

## CHAPTER FOUR

### EURIPIDES AND THE BACCHAE

The conflict between man and gods was not resolved by the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles highlighted this conflict using his ingenious techniques. There was, however, room besides the work of Sophocles for another kind of tragedy: a new generation had grown up and was ready to take up the problems posed by Aeschylus, and grapple with them in a new way. In Sophocles, the awareness of moral and religious problems had temporarily given place to other poetic interests, but now it revived most powerfully in Euripides. The tragic conflict between man and God is to be resumed with unabating vigour. The signal was given by the development of new rationalistic doctrines, which was not completed until Sophocles had passed the prime of his life. Thoughtful men were now seriously contemplating the problem of human life, which they felt, had been concealed from their fathers by the veil of traditional piety; and Euripides, applying the new critical standards to old questions must have felt as if all that have been previously written on the subject must now be rewritten. From time

immemorial, mythical tradition had been the only possible material for poetry. Aeschylus and Sophocles had breathed their very life into it, and its characters were given to work. Euripides, however, did not think and write of mythology alone.

He was put off from it now by the realities of life as they were known by his own age. It is symbolic of the attitude of that peculiarly rational and historic age to mythology that it produced the historian Thucydides, who held that to search for truth was to do away with myths. Jaeger in his Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture elucidates:

This is the spirit which inspired medical research and scientific investigation. Euripides was the first poet who deliberately worked on the artistic principle that poetry should depict reality as he saw it; and since the mythical traditions were at hand, he used them as a vehicle for the new realities as he saw. Had not Aeschylus already transformed the old sagas to suit the ideas and the hopes of his own generation? had not Sophocles been led by the same instinct to humanize the antique heroes? and had not the myths, which seemed to have died long ago in late epic poetry, been amazingly revived in fifth-

century drama through the transfusion of living blood into pale ghostly bodies of a vanished age?<sup>1</sup>

The most influential of the Greek tragedians on later poets, especially on Seneca and the Elizabethans; was Euripides. His portrayal of a tragic hero could be found in many of his extant plays, but the most important of them is The Bacchae, the last of his plays, which was written after his exile in Macedonia and produced posthumously. It was widely acclaimed by many critics as his masterpiece. Muller in his The Spirit of Tragedy states:

For me the greatness of Euripides as a tragic poet rests in a small body of work, in particular The Bacchae.<sup>2</sup>

In this play Dionysus, the god of fertility and wine on one side and Pentheus, the Theban king on the other, were on

ศูนย์วิทยทรัพยากร

จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

<sup>1</sup>Werner Jaeger, trans. Gilbert Highet, Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1945), pp. 342-343.

<sup>2</sup>Herbert J. Muller, The Spirit of Tragedy, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 103-104.

opposite sides of a confrontation. Where Dionysus, a cousin of Pentheus, represents a new religion of modern and radical concepts of what should be the true embodiment of beliefs in man, Pentheus is the conservative, cautious and strictly unbending ruler who wields his authority to uphold the status quo and will accept only things that are tested and found not only pure to his standards, but also not detrimental to the smooth running of the state and established religion.

Dionysus was a nature god; wine was his special gift to men, but he was manifest also in the growth of vegetation and of animals, above all in the tremendous vitality of the bull. Lucas in his The Greek Tragic Poets explains the process of Dionysan worship:

The process of his worship was no decorous ceremonial, as with the established Olympian gods, but a mad communal revel, of which the climax was the rending in pieces of the animal victim and a sacramental meal of the raw and bleeding flesh in which the god's spirit was incarnate. Self-abandon, exaltation, and ecstasy were the accompaniments of this worship, and since women were conspicuous among the god's votaries the opposition of authority to what was regarded as a licentious orgy is easily understood.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> D.W.Lucas, The Greek Tragic Poets, (London: Cohen & West, 1950), p. 190.

Greek legend contained a number of stories of the invasion of Dionysus and of the punishment of those who offered resistance to the commands of the new gods. These stories are probably a piece of genuine folk memory but Lucas maintains that a new faith did enter Greece in these years, and after a struggle a compromise was reached, and a somewhat tamed Dionysus was numbered among the accepted gods; and that he shared Delphi with Apollo, and perhaps gave him the oracle for which Delphi was celebrated.

The rejection of the god by his own kin and his subsequent vengeance was a good theme for a dramatist, and others beside Aeschylus had already used it. Lucas envisages that Euripides' attention may have been drawn to the subject by his visit to Macedonia, where on the barbarian fringe the worship of the god was less restricted and emasculated than in Greek proper. Abandonment of feelings and giving way of raw emotions might be the cure for modern men as well as to the ancient Greeks. To overcivilized man, burdened with an excess of self-consciousness, the primitive can suggest a release from many wearisome complications. Euripides, however, did not seem to be advocating the cause of mass emotion and the submergence of individuality which were the prelude to the

bloody rites of Bacchus. It did not seem altogether true also, that Euripides made the primitive ecstasy of the Bacchanal the theme of his play. It was a vastly different theme that Euripides in all his mastery portrayed--the controversies of his time and man's attempts to resolve the conflicts, the trials and tribulation that test man beyond human endurance and the final heroism of mortals under the god's pressure. Lucas elucidates the theme;

The Chorus and the Herdsman who describes the miraculous activities of the Maenads on Cithaeron, represent with marvellous force and sympathy the excitement, the happiness, and the strength of the worshipper made one with the god. But with bold disregard for conventions of time Euripides introduces ideas which had no place among the savages who received the original revelations of Dionysus. To them the contest between faith and reason meant nothing, for rationalism as a self-conscious force was not to exist for some centuries. But Euripides introduces the controversies of his time in a double aspect; first the clash between tradition, with the claim to possess truths revealed in the first instance by the gods, and reason, which sets itself up as the sole judge of what can and cannot be; the second, he shows rationalism employed in the defence of tradition to explain away those parts which by their crudity offend more sophisticated minds. In order to make room for all this in his play he does not hesitate to represent the religion of Dionysus as a new faith in a new-born god and, in the same breath, as a traditional belief so old as to be "coeval with time"<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Lucas, pp. 191-192

It would be obvious even to a casual observer, that the new religion of Dionysus, with its revelry and orgiastic rituals, could not meet the norms accepted by the Greeks of the day. Even though Dionysus was the product of the royal House of Thebes and of Zeus, the almighty of the gods, this very fact remained unacceptable to the members of the royal household. The very sisters of the wife of Zeus and the aunts of the new god were the original slanderers of Dionysus' deification processes and were scoffing at every facet of the genuineness of the new deity.

Even though these very daughters of the king were being punished severely by Dionysus for this very reason, the form of punishment was the same as the enjoyment of the ritualistic orgies. It would thus seem to Pentheus that his aunts were also believers of the new cult who are indulging in strange, outlandish, and unorthodox ways of worship.

In reality, Dionysus had come to Greece a long time ago and his worship in Greece had lost most of its old fire by the time the play was written. But new faiths still presented themselves advertising bliss for their votaries here and hereafter. The growing inadequacy of the old state religion gave an opening both to scepticism and to more potent

superstitions, just as was the case in Rome four centuries later, which fact was pointed out by Lucas.

In this connection, the same phenomenon was experienced by the inhabitants of the Indian sub-continent about five centuries before the advent of the Christian Messiah when the world experienced an unorthodox preaching which was directly opposite to the multi-deification beliefs of the Hindus and was of such a revolutionary nature that the royal families of the kingdoms around this Being of Enlightenment which included some of His immediate families, refused to accept Him and his teachings for years to come. Likewise, about a millenium later, another revolutionary Prophet appeared in the Middle East area which again promised bliss to his votaries here and hereafter. Again this new religion, which was an off-shoot of the old, was rejected by the staid conservatives of the region and accepted only centuries later by the majority. Inadequacies of the old state religion have a way of giving birth to revolutionary concepts which, when found logical and sustaining, became the accepted beliefs of the future. Hinduism gave birth to Buddhism in India, which was itself nurtured by the old faith until the parting. Judaism gave way to Christianity and thence to the Islamic faith. Both the latter faiths



accepted the old Testament as Scriptures while introducing new and revolutionary concepts which are distinctly novel and different from all that went before them.

New religions were inundating the Hellenistic world at that time and most rulers were suspicious of such cults as all rulers were before them and would be after them. Euripides may have foreseen that the future belonged to the mystery religions. Muller has elaborated this point:

Quite possible he did, for in his last years Athens was invaded by a number of Eastern Gods, including Cybele, Attis, Bendis, Adonis, and Sabazius--the latter an unhellenized form of Dionysus. In any case, his last great play is still more haunting in a historical retrospect. It harked back to the coming of Dionysus, in whose name Greek tragedy arose. It heralded the mighty historic drama of the future, the eventual triumph of the Eastern religions, or specifically of the dying-god of the ancient ritual dramas, with which Greek tragedy died.<sup>5</sup>

Euripides would thus be a harbinger of new religions that would sweep the world in the next centuries for at least two millennia to come. When it did arrive also, the rulers of the state did not welcome new concepts and

---

<sup>5</sup>Muller, pp. 106-107.

behaviour, with open arms. The encroachments of new ideas were resisted and the preachings scoffed at. The rulers of the "civilized world" looked down on the new Messiahs and Their followers. Buddha and his monks were treated like beggars by the kings of many states and Christ and the Disciples were treated in the same way by Middle East rulers. The only difference was that the Messiah of Christianity was crucified and his followers hounded out of many states until final acceptance many centuries later when Christianity became universally believed in those states. Buddha was not treated with respect until many years later, and during that period was treated with contempt as a beggar with a begging bowl, a preacher of harmful theories of proselytizing religion and equating the multi-tiered levels of society in the sub-continent of India. Mohamed was also not taken seriously as a Prophet and was hunted down for heresy and had to flee for his life quite a few times.

Intolerance of new beliefs and the victimization of the Messiah and his followers were not fictionalized by Eripides. It was a fact of the times and would continue for many centuries. Euripides foretold the dire consequences of such confrontations, the frictions that would entail such occurrences and the resolution of the

clash of wills. The confrontation between Dionysus and Pentheus was the outcome of such diametrically opposite points of views and beliefs. Pentheus' first impression of the new religion was the orgiastic revelry of his kith and kin (especially the womenfolk), the court jester's attire of his aged grandfather and the revered soothsayer and general consultant to the throne (who were admittedly planning to join the revelry), and the long beautiful, flowing locks and feminine beauty of the new Messiah. The aim of Pentheus was to eliminate such grossly indecent behaviour. It was the most important and controversial conflict that confronts the new religion with the old and which the Greek world was facing daily during that period. Euripides highlighted man's attempt to resolve the crisis and in so doing showed the triumphs and tribulations in the mortal's conflict with the unequally powered god and finally his defeat. The defeat of Pentheus in no way reflects ignominy or cowardice, but highlights his martyrdom in the cause of his people for whom he laid down his life.

It was most unfortunate from the original meeting that both sides namely Dionysus and Pentheus, considered employing force as a means of subjugating each other. Pentheus tries to imprison the new messiah who is propagating the new

faith, while the new cult leader reveals the powers inherent in him and now bestowed to the groups of his followers. These manifestations of his powers could be seen in the miraculous episodes revealing the supernatural properties of the cult. These magical properties alone would have made a lesser man than Pentheus bow down and accept the god. On the contrary, it made Pentheus, the conservative, all the more suspicious. It was logical and natural for a man like Pentheus to shy away from magicians and sorcerers who wanted to colonise his beloved country and he prepared to resist the unknown force with all his might.

Dionysus also came prepared for the confrontation with his cousin. From the monologue it was clear that he expects to be ill-treated and reveals his plan of action, though not in detail, of the battle to come. G.M.A. Grube in his The Drama of Euripides quotes one of the play's passages in which Dionysus says that if the city of Thebes should seek in anger and by force of arms to drive the Bacchantes from the hills, he will fight the city and lead the maenads in battle. Grube explains at length the attitude of Dionysus from the outset:

Dionysus is proudly insisting that he shall be recognised and worshipped in Thebes at all

costs, but he has not decided that the cost must be high. His concern is to establish himself in Thebes and pass on. Only if opposition to him is violent and unyielding, if Pentheus resorts to force against the Bacchants, will the god array himself against the king. He has not worked out a plan, for, when he is finally defied, he will adopt very different and more cruel means to bring Pentheus to heel. Of the god's greatness there is no doubt, but our feeling about the outcome is one of apprehension rather than horror; the more terrible side of the benign Dionysus is in the background.<sup>6</sup>

Pentheus' non-acceptance of radical beliefs and wild orgiastic rituals could also be justified on the grounds of pragmatism. It is his duty as a ruler of the state to forbid such untested and irregular cults from spreading, even though it might mean his undoing. In another aspect of the working of Pentheus' mind, it could be envisaged that such a bloodthirsty tyrant that could drink warm blood and eat the morsels of quivering, barely succumbed flesh could be a god, is highly improbable in his mind. It was animal traits of the basest kind and to his logic, it could never be that of a god. It could not even be a civilized human being. He was to know at his cost later that the decidedly inferior being was to bring disaster on him. But even if he

-----

<sup>6</sup> G.M.A. Grube, The Drama of Euripides, (New York: Barnes & Noble Inc. 1941), p. 401.

had known that this was his nemesis, Pentheus would not have given way. That is what made this king superior and heroic. It was also the very way that Euripides would have liked us to remember his hero. The way that Euripides strove to expound his ideas of men and gods and the conflict that made up this play could be summed up by the words of Edith Hamilton:

He would never, under any circumstances, in no age have seen mankind as chiefly pitiable. Indeed pity was not a major emotion with him. He had the soldier's temper which faces what is next to come with never a look back to mourn what is past. But even more than this, stamped upon his whole work is the conviction that human beings are capable of grandeur, and that calamity met greatly is justified. Passionate protest against the facts of life is no more to be found in him than in Sophocles, but for a totally different reason: a hero's death awakens neither pity nor indignation.

...Aeschylus disregarded the current religion; Euripides directly attacked it. Again and again he shows up the gods in accordance with the popular conception of them, as lustful, jealous, moved by meanest motives, utterly inferior to the human beings they bring disaster upon, and he will have none of them:

"Say not there are adulterers in Heaven,  
 Long since my heart has known it false.  
 God if he be God lacks in nothing.  
 All these are dead unhappy tales.  
 His final rejection, "If gods do evil then they are not gods," is essentially a rejection of man's creating God in his own image, a practice that was to hold the world

for centuries after him and is today more common than not. So can a master mind outstrip the ages. <sup>7</sup>

Pentheus, Euripides' hero, had a twofold duty in this case. It was not stubbornness and unbending egotism that made him fight a deity. The odds were very great and even though Dionysus did not reveal himself as a god, the miracles that he and his followers performed should point the way to their superhuman powers. The first duty as a defender of the established faith was towards the deities accepted up to that time. They were jealous gods like Jehovah, and His Successors, and if he was found paying obeisance to rivals, especially to those unacceptable to their throng, they would have destroyed him without any mercy. It was not indicated to him by Zeus and his fellow gods from Olympus that Dionysus was a true god and that the stranger with flowing golden locks and girlish good looks in Thebes now was a true representative of the new god. In the absence of irrefutable proof of this nature, Pentheus had to keep an open mind and investigate as much as he could.

-----

<sup>7</sup>Edith Hamilton, The Greek Way, (New York: W.W.Norton, 1983), p. 204.

The other duty that was imposed upon him by the traditional law of sovereignty was that his subjects would accept beliefs that were approved by him as defender of the faith. Any error of judgment on his part would have rendered the uneducated and naive people of his realm a victim of unscrupulous exploitation. It was thus his duty to safeguard and to protect his people from such perils which would have made them saddled with an imposter at the highest religious position. His fears of his beloved people becoming "lotos eaters", by deserting families and revelling incessantly and the dreaded seduction of his womenfolk through "mass hypnotism" of a kind can be seen in the first words of his appearance in the play:

...stories of our women leaving home to frisk in mock ecstasies among the thickets on the mountain, dancing in honor of the latest divinity, a certain Dionysus, whoever he may be! In their midst stand bowls brimming with wine. And then, one by one, the women wander off to hidden nooks where they serve the lusts of men. <sup>8</sup>

Here we can see that Pentheus is not only worried about the morals of his feminine subjects, but also the

-----

<sup>8</sup> William Arrowsmith, trans. "The Bacchae" in Greek Tragedy, eds. David Grene and Richard Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p.202.



dereliction of duties. They desert their homes and husbands, they abandon everything in search of lust and this he could never permit.

As a conscientious ruler and a young man with fixed and high ideals, Pentheus could never accept this radical religion of orgies, temptation and carnivorous savagery which upsets peace and order in his country, easily and immediately. He would have to test it to his own satisfaction and if he made a decision that was to affect his future, his beliefs, and even his immediate family and life, it was his to make and he made it. The decision that he made was made with courage and heroism.

Dionysus' attitude towards Pentheus, his ostensible ruler, was also unwontedly nonchalant and unnecessarily rude. Obsequiousness was not warranted, but as a king, Pentheus was owed certain obeisance which Dionysus refused to offer. Dionysus, not revealing himself as a god, should be more self-deprecating in the presence of a king, and more so in his own ruler's royal presence. Instead his girlish good looks and mocking behaviour aggravated their conflict. Pentheus was a young man and was only human to take offence of young, girlish and insolent cult leaders. If that was

his hubris, he was ready to pay for his flaw. He continued his investigation even to the extent of his dressing up like a woman. It was supposed by some critics that Dionysus influenced his mind to effect that change as Pentheus' prim and proper nature could never have donned on effeminate clothing. Some have blamed an imaginary flaw of an heroic king; namely, that of possessing a prurient mind. I beg to differ from these learned masters. I would rather think that Pentheus, to all intents and purposes, by himself, would have gladly done the impersonation if the resolution of the problem was promised. It shows the grandeur of man's will even to degrade himself for a purpose and not even for himself, but for his people. His pristine and orderly mind would have shirked naturally from such an ordeal, for nowhere in the play was Pentheus' nature shown as a hermaphrodite. He went through to the end, mincing and primping along the way to his destruction, never for a moment knowing that his nemesis was at hand. It was a great scene in which a god chose a mortal as an example to show the world what the result of disobedience to a deity was. Even if he had known that he would die trying, it is very probable that he would try and would have done it all over again once more, given the same chance. Euripides' genius in portraying such a great character was succinctly pointed out by Muller:

The Bacchae could have been written only by Euripides. Whether or not he conceived it as his last testament to Athens, it is the supreme testament of his genius as a tragic poet. Critics have therefore disagreed more radically over its meaning than any other of his plays. Some have read it as the last word of Euripides the rationalist and rebel: the tragedy of King Pentheus, a good Greek who opposed the barbarous orgiastic religion of Dionysus, is the crowning exhibit of the injustice of the gods.<sup>9</sup>

Pentheus, in accepting his duty and acting like a true leader decided like a hero. The consequences of his decision was the loss of his life. The decision was not made for self-glorification. It was made for his country and it was made in the best of intentions. There was no personal benefit to be gained except the performance of his bounden duty and every thing to lose as almost every one he loved and revered were opposed to his stand. This includes his old grandfather, the old king Cadmus, who had offered him the throne, and Teresias, the old friend of his grandfather who was no more a soothsayer in this play but still an advisor and venerable counsellor to the throne. The Chorus with their beautiful lyrics were also warning him against his antagonism towards a deity.

-----

<sup>9</sup> Muller pp. 106-107

The religion of Dionysus corresponds to a fact in human nature no less ineluctable than the existence of certain elemental forces among them, the vine, the power of the vine, the life according to nature, with the mellowing or brutalizing of man. Deny such forces, and there is tragedy; give in to them utterly and tragedy ensues no less. Not here for the first time is Euripides dealing with such a theme; for in almost the earliest of his extant drama. The Hippolytus (also a tragedy in the strictest sense), we saw the inexorable fates alike of him who denied and of her who surrendered to the elemental powers that transcend reason, "nemesis follows 'hybris'".

Greene in his Moirai: Fate, Good and Evil In Greek Thought sums up Euripides' philosophy:

Somewhere between complete surrender to instinct and complete denial of instinct lies the path of "sophrosyne", a law of Zeus which man breaks at his own peril. this is no easy path to find for us who are no longer innocent children but grown up men who have tasted of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil but only by threading warily the maze of instincts and repressions, Euripides would persuade us, can we walk as men who have attained to our full stature, as men who have learned the meaning of "wisdom".  
 ...Euripides above all feels the stinging winds of the world about him. Anger he feels

at the evil, wonder at the good in human life, and compassion with man's striving to rise above circumstances.<sup>10</sup>

Euripides, together with Aeschylus and Sophocles showed the world the magnificence of man when faced with a crisis. The greatness of man as reflected in the decisions made in times of crisis shows that man can be heroic with unequalled grandeur. Self-sacrificing decisions made by these tragic heroes indicate the heights of human spirit. These characters could have taken the easy resolutions of the problems that confronted them. They could have evaded the issues whenever possible or they could have blamed others for their quandaries. None of the heroes cited did so, and none of them escaped the harsh realities of their fates. They faced their destinies with courage and determination. They struggled against the misfortunes with whatever strength and will they possessed. Theirs was a destiny that was popularly believed to be fore-ordained, yet struggle with all their might they did, and in so doing showed the world the tragic heroism that man can attain. W.E.Henley must have been thinking about these extraordinary men when he wrote his immortal poem, "Invictus":

-----

<sup>10</sup>William C. Greene, Moirai: Fate, Good and Evil in Greek Thought, (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), pp. 216-219.

## INVICTUS

Out of the night that covers me,  
 Black as the pit from pole to pole,  
 I thank whatever gods may be  
 For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance  
 I have not winced nor cried aloud.  
 Under the bludgeonings of chance  
 My head is bloody but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears  
     Looms but the Horror of the shade,  
 And yet the menace of the years  
     Finds and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,  
     How charged with punishment the scroll,  
 I am the master of my fate:  
     I am the captain of my soul.<sup>11</sup>



ศูนย์วิทยทรัพยากร  
 จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

---

<sup>11</sup>W.E.Henley, "Invictus" in The Golden Treasury, ed.  
 F.T.Palgrave, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941), p.  
 476.