

Euripides' *Bacchai*
Alan haffa
Euripides, 480-406

- From Salamis
- Lifelong friend of Socrates
- Received an education in sophistry (Rhetoric and Philosophy) from Protagoras
- Won only 5 competitions, probably because his poetry challenged societal norms
- Left Athens for Thrace and Macedonia in 409 B.C.
- Wrote *The Bacchai* in Macedonia

Euripides' Style

- Language is more human and less poetic
- Heroes come from all classes, not just aristocratic; slaves and women were represented more humanely
- Questioned Religion
- Attacked by the conservative, Aristophanes
- Influenced by Rhetoric of Sophists

Background to *Bacchai*

- Dionysus returns to birthplace, Thebes, to avenge treatment of his mother, Semele
- Story of Semele, Zeus and Hera
 - Zeus seduced her and she became pregnant; Hera tricked Semele into asking Zeus to appear in his true form. When he appears as a bolt of lightning it burns her up
- Cadmus and Thebans tells slanderous story about Semele
 - Claim that she was struck by lightning for lying about Zeus; She was pregnant by an illicit affair with a mortal.

Opening Scene

- Dionysus returns to Thebes in disguise as a Stranger accompanied by a band of bacchantes, female worshippers of the god Dionysus
- Pentheus, grand-son of Cadmus, is King
- Pentheus has banned the worship of Dionysus
- The Stranger-Priest has driven the sisters of Semele mad and driven them to the mountains to worship him with bacchantes

Teiresias and Cadmus Succumb to Dionysus

- Even the elderly men are attracted by the new cult of Dionysus
- The prophet Teiresias appears dressed in bacchant's fawn-skin and crown of ivy

■ Cadmus: Where shall we go, where shall we tread the dance, toss our white heads to the dances of the god?...Surely I could dance night and day, untiringly beating the earth with my thyrsus! And how sweet it is to forget my old age.”

Attack on Religion by Sophists

■ Cadmus: “I am a man, nothing more. I do not scoff at heaven.”

■ Teiresias: “We do not trifle with divinity. No, we are the heirs of customs and traditions hallowed by age and handed down to us by our fathers. No quibbling of logic can topple THEM, whatever subtleties this clever age invents.”

Pentheus Maintains Traditional Order

■ Pentheus is threatened by women living out of doors and communing with nature

■ He is threatened by a religion that by its nature is about “loosening” the bands of social restraint

■ He orders the Priest-Stranger to be arrested

Pentheus’s Accusations

■ Pentheus: “reports reached me of some strange mischief here, stories of our women leaving home to frisk in mock ecstasies among the thickets on the mountain, dancing in honor of the latest divinity, a certain Dionysus, whoever he may be! And then one by one the women wander off to hidden nooks where they serve the lusts of men. Priestesses of Bacchus they claim they are, but it’s really Aphrodite they adore.”

Pentheus attacks Teiresias and Religion

■ P: “I see this is YOUR doing, Teiresias. Yes, you want still another god revealed to men so you can pocket the profits from burnt offerings and bird watching. By heaven, only your age restrains me now from sending you to prison with those Bacchic women for importing here to Thebes these filthy mysteries. When once you see the glint of wine shining at the feasts of women, then you may be sure the festival is rotten.”

Teiresias Defends Dionysus

■ “Mankind, young man, possess two blessings. First of these is these is the goddess Demeter, or Earth...it was she who gave to man his nourishment of grain. But after her there came the son of Semele, who matched her present by inventing liquid wine as his gift to man. For filled with that good gift, suffering mankind forgets its grief; from it comes sleep ;with it oblivion of the troubles of the day. There is no other medicine for misery. And when we pour libations to the gods, we pour the god of wine himself that through his intercession man may win the favor of heaven.”

Teiresias Defends Dionysus

■ He usurps the power of Ares, the warlike, creating panic in enemy—panic comes from Dionysus

■ Regarding sexual impurity: “Dionysus does not, I admit, compel a woman to be chaste. Always and in every case it is her character and nature that keeps a woman chaste. But

even in the rites of Dionysus, the chaste woman will not be corrupted.”

Cadmus uses Sophistry to Defend Dionysus

- C: “Even if this Dionysus is no god, as you assert, persuade yourself that he is. The fiction is a noble one, for Semele will seem to be the mother of a god, and this confers no small distinction on our family.”
- Presents Actaeon, who boasted that his hunting ability exceeded Artemis, as a counter example. Better to accept gods than to challenge.
- Self-advancement and self-preservation as justification for a religious fiction...

Pentheus Assumes the Worst

- Mystery religions—Dionysus and Demeter
- P: Do you hold your rites during the day or night?
- D: Mostly by night. The darkness is well suited to devotion.
- P: Better suited to lechery and seducing women
- D: You can find debachery by daylight too.
- P: You shall regret these clever answers.
- D: And you, your stupid blasphemies.

Messenger’s Description

- They lie “sleeping where they fell, here and there among the oak leaves—but all modestly and soberly, not as you think, drunk with wine, nor wandering, led astray by the music of the flute...”
- They suckle wild animals: ‘Breasts swollen with milk, new mothers who had left their babies behind at home nestled gazelles and young wolves in their arms, suckling them.’

Women become Animalistic

- When the women discover the spies, they hunt them
- “At this we fled and barely missed being torn to pieces by the women. Unarmed they swooped down upon the herds of cattle grazing there...And then you could have seen a single woman with bare hands tear a fat calf, still bellowing with fright, in two, while others clawed the heifers to pieces.”

Social Order Inverted

- Animal and Human
- Men and Women’s roles
- The men are routed by the women—as the men’s spears draw no blood but the women’s wants inflict wounds

Pentheus seduced by this social inversion: cross- dressing

- Dionysus persuades Pentheus to dress up as a woman

- He resists and is uncomfortable, but then seems to embrace his costume
- Dionysus in aside: "Punish this man. But first distract his wits; bewilder him with madness. For sane of mind this man would never wear a woman's dress...I want him made the laughingstock of Thebes, paraded through the streets, a woman"

Dismemberment of Pentheus

- Women, including his mother, Agave, hunt him and dismember him, thinking he is a wild animal, confused by Dionysus
- Even Pentheus appears sympathetic as a suppliant to his mother
- "he touched her cheeks, screaming, "No, no Mother! I am Pentheus, your own son...Pity me, spare me, Mother!"
- "But she was foaming at the mouth and her crazed eyes rolling with frenzy. She was mad, stark made, possessed by Bacchus. Ignoring his cries of pity, she seized his left arm at the wrist; then planting her foot upon his chest, she pulled, wrenching away the arm at the shoulder..."

Anagnoresis: Recognition

- Agave thinks she has done something heroic killing a Lion
- As the haze recedes from her eyes: "No! O gods, I see the greatest grief there is."
- C: You were mad. The whole city as possessed.
- Agave: Now, now I see: Dionysus has destroyed us all.
- C: You outraged him. You denied that he was truly god."

Moral

- Body is collected together by Cadmus and he addresses the dead body
- He says that they were punished for denying the god; Cadmus turned to a snake and Agave goes into exile
- "If there is still any mortal man who despises or defies the gods, let him look on this boy's death and believe in the gods."

Conclusions

- The tale is a traditional one: do not doubt the gods or challenge them or you will be punished
- But is the moral so simple? Is a god to be worshipped because of the destruction they might wreak if we deny them?
- Dionysus does not appear as a likable god
- In contrast to the Oresteia, where the gods restore order in the *Eumenides*, or the Oedipus series where some sense of justice prevails, the ending to the Bacchae feels tragic but unresolved.
- Moral and Social ambiguity makes Euripides decidedly Modern