

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.

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

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.

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

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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

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324

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332

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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

Hearest thou this angry King?

Hearest 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!”*

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!

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.

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!

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.