

Bacchae Explanatory Plot Summary

By Dan Smith

PROLOGUE: Dionysus arrives and explains his back-story. He has been gathering followers throughout Asia. His mother is Semele and his father is Zeus. Semele's sisters (Agave, Ino, and Autonoe) had spread a rumor that Semele's pregnancy was the result of an affair with a mortal man, and that she was lying about Zeus being the father. Dionysus plans to punish Agave for this. But he also plans to punish her son Pentheus because Pentheus has banned the worship of Dionysus. In doing so, Pentheus is "waging war on the gods" and demonstrating hubris, which means placing himself above the gods. Dionysus tells us that he plans to go and join his followers on Mount Kithairon. (Lines 1-64)

CHORUS: Starts by announcing that they are from Asia and worship Dionysus. Then they invite others to worship Dionysus. Then it is time to sing the hymn to Dionysus (dithyramb). The hymn talks about how to celebrate Dionysus and Rhea/Cybele (Titan earth goddess), including carrying a thyrsus, which is a stick/staff with ivy. The first Strophe ends with the "Run Bacchae" section and suggests that their worship will bring the presence of the god. Antistrophe 1 tells the story of the birth of Dionysus. Strophe 2 returns to the idea of inviting people from Thebes to join the worshippers on the mountain. Antistrophe 2 goes back to the idea of the history of worshipping Dionysus, related to the worship of Cybele/Rhea. The Epode celebrates the arrival of Dionysus on the mountain and the miracles he is performing there. (Lines 65-166)

Scene 1: Tiresias and Cadmus make plans to join the Bacchae on the mountain. They are interrupted by Pentheus. Pentheus expresses anxiety about gender and sexuality, particularly his ability to control women. He repeats what Agave has taught him about his aunt Semele, rejecting the divinity of Dionysus. Tiresias uses the rhetoric of a philosopher to try to convince Pentheus that Dionysus is a god, and that Pentheus is demonstrating hubris by refusing to accept Dionysus. The Chorus interjects to agree with Tiresias and to disagree with Pentheus. Cadmus refers to Actaeon's destruction because of his hubris in calling himself a better hunter than Artemis. Pentheus rejects their arguments and orders the arrest of Dionysus's representative (who we know is actually Dionysus). (Lines 167-369)

CHORUS: Strophe 1 is a prayer to the goddess Reverence (Aidos), informing her that Pentheus has offended Dionysus. Antistrophe 1 discusses general qualities humans should have, implying that Pentheus is not behaving properly. Strophe 2 expresses a desire to go to places where worshipping Dionysus is accepted, invoking Aphrodite (goddess of beauty) in Cyprus and the Muses (9 goddesses of arts and literature) on Mt. Olympus. The Chorus is asking Dionysus to help travel to these places. Antistrophe 2 discusses how Dionysus can help humans to achieve the proper behaviors discussed in Antistrophe 1. (Lines 370-433)

Scene 2: Soldier (sometimes translated as "Servant") returns with Dionysus. Pentheus and Dionysus argue about the worship of Dionysus, with Pentheus threatening to cut the prisoner's hair, take away his thyrsus, and tie him up. Dionysus uses a lot of irony here, because the audience knows he is Dionysus, but Pentheus thinks he is a human follower of Dionysus. (Lines 434-518)

CHORUS: Strophe 1: Chorus addresses Dirke, the naiad (river nymph) associated with the River Dirke. The Chorus notes that Dirke was present at the birth of Dionysus and witnessed Zeus put the unborn child in his thigh, but they reproach Dirke for not recognizing Dionysus now.

Antistrophe 1: Explains that Pentheus has imprisoned another follower of Dionysus and asks Dionysus to come down from Olympus and free the prisoner. Epode: Wondering where Dionysus is, the Chorus lists sites that are sacred to him: Mount Nysa, the Cave of Corycia (on Mount Parnassus), Mt. Olympus, Pieria (north of Olympus), and the Axios and Lydias Rivers (in modern-day Macedonia). (Lines 519-575)

Scene 3: Dionysus enlists the help of the Chorus to destroy Pentheus's house. The Chorus perceives this as miraculous, celebrating Dionysus as son of Zeus. In human form, Dionysus recounts his escape from Pentheus. Pentheus enters and repeats his ban on worship of Dionysus. First Messenger arrives and describes what he saw on the mountain, which was not the sex orgy he expected to see. Still, his group attempted to capture the Bacchae, but then they became hunted by the Bacchae and their hunting dogs (echoes of Actaeon story). Messenger ends by saying maybe Pentheus should give in and worship Dionysus. Chorus agrees. Pentheus does not. Dionysus persuades Pentheus to dress as a woman in order to see the Bacchae on the mountain. (Lines 576-861)

THIRD CHORUS: Strophe expresses desire to dance for Dionysus, with an image of transforming into a young deer escaping from being hunted. The Refrain considers the ideas of wisdom, triumph over enemies, and love. Antistrophe: the gods punish hubris. Epode: People strive for happiness through wealth and power, but the best strategy is to be happy in an ordinary life. (Lines 862-911)

Scene 4: Pentheus enters, dressed as a woman and under the mind-altering influence of Dionysus. Dionysus ironically predicts aspects of Pentheus's death, but Pentheus interprets these details as related to conquering the Bacchae and being celebrated as a hero. (Lines 912-976)

FOURTH CHORUS: Strophe: Calls on dogs to run to the mountain and predicts how Agave will kill Pentheus. Refrain: Calls on the goddesses Nemesis (Vengeance) and Themis (Justice) to destroy Pentheus, the son of Echion, because of his hubris. Antistrophe: Explains what Pentheus has done wrong and encourages the audience not to make the same mistakes. Epode: Calls on Bacchus to show himself as a bull or snake, and to destroy Pentheus. (Lines 977-1023)

Scene 5: Second Messenger describes what happened to Pentheus on the mountain. Chorus is pleased that Pentheus is dead, and the Messenger is unhappy about their finding joy in the death of Pentheus. (Lines 1024-1152)

FIFTH CHORUS: The Asian Bacchae celebrate the death of Pentheus. They point out that the Theban Bacchae's celebration has turned into a funeral. (Lines 1153-1164)

Scene 6: Agave thinks she has killed a lion cub and enters triumphant, but Cadmus eventually leads her to realize that she has killed her son Pentheus. Dionysus tells Cadmus and Agave that they must go into exile. The Chorus ends the play by praising the gods, in particular the ingenuity of Dionysus in bringing about the unexpected events of the play. (Lines 1165-1392)