

Euripides' *Bacchae*

Dionysus comes to Thebes disguised as a priest.

I am Dionysus, the son of Zeus, come back to Thebes, this land where I was born. My mother was Cadmus' daughter, Semele by name, midwived by fire, delivered by the lightning's blast.

And here I stand, a god incognito, disguised as a man, beside the stream of Dirce and the waters of Ismenus.

There he sees his mother's grave, placed at the very spot where her house was shattered by the lightning blast. After all these years, the tomb is still smoldering. (See what happens when you smoke in bed?).

Why does Dionysus come disguised as a priest, or a prophet of himself, instead of openly? Remember, Jesus took the same tactic: he calls himself the "Son of Man". And remember (Mark 8.28) when he asked his disciples "Who do men say that I am?" And they said "John the Baptist, Elijah, etc." And then he said, "Who do you say that I am?" And they said, "Christ". And he charged them that they should tell nobody about him. The disciples were *still* confused about it while he was hanging on the cross.

But you remember too that Jesus said that "No prophet is accepted in his own country." So too with Dionysus. He has come back home, to Thebes, but here he won't find acceptance.

He complains that Thebans ignore his rites, and think Semele was a whore (none of them believe she slept with Zeus). He drives the sisters and all the women of the city, dressed in fawn-skin clothes (so they'll be wild and free like animals) and equipped with shafts entwined with ivy (thyrsi), to the mountains in a wild frenzy to perform his rites continuously.

Now Dionysus is after Pentheus, the king of the city, who has taken control of the city from Cadmus, his grandfather. He's old, and still alive, but Pentheus is king,

and he denies that Dionysus is a divinity and should be worshiped. If Pentheus tries to stop the worship of the Bacchae, his Maenads will destroy everything.

Two old cadgers, Teiresias, Cadmus, come in dressed for the cult (fawn-skin, thyrsi, heads crowned with ivy), ready to join the women.

They start to discuss the beneficial aspects of the cult: they feel a renewed vigor, desire to dance, freedom of spirit, joy and abandon. This adds a comic side (two old men acting young). Cadmus says:

Where shall we go, where shall we tread the dance, tossing our white heads in the dances of god? Expound to me, Teiresias. For in such matters you are wise. Surely I could dance night and day, untiringly beating the earth with my thyrsus! And how sweet it is to forget my old age.

Is this cult just for women, just for the young, they ask? No, Dionysus wants all mankind to honor him. He wants no one excluded from his worship.

Hints come, however, of the dangerous, sinister side of the cult.

-blood, slain victim

-thyrsus is called violent: "Handle it reverently" (= controlled exhalation of the initiate)

Pentheus comes in, serious, out of touch with his Dionysus side. He tries to repress the cult: The women are up there on the mountain, he says, guzzling wine, and running off to hidden nooks where they serve the lusts of men. I've captured some of them and thrown them into prison. Now I'm going to catch the rest of those whores, and that prophet who has come and cast a spell on them!

Teiresias warns him. This is a religion for those who don't rely too much on worldly reason. Like St. Paul who talks of the "foolishness of the cross" in I Corinthians (note how many times Paul refers to the "preaching of the cross" as being foolishness to nonbelievers. This is a power and a union with the life force of nature that transcends reason. Teiresias, a very symbol of reason, is championing irrational ecstasy.

He says that Dionysus gift of wine alleviates the suffering of mankind, allowing them to slip into oblivion from their troubles and find medicine for their misery. During his rituals he sweeps over them with a mantic power, like at Pentacost, allowing his followers to speak in tongues and prophesy. Or he can strike irrational terror and panic in the hearts of men. The emphasis here is on the irrational way Dionysus effects the mind.

But, says Teiresias,

Dionysus does not compel a woman to be chaste. Always and in every case it is her character and nature that keeps a woman chaste. But even in the rites of Dionysus, the chaste woman will not be corrupted.

In other words, Dionysus doesn't create our personalities, he liberates what we suppress - our true impulses and character.

Pentheus' downfall: he has a suppressed obsession with seeing sexual acts, voyeurism, with girlishness and cross-dressing; and he wants nothing to do with irrational abandonment, dancing in the night by torchlight, tossing the head, beating the thyrsus, drinking the wine. Symbolically he wants to bind Dionysus in chains - drag the women off the mountain.

He demands Dionysus be captured and brought in. But Dionysus does not resist (like a sheep being brought in for the slaughter, you see) - confident, calm. The women, meanwhile, who were in prison escape. The chains on their legs snapped apart by themselves. Untouched by any human hand the doors swung wide, opening of their own accord, the soldiers of Pentheus say. Like St. Paul in prison - miracles are everywhere.

Pentheus confronts Dionysus and asks him about his rites. He accuses Dionysus of corrupting the citizens, and then threatens to hurl him into prison. Their conversation ends:

P: I will place you under guard and confine you in the palace.

D: The god himself will set me free whenever I wish (Jesus - angels).

*P: You will be with your women in prison
when you call on him for help.*

D: He is here now and sees what I endure from you.

P: Where is he? I cannot see him.

D: With me. Your blasphemies have made you blind.

P: Seize him. He is mocking me and Thebes.

*D: I give you sober warning, fools:
place no chains on me.*

P: But I say: chain him. And I am the stronger here.

*D: You do not know the limits of your strength.
You do not know what you do. You do not know who you are.*

[Forgive them, for that know not what they do.]

Dionysus demonstrates his powers

- the booming voice comes from prison
- earthquake comes, palace destroyed
- chains fall off

Some herdsmen on the mountain, eager to please Pentheus, make an ambush on the women on the mountain. This causes the women, who are being suppressed, you see, to come alive in a frenzy. They shout, "O Iacchus, son of Zeus! O Bromius!" and the mountain seemed wild with divinity. They ran, and everything seemed to run with them. They nearly tore the herdsmen apart, instead they catch two heifers and scatter them everywhere. Then they swooped down off the mountain, pillaged a village, snatched children from their home.

Pentheus wants to send an army up there to grab these women, drag them back, and sacrifice them to the god, that is, execute them. But Dionysus gives him a better idea, and here is where we see Pentheus' repressed sexual desires and voyeurism start to emerge. Dionysus encourages him to see the women for himself, drunk on wine, engaged in their sexual acts. Pentheus admits he'd really, really like to see that, and even agrees to dress as a woman so he can go undetected. He comes out primping and worrying about how good he looks as a woman. Slowly but surely Dionysus is working his magic, bringing out this suppressed perversion within him.

He is then discovered on top of a tree. At first the women seem to recognize him, but, overcome with the power of Dionysus, they soon believe that he is a lion, hiding in the tree. The women shriek, throw rocks at him and shake the tree, then, when he falls, they tear him apart.

Agave's thyrsus carries his head. She marches into town where the people are aghast. They awake her from her trance, and she too is aghast at what she has done.

Pentheus is punished. People of Thebes learn the power of the irrational, unknown impulses running through human beings.