Even though Dionysos is the god of drama and all the dramatic festivals in Attica were held in his honour, the *Bacchae* is the only surviving play about the god himself, his birth, his story, his music, the nature of his divinity. It is true that he appears onstage as a character in Aristophanes’ *Frogs*. But *Frogs* is about drama and dramatic poetry rather than about the god himself. And although the gods often change their form and appear as mortals in the Homeric poems – think of Athene in the *Odyssey* – the *Bacchae* is the only extant play where a god takes on the appearance/guise of a mortal, as he says in the play’s opening lines, ‘I am here, a god in mortal form’ (4-5). In the *Bacchae*, the god of theatre appears at his own festival in costume and in character.

He is primarily a fertility god, the raw force of life in the world, the creative force that, as Dylan Thomas put it, ‘through the green fuse drives the flower’. But Dionysos is also the destructive power of nature, of instinct, savagery, pain, and death. He is a complicated, dangerous figure, an outsider to the Olympians, the last to be accepted as one of the twelve and he breaks all the rules because he has a mortal mother. His association with the nature, the vine, wine and with theatre are manifestations of his persona as a god of altered, alternative states of consciousness and *ekstasis* (standing outside yourself).

Attic festivals honouring Dionysos began in deep winter and the culmination of the cycle was the great drama festival, the City Dionysia in the month of Elaphebolion (‘Deer Hunt’) in early Spring (late March early April), a time when sailing was good and visitors could come to Athens from all over the Greek world.

The City Dionysia ran for seven days (two days of preliminaries); during this time, the *Ekklesia* (the Democratic Assembly) didn’t meet, legal proceedings were halted, and prisoners were released from prison.

Students need to be aware of the intensity and spectacle of the City Dionysia, its powerful religious and civic ritual meanings and the lavishness of the theatrical productions; the rich costuming, the crafting of masks, the long period of rehearsals and preparation for plays that were usually given only a single performance. They need to be aware of the magnificent dawn procession that escorted the god’s statue along with the omnipresent *phallos* to the theatre and opened the city to the power of the god. They should know that the dramatic performances were been preceded by a display of tribute from Athens’ allies, the honouring of distinguished citizens and a kind of passing out parade of boys whose fathers had died fighting for Athens. Finally, before the competitions began, a pig was sacrificed, its corpse carried around the performance space and libations of wine were poured for the god. So, in this heightened atmosphere, with the heavy smell of wine and slaughter in the air, seated under the brilliant Athenian sky, with a view all the way to Piraeus, the audience would have waited for the actors to enter and begin speaking. The trilogy, with the *Bacchae* as the final play following *Iphigenia at Aulis* and the lost *Alcmaeon in Corinth*, won first prize in 405 BCE, a year before Athens fell to Sparta.

In Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, the character Jacques compares the world to a stage and human beings to actors who must play their allotted parts and then are gone. From this perspective, we are condemned to live the script of the particular performance in which we find ourselves:

*All the world’s a stage,*  
*And all the men and women merely players. Act-II, Scene-VII.*
In Euripides’ *Bacchae* the comparison works in the opposite way. In the *Bacchae*, the stage is like life, the stage shows us the world more clearly, more truthfully, stripped to essentials. The means by which theatre communicates: illusion, poetry, disguise, transformation, shifting identities, and its representation of the world in terms of irreconcilable contradictions, are a true expression of the nature of things. In the *Bacchae*, the stage is nothing less than the vehicle of divine epiphany, the medium by which a god reveals himself. Dionysos is principle actor, subject and director of the whole performance. He determines all the elements of costume, music, poetry, dance, speech, and plot. He is omnipresent. Characters are free to choose their fate, but the framework for their choice, the reality of the world in which they must choose, and the consequences of that choice, are determined by the god.

The gods are always involved in fate and destiny but never so directly or so instrumentally or so autocratically as Dionysos in the *Bacchae*. Everything that happens in the play’s present action is a direct result of Dionysos’ intervention and direction.

In the prologue, Dionysos explains to the audience that he is a god in disguise. He has assumed human form for his own purposes in order to vindicate his mother Semele and, in an interesting paradox, to reveal his divinity. The audience must understand that he is a god, but a man for those participating in the drama. This in itself calls attention to the illusory nature of theatre. The audience will be seeing a theatrical illusion, but it will also be a vehicle of divine epiphany. Dionysos explains that his aunts have denied his divinity by insisting that Semele lied about Zeus being her lover. As a consequence, he has stung, not only his aunts the daughters of Cadmus, but all the women of Thebes, with ecstatic madness. The women, but only the women, wander on Mt. Kithairon dressed in fawn skins, armed with his ritual thyrsus (a fennel stalk wound with ivy with a pine cone fixed to the end). Unlike the chorus of Bacchantes that have followed Dionysos across Asia, the daughters of Cadmus and the women of Thebes have chosen neither their costume nor their role. It is obvious right from the beginning of the play that to refuse the god inevitably leads to madness. Sometimes madness comes simply from proximity to the god. Even though they have committed no offence, Dionysos has included the womenfolk of Thebes in the madness inflicted on Semele’s sisters.

Dionysos also has his cousin Pentheus to deal with. Pentheus is a novice who has recently been made king of Thebes by his grandfather Cadmus’ abdication. As yet untried, Pentheus is out to prove himself. He has taken upon himself the role of tragic tyrant and has outlawed Dionysos’ worship. So now we know the plot, the script, and have some idea of what the outcome will be, if not its extremity of horror. The city of Thebes will experience initiation into Dionysian ‘otherness’, into a realm of metamorphosis, illusion, shifting identities, creativity, compulsions and the unconscious. He is also Dionysos the liberator.

Dionysos stage-manages every detail of the performance. He dresses his characters in costumes that blend, blur and bend all the categories of gender, age, species and culture: god with mortal, man with woman, age with youth, human with animal, Asiatic with Greek. The Theban women and Semele’s sisters are dressed in animal skins, the old men Cadmus and Tiresias in the clothes of young female maenads. At a crucial moment, Dionysos literally assumes the role of wardrobe master as he dresses Pentheus in female costume, arranges his hair and coaches him in the deportment of a bacchante,

I will dress you myself ... On your head I shall set a wig with long curls... a robe to your feet and a hair band for your head (827, 830, 831).

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You must lift [your thyrsus] in your right hand to keep time with your right foot. (926-33, 943).

Dionysos gets the play underway by instructing his followers how to perform the parodos. They must begin drumming (on the primal drum passed down from the Cretan Korybantes to Rhea, 59, 120-28) and surround the palace so that the whole of Thebes can see and hear them. From now on, this choral drumming in various metres and at various levels of audibility and intrusiveness, will accompany the action. Pentheus obviously finds them disturbing but is unable to silence them (515). The parodos reproduces the form and modality of a traditional hymn, it tells about the birth of the god, it invites the Thebans to join in his worship and celebrates his power to bring liberation and ecstasy:

O Thebes who nourished Semele!
Garland your hair with ivy,
with red berries and bryony,
with sprigs of oak and fir.
Tuft with twisted wool
your dappled fawn skins
Hold with reverent hand
the violent wand of god.
And let the dance begin! (105-114)

When Pentheus enters he repeats his aunts’ offence of denying Dionysos’ divinity many times over. His first words are that he has ‘heard stories of women deserting their homes’, frisking out on the mountain and engaging in drunken sexual orgies. Maybe someone has told him this, but we hear nothing about it. It is crucial to stress that Tiresias (315-20) and also the Messengers, who are privileged eyewitnesses, emphasize to Pentheus that the women are not drunk and that they are chaste: ‘modest, not intoxicated’ (687-88). The lurid notion of the women’s misbehaviour is a figment of Pentheus’ fevered sexual imagination. Tiresias obviously knows this aspect of his personality and his disposition to violence when he warns (311-12):

Do not be so sure that force has mastery over men; do not mistake for wisdom the fantasies of your sick mind. Welcome the god, offer him libations; crown your head and join the Bacchic rites.

Despite the emphatic denial from everyone in a position to know, Pentheus persists in the idée fixe that the women are drunkenly lascivious. Right from his first entrance, Pentheus is in the grip of an obsession that leads him into escalating violence in his desire to control, stamp out and eradicate what he sees as an infection and pollution. In effect, Pentheus’ illness inevitably entails a denial of, and opposition to, the god. Even before he has met him, Pentheus regards the newly arrived teacher of Dionysiac mysteries as criminal and the claim that Dionysos is a god as a personal affront to himself: ‘Whoever he is, do not these insults deserve a terrible death by hanging?’

Pentheus tells us that he has already imprisoned some of Dionysos’ followers and that he intends to chain and cage his mother and her sisters. Pentheus’ wish to subject his mother to imprisonment and violence, and the total absence of his father Echion from the play, inevitably suggest a psychoanalytic scenario of mother-son ambivalence, dependence and hostility. We start to understand that Pentheus is an adult son obsessed with his mother’s sexuality. Ultimately Pentheus surrenders to his regressive desire to be an infant cradled in his mother’s arms.

3 Sale (1972), 65 observes that Pentheus’ fantasy that the women are drunk, lustful, and lasciviousness ‘reflects [his] unconscious desire’. The idea that the Bacchae (Theban and Asian) are involved in drunken sexual orgies completely misses the subtlety of Pentheus’ characterization. Yet it is a misunderstanding that arises often, as in the National Theatre of Scotland’s 2005 production. For a brief video clip from this performance see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LnHm31PmpuU
Before he has even met the smiling, insouciant stranger, Pentheus’ imaginary description of his ‘long, scented, golden curls with Aphrodite in his wine dark eyes’ (235-36) is saturated with attraction and anxiety. In confrontation with Dionysos, Pentheus’ response is highly erotic:

Your hair is long, rippling over your cheeks, full of desire; it shows you are no wrestler. What a fair skin you have, you must take care of it! (455-56)

It is not a daylight complexion. Oh no, it comes from hunting Aphrodite at night with your beauty. (454-58)

Given the tendency in Greek myth and ritual to conflate head and genitalia, it is easy to read Pentheus’ threats to decapitate the stranger and cut his hair as a wish to castrate him. Their exchange in stichomythia reveals Pentheus' incapacity to think symbolically or in abstractions:

PENTHEUS I am more powerful, I bid them bind you.

DIONYSOS You do not know why you live, what you do, who you are.

PENTHEUS I am Pentheus, son of Agave and Echion.

DIONYSOS You are unlucky in that name, it is your destiny (505-08)

Pentheus learns nothing from this encounter. He orders his men to lock Dionysos in the stable and to capture the Asiatic Bacchae, ‘we’ll either sell them or keep them inside as household slaves working at looms—I shall possess them’ (511-12). This leaves the stage empty except for the chorus of Asian Bacchantes who sing the second stasimon in fear, discouragement and isolation. They sing about how Dirce hospitably received Dionysos in her waters when Zeus first snatched him from Semele’s burning womb and about Pentheus’ lineage through his father Echion from the serpent of Ares. As a descendant of the sown men, Pentheus is an Earth-born, and the present conflict is a replay of the cosmic battle between the gods and the giants.

Spawn of a serpent, monstrous son of Echion—a wild-eyed inhuman monster who battles the gods like the deadly giants of old (540-45)

The chorus call on Dionysos to liberate them. But they imagine the god is far away dancing in wild, uncanny, holy places like the forests of Olympos where Orpheus made the trees move and charmed wild beasts. This ode delivers us into the realm of myth, and it needs to because from now on events on stage and off will flout the laws of physics and the ordinary world will shift into nightmare. Out of nowhere a disembodied voice answers the chorus from offstage:

Io, hear my voice, hear it. Io Bacchae, Io Bacchae. ...

Io, Io! I speak again, the child of Semele and Zeus (576-80)

For 28 lines (576-603), the god sings from offstage while the chorus answers from the orchestra. There is no other scene like this in Greek tragedy. The innovative form is a correlative for its extraordinary content as the chorus describe earthquake and fire and the palace appears to fall at Dionysos’ command. These things happen at the command of the god who is, of course, the director of the play.

DIONYSOS Let the Mistress of the Underworld shake the floor of the

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4 Sale (1972), 67. Pentheus’ additional threats to stone Dionysos, cut his hair, and take his thyrsus, are also castration motifs.
There is a great deal of controversy about how this rending of Pentheus’ palace and the fire at Semele’s tomb may have been enacted on stage. Some scholars think that nothing happened, others focus on stage effects, on how the palace lintels may have appeared to crack. In my view, there is no doubt that whatever did happen on stage, there would have been a meaningful and deliberate discrepancy between what the chorus is describing and the conjuring of performance. After all, at 634 Dionysos reports that Bacchos had knocked the house to the ground and everything was ‘shattered to pieces’, while only a few lines later Pentheus asks Dionysos how he can have ‘appeared, standing in front of the house?’ (345). We should not underestimate the illusionism, dynamism, virtuosity, and energy of Athenian theatre performance. We are not dealing here with modern proscenium arch realism. We know that the Athenians spared no effort or expense in the staging of drama. The destruction of the palace is of course an objective correlative for the disintegration, the tearing asunder (sparagmos) of Pentheus’ world and his mind. This performance, directed as it is by the god, would have called up all available theatrical resources. It would have been nothing less than a theatrical coup, a demonstration of, an epiphany of, the reality-distorting, allusive, elusive conjuring power of theatrical illusion. This scene would properly have been a revelation of the god via his unique medium of conjuring and performance. It would almost certainly have involved effects of light, flame, smoke, smell, and acres of fabric. It seems to me that the staging of this scene would need to rely on the elements most typically, and distinctively, characteristic of Athenian ritual theatre, namely: music, percussion, vocal effects, poetry, and dance. Anyone who has any experience of traditional percussion such as, for example Japanese Wadaiko drumming, will appreciate the possibilities of drumming for creating overwhelming, hallucinatory sound. As well as volcanic drumming, there would have been aural elements of song, ululation (Greek ololuge), tongue clicks, shrieks, exclamations, wailing auloi accompanied by dance brought to a vertiginous pitch of expressive athleticism.

This illusionist, performance based approach to staging the scene is implicit in Dionysos’ account to the Chorus Leader of what happened. Pentheus thought he was roping and binding Dionysos but it was really a bull he was struggling with; he rushed around with buckets of water setting his slaves to put out imaginary fires but the palace was not on fire; he battled and stabbed at a phantom Dionysos, but it was nothing but thin air. What an opportunity to play with the resources of theatre! Who is to say that what any one saw that Spring day in the theatre Dionysos was real!

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5 See the detailed discussion in Castellani (1976), 61-83.
This is a culture where initiation into divine mysteries entails profound emotional, and physical experience, culminating in a great light such as the chorus leader describes: ‘Oh great light of our joyful dance, how glad I am to see you—I who was alone and desolate before.’ I think Seaford is correct in suggesting that the audience would recognize Dionysos’ description of Pentheus’ behaviour as matching the pre-illumination stage of initiation into the mysteries, ‘wanderings and wearisome running around in circles and some unfinished journeys half-seen through darkness; then... panic and trembling and sweating and amazement.’ But Pentheus does not see the miraculous light, his hostility and capitulation to violence negates ‘the desired ritual process’.

Pentheus is already descending into madness when he enters demanding to know how the stranger escaped,

DIONYSOS  Didn’t I say—or didn’t you hear— that someone would set me free?

PENTHEUS  But who? You keep making riddles.

DIONYSOS  He who grows for mortals the abundance of clustered grapes (649-51).

The next line, 652 is missing but Pentheus obviously takes a dim view of Dionysos’ gift of wine and in a breath-taking non sequitur orders his men to: ‘bolt tight the walls and towers of the city!’ (653). But while the logic is awry, the psychology of Pentheus’ response is entirely consistent. The stranger’s reference to the vine has triggered Pentheus’ neurotic, fraught association of wine with drunken women and sexuality. Before things go any further, and right on cue, the messenger enters. With a writer/director’s knowledge of the play, the omniscient Dionysos, obviously anticipating the messenger’s entrance and, having in effect, composed the script, instructs Pentheus to listen:

Hear this man who has come with news for you from Mt. Kithairon... We will wait—we will not run away (657-59).

The Messenger’s extended eyewitness account of the supernatural power of the Theban women reveals the beneficence of the god as well as his potential cruelty, the two faces of Dionysos. At first, the women’s behaviour is peaceful and full of miracles. Their individual personalities merge in unity with all living things, as the Messenger unforgettably says, ‘all the beasts and all the mountain, were ecstatic with divinity. And when the women ran, everything ran with them’ (726-27).

But foolishly wishing to please Pentheus by attempting to capture the women, the men unleash a terrible demonstration of their power. Urged on by Agave, the women turn lethal, hunters become the hunted, and the men narrowly avoid sharing the fate of a herd of grazing cattle that is torn limb from limb in ecstatic Dionysiac sparagmos:

You might see ribs and hooves ying everywhere and scraps smeared with blood hanging from the fir trees. Even powerful bulls with raging fury rising in their horns, were wrestled to the ground by countless soft young hands, flesh and skin torn apart faster than your royal eyes could blink (737-49)

Ultimately, the women destroy villages and utterly rout the men in what would have been a catastrophic reversal of gender roles and hierarchies for Pentheus (not to mention the male Athenian audience). It is, in fact, a rehearsal of Pentheus’ ultimate fate. Like the Guard earlier, the Messenger recognizes that this stranger is a numinous presence: ‘Receive

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this god then, whoever he is, into this city, master’ (770).7

It is Pentheus’ most notable characteristic that he is unable to listen to anyone or to take what they say, not his grandfather Cadmus, Tiresias, nor his loyal retainers. It is now quite clear that the reports he claimed to have heard about the women’s lewd behavior were indeed ‘the fantasies of his sick mind’ (328), as Tiresias saw, and Dionysos warns when he says, ‘I am in my senses and you are not’ (504). Tragically, he is unable to heed Dionysos’ many warnings.

Dionysos gives Pentheus one last chance. He offers to lead the women back to Thebes without bloodshed. But Pentheus is hell bent on making a great slaughter. His imagination turns to darkness rather than light. He embraces Dionysos’ savagery rather than his gentleness.8 The pathos and the extremity of Pentheus’ ultimate fate should not obscure our recognition of his incipient madness and inclination to violence. Pentheus’ first act in the play (we hear about others) was to demolish Tiresias’ sacred temenos and throw his seer’s garlands to the winds. Pentheus has always been prepared to make war against his mother, his aunts and the whole population of Theban women. Now, when he is given the opportunity to avoid bloodshed, he is not interested. It is appropriate that Pentheus should be trapped and hunted with a ruthlessness that is a reflection of his own. Euripides does not let us forget that aspect of Pentheus’ character. Even at the end of the play as he sorrowfully reassembles the scattered body parts, Cadmus’ pervasive memory of Pentheus is that he was regarded with ‘fear and alarm in the city’ (1310), that Pentheus would often embrace him and say:

| Does anyone trouble you or vex your heart, old man? |
| Tell me, Grandfather, and I will punish him. (1321-22) |

It seems to be the only kind of memory that Cadmus has of Pentheus. Pentheus does not recognize the obligations of leadership, the great advantage to Thebes of having the women return without bloodshed. He does not appear to consider the city at all. Demonstration of the god’s power did not move him; the prospect of collaboration with the obviously effective stranger does not move him. So now he makes his fateful choice:

| PENTHEUS Bring me my armour... and you stop talking. |
| DIONYSOS Ah!.... (809-10) |

As many scholars have observed, Dionysos’ exclamation, this ‘Ah!’ is the pivot, the reversal, what Taplin calls the play’s ‘monosyllabic turning point’. It marks the moment when Dionysos inaugurates the play’s final act. He offers Pentheus the opportunity to surrender to psychosis.

| DIONYSOS Ah! Do you wish to see them sitting together on the mountain? |
| PENTHEUS I’d give a priceless weight of gold to see it. |

| DIONYSOS Why such passionate desire [erx] to see this? |
| PENTHEUS I’d be sorry to see them drunk.... (810-13) |

Pentheus is still harping on the women’s supposed drunkenness! But now, we are at the heart of the matter. These lines bear the closest scrutiny for their detailed portrayal of Pentheus’ unraveling reason and sanity. For
instance, in an even more irrational train of thought than at line 653, Pentheus decides to avoid the women tracking him down by going openly; as if ‘going openly’ were any kind of protection! When it comes to wearing women’s clothes he makes a feeble protest that quickly dissolves before his voyeuristic desire to be a spectator of what he imagines will be, in a manner of speaking, voyeuristic, if not pornographic, theatre:

**DIONYSOS** You will be hidden in a hiding place exactly right for one who hides for crafty spying on the maenads.

**PENTHEUS** Oh yes, I imagine they bed like birds in the bushes held fast in the sweetest thralls of sex (955-58)

So we come to the famous robing scene. How do we think about the figure of Dionysos at this point? Esposito talks about the god as if he were Pentheus’ calculating opponent bent on personal vindication. However, I share the view of those who see him as a manifestation of the forces in Pentheus’ own nature, as he is for each character in the play. There is no doubt that in having Pentheus adopt the costume of a bacchant, Euripides gives strong visual expression to Dionysos’ complete divine ascendancy. But the intensity with which Pentheus embraces transvestitism and seeks to imitate his mother and his aunt Io’s demeanour also seem to derive from, and to enact, his own unconscious desire. Some scholars have thought that Pentheus’ behaviour here and elsewhere in the play are uncannily Oedipal; they cite especially his drive to witness the ‘primal scene’ of his mother’s sexuality and beyond that, his extraordinary response to the prospect of regression to infancy and symbiosis with Agave:

**DIONYSOS** You will return here, carried...

**PENTHEUS** You speak of blissful

As well as fussing about the correctness of his maenad’s costume, Pentheus is in the grip of profound visionary, or hallucinatory, experience. He sees two suns and two cities of Thebes, each with seven gates. Dionysos now appears to him ‘as a bull, with two horns’. Pentheus asks, ‘Were you an animal all this time? For now you are certainly a bull’ (921-23). Pentheus imagines he could carry Kithairon with its valleys, the Bacchae and everything on his shoulders. He asks: ‘Shall we bring crowbars? Or shall I use my hands to draw up the mountaintop and set it on my shoulder?’ (950-51). Seaford reads these visions as the mystical experience of an initiate. He writes, ‘Pentheus, like the initiand, sees the strange sights which he should see and accept; and he does so because he is, in a sense, assuming a new identity, being initiated into the thiasos’.

The transvestite Pentheus we now see before us is certainly different to the literal-minded individual who was utterly bewildered by the proposition that a god could take, ‘Whatever form he wished; the choice was his’ (478).

On a psychoanalytic reading we would see the bull vision as an objectification of Pentheus’ bestial, animal impulses. We would remember that when Pentheus had tried to imprison Dionysos in Act 3, he had ended up wrestling

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9 Later in an aside to the audience, the chorus will remind us that he is both the god in disguise and an actor in a smiling mask: ‘O Dionysos, reveal yourself as a bull! a snake with many heads, a flaming lion. Come with smiling face/mask. (1019-21).  

10 Seaford (1981), 260 cites Clement of Alexandria who compares the true mysteries of Christianity with Pentheus’ false pagan vision of ‘two suns and a double Thebes.’

11 Sale (1972), 63-82.
with a bull that was most likely a product of his fantasy. Now, he understands that Dionysus may take the form of a bull, or any form he wishes, and is content to be led and to follow. Finally, is Pentheus’ conviction that he could lift Kithairon the madness speaking? Is it sheer grandiosity? Is it cosmic identification with the earth, perhaps an appropriate identification for an autochthon? Or is it the psychic liberation of an individual who is finally released from all unconscious defenses and repressions?  

Dionysos’ vindictiveness and vengefulness are an oceanic version of characteristics that we have witnessed repeatedly in Pentheus’ personality. It is also the case that ‘Pentheus and Dionysos reveal [indeed elicit] the dark side of each other.’ This insight would be given strong visual emphasis if the two actors were wearing the same mask, which may have been the case. It is entirely possible that the actors playing Dionysos and Pentheus wore the same or similar masks, most likely with a difference in hair length and most certainly a difference of facial expression. We know that Dionysos’ mask has a smile on it throughout the play, the fixed smile of the god, of omnipotence, pleasure and passion and creativity. It is also the smiling comic mask. By the end of the play, the smile is relentless and terrible (439, 1021).

It is a sombre messenger who tells the terrible story of Pentheus’ death. Although the scene is outside the city walls in the untamed forest of Kithairon and the informing metaphors are of hunting, trapping and killing wild animals, the pitch of violence and sadism inspired by Dionysos and enacted by the Theban maenads is beyond anything that happens in hunting of animals for food or safety. It is indeed a revelation of the power and nature of the god, the other dark face of Dionysos. The play’s terrible ending exemplifies human capacity for destructive delusion and psychosis. It reveals the human propensity for mania and the horror and danger of a world where human beings lose touch with reality. Even the mocking, triumphant chorus of Asian Bacchae are finally shocked and repulsed when Agave invites them to share her feasting on Pentheus’ already partly consumed body.

So, is there any catharsis? Does Euripides give us fragments to shore against the ruin? I think he does. Even the shocking revelation of the god’s violence cannot erase the sweetness and blessedness for which the chorus worship Dionysos in the opening hymn. We cannot ignore Pentheus’ moment of clarity and lucidity before he dies: his human understanding of who he is, how he has erred, and what it means after all, to be the son of Agave and Echion (1120-22 cf. 508). And beyond all the horror, Euripides gives an unparalleled portrayal of tender, sensitive and human insight as Cadmus carefully talks Agave back to sanity and the realization of the unspeakable truth. On the other, he conveys Agave’s unshirking recognition of what she has done and acceptance of the pain to which it condemns her (1264-1300). Finally, there is the loyalty and sympathy of a supporting cast of guards, messengers and slaves who are prepared to recognize that: ‘Soundness of mind and reverence for the gods is the most beautiful thing of all’ (1149-50). As is often the case in Greek literature, the human characters ultimately come to a degree of self-knowledge and nobility that is lacking in the god.

12 Dressed as maenads and prepared to dance day and night for the god, Cadmus and Tiresias experience a restoration of their youthful vitality (187-90)
14 As in Peter Hall’s 2002 ‘The Bacchae’ at the National Theatre, London: images of the production can be viewed at: http://www.angelfire.com/zine2/DionysianUnderground/bacchae.htm
15 I have taken a liberty with T.S. Eliot’s climactic line 430 from The Waste Land: ‘These fragments I have shored against my ruins’.
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