

# Social image in Euripides' Bacchae



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In the ancient Greek tragedy *Bacchae*, Euripides reflects the pivotal role of social image on the emotions and decisions of both gods and mortals.

Throughout the play, Dionysus recollects the complex circumstances of his upbringing as the child of Zeus and a mortal, Semele. Despised by Hera even before he was born, Dionysus had to be birthed by Zeus in secret for his own protection: " But right away Zeus, son of Cronus,/ took him and hid him in chambers of birthing,/ tucking the baby inside his thigh/ fastened together with golden pins/ to hide him from Hera" (94-98). The effects of Dionysus' secretive birth extend to his controversial recognition by the Thebans, who generally doubt his legitimacy as a god. Consequently, this also contributes to Dionysus' desire to take vengeance on Thebes and its king, as he proclaims, " This city has to learn, by force if need be,/ what comes of its resistance to my rites./ And I must save the honor of my mother,/ by showing humans I am son of Zeus" (39-42). Unlike all of the other gods and goddesses, Dionysus does not receive an abundance of sacrifices and worship; Euripides reveals that Pentheus, King of Thebes, instead dissuades his citizens from participating in rites in Dionysus' name. Thus, his followers are forced to worship in the wilderness, away from the public eye, instead of in the city temples.

Another feature that sets Dionysus apart from the other gods is his acceptance for citizens who rank lower in social status and his reputation as a foreigner to Thebes. As praised by Tiresias the prophet, " the god makes no distinction. Young and old/ must dance together, everyone the same./ He wants us all to honor him together,/ and no one is excused from joining in" (206-209). Euripides also describes Dionysus' social reach as inclusive of

women and the poor as devout followers. However, in the strict social pyramid of ancient Greece, Pentheus views his populist appeal as a danger to society. Furthermore, although Thebes was Dionysus' birthplace, the city and its king still views him as an outsider to their traditions and culture. When messengers warn Pentheus of the travelling stranger in Thebes, the king immediately plots to arrest him: "Whoever he is, this foreigner deserves to hang for such outrageous wickedness" (246-247). Later, Pentheus interrogates Dionysus, disguised as a mortal, asking, "Is there a new Zeus there, who breeds new gods?" (467). Therefore, in both mortal and divine form, Dionysus is seen as a foreigner. Pentheus denies Dionysus of being a god, despite having been born from Zeus himself; in mortal form, the king also regards the Stranger as an outsider who seeks to destroy the delicate social order in Thebes.

Euripides also highlights the contrast between Cadmus, Tiresias, and the Chorus' religious devotion to Dionysus and Pentheus' blatant rejection of any ceremonies in his honor. For example, Cadmus and Tiresias uplift their praise for the god, equating Dionysus to the source of happiness for mortals: "This god is poured as offering to the gods, / so through this god comes human happiness" (284-285). Therefore, they argue that the wine that the Greeks use to honor the other gods is due to Dionysus; satisfied with these rites aided by Dionysus, the gods bless the mortals with fortune. Cadmus and Tiresias also attribute "pain-relief to suffering souls... sleep and forgetfulness from daily pain" to Dionysus' wine, as nothing else can provide a similar satisfaction to mortals (280-282). On the contrary, Pentheus' defining trait is his criticism for the negative influence Dionysus spreads over

his city, especially in ways that disrupt the social order. When Euripides first introduces Pentheus, the king is clearly concerned for the wellbeing of Thebes while under the influence of Dionysus' cult-like followers. He downplays Dionysus' divine nature and attacks the proceedings of the maenads' rites, exclaiming, " New trouble in our city./ They say our womenfolk have left their homes/ for these fake Bacchic rites. They skip and dance/ up on the shady mountains, worshipping/ this whatshisname, this new ' god,' Dionysus./ Apparently their gatherings involve/ huge vats of wine, and one by one, those girls/ slink off alone to serve some man with sex" (216-223). This also connects to Dionysus' reputation as the god of ecstasy, frenzied dancing, and wine, all of which were recognized as threats to the Theban social order by Pentheus. For example, many female followers abandoned their duties as respectable women in Greek society to celebrate Dionysus instead: " Every woman in the land/ has left her shuttle, left her loom, infected/ by the sting of gadfly Dionysus" (117-119). Therefore, Euripides heavily juxtaposes the fervent belief in the god held by Cadmus and Tiresias with the firm rejection of Dionysus by Pentheus.

Moreover, gender stereotypes also serve as a motif throughout Bacchae. When the Messenger alerts the king of the gruesome scene of the maenads, Pentheus vows to eliminate the threat, proclaiming, " We'll run those Bacchants down. It's too much/ That I be treated in this way by women!" (785-786). Ironically, Dionysus tricks Pentheus into disguising himself as a female maenad to infiltrate their rituals, thus attacking his sensitive masculinity. In doing so, Dionysus hoped that he would be publicly humiliated, losing his social status as a respectable king. By falsely

reassuring the king that the maenads would not mock his feminine appearance, Dionysus successfully plans to punish his hubris, revealing to the Chorus, " I want him to be laughed at by the Thebans:/ I'll lead him through the city in a dress" (854-855). Dionysus displays Pentheus, in his attire fit for a Theban woman, atop a tree branch for all to see and mock before the maenads brutally murder him. Thus, Dionysus also uses Pentheus' fragile masculinity to lead him to his downfall. Ultimately, Euripides emphasizes the significance of social reputation in ancient Greek society through the ways it motivates both mortals and gods to act on their beliefs.