

STUDY GUIDE FOR THE BACCHAE BY EURIPIDES

Just two years prior to his death in 404 B.C., Euripides' finished the *Bacchae*, the only extant Greek play featuring the complex Dionysus as the leading character. The play explores the myth of Dionysus' return to his birthplace, Thebes, and the city's rejection of his true divinity. Euripides chose to focus on the dangerous and frightening aspects of the Dionysian cult: the ecstatic passion and the irrational and destructive violence. The god of wine and festivals is not represented as a fun-loving, party god, but as a vengeful, unforgiving and cruel personality.

The play begins with Dionysus' return to Thebes and the conversion of many of the city's women into followers of his "foreign" cult. The image the cult represents is the antithesis of social order and civil obedience in ancient Greece: Women 1) leave their duties as wives and mothers. 2) go to the hills to dance and drink wine. 3) engage in violent rituals including hunting and sparagmos. 4) participate in orgiastic behavior.

All these behaviors are, in some forms and to degrees, socially acceptable for men: Men may 1) leave home to travel, explore or participate in warfare or glorious quests. 2) drink wine. 3) hunt animals and men. 4) engage in adulterous affairs purely for passion and/or sexual pleasure.

Therefore, the cult of Dionysus is a serious threat to social norms and stability. (In 186 B.C. Dionysian cults were temporarily outlawed in Rome.) How political leaders, in this case Pentheus, deal with such an issue is crucial to redirecting the potential violence embodied in unbridled, irrational, passionate behavior.

The play ends with Agave's return to rationality and her subsequent exile. At this point, Euripides portrays Dionysus as completely without compassion for humans. He is the extreme manifestation of irrational behavior, behavior which often has brutal and undeserved consequences.

WHAT DANGERS DOES THE BACCHAE SERVE TO EXPOSE?

HOW DOES THIS PLAY REFLECT THE SPIRIT OF THE FESTIVAL OF DIONYSUS?

DOES THIS MYTH PARALLEL ANY OTHERS TRADITIONS FROM DIFFERENT CULTURES? HOW IS IT DIFFERENT?
...THE SAME?

HOW DOES THE *ANAGNORISIS* SCENE INVOLVING AGAVE DRAW ATTENTION TO THE PREDICAMENT OF WOMEN IN GREEK CULTURE?

HOW WOULD YOU CONTRAST AESCHYLUS' MESSAGE IN THE ORESTEIA WITH EURIPIDES' MESSAGE IN THE BACCHAE?

SOME THEMES AND IDEAS:

- WARNING AGAINST HUBRIS; RELIANCE SOLELY ON THE ABILITY OF HUMAN REASON/INTELLECT.
- ACKNOWLEDGING THE PRESENCE OF THE IRRATIONAL IN THE DUAL NATURE OF HUMANS AND SOCIETY AND THE IMPORTANCE OF MEDIATING BETWEEN THE TWO FORCES.
- THE VALUE OF KNOWING ONE'S SELF AND USING THIS WISDOM POSITIVELY OR NOT. (E.G. PENTHEUS)
- ACCEPTANCE OF THE MYSTERIES OF DIVINITY AS A KIND OF WISDOM. (E.G. TIREISIAS)