

BACCHAE

DIONYSUS I, Dionysus, son of Zeus, have come to the land of Thebes!
 Semele, the daughter of Cadmus, gave birth to me on the day she was sent into
 labour by the fire of lightning. I have put aside my divine form, and in the body
 of a man I have come here, to the stream of Dirce and the waters of Ismenus.
 Here, by the palace, I see the tomb of my mother where she was struck by 5
 that lightning, and the ruins of her house, still smoking with the living
 flame of the fire of Zeus – the undying crime of Hera against my mother.
 Cadmus, however, I praise, for he has declared this place sacred as his
 daughter's shrine. I myself have covered it over with the green clusters of a
 vine. 10

I have left the gold-rich flood plains of Lydia and Phrygia, and travelled
 through the sun-beaten uplands of Persia, the walled cities of Bactria and the
 fearful country of the Medes, to rich Arabia and all of Asia that lies along the
 shores of the sea, its fair-towered cities filled with Greeks and barbarians
 mingling together. This is the first Greek city I have come to, after teaching 15
 my dances and establishing my rites there in Asia, so that I might be
 revealed to mankind as a god.

So in this land of Greece itself, it is Thebes I have first set ringing with
 cries, dressed the people in fawnskins, and put the thyrsus, the spear of ivy,
 into their hands; for my mother's sisters, the last people who should have 20
 done so, declared that Dionysus was not the son of Zeus. They said that
 Semele had slept with a mortal man, and then, on Cadmus' clever
 suggestion, blamed Zeus for her sexual shame; and for that reason, they
 gloated, Zeus killed her, because she had lied about a marriage with him.
 This is why I have stung them into a frenzy, making them leave their homes 25
 to live on the mountain, out of their minds. I have compelled them to wear
 the clothes of my wild rites, and I have driven all the women of Cadmus' city
 – but only the women – in madness from their homes. They have now joined
 the daughters of Cadmus, sitting on bare rock under the green pine trees.
 This city must learn its lesson well, even against its will, for not celebrating 30
 my rites; and I must vindicate my mother Semele, by appearing to mankind
 as the god she bore to Zeus.

Cadmus has passed on his throne and power to his daughter's son,
 Pentheus, who now fights with gods – with me! – leaving me out of his
 sacrifices, and making no mention of me in his prayers. For this reason 35

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-65372-5 - Euripides: *Bacchae*
 David Franklin
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

40 maenad This originally meant ‘mad woman’, but the term came to be synonymous with bacchantes – women inspired by Dionysus.

42 Tmolus This was a great ridge of mountains in Lydia protecting and dominating the city of Sardis (see map, page viii). Lydian bacchantes danced on its slopes.

45 mother Rhea Rhea was Zeus’ mother, and so Dionysus’ grandmother. She is linked to the Asiatic goddess Cybele, as both were worshipped as earth-goddesses (see note on line 65).

Cithaeron

Mount Cithaeron, just outside Thebes, is the location of many myths. The baby Oedipus was abandoned there, and it was also the scene of Actaeon’s death (see note on line 190).

PARODOS (ENTRY OF THE CHORUS) (49–142)

The appearance of the Chorus was an exciting moment. They were highly trained singers and dancers, and often wore magnificent costumes. Their annual performances would have been a high point in the year for the Athenians (see Introduction to the Greek Theatre, page 97).

In most tragedies, the Chorus are conventional inhabitants of the location of the play. This Chorus consists of bacchantes, Asian women dancing ecstatically for their leader and god. They call everyone present to worship Dionysus with them. That call must have meant something special to the audience in the Theatre of Dionysus.

51 my joyful labours for Bromios Bromios is a cult name of Dionysus. It means ‘the Thunderer’, drawing attention to his wildness and power.

53 Bacchus This is another name for Dionysus – hence *Bacchae*, or bacchantes.

56 the reverence of holy silence Those in charge of religious occasions called for silence. The call might also draw the audience into the play.

61 The Chorus explain what they mean by reverence (i.e. worship of and respect for the gods). The relationship between mortals and gods is crucial in this play.

65 great mother Cybele Cybele was a Persian mother-goddess embodying the fertility of the earth (compare with the Greek goddess Demeter, see note on line 223). Euripides freely associates Dionysus with other eastern fertility cults.

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-65372-5 - Euripides: Bacchae
 David Franklin
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

I will prove to him and to all the Thebans that I am a god. When I have put things right here, I will move on to another land, and reveal myself there also. But if in anger the city of Thebes attempts to take the bacchantes from the mountain with military force, I shall fight them, commanding my maenads. So it is that I have put aside my true form, and taken on the likeness of a mortal man. 40

But now, my women who have left Tmolus, the great stronghold of Lydia; my holy band of worshippers, you I have brought from a foreign land as my companions in travel and rest! Lift the native Phrygian drums that mother Rhea and I invented! Come to this royal house of Pentheus, and pound on the doors, to reveal yourselves to the city of Cadmus! I myself will go to the ravines of Cithaeron where my bacchantes wait, and I will set them dancing! 45

CHORUS

From the land of Asia,
 Leaving sacred Tmolus behind, 50
 I rush on in my joyful labours for Bromios,
 Work that does not weary me,
 Singing in worship of Bacchus.
 You in the road, you in the road,
 And you in the palace, make way! 55
 Let all show the reverence of holy silence.
 For endlessly the time-honoured hymns
 I'll sing to Dionysus.

Blessed is he who in his good fortune
 Knows the rites of the god; 60
 Who leads a life of reverence;
 Whose spirit is one with the sacred band;
 Who dances in the mountains
 In the holy rituals;
 Who honours the rites of great mother Cybele; 65
 Waving the thyrsus high in the air,
 Garlanded with ivy,
 He worships Dionysus.

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-65372-5 - Euripides: Bacchae
 David Franklin
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

69 On, bacchants! Repeated cries form part of Dionysiac ritual, just as repetition does in the prayer of most cultures (see also line 100). The rhythm of the chant would add to its force, and it is not difficult to imagine that dance added visual power to the words.

72–3 From the mountains of Phrygia The bacchants come from the wildness of Persian mountains to the civic, orderly streets of Greece; the clash of cultures might be disastrous.

74–88 The Chorus tell again the story of Dionysus' miraculous birth.

85 with the horns of a bull For the first time in the play, Dionysus is associated with an animal. The bull is his dominant animal incarnation (see also lines 778–80).

86 garlands of snakes Euripides explains why maenads entwine snakes in their hair in honour of Dionysus.



This vase, dating from c.440–430 BC, shows Dionysus holding thyrsus and wine cup, with satyr and maenad playing musical instruments.

97 the staff of wildness While holiness and wildness may seem at opposite extremes to us, their combination powerfully expresses the nature of Dionysiac worship.

102 Far from their shuttles and looms Weaving was the normal, civilised occupation of women; something extraordinary has happened to the women of Thebes.

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-65372-5 - Euripides: Bacchae
 David Franklin
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

- On, bacchants! On, bacchants!
 Escort Dionysus, 70
 Bromios, god and son of god,
 From the mountains of Phrygia
 Down to the broad streets of Greece – Bromios!
- When his mother was carrying him,
 The lightning of Zeus flashed through the sky, 75
 And in the forcing agony of labour
 She thrust him prematurely from her womb,
 Losing her life at the thunderbolt's blast.
 But instantly Zeus, the son of Cronus
 Took him to another place of birth; 80
 Concealing the baby within his thigh,
 He fastened him in with golden clasps,
 Hidden away from Hera.
- Zeus brought him to birth when the Fates decreed it,
 A god with the horns of a bull, 85
 And he crowned the child with garlands of snakes.
 And so it is that the maenads entwine
 These untameable beasts in their hair.
- Thebes, nurse of Semele,
 Crown yourself with ivy! 90
 Everywhere, everywhere sport the green
 Of bryony with its beautiful berries,
 And let all become bacchants,
 With boughs of oak and fir,
 And decorate cloaks of dappled fawnskin 95
 With fringes of white wool.
 Make yourselves holy with the staff of wildness!
 At once the whole land will dance –
 It is Bromios who leads the holy bands!
 To the mountain, to the mountain! 100
 There where the throng of women waits,
 Far from their shuttles and looms,
 Stung to madness by Dionysus.

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-65372-5 - Euripides: Bacchae
 David Franklin
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

104 the Curetes These minor divinities of Crete played a role in the story of Zeus' birth. Like his son Dionysus, Zeus was born amid danger and concealment. His father Cronus feared the fulfilment of a prophecy that he would be overthrown by his son, and so he swallowed his children as soon as his wife Rhea had given birth. When Zeus was about to be born, Rhea went to Crete and gave birth in a cave. The Curetes beat drums to prevent Cronus from hearing the baby's cries.

Euripides often connected up elements of myth, and so moves easily from the birth of Zeus to the drums played by Dionysus' Chorus to accompany the flute. The Chorus invoke the invention of their musical instruments by their divine forebears.

106 the triple-helmed corybants Corybants were spirits of nature associated with both Cybele and Dionysus. Here they seem to be identified with the Curetes. It is not clear what 'triple-helmed' means; perhaps the strangeness of the idea is an effect Euripides intended.

112 The frenzied satyrs Satyrs were the traditional companions of Dionysus. They were associated with sexual freedom, wine, music and ecstatic dance, and so they were naturally linked with his worship.

115–42 The Chorus praise an imaginary worshipper of Dionysus, who dances to exhaustion among the circling revellers, wears the fawnskin cloak, and eats raw meat. They are praising complete, unrestrained participation in the god's worship.

***Oreibasia* – mountain dancing**

Worshippers of Dionysus took part in wild events in the mountains outside the towns where they lived. They would gather at night in numbers to drink and dance to the loud, rhythmic music of drums and high-pitched flutes. The wildness of the rites culminated in the eating of raw flesh. The dominant emotion for participants was joy. Outsiders, like Pentheus, tended to feel suspicion, revulsion or fear.

In lines 115–42 the Chorus invoke the events and spirit of these rites in their original and mythical form. With the god himself leading the revellers, the earth responds to his fertile magic, flowing with milk, wine and honey. Such miracles will actually take place among the bacchantes on Cithaeron (see note on Bacchic rites, page 40).

121 *euoi!* Pronounced *E-woi*, this is the traditional Bacchic cry, encapsulating the ecstatic joy of worshippers calling to their god; hence Dionysus is also called *Euios* (pronounced *E-wi-os*).

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-65372-5 - Euripides: Bacchae
 David Franklin
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

<p>Secret chamber of the Curetes, Sacred dwelling of Crete that gave birth to Zeus, Where the triple-helmed corybants in their caves Invented for us this circle of stretched hide! In the straining dance of ecstasy, They combined it with the sweet-sounding breath of Phrygian flutes, And put it in the hands of mother Rhea, A beat for the cries of the bacchants. The frenzied satyrs took it from the mother goddess, And made it part of the biennial dance, In which Dionysus delights.</p>	105
<p>Dionysus is glad when someone in the mountains Falls to the ground from the whirling bands, Wearing the sacred cloak of fawnskin, Hunting the blood of goat-slaughter, The joy of eating raw flesh, Racing to the mountains of Phrygia, of Lydia, And the leader is Bromios, <i>euoi!</i> The ground flows with milk, flows with wine, It flows with the nectar of bees. The Bacchic god holds high the blazing flame of the pine torch And lets it stream from the shaft, Fragrant as the smoke of Syrian incense. With running and dances he spurs on the stragglers, Rousing them with his call, Tossing his long, thick hair in the breeze. Amid the joyful cries he bellows: ‘On, bacchants! On, bacchants! Wearing the splendour of gold-flowing Tmolus, Sing praise to Dionysus With the sound of the deep-booming drum, Joyfully singing “<i>euoi!</i>” to the god of that cry, With Phrygian calls and incantations, When the sweet, holy music of the pipes Sounds out its holy notes, Accompanying those who journey</p>	115 120 125 130 135

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-65372-5 - Euripides: Bacchae
 David Franklin
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

141 **Joyfully, then** The celebratory mood of this worship is clear.

- Animal imagery recurs throughout this play. What ideas does the simile of the foal inspire?

FIRST EPISODE (143–291)

After the joyful singing and athletic dancing of the Chorus, Tiresias, a blind old man, comes onto the stage, perhaps led by a boy as in other plays. From the palace appears Cadmus. Both men are decrepit with age, but nonetheless they are wearing the bacchants' characteristic clothes – fawnskins – and are carrying thyrsi like the Chorus. They even intend to dance!

Tiresias

The blind prophet Tiresias appears in many tragedies, and he has obvious dramatic value. His blindness is linked to his ability to 'see' beyond mortal knowledge, and he provides a kind of objective truthful voice within the conflicts of the drama. But his portrayal is unusual in this play. Not only is it odd that he wears Bacchic clothing; instead of offering simple wisdom, he produces a string of ingenious arguments (see note on Sophistry and rhetoric, page 14).

Cadmus

Cadmus has an extraordinary past, as exiled prince and saviour of Zeus, husband of a goddess and founder of Thebes (see Background to the story, page vii). Despite his mythic status, Euripides turns him into a strikingly human character. Our reaction to him is key to our emotional response to the play.

153–4 **I will not grow weary** Part of the Dionysiac experience is the release of wildness and energy. Whether Cadmus and Tiresias merely feel rejuvenated or are actually empowered is open to question. Some characters in the play seem to feel the power of the god; others actually demonstrate miraculous physical strength.

162 **Are we the only men** It is the women of Thebes who have left the city in frenzy, driven mad by Dionysus. Cadmus and Tiresias are unique in Thebes in *choosing* to worship Dionysus.

- To the mountain, to the mountain!' 140
 Joyfully, then, like a foal with its grazing mother,
 The bacchant kicks up her flying feet and leaps!
- TIRESIAS** Who guards the gates? Call Cadmus from the palace, Cadmus,
 son of Agenor, the man who left the city of Sidon to build these towers of
 Thebes. Go, someone, tell him that Tiresias wants him. He knows why I 145
 have come, what we two old men agreed: to make ourselves a thyrsus each,
 put on fawnskins, and garland our heads with ivy wreaths.
- CADMUS** My good friend – I heard you from inside the palace, and I
 recognised the wise voice of a wise man – I have come ready, wearing these 150
 clothes of the god. Dionysus, who has appeared to mankind as a god, is the
 son of my daughter, and we must honour him as much as we are able.
 Where must we go to dance, to dance his steps and shake our grey heads?
 You tell me, Tiresias, as one old man to another; for you are wise. I will not
 grow weary, night or day, striking the ground with my thyrsus; it is so sweet
 to forget that we are old! 155
- TIRESIAS** You feel the same as I do; I too feel young, and will take
 part in the dance.
- CADMUS** Should we travel to the mountain in a wagon?
- TIRESIAS** No, that would show the god less honour.
- CADMUS** I will guide and protect you, though we are both old. 160
- TIRESIAS** The god will lead us there, and it will not be hard.
- CADMUS** Are we the only men from the city who will dance for
 Bacchus?
- TIRESIAS** Yes, for we alone have sense; the others are wrong.
- CADMUS** We are hesitating too long; take my hand. 165

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-65372-5 - Euripides: Bacchae
 David Franklin
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

Worship and doubt

168–71 intellectual debates on the gods Contemporary philosophers were questioning the nature and existence of the gods. Euripides was certainly aware of and interested in these arguments, but Tiresias dismisses them. He declares that such rationalism is arrogant and blasphemous, and that the right course of action is to follow tradition. Although worship of Dionysus is new, with no prior tradition in Greece, Tiresias says that they should revere the divine in whatever form it appears, rather than using reason to debate it.

171–2 Will people say

- Is Tiresias embarrassed about what he is doing?

176 Tiresias, since you cannot see Euripides uses Tiresias' blindness to let Cadmus announce the arrival of Pentheus. Such 'stage directions' can seem somewhat contrived.

177 Echion was one of the *Spartoi*, the Sown Men. His name means 'snake' or 'dragon', referring to his origin in the teeth of the dragon (see Background to the story, page vii). Pentheus has succeeded Cadmus as king, but Echion's fate is not mentioned in this play, nor anywhere else.

Tiresias and Cadmus

This is a much-discussed scene, because the tone is so difficult to gauge. Two old men wearing such clothes and attempting to dance could easily be laughable; certainly Pentheus will call them ridiculous.

- Do you think Euripides wrote this as a comic scene to entertain, caricaturing Dionysiac worship?
- Some critics insist that humour damages the power of Greek tragedy, and see the old men's behaviour as admirable. Do you agree?
- Is the scene more dramatically effective when played for laughs?

Pentheus

The young king appears, enraged by the news that the women of his city have rushed off to the mountains to worship a new god, led by a foreign stranger.

- He gives a vivid description of what he believes the bacchantes are up to on Cithaeron; but on what evidence does he base this picture? What do we learn about his character from this speech?

188 Those still at large I will hunt Dionysus has warned that the maenads must not be hunted from the mountain (38–40).

190 Actaeon Artemis, the goddess of hunting, turned Actaeon into a stag, and he was torn apart by his own hounds on Mount Cithaeron (see note on 269–71). He is mentioned several times in this play, where hunters and hunted change places, and his fate will have a still more horrible echo.