

When Shadows Meet:
The Interplay of Archetypes in *The Bacchae*

By Emma Tresemer

Alas, poor Pentheus. He is doomed by the first page of Euripides's *Bacchae*; we know this because Dionysus has decreed it, and we also know without a doubt that Dionysus is, in fact, a god. As a result of this knowledge, we find it remarkably easy to have contempt for, even to laugh at the foolishness of, Pentheus. But lest we too quickly judge and dismiss this fated king of Thebes, Euripides brings him to such a wildly terrible and tragic end that even the harshest critical reader must pause and wonder why. To what end, Euripides? Is there more to the relationship between these estranged cousins (for they are cousins, even if one of them is divine)? Is there more to the character of the reckless king, or more to the god's story than merely correcting those who would deny him? Who are Pentheus and Dionysus in *The Bacchae*? What do they represent? And why such a tragic end?

I will start with Pentheus, not because I find him an easier character but because Euripides makes him so much more obscure in the beginning of the play; indeed the author loads the dice immediately with Dionysus's beginning speech:

So, the son of Zeus is back in Thebes:
I, Dionysus, son of Sémele-- daughter of Cadmus--
who was struck from my mother in a lightning stroke. [...]
Elsewhere, everywhere, I have established
my sacraments and dances:
to make my godhead manifest to man. (lines 2 - 3, 21 - 23)

There is no way even to conceive of doubt concerning the validity of the god's claim of divinity. Furthermore, one finds it easy to sympathize, even empathize entirely with Dionysus as he is the primary character: he has begun the story, and whoever begins has the audience in hand. It is through their experience that the audience experiences the play, thus making it almost impossible to shift the mental focus onto another player and equally difficult to find compassion for those introduced later on, especially if they are antagonistic to the primary speaker-- which Pentheus will undoubtedly be.

Even more telling than Dionysus's words themselves are the stage directions used throughout the introductory speech. Despite the danger involved in following too closely anyone's interpretation of Euripides, let us borrow from Roche's translation: beneath line 5 shows Dionysus to be speaking '*bitterly*,' between lines 35 and 40, '*grimly*'. Add to this his appearance: "*In spite of the dreamy, even sweet expression of his eyes, he walks with a springy, lilting tread. On his lips plays an enigmatic, slightly ironic smile*" (79). This prologue is not a speech of reconciliation nor is the smile one of positive intent, but both are suggestive: subtle, almost coy, even playful, and definitely exuding the air of one who has been wronged and has taken it upon himself to right the situation. By the time the first speech is done, the reader is thoroughly aligned with Dionysus; thus, when Pentheus finally arrives on the scene several pages later one finds it very easy to dismiss him.

Of course he does nothing to help his case, beginning immediately with heated contempt of his own:

They tell me our womenfolk have left their homes--
in ecstasy, if you please--
go gadding to the mountains, the shady mountains,
dancing honor on this brash new god:
this--this Dionysus they've got hold of.
In the middle of each coterie of god-possessed

stands a bowl of wine-- brimming.

Afterwards, they go sneaking off one by one
to various nooks
to lie down-- with *men*. (Roche 86)

It would seem that the main issue Pentheus has with Dionysus is represented by the fallen morals of the women of his city, women who are out in the woods dancing, drinking, and willingly having sex with men. One wonders what life of boredom Pentheus would actually support, but interestingly he never quite tells us; he just asserts that he is going to end the mayhem of these wanton women, “capture them in iron traps--/ put a stop to this immoral rollicking” (87). Keeping them at home and safely tucked away from the madness seems to be of paramount importance to the king of Thebes, and he never does stop to confirm that his impressions of the sacred rites in which they are involved are anything but gross misconstructions. What Pentheus despises is nothing more than a reduced parodic commentary of what the god represents, and even this is no more than blasphemous gossip, for as he states: “I’ve come straight back from abroad/ hurried home by rumors” (Roche 86). Fertility, frequently associated with Dionysus, when reduced to its profane state, is indeed just sex. Worship of wine and the ecstasy it imbues (again, Dionysus’s realm), when regarded by puritans, is indeed just drunken abandon. When Pentheus appears he has already decided that his version of events is the correct (and only) version, and he is not such a man that can be swayed to think differently.

Here, too, the stage directions are important. Arriving on the scene of the conversation between Cadmus and Tiresias “*shod in jackboots, wearing a short riding tunic and carrying a hunting crop, he stalks into their presence with a brisk, no-nonsense manner. He is so full of what he wants to say that he harangues the old men without at first noticing their extraordinary fancy dress*” (Roche 86). The reader is presented with the image of military efficiency and the overt masculinity often associated with such a position. Not the effeminate ‘lilting’ of Dionysus

nor the suggestive smile; one gets the immediate sense that Pentheus would not understand irony if it were to sit upon his head. His sense of humor and propriety also seem to be in direct correlation: when his sense of proper posturing is affronted, all sense of comedy seems to abandon him. Instead of finding humor at the dress of his elders, he finds offense. Instead of courtesy, he offers condescension, thus leaving the reader with those sickly, uncomfortable feelings associated with the blatant disrespect of family members. “Ye gods! What is this?/ Tiresias decked out like a spotted goat!/ And my grandfather-- it’s preposterous--/ playing the bacchant with a fennel wand?/ Sir, sir, this is not my mother’s father.../ so ancient and so idiotic!” (Roche 87). Harsh words to the grandfather who has passed down the kingdom to him, made more severe by his blustering air of righteous self-importance.

By now Pentheus does not need to do much else for the reader to condemn him. We feel neither pity nor fear towards his character, as in the words of Aristotle he is not (yet) an undeserving sufferer, nor is he similar enough to the reader to evoke the fear of suffering (Heath, 21). Pentheus is “the person intermediate between these [emotions]. This is the sort of person who is not outstanding in moral excellence or justice; on the other hand, the change to bad fortune which he undergoes is not due to any moral defect or depravity, but to an error of some kind” (Heath 21). In another translation of Aristotle, Fergusson adds, “the change of fortune should not be from bad to good, but, reversely, from good to bad. It should come about as the result not of vice, but of some great error or frailty” (76). Thus we are introduced to the concept of *hamartia* that pervades Greek tragedy; not a tragic flaw, but a mistake of judgment: an error that a normal man in an elevated position (Pentheus is an easy example, though Oedipus could easily fit and Aristotle also suggests Thyestes) makes and continues to make. In this case, we have Pentheus’s continued irreverence.

But this is all the shadow side of Pentheus's character, and there is, of course, a positive side as well. Easy indeed to condemn the man for not knowing something the reader knows from the beginning of the play, but if this were a current situation would we not expect our leaders to have a healthy dose of skepticism when confronted with such a radical new form of congregation? If not for doubt, would humanity not be inundated by a continual stream of new deities, claims, and new religions? In fact, are we not already? How poignant to read Euripides at this time, when we are constantly bombarded by an endless succession of new 'experts' telling us what revolutionary belief system will save us now, only to have it reduced to rubble a minute later when the next one comes along. It becomes a matter of survival to not let every new guru become *the* guru, or every new spiritual practice become the format through which one lives life. Self-proclaimed gods are shiny, new and just that: self-proclaimed gods. Without meeting such a doubt and transcending it, would Dionysus have lasted as a deity on the world stage? Most new belief systems crumble at the first wave of criticism. It is perhaps Euripides's most ironic moment: that to prove his own divinity, Dionysus needs Pentheus's doubt.

As such, it is fitting that Pentheus regards the new cult of Dionysus with a wary eye, especially when it has thrown the inhabitants of his city into apparent madness. Indeed such wariness is even more warranted in retrospect, for it is the Bacchic frenzy of Pentheus' own mother that leads to his death. Though in the beginning Pentheus seems just the archetypal power-hoarding politician, he is also the King of Thebes who isn't quite sure that his cousin, whose parentage his own mother Agave often questioned, is really... well, a *god*. Much easier to deny the deity and place those who would follow him under arrest. And quite fierce are his threats to the unknown priest: "I'll stop him tapping with his thyrsus./ tossing his mane of curls./ I'll separate his head from his carcass" (Roche 87). His words may be harsh, but one cannot

contest that Pentheus is trying to protect his city from what he perceives as a threatening, unknown, and morally depraved cult. Nor does his conviction falter when he at last comes in direct contact with the god in disguise:

Dionysus: Tell me my sentence, then: the worst that you can do.

Pentheus: First I'll-- I'll chop your dainty love-locks off. (94)

A threat made solely for the sin of appearing too feminine to the masculine military commander of the city. It is a ridiculous threat, and even Pentheus seems to know this as he says it, shown by the way he stammers. Throughout the conversation between the god and the king, one begins to notice a theme of Pentheus acting as if against his own intuition. His threats are increasingly outlandish, even foolish; his lack of confidence suggesting that there is a part of himself that he is denying in order to continue denying the godhood of Dionysus. Again we see Pentheus's *hamartia*, his continued error of judgment. The conversation shows that though he may have the city's best intentions at heart, his unwillingness to shift away from resistance and ridicule is somewhat pathological, as if to say he (quite literally) cannot help himself.

Which brings us, finally, to the realm of what Pentheus represents. If we are able to look past the boundaries of Euripides's play, if we think in terms of the mythic figure represented by the king, what becomes obvious is that this level of character limitation is in itself mythical. Rather than being human, Pentheus has transcended humanity; he is not so much flawed as he is the flaw embodied. His personality, character, and action all begin to resemble an archetype, as if to say that the man is merely a vehicle for something greater, even as that greater thing comes with a terrible fate. He himself was the great grandchild of gods, and it is fitting that as such he becomes the archetype of structure, rules, the rigidity of form, and adherence to the known system. Pentheus is emblematic of present day institutions that, through following their rules and forms too closely, destroy themselves. The Catholic Church's adherence to a celibate priesthood,

for example, that has resulted in such incredible backlash. Pentheus is the Biblical God in the Garden of Eden, raging against the turn of events that he himself put in motion. Pentheus is the system that breaks after becoming too strictly controlled, for there will always be change and growth whether or not leaders will it to be so.

Pentheus: [*to the GUARDS*] Seize him. He's laughing up his sleeve at me and Thebes.

Dionysus: Hands off, I say! You'll be sorry if you bind me.

Pentheus: And I say bind him. *I am in command.*

Dionysus: [*looking straight through him*] You-- you do not know what your life is, what you do, or even what you are.

Pentheus: [*shaken, in spite of himself*]

I-- I am Pentheus, Agave's son:

Echion is my father.

Dionysus: [*the smile has become sinister*]

Pentheus, yes: the name spells sorrow.

It fits you perfectly.

Pentheus: Away with him: lock him in the stables near.

Give him all his darkness and murk. (94-95)

Pentheus, despite his confusion and obvious moments of reservation and fear, cannot change: as the archetype, he must play out his part to the very end. And so we leave him for now, tying up the bull as Dionysus looks on, running around calling for water as Dionysus paints the illusion of the palace on fire, slowly forcing him to lose his mind. Alas, poor Pentheus.

And so we are brought to the question of Dionysus. Who is Dionysus, and what is his purpose in this particular conversation? To begin with, if we may step outside of the play, Dionysus is a god who is often associated with mainly positive things: elation, joy, happiness, the ecstasy of losing oneself into something bigger, the theater, fertility, and of course the wine.

As Tiresias says in Euripides' play:

I tell you, young sir,
mankind has two blessings:
Demeter is the one, the goddess
(Earth, that is-- call her what you will),
who keeps men alive with solid food;

the other is Sémele's son,
 who came afterward and matched her food with wine.
 He it was who turned the grape into a flowing draft
 and proffered it to mortals
 So when they fill themselves with liquid vine
 they put an end to their grief. (88)

But there is a harsh side to every divinity, even one as joyful as Dionysus. Indeed, if there is any deity that could rightfully have a vengeful side, it would be the god that was brought into being in such a violent and catastrophic way.

To briefly retell the myth: Hera, angered at Zeus's dalliances -- this time with the mortal woman Sémele-- and especially vindictive due to the pregnancy that has resulted, decides to take revenge not on her husband but on Sémele instead. For as she says through Ovid, "what have I gained for all/ my reprimands to him, my bitter quarrels?" (Mandelbaum 87) She appears to Sémele dressed as a nursemaid and gives out the fatal advice: "ask him to embrace you-- and to show/ the might and majesty that Juno knows:/ let him display his powers when he comes" (Mandelbaum 88). Sémele does, first extracting from her lover an oath sworn on the River Styx to give her exactly what she wants, and he, perhaps lightheaded in the promise of the encounter to come, assents, not knowing what that request will be. Needless to say, the moment Jove shows himself in his true form, Sémele is burned to ash. Zeus saves the unborn baby that she has been carrying by sewing the fetus into his thigh. Thus when Dionysus is finally delivered, he is referred to as the twice-born.

As his myth of creation is rather savage, so is his introduction into the world as a deity. We find him in both Ovid and *The Homeric Hymns* appearing as a younger god being accosted by a band of rowdy sailors who attempt to make him their prize. Ovid describes him as "a boy whose form/ could match the loveliness of a young girl" (Mandelbaum 101), and in *The Hymns* as "son of Sémele,/ who had such a beautiful face./ Without you,/ the way to compose a sweet

song/ is forgotten” (Boer 17). Even Pentheus, as uninterested as he is in all things feminine, cannot deny Dionysus’s beauty though he does try his best to belittle it:

Hm, my man-- not a bad figure, eh? [...]
 Nice curls, too...
 no good for wrestling, though.
 Very fetching, all the same:
 the way they ripple round your cheeks. [...]
 And such clear skin!
 You take good care of it-
 keep it out of the sun, what?...
 hunt Aphrodite and beauty in the shade. (Roche 93)

The subtle dismissal of Dionysus’s power due to his obvious effeminate grace is intriguing; the innate sexism of the time and the affiliation of beauty with weakness are made apparent. Femininity and grace are things only good for love games and not the more manly practice of wrestling (one infers other forms of fighting and violence as well). He is not considered minatory because there is no way to see this figure in that light; he, in his many introductions, is presented as the archetypal youth: innocence embodied. As such, he is an object of great desire and in each story, even Euripides’s version, the assumption is made that this is a creature that can be exploited; either possessed and used, or seized, judged, and locked away as Pentheus tries to do.

One begins to notice a pattern, and from it a question is raised: must Dionysus always fight to prove he is a god? The answer I would suggest is: yes. Yes because the system and the world into which he is brought into is old and stagnant and needs to change, and for that to happen something needs to break. Hence, the fight; insert appropriate metaphor concerning the inability to make an omelet without breaking an egg. Perhaps it would have been easier (and nicer, and cleaner) if Pentheus and all those foolish sailors had simply accepted the divine status of the being in front of them, but one gets the sense that if not for them, someone else in some other country would have vocally challenged him at some point down the line. Pentheus is easily

the most convenient character with whom to fight, a better choice by far than a boat full of mariners, as not only is he the archetypal resistance of all things new, he is also the king and Dionysus's own cousin.

Which brings us to the way that Dionysus destroys him. Michael Parsons uses Freudian theory to explain the intensity of the argument, in that Pentheus, in a futile attempt to repress that which is Dionysian in his own psyche, simply brings it upon himself in a stronger form from the outside world. I agree with this. However, I would add that this conversation between god and man goes further than the twin issues of repression and projection; that neither Pentheus nor Dionysus, each being both more (and, simultaneously, less) than human are as such not subject to the same psychological guidelines as an ordinary person would be. It would be foolish to regard the god as a mere aspect of the king's psyche, perhaps more sensible to regard the king as an aspect of the god's, but either way the argument is flawed. In this play, Pentheus is the archetype of structure and Dionysus seems to be the archetype of undoing that structure. Though I would hesitate to say that they need each other in the same way, it is clear that they do both need each other: Pentheus needs Dionysus as any structure needs to shift, change, and grow. Dionysus needs Pentheus--to destroy. For if he is to define himself, he must illustrate in a most gruesome manner that the nature of change can be fundamentally destructive.

Furthering this argument is the god's willingness to be brought to the king. "The animal we found was tame, sir:" state the guards, continuing that he

put himself without resistance in our hands;
 didn't even blanch
 or lose that wine-rose glow of his;
 actually smiled and said we'd *got* to handcuff him...
 even waited for me,
 to make my job the easier. (Roche 93)

One wonders at the intention of the god. Is he giving his opponent a final opportunity to change? Doubtful. The smile on the face of Dionysus is enough to put one in mind of a large cat playing with a small, deluded mouse. Like the Guy Fawkes mask-wearing hero 'V' in the movie *V is for Vendetta* that shows the same small, iconic grin; he, too, willingly hands himself over to his captors right before he destroys them one by one, stating firmly through that same smile to the last man standing that "ideas do not die."

In the same vein, Dionysus destroys his enemy mentally first: he simply removes the archetypal container that has defined Pentheus, giving light to that which is left over in the man, in other words, that which was shadow. Here we find Pentheus' feminine qualities, a caring for his appearance (for which he had so maligned the god previously), an ambiguous sexuality, a burning curiosity, and a desire to let go of the structure that he had so fought for, represented, and become. Here he begins to act as a dependent, taking his cues from the god and allowing himself to be gussied up to play the pretty girl. He is given over to curiosity about the sacred rites that he has, up until now, shunned.

This process, in modern terms, is what we would call a psychotic break. These are not emotions that dawdle right underneath the surface but rather are so shadowed that their emergence requires the complete breakdown of the persona. And this is where Dionysus truly shines: he is the undoer of boundaries, the one who removes the structures, rules, and rigid forms of the world. He is the god that through either despair or elation pulls off the carefully constructed mask of the personality. Dionysus is an ultimate contradiction: born of a man, he is one of the more effeminate gods; constantly surrounded by those who are slightly mad, he is remarkably sane and in control. Though he lives freely on the edge between creation and

destruction, “nowhere do we see Dionysus more destructive and his worship more dangerous than in this play” (pantheon.org). Pentheus hasn’t a chance.

And still I find myself wondering about the morality of the act, as Dionysus dresses up his cousin like a cruel puppet master would a doll that he is going to sacrifice. But, as Parsons so blithely states: “moral categories do not apply to Dionysus” (92). To this I would add that though Dionysus has appeared in human form, he is, in effect, killing off his own humanity by sending Pentheus to his death at the hands of his mother and his aunts. For though they are his known enemies they are also his family; if he were a mortal man and committed this sin, the furies would be after him. Here, however, it is an act that reveals Dionysus as entirely a god. He is no more human than Zeus, no more connected to the world in which he has walked for such a brief time, and definitively above the rules within it. Like the maenads that follow him, Dionysus shows his own shadowed, destructive side as would any god whose claim was so disputed.

And so the play ends. The claim of Dionysus’s divinity can no longer be debated by anyone, and the god has completely severed his mortal connections. Agave, after awakening from the maenad trance into which she has been forced, finds the head of her own son in her lap rather than the lion’s she was so proudly displaying to the crowd a moment before. We are almost embarrassed to read how Euripides allows her character to wax on in such a boastful manner about her hunting prowess and how Pentheus should look to learn some of the craft from her; yet another example of sexual ambiguity in the field of Dionysus. In the words of Aristotle, Euripides, “faulty though he may be in the general management of his subject, [he is yet] felt to be the most tragic of poets” (76-77). Tragic indeed. Agave is banished with the knowledge of her actions and both Cadmus and his wife Harmonia are to become snakes. The gods are indifferent

to their suffering, and as the subdued and cowed characters depart in sorrow, we are reminded of

Dionysus's beginning prophecy:

Pentheus opens war on deity in me,
wards me off his sacrifice,
cuts me from his prayers...

Very well,
I'll show myself to him and all of Thebes
a god indeed.

And when everything has happened as I wish,
I'll remove myself to another land
and there reveal myself. (Roche 80)

And after what happened to Pentheus, who would ever dare to doubt Dionysus again?

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