

Pentheus (III. 528-733)



Bacchus in his chariot - Virgil Solis, 1514-1562

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Pentheus has listened to Tiresias tell the story of Narcissus, but foolishly mocks the blind, old prophet, who in turn warns Pentheus about the imminent arrival of Bacchus, whose divinity he would deny and for which act he would die, as he finally learns that Tiresias sees things all too clearly. When Bacchus does arrive, Pentheus (531-563) rebukes the citizens of Thebes for allowing their city to be captured by a boy, even sending men to arrest the pretender. Pentheus portrays the god as definitely not male and in fact as feminine, while the citizens forget their origins as men born from a serpent's teeth sown by Cadmus and cede their city to a boy dressed like a perfumed girl.

The men return without Bacchus, but with a young man named Acoetes, who is urged by Pentheus to tell his story. In a long (582-691) and rambling (check the digression on his father and his learning to sail or the crew turning into dolphins) story, Acoetes tells how Bacchus was brought from Chios to Naxos, and how he has been the god's devoted follower since then. Taken off to be tortured at Pentheus' angry order, Acoetes is freed by Bacchus' intervention in a miraculous fashion. Pentheus, driven by more anger, chooses to go to Mt. Cithaeron to see what happens there. Almost immediately he is seen and attacked by the female members of his family, two aunts (one of whom, Autonoe, had lost her son Actaeon to the anger of the goddess Diana, who was accidentally seen bathing by the unfortunate Actaeon); believing him to be a wild boar, the women tear him limb from limb. When his own mother Agave bears Pentheus' head back to Thebes in her mistaken and grisly triumph, the city quickly acquiesces and the women cherish the new rites of Bacchus.

Some obvious points leap out from this story. First, one should not dishonor a god; second, as the point is made in the Bible with regularity, a prophet is often without honor in his native land. Even more so is this true for a previously unseen cousin; Bacchus, the child of Semele who is the sister of Pentheus' mother, returns claiming to be an Olympian god. Bacchus is the last of the Olympian gods and his new rites stirred resentment and prejudice in Greece and in the Roman world, primarily because of their enthusiastic reception by women. Men had great difficulty thinking that anything good would come from women going to a mountain to drink wine and sing and dance in new ceremonies from which most men were excluded. Also worth noting is the verbal attack on Bacchus by Pentheus, which depicts the youthful god as feminine, one who does not like the things of war and dresses in dresses in the manner of a woman. Euripides wrote a tragedy called the *Bacchae*, which is equally horrifying and grim; Ovid was familiar with this work with and follows the story in much the same fashion. Students might want to read the Euripides' version, preferably in the most recent translation available.

Outline:

528-563 At Bacchus' arrival near Thebes Pentheus rebukes his people for welcoming this unmanly new "god."

564-571 His male relatives try to restrain his anger, but it only increases.

572-581 Men return with a Bacchant male prisoner, whom Pentheus orders to speak.

582-691 Acoetes' speech:

582-595 Acoetes tells of his childhood and then relates how he became a ship's captain.

596-604 Acoetes and his men land on Chios

605-649 The crew finds Bacchus, whom Acoetes recognizes as some god, but the crew wants to sell him into slavery and not take him to Naxos as requested. The crew mutinies and Acoetes is replaced violently.

650—657 Bacchus, as if just awakened, asks why they are acting this way towards him. The crew keeps rowing.

658-686 Bacchus stops the ship and turns the crew into dolphins.

687-691 As sole survivor, Acoetes took Bacchus to Naxos and now is his follower.

692-700 Pentheus sends Acoetes off to be tortured but he is miraculously released.

701-707 Pentheus resolves to see for himself what is happening on Mt Cithaeron.

708-733 Seen by his female relatives, Pentheus is dismembered and his head is carried in triumph to Thebes, where the people accept the new god.