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# The Disorderly Women

A Play

John Bowen

A Samuel French Acting Edition

SAMUEL FRENCH
FOUNDED 1830

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For the past, present and
future students of the
London Academy of Music
and Dramatic Art

# FOREWORD

If myths are archetypical (as well as being symbolic accounts of what has actually occurred at times for which almost no other accounts have survived), then they must be relevant, for those societies which have remembered them, as long as they are remembered. Yet at particular times they may seem to have a particularly strong relevance, and it seems that now – April 1969, as I write – is such a time for the myth of the Bacchae. The same month as my own play, *The Disorderly Women*, opened at the Stables Theatre Club, Manchester, the National Theatre, in a programme of experimental plays at the Jeanetta Cochrane, mounted a one-act version by Maureen Duffy, set in a Ladies' Lavatory. The Methuen Playscripts series has an Australian version by Rodney Milgate. A kind of improvised entertainment (in which the audience were encouraged to enjoy the actors in a fuller sense than is usual in the theatre) called *Dionysus 1969* has been playing in New York, and it is not so long since Robert Bolt offered us in *Gentle Jack* his own statement of the myth. Since I greatly admire Mr Bolt's work, even though *Gentle Jack* seemed to me a failure, I used a record by the Manfred Mann Group called *My Name is Jack* to introduce both the acts of my own play. It was a very private joke, and nobody understood it.

Nevertheless, although the idea of an archetype presupposes a general relevance to the human condition, human beings are also particular people, and their ways of interpreting this generality will be different and individual. For the director and cast of *Dionysus 1969*, it seems that the myth of the Bacchae is an expression of joy, showing how sexual reticence and social conformity may be broken down and human beings find the truth about life and themselves in instinctive behaviour. Miss Duffy seems to use the myth as a feminist statement. I myself have presented it as a tragic story, in which a good man, attempting to perform good acts, is destroyed by what during

my schooldays used to be called 'the fatal flaw' in his own nature, in this case by his refusal to accept the imperfectibility of man, his denial both in himself and others of what is instinctive, irrational, irresponsible, selfish and destructive. I have attempted to make explicit what may be implicit in Euripides' play, that the myth of the Bacchae is primarily about the fight between Apollo and Dionysus, in which Dionysus wins.

Put this to someone born after 1945, and he may tell you, 'Quite right. Dionysus ought to win. Instinctive behaviour is what life is for.' My own designer at Manchester, Christopher Hewitt, was in no doubt that the play was saying, 'Dionysus good. Pentheus bad,' and produced an all-grey Thebes in support of his belief. (Eventually we compromised between his view of Thebes and mine by giving Pentheus a rose to wear on the jacket of his costume, and putting something red on each of the desks in the administrative offices.) But I was born in 1924, and grew up in the nineteen-thirties. I am one of those middle-aged liberals in this country, who voted Labour until Hugh Gaitskell died, and have felt politically directionless ever since. I used to believe that most crime was a by-product of poverty, that the idea of social justice and the spread of an education which would teach people to evaluate evidence so as to make their own choices between opposing arguments would cure most political and social ills. I believed that men did not want to hurt each other, though they might be tricked into doing so. When I was a child, E. Nesbit was my favourite author, and by the end of a remarkably protracted adolescence, Bloomsbury and Fabianism had come together to form my beliefs. I believed as Pentheus does:

> 'We are more than animals . . . We have intelligence, forethought and memory. We perceive harmony, and respond to logic. We have compassion and concern: we care for each other. What must the law do, then, but help us to be the difference between men and animals? – to be most truly ourselves. Such laws . . . are made by all men together, in free argument and persuasion. Those who break

> the law must be punished, for they have broken the strength of our city, but none may be punished who has not broken the law.'

and again:

> 'PENTHEUS. We make a good life for our people here. I tried to make you understand that. Nothing in excess. Everything in moderation. Everything works. Everyone has a part to play in the life of the city. Balance. Equality. Freedom under the law. Respect. Even those who do the dirtiest and most monotonous jobs have compensation and respect.
> DIONYSUS. A noble ideal!
> PENTHEUS. Yes. A reasonable society. It's not exciting, but it is noble.'

Well, it *is* noble, but the facts are against it. The facts of Auschwitz, Dachau, Buchenwald, Dresden, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Vietnam are against it, more facts than we know of in the U.S.S.R. and the Chinese People's Republic, more than we know of in Africa, more everywhere. And crime, it seems, is not much to do with poverty. In certain people the predisposition to criminal behaviour is overwhelming, and it is present in us all. Liberal democracy is only one of many ineffective forms of government, and all over the world it is giving way to various forms of dictatorship. Educational opportunity, at least in Britain and the U.S.A. is more widely spread than ever before, and far from wishing to choose between opposing arguments, many of the newly educated refuse even to give a hearing to any argument opposed to their own beliefs, and the reiterated bleating of 'Four Legs good! Two legs bad!' is to be heard, not in *Animal Farm* but at most British universities. If my 1969 self were to return to 1945, it could only say, 'I have seen the future, and it doesn't work.'

*The Disorderly Women*, then, is a work of pessimism, which may help to explain why there are so many jokes in it. At the end, Pentheus is dead, his work undone, and it is clear that Thebes will revert (under the Senior Departmental Secretary) to the dictatorship it was in his father's time. 'Dionysus wins',

but of course 'winning' in social and political terms is meaningless to Dionysus: instinctive behaviour is not concerned with such terms. In a practical sense, Dionysus has 'won' as a child wins when it knocks down building-blocks: someone else has to build the blocks up again, and it doesn't much matter who does it. The victory is what matters: anyone may turn it to account. Pentheus has 'denied' Dionysus – that is, he has denied the strength of instinct both in others and himself, and in consequence 'his own flesh killed him'. Yet instinctive man is still man. Man is a social being, and needs to build social institutions. So over and over again, within each society and within each man, there occurs the Argument I have placed before Act Two of this play. If it were only a two-way argument between the desire to exercise power and the need in any social system for fairness, 'understanding, tolerance, rational thought', then it might be settled, and probably in favour of social justice, but whenever settlement seems likely, the third participant says, 'Your terms have no meaning for me, and I shall destroy the winner.'

I have suggested that much of this may be implicit in Euripides' play, but Euripides never wrote a foreword to the published text of *The Bacchae*, and there is some disagreement about the play's meaning. Mr. Philip Vellacott, in the excellent introduction to his translation of the play for Penguin Books, mentions 'two unsatisfactory theories'. The first is that Euripides, after a lifetime of scepticism, became converted to religious belief, and wrote *The Bacchae* to show what happens to disbelievers. The second is that the play is intended to show how people may be led into dreadful acts by a religious frenzy brought on by misinterpreting natural events as miracles.

But these are extreme views. Leave them aside, and there is still ambiguity. Whether Euripides intended, as Gilbert Murray suggested, to 'glorify' Dionysus, whether an old man, living in exile in Macedonia and bitter at the sophisticated Athenians who had driven him out, found a new delight in nature and was driven to express it in poetry, whether a famous playwright who had found refuge at the court of a rustic king thought it prudent to pick a subject that would

please his patron (for the Dionysus cult entered Greece from the north east), whether nevertheless the end of the play expresses a revulsion from the cult or the conclusion that nature is terrible as well as delightful, whether all these and many whethers besides, it seems to me that the ambiguity in the play arises from Euripides' characterization of Pentheus, whom he presents as an obstinate, choleric and stupid tyrant, no kind of antagonist for a god. There is no 'tragic hero', no 'dramatic conflict', no 'fatal flaw', nothing of that sort. Instead there is, at the *explicit* level, a simple moral tale about a bad man who defies a god, and is most horribly punished. Like Shockheaded Peter and the boy who sucked his thumbs and had them cut off by the Scissors Man, he suffers a punishment altogether disproportionate to the offence. *We* may say that the dramatist deliberately chooses such a victim so that we may feel revulsion for the divine behaviour itself, uncoloured by any feelings of sympathy with the man, but we only have one line ('Gods should be free from human passions' – the passion for revenge in this case) to support us, and we must acknowledge the possibility of other opinions.

Ambiguous plays may be great plays, and *The Bacchae* is one of them, but I did not wish to write *The Bacchae* over again. I have been preoccupied with myth for much of my writing life, as anyone who is acquainted with my novel (and later play), *After The Rain*, and my novel, *A World Elsewhere*, will know: even my first novel, *The Truth Will Not Help Us*, long since remaindered, made an attempt to use history as myth. I wanted to do what Euripides did, what all the Greek dramatists did, what in our own century Giraudoux, Sartre and Anouilh have done, to go back to the myth and write the story in my own way. My Pentheus is very different from Euripides' Pentheus; Tiresias does not appear in my play; Cadmus is no longer the king's grandfather, but has become an old tutor, raised to head the administration of the city when the young king succeeds his father.

Yet anyone can tell that at certain points there are close correspondences between *The Bacchae* and my play. The Policeman's story in Act One is clearly a version of the

Herdsman's speech; some of the Messenger's speech has been given to my Junior Departmental Secretary; Dionysus' speech to the audience at the end of Act One is said to the Bacchae in *The Bacchae*; the Argument Before Act Two, though it expresses three conflicting points of view, has largely been lifted from one of the great choruses. And from the moment that Agave returns, carrying her son's head, *The Bacchae* and *The Disorderly Women* come very close together.

The reason is simple, and not admirable. I carry the wish to write a particular play or novel around with me for a long time, and if at the end of that time (for *A World Elsewhere*, ten years) the wish is still alive, I start to write. When I thought I was ready to write *The Disorderly Women*, I suggested to Norman Ayrton, the Principal of L.A.M.D.A., that I might direct third-year students in a first draft to try it out, and he cheerfully agreed. I began to read seriously. I read all the translations of *The Bacchae* I could find, and Professor Dodds' commentary, and R. P. Winnington-Ingram's *Euripides and Dionysus*, and various general works – Robert Graves' *Greek Myths* inevitably among them – for the myth itself, and I read up on the effect of the hallucinatory drugs, and talked to people who had tried marihuana and L.S.D., and then I started to write.

Meanwhile *Little Boxes* had opened at the Hampstead Theatre Club, and against our expectations transferred to the Duchess Theatre, and for various reasons I found myself far more involved in the mechanics of the transfer and the run than a playwright usually is, and suddenly the day when I must start rehearsals at L.A.M.D.A. was close, and my first draft was nowhere near written.

I took two kinds of remedial action. One was, from my own point of view, entirely successful. The two scenes in Act Two which we called 'Down Memory Lane' and 'Revival Meeting' were the result of a day spent with Agave and the six women, lying in the sun on the roof of the L.A.M.D.A. Theatre, talking, improvising, trying to find out why each woman had decided to drop out. The second action was more desperate, and its benefits were mixed. I patched the other holes in my own draft with pieces of loosely adapted Euripides.

Then I discovered an unexpected disadvantage in this trial run. Sure enough, it taught me what didn't work, and I was able to rewrite all that before the play's first professional production in Manchester. But it also taught me what did work, and I found myself unable to rewrite something which had worked well in performance, simply for the sake of taking it further away from Euripides. I needed a set speech from the Policeman at that point in the play; I needed it to arouse exactly the emotions it did arouse; I needed something which was violent and 'uncivilized', and which also demanded bravura acting to shock both Pentheus and the audience. I was stuck (you should excuse the *jeu de mots*) with some of my patches.

Well, there they are, and if their presence should lead some people to believe that *The Disorderly Women* is no more than a free adaptation of *The Bacchae*, that is the consequence of my own act. But it may be useful for those who wish to read, or act, or attend a performance of my own play, if I mention some of the ways in which the myth itself has led me on from Euripides' treatment of it.

First, the mushrooms. Robert Graves, both in his foreword to the 1960 edition of *The Greek Myths* (Penguin) and at much greater length in an essay, *What Food the Centaurs Ate*, published in *Steps* (Cassell: 1958) has suggested that the worshippers of Dionysus ate mushrooms. The *amanita muscaria* gave them great physical strength so that they were able to tear animals to pieces, and the *panaellus papilionaceus* induced 'harmless and most enjoyable hallucinations'. To discuss the correctness of Robert Graves' theory is not in my province. I used it because it fitted my own way of looking at the myth. Apollonian man makes logical connections, directs his attention outwards, regards others as part of a complex network of social obligations, remembers the past and plans for a likely future: he is the centre of his own world, to be sure, but there is a world for him to be the centre of. Dionysian man (or woman) is the opposite, and the experience provided by the hallucinatory drugs, and particularly L.S.D. *is* opposite: it is private and sensual, and the connections it makes are imagistic, having nothing to do with verbal logic. Where others do enter

the experience, they do so in a Dionysiac way, and the experience becomes a group-experience, as panic is, not a co-operative experience as a committee is. Therefore 'We eat mushrooms'. Therefore the lack of communication when the women try to explain to Pentheus what the experience is like. 'Under the hallucinatory drugs, disassociation of perception is a common phenomenon,' he says: he has an intellectual understanding but he cannot share. And when he is torn to pieces, he still cannot understand what is happening.

It may be objected that those who speak with missionary zeal about the 'mind-opening' qualities of L.S.D. are notoriously pacifists. They tell us that they hate war, and they have not yet been known to tear royalty to bits. But first we should note that to hate war is not the same as hating violence. To wage war means to accept social organization. An army is one of the most intricate social organizations there is.

Secondly, one must remember that to tear someone to bits need not imply the intention to cause pain. Once the concept of cause and effect has gone, the concept of cruelty has gone. Let us take a sequence of events. An arm is pulled off a body. Pretty blood appears, and can be smelt. A noise is heard. Logical Apollonian man calls the noise 'screaming', and makes the connection between the statements, but to a mind that doesn't use logic, they may only be statements of sensation.

You may think it unfair to hippies that I should associate them so firmly with L.S.D., when it is unlikely that all hippies, or even most hippies, take it. But I needed an equivalent to the Bacchae which should both fit the myth and be recognizably a part of our own world in 1969, and the philosophy of the hippies is private, is interior, is anti-social and anti-logical, and does include an approval of the hallucinatory drugs. There is also another way in which hippy life fits the myth. Hippies are not rationalists. They are usually religious people, though their religion is not Christianity, or any other institutionalized religion. Indeed, to talk to a hippy about religion at all is likely to be confusing to a logical person, but what will probably emerge is a mish-mash of Hindu religious philosophy, in which

the most outstanding idea is that, 'God is in everything. Everything is good.'

The hippies, then, get their religious ideas from the East – and Dionysus-worship came to Greece out of the east. Again one may object that (leaving L.S.D. out of the account this time) the belief that 'Everything is good' is innocent and peaceful, not at all violent. 'Everything's good. Morning's good. Food's good. Hot's good. Cold's good. Naked is good. Flowers are good. Shit's good.' – how does this end with tearing someone to pieces? Only extend it – 'Pain's good. Killing's good.' Then we remember that Kali is as much a part of Hindu religious belief as Krishna, and our Apollonian heads may feel a little less secure on our shoulders.

I have suggested (on p. 12) that the argument of the play has three points of view. Again I looked to the myth to provide me with a third protagonist. The view is taken in dialogue by the Senior Departmental Secretary, but the real protagonist does not appear in the play, though his shadow lies heavily over it. This is Echion, the king's father.

The city of Thebes, as the myth has it, was founded by Cadmus, a grandson of Poseidon. The Delphic Oracle told him to follow a cow until she lay down, exhausted, and there to build a city. So he found a cow, and followed her for a long time, and at last she inconsiderately chose to collapse near a spring which was guarded by a dragon. This dragon killed most of Cadmus' soldiers, after which he himself killed the dragon, and was ordered by Athene to plant the dragon's teeth. He did so, and a new army of soldiers grew from the teeth, and at once fell to fighting each other until only five survived. To one of these five, Echion, Cadmus married his daughter Agave.

In fact the myth does not tell us that Echion ever ruled Thebes: Cadmus resigned his kingship directly to his grandson. But I have chosen to depart from the myth, and for two reasons.

The first is contained in a speech of Pentheus to Dionysus in Act One.

> 'My father was a soldier, and I am told, a good one. *He* was the law here in Thebes. Its strength was his strength.

> The city was young, and needed such strength. I honour him. But needs change.'

The reign of Echion stands for a period in the evolution of states which is, of course, longer than the lifetime of one ruler, just as the reign of Pentheus does. The play reminds us that, although states may evolve from such a form of government, they also revert to it, as my city of Thebes is clearly in for another bout of Echion-rule when the play ends.

This is a general statement. Plays may make such statements, but actors cannot act in general terms; they need particularities. So there is also a particular reason for my use of Echion, and it is to do with the characterizations of Pentheus and Agave, and the narrative development of the play. There had to be a reason within his own character why Pentheus should dress up as a woman, and go to the mountain to spy. There had to be a reason below the ostensible reason that she sees only crouching bones and thinks them to be those of a lion, why Agave should tear him to pieces. There had to be something in them both for Dionysus to work on, something that belonged particularly to him.

An actor begins by asking, 'Who am I?' – perhaps that is why so many plays deal with what is called 'the problem of identity'. Suppose we begin by saying to Pentheus, 'You are a king. You are an only son, and unmarried. Your father was a warrior. You believe in peace, in tolerance, in equality under the law, and that those who live under the law should share in making it.' The actor playing Pentheus, the actress playing Agave, certainly the director, must ask, 'Why an only son? Why unmarried?' By asking questions of this sort, always with reference to the text itself, they will be able to find the basis of a sub-text out of which the characterizations will grow.

Such a sub-text will begin with Echion, a rough violent man, an absolute king, who gets one son on his wife, and no healthy children thereafter. He finds his pleasure elsewhere, in the company of soldiers, the practice of war, the enjoyment of easy sexual conquests, leaving her largely without pleasures. The son is taken early from his mother to be taught to be a

king, and reared in a manly way. Agave has been deprived of a child, Pentheus of a mother. He grows to hate his father. More than that, he grows to fear his father in himself, for he knows himself to be his father's son – lust, violence, selfishness, these are his father's characteristics, which he must fight against, both publicly as a ruler and privately within himself. When his father dies, Pentheus has been planning for a long time to reverse his father's policies, and does so.

One might expect mother and son now to be reunited, but this would be to ignore the passage of twenty years. There is a six-year-old Pentheus inside Pentheus which longs for its mother – lusts after her, indeed: Oedipus may not have had an Oedipus-complex, but Pentheus certainly does. But lust must be denied, childishness cannot be acknowledged. As for Agave, she is presented with a well-meaning stranger in his early twenties when what she wants is the six-year-old who was taken away. And in place of the isolation she suffered under Echion, she is presented with the obligations of a Queen Mother in a constitutional monarchy. It is just as lonely, more restricting, and with as little of any real importance to do.

Since Dionysus is a god, we may assume that he knows the sub-text: so he has quite enough to work on in persuading the characters to destroy themselves. And if anyone should object that, as a god, he should not need to work, that a single miracle of some cataclysmic sort should be enough to punish Thebes without putting him to the trouble of impersonating a man and all that follows, then I should answer that the gods do impersonate men (Christ did, for one), and that trapping someone into destroying himself seems to be a favourite method of destruction with them. As for miracles, though they have nearly all been supplied with a rational explanation, I have kept one, which is not in the myth: it is my own small miracle. The music which calls the women to the mountains comes out of the air, and is never explained. I've already remarked that E. Nesbit was my favourite author when I was a child. I enjoy magic, particularly in the theatre.

*London, April 1969* JOHN BOWEN

A first draft of this play was performed by third-year students of the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art in June 1968. The first professional production was at the Stables Theatre Club, Manchester, on February 19th, 1969, with the following cast.

| | |
|---|---|
| FIRST WOMAN SECRETARY AND FIFTH WOMAN | Maureen Lipman |
| JUNIOR DEPARTMENTAL SECRETARY | Richard Howard |
| SECOND WOMAN SECRETARY | Carla Challenor |
| SENIOR DEPARTMENTAL SECRETARY | Robert Morris |
| PRINCIPAL PRIVATE SECRETARY | André van Gyseghem |
| FIRST WOMAN | Celia Hewitt |
| SECOND WOMAN | Ann Rye |
| AGAVE | Maureen Pryor |
| THIRD WOMAN | Marion Winton |
| PENTHEUS | William Roache |
| FOURTH WOMAN | Vivienne Davies |
| POLICEMAN | William Simons |
| DIONYSUS | John Fraser |

The play was designed by Christopher Hewitt, lit by André Tammes and directed by the author.

# Act One

*The actual set will vary according to the type of theatre in which the play is to be played. At the L.A.M.D.A. theatre, where I directed a draft of the play, the audience was in the smaller segment of a circle, with the front row of the audience on the same level as the floor of the stage. At the Stables Theatre Club, Manchester, a traverse stage was used, with the audience on opposite sides and the action between them. Even a picture-frame stage could be used provided that there were some kind of apron to allow the actors to make direct contact with the audience from time to time.*

*What is essential is that there are three platforms, connected to each other, and each higher than the one before. These represent the administrative offices of the city of Thebes. The top platform is the office of King* PENTHEUS, *the middle the office of certain* DEPARTMENTAL SECRETARIES *and the king's* PRINCIPAL PRIVATE SECRETARY. *The lowest platform is where the* WOMEN SECRETARIES *sit.*

*A second essential is a reasonably spacious flight of steps. Where the audience sits in front of the action, these steps can be leading up to the administrative offices. Where a traverse stage is used, the steps are opposite the offices with what is assumed to be a piazza in between. In that case, the steps lead up to a statue of Apollo which is part of the exterior of the City Art Gallery. This separation of steps and offices can also, of course, be used on a stage of any shape.*

*The offices are pastel grey. The desks will need to be small so as to allow as much free movement as possible, and will be relatively uncluttered. Each desk has a touch of red: this will most usefully be provided by a red egg-lamp, extended when the desk is occupied, down when it isn't. The king's office has the largest desk, and a swivel-chair, and an extra chair for visitors. Outside the offices, all is clean and bright and functional.*

*Although whatever is used must work, the set is not naturalistic. No walls divide the offices, and one can speak from the top office down to the piazza if circumstances demand it.*

*There is no curtain. Before the play begins, the set is lit with whatever pre-set lighting the director thinks suitable. All desks are unoccupied.*

*Fade to black-out. During the black-out, the theme music of the play is heard. I myself have used the verse and first chorus of a recording by the Manfred Mann Group,* My Name is Jack.

*Lights on the lower platform. The* FIRST WOMAN SECRETARY *enters, and goes to her place, noticing that the other desks on the platform are empty. She extends her egg-lamp and is preparing to start her working day when Music is heard – the music of a distant flute or piccolo and drum.*

*The music affects her. She is fascinated by it, begins to decide to follow it, then changes her mind as the music stops.*

*The* JUNIOR DEPARTMENTAL SECRETARY *enters, and lights come up on the middle platform as he goes to his desk. Conversation as he passes.*

JUNIOR SECRETARY. Good morning.

FIRST WOMAN SECRETARY. Good morning.

*During the conversation, the* SECOND WOMAN SECRETARY *enters. She also notices an empty desk on the lower platform.*

SECOND WOMAN SECRETARY. She's not back yet?

FIRST WOMAN SECRETARY. No.

*The* SENIOR DEPARTMENTAL SECRETARY *enters, and goes to his desk. Exchange of* 'Good Mornings' *as he passes the two* WOMEN SECRETARIES, *who do not much like him.*

SENIOR SECRETARY (*to* JUNIOR SECRETARY). Good morning.

JUNIOR SECRETARY. Morning.

*As the* SENIOR SECRETARY *is about to sit, the music is heard again. Both* WOMEN SECRETARIES *react to it. Then the* FIRST WOMAN SECRETARY *contracts her egg-lamp, and is clearly about to leave.*

SENIOR SECRETARY. Er . . .

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