

Introduction to the Bacchae

- Let me begin by saying that I have been assigned to perform an impossible task. I have been given just a few minutes to introduce the play. In other words, this means that in the next five or ten minutes I will attempt the impossible:
- To place The Bacchae in the context of Euripides' work
- To place Euripides in the context of Greek Tragedy
- To place Greek and Euripidean Tragedy in the context of Greek and Athenian History
- To place all of the above in the context of the present, and explain why all these are important for us right here, right now both personally and collectively.
- So let me begin:
- Euripides, together with Aeschylus and Sophocles, was one of the three most famous and influential Greek Tragedians in the fifth century BC Athens, the golden age of Greek Drama. But of the three, Euripides is the most modern, the most revolutionary, the one who was most popular with the people (Sicilian Expedition) in spite of the fact that he received fewer awards by the judges, the one whose more plays survived, the most tragic according to Aristotle, the most innovative, the most philosophical, and MY most beloved Athenian Playwright with whom (by my own admission) I have spent a considerable amount of my life, INTIMATELY....
- The Bacchae is one of Euripides' most profound plays, one of the most powerful plays ever written, and it was presented for the first time in ancient Athens shortly after the poet's death in 406 B.C. However, its meaning and ideas remain most relevant today, particularly in front of the troublesome issues that challenge our humanity in the present, both personally and collectively. It is even more relevant for us because the resemblance of our contemporary reality to that of the Athenian world of the late fifth century, which created the Bacchae, is strikingly and even frightfully similar.
- In fact, the Bacchae could be read today as a long, accurate commentary on our own reality

Let me explain this by

First reminding you that the THEATER in ancient Athens was a STATE function and its main purpose was the EDUCATION of the citizens, and

Second by giving you some examples to point out the historical and cultural similarity of that world to ours.

- 1) In the early fifth century BC, the Athenians were the ones who were mostly responsible for saving the Greek world from the Persian aggression. And in a similar way, in the mid-twentieth century, the Americans were mostly responsible for saving the Europeans from Hitler's aggression.
- 2) After the Persian Wars, the Athenians formed a great alliance, the Delian League, whose purpose was to protect their allies from the enemy. In a similar way, the NATO alliance was created under American leadership for similar purposes.
- 3) In time, through their position of leadership in those alliances, both the Athenians and the Americans became formidable powers, fact which started causing suspicion even among their respective allies.
- 4) At a certain point, both alliances lost the focus and the clear purpose of their own existence. Years after the Persians were completely gone, the Athenians would not let go of their allies, and in fact they would even try to expand their influence by enlisting more members. When the Athenians pressured the Melians to join their alliance the Melians indicated that they would prefer to remain neutral. But the Athenians addressed them with cruelty saying: "If you are not with us you are against us," and they attacked them.
Similarly, when some NATO allies found themselves unable to support the Americans in attacking Iraq, in the same Athenian spirit, the Americans proclaimed that: "If you are not with us you are against us."
- 5) In 415 BC, the Athenians, intoxicated and mesmerized by their own might and power, got involved in a disastrous unprovoked war in a far away country, in Sicily; Similarly, the Americans, too confident of themselves, got involved in an unprovoked war in a far away country, in Iraq, suffering quite unpredicted and dire consequences.
- 6) When the Athenian hubristic imperialism reached its peak, its Democratic Institutions deteriorated tremendously as well. The Athenians grew increasingly more narrow, polarized, partisan, fearful, xenophobic, suspicious, intolerant and aggressive. The historian Thucydides, who records these events, is in awe in front of the cultural turbulence and the deterioration of language and ideals that this reality had produced. And, of course, anyone who follows our News of today cannot fail to witness a similar corrosion in our own language, culture and ideals as well.

I believe that I have made the point. It becomes evident then why the destructive turbulence reflected in the Bacchae could be used as an insightful commentary on the cultural and political turmoil not only of Ancient Athens, but of our own reality as well.

The Bacchae

The title of the play is the BACCHAE. Bacchae or Bacchanals or Maenads were the female followers of the God Dionysus, who, possessed by the god, dance in ecstasy and hunt in Nature.

The god Dionysus, the most ambiguous and mysterious Greek god, is the main character of this play; and through the way the human characters interact with him, Euripides explores and illuminates many eternal themes of our humanity like race, gender, power, intelligence, military superiority, religion, cultural understanding, ignorance, and above all the meaning of wisdom in the face of all these.

- The play opens outside the palace in the Greek city of Thebes, where the god Dionysus, in a human disguise, has arrived to show himself as a god. His first words on stage (lines 1-3) state his origin, especially emphasizing the fact that he is the son of a heavenly father, Zeus, and an earthy mother, Semele.
- According to the old story, Semele, the Theban princess, bore Dionysus to Zeus and, while still pregnant with the child, she was burnt by his thunderbolts because she dared to insist upon seeing Zeus in all of his glory. Zeus protected the child by wrapping it in his thigh, and thus, when the time arrived, Dionysus “was born by the father” as a powerful god himself. All this was to be sure a well known mythical tradition. Yet Euripides’ effort here to stress the duality of the god from the outset deserves special attention, especially in view of what follows. For although Dionysus claims he is a god, on the stage he appears as being mortal; he says that he is a man, but he looks soft and effeminate with his beardless face and his long blond, and curly hair; he speaks of his mother, the princess of Thebes, the daughter of Cadmus, yet he adds that he has come from the East, from Asia, where Greeks and barbarians mingle.
- As for his purpose of visiting Thebes, he says, it is to reveal or even impose his divinity there. The whole city, he adds, must learn, even despite its will, that he is the son of Zeus.
- To the young king Pentheus, the grandson of Cadmus who fights and slights the god (*theomachei*), Dionysus will reveal himself as a true god.
- As for his mother’s sisters, they above all must come to know him for Zeus’ true son. For it was they who slandered Semele by saying that she bore Dionysus to a mortal man, fathering off her shame on Zeus. And it was they who claimed that it was for that reason that Zeus blasted her down with his lightning. But Dionysus has already started showing himself to them. He has stung them with frenzy, he has haunted them from home up to the mountains, has compelled them to wear the livery of his rites. Together with them he has driven mad, away from home, all Theban women; and on the roofless rocks now sit rich and poor alike, the daughters of Cadmus mingled with the common women of Thebes.

- At the end of the prologue, as Dionysus leaves the stage to join the Theban Bacchanals on mount Cithaeron, his Asiatic votaries enter the orchestra. Their long song (lines 64-169), in beautiful lyrics stresses the same elusiveness of the god that the audience had witnessed in the prologue.
- Here the abundance of opposites which are enigmatically combined in peaceful coexistence is striking.

Heaven and Earth, Greek and Asiatic, god and beast, male and female, rich and poor, old and young, piety and cruelty, holiness and bloodshed, tenderness and harshness, madness and peaceful serenity are mysteriously fused. The mystery is called Dionysus. It is he who stands between the opposites and is capable of moving himself as well as those who experience him into different levels of existence. This, having been stated by recitation in the prologue and by lyric song in parodos, remains to be further developed as the action of the play begins.

- In the first episode, the old king Cadmus and the old priest of Apollo Teiresias, who have observed the power of Dionysus, have expediently changed their tune, they are incongruously dressed in Dionysiac livery, and are ready to join the women and their Bacchic dances on the mountain.
- Pentheus, the young king of Thebes, mocks them, and, threatened by the mysterious power of the God whom he does not understand, is trying to reduce him through weapons, the army, with chains and imprisonment.
- Throughout the play, Pentheus is painted as the traditional tyrant of tragedy: he is the one-sided, one dimensional, conservative Greek aristocrat who, puffing with racial pride, despises the new religion as barbarous; he hates it for its obliteration of sex and class distinctions; and he fears it as a threat to social order and public morals.
- But, despite all of his efforts to resist, little by little, Pentheus falls into Dionysus' net, into the confusion of mind (symbolized by the destruction of his palace), into the chaos of the God's obliteration of opposites, and he finally succumbs to the god by dressing as a Maenad, curious to explore the Bacchic dances himself .
- Dionysus will call him ignorant, and will finally lead him to the mountain where he will meet with his final destruction. There, Pentheus will be torn apart by the Bacchae, and he will be decapitated by his own mother Agave, who, in her delusion, believes that she holds the head of a lion.
- The messenger's speech which follows, one of the most vivid and intense narratives in Greek Drama, completes the god's revelation. Twice here the imagery of a cycle (1064-1067, 1106-1109) describes Pentheus' entrapment by Dionysus. And a great, supernatural light (1083) indicates the god's epiphany. As this moment, heaven and

earth come together; all Nature hushes: the air, the beasts, the leaves hush; all becomes one; all becomes light; the light becomes Dionysus who contains them all, who is omnipotent, who is the Chaos which contains them all. For one moment only this light shines in Pentheus' mind, one moment only and then he is crushed. Dramatically, this is described by his dismemberment by the Theban Bacchanals led by his own mother Agave. When she will come to her senses, she too will be crushed by her sorrow. And at that point, Dionysus will make his final appearance—this time *ex machina*—in order to declare that his victory and revelation are now complete.

- On the human floor, the stark sight of Pentheus' head and limbs and the pitiful presence of the crushed Agave and Cadmus, will recapitulate the violence and the chaos to which Dionysus' unrecognized or suppressed power can lead. And the audience, in awe, will be left to ponder.

Why is this play important for us?

- I believe that, in Dionysus, Euripides sought to describe Life's Wholeness, and at the same time to describe "the other" which threatens to destroy king Pentheus' neat world of exclusive superiority. In an ignorant way, Pentheus believed (like some of our modern politicians) that he could keep his city and his world safe and orderly by suppressing and by excluding this "other" whether it be **foreign, feminine, religious, sexual, emotional, irrational, different.** And he tried to destroy with weapons and force what is **Natural and Spiritual** within him and around him. But he did so to his own detriment and he destroyed not only himself, but also all those he had tried to protect.
- Like Pentheus, the Athenians of the late fifth century were suppressing and rejecting this "other" with blind intolerance. And, like Pentheus, they did so recklessly and persistently to their own final detriment and defeat at the end of the Peloponnesian War. So I feel that, in those terms, the Bacchae was a prophetic play for the Athenians, but, at the same time, could not be more appropriate for our own enlightenment in the here and now.
- For if it is true that, in Pentheus (the young man of sorrow, the Athenians could see themselves, it is also true that, in a strange way, after so many centuries, The Bacchae is still providing a powerful mirror in which **WE, TOO, CAN SEE OURSELVES.**
- ENJOY THE PLAY
- I PROMISE YOU, YOU ARE IN FOR **A BIIIG! TREAT** TONIGHT

