

The Bacchantes

Euripides 485/4-406 B.C.

DIONYSUS

Far now behind me lies the golden ground            16

Of Lydian and of Phrygian; far away

The wide hot plains where Persian sunbeams play,

The Bactrian war-holds, and the storm-oppressed

And Asia all, that by the salt sea lies

In proud embattled cities, motley-wise

Of Hellene and Barbarian interwrought;

And now I come to Hellas—having taught            24

All the world else my dances and my rite

Of mysteries, to show me in men's sight

Manifest God.

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O Brood of Tmolus o'er the wide world flown,

O Lydian band, my chosen and mine own,

Damsels uplifted o'er the orient deep            72

To wander where I wander, and to sleep

Where I sleep; up, and wake the old sweet sound,

The clang that I and mystic Rhea found,

The Timbrel of the Mountain! Gather all           76

Thebes to your song round Pentheus' royal hall.

I seek my new-made worshippers, to guide

Their dances up Kithaeron's pine clad side.

*Exit DIONYSUS.*

*Enter CHORUS.*

**CHORUS**

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*Hail thou, O Nurse of Zeus, O Caverned Haunt*

144

*Where fierce arms clanged to guard God's cradle  
rare,*

*For thee of old crested Corybant*

*First woke in Cretan air*

*The wild orb of our orgies,*

148

*The Timbrel; and thy gorges*

*Rang with this Strain; and blended Phrygian chant*

*And sweet keen pipes were there.*

*But the Timbrel, the Timbrel was another's,*

152

*And away to Mother Rhea it must wend;*

*And to our holy singing from the Mother's*

*The mad Satyrs carried it, to blend*

*In the dancing and the cheer*

156

*Of our third and perfect Year;*

*And it serves Dionysus in the end!*

---

*Yea, all men shall dance with us and  
pray,*

*When Bromios his companies shall  
guide*

*Hillward, ever hillward, where they  
stay,*

140

*The flock of the Believing,*

*The maids from loom and weaving*

*By the magic of his breath borne  
away.*

---

*All the Maidens*

*Hither, O fragrant of Tmolus the Golden,*

*Come with the voice of timbrel and drum;*

*Let the cry of your joyance uplift and embolden*

184

*The God of the joy-cry; O Bacchanals, come!*

*With pealing of pipes and with Phrygian  
clamour,*

*On, where the vision of holiness thrills,*

*And the music climbs and the maddening  
glamour,*

188

*With the wild White Maids, to the hills, to the  
hills!*

*Oh, then, like a colt as he runs by a river,*

*A colt by his dam, when the heart of him sings,*

*With the keen limbs drawn and the fleet foot  
a-quiver,*

192

*Away the Bacchanal springs!*

*Enter TEIRESIAS.*

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*CADMUS*

*Where then shall I stand, where tread*

212

*The dance and toss this bowed and hoary head?*

*O friend, in thee is wisdom; guide my grey*

*And eld-worn steps, eld-worn Teiresias.—Nay;*

*I am not weak. [At the first movement of worship his manner begins to change;  
a mysterious strength and exaltation enter into him.*

216

*Surely this arm could smite*

*The wild earth with its thyrsus, day and night,*

*And faint not! Sweetly and forgetfully*

*The dim years fall from off me!*

220

*TEIRESIAS*

*As with thee,*

*With me 'tis likewise. Light am I and  
young,*

*And will essay the dancing and the song.*

*CADMUS*

*Quick, then, our chariots to the mountain  
road.*

---

228

*CADMUS*

232

*Shall things of dust the Gods' dark ways  
despise?*

*TEIRESIAS*

*Or prove our wit on Heaven's high  
mysteries?*

*Not thou and I! That heritage sublime*

*Our sires have left us, wisdom old as time,*

*No word of man, how deep soe'er his  
thought*

236

*And won of subtlest toil, may bring to  
naught.*

*Aye, men will rail that I forgot my years,*

*To dance and wreath with ivy these white  
hairs;*

*What recks it? Seeing the God no line bath  
told*

240

*To mark what man shall dance, or young or  
old;*

*But craves his honours from mortality*

*All, no man marked apart; and great shall  
be!*

244

*Scarce had I crossed our borders, when mine ear*

*Was caught by this strange rumour, that our own*

*Wives, our own sisters, from their hearths are flown*

*To wild and secret rites; and cluster there*

252

*High on the shadowy hills, with dance and prayer*

*To adore this new-made God, this Dionyse,*

*Whate'er he be!—And in their companies*

*Deep wine-jars stand, and ever and anon*

256

260

264

**268**

**272**

**276**

**280**

**284**

**288**

**292**

**296**

**300**

**304**

*LEADER OF THE CHORUS (the words are not heard by PENTHEUS)*

*Injurious King, hast thou no fear of God,*

*Nor Cadmus, sower of the Giants' Sod,*

*Life-spring to great Echîdon and to thee?*

*308*

*312*

*316*

*320*

**324**

**328**

**332**

**336**

**340**

**344**

**348**

**352**

**356**

**360**

364

*Nay, mark me! Thou hast thy joy, when the Gate  
Stands thronged, and Pentheus' name is lifted great*

*And high by Thebes in clamour; shall not He*

368

*Rejoice in his due meed of majesty?*

*Howbeit, this Cadmus whom thou scorn'st and I  
Will wear His crown, and tread His dances! Aye,*

*Our hairs are white, yet shall that dance be trod!*

372

*I will not lift mine arm to war with God*

*For thee nor all thy words. Madness most fell*

*Is on thee, madness wrought by some dread spell,*

*But not by spell nor leechcraft to be cured!*

**CHORUS**

*Some Maidens*

*Thou Immaculate on high;*

*Thou Recording Purity;*

*Thou that stoapest, Golden Wing,*

*Earthward, manward, pitying,*

428

*Hearst thou this angry King?*

*Hearst thou the rage and scorn*

*'Gainst the Lord of Many Voices,*

*Him of mortal mother born,*

432

*Him in whom man's heart rejoices,*

*Girt with garlands and with glee,*

*First in Heaven's sovranity?*

*For his kingdom, it is there,*

436

*In the dancing and the prayer,*

*In the music and the laughter,*

*In the vanishing of care,*

*And of all before and after;*

440

*In the Gods' high banquet, when*

*Gleams the grape-flood, flashed to  
heaven;*

*Yea, and in the feasts of men*

*Comes his crownèd slumber; then*

444

*Pain is dead and hate forgiven!*

---

**SOLDIER**

504

*Our quest is finished, and thy prey, O King,*

*Caught; for the chase was swift, and this wild  
thing*

*Most tame; yet never flinched, nor thought to  
flee,*

*But held both hands out unresistingly—*

*No change, no blanching of the wine-red  
cheek.*

508

*He waited while we came, and bade us wreak*

*All thy decree; yea, laughed, and made my  
best*

*Easy, till I for very shame confessed*

*And said: "O stranger, not of mine own will*

512

*I bind thee, but his bidding to fulfil*

*Who sent me."*

*And those prisoned Maids withal*

*Whom thou didst seize and bind within the  
wall* 516

*Of thy great dungeon, they are fled, O King,  
Free in the woods, a-dance and glorying  
To Bromios. Of their own impulse fell  
To earth, men say, fetter and manacle,* 520

*And bars slid back untouched of mortal  
hand.*

*Yea, full of many wonders to thy land  
Is this man come.... Howbeit, it lies with  
thee!*

---

*PENTHEUS* 568

*And comest thou first to Thebes, to have thy  
God*

*Established?*

*DIONYSUS*

*Nay; all Barbary hath trod  
His dance ere this.*

*PENTHEUS*

572

*A low blind folk, I ween,  
Beside our Hellenes!*

---

*CHORUS*

*A Maiden*

*Oh, where art thou? In thine own  
Nysa, thou our help alone?  
O'er fierce beasts in orient lands*

*Doth thy thronging thyrsus  
wave,* 676

*By the high Corycian Cave,  
Or where stern Olympus stands;  
In the elm-woods and the oaken,*

*There where Orpheus harped of  
old,* 680

*And the trees awoke and knew  
him,*

*And the wild things gathered to  
him,*

*As he sang amid the broken*

*Glens his music manifold?*

684

*Dionysus loveth thee;*

*Blessed Land of Piérie,*

*He will come to thee with dancing,*

*Come with joy and mystery;*

688

*With the Maenads at his hest*

*Winding, winding to the West;*

*Cross the flood of swiftly glancing*

*Axios in majesty;*

692

*Cross the Lydias, the giver*

*Of good gifts and waving green;*

*Cross that Father-Stream of story,*

*Through a land of steeds and glory*

696

*Rolling, bravest, fairest River*

*E'er of mortals seen!*

---

MESSENGER

800

*Our herded kine were moving in the dawn  
Up to the peaks, the greyest, coldest time,  
When the first rays steal earthward, and the rime  
Yields, when I saw three bands of them. The one  
Autonoë led, one Ino, one thine own*

804

*Mother, Agâvê. There beneath the trees  
Sleeping they lay, like wild things flung at ease  
In the forest; one half sinking on a bed  
Of deep pine greenery; one with careless head*

808

*Amid the fallen oak leaves; all most cold  
In purity—not as thy tale was told  
Of wine-cups and wild music and the chase  
For love amid the forest's loneliness.*

812

*Then rose the Queen Agâvê suddenly  
Amid her band, and gave the God's wild cry,  
"Awake, ye Bacchanals! I hear the sound  
Of hornèd kine. Awake ye!"—Then, all round,*

816

*Alert, the warm sleep fallen from their eyes,  
A marvel of swift ranks I saw them rise,  
Dames young and old, and gentle maids unwed  
Among them. O'er their shoulders first they shed*

820

*Their tresses, and caught up the fallen fold  
Of mantles where some clasp had loosened hold,  
And girt the dappled fawn-skins in with long  
Quick snakes that hissed and writhed with quivering  
tongue,*

824

*And one a young fawn held, and one a wild  
Wolf cub, and fed them with white milk, and smiled  
In love, young mothers with a mother's breast  
And babes at home forgotten! Then they pressed*

828

*Wreathed ivy round their brows, and oaken sprays  
And flowering bryony. And one would raise  
Her wand and smite the rock, and straight a jet  
Of quick bright water came. Another set*

832

*Her thyrsus in the bosomed earth, and there  
Was red wine that the God sent up to her,  
A darkling fountain. And if any lips  
Sought whiter draughts, with dipping finger-tips*

836

*They pressed the sod, and gushing from the ground  
Came springs of milk. And reed-wands ivy-crowned  
Ran with sweet honey, drop by drop.—O King,  
Hadst thou been there, as I, and seen this thing,*

840

*With prayer and most high wonder hadst thou gone  
To adore this God whom now thou rail'st upon!*

*Howbeit, the kine-wardens and shepherds straight  
Came to one place, amazed, and held debate;*

844

*And one being there who walked the streets and  
scanned*

*The ways of speech, took lead of them whose hand  
Knew but the slow soil and the solemn hill,  
And flattering spoke, and asked: "Is it your will,*

848

*Masters, we stay the mother of the King,  
Agâvê, from her lawless worshipping,  
And win us royal thanks?"—And this seemed good  
To all; and through the branching underwood*

852

*We hid us, cowering in the leaves. And there  
Through the appointed hour they made their prayer  
And worship of the Wand, with one accord  
Of heart and cry—"Iacchos, Bromios, Lord,*

856

*God of God born!”—And all the mountain felt,  
And worshipped with them; and the wild things knelt  
And ramped and gloried, and the wilderness  
Was filled with moving voices and dim stress.*

860

*Soon, as it chanced, beside my thicket-close  
The Queen herself passed dancing, and I rose  
And sprang to seize her. But she turned her face  
Upon me: “Ho, my rovers of the chase,*

864

*My wild White Hounds, we are hunted! Up, each rod  
And follow, follow, for our Lord and God!”*

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**PENTHEUS**

*It is some compact ye have made, whereby*

*To dance these hills for ever!*

**DIONYSUS**

*Verily,*

*That is my compact, plighted with my Lord!*

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**CHORUS**

*Some Maidens*

**1052**

*Will they ever come to me, ever again,*

*The long long dances,*

*On through the dark till the dim stars wane?*

*Shall I feel the dew on my throat, and the  
stream*

**1056**

*Of wind in my hair? Shall our white feet  
gleam*

*In the dim expanses?*

*Oh, feet of a fawn to the greenwood fled,*

*Alone in the grass and the loveliness;*

**1060**

*Leap of the hunted, no more in dread,*

*Beyond the snares and the deadly press:*

*Yet a voice still in the distance sounds,*

*A voice and a fear and a haste of hounds;*

**1064**

*O wildly labouring, fiercely fleet,*

*Onward yet by river and glen...*

*Is it joy or terror, ye storm-swift feet?...*

*To the dear lone lands untroubled of men,*

*1068*

*Where no voice sounds, and amid the shadowy  
green*

*The little things of the woodland live unseen.*

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*DIONYSUS*

*1132*

*When I look on thee, it seems*

*I see their very selves!—But stay; why  
streams*

*That lock abroad, not where I laid it,  
crossed*

*Under the coif?*

*PENTHEUS*

*1136*

*I did it, as I tossed*

*My head in dancing, to and fro, and cried*

*His holy music!*

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*Euripides. The Bacchæ, translated by Gilbert Murray. Vol. VIII, Part 8. The Harvard Classics. New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909–14; Bartleby.com, 2001.*