The Bacchae Study Guide

The Bacchae by Euripides

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Euripides was more than seventy years old and living in self-imposed exile in King Archelaus's court in Macedonia when he created *The Bacchae,* just before his death in 406 B.C. The play was produced the following year at the City Dionysia in Athens, where it was awarded the prize for best tragedy. Ever since, *The Bacchae* has occupied a special place among Greek dramas and particularly among the eighteen surviving plays of Euripides. It was a favorite of the Romans in the centuries following the decline of the Greek Empire. It persisted through the "dark ages" of Medieval Europe and was among the first classical plays translated into vernacular languages during the Renaissance. Alongside *Medea* and Sophocles's *Oedipus the King* (also known as *Oedipus Rex)* it is one of the most produced ancient plays of the twentieth century.

The simple plot of *The Bacchae* mixes history with myth to recount the story of the god Dionysus' s tumultuous arrival in Greece. As a relatively new god to the pantheon of Olympian deities, Dionysus, who represented the liberating spirit of wine and revelry and became the patron god of the theatre, was not immediately welcomed into the cities, homes, and temples of the Greeks. His early rites, originating in Thrace or Asia, included wild music and dancing, drunken orgies, and bloody sacrifice. Many sober, conservative Greeks, particularly the rulers of the many Greek city-states, feared and opposed the new religion.

Pentheus, the king of Thebes, stands as a symbol in the play for all those who opposed the cult of Dionysus and denied the erratic, emotional, uninhibited longings within all human beings. He confronts the god, faces him in a battle of wills, and is sent to his bloody death at the hands of his own mother and a frenzied band of maenads, female worshipers of the god.

In half a century of playwriting, Euripides tackled many difficult and controversial topics and often took unconventional stands, criticizing politicians, Greek society, and even the gods. *The Bacchae,* however, has proven frustratingly ambiguous in its treatment of gods and men. Writing the play in exile, while watching the glory of Athens disintegrate near the end of the Peloponnesian War, Euripides explores the disintegration of old systems of belief and the creation of new ones. He questions the boundaries between intellect and emotion, reality and imagination, reason and madness. At the end of it all, however, it is not quite clear whether the tragic events were meant to glorify the gods and reinforce their power and worship among the Greeks, or condemn the immortals for their fiendishness, their petty jealousies, and the myriad sufferings they inflict on humankind.

Author Biography

The life of Euripides, one of the great tragic playwrights of Classical Greece, spans the "Golden Age" of 5th century B.C. Athens. This single stretch of a hundred years saw the reign of Pericles, the great Athenian statesman and builder of the Parthenon; the final defeat of the Persians at the Battle of Salamis; the philosophical teachings of Anaxagoras, Protagoras, and Socrates; the construction of the Theatre of Dionysus; the playwriting careers of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Aristophanes; and, ultimately, the decline of the Greek Empire following the devastating Peloponnesian War.

Although accounts of Euripides's life differ, some elements seem relatively certain. He was born on the island of Salamis in 484 B.C. but spent most of his life on the Greek mainland, in Athens. Based on the education he received, and the personal library he reportedly owned, his family was likely at least middle-class. His father, upon hearing a prophecy that his son would one day wear many "crowns of victory," led him to begin training as an athlete. Later, he studied painting and philosophy before finally turning to the stage and producing his first trilogy of plays in 455 B.C., just after Aeschylus's death.

Third in the line of great Greek tragedians, behind Aeschylus and Sophocles, Euripides's plays were quite different from his traditional-minded predecessors and stirred much controversy when they were presented at the annual theatre festivals (called the Dionysia) in Athens. To begin with, Euripides shared a healthy intellectual skepticism with the philosophers of his day, so his plays challenged traditional beliefs about the roles of women and men in society, the rights and duties of rulers, and even the ways and the existence of the gods. He had been influenced by the Sophists, a group of philosophers who believed that truth and morality are matters of opinion and by the teachings of Sophocles, who sought truth through questioning and logic. His own doubts, about government, religion, and all manner of relationships, are the central focus of his plays.

Additionally, Euripides did not adhere to accepted forms of playwriting. He greatly diminished the role of the chorus in his plays, relegating them to occasional comments on his themes and little or no participation in the action onstage. Furthermore, he was criticized for writing disjointed plots that didn't rise in a continuous action and for composing awkward prologues that prematurely reveal the outcome of plays. When seeking a resolution for the conflicts in his work, he often turned to the *deus ex machina,* or "god from the machine," and hastily ended a play by allowing an actor, costumed as a god, to be flown onto the stage by a crane to settle a dispute, rather than allowing the natural events of the story to run their course.

Perhaps most importantly, Euripides provided characters for his plays that seemed nearer to actual human beings than those of any of his contemporaries. Figures like Medea, Phaedra, and Electra have conflicts rooted in strong desires and psychological realism, unlike the powerful, but predictable, characters in earlier tragedies. It has been said that Aeschylus wrote plays about the gods, Sophocles wrote plays about heroes, and Euripides wrote plays about ordinary humans.

During his fifty year career as a dramatist, Euripides wrote as many as ninety-two plays, yet won only five prizes for best tragedy in competitions. In contrast, Sophocles wrote more than 120 plays and won twenty-four contests. During his lifetime, Euripides was not always appreciated by his audiences or his critics□he, in fact, found himself the object of ridicule among writers of comedies like Aristophanes, who lampooned the tragedian and his techniques in his satire *The Frogs*. Time, however, has proven Euripides's merits. While Aeschylus and Sophocles are each represented by only seven surviving plays, eighteen of Euripides's tragedies still exist, along with a fragment of one of his satyr plays. They have been preserved over the centuries as admirable models of classical tragedy and helpful examples of spoken Greek. Due largely to his progressive ideas and realistic characters, the same qualities that once earned him scorn, he is now one of the most popular and widely-produced writers of antiquity.

Plot Summary

The setting of *The Bacchae* is the royal palace of Thebes, where Pentheus has succeeded his grandfather, Cadmus, as king. The play begins with a prologue spoken by Dionysus, the great god of wine and revelry himself. He announces that he has successfully spread his cult throughout Asia and returns now to the land of his mother, Semele, in order to teach the Greeks how to worship him through dancing, feasting, and sacrifices.

Some of the women of the city, including his own mother's sisters, have denied his status as a god, claiming he is simply a mortal and that the great Zeus killed his mother for lying about her lover. In threatening tones he describes how he has already driven the women of Thebes mad and sent them to the hills around the city, where they wear the animal skins of bacchants, priestesses of Dionysus, carry the ivy-entwined thyrsus (a symbol of his worship), and dance and sing hymns of praise to the new god. Now he is ready to turn his attention to King Pentheus, who opposes his worship and denies his existence.

To accomplish his task, he has come to Thebes disguised as a mortal and brought with him a chorus of his Asian followers. Together, he claims, they will try to persuade the Thebans to accept him into their rites of worship, even fight them if necessary. Then he will leave Thebes and spread his cult throughout Greece.

Dionysus leaves to join the bacchants on Mount Cithaeron as his Chorus enters to sing and dance for the people of Thebes. The Chorus' song explains the origins of the god and describes how the Greeks can become worshipers themselves. They sing about Dionysus's mother, Semele, who conceived the god with Zeus, ruler of all the immortals on Mt. Olympus; and how she was tricked into asking Zeus to reveal himself to her in all his godlike glory. Zeus complied, appearing to Semele as a lighting bolt and killing her instantly in his flame. Zeus himself plucked the unborn Dionysus from the fire and sealed him up in his thigh, later giving birth to his half-human, half-divine son.

To worship Dionysus, the Chorus sings, followers need only to crown themselves with ivy, wear deer skins lined with goat hair, carry the branches of oak and fir trees, delight in the bounty of the vine, and make ritual animal sacrifices. If they do, the land will overflow with natural beauty and riches - fawns and goats, wine and honey.

The women worshipers of Dionysus are interrupted in their revels by the arrival of Tiresias, the famous blind prophet. Tiresias has come to collect Cadmus; the two elders have rediscovered their youth in the worship of Dionysus, and they are headed to the hills around Thebes to dance and sing the god's praises. Before they can leave, however, King Pentheus returns to the city from a trip abroad.He heard about the flight of women from his city and hurried back to contain the madness. He proclaims the worship of Dionysus false and immoral, reveals he has already caught and jailed many of the mad women, and soon will have them all captured and safely imprisoned.

Although both Tiresias and Cadmus try to convince Pentheus not to spurn the new god, on peril of his life, the king is unconvinced. He has heard about the arrival of a mysterious stranger in Thebes, a sorcerer with golden curls who is always surrounded by women. Not knowing the man he seeks is actually the god Dionysus himself, he orders the stranger caught and brought back to the palace in chains, to face death by stoning. As a further insult, he orders Tiresias's home - where he divines his prophecies - destroyed and even threatens his grandfather, Cadmus, before rushing off in search of Dionysus.

After a brief interlude by the Chorus, which chants a warning about human pride and men who will not give in to the pleasures of life, Pentheus returns and is met by a Servant, leading the disguised Dionysus in chains. The Servant reports that the stranger turned himself in willingly, but that all the women Pentheus had captured have escaped from their jails by some miracle of the gods. In a brief exchange, Pentheus accuses the Stranger of worshiping a false god and undermining the morals of women and orders him imprisoned, to await his death. The Stranger (Dionysus) warns Pentheus that he will free himself and that the god's wrath will fall heavily on the king and his city, but Pentheus, filled with arrogance, doesn't listen and leads the god away to his punishment.

The Chorus provides another interlude, this time worrying about the fate of Dionysus. They wonder if the god has forsaken them in Thebes. Suddenly, in the midst of their chanting, the Chorus is startled by a roar of thunder and the brilliant flash of lightning that engulfs the palace and the nearby tomb of Semele. When the blaze dies, the Stranger appears again and tells the bacchants how he escaped by tricking Pentheus into shackling a bull, tearing down the prison, and fighting phantom images.

Worn down by his struggles, Pentheus reappears in pursuit of the Stranger. They are met by a Herdsman from Mount Cithaeron, who describes a terrible battle he has just witnessed between Dionysus's frenzied female worshipers, the maenads, and the villagers on the mountain. Stumbling upon the bacchants in the forest, the villagers hid and saw the women perform strange miracles. They seemed to communicate with the wild animals and draw water from rocks and wine from the earth itself. Among the crazed women was Agave, Pentheus's mother, and they decided to help their king by capturing her and bringing her home again. When the women saw the villagers, however, they attacked them ferociously. Weapons could not harm the bacchants, but with simple branches or their bare hands Dionysus' s priestesses wounded their attackers, then turned on their cattle, ripping the cows and bulls to pieces and feeding on the raw flesh.

Though the Herdsman and the Chorus implore Pentheus to accept the fearsome new god, the king is more resolute than ever. He orders his soldiers called to arms in preparation for an attack on the bacchants in the hills. Dionysus, still in the guise of the Stranger, again warns Pentheus not to tempt fate by taking arms against a god, but it is too late to change his mind: Pentheus, like all tragic figures, is blind to his errors, and stumbling inexorably toward his doom.

Seeing no way to deter the king, Dionysus instead begins to prepare Pentheus for his punishment. He offers to lead the hapless man to the forest to spy on the women in their revels. To prevent him from being discovered, Dionysus convinces Pentheus to dress himself as a woman. Thus, attired in women's robes and deerskins, and carrying the Thyrsus of Dionysus, Pentheus is led, in a hypnotic trance, through the streets of Thebes and into the hills where the bacchants dance. The Chorus, knowing the fate that awaits him, sings a song of celebration, cheering the impending death of the foolish king and exalting the name of Bacchus - Dionysus - the god of wine and revelry.

Soon afterward, a Messenger arrives to relay the news of Pentheus's grisly destruction: When the king and his soldiers arrived near the grassy glade occupied by the maenads, the Messenger tells the Chorus, Pentheus complained he could not see the women through the trees. The Stranger reached up and pulled down the top of a tall fir tree, set Pentheus in its branches, then gently straightened the trunk again, sending the king upward to the top of the forest. As soon as he was aloft, the Stranger disappeared and the voice of Dionysus boomed across the hillside, calling the women to attack the non-believer perched helplessly atop the tree.

The Messenger watched while the women pulled the tree from the ground, roots and all, sending Pentheus plummeting to earth. They descended upon him like animals with Agave, his own mother, in the lead. Pentheus tore off his disguise and pleaded with his mother to recognize him and spare him, but in her madness she thought he was a mountain lion and helped tear him apart, limb from limb, taking his head as a trophy of the hunt.

Finishing his tale, the Messenger hurries away as Agave approaches, bearing Pentheus's head on her thyrsus. Still in a Dionysian frenzy, Agave boasts that she was the first of the maenads in the hunt to reach the lion, whose head she claimed as a prize. Cadmus enters with servants, carrying some of Pentheus's remains on a bier. Sorrowfully, the founder of Thebes forces his daughter, Agave, to shake off her trance and recognize her own son's bloody head in her hands. He laments that it was her own blindness, and that of Pentheus and the women of Thebes, that led to this disaster. Because they mocked the god and dishonored his name, Dionysus has punished them all.

Dionysus himself returns and pronounces their final punishment: Cadmus will be driven into exile, later to be turned into a serpent with his wife Harmonia. Agave, too, will be banished from Thebes and forced to wander as an outcast for the remainder of her days. As father and daughter bid each other a tearful goodbye, the Chorus delivers the play's final lesson - that the gods may appear in many forms and accomplish wondrous, unexpected things. Let mere mortals beware.

Prologue

Prologue Summary

Dionysus, son of the god, Zeus, and the mortal, Semele, is at the palace of Pentheus, King of Thebes. Dionysus addresses the audience to announce himself and his reason for coming. He has taken the form of a human leader of the Dionysian cult, so that he may punish those of Thebes who do not worship him as a god. He also intends by this to vindicate his mother, Semele.

When Zeus had his affair with Semele, Hera found out and caused Semele to question whether the one she loved was really Zeus. Semele secured a promise from Zeus to grant her any wish, and her wish was that he reveal himself as a god. The lightening flash from his god-self destroyed Semele. Zeus took Dionysus from her womb and sewed the unborn Dionysus into his own thigh until the baby was full term. To this day, smoke still rises from the site of Semele's death, and is visible from Thebes.

Although Semele's father, Cadmus, honors her burial site, no one in Thebes honors her or her son by believing that Zeus is Dionysus' father. This is why he has come to teach the whole city a lesson. Dionysus has already caused madness to confuse the women of Thebes, starting with his aunts. They are outside the city now, dressed in the manner of his cult. Dionysus threatens to use these women, his bacchants, to fight any who would try to remove them from the mountain by military force.

One of these women is Agave, the mother of Pentheus. Pentheus, besides being king, is Dionysus' cousin. Pentheus does not know Dionysus and does not believe him to be the son of Zeus. Therefore, he has left Dionysus out of his prayers and worship. Because of this, Dionysus has come to reveal himself to all of Thebes. He has brought a chorus of believers with him.

Prologue Analysis

The Bacchae is a Greek drama, written by Euripides, and set in Greece in the 400s, B.C. The Cambridge Translation of The Bacchae into English explains that the danger of ignoring the gods was a common theme in Greek tragedies. During this time in particular, there was much discussion in Greece over whether the gods existed.

The same as with any enduring myth, *The Bacchae* tells a truth about human consciousness. From this, the reader can understand that Pentheus, the head of the city, is a symbol of human intellect and pride. With Pentheus in charge, faith is suppressed, or sent outside the city as a wild and dangerous thing. Something larger than human intellect must be honored, or humanity is destroyed. Dionysus' threat unequivocally foreshadows Pentheus' destruction at the hands of the women of his own city, or the intellect's destruction at the hands of its own emotions.

Parodos

Parodos Summary

The Parodos is a hymn of praise to Dionysus by his cult followers. The cult has followed him from Persia, not realizing that he is actually the god they worship. In song, they again tell the story of his birth. They describe the joy of worship with abandon, even to the point of dressing in animal skins and eating raw meat. Wildness and holiness are synonymous in the worship of Dionysus, although this combination is frightening and revolting to outsiders like Pentheus.

Parodos Analysis

For his Chorus and for Dionysus, worship is more important than reason. This song praises unrestrained worship instead of reason. In fact, it suggests that worship is the only reasonable response to the gods.

First Episode

First Episode Summary

The blind prophet, Tiresius, enters the stage, calling for Cadmus. The two old men have agreed to join in the festivities honoring Dionysus, each dressed in fawn skins and carrying the thyrsus, which is a sort of spear made with leaves. The men also wear garlands of leaves on their heads. Tiresius and Cadmus prepare to walk out to honor Dionysus and enjoy feeling young again in his dance.

Pentheus, King of Thebes, enters with scandalous stories of what the women are doing in their worship of Dionysus. The king is clearly obsessed with what he imagines to be their wanton sexual behavior. Pentheus scolds his grandfather, Cadmus, for looking foolish and accuses Tiresius of supporting the new god, Dionysus, for his own selfish reasons, saying Tiresius does so to increase his own offerings as a prophet. Pentheus scoffs at the story that Dionysus was born a second time from Zeus' thigh.

In response, Tiresius tries to reason with Pentheus. Tiresius tells him, for example, that the story of Zeus' thigh is a metaphor. What really happened, he says, is that Zeus hid Dionysus from Hera, and that is what the story means. Then he continue to offer advice that Pentheus should not rely on force to dominate mankind. Failing to give honor where honor is due, Tiresius says, is the real madness.

Cadmus argues with Pentheus, too, but on different grounds. Cadmus doesn't say whether or not he believes Dionysus is a god, but he says it would be wise for Pentheus to treat him like one. If Pentheus would declare Dionysus a god, it would honor their whole family.

Pentheus, however, is angered by their words, so he orders the destruction of Tiresius' seat and the capture of Dionysus and the women. Tiresius does not respond in anger, but in pity.

First Episode Analysis

This play is a study in characterization. Pentheus is fascinated by what he imagines is involved in that worship, but he distances himself from it. Tiresius, who often shows up in Greek plays as a prophet, flatly foreshadows the tragic end of this story. He does this not by use of his prophetic gifts but by simple common sense. Cadmus is a politician who argues for the wisdom of worship for political and family reasons.

Again, the time period of this play is important to its understanding. If people begin to question the existence of the gods, the status of prophets and seers becomes shaky. So the prophets and seers begin to explain the metaphors in their myths, in hopes of salvaging their meaning. Politicians may counsel hanging on to tradition for the stability

of society. Intellectuals may express disgust. None of these, however, satisfies that in the human psyche which longs for faith and devotion.

First Choral Ode

First Choral Ode Summary

The Chorus sings a hymn denouncing Pentheus as a blasphemer and extolling the virtues of simple living. Dionysus is praised as the god that brings wine and plenty that "cures [the] grief" of both the rich and the poor.

First Choral Ode Analysis

Usually, the Chorus of a Greek play does not take sides, but this Chorus is not objective. This chorus consists of those devotees who have followed Dionysus from Persia into Thebes. By making even the Chorus take sides, Euripides seems to suggest that to ignore the divine is indeed folly.

Second Episode

Second Episode Summary

In this first of three confrontations between Dionysus and Pentheus, a soldier brings Dionysus to the palace. The soldier is ashamed, he says, because the 'stranger' came so willingly. The soldier also informs his king that the women have already been set free from their prison, so this man seems to cause miracles.

Pentheus begins to question his prisoner and becomes enraged when he cannot understand the answers. Dionysus says, more than once, that the god is now before Pentheus, but the king is only more confused by his words. The king still thinks he has the power in this conversation. Pentheus thinks he is only dealing with a cult leader and issues orders to lock up Dionysus. Pentheus also says that he will sell the women as slaves or keep them as servants, spinning at the loom, to quiet their drumming in worship.

Second Episode Analysis

This first confrontation shows why a tragic end is inevitable. The gods must be honored and that is not up for negotiation. Pentheus, however, cannot see the god standing before him. The collision between the two perspectives is infuriating for both Pentheus and Dionysus.

It is ironic that Pentheus threatens to keep the women spinning at the loom, since that is where they were before Dionysus caused the madness to befall them. Both use the women of the city as pawns in their conflict.

Second Choral Ode

Second Choral Ode Summary

The Chorus sings another hymn to denounce Pentheus and pray for the release of their cult leader.

Second Choral Ode Analysis

It is ironic that the Chorus does not recognize Dionysus in the person of their cult leader any more than Pentheus does. They do, however, honor and worship him, and so they are in correct relationship to him.

Third Episode

Third Episode Summary

As though in answer to prayer, there is an earthquake, and Dionysus is set free from the palace prison. A messenger arrives with news about the bacchants, the women outside the city. This messenger reports that they are not living lasciviously, like Pentheus said they were. The messenger did report, though, that these women overcame men in battle.

Pentheus, true to character, is enraged and confused. The kind wants Dionysus to shut up, until Dionysus suggests that he could sneak out and see the women for himself, dressed as a woman. Pentheus is entranced by the idea and begins to fall under the spell of Dionysus.

Third Episode Analysis

In this scene, the audience sees further signs of the divinity of Dionysus. However, Pentheus remains as blind to it as ever. Because Pentheus is as attracted as he claims to be repelled by the women and what he imagines they do, Dionysus is able to set a trap.

Third Choral Ode

Third Choral Ode Summary

The Chorus looks forward to the Dionysus' revenge. The Chorus sings that although divine power is slow, it will certainly punish the arrogant. Again, the Chorus extols the virtues of the simple man who lives within the traditions of his people.

Third Choral Ode Analysis

Like Tiresius and Cadmus, the Chorus seems to argue that to honor the divine is just good common sense for mortals to follow.

Fourth Episode

Fourth Episode Summary

Pentheus comes out of the palace dressed as a bacchant and playing the part. Now he is eager to spy on the women and hopes to catch them at lovemaking. Dionysus mocks him by humoring him, and promises that Pentheus will return in the arms of his mother. Pentheus replies, "I take what I deserve."

Fourth Episode Analysis

This episode is rich with irony, for the Pentheus' mother certainly will carry him home. His mother will carry his head as a trophy. From the perspective of the gods, Pentheus speaks correctly when he says he will get what he deserves.

Fourth Choral Ode

Fourth Choral Ode Summary

The Chorus sings to inspire the mad bacchants' rage against Pentheus. The Chorus refers to him as the offspring of animals and they call for justice to avenge the gods.

Fourth Choral Ode Analysis

From what comes next, the audience is to understand that several hours have passed during the singing of this ode. Dionysus and Pentheus have traveled through Thebes and on to Cithaeron where the women are. By referring to Pentheus as the child of beasts, the Chorus adds to the bacchants' insane perceptions.

Fifth Episode

Fifth Episode Summary

The second messenger to appear in this play comes to report the violent death of Pentheus. When he could not see the women well, Pentheus complained, and so Dionysus bent down the top of a tree and placed him there. Once Pentheus was high up in the tree the messenger says Dionysus called and ordered the women to take their vengeance on Pentheus for mocking their rites.

The women ripped the tree out of the ground, and his mother, Agave, ripped Pentheus limb from limb. In her state of mind, she did not recognize her son. Poor Agave is now on her way, carrying the head of her son like a battle trophy. All she has won, though, are tears, says the messenger.

Fifth Episode Analysis

In this horrid description of the death of Pentheus, the audience is reminded that the king is not the only person being punished. By making the king's own mother the murderer, Dionysus has completed his revenge on the whole family and the city of Thebes.

Fifth Choral Ode

Fifth Choral Ode Summary

The Chorus sings in celebration of Dionysus' revenge and mocks Agave when she returns carrying Pentheus' head, unaware that she has murdered her own son.

Fifth Choral Ode Analysis

The Chorus functions as an extension of Dionysus himself. Dionysus' revenge is their revenge.

Exodos

Exodos Summary

When Agave triumphantly returns to the city, even the Chorus expresses pity for her. Cadmus comes out to see what has happened, and then he talks Agave back to her senses, helping her face what she has done. Cadmus explains that Dionysus has punished them all, because they did not recognize him as a god.

Agave and Cadmus complain to Dionysus that his punishment is too harsh, but he is unrelenting. Agave and Cadmus grieve while they leave Thebes for separate exiles.

Exodos Analysis

Surely Agave and Cadmus speak for the audience when they complain that Dionysus was too hard on them, but the message of the final scene is clear. The gods will have their honor, and they will not be merciful if it is denied them.

Characters

Agave

Agave is daughter to Cadmus, the founder and former king of Thebes, and mother to Pentheus, the city's current ruler. As revealed by Dionysus in the play's prologue, Agave insulted the god by saying he was not the son of Zeus; that Semele, Dionysus's mother and Agave's own sister, lied about her lover, who was actually some mortal. For her heresy, Dionysus has driven Agave, and all the women of Thebes, mad and sent them into the hills where they have been wearing animal skins, dancing, and singing hymns of praise to the god of wine and revelry. Near the end of the play, Agave, still in a mad frenzy, leads the women in a bloody attack on Pentheus, her own son, who she mistakes for a mountain lion. She returns to Thebes triumphant, carrying her son's head as a trophy. Cadmus finally breaks the spell she has been under, bringing her back to sanity and the painful realization of what she has done. She and her father are both condemned to exile by the angry Dionysus.

Cadmus

In Greek mythology, Cadmus was the ancient founder of Thebes. He populated the city by sowing the teeth of a dragon he and his brothers had slain. The planted teeth grew into soldiers called Spartoi, who became the Theban nobility and helped Cadmus build the city's citadel. Interestingly, because one of Cadmus's daughters, Semele, was Dionysus's mother, Cadmus is actually the god's uncle. In *The Bacchae,* Cadmus appears in his old age, after he has resigned the throne to his grandson, Pentheus. Cadmus and his friend, the blind prophet, Tiresias, have discovered the joys of the worship of Dionysus and thereby discovered a second youthful spirit. Try as he will, however, he cannot convince the headstrong Pentheus to accept Dionysus into the pantheon of gods in Thebes. At the end of the play, he is banished by Dionysus and told he and his wife, Harmonia, will become serpents before perishing in another land.

Chorus

The Chorus is a group of Asian "Bacchae," women followers of Dionysus who wear deer skins and crowns of ivy, carry the thyrsus wand and fennel stalk, drink, dance, and sing hymns - or "dithyrambs" - in honor of the god of wine and revelry. They watch all the action of the play, never becoming direct participants but providing, through their songs, important background information about the life and worship of Dionysus. As with most choruses in Greek tragedies, they often address the audience directly, moralizing about the actions of the play's characters, as when these Bacchae warn the onlookers that the gods punish mortals who do not honor them properly. Their pure spirit and beneficent actions contrast with the view Pentheus has of Dionysus and his cult.

Dionysus

The Greek god of wine and revelry, Dionysus was also known as Bacchus to the Romans. In Greek myth, he is said to have been the son of the immortal king of the gods, Zeus, and Semele, the mortal daughter of Cadmus, founder of Thebes. When jealous Hera, Zeus's Olympian wife, tricked Semele into asking Zeus to show her his real identity, the hapless woman caught only a glimpse of the god in his glory before she perished in his divine fire. Zeus plucked the unborn baby Dionysus from her womb and concealed him in his thigh, until his proper birth.

As a young god, Dionysus did not receive the recognition he deserved in Greece, so he left for Asia, where he gathered his power and his followers before returning to conquer his homeland and spread the worship of the vine. It is at this point in the god's life where the play begins. He has returned to Thebes, the home of his mother, Semele, leading a chorus of "Bacchae," his female followers. He wants the Thebans to be the first among the Greeks to learn the songs, dances, and rites of the Dionysian cult. He has encountered difficulty, however: While the old founder and ruler of Thebes, Cadmus, and the wise seer Tiresias have chosen to honor him, the people of Thebes, and especially their new king, Pentheus, deny his name and refuse his worship.

A jealous but patient god, Dionysus has driven the women of Thebes mad and sent them into the hills where they have been dancing and singing his praises. Disguising himself as a mortal, a priest of his own cult, he tries to convince King Pentheus to accept the new god into Thebes. Pentheus, however, doubts Dionysus's existence and finds the drinking and dancing associated with his worship immoral, especially among women. He orders the Stranger (Dionysus) placed in chains and led off to prison to await his death. Dionysus escapes, wreaking havoc on the king and his court. Unable to reason with Pentheus, he finally devises a gruesome punishment for the prideful mortal: He places Pentheus in a trance, then convinces him to dress as a woman and spy on the Bacchae dancing Dionysus's rites in the hills. When the women discover him, they tear Pentheus limb from limb, and his own mother carries his head back into the city. In the end, Dionysus banishes what is left of the royal family of Thebes and declares his cult newly established in Greece.

First Messenger

Messengers in Greek drama are typically minor characters whose principal function is to relay important information about plot developments offstage, so the action of the play can continue unabated. The First Messenger in The Bacchae is a herdsman from Mount Cithaeron, who appears halfway through the play to describe a terrible battle he witnessed between the "maenads" (another name for Dionysus's female followers) and the villagers of the mountain. During the battle, he claims, the women were impervious to the villagers' weapons but were themselves able to wreak terrible havoc with simple branches and reeds. Furthermore, they tore cattle apart with their bare hands and

caused wine to flow from the earth. Like others before him, the First Messenger encourages King Pentheus to accept Dionysus and his cult before it is too late.

Pentheus

Pentheus is the son of Agave and grandson of Cadmus, making him cousin to the god, Dionysus. He has inherited the throne of Thebes from Cadmus, and early in the play he is abroad on business of his realm. He returns quickly, however, after hearing that the women of his city have been driven mad and are cavorting in the hills around Thebes, dressed in the manner of Dionysian priestesses. Though Cadmus and Tiresias each try to convince him to accept the new god and his rituals, Pentheus is, in the manner of all Greek tragic protagonists, too filled with pride and blind to his errors to see the folly of his ways.

Even when he is confronted with the god himself, disguised as a priest of his cult, Pentheus calls Dionysus a false divinity, sends him off to prison, and orders soldiers to attack his Bacchae in the hills. As punishments for his crime, Pentheus is entranced by Dionysus, who convinces him to don women's clothes and suffer humiliation walking through the streets of his city out to the forest, to spy on the women worshiping the god. He is placed atop a tall tree to see the women dancing and singing but once there they see him and, in their frenzy, pull the tree up from the roots, tumbling the ill-fated king to the ground. The women fall on him, led by his own mother, Agave. They tear him limb from limb, and Agave, thinking he is a mountain lion, claims his head as a prize.

Second Messenger

For the most part, scenes of death and destruction in Greek tragedy occur offstage. It is usually left to messengers to report the bloody deeds to the other characters and the audience, using words that often describe the scene as vividly as if it were taking place before their eyes. The Second Messenger in *The Bacchae* is given the task of reporting the grisly death of Pentheus. He was part of Pentheus's retinue of soldiers who followed the king to the forest and witnessed him being torn to pieces by the maenads. Near the end of the play, he arrives back in Thebes just ahead of Agave and tells the Chorus about the tragic events on Mount Cithaeron.

Servant

Playing only a small part in the play, the Servant is one of King Pentheus's men. He leads the group that captures the Stranger (actually Dionysus in disguise), and he reports the escape of the captured Bacchae from their jail cells.

Tiresias

In Greek mythology, Tiresias was the famous blind prophet of Thebes, and he appears in many stories, including Homer's *Odyssey,* Sophocles's *Oedipus* cycle, and another play by Euripides, *The Phoenician Women*. He was a descendant of the Spartoi sown by Cadmus, and he was given the gifts of prophecy and long life by Zeus, after being struck blind by the goddess Hera.

In *The Bacchae,* Tiresias appears briefly at the beginning of the play, as the voice of wisdom and experience. Along with Cadmus, he tries to persuade the headstrong Pentheus to accept Dionysus and his worship, telling him he is wrong to rationalize about the gods, whose ways cannot be known by mere mortals such as himself.

Themes

Rational vs. Instinctual

The Greeks of the 5th century B.C. prized balance and order in their lives. Their art and architecture, laws, politics, and social structure suggest a culture that sought equilibrium in all things, including human behavior. Even their gods aligned themselves with opposing aspects of human essence. Apollo was the Greeks' god of prophecy, music, and knowledge. He represented the rational, intellectual capacity of the human mind and its ability to create order out of chaos. As the god of wine and revelry, Dionysus represented the opposite but equally important feature of human instinct: the emotional, creative, uninhibited side of people that balances their daily rational, structured, law-abiding behavior. The main conflict in *The Bacchae* is between these two conflicting behavioral patterns, the rational and the instinctual, disciplines often referred to as the Apollonian and the Dionysian.

The fruits of Dionysus's worship are extolled by Cadmus, the former king of Thebes; Tiresias, the elderly blind prophet of the city; and by the Chorus of Bacchae, the god's followers. Never too old to learn a new lesson, Tiresias and Cadmus have discovered the joys of the Dionysian rites and in them a new youth. "I shall never weary, night or day, beating the earth with the thyrsus," Cadmus boasts, "In my happiness I have forgotten how old I am."

The Chorus, who explain the history of the god and describe how to worship him, also warn about his dual nature, and the peril of crossing him. "The deity, Zeus's son, rejoices in festivals," they sing. "He loves goddess Peace, who brings prosperity and cherishes youth. To rich and poor he gives in equal measure the blessed joy of wine. But he hates the man who has no taste for such things□to live a life of happy days and sweet and happy nights, in wisdom to keep his mind and heart aloof from over-busy men."

Pentheus's error in the play is his distaste for the simple pleasures Dionysus offers. He is totally dedicated to reason, and he refuses to acknowledge the need of his citizens, or himself, to occasionally release inhibitions□to dance, to sing, to eat, drink, and be merry. Ever the conservative moralizer, he warns Tiresias, "When the sparkle of wine finds a place at women's feasts, there is something rotten about such celebrations, I tell you." His sin is excessive pride, or *hubris* to the Greeks. He doesn't believe in Dionysus, a god of wine and celebration, and his fanatical obsession with order proves his downfall, in spite of the warnings he is given.

Individual vs. God

The struggle between individuals and their gods, whether actual or metaphorical, has been depicted countless times in literature, from the biblical stories of Moses and Job to

modern plays like Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus* (1985) and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (1993). Each of these stories recounts the difficult, delicate relationship between mortals and the higher powers that may have created them□and possibly provides them their life force, their sustenance, and their inspiration. In spite of the love/hate relationship they often share in these stories, however, humans rarely encounter their divine nemeses directly, the way Pentheus battles Dionysus in *The Bacchae*.

At stake in the struggle is Dionysus's right to exist and to expect homage from the mortals of Greece, whether they wish to honor him or not. "This city must learn, whether it likes it or not, that it still wants initiation into my Bacchic rites," the god explains in the prologue to the play. "The cause of my mother Semele I must defend by proving to mortals that I *am* a god, borne by her to Zeus." Dionysus's jealous behavior is similar to that of God in the Old Testament, who tests his human creations, ravages entire cities, and floods the earth to purify it for his worshipers.

Pentheus, Dionysus's mortal opposition, is a cynical realist, unwilling to believe in the god or his fantastic powers. He believes he can shackle Dionysus, contain his followers, and stop the spread of his worship through sheer physical force, even though everyone near him warns against his folly. Cadmus and Tiresias encourage Pentheus to allow Dionysus's worship into the city. The Chorus sings the god's praises. The Herdsman from Mount Cithaeron declares, "If *he* exists not, then neither does Cypris, nor any other joy for men at all." In spite of all the warnings, however, Pentheus stays his course, and only experiences the mystery of Dionysus's powers when the god himself hypnotizes the hapless king and sends him to his death.

The result of the struggle between individuals and gods is often the same, though with different lessons to be learned. After battling his creation for centuries, the Biblical God is reformed in the New Testament, following the life and martyrdom of his son, Jesus. Free will is offered to humanity, along with the freedom to suffer or prosper at the hands of others. *In Amadeus,* Shaffer's Salieri is consumed by his hatred for God and destroys himself. The characters in Kushner's *Angels in America* fight divinity to a draw. Pentheus, of course, learns a valuable lesson much too late.

Sex Roles

Of all the Greek tragedians, Euripides provided the most leading roles to women (although, in keeping with the theatrical conventions of the time, the parts would have been played by men). His plays also often seem to sympathize with the plight of women in Greek society. Medea, scorned by Jason, becomes an almost sympathetic figure, in spite of the fact that she murders her own children. Hippolytus's stepmother, Phaedra, is driven by a passion she cannot control and, like Pentheus, Hippolytus is a fanatical extremist who may deserve his grisly fate. In *The Bacchae,* the playwright's analysis and criticism of the Greeks' treatment of women may not be immediately obvious, but it exists in the portrayal of the Dionysian rites, the sympathetic Chorus of Bacchae, and Agave's suffering at the end of the play.

During Euripides's lifetime, women were mainly prohibited from politics, the arts, and many religious ceremonies. Dionysus's cult offered women an outlet for worship, equal or greater to that afforded to men. In the spirit of the wine and revelry he represented, women could become priestesses of Dionysus, or "Bacchae," simply by drinking, dancing, singing, and releasing their inhibitions. Although Pentheus, the conservative voice of male-dominated Greek culture, objects to women drinking and participating in religious ritual, Tiresias notes that women's own nature, not a god, will determine whether they are moral or not. "Even in Bacchic revels the good woman, at least, will not be corrupted," he claims. The Chorus of Bacchae in the play prove Pentheus wrong. They have followed the god from Asia minor, where he first established his cult, and now exist only to worship him and share in his peaceful bounty. "The ground flows with milk, flows with wine, flows with the nectar of bees," they sing.

Agave's punishment at the end of the play proves that women are equal candidates for suffering as well as for pleasure. It was Agave who originally denied Dionysus's divinity, claiming her sister, Semele, lied about her amorous relationship with Zeus, the king of the gods. Agave's false claims brought the wrath of Dionysus down on the women of Thebes, driving them mad and sending them into the hills around the city. Because her son, King Pentheus, chose to compound her mistake by denying the worship of the god to the people of Thebes, they both suffered horribly: The mother was forced to kill her own son and carry his severed head among the stunned Thebans.

Style

Climactic Plot Construction

Classical Greek tragedians were the creators of climactic plot construction, a form of playwriting that condenses the action of the story into the final hours or moments of the protagonist's struggle and places the most emphasis on the play's climax. This is quite different from an episodic plot, such as those created by Shakespeare or those used by most modern films, in which the protagonist, or hero, of the story encounters many harrowing episodes in a story that may take place across many days, months, or even years. Aristotle recognized the appeal of climactic plots in his *Poetics* when he suggested that "beauty depends on magnitude and order." In the case of a climactic plot such as *The Bacchae,* magnitude and order emerge from the simple structure of the plot: One man struggles against one overwhelming force, a god, and is defeated in the course of a single day.

In a climactic plot, the "point of attack," or starting point, of the play is relatively late in the entire story, requiring a great deal of exposition up front. In other words, a number of things have already occurred to propel the action to the point it is at when the play begins and all that is left is for the protagonist to make the fatal error that plunges him into tragedy. In *The Bacchae,* for example, Dionysus presents a prologue at the beginning of the play that sums up what has already taken place: He has been to Asia and successfully started his cult of worship there and now has returned to Greece to offer his homeland the rewards of his divinity. He has learned, however, that his own mother's sisters have denied his origins, and King Pentheus refuses to worship him. In retaliation, he has already driven the women mad and sent them into the hills. Almost immediately, Pentheus returns from abroad to confront the new menace, and the play's struggle begins in earnest. A few hours later, the battle has ended and, through his pride, Pentheus has suffered a grisly death.

Dialogue

One interesting convention of the Greek stage required playwrights to carefully structure their tragedies in short, distinct episodes and forced actors to be extremely versatile in approaching their parts. When Thespis, a dramatist and performer long credited with being the first "actor" (thus the term "thespian"), won the award for the best tragedy at the City Dionysia in 534 B.C., he alone played all the parts in his plays. For at least the next sixty years, tragedies were limited to a chorus and one actor. According to Aristotle, Aeschylus introduced the second actor, sometime around 470 B.C., and Sophocles is credited with adding a third. By the time Euripides began writing plays, dramatists were limited to no more than three principal actors to play all the parts.

To the dramatist, this means the plot of the play must be divided into distinct episodes in which the important characters of the story can confront one another in groups of two or

three, with the chorus standing near, observing the action. Playwrights manufactured reasons for characters to leave the stage, so other characters (played by the same performers) could appear. To accommodate scene and costume changes, the chorus provided interludes consisting of song and dance that usually commented on the action of the play. A quick glance at the episodes in *The Bacchae* will reveal that three separate actors must play the parts of Pentheus, Cadmus, and Tiresias, since these characters all appear on stage at the same time; but the actor playing Tiresias might also portray Dionysus and the Stranger, while the actor playing Pentheus may double as his mother, Agave, since these combinations are never seen together on the stage.

Chorus

One of the most unique and recognizable features of the construction of classical Greek tragedies is the use of a chorus. Some historians have speculated that the very origins of Greek tragedy lie in the appearance of the chorus on stage. Before there was actual dialogue and characters in conflict in drama, performances consisted of large groups of men, perhaps as many as fifty, representing each of the various tribes in the hills around Athens, who would gather at festivals honoring Dionysus and dance and sing hymns (or dithyrambs), honoring the god of wine, revelry, and the theatre. After 534 B.C., the year of the first competition for tragedies at the City Dionysia festival in Athens, the role of the chorus began to diminish as the individual characters in the plays became increasingly important.

By the time Sophocles wrote *Oedipus the King* in the late 5th century B.C., the conventional size of the chorus had been fixed at fifteen. The chorus continued to sing, chant, and dance and occasionally interacted with the principal characters, but most often, as in *The Bacchae,* they stand outside the action and provide the audience with important background information, sometimes commenting on what they see happening or even warning characters that their choices may prove dangerous. Typically, the singing and dancing of the chorus occur during choral interludes that divide the episodes of the play. These interludes may help suggest the passing of time, as when the Chorus of Dionysus's followers in *The Bacchae* chant an appeal to the god for justice while Pentheus goes off to face his death. Practically speaking, they also may help delay the action in the play while scenery is replaced or actors change costumes to appear in other roles. Of the three Greek tragedians whose work has survived, Euripides used the chorus least, preferring instead to allow his individual characters more time to develop his themes.

Historical Context

Greece in the 5th century B.C. was a collection of many small, independent city-states, each called a "polis." While these tribal communities would occasionally band together in a common cause, as the Athenians and Spartans did to overthrow Persian control of Greek colonies early in the century, they remained, for the most part, separate, autonomous entities, constantly suspicious of each other and forever questing for greater wealth and control in the realm.

The 5th century B.C. has been called the "Golden Age" of Greece, and for most of the era, the polis of Athens was the centerpiece of a burgeoning culture that has left an indelible imprint on more than two thousand years of science, religion, philosophy, and the arts. Golden Age Athens produced the philosopher Socrates and his pupil, Plato. Phidias, the famous sculptor, lived in the same community as the great dramatists Sophocles and Euripides. Pythagoras, Protagoras, and Herodotus, some of the greatest scientists and thinkers of all time, lived in the shadow of the famous Parthenon, perched atop the city's Acropolis.

Politically, Athens accomplished what has been called the world's first democracy nearly 2,500 years ago. Beginning with the "tyrannos," or popular leader Pisistratus, who fought against aristocratic power in the 6th century B.C., Athens was led by a series of governors who included its citizens in the creation and enforcement of its laws, even though those citizens did not include women, foreigners, or slaves, which the Athenians took from various wars and kept as household servants and tutors for their children. The democratic system established by the Athenians divided the society into ten tribes, each of which provided fifty men for the city's "boule," a legislative body that was on duty year round, night and day, with each tribe on duty for thirty-six days at a stretch, working three daily shifts. Additionally, all eligible Athenians were expected to participate in the "ekklesia," a meeting of at least 6,000 citizens held about every nine days, during which the entire city would debate issues raised by the boule.

Between them, the boule and the ekklesia created laws, empowered a police force, established a law court, the Helaia, and developed a trial by jury system. Interested as they were in fair, impartial decisions, the Athenians demanded a minimum jury size of 201 citizens, with larger juries of 501, or even 1001 or 2001 not uncommon.

As presented in *The Bacchae,* ancient Greek religion was "polytheistic." The Greeks believed in a "pantheon" of twelve main gods, along with a host of lesser deities, heroes, and local, household gods. Each of the gods represented a different facet of human knowledge and experience, though they were recognized as something superior, or at least different from, earthly mortals. Stories about the gods often depict them interfering in human affairs, though no god was ultimately viewed as entirely good or entirely bad. Each was capable of helping, or harming, humans.

Religious ritual was extremely important in the daily lives of the Greeks. Their cities were often set up around the various temples to Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Demeter, Apollo,

and the other immortals who were thought to live atop Mount Olympus; many days in the Greek calendar were set aside for the worship of these gods, which included prayer, sacrifice, and divination.

Greek theatre emerged from the worship of one of the minor gods, Dionysus, who was thought to be the son of Zeus and Semele, a mortal, and was associated with wine, fertility, and celebration. Although Dionysus had been worshiped in Thrace and Asia Minor since at least 700 B.C., it wasn't until the 6th century B.C. that his cult reached into Athens. Worshiping Dionysus involved the sacrifice of animals and feasts, accompanied by wine drinking, dancing, and singing dithyrambs, ritual hymns honoring the god. Eventually, a contest for dancing and dithyramb singing evolved among the tribes of Athens and from this singing and dancing, it is believed, drama developed. The first contest for tragedies was held in Athens at the City Dionysia, an entire festival honoring Dionysus, in 534 B.C. During the next hundred years, through the play-writing careers of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, the great stone amphitheatres of Greece, some seating as many as 17,000 people, were built and production practices involving costuming, masks, and machinery evolved.

Throughout its Golden Age, Athens' s great rival was Sparta. While Athens assembled a confederacy of city-states in the North through peaceful agreements and trade negotiations, Sparta, known primarily for its military might, built a minor empire to the South out of smaller territories it conquered. While the two rivals found a common interest in defeating the Persians early in the 5th century B.C., old jealousies and new affronts stirred renewed animosity and led to the Peloponnesian War. This terrible series of battles between Spartan and Athenian forces lasted from 431 to 404 B.C., eventually destroying Athens and elevating Sparta to supremacy in mainland Greece. At the end of the war, to avoid having all their soldiers killed and their women and children sold into slavery, the Athenians agreed to Spartan terms of peace, which included government of Athens by thirty pro-Spartan aristocrats, who became known as the Thirty Tyrants. Athens' s democracy was dead, and though it would struggle to its feet again in the fourth century, the glory of Greece belonged next to the Thebans, the Macedonians, and, finally, the Romans.

It was in the historical context of Athens' s decline, just before its defeat at the hands of the Spartans, that Euripides chose to leave the city he had called home for so many years and journey into self-imposed exile to King Archelaus's court in Macedonia. There, he wrote *The Bacchae* and, according to popular account, was accidentally killed by the king's hunting dogs while walking in the woods□just two years before the fall of Athens.

Critical Overview

While the original productions of classical Greek tragedies were not reviewed for potential audiences the way theatrical performances are today, some measure of their critical success may be determined by the awards they received (or did not receive) during the festivals at which they were produced, and by the subsequent number of times the plays were revived over the years.

Euripides spent most of his playwriting career pursuing the elusive top prize at the City Dionysia, Athens' s famous annual festival honoring Dionysus, the Greek god of wine and revelry. While Aeschylus, Sophocles, and dozens of other tragedians whose work has not even survived the ages received many honors and a great deal of popular acclaim, Euripides took only four first prizes during his lifetime and, as often as not, his plays came in last. Whether it was his own death in 406 B.C. or the radical departure in subject matter from his earlier plays, he achieved a new level of fame and appreciation by the time *The Bacchae* was produced in Athens in 405 B.C. The avant-garde playwright was posthumously awarded the top prize for that year's festival.

Scattered references to the play suggest that it was revived continuously on Athens's stages for the next hundred years and that it continued its popularity during the period of the Roman Empire, when it was translated into Latin and performed across Italy. There is evidence that the work was familiar to Horace, Virgil, and Ovid. During the Middle Ages, it is commonly known, Euripides received more attention than either Aeschylus or Sophocles as a first-rate tragedian and brilliant writer of spoken Greek. *The Bacchae* and other plays by Euripides were among the first to be translated into Latin prose and Italian during the Renaissance and seventeenth and eighteenth century writers from Milton to Goethe praised the play's singular purpose and intense depiction of man's conflict with his god.

In the modern era, criticism of *The Bacchae* has largely been divided between scholarly commentary on the text and history of the play and popular reviews of occasional performances. In *Dramatic Lectures,* a collection of his scholarly analyses of dramatists and their plays, the nineteenth century German critic August W. Schlegel wrote, "In the composition of this piece, I cannot help admiring a harmony and unity, which we seldom meet with in Euripides, as well as abstinence from every foreign matter, so that all the motives and effects flow from one source, and concur towards a common end. After the *Hippolytus,* I should be inclined to assign to this play the first place among all the extant works of Euripides."

In his autobiographical *Life of Macaulay,* the famous English historian G. M. Trevelyan praised Euripides, writing," *The Bacchae* is a glorious play. I doubt whether it be not superior to the *Medea,* it is often very obscure; and I am not sure that I fully understand its general scope. But, as a piece of language, it is hardly equaled in the world. And, whether it was intended to encourage or to discourage fanaticism, the picture of fanatical excitement which it exhibits has never been rivaled."

Twentieth century productions of *The Bacchae* are not as common as stagings of Euripides's other masterpiece, *Medea,* and they tend to meet with mixed or unfavorable reaction. In his review of Michael Cacoyannis' s adaptation of the play, which Cacoyannis himself directed for Broadway in 1980, *New York* magazine critic John Simon wrote, "There is serious doubt in my mind about whether Greek drama can be performed today." Simon complained about the artificial, melodramatic qualities of classical tragedies, Cacoyannis's translation of the play, which he deemed embarrassing and accidentally comic, and the problems inherent in staging plays that were originally meant to be performed in enormous outdoor amphitheatres before crowds of several thousand.

In his review of the same production for *Newsweek* magazine, critic Jack Kroll observed that mounting modern productions of classical tragedies is a difficult feat, requiring immense creativity and, often, radical reinterpretation for contemporary audiences. "Euripides' s *The Bacchae* is a stupendous, searing play," Kroll noted, "but like most productions of Greek tragedy, Michael Cacoyannis's staging at Broadway's Circle in the Square can't really break through the centuries-old crust to the white-hot life beneath. Directors have gone to great lengths to solve this problem. In America, Peter Arnott used marionettes instead of actors. In Italy, Luca Ronconi used one actress ... to speak the entire play as the audience moved with her through a series of rooms and spaces. In Germany, Klaus Michael Gruber used nudity, horses, glass walls and 100,000 watts of neon lights."

In the *Nation,* reviewer Julius Novick echoed Kroll's comments, and asked, "Am I alone in having difficulty with the elaborate passages of woe in which the Greek and Elizabethan tragic playwrights so frequently indulged themselves? If my sensibilities are typical at all, modern audiences are conditioned to be moved obliquely, by irony, or poignant understatement, rather than by lines like 'O Misery! O grief beyond all measure!'"

At least part of the reason *The Bacchae* has been applauded as a literary text and dismissed in performance during the twentieth century may lie in Greek tragedy's original purpose: religious ritual. Several critics have observed that, since modern audiences do not feel the same ritual impulses as the ancient Greeks, their plays do not have the same effect on us in performance. In 1969, the avant-garde theatre producer Richard Schechner assembled a group of performers and created a modern version of *The Bacchae* they called *Dionysus in 69*. In his collection of criticism called *God on the Gymnasium Floor,* Walter Kerr explained his objections to the production this way:

Mr. Schechner has gone all the way back□as far as our literary history permits□in his search for a religious impulse capable of breeding a fresh form of drama. He really does wish us to act on the impulse he has attempted to borrow: to get up from our places on the floor and to enter, to *feel,* the interior Dionysiac pressure toward abandon that the Greeks felt and that exists as a record in Euripides's play. We do not in fact feel this specific religious impulse today, however; we do not bring it into the theatre with us as a deposit or guarantee. The specific religious impulse is dead. It has been dead for a very long time. Because it is dead, the gesture dependent upon it must, for the most part, be

empty, effortful, artificial. We can try to let ourselves go, but there is nothing genuine pushing us.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Glenn is a Ph.D. specializing in theatre history and literature. In this essay he examines Euripides's ambiguous treatment of Dionysus as a god to be either worshiped or abhorred in The Bacchae.

For half a century, Euripides was known as a playwright unafraid to speak his mind. Very often what he had to say disturbed his audiences. In plays like *Medea, Hippolytus,* and *Alcestis,* he recalled stories and myths familiar to ancient Greek audiences. Yet, viewed from the perspective of their respective protagonists, they also function as harsh criticisms of the Athenian society they inhabited. These plays show the Greeks' utter disregard for women, bastards, and foreigners. In addition, they lampoon some of the culture's most cherished heroes and even call into question the wisdom of the gods. Euripides was not one to follow rules of literature, pander to audience tastes, or shy away from public controversy. Plot and character were usually subverted by the themes in his plays, and he was as likely to indict his audiences as his villainous characters for crimes against humanity.

Euripides's reputation as a hard-nosed, cynical critic of contemporary society makes the ambiguous thematic statements of *The Bacchae* all the more puzzling. Was he, true to earlier form, questioning the motives of the gods and condemning the damaging effects of religious excess? Or as an old man, well into his seventies when the play was written, did he finally choose to accept the Dionysian rites that might make him youthful again? Was he making an appeal to the great god of wine, revelry, and the theatre? Critics have disagreed for centuries over this fundamental question raised by *The Bacchae,* and, confoundingly, the play itself offers evidence to support either view.

To begin with, Dionysus has the largest speaking role and controls the play from start to finish, suggesting his order is the order of the day, and perhaps the playwright meant to justify his ways and glorify his godhead. It is the god, rather than the Chorus or some secondary figure, who appears at the beginning of the play to deliver the prologue, describing how he has developed his worship abroad and only recently returned to his homeland, the land of his dead mother, Semele, to teach the Greeks the glory of the vine and provide for them his bounty. Very likely, he raises sympathy from the audience when he recalls the tragic circumstances of his birth. His mother was seduced by Zeus, impregnated, then tricked by Hera into asking to see Zeus's real identity. He obliged, and in an instant she was burned to ashes by the lightning flash of Zeus's divinity. "Close by the palace here I mark the monument of my mother, the thunderblasted," the orphaned Dionysus tells the audience, "The ruins of her home, I see, are smoldering still; the divine fire is still alive - Hera's undying insult to my mother."

Dionysus has brought with him a Chorus of Bacchae, Asian women followers from the North, who recount his history and sing his praises at every opportunity. In fact, while the choruses of most Greek tragedies sound a variety of themes between the episodes of their plays, from beautiful paeans honoring nature to moral judgments on the actions of characters, the *Bacchae* Chorus sings each of their five choral odes - four stasima

and the parados - in honor of Dionysus. They know no other theme, and in Greek tragedy this may be an indication of the author's intent. As John Edwin Sandys noted in *The Bacchae of Euripides,* "The chorus in Greek tragedy is, again and again, the interpreter to the audience of the inner meaning of the action of the play; and the moral reflections which are to be found in the lyrical portions of *The Bacchae* seem in several instances to be all the more likely to be meant to express the poet's own opinions, when we observe that they are not entirely in keeping with the sentiments which might naturally have been expected from a band of Asiatic women."

Sandys may be right. Throughout the play, this Chorus provides sage bits of wit and wisdom that sound decidedly like a classically educated scholar - or playwright. "If man, in his brief moment, goes after things too great for him, he may lose the joys within his reach," the Bacchae lecture in their first choral ode. More important to the stature of the god within the play, however, is the passion and poetry the Bacchae display for Dionysus. In their opening song, the parados, they rejoice:

My love is in the mountains. He sinks to the ground from the racing revel-band. He wears the holy habit of fawn-skin; he hunts the goat and kills it and delights in the raw flesh. He rushes to the mountains of Phrygia, of Lydia. He is Bromius, the leader of our dance. Evoe! The ground flows with milk, flows with wine, flows with the nectar of bees. Fragrant as Syrian frankincense is the fume of the pine-torch which our bacchic leader holds aloft.

The spirit of the Bacchae is contagious, and, while it has been unable to move Pentheus, the new king of Thebes, it has reached the wise in the upper echelons of Theban society. Cadmus, the city's original founder, and Tiresias, the famous blind prophet of Thebes, have both discovered the joys of Dionysus's worship. As the Chorus completes their ode, Tiresias appears at the city gate, calling for his friend and fellow cultist to "dress the thyrsus and put on skins of fawns and wreathe our heads with shoots of ivy." Unlike the women of Thebes, they do not need to be compelled, or driven mad, to find the spirit in their hearts to worship a god who makes them feel young again. In a voice that could be that of the aged (and reformed) Euripides himself, Tiresias lectures, "We do not rationalize about the gods. We have the traditions of our fathers, old as time itself. No argument can knock *them* down, however clever the sophistry, however keen the wit." If Tiresias's sentiment does indeed mirror Euripides' s at the time he wrote the play, then the author had certainly come a long way from his earlier work, which typically criticized, satirized, or simply ignored the gods.

Perhaps the most compelling evidence to suggest Dionysus was meant to be the hero, and not the villain, of *The Bacchae* is the personality of his nemesis, Pentheus. The new king of Thebes, though descended from the wise and noble Cadmus, is immature, headstrong, and puritanically conservative. The fault common to each of these flaws is the Greek concept of *hubris,* or excessive pride. He is convinced he is right, and he simply will not be told what to do. Encountering Tiresias and Cadmus on their way to the hills and the bacchic rites, Pentheus rails, "This is *your* instigation, Tiresias. This is another device of yours to make money out of your bird-gazing and burnt sacrifices - introducing a *new* god to men." He threatens the old, blind prophet with imprisonment

and complains, "When the sparkle of wine finds a place at women's feasts, there is something rotten about such celebrations, I tell you."

Pentheus's position on the moral high ground makes him unsympathetic to audience members who have very likely experienced lapses in ethical behavior, as most humans have. Pentheus's *hubris* is that he claims to be something more than human, something perfect. Like Hippolytus, who wears his virginity like a badge of honor and refuses to worship Aphrodite, the goddess of love, Pentheus is heading for a fall from the moment he appears on the stage.

Taking only these elements into account - Dionysus's supremacy, the recommendations of the Bacchae, and the wise instincts of the Theban elders - it seems likely that Euripides intended *The Bacchae* as a moral lesson on the proper worship of the gods. As German scholar K. O. Muller suggested in his *History of the Literature of Ancient Greece,* "This tragedy furnishes us with remarkable conclusions in regard to the religious opinions of Euripides at the close of his life. In this play he appears, as it were, converted into a positive believer, or, in other words, convinced that religion should not be exposed to the subtleties of reasoning; that the understanding of man cannot subvert ancestral traditions which are as old as time, that the philosophy which attacks religion is but a poor philosophy, and so forth."

With Cadmus and Tiresias, two of Thebes' most distinguished and respected elders, shuffling off the infirmities of age to toss their heads and beat the earth and Dionysus's chorus of devotees dancing and singing his praises between each episode of the play, it is difficult to find sympathy with Pentheus, the lone abstention from the merriment of the bacchic rites; he's the lone square at a hipster ball. Still, Dionysus has his devilish side, and there is enough in the play to also suggest that Euripides may have been less interested in appeasing the god in his old age and more determined to chastise the drunken deity for his reckless, damaging behavior. To establish his cult in Thebes, Dionysus has had to drive the women to madness, a state of artificial religious frenzy. In spite of the bounty he offers those who worship him, he can be jealous and petty, and even his most devoted followers may suffer terrible fates.

If Dionysus were held to the same standard of *hubris* as his mortal adversary, Pentheus, he would likely have to suffer a fate worse than the king's for his outrageous, unreasonable pride. After boasting of his success establishing his Asian cult, he threatens, ominously, "This city must learn, whether it likes it or not, that it still wants initiation into my Bacchic rites." God or no, his tactless, overbearing rant detracts from the dignity his divinity should afford. While Pentheus is overreaching for the status of a god on earth, Dionysus is cutting himself down to the stature of a mere man through his bullying and hypersensitivity.

Then there is the matter of the justice the god dispenses at the end of the play. While it is true he gave Pentheus many opportunities to change his mind and accept the bacchic rites as part of the Theban rituals, does the errant king's punishment really fit his crime? For denying Dionysus' s rightful place in the pantheon of gods and for imprisoning his servant (actually the god himself in disguise), Pentheus is hypnotized, fooled into

donning women's clothes and walking through the town, and led to the forest to spy on the maenads. The crazed women, led by his own mother, Agave, shake him down from atop a tree and tear him limb from limb. Agave herself carries her unfortunate son's head back to the city as a trophy, thinking it is the head of a lion she has helped to kill.

Pentheus's destruction is gruesome enough, but how bad was Agave's crime that she must suffer this way - with the knowledge that she murdered her own son and carried his head aloft through town. Then, to make matters even worse, Dionysus decrees exile for Agave, her sisters, and their father, Cadmus. While Agave and her sisters insulted the god directly, by claiming he was not the son of Zeus, Cadmus's "crime" was far less malevolent. He is punished simply for allowing Pentheus, a non-believer, to ascend to the throne in Thebes, once he himself had finally become too old to rule.

The Bacchae is a play tantalizingly filled with contradictions. Whether Euripides intended his audiences to become more devout worshipers or hone their cynicism, however, may be beside the point. There is more to the play than whether or not Dionysus's claim to divinity is a legitimate cause for disrupting the life of a city. As G. M. A. Grube noted in *The Drama of Euripides,* "The tragic beauty of *The Bacchae* does not arise from a purely external conflict between a ruthless god and a mortal who defies him; it arises from a conflict within the nature of the god himself."

It is worth remembering that Dionysus is the god of wine and revelry. Wine sets free inhibition and releases passions that are locked inside every one of us. The Greeks adored balance and order and recognized the need for each thing, as well as its opposite. Laws, civility, and propriety govern the day-to-day world, but passion is the essence of life and fighting against passion destroys the soul, as surely as Pentheus was flung from his tree and torn limb from limb. Dionysus is also the god of *passion,* and, Grube continued, "It is this god, and this worship, that Euripides has dramatized in all its aspects, its beauty and its joy, its ugliness and terror; he has even included the disgusting and the merely silly. Few will deny that it is from the very completeness of the picture that the play derives its power and its greatness."

Source: Lane A. Glenn, for *Drama for Students,* Gale, 1999.

Critical Essay #2

In this essay, Walton delineates the plot of The Bacchae *and discusses its historical significance in relation to Euripides's other works and those of his ancient Greek contemporaries*.

The god Dionysus returns in disguise to Thebes where he was born. Rejected by his family, he is now set on punishing his cousin Pentheus, king of Thebes, for denying his divinity. Pentheus has Dionysus imprisoned but he escapes and persuades the king to dress up as a woman so as to witness the Dionysiac rites. Pentheus's mother, Agave, and the other women tear Pentheus to pieces believing him to be a lion. Cadmus, the grandfather of both Pentheus and Dionysus, restores Agave to sanity while Dionysus looks on unrepentant.

Euripides went to live in Macedon for the final years of his life. *The Bacchae* was written there and performed posthumously in Athens in 405 B.C. The play revolves around the clash between a traditional culture in the person of Pentheus, and a foreign invasion in the figure of Dionysus, the god intent on introducing his religion to Thebes. Dionysus opens the play with a prologue, disguised as a man, in which he outlines his progress through Asia with his chorus of Bacchae before returning to his birthplace. The son of Zeus and Semele, he is both an individual and a representative of a religion of freedom and mystical powers. Introduced primarily as a religion for the women of Thebes, this religion has claimed Cadmus, founder of Thebes, and the prophet Teiresias among its converts. The young Pentheus sees his authority under threat when, under the influence of the god, the women of Thebes abandon the city and roam the mountains, apparently performing miracles.

Whether or not such miracles occur in the play is an open question. When Dionysus and Pentheus meet face to face, it soon becomes apparent that Dionysus's power is related to his ability to confuse and delude. This is how he escapes from imprisonment. It is never quite clear whether an earthquake, which the chorus "see" destroy the palace, really takes place. When Dionysus begins to exert his influence over Pentheus he persuades him to dress in women's clothes, believing these will serve as a disguise. He is torn apart by women who think he is a lion, his head returned on a Bacchic wand brandished by his mother. Cadmus, now freed from Dionysus's influence, has the task of bringing his daughter to see what she has done. At the end of the play Dionysus reveals himself as a god and Cadmus and Agave depart into exile.

A bloodthirsty enough story, the play is pervaded by a sense of theatrical power. For the Greeks, Dionysus was the god of ecstasy, as well as the god of wine. He was also the god of illusion and the god of the theatre. The play is full illusions: Dionysus is in disguise; Cadmus and Teiresias deck themselves out as Bacchants; Pentheus dresses up; a messenger reports remarkable events he claims to have witnessed□milk pouring from the earth, women unharmed by weapons that bounce off them, superhuman strength, snakes licking blood off human faces.

This world beyond reason is one with which Pentheus is ill-equipped to cope, but his clash with Dionysus is not a simple meeting of rational and irrational. Pentheus is no Apollo-figure for all his claims that he stands for order in a world that threatens to become chaotic. Dionysus destroys Pentheus by locating the Dionysiac elements in him: his conceit, his childishness, his prurience, turning him into a voyeur who contributes to his own destruction. Dionysus does so in the name of his religion which he claims as benign and beneficial except when opposed. Yet his motives are personal. Half-god, but from a mortal mother, he resents as a human being that he is excluded from his human family. As a god he has divine power to execute a revenge that is fearsome in its callousness. This ambiguity about where an audience's, or indeed the author's, sympathies may lie, has led to widely divergent interpretations and productions. For some, Dionysus is a destructive force whose cat-and-mouse cruelty disqualifies him from any claims to approval. At least one rationalist critic refused to believe him a god at all, but a sinister con-man with skill as a hypnotist. His defenders regard Pentheus as a "fascist" dictator in opposition to the life-force. Popular in the 1960's, this view led to bizarre adaptations like the Performance Group's *Dionysus in'69*.

The play can stand a variety of treatments but functions best as a warning against excess of any kind, thus linking it to Euripides' earlier *Hippolytus*. The power that Dionysus represents, and of which the Chorus of Bacchae serve as a living manifestation, is both formidable and mysterious. It exists and, whether the story is seen primarily at a literal or at a figurative level, the implications are the same. There are aspects of the individual and of the collective which transcend reason and should be recognised. Pentheus, in trying to maintain order in Thebes, is suppressing not only the instinctive desire of the women to escape from the constant drudgery of their everyday lives, but also those aspects of himself which are part of the feminine side to his nature. Dionysus, who wins all the arguments and all the battles, does so at the expense of both humanity and compassion. To an audience of any age such a sacrifice is likely to seem too great.

Source: J. Michael Walton," *The Bacchae*" in *The International Dictionary of Theatre,* Volume 1: *Plays,* edited by Mark Hawkins-Dady, St. James Press, 1992, pp. 39-41.

Critical Essay #3

In this positive review, the critic praises a 1930 British production of Euripides's play, noting the strength of the chorus and the director's faithfulness to the original play text.

Cambridge has broken new ground in producing the *Bacchae*. Of Euripides the Ion was produced forty years ago and the *Iphigenia in Tauris* a little later, and now with admirable enterprise the finest, to many minds, and assuredly the most difficult of his plays to appraise and explain has been performed, for the first time, so far as we know, for many centuries. The executors of *Euripides* produced it just after his death, and it was acted in Athens and elsewhere for a time. Pagan and Christian writers have borrowed from it at all times since then. There is little here of "Euripides the human" or of "the touches of things common till they rose to touch the spheres," that Mrs. Browning found in other plays. The play has its passages of wild grandeur that are almost Aeschylean, and a solemn, dreadful treatment of madness inflicted by divine power, in which the audience is spared nothing of horror and pity. The more ghastly scene of Agave with her son's head is scarcely more weird than the "fascination " scene in which Dionysus gradually asserts his power over Pentheus until he has a crazy victim at his bidding.

Very wisely and mercifully the production last week attempted no indication of controversial interpretations. There were no laboured hints of matriarchal legends, of women's rights, or of Dr. Verrall's theories, whose delightful ingenuity would have puzzled Euripides. The play was not one of the Euripidean series written in Athens for competition at the Dionysia. It was the work of his old age at the Court of Archelaus, and seems to us to be the teaching of his disillusion over human intelligence, summed up in ... the Second Chorus; "the foolishness of God is wiser than men" . . . The lesson of thankfulness for the good and pleasant things that Dionysus brought to man as against a stark puritanism is simpler and is rarer in tragedy. No tricks were played with the text, but the last scene, where the god pronounces the doom of Cadmus and Agave, was sensibly and substantially cut on account of the well-known mutilations and imperfections.

The scenery was novel and effective, with departures from antiquarian correctness. There was no pretence of reproducing the altar of Dionysus which was invariably the central object at Athens, but the play, none the less, kept that ultimate sense of worship which prevails in other plays in which Dionysus himself does not appear. The royal palace was placed to the right instead of in the centre of the stage, to give that honour to the shrine of Semele. The dresses of the Chorus were original rather than beautiful, but their merit appeared in the colour schemes of the dances, though they did not lend the grace of line which could be seen, for instance, in the robes of the Bacchantes on a beautiful little altar which was in Lansdowne House. The figure of Dionysus himself had the right effeminate charm of the dispenser of pleasure. Pentheus was the handsome blusterer that we expect until he is undone by the "fascination." All the acting was good except at two points. To our mind the "fascination" was taken too abruptly and lost the gradual growth of horror. Secondly, the comic sporting of Cadmus and in a less degree

of Tiresias (whose blindness the actor seemed to forget), when they set out for the revels, was out of place. They were following a divine instinct, not a "lark," and the Cadmus of that scene could never have been the infinitely tender father of the last, when he brings Agave to her senses. The elocution was admirable. The two long narrative speeches were so delivered that every word could be followed and the two actors without any labouring spoke with great feeling. The music was a surprise to many. It was not, as is usual, composed for the play, but entirely adapted from operas of Handel that are known only to musical scholars. The ingenuity expended must have been great, but was not apparent. All the necessary dignity was there....

These plays, carefully mounted and performed at Oxford, Cambridge, Bradfield or elsewhere in England, revived, too, abroad in ancient Sicilian or other theatres, are classics, and a classic work is one upon which time has no effect. The spirit survives through the ages. Even the Roman comedies, Greek at second hand, as played at Westminster, are alive to-day: and great passages can be spoken by Eton boys in knee-breeches and silk stockings without seeming absurd. Pedantry may have a hand in preparation: mere antiquarianism may prevail over art or intelligence on a small point here or there. But the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes are immortal classics. Time after time the man who vaunts himself to be "practical" has come to mock and always he has remained to pray. He has thought that his emotions (if he had any) were proof against the purging by pity and fear as threatened by "an old tag," until he has suffered the experience and felt a better man therefore. So, too, it seemed a joke to call a classical education "fortifying." Yet the man who has learnt the lessons of the Bible (we do not speak here of its sacred side as well) and of the Greek tragedians, lessons of beauty, nobility and awe, is fortified for the struggles of life as other men are not All round us we hear complaints of the results of a narrow education that is no education, but a futile specializing aimed at securing quick material returns. The War opened the eyes of many to the effects of that materialism. Since the Peace we have heard of the gradually but steadily growing appreciation of a classical education It holds its own in the Universities and Public Schools and is spreading healthily into the schools provided from our rates and taxes, where scholars have until now had little chance of its blessings. This performance of the *Bacchæ* last week is not an action isolated from the movement, but it has been a vivid, stimulating and delightful event within that movement.

Source: Anonymous. Review of *The Bacchae* in the *Spectator,* Vol. 144, no. 5307, March 15, 1930, pp. 421-22.

Adaptations

The Bacchae has inspired a handful of operas, including at least three that are available on CD: Szymanowski's *King Roger* (1926) and Hans Werner Henze's The Bassarids (1966), each available from the Koch Schwann label; and Harry Partch's *Revelation in the Courthouse Park* (1961), available on the Tomato label. Other operatic versions include Egon Wellesz's *Die Bakchantinnen* (1931); Daniel Bortz's *Backanterna* (1991); and John Buller's *Bakxai* (1992).

Italian director and writer Giorgio Ferroni produced a filmed adaptation of Euripides's play in 1961 called *Le Baccanti*. The film stars Taina Elg as Dirce (a character Ferroni introduced to his version of the story), Pierre Brice as Dionysus, and Elberto Lupo as Pentheus. An English version, called *Bacchantes* is available on video.

In 1968 the avant-garde American theatre producer Richard Schechner formed his own company called the Performance Group. Their first production, staged in a converted garage, was *Dionysus in 69,* a reworking of *The Bacchae* that explored sexuality, freedom, and societal repression through a series of ritual vignettes.

Topics for Further Study

Research the agriculture and economy of Greece in the 5th century B.C. What products did the Greeks export? Which did they import? How was trade within the country, and outside the country, managed? How was the worship of Dionysus conducted to coincide with important phases of agriculture throughout the year?

When writing his plays, Euripides seems to have concentrated his efforts mainly on characters and themes and often appears to have ignored important elements of plot. Sophocles, on the other hand, has been called the greatest constructor of plots in the ancient world, and Aristotle called his *Oedipus the King* the finest example of Greek drama. Research *Oedipus the King* and compare it to *The Bacchae*. Consider the similarities and differences between each play's plots, characters, and themes.

By the end of the 5th century B.C., Greek theatres had developed a distinct shape and very particular elements of scenery, costuming, and special effects that affected the way plays such as *The Bacchae* were produced. Research the physical properties of Greek theatres in the age of Euripides, then choose a scene from *The Bacchae* and describe how it might have been staged. As a group project, you may wish to actually recreate the scene you have chosen.

In his time, Euripides was widely known as skeptic, someone who questioned authority and doubted traditional beliefs. His ideas were influenced by, among others, the *Sophist* philosophers, who believed that truth and morality were relative to the individual and largely matters of opinion. Who were some of the Sophists? What were their beliefs? How did they influence Western culture?

In his *Poetics,* Aristotle suggests that the ideal tragic protagonist is someone who is highly renowned and prosperous, basically good, and suffers a downfall not through vice or depravity but by some error or frailty□a "tragic flaw" as it has often been called. Does this description suit Pentheus? Why/why not?

Compare and Contrast

5th Century B.C.: The Athenian democracy which evolved during the 5th century B.C. is considered to be the first of its kind in the world. Matters of the state are decided by a vote of the citizen assembly, known as the *ekklesia*.

Today: The United States is considered the world's leading democratic nation, though American democratic practices are quite different. Officials of the state are elected to one of three branches of the government: the executive, the legislative, or the judicial. Each branch is given different responsibilities and authorities to act on behalf of the citizens of the country, all of whom, men, women, and naturalized citizens included, may vote, or choose to run for office, during periodic public elections.

5th Century B.C.: Education in Athenian society is reserved for boys, who learn reading, writing, arithmetic, and music. Once the boys reach age twelve, physical education becomes a priority, and they are taught gymnastics and sports such as wrestling, running, the discus and javelin toss, which will serve them well during their mandatory military service at age eighteen. Middle and upper class girls, expecting to marry well, may learn to read and write, and perhaps play the lyre, from a female tutor at home. They rarely, if ever, participate in physical education or sports.

Today: Equal education for women, in both academic subjects and sports, is recognized as important in a majority of the world's industrialized nations. In the United States, some type of formal education is required of all children and public education is available for everyone from kindergarten through the twelfth grade. A limited amount of music and physical education may be required of students but intense training in these areas is largely elective. Military service is not mandatory for young men, though American boys must still register to be drafted when they turn eighteen.

5th Century B.C.: Theatre in Greece is associated with religious worship and the cult of Dionysus, the Greek god of wine and revelry. Plays are produced each March during the Dionysia. Production of the plays is financed by rich and public-spirited citizens, known as *choregoi,* who are assigned a playwright and up to three actors and charged by the state with employing a chorus, hiring a trainer for the group, and providing costumes, scenery, and props.

Today: Most theatre is no longer associated with religious worship, though "Passion Plays," commemorating the lives of Jesus and the saints, are common in American Christian churches. Plays are performed year-round, mainly for recreational and entertainment purposes. In the United States, professional play production is concentrated mainly in larger cities, such as New York, where individual financiers or groups of wealthy investors provide the funds necessary to pay large groups of performers and buy often extravagant sets, costumes, and lighting effects, which may cost millions of dollars.

5th Century B.C.: Many of the most popular Greek tragedies impart a lesson that is central to Athenian society: the gods are all-knowing and all-powerful and human beings should not allow hubris to let them think they are equal or superior to the deities.

Today: The European Renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries encouraged exploration and experimentation in the fields of science, geography, philosophy, and the arts. As a result, in the twentieth century, a variety of mainly monotheistic religions offer the opportunity to worship at will, while individual human endeavors and accomplishments are regularly recognized for superior achievement, and pride in ability, within reason, is encouraged as an important feature of personal development.

What Do I Read Next?

Eighteen of Euripides's plays have survived, each of which contains elements of the dramatist's non-traditional style that raised criticism from his contemporaries and earned him the respect and admiration of later generations of play readers and theatergoers. One of his most popular works is *Medea,* Euripides's 431 B.C. retelling of the myth of the sorceress who, faced with abandonment and exile in a strange land, murdered her own children and cursed her unfaithful husband. *Hippolytus* (428 B.C.) is the story of King Theseus' s bride Phaedra, who falls in love with her stepson, Hippolytus, leading them both down a path toward destruction.

Classical historian Michael Grant has written several books about the ancient Greeks and Romans, including *The Rise of the Greeks* (1987), which largely examines the political and military history of the Greek Empire; *The Classical Greeks* (1989), which provides a profile of Greek society through brief biographical essays about prominent Greek writers, philosophers, and leaders; and *A Social History of Greece and Rome* (1992), an exploration of the roles of women and men, slaves and citizens in Greek society.

The Mask of Apollo is a novel of historical fiction by Mary Renault. Niko, the story's protagonist, is an actor in the 4th century B.C. who travels the Greek Empire, performing for kings and tyrants and befriending Plato, the famous philosopher, and Dion, a great soldier and statesman. The book draws on Renault's lifetime of classical research and presents an engaging glimpse into the life of the Greeks thousands of years ago.

Much of what is known of classical Greek tragedy is recorded in Aristotle's *Poetics,* a 4th century B.C. treatise in which the philosopher attempts to describe dramatic poetry (tragedy). Aristotle suggests the six essential ingredients of good tragedies are plot, character, theme, diction, music, and spectacle; and he refers specifically to the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides as examples. While several translations and editions of the *Poetics* exist, S. H. Butcher's version, which first appeared in 1902, is one that is often used in the classroom and appears frequently in literary anthologies.

For nearly 150 years, students and teachers alike have relied on *Bulfinch's Mythology* as a dependable and entertaining way to learn about the great heroes, gods, and myths of the world. In this great collection of legends, originally published in 1855 but readily available in recent editions, Thomas Bulfinch has carefully researched and retold some of the greatest stories the world has ever known, including tales about the full pantheon of Greek gods and the mortals who dared to cross them.

Peter Connolly's *The Ancient City: Life in Classical Athens & Rome* is an introduction to the history and culture of two of the world's greatest empires. Filled with original drawings, suggesting what ancient theatres, temples, and homes may have looked like, as well as photographs and helpful maps, Connolloy's carefully researched text is simple, straightforward, and entertaining.

Further Study

Arnott, Peter. *The Ancient Greek and Roman Theatre,* Random House, 1971.

An accessible, basic introduction to the drama and stagecraft of the classical Greeks and Romans that includes theories about the origins of tragedy, suggestions about the evolution of the Greek performance space, a handful of illustrations, and a helpful bibliography.

Bieber, Margarete. *The History of the Greek and Roman Theatre,* Princeton University Press, 1961.

An in-depth, scholarly look at the evolution of the classical Greek and Roman theatres, including many photographs, illustrations, and conjectural drawings.

Foley, Helene P. "The Bacchae" in her *Ritual Irony: Poetry and Sacrifice in Euripides*, Cornell University Press, 1985.

In this essay, Helene suggests one of the things Euripides accomplished with *The Bacchae* was an investigation of the relationship between ritual and theatre and between the spirit of festival and the society that creates it.

Grube, G. M. A. "The Bacchants" in his *The Drama of Euripides,* Barnes and Noble, 1961.

A careful episode-by-episode examination of the plot of *The Bacchae,* with running commentary by Grube explaining terminology and the possible historical and cultural significance of words and deeds in the play.

Hamilton, Edith. *The Greek Way,* W. W. Norton, 1993.

Hamilton's research and writing about the minds and culture of the ancient Greeks have been popular reading for decades. This relatively slim volume includes references to Euripides.

Segal, Charles. *Dionysiac Poetics and Euripides's* Bacchae, Princeton University Press, 1982.

In this exhaustive, scholarly tome, Segal examines many of the popular questions about *The Bacchae,* including whether or not Euripides approved of Dionysus's worship himself, the importance of the

Dionysiac cult to Greek society, and sex roles in the plays of Euripides.

Stapleton, Michael. *The Illustrated Dictionary of Greek and Roman Mythology,* Peter Bedrick Books, New York, 1986.

A helpful collection of brief descriptions of some of the most famous Greek gods, heroes and myths, arranged alphabetically.

Winnington-Ingram, R. P. *Euripides and Dionysus: An Interpretation of the Bacchae,* Cambridge University Press, 1948.

A careful examination of *The Bacchae* that explores each action of the play, setting it in its literary and historical context, with special emphasis on Euripides's possibly negative opinion of Dionysus and the Greek gods.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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