands of his mother, Agave, who is one of the Bacchae. The second messenger delivers his "lesson" before departing, declaring that "moderation and reverence for the gods are a mortal's best possession."

The Bacchae – The Bacchae are Dionysus' hedonistic female followers. In Greek mythology, they achieve a state of ecstasy through drunkenness, ritual dance, and sexual freedom. They dress in Dionysian costume, which generally consists of fawn skin and a **thyrsus**, which is a tall rod imbued with supernatural powers wound with ivy and topped with a pine cone. The Bacchae prove themselves to be capable of gruesome violence, tearing living creatures limb from limb and eating their raw flesh. Dionysus turns the women of Thebes into Bacchae, putting in place the necessary elements to bring about Pentheus' death at the hands of his own frenzied mother,

Agave.

The Chorus – The chorus is a group of Bacchae that Dionysus accumulated during his journeying through Asia. They don't get involved in the action, but serve as a way of heightening the drama. For example, they invoke the "hounds of madness" in anticipation of Pentheus' murder. In general, the chorus acts as a kind of commentary in the action—but in this case, they're undoubtedly biased towards Dionysus.

Semele – Semele is Dionysus' mortal mother, the daughter of Cadmus, and the sister of Agave, Ino, and Autonoe. Semele was killed accidentally by her lover, the supreme god Zeus, when he took on the form of a lightning storm. Though she never appears on the stage, she is a major reason for Dionysus' presence in Thebes. Since her death, rumors spread that her lover was a mortal, and that she had invented the Zeus to protect her dignity. Dionysus has come to prove his godliness and thereby restore honor to his mother's name.

Zeus – Zeus is the king of the Greek gods and the father of Dionysus. He doesn't appear in the play, but is in important part of Dionysus' back story. Zeus killed Semele, Dionysus' mortal mother, when she was tricked by Hera, Zeus' wife, into asking him to reveal his divine form—a deadly lightning storm.

Harmonia – Harmonia is Cadmus' wife. She never appears on stage, but Dionysus banishes her and Cadmus to a bizarre fate: they will be turned into snakes and eventually return to Greece leading hordes of barbarians. Although this will put them in danger, the gods will deliver them to the "Land of the Blessed."

MINOR CHARACTERS

Ino – Ino is one of Cadmus' daughters and sister to Agave, Autonoe, and Semele. She never appears on stage, but the herdsman and the second messenger reveal that she is one of the Bacchae, firmly in the grip of Dionysian ecstasy.

Autonoe – Autonoe is one of Cadmus' daughters and sister to Agave, Ino and Semele. Although she never appears on stage, the herdsman and the second messenger explain that she is firmly in the grip of Dionysian ecstasy as one of the Bacchae.

Actaeon – Actaeon was Pentheus' cousin. He doesn't appear in the play apart from as a cautionary tale Cadmus recounts to Pentheus: the gods killed Actaeon because he didn't show the proper respect.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

DISGUISE, DECEPTION, AND IDENTITY

Nothing is quite as it seems in the world of *The Bacchae*, an ancient Greek tragedy about the god Dionysus and the naive King Pentheus. Euripides uses misunderstandings, both deliberate and accidental, to construct a morally ambiguous play that resists easy interpretation. But perhaps that's the point—by creating an uncertain world, Euripides highlights the folly and deception involved in the identities people construct for themselves, arguing that life is infinitely more complex and identity more fragile than people might think.

Dionysus, god of wine, theater, and fertility, sets the tone, appearing in different forms throughout the play. His conflicting ways of being contribute to an overall sense of anarchy throughout, both muddying any morality in the play and, by extension, arguing the unreliability of society's governing morality more generally. He manipulates and undermines the other characters in the play, destabilizing people's identities and thereby undermining their position in society.

Dionysus uses his ability to change form in order to create confusion and disorder. He sets out this strategy in the opening lines of the play, telling the audience he has taken human form—specifically as a Dionysian priest—to avenge his dead mother, Semele, whose sisters have dishonored her name. He has Pentheus, his own cousin, firmly set in his sights, both because Pentheus refuses to believe in Dionysus' divine identity and because Pentheus believes himself to be an all-powerful, rational king. Pretending to be a priest of the Dionysian religion, Dionysus deliberately allows himself to get caught by Pentheus' armed guards. This allows Dionysus to get close to Pentheus, the king of Thebes, and exact his revenge. Assuming human form, then, allows Dionysus to embed himself in human society and create chaos from within. At the end of the play, Dionysus appears as a bull, representing his power and primal nature. His different forms show both the instability sown by Dionysus *and* his ability to dictate what happens. More than anything, though, Dionysus' shape-shifting shows that he has total control over his identity—or at least his identity as perceived by humans.

Dionysus' control over his identity contrasts with Pentheus and his mother, Agave, who both have their identities completely undone by Dionysus' godly manipulations. Pentheus is an arrogant king whose power has gone to his head, so much so that he refuses to pay tribute to Dionysus despite numerous warnings and believes himself capable of matching the god's powers. Pentheus likes to portray an air of rational skepticism, admonishing his grandfather Cadmus and the blind prophet Tiresias for indulging in Dionysus' "ridiculous" rituals. Dionysus then uses deception to trick Pentheus, destabilize his mind, and eventually lead him to his death. It doesn't take much—posing as the Dionysian priest, Dionysus only has to offer Pentheus a

glimpse of Dionysus' hedonistic female followers, the Bacchae (also known as Maenads), to make him willing to cross-dress and undermine his kingly identity. He even has Pentheus briefly take part in Dionysian ritual when the two go into the **palace** to prepare Pentheus' womanly costume. Starkly contrasting with his earlier authoritarian behavior, Pentheus seems to enjoy dressing up as a woman, asking Dionysus if he looks more like his mother or his aunts. In manipulating Pentheus' sense of self, Dionysus shows Pentheus' magisterial identity to be less stable than he would like, playing on Pentheus' latent fantasies to do away with his kingly self and join in the ecstatic Bacchic rituals of wine and sexual freedom—in other words, to be set free from the identity that he holds so dear. This suggests the wider point that people's identities are more fragile than they realize, and that it only takes a few changes or opportunities to undermine their sense of self.

The cruelest deception of all is that of Agave, Pentheus' mother and Dionysus' aunt. Agave occupies a kind of temporary identity, in which she is completely won over by Dionysus' hedonistic ways; she "loses" herself in the festivities of drunkenness and sexuality, making her unable to recognize her own son—whom she subsequently kills. This argues that people's actions not only affect the stability of their own identity but also how they perceive other people. This "loss of self" allows Agave to morally transgress her normal identity. When Pentheus pleads for his life, Agave's eyes are "rolling," her "mouth filling with foam." She doesn't recognize Pentheus, both because of his own disguise and her entrancement, and delivers the fatal blow. This deception reaches its tragic conclusion at the end of the play, when Agave appears on stage carrying the head of Pentheus on a spear. It's only when her father, Cadmus, makes her first look at the sky to "reset" her identity and then to examine the head more closely that she realizes the horrors of what she's done.

Disguise and deception propel the plot of *The Bacchae*. They highlight the fragility of individual identities and allow Dionysus to enact his revenge. Euripides thus challenges the audience to question the stability of their own identities. In ancient Greece, people were more likely to believe that the gods could make mortals commit acts that they wouldn't normally; contemporary audiences are more likely to believe in personal responsibility for individuals' actions. Euripides' play questions both—there's plenty of tragedy in modern day life—probing the relationship between identity and unexpected behaviors.

GODS AND MORTALS

There is an important tension between the world of the gods and the world of the mortals in *The Bacchae*. It's important to remember that when this play was first performed in ancient Greece, audiences would have been much more familiar with the mythical backstories involved, and, of course, many would have believed in them. The characters in the play, also believers, have to make a critical choice—either follow the god Dionysus or risk offending him. Dionysus has come to Thebes prove his godliness and to reinforce the idea that mortals ought to bow down to him. Pentheus, on the other hand, wants to exert his power as king and undermine Dionysus. Everyone else has to choose between these two viewpoints, with all but the king deciding it's best to worship Dionysus; Cadmus even thinks it would be a point of pride for the family if Dionysus' godliness is confirmed (Dionysus is Cadmus' grandson). The play, then, argues two fundamental points: firstly, that the very nature of belief involves giving yourself up to something you don't fully understand; and that, secondly, the gods ought to be worshipped not because they set a particularly useful moral example but because their powers are so immensely superior to anything in the mortal realm.

From the beginning, Euripides sets up Pentheus and Dionysus to represent the opposite spheres of gods and mortals. Both of them have just arrived in Thebes; Pentheus has been away and has returned to find his citizens enthralled by the cult of Dionysus, undermining his power. Dionysus' thirst for revenge is largely based on the fact that Pentheus' mother, Agave, and her sisters, Ino and Autonoe, don't believe the story that Dionysus is the offspring of Semele (his mortal mother) and the supremely powerful god Zeus. Pentheus doesn't believe the story either, dismissing Dionysus as a "fraudulent" "magician"—"whoever he is." In ancient Greek mythology, the gods were often infuriated by mortals' non-belief. This sets the play up as a contest for power, with Pentheus seeking to exert his administrative control over Thebes against Dionysus' desire to see the Thebans indulge in his rites and rituals, and, in doing so, prove his status as a god. Of course, Dionysus ultimately proves his point and destroys Pentheus and his family in the process. As a shape-shifting god, Dionysus could have used much less cruel means to prove his godliness, but opts not to. Dionysus seeks to actively punish those who doubt him, showing him to have a heartless side that, when judged on human terms, is hard to understand.

Dionysus is on a mission to convert people to believe in him and show faithfulness to his festivities of drunken abandon. Dionysus has just arrived from Asia, having successfully established his "rites and mysteries" and "set all Asia dancing." Now, he wants the place of his birth, Thebes, to fall in line too. He believes that he is a god that ought to be followed, but this is also something of a contradiction—he is the only god that was born to a mortal mother, making him part human. This makes him a fundamentally ambiguous figure, and is one of many dualities in the play that sets it up as resistant to taking away one clear simple message. Perhaps, then, his cruelty is a product of his human fallibility—not being completely divine, he is prone to the most damaging of human emotions. Possibly, too, Euripides is reinforcing the idea that humans can't expect

to understand what exists beyond their limits of comprehension.

Another explanation for Dionysus' particularly cruel way of enacting revenge comes from his associations as a god—not only is he the god of wine and ecstatic ritual, but he is also considered the god of *theater*. As such, perhaps another important motivation for him is the creation of drama itself. In fact, given that he could just kill Pentheus himself, rather than elaborately orchestrate a scenario in which Agave does the deed, it's fair to say that he wants the death to happen in a particularly dramatic—and tragic—way.

The relationship between the mortals and the gods, then, is highly complicated—but most of the citizens of Thebes see it as their duty to uphold the beliefs and customs imposed on them by the immortals. Euripides argues that, rightly or wrongly, failure to bend to the will of the gods in this instance results in annihilation. However, he also shows that, in the ancient Greek world at least, gods are complex figures that don't offer any easy moral guidance.

ORDER VS. IRRATIONALITY

The Bacchae is chiefly concerned with two very different ways of being. On the one hand, there is the "civilized" order represented by King Pentheus which, generally, is the way the Thebans live their life. However, Dionysus' aim is to show them the other side of themselves—to get them to give into their irrational nature, a plan that clearly works. Pentheus believes his subjects are wrong to indulge in irrationality, and tries to impose order by hunting down the Bacchae (Dionysus' followers) "with nets." The play, then, asks whether there is a place in life for irrationality—or whether what Dionysus gives the Thebans is even irrational in the first place.

Dionysus is the god of wine. His festivities encourage the Thebans to drink alcohol as a means to loosen the order from everyday life and connect with their more "irrational" side. This poses the question—does this widespread drunkenness represent wasteful irrationality or an important method for the reevaluation of life itself? Wine is certainly at the heart of Dionysian celebration. He sees it as a way of attaining a state of ecstasy, a kind of release that reminds people of what makes them human in an increasingly civilized world. Tiresias sees wine as a great gift bestowed on humanity by Dionysus. He says it "brought peace to the troubled mind, gave an end to grief, and gave us sleep—blessed sleep—a forgetting of our sadnesses. He, a god himself, is poured out in honour of the gods. Through that holy wine we win their favour." In other words, Tiresias believes wine to be a kind of cure, bringing order to emotional distress. Pentheus, on the other hand, associates wine with madness, irrationality, and immorality, claiming that "Drink is at the bottom of it all." Both Pentheus and Tiresias are right, in a way. Dionysus *does* intend to use "drink" to bring madness to Thebans as part of his revenge, but his "gift" is also intended to improve people's lives, as the chorus lets the audience know: "He shares his gift of wine, of bliss, with rich and poor, and hates all those who have no care of this: who would not live a life of blessedness, day and night." For Dionysus, then, there isn't really a contradiction between order and irrationality—one is part of the other. By facilitating his followers' so-called irrationality, he restores what he sees as a kind of order to their lives, based on realizing the more primal and sensual sides of their nature.

It's not just copious amounts of wine that symbolizes Dionysus' undermining of the social order of Thebes. His followers temporarily reject their civilized nature by leaving the city for the mountains and indulging in behaviors that would normally be considered irrational. Euripides explicitly links their actions with a return to a more "animal" nature, asking the audience to examine what "civilization" really means. Dionysus inspires his female followers to leave Thebes and decamp into the mountain forests. Here, they sleep on pine needles and breastfeed wild animals, surviving on hunted prey that they tear apart with their bare hands and eat raw; Dionysus wants his followers to abandon the order of their normal, civilized lives in order to reconnect with the natural world. Numerous characters explicitly frame the "madness" of the Bacchae as a supernatural liberation. After Pentheus has tried to imprison some of the women, a servant tells the king that they've escaped—"the chains just fell of them, like magic." When Dionysus effortlessly destroys Pentheus' **palace**, he undermines one of the grand symbols of Theban civilization.

Euripides leaves the question of order and irrationality open to the audience's interpretation. Pentheus and Dionysus represent two extremes—and it's up to the viewer to decide which is right, or whether there is a compromise that leads to a happy, fulfilled life. In the play, too much order and too much irrationality both lead to destruction. Pentheus' refusal to acknowledge Dionysus' godliness is also a denial of Dionysus' philosophy of irrationality, chaos, and ecstasy. That's part of the reason why Dionysus feels he has to teach Pentheus such a tragic lesson. However, Dionysus hardly offers a sustainable way of living—to engage in Dionysian behavior continuously would also result in a person's destruction. So perhaps Euripides is arguing for a third way—a mode of living that is generally civilized but is punctuated by rituals that remind individuals of the full scope of human nature by exploring humanity's more wild and animal side. The second messenger, who arrives to bring news of Pentheus' death, offers this view: "This is another lesson: that moderation and reverence for the gods are a mortal's best possession."

Order and irrationality, then, offer the audience another duality. They appear to be two contradicting, conflicting ways of being—but neither extreme order nor extreme irrationality comes across as particularly appealing. In investigating order

and irrationality, Euripides asks the audience to examine their relationship to one another, and to consider that they are, perhaps, not contradictory, but complimentary. It's not certain that this is Euripides' intention—but if Pentheus had embraced his irrational side, he would have saved himself; and if Dionysus had brought more order to his actions, he might have won his following without having to resort to deception and murder.

VIOLENCE

The Bacchae is a play full of violence from the outset. People are beheaded, animals are torn apart limb from limb—but it's not gratuitous violence written in for the sake of it. In his violently graphic descriptions interspersed throughout the play, Euripides examines the nature of violence, asking those in the audience whether they are capable of violent acts and exploring the relationship between violence and the imagination. The play seems to suggest that violence is a part of human nature that can't be entirely civilized away; though violence itself can be suppressed, its urges still lurk under the surface of the human psyche.

From the outset of the play, Euripides shows that violence isn't that far from daily life, and that it's kept at bay by a thin veil of civility. Dionysus' first speech on stage makes it obvious that what's coming is going to be violent, and he sees himself as both an invader and someone returning home: "Once I am established here I will move on to other lands and show myself there. But if Thebes tries to drive my Bacchae from the mountains by force of arms, I will marshal my Maenads and bring on war. I have readied myself for battle: put my deity aside and taken human form." King Pentheus, too, sees violence as the best course of action: "I've had some of them [the Bacchae] trapped, and shackled in the prison. The rest are still out there on the mountain—even my mother is among them [...] I'll hunt them down with nets." The audience, then, knows violence is looming. Coupled with the fact that Dionysus is known as the god of theater, perhaps then Euripides is gesturing to the audience's own thirst for a simulated violence that they can observe from a safe distance. Theater could be seen as a way of simulating violence under the mask of civility (that is, people seek out violence as entertainment under the pretense of simply going to the theater), echoing the way violence exists in real life. This, too, might further explain Dionysus' particularly cruel treatment of Pentheus, Agave and Cadmus—he finds the most theatrical way to satisfy the bloodlust of his own, of his followers, and, most importantly, of the audience. Though the actual murder may take place off stage, its descriptions spare no details, and Agave's display of Pentheus' impaled head is undoubtedly gory.

Dionysus' appearance allows the Theban women to become Bacchae and indulge their latent fantasies of violence. But crucially, it's also *Pentheus'* thirst for violence that brings about his end, even though on the surface he is adamantly opposed to the behaviors and rituals involved in Dionysian worship. Pentheus thinks he is getting a handle on the situation by imprisoning the Bacchae and their priest, who is actually Dionysus in disguise. Although he professes to be opposed to the Bacchae's violence, Pentheus uses that same violence to suppress them and momentarily restore order. Dionysus then exploits this violent side of Pentheus' otherwise orderly character by making him a tempting offer—to witness the Bacchae's violence at first hand, alongside their sexual activity. Pentheus is instantly desirous to do so, and says "I am the only one in this city brave enough to go." Pentheus' attitude to violence, then, is not merely one of necessity. Violence isn't just a way of preserving the order of his kingdom—it's something that actively appeals to his psyche.

Furthermore, Euripides shows that fantasies of violence, which lurk under the surface of the human psyche, can easily become reality. It doesn't take much more than wine and dancing to turn the women of Thebes into bloodthirsty killers. When the first messenger, the herdsman, appears in the play, he brings news of the violent behaviors of the Bacchae. Before Dionysus arrived, these women were occupying their usual roles in society as wives to men—only the men were permitted to undertake violent acts. The women evidently embrace actual violence with relish: "A single woman pulled a mewling calf in two, while others clawed apart a full-grown heifer [...] They snatched children from their homes, and pillaged houses." By having women engage in such wanton violence, Euripides achieves two things: firstly, he argues that everyone has a capability for violence within them, and all it takes is the right conditions to set it loose; secondly, Euripides demonstrates how violence conducted by men is normalized in society—if it was men committing these acts of violence, neither the characters in the play nor the audience would find it so shocking.

Euripides, then, manages to use violence to explore the complexities of human psychology. He shows how fantasy can lead to reality, and how imagination can lead to violent engagement. This turns the play back onto the audience itself: as audience members sit "enjoying" the violence on stage, they are forced to consider their own capacity for senseless violence. In implicating this question to his viewers, Euripides ultimately argues that people know less about themselves than they think.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE PALACE

The palace in Thebes initially symbolizes King Pentheus' authority but eventually highlights his vulnerability instead. The palace is the center of Pentheus' kingly power; it's where he directs his kingdom according to his whims, making the decisions that govern the lives of the Theban citizens. It's also where Pentheus gets waited on hand and foot by his servants, and accordingly represents both the administrative reach of the king and his own indulgences. Grand buildings like this are meant to be a daily reminder to the local population of who's in charge, and make people think twice about engaging in acts of rebellion. It is, then, the most imposing visual reminder of the king's power. That's why it's all the more significant that the palace has no effect on Dionysus whatsoever—in fact, he is able to set the palace on fire and bring it tumbling to the ground with ease. This emphasizes the supremacy of Dionysus' godly powers over anything a mortal could possibly do—even if that mortal is the imposing king of a magnificent city. The palace, then, begins the play by demonstrating Pentheus' authority; but through Dionysus' rapid and effortless destruction, it shows the extent of Pentheus' vulnerability, both in terms of his power and his unraveling sanity.

THYRSUS

The thyrsus is an essential part of Dionysian costume and has several layers of symbolic significance. It is a tall rod that the Bacchae hold in one hand, usually made from fennel, wrapped with ivy and topped off with a pine cone. The thyrsus is a remarkable piece of equipment: when granted Dionysian power, it is capable of conjuring forth water, wine, milk from the land. It doubles as a fearsome weapon too, impaling its victims and thus granting the female Bacchae the kind of physical domination usually associated with men. It is, then, a transformational item, granting people new and supernatural powers that extend beyond gender norms and social convention. Another important aspect of the thyrsus is that it is a kind of phallic symbol, emphasizing Dionysus' status as a god of fertility (and, of course, the ecstatic sexual abandon his rituals include).

The thyrsus turns tragic at the end of the play, as Agave parades through Thebes with the impaled head of her son, Pentheus, perched atop the rod. The thyrsus thus comes to represent the "height" of her tragedy—that is, the immense sorrow that comes with her realization that she has brutally killed her own son. However, it also emphasizes her excessive pride in mistakenly bragging that what's on top of the thyrsus is some kind of hunting trophy. Ultimately, then, the thyrsus sheds its previous meanings for its ultimate definition—it shows Dionysus' complete control over the tragedy and horrors that have just unfolded in Thebes.

HAIR

The ancient Greeks traditionally depict Dionysus' human form as an effeminately beautiful young man, and hair was often grown long as a tribute to the gods. Thus, Dionysus' long and luscious hair emphasizes his feminine grace and beauty, which, coupled with his more traditionally masculine characteristics, increases the sense of his sexual appeal and power. When the two cousins first meet, Pentheus is intrigued (and perhaps attracted) by Dionysus' beautiful locks, eventually cutting them off in a vain attempt to exert his authority and "emasculate" Dionysus of his attractiveness. Later, when Pentheus has been convinced to dress a woman, he's chiefly concerned with making sure his hair looks good, echoing back to suggest a subconscious desire for Dionysus—or to be like Dionysus—on his part in the earlier encounter. Euripides adds a final, cruelly ironic twist to this symbol during Pentheus' death—Agave thinks Pentheus' is some kind of mountain lion, probably confusing in her frenzy his womanly wig for a lion's mane.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Ecco edition of *The Bacchae* published in 2015.

Lines 1 - 168 Quotes

So I must teach this Pentheus, teach all of Thebes,
what kind of god I am.
Once I am established here
I will move on to other lands and show myself there.
But if Thebes tries to drive my Bacchae
from the mountains by force of arms,
I will marshal my Maenads and bring on war.
I have readied myself for battle:
put my deity aside and taken human form.

Related Characters: Dionysus (speaker), The Bacchae, Pentheus

Related Themes:

Page Number: Lines 47-53

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Dionysus outlines his general mission, which is to both spread his religion and, more pressingly, exact his revenge on his cousin, the irreverent King Pentheus. Clearly, an important part of his motivations is proving his status as a god and undermining Pentheus' mortal authority.

By using this militant language right at the beginning, Dionysus also establishes the sense that the play will heavily feature violence. As a powerful shape-shifting god, Dionysus could easily prove his godliness without violence, but it's clear he plans to use disguise and deception to bring about a particularly cruel form of revenge. Dionysus' desire to use violence for the sake of revenge (and to prove his own power) highlights the notion that Greek gods are powerful but not necessarily morally perfect or admirable.

Blessèd are those who know the mysteries of the god.
Blessèd are those who consecrate their lives to worship.
Blessèd are those who give themselves up to the dance,
to the mysteries, to purification on the holy mountain
where the dance and the mysteries take place.

Related Characters: The Chorus (speaker), Dionysus

Related Themes:

Page Number: Lines 72-76

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, which is from the first lines by the chorus, exemplifies one way that mortals can navigate their relationship to the gods—by not trying too hard to understand the gods and instead paying tribute to the mystery. Dionysus is not a god who is meant to be understood; he can't be rationalized away through humans' limited understanding. Instead, mortals can best protect themselves from his wrath by getting it in touch with their irrationality through the medium of Dionysian rituals (such as ecstatic dancing). It's also worth remembering that the chorus is comprised of Dionysus' female followers, the Bacchae—so they're unlikely to say anything critical about him, and, accordingly, shower him with praise throughout the play. The quote also outlines Pentheus' mistake: if he would just let go of his pride and worship Dionysus, he might prevent his tragic fate.

Lines 169 - 519 Quotes

CADMUS
Are we the only men who'll dance for Dionysus?

TIRESIAS
The rest are blind. Only we can see.

Related Characters: Tiresias, Cadmus (speaker), Dionysus

Related Themes:

Page Number: Lines 195-196

Explanation and Analysis

The audience doesn't learn much about the attitudes of the men of Thebes, apart from Cadmus, Tiresias, and Pentheus. Cadmus (the previous king) and Tiresias (a prophet) are clearly willing to pay tribute to Dionysus—in this early exchange, they're both dressed in Dionysian outfits and are about to leave for Mount Cithaeron, where the rituals take place. An important undertone here, which wouldn't have been lost on Greek audiences at the time, is that Tiresias is a blind prophet (also the result of some god-related turmoil). Despite being a mortal, he has the gift of "second sight"—an ability to see into the future. The irony, then, is that Tiresias sees far more than Pentheus can, and knows that Dionysus will react with rage to anybody that refuses his supremacy.

Women have deserted their homes for these
fraudulent rites up in the woods and mountains,
dancing to celebrate some new god
Dionysus, whoever he is.
Drink is at the bottom of it all.
Huge bowls stand in their midst, I'm told,
brimming with wine, and one by one the women
slip into the shadows to satisfy the lusts of men.
They say they are priestesses, sworn to Bacchus,
but it's clearly Aphrodite they adore.
I've had some of them trapped, and shackled in the prison.
The rest are still out there on the mountain –
Even my mother is among them,
she who bore me to Echion,
with her sisters Ino and Autonoe, mother of Actaeon.
I'll hunt them down with nets.
I'll put an end to their filthy orgies.

Related Characters: Pentheus (speaker), Actaeon, Autonoe, Ino, Agave, The Bacchae, Dionysus

Related Themes:

Page Number: Lines 215-232

Explanation and Analysis

When Pentheus first enters, he outlines some of his objections to Dionysus. Essentially, he views the behavior of

the women of Thebes as immoral, and is particularly frustrated at their drunkenness, perhaps because it represents a kind of opposite of the type of rational, authoritarian order he seeks to impose upon his kingdom. These lines also show the extent and power of Dionysus' influence over the Bacchae—Pentheus' own mother and aunts are all enthralled by the god. This also heightens the dramatic tension of the play by making further gesture to the violence that is to come. Meanwhile, the mention of Actaeon should act as a kind of warning to Pentheus—he's an irreverent mortal who was killed by a god.

They say some foreigner has arrived from Lydia:
one of those charlatan magicians
with blond hair that reeks of scent,
the flush of wine in his cheeks
and all the tricks of Aphrodite in his eyes.
Day and night he's with the women,
showing them his mysteries –
holding up his secret, for them to adore.
Once I catch him there'll be none of that tossing of locks
and waving of wands:
I'11take that head from off his body!

Related Characters: Pentheus (speaker), The Bacchae, Dionysus

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: Lines 233-242

Explanation and Analysis

This fleshes out Pentheus' distrust and denial of Dionysus' godliness. He thinks it's all fraudulent magic and tricks rather than genuine displays of godly power. From a psychological standpoint, it's interesting just how adamant Pentheus is in his criticisms of Dionysus—as if he is secretly fascinated by the god's power over women and indulgence in wine. He also seems to be preoccupied with Dionysus' appearance—although Pentheus currently thinks that Dionysus is a Dionysian priest, not the god himself. The mention of hair is significant as it's a symbol of worship and virility. Subconsciously, Pentheus wants to castrate Dionysus—or the priest—by getting rid of his hair and his thyrsus (a phallic symbol). Euripides masterfully sets Pentheus up for an almightily tragic fall by having him unwittingly predict his own fate—decapitation.

And here's another miracle! The prophet Tiresias
all got up in fawn skin, and my mother's father
dressed up as a Bacchant with a wand.
You look ridiculous, both of you: have you lost your wits?
I'm ashamed of you, Grandfather.
Shake off that ivy and drop that bloody stick!
This is your doing, Tiresias, I can tell:
another imported god, another chance
to make money on the side from burnt offerings
and reading auguries from the guts of birds.

Related Characters: Pentheus (speaker), Dionysus, Tiresias, Cadmus

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: Lines 248-257

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Pentheus notices his grandfather, Cadmus (the previous king of Thebes), and Tiresias, the blind prophet, dressed in Dionysian garbs. Pentheus is being patently cynical and ironic by calling them a "miracle," and again is preoccupied with the phallic symbol (the thyrsus). This also sets up the question of irrationality and madness that runs throughout the play. Pentheus sees the two elderly men as mad for indulging in Dionysian rituals, especially given their age. As the play continues, the alternative viewpoint emerges—that Pentheus himself is the mad one, both for trying to deny Dionysus and for wanting to spy on the Bacchae without consequently worshipping the god. It's clear Pentheus doesn't have much respect for the gods generally, given the way he dismisses Tiresias—who has direct experience with the gods in his past—as an opportunist fraud. The image of bird guts also adds to the impending sense that gory events are to follow.

The new god you ridicule will be a great Power in Greece.
Let me explain, young man, the two blessings of human life.
Firstly Demeter, Mother Earth – call her what you will –
sustains us mortals with the gift of grain, of solid food.
But he who came next – son of Semele – matched
her gift to man: he brought us wine.
And wine brought peace to the troubled mind,
gave an end to grief and gave us sleep – blessed sleep –
a forgetting of our sadnesses.
He, a god himself is poured out in honor of the gods.
Through that holy wine we win their favor.

Related Characters: Tiresias (speaker), Dionysus, Pentheus

Related Themes:

Page Number: Lines 271-282

Explanation and Analysis

This is Tiresias' reply to King Pentheus' barrage of derogatory criticism, and it provides a little bit of general background information on the Greek gods more generally. Demeter is the goddess of grain, agriculture, harvest, growth, and nourishment; Tiresias sees Dionysus as being almost as important. It's interesting how Tiresias views Dionysus' "gift" of wine as something uniformly beneficial to mankind. Firstly, most people would agree that relentless overindulgence in alcohol doesn't lead to a balanced or healthy life; secondly, Tiresias seems a little too trusting of Dionysus' intentions. Perhaps, as a god so keen to disrupt the status quo and bring anarchy to society, wine is a useful way for Dionysus to bring people to a frenzied state and specifically make them engage their irrational side.

As for the women, it is not for the god to enforce chastity.
Dionysus releases their true nature. Even plunged in delirium,
a virtuous soul does not turn vile.

Related Characters: Tiresias (speaker), The Bacchae, Dionysus, Pentheus

Related Themes:

Page Number: Lines 315-317

Explanation and Analysis

Tiresias continues to defend Dionysus, offering up the reasoning behind the Bacchae's sexually liberated behavior. Tiresias implies that the Dionysian rites and rituals are not wholly irrational; instead, they offer a way for mortals to embrace their "true nature." Tiresias thinks that it's not Dionysus' place to "enforce chastity," but it seems that Dionysus actually enforces promiscuity—an idea that challenges Tiresias' notion of the "true nature." Tiresias' words also add depth to the events near the end of the play—when Agave kills her own son, Pentheus, is she under Dionysus' duress, or is it just her "true self" behaving in the way that it wants? Euripides leaves this question unresolved, but it seems fair to say that the playwright neither argues completely in favor of either Dionysus' or Pentheus' view of the world, perhaps suggesting that both chaos and order are necessary for a full life.

So. Not entirely unattractive—at least to women, I suppose,
which is why you're here in Thebes.
Such long hair.
Not a wrestler then, I take it?
So long, it frames your cheeks.

Related Characters: Pentheus (speaker), Dionysus

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: Lines 454-458

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from Pentheus' first encounter with Dionysus, who is in disguise as a priest of his own religion. Dionysus' mortal appearance is effeminate, graceful and undeniably attractive. Considering how much Pentheus professes to hate Dionysus and his ways, his admission that Dionysus is "not entirely unattractive" sounds like high praise indeed. Pentheus is quick to dispel any suggestions of homosexuality by adding the caveat, "to women, I suppose"—but the sense that the king is confused by feelings of physical attraction to Dionysus is certainly present. Pentheus' question about wrestling is intended to put Dionysus down, implying that he is somehow less manly because of his beautiful long hair. It's worth noting that Dionysus has chosen this particular form—he could have picked any human shape and aesthetic—and so has most likely deliberately intended to rouse these confusing feelings in Pentheus. By doing so, the god begins the process of destabilizing the king's mind, making him vulnerable to later suggestions.

Lines 520 - 866 Quotes

CHORUS
Look: the stone lintels gape from their columns!
The Roaring One is pulling down the palace from inside!

DIONYSUS
Spark the lightning bolt!
Let the flames feed on the house of Pentheus!

Related Characters: Dionysus, The Chorus (speaker), Pentheus

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: Lines 591-594

Explanation and Analysis

Once Pentheus has imprisoned Dionysus (disguised as a mortal priest), it's time for the god to start showing his true powers. Dionysus uses his supernatural might to bring Pentheus' palace crashing to the ground, thereby undermining his authority and further distressing the king's psyche. "The Roaring One" is just one of many alternative names for Dionysus. There's also a clear signal towards Dionysus' godly parentage here: his father is Zeus, whose divine form is a lightning storm. By using his fearsome control over the elements, Dionysus emphasizes his godliness—the very point he vowed to prove at the beginning of the play.

PENTHEUS
This is maddening.
That stranger, that man I had in chains, has escaped!

What! How is it that you're free, standing at the gates of my palace?

Related Characters: Pentheus (speaker), Dionysus

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: Lines 643-645

Explanation and Analysis

Pentheus runs out of his collapsing palace, incredibly confused by what's happening. The key word in this quote is "maddening"—Dionysus has already told the audience that part of his plan is to undermine Pentheus' rationality. Dionysus is masterfully manipulating Pentheus' mental state so that he can lead to him to the particularly cruel and tragic fate that the god has in store. Dionysus' sudden appearance—disguised as the priest—defies the logical possibilities of the material world, at least in Pentheus' mind. The King has only just imprisoned the priest within the mighty walls of the palace, so it's not possible that he can now be standing outside. Again, this undermines Pentheus' authority—his palace is supposed to be an impenetrable symbol of his power and domination. Dionysus shows just how fragile Pentheus' authority is in the face of the gods.

PENTHEUS
Bar every gate of the city!

DIONYSUS
What good will that do? What is a wall to a god?

Related Characters: Dionysus, Pentheus (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: Lines 654-655

Explanation and Analysis

Pentheus desperately tries to reassert his authority on Thebes, which seems to be slipping beyond his grasp. Pentheus is trying to physically contain Dionysus, but as the god points out, the material limits of the mortal world mean nothing to those with supernatural powers. His questions function to shake Pentheus' understanding of the world, again making him more prone to influence later in the play. With Dionysus' ability to change form and to summon lightning and fire, it's clear that no manmade walls can contain his power. Pentheus, despite all the evidence to the contrary, is still not willing to admit Dionysus' godliness.

THE HERDSMAN
One woman struck her thyrsus on a rock
and a spring of water shot out, bubbling.
Another drove her fennel wand into the ground
and the god released a jet of wine.
Those who wanted milk
simply tapped the earth
with their fingers and a fountain started.
Pure honey spurted and streamed
from the tips of their wands.
If you had been there, sire,
you would have gone down on your knees and prayed
to the very god you deny.

Related Characters: The Herdsman (speaker), Dionysus, Pentheus, The Bacchae

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: Lines 705-710

Explanation and Analysis

The first messenger, the herdsman, enters just after the destruction of Pentheus' palace. His speech gives the audience the first detailed sense of the wild and peculiar behaviors of the Bacchae up on Mt. Cithaeron. Clearly, Dionysus' followers have temporarily inherited a small portion of his power, accessible through the use of the thyrsus (which is a phallic symbol implying fertility and power). The herdsman's lines serve an important dramatic function because they conjure an atmosphere of peace and calm, making the violent scenes that follow all the more shocking and incomprehensible. There's also an undeniable presence of sexual imagery, with the "spurting" and "streaming" of liquids from the thyrsi. This association is in keeping with one of the central aspects of Dionysian worship: sexual freedom.

They snatched children
from their homes, and pillaged houses.
Everything they threw on their backs stayed there:
nothing, not even bronze or iron, fell to the earth.
Flames danced in their hair but did not burn them.
The furious villagers took up their weapons in defense
and, sire, what happened next was dreadful to see.
The men's spears of pointed metal drew no blood,
while the flung wands of the women ripped open flesh,
and the men turned and ran.

Related Characters: The Herdsman (speaker), Pentheus, The Bacchae

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: Lines 753-763

Explanation and Analysis

The herdsman's story takes a turn for the gruesome, showing the Bacchae to be capable of extreme violence. These Bacchae are, of course, Dionysus' latest converts: the women of Thebes. This underscores just how much of a digression this behavior really is—these aren't followers who have come from afar, like the Bacchae from Asia that make up the chorus, but are local women who until recently were subservient to King Pentheus and the men of Thebes and did what was expected of them. The women's wild and uncharacteristic actions are another way Dionysus demonstrates his godly power; they would never behave in this way if it weren't for his overwhelming influence. This quote is also the first explicit instance of violence in the play. Cleverly, though, Euripides has the violence happen off stage and recounted. This both provokes the violent imaginations of the audience and makes the violence more believable by not subjecting it to the constraints of theater.

While he is sane he will never wear a woman's dress.
But he will shortly, as he is nearly mad.
After all those threats,
I want him walking down these streets in a frock;
I want him a laughing-stock.
Now I shall dress him for Hades,
where he will go by his mother's hand.
And he shall finally know Dionysus, son of Zeus,
a god both terrible and gentle to the world of man.

Related Characters: Dionysus (speaker), Pentheus

Related Themes:

Page Number: Lines 851-860

Explanation and Analysis

These lines come just after Dionysus (still disguised as the priest) has offered Pentheus an opportunity to secretly glimpse the shocking behaviors of the Bacchae. With the king surprisingly confessing that he does indeed want to observe them, Dionysus convinces him that the only way to do so safely is to dress as a woman. This reverses Pentheus' earlier suggestion that Dionysus' long hair makes him less of a man, and perhaps explains the existence of an attraction to Dionysus on Pentheus' part—he wants to know what it's like to be in touch with the his more feminine side. Dionysus' plan to destabilize Pentheus' mind is clearly working. Dionysus dresses Pentheus "for Hades," the Greek underworld, where mortals go when they die—overtly foreshadowing the King's impending death. Meanwhile, Dionysus' own summary of his godly nature is interesting—it might imply that he is terrible to those mortals who deserve his wrath, and gentle to those who pay him tribute; on the other hand, he might be more anarchic than that, dishing out the terrible and gentle in a way that

no mortal can truly understand.

Lines 867 - 1022 Quotes

PENTHEUS
I see two suns in the sky;
two cities of Thebes, each with seven gates.
And you, my guide, you seem to be a bull.
Horns grow from your head.
Were you a beast all along? For you are a bull now.

DIONYSUS
The god is with us.
There were difficulties, but now we have a truce.
You see now what you should have seen before. The god.

PENTHEUS
So how do I look?
A little like Aunt Ino, or a bit more like my mother?

DIONYSUS
The very image of your mother, now I can see you plain.
But let me fix this curl that's come astray.

PENTHEUS
It must have been all that Bacchic ecstasy there in the palace.
I was shaking my head so much!

Related Characters: Dionysus, Pentheus (speaker), The Bacchae, Ino, Agave

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: Lines 918-930

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes just after Dionysus and Pentheus have prepared Pentheus' female disguise. It represents the height of Pentheus' loss of rationality; Dionysus has been toying with the King by dramatically altering his form. Pentheus' double vision demonstrates that he is losing his grip on reality. Dionysus even confesses to Pentheus that he is the god, rather than the Dionysian priest, but Pentheus is too preoccupied with his new outfit to even notice. Pentheus has clearly let loose a buried part of his psyche, wanting to look like either his mother or his aunt. Euripides underscores the irony of Pentheus' transformation by returning to the imagery of hair—Pentheus' sudden concern with the state of his hair completely undermines his earlier insult to Dionysus' long (but "not entirely unattractive") locks. Here, again, some important action takes place off stage—Euripides suggests that not only has Pentheus lost all sense of his earlier gripes with Dionysian ritual, but has now actively engaged in the very behavior he earlier sought to stamp out from Thebes.

Lines 1023 - 1392 Quotes

His own mother,
like a priestess with her sacrifice, fell on him first.
But he snatched off his headdress and wig
so she could see who he was.
He reached out his hand to touch her cheek
and cried out: "Mother! Mother! Look!
It's me, Pentheus, Your own son!
The son you bore to Echion!
Spare me, Mother, I beg You!
I have done wrong, Perhaps,
but you cannot kill your own son!"
But Agave's eyes were rolling,
and her mouth filling with foam.
In the grip of the god and the god's frenzy,
it was as if she couldn't see him, couldn't hear.
Grabbing his left hand at the wrist,
she planted her foot against his flank and wrenched,
pulling his arm straight out of his shoulder—
not with her own strength but the strength of the god.

Related Characters: The Second Messenger (speaker), The Bacchae, Pentheus, Agave

Related Themes:

Page Number: Lines 1115-1128

Explanation and Analysis

Soon after Dionysus and Pentheus depart to see the Bacchae, Euripides uses the sudden arrival of a messenger once again, this time forcing the audience to actively imagine Pentheus' violent death rather than perform it on stage. This quote is important for many reasons. Firstly, it demonstrates the extent to which Agave has given herself—or been forced to give her self—to the way of the Bacchae. She is so firmly entrenched in Dionysian ritual that she can't recognize her own son, who should be the clearest reminder of her normal life. She is "like a priestess" because she is leading the group, embodying the importance of sacrifice to Dionysus' religion. King Pentheus suffers further ignominy by being reduced to nothing more than a

scared little boy crying for his mother, completely undermining his earlier illusory sense of magisterial authority. Agave's eyes and mouth are clearly reminiscent of deranged animals (particularly dogs infected with rabies) emphasizing the return to a more primal nature. The death is unquestionably gory, and the particular method of killing makes it impossible for Agave, upon realizing her mistake, to give her son a proper burial.

Father, you have the right to make the proudest boast,
for you have sired the bravest daughters in the world.
And of us all, I am the foremost:
leaving the shuttle and loom for bigger things –
hunting animals with my bare hands.
As you can see, I have a trophy for our house,
to hang here on the wall.

Related Characters: Agave (speaker), Pentheus, Cadmus

Related Themes:

Page Number: Lines 1231-1240

Explanation and Analysis

These are Agave's words as she appears on stage for the first time—previously the audience only encountered her through recounted stories from the messengers. This moment represents the height of the play's tragedy, as Agave parades her own son's head, deluded into thinking she has nobly killed a mountain lion. It's at this point that audience has to really question the nature of Dionysus' revenge, and whether it is a just punishment for denying his godliness. Agave displays hubris—an excessive belief in one's own abilities or achievements—just to add further pain to the tragic events that have taken place. This moment also examines the way people view violence—there is a sense in which, by wanting to see violence on stage, the audience has bloodlust in common with Agave.

AGAVE
Cithaeron? But why was Pentheus there?

CADMUS
He went to mock the gods, and your rituals.

AGAVE
But we—why were we there?

CADMUS
You were out of your wits.
The whole city was possessed by Bacchus.

AGAVE
I see. Dionysus has destroyed us all.

Related Characters: Cadmus, Agave (speaker), Dionysus, Pentheus

Related Themes:

Page Number: Lines 1292-1296

Explanation and Analysis

Agave realizes her tragic mistake, and tries to piece together what has happened. She has been so deeply entranced by Dionysus that she remembers nothing, asking the audience to consider how much agency she has had throughout the play. It's not easy to ascertain whether she has any true responsibility for her actions, or whether she has been a mere puppet for Dionysus to enact his particularly cruel revenge. Cadmus suggests that what she has been though constitutes a form of madness—but this contradicts the idea that mortals ought to follow the gods and pay them tribute. Agave has done what Dionysus wanted, but only brought tragedy upon herself and, ultimately, destroyed the entire family.

The gods take many shapes,
accomplish many things beyond our expectations.
What we look for does not happen;
what we least expect is fashioned by the gods.
And that is what has happened here today.

Related Characters: The Chorus (speaker), Dionysus

Related Themes:

Page Number: Lines 1388-1392

Explanation and Analysis

These are the closing lines of the play, offering a dissatisfying explanation for the events that have transpired. In a way, the fact the explanation is dissatisfying is appropriate. The point the chorus is making here is that mortals can't expect to understand gods—it's arrogant to think that anyone, whether characters in the play or members of the audience, can really rationalize Dionysus' actions. Dionysus is especially relevant to this idea, because he is positioned as the very god responsible for irrationality—no wonder it's hard to make sense of him. The play, then, ends on a note that offers no easy answers, perhaps better reflecting the complexities of life itself—rather than offering simple narrative answers.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

LINES 1 - 168

Dionysus, Greek god of wine, fertility, ritual madness, and ecstasy, stands outside of the royal **palace** of Thebes. He has taken human form and returned to Thebes, the town of his birth, to avenge the dishonorable treatment of his deceased mother, Semele.

Dionysus is a complicated figure, able to take on different forms. This opening, in which one of the characters provides background information to the play, is a traditional feature of ancient Greek theater.

Semele was the daughter of Cadmus, the elderly Theban who has given over the rule of the kingdom to his grandson, and Dionysus' cousin, Pentheus. Semele was impregnated by Zeus, the king of the gods. Hera, Zeus' wife, was jealous of Semele's relationship with Zeus and tricked Semele into asking Zeus to reveal himself in his true form—a lightning storm, which struck and killed Semele.

Ancient Greek audiences would have been familiar with the backstories of the play's main characters. The Greek gods frequently interacted with mortals, and Dionysus' visitation to the mortal world mirrors Zeus' earlier appearance there as Semele's lover. The gods are frequently deceptive, jealous and impulsive throughout the Greek myths. This gives the audience an understanding of Dionysus' motive for revenge.

Dionysus tells the audience he has arrived in Thebes from the East, where he established his "rites and mysteries" and "set all Asia dancing." He's set the city "ringing" with his "ecstasies" and "the cries of women, clothed in fawn-skin, holding the **thyrsus**." He explains that he's targeted Thebes because his mother Semele's sisters, Agave, Ino, and Autonoe, deny that he is the son of Zeus and dishonor his mother's memory. They thought the story was just a ruse thought up by Cadmus because Semele had a scandalous affair with a mortal man.

Dionysus' rites and rituals are all about ecstatic revelation, in which participants are encouraged to "lose themselves" in drunkenness and orgiastic behavior. The thyrsus is a rod made from fennel that doubles as a weapon and an item with magical qualities. It's also a phallic symbol, reminding the viewer of the important sexual element in Dionysus' cult.

Dionysus wants Thebes to "learn its lesson" and follow his rites and rituals. All of the women of the city are already entranced—they've decamped to the mountains, driven "delirious" by Dionysus. They are his Bacchae. He says that when the Thebans realize his godliness they will see Semele's innocence.

A lot of action has already taken place before the beginning of the play. Most notably, Dionysus has already bewitched the women of Thebes, demonstrating to the audience his godly power. It's also clear that part of his revenge hinges on proving his godly superiority over those who doubt his divinity. "Bacchae" is the name for his female followers—they're called "Maenads" sometimes too.

Dionysus is angry with Pentheus, the king of Thebes and grandson of Cadmus, for disrespecting him by refusing to offer sacrifice or prayer in his honor. He says that once his task is done in Thebes, he'll move on to other cities—but if anyone tries to stop his female followers, the Bacchae, he will "bring on war." Dionysus calls on his "women" to beat their drums at the **palace** doors, before leaving to join the dance of his Bacchae on Mount Cithaeron.

This sets up the opposition between Dionysus, who values anarchy and chaos, and Pentheus, who tries to impose order on Thebes and its citizens. Since they share the same grandfather, they are cousins. The audience gathers that Dionysus is bloodthirsty and not looking for a peaceful resolution to his desire for vengeance.

The chorus sings Dionysus' praises, charting their journey from Asia to Greece. They say those who give themselves to Dionysus will be blessed. They also recount the story of Dionysus' birth. According to the chorus, if Theban women dress in ivy and wool, carry the **thyrsus**, and dance, they will be "freed from themselves, possessed by Dionysus!"

Choruses occupy an unusual role—they are both part of the play and independent from it, serving more as a commentary to what's going on than actually getting involved in the action. In this play, the chorus is made up of some of Dionysus' female followers, the Bacchae. In this instance, they reinforce the idea that to give in to Dionysus' chaotic rituals represents a form of liberation. It's worth noticing the emphasis on the Dionysian costume being an important element in the transformation.

LINES 169 - 519

Tiresias, the elderly blind prophet, enters dressed as a Dionysian follower. He calls to Cadmus to come out of the **palace** and join him. Cadmus arrives and greets him warmly, also dressed in Bacchant garbs. Both of them are excited to join in the dance, despite their old age. They're the only men in Thebes willing to dance for Dionysus. Cadmus tells Tiresias that he can see Pentheus approaching.

Tiresias and Cadmus are the only men in the play who display an open willingness to embrace Dionysus' godliness and pay him tribute. In fact, they seem genuinely excited to do so. Tiresias is generally a wise figure in Greek mythology, supposedly able to see into the future despite being a mortal.

Pentheus appears, accompanied by his attendants. He has been out of the country for a few days and is furious at the scenes he's come back to. He complains about Dionysus and the way he has deceived the women of the town. He believes that "drink is at the bottom of it all," and that it's making the women promiscuous. He boasts that he's already imprisoned many of them, and that he will hunt down the rest on the mountain—even his mother, Agave, and his aunts, Ino and Autonoe.

Like Dionysus, Pentheus has just arrived in town, further contributing to the idea that they represent opposites. Pentheus clearly isn't willing to worship Dionysus and seems to mistrust drunkenness and sexuality. His priority seems to be imposing order on Thebes and undoing Dionysus' mischievous handiwork—that's why he's even willing to imprison his own mother and aunts.

Pentheus goes on, lambasting Dionysus as just some "charlatan magician"; Pentheus vows to put a stop to his mischief and behead him. Pentheus scorns the idea that Dionysus is a god, and says Dionysus and Semele were killed for the latter's lie that she had slept with Zeus.

Pentheus confirms what Dionysus earlier told the audience—that he doesn't believe in Dionysus' godliness. His vow to behead Dionysus is tragically prescient of his own fateful end.

Pentheus notices Cadmus and Tiresias and their Dionysian attire. He mocks them, and tells Cadmus he is ashamed of him. He accuses Tiresias of embracing Dionysus so he can make money on the side from burnt offerings and prophecies. The chorus accuses Pentheus of "blasphemy."

Pentheus clearly views Dionysus as a threat to his power. The chorus offers further commentary on the action, making clear that Pentheus will incur Dionysus' godly wrath. It's also worth noting that Pentheus dismisses Tiresias' ability to see into the future.

Tiresias argues in Dionysus' favor, saying the god will be a great power in Greece. He says that the ecstatic rituals of Dionysus bring the "power of second sight." He also praises Dionysus for the gift of wine, which brings "peace to the troubled mind" and gives people "blessed sleep." He says Dionysus doesn't corrupt women, but releases their "true nature," and that Pentheus is "mad" not to pay tribute.

Tiresias was blinded by the gods, but given "second sight" in return—the ability to see far into the future. His view of wine is undoubtedly skewed, given the physical and mental problems that accompany too much alcohol. Again, there is this appeal to Dionysian ecstasy as not chaos but a restoration of the "true" self. Tiresias thinks Pentheus is mad, and Pentheus thinks Tiresias and Cadmus are mad—these are two competing ideas of what it means to be rational.

Cadmus tells Pentheus that he needs to follow "customs and traditions." He reasons that, even if Dionysus isn't a god, it does no harm to act as if he is. Firstly, they'll avoid divine retribution and, secondly, it will bring honor to their family to be associated with godliness. He reminds Pentheus of the tragic end Pentheus' cousin Actaeon, who was torn apart by dogs because he bragged that his hunting skills were superior to a god's.

Cadmus' belief in Dionysus doesn't seem to be based on genuine devotion—it's more of a prudent insurance policy in case *Dionysus is a god. He's also showing hubris, or excessive pride, in wanting to be associated with Dionysus to bring honor to the family's name.*

Pentheus rejects Cadmus and Tiresias' arguments, ordering his servants to capture the priest—actually Dionysus in disguise—who is leading the women astray. Tiresias and Cadmus leave to pay their respects to the god, and Tiresias predicts that Pentheus' actions will "end in folly." The chorus sings further praises of Dionysus, warning that "over-reaching mortals simply shorten their lives."

Dionysus poses as a priest of his own religion, and keeps this form for most of the play. The implication of the chorus' words is that Pentheus has foolishly believed his power to be greater than that of the gods, and that this prideful, false belief will bring about his untimely death.

A servant enters, bringing in the enchained Dionysus, still in disguise and willingly held captive. He also tells Pentheus that the imprisoned Bacchae have miraculously escaped their shackles and are now returning to the mountain.

The escape of the Bacchae should help Pentheus see that they have a god on their side, but he's too impetuous to notice. Their magical escape suggests that Dionysus has power over the material world, able to do the impossible.

Pentheus takes an intrigued look at Dionysus, saying that he is "not entirely unattractive" and praising his skin and **hair**. Pentheus interrogates Dionysus, who says he has come to Thebes to bring the rituals of his god, Dionysus. Dionysus says only "initiates" may know the secrets of Dionysian "mysteries."

Pentheus is clearly curious about Dionysus, and there is the subtle hint at a sexual attraction, if only on a subconscious level. This lays the foundations for Pentheus' later willingness to disguise himself in order to spy on the Bacchae.

Dionysus' evasiveness angers Pentheus. Pentheus cuts off Dionysus' **hair** and snatches his **thyrsus**, before ordering him to be locked up. Dionysus warns Pentheus that he will pay for his "blasphemy." He says, "put chains on me, and you are binding Dionysus." He is led off in chains, and Pentheus exits too.

Dionysus' long hair represents his being in touch—literally and metaphorically—with his women, and thereby his sexual power. Pentheus is trying to emasculate him by cutting it off, and snatching the phallic thyrsus from Dionysus' grasp. Dionysus is stating his true identity out loud, but only the audience understands what he truly means. Pentheus tries to impose his supremacy on Dionysus through the use of the chains, but Dionysus' godliness makes this a futile gesture.

LINES 520 - 866

The chorus sings about Dionysus' birth and Pentheus' betrayal of his origins. The singers call on Dionysus to "come down from Olympus" and free them and their leader (Dionysus in disguise), and punish Pentheus.

One of the functions of the chorus is to raise the dramatic tension of the play, which they do so here by inciting Dionysus to punish Pentheus. Olympus is the mountain home of the Greek gods.

Dionysus calls to the chorus and his other followers from within the **palace**. He brings about a great earthquake to "shake the roots of the world" and destroy the palace, which goes up in flames and crumbles to the ground. Dionysus is reunited with the fearful chorus, who, like Pentheus, perceive him as a priest. Those in the chorus are in awe of the power of Dionysus; he comforts them.

Dionysus shows the futility of his imprisonment—by destroying the palace from within, he is making more blatant display of his power than if he were to do so from afar. The members of Dionysus' chorus are terrified of his power but, as his followers, are under his protection. Pentheus' palace is supposed to project his own power and the rigid structure of Theban society and his rule—its destruction shows that his power means nothing without the support of the gods.

Dionysus explains to the chorus how he escaped from the **palace**. Apparently, he had deceived Pentheus throughout their interaction. Pentheus thought he had shackled a Dionysian priest, but in fact it was just a bull. Then Dionysus had set the palace ablaze. Pentheus had tried to stab his prisoner, but had only managed to stab the shadows.

Dionysus shows that he's been in control all along, and is just toying with Pentheus. The "bull" symbolizes Dionysus' raw masculinity, showing that he is capable of embodying aspects of both men and women. Euripides doesn't make it clear whether Pentheus was hallucinating or not, leaving it up to the audience whether it is Dionysus' behavior or Pentheus' denial of the gods that is "irrational." Pentheus' stabbing at the shadows shows that physically he is no match for Dionysus.

Pentheus arrives with his retinue, furious that his prisoner has escaped. Suddenly he notices Dionysus—still in the guise of the Dionysian priest—standing there, and is baffled as to how he can be "free, standing at the gate of my palace?" Pentheus is enraged, and orders his servants to lock all of the city gates. Dionysus says walls mean nothing to a god.

To Pentheus, it's physically impossible for Dionysus to appear outside the palace so suddenly. This contributes to the destabilization of Pentheus' mind that Dionysus will later use to his advantage. As Dionysus says, the material world cannot contain the power of a god—there's no use putting chains on him or enclosing him in walls.

A herdsman arrives with a message from Mt. Cithaeron. He has come to tell Pentheus of what he's seen: the Bacchae are running wild. He tells Pentheus he saw Agave, Ino, and Autonoe leading three bands of women; at first they seemed to be resting calmly.

This is the first instance in which a minor character arrives to bring news of violence. The fact that Pentheus' aunts and mother are the leading Bacchae is an extra taunt on Dionysus' part—they're the ones who originally denied his godliness and sullied his mother's name.

But then, continues the herdsman, Agave heard the sound of cattle and sprung to her feet, waking up the rest of the Bacchae. As they woke, some of them "drew gazelles and wolf cubs to their swollen breasts and let them feed." They fixed up their Dionysian garments and tapped their **thyrsi** on the rocks, bringing forth water, wine, milk, and honey.

The women of Thebes are deeply entranced by Dionysus, engaging in behaviors far removed from the established order of society. The Bacchae's nursing of wild animals indicates that they have returned to a more primal state—it's up to the audience to decide if Dionysian life represents a liberation, as both the chorus and Tiresias (to a lesser extent) implied earlier, or if it is a descent into irrationality and madness. The nursing, though obviously quite strange, momentarily depicts the Bacchae as tender and caring—making their following actions all the more shockingly violent.

Someone from the city asked the herdsman if they should earn the "gratitude of the king" and capture Pentheus' mother, Agave. They lay in ambush as the Bacchae came by, practicing their rituals, seemingly possessed. The herdsman jumped out at Agave, but she quickly called on the women to turn their **thyrsi** against the men.

The herdsman thought he would earn grace and favor with Pentheus by capturing his mother, showing that Thebes' residents usually respect their King. Once again, they thyrsus is a phallic symbol that, when used by the women, represents a disruption of the usual order of male-dominated society. Violence is usually the male domain, but Dionysus has given that power to his female followers.

The herdsman and his group fled from the Bacchae—the women then turned on the nearby herd of cattle. They tore apart the animals—even the bulls—limb from limb with their bare hands. Body parts were strewn everywhere, "dripping from the trees."

The behaviors of the Bacchae are intended to come across as animalistic and savage—in short, uncivilized. This further poses the question of whether they are "freed" or "mad," or perhaps both. Interestingly, Euripides never depicts the violent scenes on stage, but instead has messengers describe them in vivid detail. This spurs the audience to examine their own relationship with violence—by watching this play, perhaps they are indulging in violent fantasies of their own.

The Bacchae continued their rampage, heading to nearby villages, where they snatched children and pillaged houses. "Flames danced in their hair," and the villagers' weapons were powerless to stop them—their spears drew no blood. The women flung their **thyrsus** wands at the men, ripping open their flesh. The herdsman says it was clear some god was empowering them. He implores Pentheus to welcome this god, whoever he may be, to Thebes. Making his exit, the herdsman praises Dionysus for his gift of wine.

Here, the Bacchae show themselves as truly distanced from conventional morality—and it's clear that Dionysus has granted them superhuman abilities, thus demonstrating his power. The Bacchae have lost all respect for human life and treat the men as they did the cattle earlier. This speech represents another warning to Pentheus that he ought to obey Dionysus and pay tribute. The violence in this story presages the violence described at the end by the second messenger.

The leader of the chorus tells Pentheus that there is no god greater than Dionysus. Pentheus tells his servant to go and mobilize the Theban army, declaring "we will not be treated this way by women. It is against nature!"

Ironically, Pentheus sees the Bacchae's behavior as going against nature, while Dionysus' followers see his rituals as a return *to nature. Pentheus insists on trying to summon all the mortal might of Thebes to combat Dionysus, which already appears doomed to fail.*

Dionysus, still posing as the priest, offers Pentheus a last chance to avoid "taking arms against a god." He warns that there will grave consequences if Pentheus tries to drive the women from Mt. Cithaeron. He says, "if I were you I'd offer up a sacrifice, not a spear: You are a mortal against a god."

Dionysus lays down the opposition between himself and Pentheus in clear, unambiguous terms, offering Pentheus another chance to avoid tragedy.

Dionysus offers to bring the Bacchae back to Thebes with no bloodshed, but Pentheus doesn't trust him. Pentheus tells his guard to bring him his armor, and Dionysus to shut up.

Pentheus has no reason to trust Dionysus at this point. He still thinks he can compete with Dionysus, even though all the evidence so far is to the contrary. Pentheus, then, displays an arrogant refusal to see what's in front of him.

Dionysus cunningly asks whether Pentheus would like to spy on the Bacchae as they "go about their mysteries." Pentheus says he would pay a lot of money to do so, though it would "pain" him to see them drunk. He suggests that he could hide in the trees, but Dionysus says the Bacchae would "hunt him down" if they discovered him.

It's notable how quickly Pentheus switches from his militaristic mode to admitting he would like to spy on the Bacchae. This suggests that either his mind is weak and Dionysus is taking advantage of him, or that he harbors a secret desire to experience the Dionysian rituals too, even just as a bystander. It seems that something about the "wild" and "free" behavior of the Bacchae attracts him. This desire suggests that, for all his protestations, his projection of himself as a mighty and powerful ruler is not as strong as he pretends.

Dionysus tells Pentheus that in order for him to spy on the Bacchae, he needs to disguise himself as a woman. Though Pentheus finds the idea shameful, he admits it makes sense. Dionysus instructs him to put on a "**wig of flowing hair**," a dress that goes down to his feet, and a headdress. To complete the outfit, he needs a "dappled fawn-skin" and a **thyrsus**.

Dionysus is seeking to further undermine Pentheus' identity as a strong male ruler by cunningly convincing him to dress as a woman—there's no doubt who is control of the situation here. Once again, hair is used to symbolize male effeminateness.

Pentheus hesitates about the cross-dressing plan, but Dionysus says it's either that or "fight the women and spill blood." Pentheus goes into the ruins of the **palace** to think about what he should do. Dionysus makes it clear to the chorus that he intends to drive Pentheus mad and embarrass him. Then, Pentheus will "finally know Dionysus, son of Zeus, a god both terrible and gentle to the world of man." He, too, enters the palace.

Dionysus explicitly articulates his aim here as bringing irrationality to Pentheus' "orderly" mind. Dionysus' statement that he is both "terrible and gentle" could be interpreted in two ways: either he is simply terrible to those who deny his godliness and gentle to those who worship him, or perhaps he is stating that his primary motivation is to disrupt the order of "the world of man" and undermine the values that hold society together.

LINES 867 - 1022

The chorus sings about gods and honor: "the greatest gift of the gods is honor: to reach your hand in triumph over the heads of the enemy." The chorus members sing that the gods will crush "men of arrogance." According to the chorus, everyone in the world competes for wealth and power, but those "who live from day to day" will be the happy ones.

The chorus is comprised of Dionysus' followers—they're not a neutral observer of the action. The chorus embodies the view that mortals need to worship the gods and follow their instructions, but that doesn't mean that the play as a whole reinforces that message. Euripides asks his audience whether Dionysus' actions, supported by the chorus, are fair and just. It's obvious that "men of arrogance" is a criticism leveled at Pentheus. The final chorus comment about living day to day is slightly out of keeping with the chorus' general attitude or the behaviors of Dionysus. Dionysus, himself, is not living from day to day, but seeking revenge for historical events; furthermore, his motivation for that revenge is to unequivocally prove his godly power. So the chorus' advice is more like a suggestion for how people can avoid the wrath of the gods than a means to a happy life.

Dionysus comes back, ushering out Pentheus, who is dressed as a woman and carrying a **thyrsus**. Pentheus seems disoriented, telling Dionysus that he appears to be a bull. Dionysus says it's because he is a god, but Pentheus doesn't understand him properly. Pentheus asks if he looks like his aunt Ino or his mother, Agave.

Pentheus is losing his ability to perceive the world rationally. His question of whether he looks like his mother or his aunt heightens the tragedy of the events that shortly follow. Once again, Dionysus delights in telling Pentheus the truth without the latter properly following the implications of Dionysus' words. Suddenly, Pentheus' military posturing seems entirely inaccessible—he's more concerned with how he looks as a woman.

Dionysus fixes up Pentheus' **hair**, which Pentheus says must have come loose in "all that Bacchic ecstasy there in the **palace**." They also make sure Pentheus' dress is lined up nicely. Pentheus asks which hand he ought to hold the **thyrsus** in to look "more like a true and proper Bacchante."

The audience learns that Pentheus, after all his protests and military posturing, has been involved in some kind of Dionysian ritual ("Bacchic" means essentially the same thing, referring to Dionysus' equivalent Roman god, Bacchus). The play never explains just what went on in the palace, or whether the palace was miraculously reconstructed. It may be that Pentheus is spell-bound by Dionysus, in a way similar to the Bacchae on the mountain.

Dionysus hints that Pentheus is heading towards his death, but the latter doesn't pick up on the suggestion. Dionysus says Pentheus will be carried back "held in his mother's arms," an idea that delights Pentheus. Pentheus, says Dionysus, "will be spoiled." They leave for the mountains.

Dionysus, of course, is predicting Pentheus' death at the hands of his own mother, but Pentheus has no idea of the true implications of Dionysus' words. Just like in their earlier exchanges, Dionysus delights in telling Pentheus the truth about what's going on, or what's going to happen without Pentheus properly understanding.

The chorus invokes the "hounds of madness" to run to the mountains and send the Bacchae into a frenzy against "the man in woman's clothes." Pentheus, they sing, is walking, is walking "headlong" to his death. If only he had been "pure and pious," they lament. They call on Dionysus to appear as a bull, a "many-headed serpent" and a "lion in flames"—and to "throw out the net of death."

The chorus is bloodthirsty, lusting for Dionysus to kill Pentheus. "Headlong" gestures towards Pentheus' imminent grisly fate. In this moment, audience members have to ask themselves whether they, too, are lusting for the same violence as the chorus.

LINES 1023 - 1392

The second messenger arrives, bearing "mournful" news—Pentheus is dead. The leader of the chorus celebrates. When chastised by the messenger, the chorus leader says: "I am no Greek, and he was not my king. I praise my lord in my own way. This news frees us from the fear of chains."

Time goes by in a mysterious way in this play. Pentheus has only just exited the stage, but already the second messenger brings news of his death. The second messenger accuses the chorus of being immoral, and the leader reiterates the idea that Dionysus offers people "freedom" rather than madness.

The second messenger recounts what happened to Pentheus. He went with Pentheus and Dionysus to Mt. Cithaeron. They came across some of the Bacchae, who were singing songs and repairing their **thyrsi**.

This emphasizes the importance of the thyrsus to Dionysus and his followers, rendering it as a symbol of their power. As with the previous messenger's story about the Bacchae, this story begins with Dionysus' followers seemingly at rest, making them seem momentarily less threatening.

Pentheus wanted to get a closer look, continues the second messenger, and asked Dionysus if it would be a good idea to climb up a nearby fir tree. Dionysus pulled the highest branch of the tree to the ground with ease and sat Pentheus down, before letting the tree return to its normal height.

Dionysus' demonstration of strength with the tree is a further demonstration of his godliness. However, he's not helping Pentheus—he's making him a more obvious target.

The Bacchae then spotted Pentheus at the top of the tree. The second messenger relates how the voice of Dionysus came from the sky and told the "Bacchae" that here was the man who "mocked" him and denied his "sacred mysteries." With lightning flashing in the sky, Dionysus implored his followers to retaliate against Pentheus for his "crimes."

Dionysus' motivations become clear—Pentheus has to be punished for mocking him and refusing to pay him tribute. Dionysus brings lightning to the sky, echoing the godly attributes of his father, Zeus, whose "true" form was a lightning storm.

The Bacchae threw stones and branches at Pentheus, but he held his grip. Then Agave, his mother, gathered the Bacchae around the tree and had them tear it out of the ground, sending Pentheus crashing to the floor. Agave pounced on him, continues the second messenger. Pentheus took off his wig and headdress and cried out, "Mother! Mother! It's Me, Pentheus, your own son!"

The previous messenger's story prepared the audience for this display of violence. Dionysus has already demonstrated immense power over mortals and their world, be it through the destruction of the palace, his shape-shifting to destabilize Pentheus' mind, or his possession of the minds of the Theban women. This means that he could have easily overpowered Pentheus in a less cruel way, but opts to force him to meet his death in these particularly tragic circumstances. Pentheus cries to his mother return him to the status of a scared little boy, thus stripping him of any remaining sense of magisterial identity.

Pentheus pleaded with Agave for his life, but her "eyes were rolling, and her mouth filling with foam." She wrenched his arm right off of his body, "in the grip of the god and the god's frenzy." Then the other Bacchae, including Pentheus' aunts, Ino and Autonoe, helped tear him apart. Soon, his remains were scattered everywhere.

Earlier, Dionysus and his followers claimed that Dionysian rituals restore people's "true" selves; however, it's hard to argue that Agave is not possessed by a kind of madness here. Besides her inability to recognize her own son, Agave is foaming at the mouth, which is usually a sign of serious mental or physical distress. Pentheus is killed in an especially violent manner, suggesting that Dionysus takes delight in treating non-believers cruelly.

Agave picked up Pentheus' head and mounted it on the top of her **thyrsus**. The second messenger says he heard her calling out to Dionysus, her "fellow huntsman" and "companion in the chase, in the taking of the prize." The herdsman says that her only prize is grief, and that he can't bear to be around and see Agave realize her mistake. He parts with words of advice: "that moderation and reverence for the gods are a mortal's best possession."

Agave thinks she has hunted some wild creature, rather than her own son. The grisly image of Pentheus' head impaled on the thyrsus creates a powerful symbol of Dionysus' supremacy—Pentheus has become nothing more than a part of Agave's Dionysian costume. The messenger's parting words seem sensible, and suggest that Agave has reverence for the gods—but, fatally, has lost any capacity for moderation.

The chorus celebrates what's happened to Pentheus. Agave enters, carrying her **thyrsus** with the head of Pentheus impaled upon it. Agave addresses the chorus, telling that the "the hunting was good" and that she has caught "a mountain lion." She says "soon the men of Thebes will praise the mother who caught this whelp and brought him home." The chorus asks if she is happy, and she replies she "feels the thrill of having done something great."

Dionysus makes Agave parade her delusions in front of the other characters and the audience. This heightens the sense of tragedy, particularly given that everyone apart from Agave assumes that she will soon realize her mistake. Perhaps the fact that she thinks Pentheus' head is that of a lion has to do with the wig that he was wearing at the time of the Bacchae's attack—in her frenzy, she might have confused the wig for a mane.

Agave shows off the head before asking the whereabouts of Cadmus and Pentheus. Cadmus arrives with a servant carrying a "draped stretcher." Cadmus has been searching for the different parts of Pentheus' body and gathering them up, "a gory jigsaw." He had heard what Agave had done and headed back up the mountain, where he saw Ino and Autonoe, both still "stricken with madness."

Cadmus is trying to piece Pentheus back together again, underscoring the incredibly violent nature of his death. The audience is made to question whether Dionysus' punishment was just and fair. Of course, one answer is that conventional standards of morality don't apply to gods. Meanwhile, all three of the sisters are still in the grip of Dionysus' power.

Agave tells Cadmus that he should be proud of her and her sisters, given their skill at "hunting animals" with their bare hands. She gives him Pentheus' head, calling it a "trophy for our house" and asking him to "share the glory of my kill."

Agave is now displaying hubris, boasting about what she thinks is her great hunting success. As the old saying goes, pride comes before a fall.

Cadmus tells Agave that her and her sisters aren't hunters, but murderers. He says he pities her for the "grief to come," and that they must have seriously wronged Dionysus to deserve what's happened: "he has been so just, so terribly just, he has destroyed us all." Agave just thinks Cadmus is being miserable in his old age.

As Cadmus says, Dionysus has brought about some kind of retribution, but it's a terrible justice. By now, most audiences will feel that Dionysus' actions are out of proportion with the original "crime." If Dionysus is in some way the god of the irrational—or, at least, the god most concerned with disrupting society's usual order—perhaps his own sense of justice is skewed.

Agave calls out for Pentheus, so he can witness "his mother's good fortune." Cadmus says that if she ever realizes what she's done, then she will be driven mad. She asks, "where is the shame? Where is the cause for grief?" He tells her to look up towards the sky.

Ironically, Cadmus instructs Agave to look up at the sky in order to clear her head—but the sky is also where the Greek gods are supposed to live, in a palace in the clouds. This also symbolizes Agave's parting with her temporary animal nature, which was rooted to the land (by hunting and living amongst the pines). Both her deception and her restoration, then, are linked to the sky, suggesting the border between the worlds of the gods and the mortals is blurry.

As Agave stares at the sky, she feels her "head is clearing." She tells Cadmus she can't remember what they were talking about. He asks her a series of questions about who she is in order to establish her sanity, which she answers correctly. He asks her to look at the head in her hands and say what it is. She reluctantly takes a look and realizes she is holding the head of her son, Pentheus.

Agave slowly returns to her pre-Dionysian self. As she can't remember what they've been talking about, Euripides implies that Agave has alternated between two distinct states. However, any previous sense of self that comes back to her will be forever ruined when she learns of her actions. It seems that what's taken place during the play has not portrayed a "freed" woman, but one under the possession of a god.

Agave asks who killed Pentheus. Cadmus explains what happened—that Agave and her sisters are responsible. She doesn't remember anything, not even being part of the Dionysian rituals. Cadmus tells her: "You enraged him. You denied him as a god." She asks where the rest of Pentheus' body is; he points to the body parts on the stretcher.

Euripides enhances the tragedy by having Cadmus reveal to Agave the full extent of her actions and her responsibility for Pentheus' death. Though Cadmus lays the blame on Agave, if her actions were the result of her possession by Dionysus, it's unclear if she is truly responsible. Part of the play's sense of tragedy, then, is that it's difficult to assign moral culpability.

Cadmus explains to Agave that Pentheus was made to suffer because "he refused the god." He laments that their dynasty has been destroyed, and that he has no male heirs. He addresses Pentheus' corpse, praising his grandson for keeping order over Thebes and taking care of him in his old age. He says that if "anyone disputes the power of heaven," they need only to look at Pentheus' death and realize that "the gods live."

Cadmus feels that the identity of his family has been lost through the destructive events of the play. This is also the first glimpse the audience gets of the positive side of Pentheus' character—not much of a sense of Pentheus as a ruler has been given to the audience thus far.

Dionysus appears, "revealed as a god." He tells Cadmus that he and his wife, Harmonia, will be turned into snakes, "drawn by oxen in a cart," and "lead a barbarian horde and sack many cities." When they attack the wrong shrine, they will be in danger—but the gods will bring them to the "Land of the Blessed." Dionysus reiterates his godliness.

Unbelievably, Dionysus isn't finished yet. He returns to dish out this bizarre fate to Cadmus and Harmonia, and, as if it wasn't already proven, to state his godliness once more. The audience is provoked to ask whether Dionysus' "justice" is in itself a kind of madness, or just the mysterious workings of a god.

Cadmus pleads with Dionysus, asking "should not gods stand above all mortal passions, such as anger?" Dionysus says that Zeus told him all of this would happen—the events were inevitable, and there's no point him staying around any longer. He leaves.

Cadmus' question is central to the play: are gods above the passions of the mortals, or are mortals unable to properly understand the actions of the gods? That's why Cadmus offered the pragmatic advice to Pentheus earlier in the play that it's best to pay to tribute to the gods even if you're not a true believer—a kind of insurance policy. Furthermore, in claiming that he already knew what was going to happen, Dionysus suggests that nobody in the play truly has free will—and therefore nobody is truly responsible for their actions.

Agave embraces Cadmus, distraught that she must be exiled with him. Cadmus says he can't help her. Agave bids farewell to her "home," "city and "marriage bed." She tells Cadmus she grieves for him, and he says he does the same for her and her sisters.

Agave knows that she can never undo her terrible actions. Most audiences by this point will sympathize with Agave and Cadmus—but, in watching the play as entertainment, they have themselves indulged in actively enjoying the thrill of violence. Dionysus is the god of theatre, so accordingly the play asks whether there is a theatrical element to violence in human society.

Agave says "terrible is the ruin Lord Dionysus has visited on this house"; Cadmus says it's their fault for dishonoring the god. They bid farewell to each other and leave in different directions. The chorus closes the play: "what we look for does not come to pass; what we least expect is fashioned by the gods. And that is what has happened here today."

Agave addresses Dionysus as a "Lord," showing heartbroken respect for his superior power. She and Cadmus leave in different directions to symbolize the finality of the tragedy—they will likely never see each other again. The chorus strikes a slightly different tone from its blood lust earlier, here giving a fairly accurate description of what's happened in the play—the unexpected. This final moment, then, reiterates that the gods are beyond the understanding of mortals. Even those who pay tribute to Dionysus in the play can't be said to fully comprehend the extent—or motives—of his powers.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Howard, James. "*The Bacchae*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 3 Nov 2018. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Howard, James. "*The Bacchae*." LitCharts LLC, November 3, 2018. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-bacchae.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Bacchae* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Euripides. The Bacchae. Ecco. 2015.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Euripides. The Bacchae. New York: Ecco. 2015.