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Dionysus and Democracy

In many ways Euripides's *The Bacchae* is a cautionary tale, a warning for those who dare to challenge or question the gods. Greek norms and values are intertwined with mythology to illustrate the consequences of such behavior. In fact, it is only appropriate that Dionysus is the leading character of this play. Perhaps no other Greek god could create the types of situations that would allow people to see things from such a dramatically different perspective, thus exposing the error of their ways. In a democratic Athens, Dionysus's role in *The Bacchae* represents the importance of balance and compromise and what can happen when people refuse to relinquish any power.

By using the god of boundless excess, Euripides cleverly illustrates how one must live in a democracy. Dionysus represents the kind of freedom not typically associated with a monarchy, so his presence presents an immediate threat to Pentheus's rule. Pentheus, though angered by the chaos Dionysus causes, does not necessarily see him as a legitimate threat. This is due to his arrogance and because Dionysus arrives in Thebes dressed as a woman, the lesser sex according to the ancient Greeks. This attitude is repeatedly exemplified through Pentheus's reaction to all things feminine. For example, when Pentheus receives word about the women's Bacchic behavior he says, "When women are allowed to feast on wine, there is no telling / to what lengths their filthy minds will go" (Euripides 536). With this statement Pentheus is essentially denouncing the freedom of women, and by extension the freedom of his entire kingdom.

Although Dionysus places everyone in a trance, Pentheus's rule also represents a trance of sorts, with everyone maintaining their ascribed station in life without question. Being synonymous with freedom, Dionysus represents an alternative to that. However, *The Bacchae* is effective in showing that even though freedom can be enlivening, it does not come without cost. This is illustrated in the way Dionysus reverses gender roles throughout the play. Agave and her sisters essentially experience what it is like to be a man, with all the freedom that implies; while the men experience what it is like to be a woman, demeaned and cast out by society. Agave's reaction to this newfound freedom is apparent in her reaction to her kill. "From now on, / no more weaving at the loom, no little chores for me. / I'm meant for greater things – for hunting / savage beasts with my bare hands" (Euripides 571). This freedom is undoubtedly exhilarating for Agave, but she pays for it with her son's life, a situation that emphasizes the importance of balance in a free society. In addition, Dionysus dressing the men as women emphasizes their weakness in comparison to the gods. This is important because Pentheus has attained too much power and refuses to surrender any of it. This is apparent in his unwillingness to dress the way Dionysus wants him to.

The consequences that result from Pentheus refusing to acknowledge and obey Dionysus serve as a reminder for people to keep their power in check. This is something that is of particular importance in a democratic society, where the ruler is expected to submit to the will of the people. Pentheus, however, sees himself as a godlike figure, bending to no one's will, not even the gods', behavior that is eventually punished. This is foreshadowed by the play's Chorus when they say, "slowly, but implacably, / divine power moves / to strike at the arrogant man / who brazenly worships / his own image as God / and not the Gods themselves" (Euripides 558). When he is finally forced to obey Dionysus, Pentheus experiences the brutality with which the

gods can exact their vengeance upon those who try to rival them. This is also symbolic of Pentheus being forced to submit to the will of an uprising people.

The anarchic situation that Dionysus creates within Pentheus's kingdom does more than show what can happen when one tries to attain too much power or refuses to acknowledge and obey the gods. It also highlights how the gods, according to the ancient Greeks, demanded to be worshipped. Those who questioned Dionysus's divinity were treated without mercy, while those who worshipped him were treated with kindness and respect. This belief in the importance of acknowledging and worshipping the gods is seen throughout *The Bacchae*. The Chorus repeatedly emphasizes this, but it becomes more significant when the Messenger, who has just witnessed Pentheus's death says, "reverence and humility before the Gods / is best for all men. It is also the only wisdom. / If only men would use it" (Euripides 567). According to the ancient Greeks, the gods were supposed to be worshipped without question, like the maenads worshipped Dionysus, in order to avoid their wrath. Because Pentheus and his family refused to recognize Dionysus's divinity, they effectively invited that wrath upon the kingdom. As the Chorus points out when they say to Dionysus, "those who try to strangle you / in the roots of their own nature, / who oppress and are oppressed, / through you, achieve their own destruction" (Euripides 579). In a sense, Pentheus and his family have treated Dionysus like the women of ancient Greece. Like those women, Dionysus has been demeaned and cast out by society, adding another layer of complexity to the men's Bacchic garb. Moreover, by sending Pentheus's family into exile, Dionysus casts them out.

The wrath that is unleashed upon Pentheus's kingdom is ultimately a direct result of his attempt to achieve god-like status through power. Euripides uses Pentheus as an extreme example of the destruction people can face if they try to tempt the gods in this way. Kingdoms

can fall and families can be destroyed. In fact, there is a certain symbolism at the end of the play when Dionysus puts the final nail in the coffin of the kingdom. As he says, “Men like Pentheus / who abuse their power in defiance of the Gods / shall ever rediscover the inexorable terror of divine justice” (Euripides 579). In order for a government by the people to exist, those who refuse to give up an ounce of power must be destroyed, restoring balance between the principles of Apollo and Dionysus. Essentially, in having Pentheus torn apart, Dionysus symbolically dismembers the monarchy to make way for a democracy.

