

THE BACCHAE

by Euripides

As long as human beings have been self-aware (and just when that occurred in human history is a fascinating subject for study and discussion) they have speculated about the meaning of life.

Through science, humans have subjected all experience to rigorous, self-correcting study. But the sciences do not deal with the ultimates of life. Where science ends, philosophy begins, seeking to find meaning and purpose in our existence.

Religion is also concerned with ultimate answers, but seeks them from divine revelation, especially from sacred texts which have been accumulated over time: the Torah, the Gospels, the Qur'an, and sacred writing of India and the Orient. These religious sources stand apart from science and do not depend on objective study.

Apart from science and religion, there is a third way to deal with ultimate questions and that is tragedy. We use the term to mean something sad or horrific, but that is just an aspect of tragedy. The term actually means a kind of traversal in search of truth; an illustration of some aspect of life's meaning.

A tragedy usually involves a person of exceptional ability who sets out to achieve a goal and never deviates from it, seeing it through to its conclusion. The audience is invited to watch the process and draw personal conclusions from it.

Euripides' "The Bacchae" examines one of the major ethical debates of the Fifth Century B.C.E.: the conflict between *nomos* and *physis*. (The following is adapted, in part, from an article by classicist Charles Segal)

Nomos (law or custom) stands for social practices and established institutions. The play concerns the attempt to bring Dionysian worship safely into the realm of accepted custom.

Physis (roughly, nature) refers to the instincts, appetites, and demands of the body which are kept in check by *Nomos*. It could be argued that *Nomos* is an artificial restraint on something more basic than human institutions. *Physis* includes aspects of the natural world beyond human control, not made by human design, but to which humans may be subject.

Nomos is used to keep these aggressive, dangerous traits under control and to make orderly society possible. If everyone lived by the instinctual impulses we share with animals, what we call civilization would be impossible.

In the play, Pentheus attempts to ban what he considers a dangerous religious rite for the good of the community. In doing so, he unwittingly unleashes its deeper, more dangerous characteristics. Religious ecstasy, when placed under constraint, may erupt in dangerous, even disastrous ways.

The Nomos-Physis dichotomy is just one aspect of this fascinating play, but it offers perhaps the most fruitful material for discussion. The end result of the actions of both Dionysus and Pentheus bring death and social upheaval to the city of Thebes. The god is no better than the man in this regard. Religion can be as savage in its expression as human institutions.

Dionysus may be viewed as the god of Letting Go. Again and again in the play, he is cited as The Releaser, one who liberates humans from the mundane restraints of life through wine, singing, dancing, and illusion-inducing power of the mask and theatre.

But to what extent may one release oneself from the safety of those rules and conventions which constitute an orderly and balanced society? How much of one should we give up for the other?

As do all tragedies, "The Bacchae" elicits these and other thoughts, which is why watching and contemplating such plays helps us come to an understanding of what it means to be human.

This play is a frightening study of the beauty and horror of religious ecstasy. It sets in opposition life in nature and life in a cosmopolitan setting. It prompts the question of what lies beneath the constraints of civilization and what good and painful things can happen when we free ourselves of those constraints.

It also presents an ancient view of the gods as coldly indifferent to the sufferings of humanity, jealous of their prerogatives, and unspeakably cruel in their punishments. It has been said that none of the characters in this play, divine or human, come off well.

Some commentators consider this work Euripides' savage, embittered valedictory to the world as he saw it.

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The god Dionysus begins the play's prologue in the shape of a handsome, young man. He announces that he has come to introduce his worship and rites to Thebes, the city and land of his mother, Semele. He tells of his conception by Zeus, the father of the gods, and how Semele tricked Zeus into revealing himself. The sight destroyed her, but the unborn baby was saved and placed in his father's thigh, from whence he was born.

Thebes is now ruled by Pentheus, son of Agave, who is sister to Semele. He received his authority from Kadmus, father of Semele and Agave. Dionysus makes it clear that Pentheus must accept his worship and he summons his followers, women of Asia, to enter the city and assist him.

The chorus dances in, singing a hymn to Bacchus (Dionysus), detailing his attributes and the service due him.

Scene One introduces, Kadmus, former ruler of Thebes, and the aged hermaphroditic prophet, Teiresias. Both have dressed in faun skins in order to join in the Bacchic rites outside city walls. Pentheus enters and scolds the two old men for their foolishness, declaring that the story of Semele giving birth to a god is a fiction. He is furious that his mother has also joined the bacchantes. Teiresias lectures Pentheus on the need to give all the gods their due, but the young king has decided to have the man who is preaching this new religion (Dionysus in disguise) arrested.

The chorus sings Ode I, which warns that Pentheus' behavior is wrong and dangerous. They end with further praise of Dionysus.

In Scene II, the disguised Dionysus is brought before Pentheus in chains. After a fruitless argument, Pentheus sends Dionysus to prison.

In Ode II, the chorus again praises Dionysus and gives ominous hints of the danger in which Pentheus has placed himself.

An earthquake opens Scene III and Dionysus walks out of the palace, free and unfettered. He tells the chorus how easily he deceived his captors and walked to freedom.

Pentheus races from the palace, furious and upset. He sees Dionysus and threatens him again, but a messenger interrupts. He has come from the slopes of Mount Kithairon where he has seen the women in their Bacchic rites. At first, the crowd was peaceful, causing milk and honey to gush from the ground, suckling young animals as if they were babes. But men, observing the rites, decided to capture Agave and return her to the king. At this point, the women went wild, tearing apart with their bare hands all living things they encountered. The messenger escaped to bring the king this fearful news.

It is worth interrupting at this point to emphasize that these Bacchic rites of wild, orgiastic ecstasy have nothing to do with sex. That's what modern audiences would assume, but Euripides goes out of his way to demonstrate otherwise.

Pentheus decides to summon his army and move against the women. But Dionysus stops him with a temptation: how would he like to spy on the women

in their revels? Pentheus succumbs and goes into the palace. Dionysus follows to effect the king's transformation.

The chorus speaks of wisdom and submission to the gods in Ode III.

Scene IV opens with Dionysus summoning Pentheus from the palace. He has dressed the king in a gown and made him up to look like a woman. He then leads the submissive king off to witness the revels.

The chorus cries out for vengeance in Ode IV.

A second messenger enters in Scene V to tell of the king's fate. In order that Pentheus might see better, Dionysus bends a tall tree to the ground and sets the king upon it. As he rises in the air, he is spied by the women who charge him and bring him to the ground where his mother, Agave, tears him apart with her bare hands, thinking it is some beast she has killed. She is returning to the city with Pentheus' head impaled on a thyrsos, a rod covered with ivy.

The chorus exults in their victory over Pentheus in Ode V.

Agave enters, bearing her trophy, calling on the women to celebrate with her. Kadmos follows, with the gathered remnants of his grandson's body. Slowly, he brings Agave out of her trance. When she sees Pentheus' head, she screams in terror.

Dionysus then appears on top of the palace and orders Agave to leave the city. He tells Kadmos that he and his wife, the goddess Harmony, will be turned into serpents and driven forth as well. But they will be redeemed by the god Ares, Harmony's father, later on. Kadmos pleads for mercy, but Dionysus is unmoved: "I am a god; you have offended me."

The chorus leaves the stage, singing of the gods' mysterious ways.

Euripides

Euripides was born between 480 and 484 B.C.E., mostly probably on the island of Salamis. He was the son of Muesarchus (or Muesarchides) and grew up in a well-to-do family. It's likely that his mother was of a prominent family; Aristophanes' joke that she was a greengrocer was funny because it so far off the mark.

Little is known of his life, apart from the fact that he began his professional career as a painter. He was moderate in his views, but did not take an active part in public life as did Aeschylus and Sophocles. Commentators speculate that

he was morose and deduce from his plays that he was a misogynist. These are simply guesses. We rather admire him for the prominent role he gives to women in his plays. His contemporaries thought it scandalous.

Certainly he was interested in philosophy and the issues of his day. Although from the same period as Sophocles, his tragedies seem to be from a different age. His plays focus on individuals, ideas, and passions rather than on community. During his lifetime he aroused great interest and great opposition. In 408 B.C.E. he visited the court of Archelaus, King of Macedon, and died there around 406/407 B.C.E. Sophocles is said to have dressed the chorus of his next play in mourning as a tribute.

Euripides was the third of the classic Greek playwrights and author of some 90 dramas, only 19 complete scripts of which survive. Little regarded in his lifetime, he became extraordinarily popular after his death and his plays were often revived. At the beginning of his career, he wrote formal tragedies, but gradually his stories evolved into hybrid forms.

While his plots were popular and exciting, he sometimes achieved his effects at the cost of consistent character development. He devised involving stories, but often solved them quickly by having a god intervene at the end of the play.

(The term for this is "deus ex machine" - a Latin phrase meaning, literally, "the god from the machine." This comes of the practice in Greek theatre of having the god appear above the building at the rear of the stage area and coming down in some kind of hoist.)

He was awarded first prize only five times, the last coming after his death. This final prize was for "The Bacchae".

Euripides' surviving plays:

Alcestis Ion

Andromache Iphigenia in Aulis

The Bacchae Iphigenia in Taurus

The Children of Herakles Medea

The Cyclops (a satyr play) Orestes

Elektra The Phoenician Women

Hecuba Rhesus (possibly by someone else) Helen The Suppliant Women

Herakles The Trojan Women

Hippolytus

You might note the sequence of plays beginning with "Hecuba" and ending with "Iphigenia in Taurus." These seven plays were part of a complete collection of Euripides' works and have survived by chance.

Over the years, the bulk of classic dramas have been lost in the burning of great libraries, and the loss of personal collections through the accidents and ravages of time. It is almost miraculous that we have the few copies which remain.

One of the most hopeful prospects for discovering additional texts is in the exhumation of graves in Egypt. Papyrus texts were often used in the mummification of commoners and, as they have been examined by archeologists, some surprising discoveries have been made.

For example, the only copy we have of a play by the Greek writer Menander - a profound influence on Roman and Elizabethan playwrights - was taken from an Egyptian corpse in modern times.