

# Euripides: from *The Bacchae*

*The Bacchae* tells the story of the introduction of the worship of the god Dionysus from Asia into Greece. But as Dionysus arrives in the Greek city of Thebes, he finds that the populace, led by its king, Pentheus, refuses to acknowledge his divinity.

Dionysus sets out to punish the unfaithful, and “stings the female population of Thebes with daemonic frenzy, sending them to the mountains outside of the city where they celebrate his rites at last.”<sup>1</sup>

[Scene: The Greek city of Thebes, outside the royal palace. Dionysus, appearing as young man, is alone, with the palace behind him, its main doors facing the audience. He speaks directly to the audience]

DIONYSUS

I've arrived here in the land of Thebes,  
I, Dionysus, son of Zeus, born to him  
from Semele, Cadmus' daughter, delivered  
by a fiery midwife—Zeus's lightning flash.<sup>2</sup>  
Yes, I've changed my form from god to human,  
appearing here at these streams of Dirce,  
the waters of Ismarus. I see my mother's tomb—  
for she was wiped out by that lightning bolt.  
It's there, by the palace, with that rubble,  
the remnants of her house, still smoldering  
from Zeus's living fire—Hera's undying outrage  
against my mother. But I praise Cadmus. [10]  
He's made his daughter's shrine a sacred place.  
I have myself completely covered it  
with leafy shoots of grape-bearing vines.

I've left the fabulously wealthy East,  
lands of Lydians and Phrygians,  
Persia's sun-drenched plains, walled towns in Bactria.  
I've moved across the bleak lands of the Medes,  
through rich Arabia, all Asian lands,  
along the salt-sea coast, through those towns  
with their beautifully constructed towers,  
full of barbarians and Greeks all intermingled.  
Now I've come to Thebes, city of Greeks, [20]  
only after I've set those eastern lands  
dancing in the mysteries I established,  
making known to men my own divinity.  
Thebes is the first city of the Greeks  
where I've roused people to shout out my cries,  
with this deerskin draped around my body,

this ivy spear, a thyrsus, in my hand.<sup>3</sup>  
For my mother's sisters have acted badly,  
something they, of all people, should avoid.  
They boasted aloud that I, Dionysus,  
was no child of Zeus, claiming Semele,  
once she was pregnant by some mortal man,  
attributed her bad luck in bed to Zeus, [30]  
a story made up (they said) to trick Cadmus.  
Those sisters state that is why Zeus killed her,  
because she lied about the man she'd slept with.  
So I've driven those women from their homes  
in a frenzy—they now live in the mountains,  
out of their minds. I've made them put on costumes,  
outfits appropriate for my mysteries.  
All Theban offspring—or, at least, all women—  
I've driven in a crazed fit from their homes.  
Now they sit out there among the rocks,  
underneath green pine trees, no roof overhead,  
Cadmus' daughters in their company as well.  
For this city has to learn, though against its will,  
that it has yet to be initiated  
into my Dionysian rites. Here I plead [40]  
the cause of my own mother, Semele,  
appearing as a god to mortal men,  
the one she bore to Zeus. Now Cadmus,  
the old king, has just transferred his power,  
his royal authority, to Pentheus,  
his daughter's son, who, in my case at least,  
fights against the gods, prohibiting me  
all sacrificial offerings. When he prays,  
he chooses to ignore me. For this neglect  
I'll demonstrate to him, to all in Thebes,  
that I was born a god. Once these things here  
have been made right, I'll move on somewhere else,  
to some other land, revealing who I am.  
But if Thebans in this city, in their anger, [50]  
try to make those Bacchic women leave,

<sup>1</sup> Source: Translation by Ian Johnston, 2003. <https://johnstoniatexts.x10host.com/euripides/bacchae.html>

<sup>2</sup> Semele, Cadmus's daughter and Dionysus's mother, had an affair with Zeus. Hera, Zeus's wife, tricked Zeus into destroying Semele with a lightning bolt. Zeus took the infant Dionysus from his mother's womb as she was dying and sewed him into his thigh, where Dionysus continued to grow until he was delivered as a new-born infant.

<sup>3</sup> A thyrsus (pl. thyrsoi) is a hollow plant stalk, usually decorated with ivy, and carried as a symbol of Dionysus in the dancing celebrations (where it can acquire magical powers).

to drive them from the mountains forcibly,  
then I, commander of these Maenads,  
will fight them.<sup>4</sup> That's why I've transformed myself,  
assumed a mortal shape, altered my looks,  
so I resemble any human being.

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

But you there, you women who've left Tmolus,  
backbone of Lydia, my band of worshippers,  
whom I've led here from barbarian lands,  
my comrades on the road and when we rest,  
take up your drums, those instruments of yours  
from Phrygian cities, first invented  
by mother Rhea and myself. Move round here, [60]  
beat those drums by Pentheus's palace,  
let Cadmus' city see you, while I go,  
in person, to the clefts of Mount Cithaeron,  
to my Bacchae, to join in their dancing.<sup>5</sup>

[Exit Dionysus.]

. . .

*In this passage, a messenger describes to  
Pentheus the sights he has seen on Mount  
Cithaeron, where the Theban women—now  
Bacchantes, Dionysus' female adherents—have fed.  
Among them are Pentheus' mother Agave, and her  
sisters Autonoe and Ino.*

MESSENGER

The grazing cattle  
were just moving into upland pastures,  
at the hour the sun sends out its beams  
to warm the earth. Right then I saw them—  
three groups of dancing women. One of them [680]  
Autonoe led. Your mother, Agave,  
led the second group, and Ino led the third.

They were all asleep, bodies quite relaxed,  
some leaning back on leafy boughs of pine,  
others cradling heads on oak-leaf pillows,  
resting on the ground—in all modesty.  
They weren't as you described—all drunk on wine  
or on the music of their flutes, hunting  
for Aphrodite in the woods alone.

Once she heard my horned cattle lowing,  
your mother stood up amid those Bacchae,  
then called them to stir their limbs from sleep.  
They rubbed refreshing sleep out of their eyes, [690]

and stood up straight there—a marvelous sight,  
to see such an orderly arrangement,  
women young and old and still unmarried girls.  
First, they let their hair loose down their shoulders,  
tied up the fawn skins (some had untied the knots  
to loosen up the chords). Then around those skins  
they looped some snakes, who licked the women's cheeks.  
Some held young gazelles or wild wolf cubs [700]  
and fed them on their own white milk, the ones  
who'd left behind at home a new-born child,  
whose breasts were still swollen full of milk.  
They draped themselves with garlands from oak trees,  
ivy and flowering yew. Then one of them,  
taking a thyrsus, struck a rock with it,  
and water gushed out, fresh as dew. Another,  
using her thyrsus, scraped the ground. At once,  
the god sent fountains of wine up from the spot.  
All those who craved white milk to drink  
just scratched the earth with their fingertips—  
it came out in streams. From their ivy wands [710]  
thick sweet honey dripped. Oh, if you'd been there,  
if you'd seen this, you'd come with reverence  
to that god whom you criticize so much.

Well, we cattle herders and shepherds met  
to discuss and argue with each other  
about the astonishing things we'd seen.  
And then a man who'd been in town a bit  
and had a way with words said to us all,  
"You men who live in the holy regions  
of these mountains, how'd you like to hunt down  
Pentheus' mother, Agave—take her [720]  
away from these Bacchic celebrations,  
do the king a favour?" To all of us  
he seemed to make good sense. So we set up  
an ambush, hiding in the bushes,  
lying down there. At the appointed time,  
the women started their Bacchic ritual,  
brandishing the thyrsus and calling out  
to the god they cry to, Bromius, Zeus's son.  
The entire mountain and its wild animals  
were, like them, in one Bacchic ecstasy.  
As these women moved, they made all things dance.  
Agave, by chance, was dancing close to me.  
Leaving the ambush where I'd been concealed, [730]  
I jumped out, hoping to grab hold of her.  
But she screamed out, "O my quick hounds,  
men are hunting us. Come, follow me.  
Come on, armed with that thyrsus in your hand."

<sup>4</sup> The Maenads, who make up the Chorus of the play, are the female followers of Dionysus, who have followed him from Phrygia in Asia Minor to Thebes.

<sup>5</sup> Rhea is Zeus's mother. The drums are tambourines. Tmolus is a mountain in Asia Minor. Mount Cithaeron is a sacred mountain near Thebes.

We ran off, and so escaped being torn apart.  
But then those Bacchic women, all unarmed,  
went at the heifers browsing on the turf,  
using their bare hands. You should have seen one  
ripping a fat, young, lowing calf apart—  
others tearing cows in pieces with their hands.  
You could have seen ribs and cloven hooves [740]  
tossed everywhere—some hung up in branches  
dripping blood and gore. And bulls, proud beasts till then,  
with angry horns, collapsed there on the ground,  
dragged down by the hands of a thousand girls.  
Hides covering their bodies were stripped off  
faster than you could wink your royal eye.

Then, like birds carried up by their own speed,  
they rushed along the lower level ground,  
beside Asopus' streams, that fertile land  
which yields its crops to Thebes. Like fighting troops, [750]

they raided Hysiae and Erythrae,  
below rocky Cithaeron, destroying  
everything, snatching children from their homes.  
Whatever they carried their shoulders,  
even bronze or iron, never tumbled off  
onto the dark earth, though nothing was tied down.  
They carried fire in their hair, but those flames  
never singed them. Some of the villagers,  
enraged at being plundered by the Bacchae,  
seized weapons. The sight of what happened next, [760]  
my lord, was dreadful. For their pointed spears  
did not draw blood. But when those women  
threw the thyrsoi in their hands, they wounded them  
and drove them back in flight. The women did this  
to men, but not without some god's assistance.

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

CHORUS LEADER

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

PENTHEUS

This Dionysian arrogance, like fire,

keeps flaring up close by—a great insult  
to all the Greeks. We must not hesitate.

[*To one of his armed attendants*]

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

DIONYSUS

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

PENTHEUS

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

DIONYSUS

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

PENTHEUS

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

DIONYSUS

You'll all run.  
What a disgrace! To turn your bronze shields round,  
fleeing the thyrsoi of those Bacchic women!

PENTHEUS

[*turning to one of his armed attendants, as if to go*]  
It's useless trying to argue with this stranger— [800]  
whatever he does or suffers, he won't shut up.

DIONYSUS [*calling Pentheus back*]

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

PENTHEUS

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

DIONYSUS

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

PENTHEUS

I don't think so.

You're setting me up for your tricks again.

DIONYSUS

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

PENTHEUS

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

DIONYSUS

Yes, that's true.

I have made some arrangement with the god.

PENTHEUS [*to one of his armed servants*]

You there, bring me my weapons.

[*To Dionysus*] And you—

No more talk! Keep quiet!

DIONYSUS

Just a minute!

[810]

[*Moving up to Pentheus*]

How would you like to gaze upon those women  
sitting together in the mountains?

PENTHEUS

I'd like that.

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

DIONYSUS

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

PENTHEUS

I'd be sorry to see the women drunk.

DIONYSUS

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

PENTHEUS

Yes, I would—

if I were sitting in the trees in silence.

DIONYSUS

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

PENTHEUS

You're right.

I'll go there openly.

DIONYSUS

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

PENTHEUS

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

[820]

DIONYSUS

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

PENTHEUS

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

DIONYSUS

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

PENTHEUS

Right again. You always have the answer.

DIONYSUS

Dionysus taught me all these things.

PENTHEUS

How can I best follow your suggestion?

DIONYSUS

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

PENTHEUS

What? Dress up in a female outfit?  
I can't do that—I'd be ashamed to.

DIONYSUS

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

PENTHEUS

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

[830]

DIONYSUS

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

PENTHEUS

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

DIONYSUS

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

PENTHEUS

What else? What other things will you provide?

DIONYSUS

A thyrsus to hold and a dappled fawn skin.

PENTHEUS

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

DIONYSUS

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

PENTHEUS

Yes, that's true.

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

DIONYSUS

Hunt down evil by committing evil—  
that sounds like a wise way to proceed.

PENTHEUS

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

DIONYSUS

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

PENTHEUS

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

DIONYSUS

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

PENTHEUS

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

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

DIONYSUS

My women! that man's now entangled in our net.  
He'll go to those Bacchae, and there he'll die.  
That will be his punishment. Dionysus,  
you're not far away. Now it's up to you.  
Punish him. First, make sure he goes insane [850]  
with some crazed fantasy. If his mind is strong,  
he'll not agree to put on women's clothes.  
But he'll do it, if you make him mad.  
I want him made the laughing stock of Thebes,  
while I lead him through the city, mincing  
as he moves along in women's clothing,  
after he made himself so terrifying  
with all those earlier threats. Now I'll be off,  
to fit Pentheus into the costume  
he'll wear when he goes down to Hades,  
once he's butchered by his mother's hands.  
He'll come to acknowledge Dionysus,  
son of Zeus, born in full divinity, [860]  
most fearful and yet most kind to men.

*Pentheus goes to Mount Cithaeron to see what the  
women are doing, but Dionysus traps Pentheus in  
a tree and calls on the Maenads to punish the one  
who denounced and ridiculed them. In their  
unreasoning frenzy they tear Pentheus apart, limb  
from limb, led by Pentheus's mother, Agave,  
daughter of Cadmus.*

[Enter Agave, cradling the head of Pentheus.]

AGAVE

Asian Bacchae . . .

CHORUS

Why do you appeal to me?

AGAVE [*displaying the head*]

From the mountains I've brought home [1170]  
this ivy tendril freshly cut.  
We've had a blessed hunt.

CHORUS

I see it.

As your fellow dancer, I'll accept it.

AGAVE

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

CHORUS

What desert was he in?

AGAVE

Cithaeron.

CHORUS

On Cithaeron?

AGAVE

Cithaeron killed him.

CHORUS

Who struck him down?

AGAVE

The honour of the first blow goes to me.  
In the dancing I'm called blessed Agave. [1180]

CHORUS

Who else?

AGAVE

Well, from Cadmus . . .

CHORUS

From Cadmus

what?

. . .

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

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

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

CHORUS  
His hair makes him resemble  
some wild beast.

AGAVE  
Bacchus is a clever huntsman—[1190]  
he wisely set his maenads on this beast.

CHORUS  
Yes, our master is indeed a hunter.

AGAVE  
Have you any praise for me?

CHORUS  
I praise you.

AGAVE  
Soon all Cadmus' people. . .

CHORUS  
. . . and Pentheus, your son . . .

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

CHORUS  
It's a strange trophy.

AGAVE  
And strangely captured, too.

CHORUS  
You're proud of what you've done?

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

CHORUS  
Well then, you most unfortunate woman, [1200]  
show off your hunting prize, your sign of victory,  
to all the citizens.

AGAVE [*addressing everyone*]  
All of you here,  
all you living in the land of Thebes,  
in this city with its splendid walls,  
come see this wild beast we hunted down—  
daughters of Cadmus—not with thonged spears,  
Thessalian javelins, or by using nets,  
but with our own white hands, our finger tips.  
After this, why should huntsmen boast aloud,  
when no one needs the implements they use? [1210]  
We caught this beast by hand, tore it apart—  
with our own hands. But where's my father?  
He should come here. And where's Pentheus?  
Where is my son? He should take a ladder,  
set it against the house, fix this lion's head  
way up there, high on the palace front.  
I've captured it and brought it home with me.

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

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

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

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

AGAVE  
Father, now you can be truly proud.  
Among all living men you've produced  
by far the finest daughters. I'm talking  
of all of us, but mostly of myself.  
I've left behind my shuttle and my loom,

and risen to great things, catching wild beasts  
with my bare hands. Now I've captured him,  
I'm holding in my arms the finest trophy,  
as you can see, bringing it back home to you,  
so it may hang here.

[*Offering him Pentheus' head*]

Take this, father [1240]  
let your hands welcome it. Be proud of it,  
of what I've caught. Summon all your friends—  
have a banquet, for you are blessed indeed,  
blessed your daughters have achieved these things.

CADMUS  
This grief's beyond measure, beyond endurance.  
With these hands of yours you've murdered him.  
You strike down this sacrificial victim,  
this offering to the gods, then invite me,  
and all of Thebes, to share a banquet.  
Alas—first for your sorrow, then my own.  
Lord god Bromius, born into this family,  
has destroyed us, acting out his justice, [1250]  
but too much so.

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

CADMUS  
Alas! Alas! What dreadful pain you'll feel  
when you recognize what you've just done. [1260]  
If you stay forever in your present state,  
you'll be unfortunate, but you won't feel  
as if you're suffering unhappiness.

AGAVE  
But what in all this is wrong or painful?

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

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

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

AGAVE  
It seems, well, brighter . . .  
more translucent than it was before.

CADMUS  
And your inner spirit—is it still shaking?

AGAVE  
I don't understand what it is you're asking.  
But my mind is starting to clear somehow.  
It's changing . . . it's not what it was before. [1270]

CADMUS  
Can you hear me? Can you answer clearly?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

AGAVE [*inspecting the head*]  
What is this?  
What am I looking at? What am I holding? [1280]

CADMUS  
Look at it. You'll understand more clearly.

AGAVE

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

CADMUS

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

AGAVE

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

CADMUS

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

AGAVE

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

CADMUS

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

AGAVE

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

CADMUS

You killed him—  
you and your sisters.

AGAVE

Where was he killed?  
At home? In what sort of place? [1290]

CADMUS

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

AGAVE

Why did this poor man go to Cithaeron?

CADMUS

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

AGAVE

But how did we happen to be up there?

CADMUS

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

AGAVE

Now I see.  
Dionysus has destroyed us all.

CADMUS

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

AGAVE

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

CADMUS

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

AGAVE

Are all his limbs laid out  
just as they should be? And Pentheus, [1300]  
what part did he play in my madness?

CADMUS

Like you, he was irreverent to the god.  
That's why the god linked you and him together  
in the same disaster—thus destroying  
the house and me, for I've no children left,  
now I see this offspring of your womb,  
you unhappy woman, cruelly butchered  
in the most shameful way. He was the one  
who brought new vision to our family.

*[Addressing the remains of Pentheus]*

My child, you upheld the honour of our house,  
my daughter's son. You were feared in Thebes. [1310]

No one who saw you ever would insult me,  
though I was old, for you would then inflict  
fit punishment. Now the mighty Cadmus,  
the man who sowed and later harvested  
the most splendid crop—the Theban people—  
will be an exile, banished from his home,  
a dishonoured man. Dearest of men,  
even though, my child, you're alive no more,  
I count you among those closest to me.

You won't be touching my cheek any more,  
holding me in your arms, and calling me  
"grandfather," as you ask me, "Old man,  
who's injuring or dishonouring you? [1320]

Who upsets your heart with any pain?  
Tell me, father, so I can punish him—  
anyone who treats you in an unjust way."  
Now you're in this horrifying state,  
I'm in misery, your mother's pitiful,  
and all your relatives are in despair.  
If there's a man who disrespects the gods,  
let him think about how this man perished—  
then he should develop faith in them.



CHORUS LEADER

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

AGAVE

Father, you see how all has changed for me.<sup>6</sup>  
[From being your royal and honoured daughter,  
the mother of a king, I'm now transformed—  
an abomination, something to fill  
all people's hearts with horror, with disgust—  
the mother who slaughtered her only son,  
who tore him apart, ripping out the heart  
from the child who filled her own heart with joy—  
all to honour this god Dionysus.  
But, father, give me your permission now  
to lay out here the body of my son,  
prepare his corpse for proper burial.

CADMUS

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

AGAVE

*[removing Pentheus's limbs and placing them on the ground  
in front of her]*

Alas, for my poor son, my only child,  
destroyed by his mother's Bacchic madness.  
How could these hands of mine, which loved him so,  
have torn these limbs apart, ripped out his flesh.  
Here's an arm which has held me all these years,  
growing stronger as he grew into a man,  
his feet . . . O how he used to run to me,  
seeking assurance of his mother's love.  
His face was handsome, on the verge of manhood.  
See the soft down still resting on these lips,  
which have kissed me thousands of times or more.  
All this, and all the rest, set here before us.  
O Zeus and all you Olympian gods . . .

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

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

CHORUS LEADER *[helping Agave get up]*

Lady, you must bear what cannot be borne.  
Your suffering is intense, but the god is just.

You insulted him in Thebes, showed no respect—  
you've brought the punishment upon yourself.

CHORUS

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

*[Enter Dionysus.]*

DIONYSUS

Yes, I am Dionysus, son of Zeus.  
You see me now before you as a god.  
You Thebans learned about my powers too late.  
Dishonouring me, you earn the penalty.  
You refused my rites. Now you must leave—  
abandon your city for barbarian lands.  
Agave, too, that polluted creature,  
must go into perpetual banishment.  
And Cadmus, you too must endure your lot.<sup>7</sup>  
Your form will change, so you become a serpent. [1330]  
Your wife, Harmonia, Ares' daughter,  
whom you, though mortal, took in marriage,  
will be transformed, changing to a snake.  
As Zeus's oracle declares, you and she  
will drive a chariot drawn by heifers.  
You'll rule barbarians. With your armies,  
too large to count, you'll raze many cities.  
Once they despoil Apollo's oracle,  
they'll have a painful journey back again.  
But Ares will guard you and Harmonia.  
In lands of the blessed he'll transform your lives.  
That's what I proclaim—I, Dionysus, [1340]  
born from no mortal father, but from Zeus.  
If you had understood how to behave  
as you should have when you were unwilling,  
you'd now be fortunate, with Zeus's child  
among your allies.

*Agave and Cadmus take leave of each other, both  
cursed by the horrific events.*

<sup>6</sup> At this point, there is a major gap in the manuscript. The text here is reconstructed from what we know about the content of the missing portion.

<sup>7</sup> The Greek text resumes here at the end of the gap in the manuscript.

AGAVE

How I grieve for you, my father.

CADMUS

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

AGAVE

Lord Dionysus has inflicted  
such brutal terror on your house.

DIONYSUS:

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

AGAVE

Farewell, father.

CADMUS

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

AGAVE

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

*[Exit Agave.]*

CHORUS

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

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