What *ought* the Thebans to have done?

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Something goes terribly wrong in *Bacchae.* The god Dionysus, son of the Theban princess Semele, has returned to Thebes to establish his cult there. Every spectator watching the play at the City Dionysia knows that this cult, like Dionysus' gift of wine, can bring great pleasure and great release of mental tension. And yet its arrival in Thebes produces catastrophe. Semele's nephew Pentheus, the king of Thebes, is torn in pieces by his mother Agaue, her sisters Ino and Autonoe, and the other women of Thebes; Agaue returns to Thebes in triumph, believing she has killed a lion, and displaying Pentheus' head on the end of her ritual rod (*thyrsos*); and finally the entire family, including Agaue's aged father Cadmus, are expelled from the city. Why has this happened?

In one sense, Dionysus himself answers this question right at the beginning. Semele, made pregnant by Zeus, had perished through the guile of Zeus's ever-jealous consort Hera. The story (told somewhat allusively in *Bacchae*) is that Hera, in disguise, persuaded Semele to ask Zeus to visit her in his full divine splendour; Zeus, having promised Semele to do whatever she wished, could not refuse her request, and the lightning-fire of his presence destroyed her. Zeus snatched her unborn infant from the flames and sewed him up in his own thigh, eventually to be "born" a second time.

Cadmus turned Semele's house and tomb into a shrine (6-12). Her sisters Agaue, Ino and Autonoe took a very different view (26-31). They claimed that Semele had really been pregnant by a mortal lover, and at her father's suggestion had covered her shame by pretending Zeus was the father of her baby, and that Zeus had destroyed her to punish this lie. Because of this slander, the three sisters, with all the other women of Thebes, have been "driven in madness from their homes", and made to wear Dionysus' sacred garb and perform his rituals (32-38).

That, however, need not have had catastrophic results. If Thebes, as Dionysus puts it (39-40), "learn[s] … that it is uninitiated in my bacchic cult", and adopts it officially, Dionysus will doubtless let the women go home (cf. 804-7). But will Thebes do that? Not if Pentheus has his way. He "fights against the gods," says Dionysus, "or at least against me, debars me from libations, and does not mention me in his prayers" (45-46); he may try to bring the women

home by force – in which case Dionysus will "join with the maenads as their general" (52) with unstated, but evidently fatal, results for Pentheus.

Dionysus' indictment of Pentheus may at first sight seem a little unjust. Pentheus was abroad when Dionysus came to Thebes (215), and has had no way of knowing that he even exists, much less that he demands universal worship. What is more, it is perfectly reasonable that he should believe Semele's infant had perished (since that is what normally happens when a pregnant woman suffers a violent death, and no one in Greece knows of any evidence to the contrary) and perfectly reasonable that he should believe the baby's father was not Zeus (for Zeus would not have destroyed his own offspring). But whatever sympathy we may initially have for him is dissipated with extraordinary rapidity as we get to know him better. Dionysus' condemnation is quite unjustified in terms of what Pentheus had done *previously*; but what Pentheus does *subsequently* shows, at the very least, that he was riding for a fall of some sort.

Pentheus starts putting himself in the wrong almost from the moment he appears. He has imprisoned numerous free-born women in chains (226-232) on the basis of unsubstantiated rumour ("I hear" 216, "they say" 233). If he catches their priest (who is really Dionysus in disguise) he will execute him by stoning (356) or by decapitation (241) – a punishment utterly abhorrent to Greeks – and there is no indication that there will be any trial. He tells his own grandfather that he is making a ridiculous fool of himself (250-2, 344-5). He accuses the prophet Teiresias of being complicit in the introduction of the new cult in the hope of increasing his professional income (255-7) – and we know that when someone accuses Teiresias of corruption it is always a bad sign (ask Oedipus, or Creon in *Antigone*); later he orders the physical destruction of Teiresias' seat of augury (346-351), thus putting himself in the wrong with Apollo as well as Dionysus. No wonder Teiresias ends the scene (367-9) by hoping that Pentheus, whose name means "man of grief", may not bring grief to Cadmus and his family.

So far, as we have seen, Pentheus has spoken and acted entirely on the basis of rumour – some of which will prove completely false (notably the allegation that the women's bacchic rites are a cover for sexual debauchery). Now he begins to receive authentic information which makes it obvious that a god is at work. The guard who has arrested the supposed priest reports that the imprisoned women have been miraculously liberated, their feet being

unchained, and the prison doors opened, by no mortal hand (443-8): Pentheus' response, incredibly, is to order the guards to let go of the priest's arms, "because now he is in the net, he is not speedy enough to escape me" (451-2). It is as if he had not heard what had just been said to him – not the last instance of such selective deafness or blindness. And after an interview in which contempt of the new cult is strangely mingled with curiosity (cf. 471-480), he has the "priest" locked up in the palace stables, and gratuitously adds that his Asian followers will be seized as slaves (511-4).

There follows another miracle, or series of miracles, of which this time Pentheus is an eyewitness. A mighty voice is heard; the palace shakes; the sacred fire on Semele's tomb suddenly flares up; and presently the "priest" walks calmly out of the palace, his prison having been demolished. Pentheus meanwhile has been kept busy tying up a bull (618-621), fighting the fire, and trying to kill a phantom (629-631). Surely by now he must have some suspicion that he is up against something too powerful for him? Not the least: his next order is to close all the city's gates (653) as if this were a routine jailbreak.

The final proof that Pentheus' whole approach is both false and dangerous comes immediately afterwards, as a herdsman arrives with news from Mount Cithaeron. He has seen the bacchants on the mountain, and they are as orderly as a military garrison: they are divided into three companies each under a commander (680-2), they rise promptly at reveille (689-694) and adjust their uniforms carefully (695-8), they perform their rituals at fixed times (723-4), and sexuality and drunkenness are nowhere to be detected. On the other hand, the impossible and the miraculous seem to be matters of routine: the women use live snakes as belts (698), suckle fawns and wolf-cubs (699-702), and by a stroke or a touch make the ground flow with milk, honey, water and wine (704-711). All utterly amazing, and utterly unthreatening – except of course that society will collapse if the women aren't restored to sanity, and to Thebes, fairly soon. This, though, cannot be done by force, as the rest of the herdsman's narrative makes clear. When he and his friends, encouraged by a know-all from the city (717-721), try to capture the women, they immediately run amok, tear cattle in pieces, raid two villages and put the armed inhabitants to flight; and loads do not burden them, fire does not burn them, weapons do not wound them. How will Pentheus respond to this?

He responds in his accustomed manner. He has by now witnessed, or been credibly informed of, fifteen or twenty manifest miracles. And as ever, he neither accepts nor denies their reality; he just ignores them. He orders an immediate military expedition against the bacchants (780-5), vowing to "stir up a great deal of women's blood" on Mount Cithaeron (796-7) – oblivious, it seems, to the fact, of which we have recently been repeatedly reminded (682, 690, 720, 728), that one of these women is his own mother. It is perhaps significant that he refers to them as his "slaves" (803), as if he were the King of Persia[1] –doubly ironic, this, considering how he prides himself on his Greekness (483, 779) in contrast to barbarians like the Lydian "priest" and his followers. We now expect the threatened military expedition (cf. 52) to be launched, and Dionysus to take command of his maenad army as promised. What happens is rather different.

For at this moment Dionysus shows that he is, after all, a god of justice. Pentheus has shown himself a tyrant with no respect for man or god, ready to insult his grandfather, imprison or kill his mother, chop off heads on mere suspicion, and treat free people like slaves, wilfully blind and deaf to the plainest evidence that a superhuman agency is at work – and yet Dionysus offers him a way out. "I will bring the women here," he says, "without the use of arms" (804). Thebes can be restored to normality without any blood being shed. Of course, there is a price: the definitive establishment of Dionysiac cult at Thebes (807-8). But why on earth not? On all the available evidence, the cult brings pleasure and, unless provoked, no pain. But Pentheus will have none of it:

> Bring me my armour out here. And you, stop talking (809).

The disguised god doesn't stop talking, and Pentheus never gets his armour; in fact, the next time we see him he will be dressed as a woman, and the time after that he will be a set of detached body parts.

Pentheus' approach to the Dionysiac phenomenon has been a disastrous failure, and this naturally leads us to ask what alternative approach, if any, could have been successful. The play actually offers us a considerable range of options, before it narrows its focus to show us the consequences of the one chosen by Pentheus.

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[1]On the Greek belief that barbarians were the “slaves” of their rulers, cf. Eur. *Helen* 276, and see E.M. Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian* (Oxford, 1989) 193-7. Another tyrant, Lycus, speaks similarly in Eur. *HF* 251.

The first of these options is presented by the chorus of Lydian bacchants in their opening song (*parodos*). One part of this song narrates the birth(s) and infancy of Dionysus; other parts give a detailed and evocative picture of his ecstatic worship, first in the streets (64-87), then in the mountains (135-169). The song is full of "barbarian" elements: the women are Asian, they wear the weird garb of bacchic ritual, carry and doubtless beat drums; there are repeated references to Lydia, Phrygia, even Syria, all of which to the Greek mind were places that slaves came from. The mountain ritual consists of running, leaping, falling, dancing, singing, shouting, with drums, pipes and torches, and its focus and object is to hunt down goats, tear them in pieces and eat their raw flesh (139). It may well be doubted how anyone could think it wise to introduce such practices as this into a society that wished to be sane and safe. In particular, a crucial psychological prerequisite, apparently, is what the chorus call "communalizing the soul" (75-76): abandoning individuality, merging one's personality in the swarm. Such an experience can be extremely uplifting and pleasurable. It can also, however, be extremely dangerous: "herd instinct", "crowd hysteria", "mob violence", are all designations of what can happen if this process gets out of hand. The Greek *polis* is a place where law rules and where the individual citizen is responsible for his actions. At the very least, even if one accepts that a degree of uninhibited release may be beneficial, it must be kept within some kind of boundaries. There is no sign that this chorus is willing to accept anything of the kind. They claim authority over the streets and houses and their inhabitants (68-70); they become animalized, wearing fawnskins and galloping like fillies (137-8, 164-9); they tear animals apart as if they owned them, not caring that goats might have a goatherd. If this is what Thebes and Pentheus are being offered, one can well understand if they feel they have to reject it.

Next we see two Thebans, Teiresias and Cadmus, both aged men. They may not be able to gallop like fillies or tear goats in pieces, but they do believe it is their duty to join in the worship of Dionysus. They have, though, two very different approaches to the cult.

The fate of Cadmus in the play may well seem unjust. Early in the prologue Dionysus praises Cadmus for creating a shrine to Semele (10-11), and we learn also that he, unlike his daughters, had always publicly maintained that Semele's lover had been none other than Zeus. On learning that Semele's son has returned to Thebes as a god, Cadmus is eager to do him honour. That Cadmus is in the end bereaved of his treasured grandson is of course not

inconsistent with this: the punishment of the guilty inevitably has side-effects on their innocent kin. But Cadmus also receives from Dionysus a specific punishment of his own: exile from Thebes to a barbarian land, and transformation into a snake (1330-4, 1354-60). It is true that he will eventually go to the Isles of the Blest (1337-8), but overall his fate is undoubtedly meant as a punishment, as Dionysus makes clear in words that are addressed to Cadmus as well as his daughters:

> If you had known to be sensible, when you refused to be, you would now be happy, with the son of Zeus for your ally. … You have understood us too late; you did not know us when you should have done. … I was a god, and you insulted me (1341-7)

And Cadmus admits the charge (1344, 1346, 1377-8), even while pleading for mercy. What is he admitting being guilty of? If the play offers an explanation at all (and surely it ought to), it must come in the scene in which Cadmus and Teiresias are confronted by Pentheus. It may not matter much that Cadmus tells Pentheus that "even if, as you claim, this god does not exist, *you* should pretend he does" for the honour of Semele and the family (333-6); taken by itself, that might be just Cadmus desperately trying to get through to Pentheus with an argument that might possibly appeal to him. But Cadmus had spoken like that to Teiresias too:

> I have come prepared, wearing this sacred attire of the god;
> for since he is my daughter's son, it is right
> that he should be magnified and glorified to the best of our ability (180-3).

Admittedly Cadmus, as the first mortal ever to have a god for a grandchild, is in a unique position with no precedent to guide him, but his language strongly suggests that he is magnifying and glorifying Dionysus *only* because Dionysus is his grandson – doing, in fact, precisely what he later recommends Pentheus to do, and "telling a fine lie" in the family's interest. His attitude also changes the significance of what we heard in the prologue: the insistence that Semele's lover had been divine, the creation of a shrine to her, now look like the contrivances of a head of family determined to put a positive spin on what might have been a very shaming episode. To say the least, we cannot be sure he actually believes Dionysus is a god.

Now it is true that Greek religion, generally speaking, was a matter of practice rather than of belief. The gods, on the whole, didn't mind what mortals thought about them, so long as they

received their dues in the form of prayer and especially sacrifice. But as the trial of Socrates would soon show, belief couldn't be ignored, because it could have an effect on practice. If the belief spreads that the gods do not really exist, sooner or later the community will decide that it can use its resources better than by sending them up in smoke to these non-existent gods – and if by any chance the gods *do* in fact exist, such a decision could have unfortunate consequences. And Dionysus, in particular, can only be truly worshipped by those who throw their whole being into the act of worship – and one can hardly be doing that if one is thinking of Dionysus as a family asset. It is therefore appropriate that whereas the chorus of Asian devotees condemns Pentheus (263-5) and praises Teiresias (328-9), they say nothing at all about Cadmus.

Teiresias, in tragedy, is nearly always right, and the audience may well look to him for some words of pious wisdom in an attempt to set Pentheus on a more prudent path. They may perhaps be disappointed. Teiresias speaks less like a prophet than like a sophist. He rationalizes everything; all the mystery and the ecstasy disappear. Dionysus is the inventor of (or perhaps *is*) wine, which is good for drowning sorrows, inducing sleep, and pouring in libations (278-285). He was never sewn up in Zeus's thigh; that story was created through the confusion of two similar-sounding words (286-297). He also has (in reality rather minor) connections with prophecy and war (298-305). And while Dionysus will not compel women to be chaste, a woman who *is* truly chaste by nature will not change her nature under his influence (which, for an overwhelmingly male audience that was not disposed to think particularly highly of women's moral capacity, would beg a very big question). All this is all very well, but it has little to do with the kind of ecstatic worship that we have heard partly described, partly enacted by the chorus in their opening lyric. It is an attempt to tame Dionysus and make him into a reasonable god that reasonable, educated late fifth-century Athenians can rationally worship. If that is the kind of god he wants to be, he would never have come to Thebes accompanied by these outlandish barbarian women.

Or so we probably think, until the scene ends and the outlandish barbarian women sing their second ode. And to our surprise we find that all the wild ecstasies have vanished, to be replaced by the not exactly sober, but at any rate bounded and socialized pleasures of that civilized, urban(e) institution, the symposium (376-385). The chorus commend "a life of quietness and good sense" (389-390) and warn against the danger of "not thinking mortal thoughts" and of "chasing great things" instead of making the best of what one can get (395-

9). They pray to be taken to Cyprus or Pieria (402-416), the lands of Aphrodite and of the Muses. The connection between Dionysus and the Muses would be obvious to every Athenian spectator; and Aphrodite, as the Herdsman will remind us (773-4), is (in the right context) an essential part of the good life. In the final stanza Dionysus' association with "the painless delight of wine" is re-emphasized, as is his democratic nature: he offers his gifts "equally to the prosperous and the inferior" (421-2). More than once the chorus express a rejection of what may be called intellectualism (*to sophon*, 395); true intelligence (*sophia*) is something different – it is accepting the human condition and the opinions and practices of "the masses of ordinary people" (430). This distinction between two contrasting connotations of *sophia* – being clever enough to know what's good for one, and being too clever for one's own good – runs right through the play[2].

Is this the answer we have been seeking? It seems surprisingly banal and naïve, and resolutely oblivious to the tragic aspects of human existence. Accept life's pleasures – song, dance, food, drink, sex, sleep, and good company (the listing is Kenneth Dover's[3] – in another, though still Dionysiac, context – and all of them figure in the choral ode we have been looking at); don't try to rationalize them into conformity with some high-flown philosophical schema; respect popular traditions, especially religious ones; that is true wisdom, and will bring happiness. Naïve or not, this view does seem to be endorsed by all the Theban *commoners* we see in the play. The guard who arrested the disguised god was reluctant to do so and told his prisoner as much (441-2), and he tells Pentheus "this man … is full of miracles" (449-450). The herdsman, though fearful of the king's anger (670-1), urges him to accept the new god, not least because "they say … he gave mortals the vine which puts a stop to grief; and if there is no more wine, there is no more Aphrodite, nor any other human pleasure" (771-4). And the messenger who reports Pentheus' death concludes that "to know one's place (*sōphronein*) and revere the divine is best, and I think it is also wisest" (1150-1).

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[2] Good *sophia*: 266, 427, 480, 641, 656, 839, 1151. Bad *sophia*: 30, 200, 203. The two are contrasted at 395. Pentheus condemns the sophistries, as he sees them, of the priest who is in fact Dionysus at 489 and 655; in his later delusion he praises the *sophia* of the disguised god as the latter schemes to destroy him (824), and Agaue, also deluded, praises the god's *sophia* in urging on the maenads to hunt the "lion" who was in fact her son (1190).

[3] K.J. Dover, *Aristophanes: Clouds* (Oxford, 1968) liii, listing the good things of which, in the world of Aristophanic comedy, "the normal man … takes as much as he can".

There is, after all, no contradiction in believing that life has both its tragedies, many of them unavoidable, and its pleasures, and that since total renunciation of the pleasures will not help one escape the tragedies, it is foolish not to accept them (within reason, of course). If Pentheus has rejected normal pleasures (and one certainly doubts if he'd make a good companion for a symposium), it seems only to have led him to seek perverted ones: his way of showing affection for his grandfather had been to ask whom Cadmus wanted him to punish (1310-2, 1318-22), and he is lured to his death by being offered the chance to spy on the maenads' alleged sexual orgies. And his evidence-proof hatred and contempt for Dionysus and all he stands for leads to an appalling catastrophe that was entirely avoidable.

It remains true that though Pentheus and Cadmus, Agaue and Ino and Autonoe, have all deserved to suffer, they all suffer far more than they deserve, or than anyone deserves – and *that* is the note on which the play ends. It may well be, as Richard Seaford supposes[4], that Dionysus' speech as *deus ex machina* (most of which has been lost from the only manuscript) included instructions for establishing an organized cult of Dionysus at Thebes; but the Thebans who will benefit from that cult are not on stage. Those who are present are Cadmus, the lonely old man facing a future he loathes; Agaue, the mother who has killed her son; and that son's dismembered body, over whose torn limbs, one by one, Agaue, in another lost passage, had lovingly lamented. As often in Euripides, human love seems the only consolation in a cruel world: father and daughter part with an embrace (1363-7), and Agaue will share her exile with her sisters (1381-2). They themselves may have made the world crueller than it need have been, but we can pity them nevertheless – as even the chorus do (1327-8).

And we can go a little beyond pity. In the play's last genuine words, Agaue says:

> May I go where
> foul Cithaeron shall never see me again
> nor I set eyes on Cithaeron,
> and where no *thyrsos* is dedicated, to remind me!
> Let them be the concern of *other* bacchants! (1383-7)

Just as the savage zeal of Pentheus was counter-productive, so too, at least in one respect, has been the zealous savagery of his cousin Dionysus. It has benefited nobody, at least in Thebes

[4]R.A.S. Seaford, *Euripides: Bacchae* (Warminster, 1996) 252-3

(since Dionysus could have destroyed Pentheus, or rendered him harmless, in many less atrocious ways), and it has irrevocably alienated this sister of Semele. It is entirely understandable that Agaue should thus loathe and shun that which caused her ruin. She cannot be expected to reflect – but we should – that so many things in this world have caused the ruin of someone at some time that we cannot possibly shun them all. We have seen in this play that Dionysus is a risky, destabilizing god; but deliberately, obsessively to avoid all risk and instability is itself risky and destabilizing. And deliberately, obsessively to avoid pleasure as such merely ensures that life will be all pain – as if there wasn't enough of that anyway.