

The οἶκος and its Destruction in Euripides' *The Bacchae*

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The arrival of Dionysus in Thebes marks the return of a long absent member of the house of Cadmus. As cousin to Pentheus, nephew to Agave, Autonoe and Ino, and grandson to Cadmus, Dionysus returns to his family to correct some grievous errors. His mother was slandered by her sisters and his divinity was denied. Dionysus seeks to restore his mother's good name and establish his rites in the city of his birth. Dionysus must correct this familial crime because it is through the family that he and the other characters affirm their identity. The god will correct his aunts and cousin as well as reveal his divinity through the establishment of his rites. This will function as punishment and revelation. Only Cadmus acts well in worshipping the god, but Pentheus cannot see this; he sees only the ridiculous garb his grandfather dons. Pentheus, however, is irredeemably ignorant of his own family. In trying to preserve its dignity, he ends up destroying it. He is murdered at the hands of his mother in the culmination of the Dionysian ritual, the *σπαραγμός*, the ritual rending of a sacrificial victim. There we see the whole family dissolved so that Dionysus might remove himself from it and preserve the dignity fitting for a god. As the patriarch, Cadmus is left to account for the sins of his family, while being spared by his marriage to Harmonia. The royal house of Thebes suffers from internal corruption deriving from ignorance of itself. In denying each other, the members of the house of Thebes end up destroying each other.

The Bacchae begins with the proem of Dionysus in which the god lays out the context of the dramatic action. We must pay special attention to these 63 lines, for they tell us what crimes have thus far been committed, the consequences that follow from them, and the justification and reasons that Dionysus employs. Dionysus tells us why he has come to Thebes and what he is going to do now that he has arrived.

Dionysus begins his speech by identifying himself through his lineage. The first three words of the play are Ἔκω Διὸς παῖς,¹ ("I have come, the son of Zeus"). Dionysus' bold introduction and declaration of identity derive from his parentage. The god emphasizes this throughout the play, accusing the other characters of denying his divine heritage, that Zeus was indeed his father and the consort of his mother Semele. Dionysus continues to identify himself by turning to the other side genealogy and his birth. He declares that he was born by the daughter of Cadmus, Semele. Dionysus has similarly strong feelings about his mother, coming to Thebes in order to defend her good name from the slander of her sisters.

¹ 1. Unless otherwise noted, all citations refer to the line numbers in: Euripides, *Bacchae*, ed. E.R. Dodds (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960). All translations are my own working from the Greek text of Dodds' edition (1960).

Semele bore Dionysus “giving birth by the lightning-flashing fire”² This miraculous birth is in many ways the locus of the whole play. It defines both the god and the problem that must be resolved. Dionysus is characterized by the contradictions and mutually exclusive qualities that he holds within himself. This lightning bolt epitomizes this double-nature of Dionysus. Martha Nussbaum describes it as “a birth that brings death, a fertility that is blazing destruction... The event also combines ecstasy with fatality.”³ The genesis of Dionysus both gives and extinguishes life. It is both one thing and its opposite, much like the god himself.

Further, it is this miraculous thunder-strike that is the contested question of the drama. Dionysus has arrived to correct a most erroneous bit of hearsay. His own family denied that this was the moment of his birth, instead saying that it was divine retribution for claiming to be the consort of Zeus. Dionysus will reveal their folly and prove to the whole city that his mother was indeed married to Zeus. This is his motivation for coming to Thebes. It is fitting, then, that the ruins of Semele’s memorial should remain onstage throughout. The whole play takes place under their auspices. Nussbaum comments, “The still-smoldering tomb is the setting for the play’s action. The spectators watch it throughout, reminded by that monument of a contact between civilized human life and what is other than, outside of, civilization.”⁴ Dionysus is right to draw attention to this memorial from the beginning. The lightning death-birth highlights both the double-nature that characterizes the god and the play’s action as a whole, as well as reminds us why Dionysus has come to Thebes in the first place: to correct a most grievous slander.

The grave of Semele lies onstage next to the ruins of her home. Having arrived in Thebes, Dionysus tells us, “I see this here memorial of my thunderstruck mother near the home and smouldering ruins of the house.”⁵ The proximity of the tomb to the home should be ominous to the audience. It highlights the link between this divine instantiation and the οἶκος. As our discussion of *The Bacchae* will show, this link is at the very heart of the matter. The unity of the οἶκος and its well-being are precisely what are at issue in the dramatic action. Here onstage we see that Semele’s union with the divine proved to be too much. In her apprehension of Zeus’ divine figure, both she and her home were destroyed, leaving nothing but ruins, a reminder and a warning to others.

This tomb is a monument to a divine crime. Dionysus describes this very tomb as “the undying outrage (ἀθάνατον ὕβριν) of Hera against my mother.”⁶ The ruins are a token of the ὕβρις that Hera committed against Dionysus’ mother. Dodds tells us that “Hera tempted [Semele] to require Zeus to appear to her in his true form.”⁷ Bound by a promise made to his mortal lover, Zeus promptly appeared as a lightning bolt and killed

² 3: “λοχευθεῖς ἀστραπηφόρῳ πυρί.”

³ Martha Nussbaum, “Introduction,” in *The Bacchae of Euripides*, trans. C.K. Williams (New York: Farrar, Straus, Girous, 1990), xiv.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ 6-7. “ὄρω δὲ μητρὸς μνήμα τῆς κεραυνίας τόδ’ ἐγγυὸς οἴκων καὶ δόμων ἐρείπια τυφόμενα.”

⁶ 9.

⁷ Euripides, *Bacchae*, pg. 64, Dodds’ commentary on line 9.

her. In a play littered throughout with acts of ὕβρις, it is telling that the inaugural event of the dramatic action should itself be ἀθάνατος ὕβρις. Crime is piled upon crime by the scepticism of Semele's sisters. Their denial of this ὕβρις is itself hubristic. Dionysus's arrival is also a response to ὕβρις.

Dionysus is not, however, angry with everyone. At least one man has thus far escaped his ire. After reflecting briefly on the tomb, Dionysus says, "I laud (αἰνῶ) Cadmus, who made this here ground untrodden, the burial place of my mother."⁸ Cadmus has honoured his daughter and by extension also Zeus and Dionysus. He made the site of Semele's death and Dionysus' birth hallowed ground, bringing honour to the god and consequently earning his favour. In fact, Dionysus even adds to the good work that Cadmus has already begun; he tells us, "I covered [the tomb] all around with the grapy foliage of the vine"⁹ One good deed deserves another and Dionysus' addition is nothing short of applause for Cadmus' initiative. Dionysus delights in the good standing that Cadmus has accorded him and praises him for it.

We should not try and read subtleties and careful qualifications into αἰνῶ. It is plain and simple that Dionysus favours the old man. There is no mention whatsoever in Dionysus's opening speech of anger against Cadmus. In these 63 lines, Cadmus is mentioned six times. The first instance I have just mentioned. Next he is mentioned on account of his σοφίσματα,¹⁰ but this is not Dionysus's terminology, but that of his daughters who pay him no respect. He is mentioned twice only to specify his daughters.¹¹ At line 43 Dionysus reports that Cadmus has handed over the "honour and tyranny" (γέρας τε καὶ τυραννίδα) to Pentheus. The final mention comes at line 61, where Dionysus mentions Thebes as the Κάδμου πόλις. The only mention of Cadmus that bears any weight is the first, in which Dionysus praises the old man. In a speech that is largely spent cataloguing the various crimes committed against the godhead, surely Cadmus would be charged had he committed any wrongdoing. We should conclude from this that Cadmus remains in his divine grandson's good books.

After outlining his travels from the east all the way through Ionia to Greece, Dionysus tells us why he has begun to initiate his rites here in Thebes. Thebes shall be the first of Greek cities because of the dishonour that his aunts have brought against him, his mother and Zeus. He begins here because "my mother's sisters, who least of all ought to, said that I, Dionysus, was not born of Zeus, but that Semele, wedded by some mortal, attributed to Zeus the mistake (ἁμαρτίαν) of the bedroom."¹² His aunts, Agave, Autonoe, and Ino, slandered their sister by claiming she hid her youthful error with the clever excuse that Cadmus provided. Because they are Semele's sisters and Bacchus's aunt, their crime is all the more grievous. They are obligated to know their family well and

⁸ 10-11.

⁹ 11-12: "ἀμπέλου δέ νιν πέριξ ἐγὼ 'κάλυψα βοτρωῶδει χλόη."

¹⁰ 30.

¹¹ 35, 37.

¹² 26-29.

preserve its dignity. Although extra-familial ignorance is also not permissible, it is less serious. Their ignorance of their only family is a grave violation for which they must atone. The honour of Semele has been besmirched and along with it that of her husband and son. The bond of family serves to unite the honour and dignity of its members so that slander of Semele also slanders Bacchus.

The dignity of the family is thus shared because one's identity is derived from one's family. As we have already seen, Dionysus identifies himself by outlining his lineage. Dionysus is who he is by virtue of the identities of his mother and father. To say nothing of the familial addresses peppered throughout the play (e.g. *πατέρα τε μητρὸς τῆς ἐμῆς*¹³), identity is established and restored through familial appeals. Pentheus exhibits this twice. First, he asks the stranger to identify himself. He says, "so first tell me who you are with respect to your family (*γένος*)."¹⁴ In seeking to know who the stranger is, the question inevitably turns to his *γένος*. Dionysus, of course, hides his identity by dodging the question, mentioning nothing of his family but instead saying where he came from.¹⁵ At the end of this same discussion, Dionysus calls Pentheus' identity into question. He tells the agitated king, "You do not know what you live (*ὄ τι ζῆς*), nor what you do (*ὄ δρᾶς*), nor who you are (*ὄστις εἶ*)."¹⁶ To this Pentheus responds by declaring his ancestry: "Pentheus, son of Agave and my father Echion."¹⁷ In asserting himself and who he is, Pentheus turns to his family. There he finds the context to ground his identity and establish his person. Pentheus' person is deeply grounded in who his mother and father are.

Agave too takes recourse to her family to establish her identity. Upon her return from Cithaeron, Agave is still mad and possessed by Bacchus. Raving and delighting in her glorious hunt, she has forgotten the face of her own child, mistaking it for a lion. Despite the anguish that will follow, Cadmus tries to end her unfortunate frenzy. He tells his daughter to look up at the sky and thus begins her release from the Bacchic possession. The brightness and translucence (*λαμπρότερος ἢ πρὶν καὶ διειπετέστερος*¹⁸) signal the beginning of the change. Free from her stupor, Agave is now *ἔννοος*¹⁹ and has the capacity to think, yet she has still not fully recovered. Agave's full identity does not return to her until Cadmus reminds her about her family. He asks her, "To what home (*οἶκον*) did you go after the wedding?" and "What child (*παῖς*) came to be in your home by your husband (*πόσει*)?"²⁰ Recalling Echion and Pentheus, Agave finally reclaims her mind and herself. Through recollection of her husband and son, Agave is able to recover

¹³ 250.

¹⁴ 460.

¹⁵ cf. Euripides, *Bacchae*, pg. 135, Dodd's commentary on line 461.

¹⁶ 506.

¹⁷ 507.

¹⁸ 1267.

¹⁹ 1270.

²⁰ 1273, 1275.

her identity; that is to say, her identity is grounded in her familial relations, without which she is simply not herself.

We see then why familial dignity is so crucial in *The Bacchae*. The family is crucially linked to identity; the οἶκος grounds who a person is. Accordingly, an attack on the honour and dignity of the family is quickly and easily extended to the constituent members. If someone neglects the reputation of their family, they also neglect their own dignity. Accordingly, when Semele's own sisters slander her, their crime is all the more egregious. They violate their own family and they violate themselves. Because the slander comes from within his own family, Dionysus is all the more affronted. That the corruption is internal also heightens its indignity. One way or another, Dionysus must resolve the dishonour that Agave and company have caused. He must reveal himself in Thebes first because the issue is most paramount here.

Dionysus' solution to this problem is to initiate his rites, the function of which is to reveal the god. In coming to Thebes, Dionysus will excite the city with Bacchic cries, dress it in fawn skins and equip the enchanted with thyrsos.²¹ The purpose, Dionysus tells us, is to teach the city about his godhead: "For it is necessary that this here city learn well (ἐκμαθεῖν), even if it does not wish to, since it is uninitiated in my Bacchic rites (Βακχευμάτων), and that I speak in defense (ἀπολογία) of my mother."²² In defending his mother's honour (and his own), he teaches the city his divinity. This instruction will take the form of initiation into his rites. The performance of the rites will be that very instruction. Only when the whole ceremony is complete will the city be initiated and the god revealed.

The other violation of which Dionysus here speaks is that of Pentheus. Having received political office from his grandfather Cadmus, Pentheus "fights against the gods (θεομαχεῖ), particularly me, and banishes me from libations."²³ Pentheus will not allow the Dionysian rites to be established in what is now his city. Dionysus tells us that for this reason he will reveal himself a god to this man and to the city.²⁴ Put otherwise, he will introduce his revelry on the mountain, complete the ceremony, and thus teach the city his godhead. Dionysus will have one response to the crimes of both his aunts and his cousin. By completing the hilltop ritual, Dionysus will exact justice and save his dignity.

Following the first choral ode, the next scene presents Cadmus and Teiresias preparing to revel on the mountain. Despite its humour, this scene presents us with some serious considerations. Teiresias represents to an extent a sophistic approach to religion. Winnington-Ingram deftly argues that Teiresias is a clever speaker whose arguments resemble those of fifth century sophists. As a point of example, the distinction he makes between the wet and dry principles resembles the argumentative techniques of Prodicus.²⁵

²¹ 23-25.

²² 39-41.

²³ 45-46.

²⁴ 47.

²⁵ R.P. Winnington-Ingram, *Euripides and Dionysus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948), 48.

Yet we should not dismiss Teiresias' position altogether on account of this sophistry; he still has important insights. Teiresias is quite right when he justifies his and Cadmus' revelry by saying, "The god does not distinguish, neither if it necessary for the young to dance, nor for the older."²⁶ This claim is confirmed by the first messenger speech.²⁷ Teiresias' sophistry has some understanding of the revelries, though it is limited. Teiresias is also right to claim that only he and Cadmus are in their right minds. He tells Cadmus, "We alone think well (εἴ ῥονονοῦμεν), the others think badly."²⁸ As Cadmus points out, they are the only two remaining in the city that go dancing on the hilltop.²⁹ The city can be divided into three groups: all the Theban women, who are possessed by Bacchus and dance and rave on the hilltop; Teiresias and Cadmus, who go willingly (albeit laughably) to dance; and every other male in Thebes, who refuse to acknowledge the god and remain indignant in the city and whose figurehead is the pitiable Pentheus. In their willing worship Teiresias and Cadmus run the course between raving madness and θεομαχεῖν. They neither impiously rail against the god nor are completely overrun out of their minds. Between the two extremes, they find a narrow path of correct worship. These two alone think well.

The major objection to the claim that Cadmus worships correctly is that in the conclusion he is punished. Presumably Dionysus punishes him for his weak faith that is grounded not in true devotion in the godhead but in a desire for family honour. The question of Cadmus' punishment is a puzzling one, and no doubt this is the most tempting response. Ultimately, however, this explanation does not satisfy the play. As mentioned above, at the outset of the play Dionysus has no qualms with Cadmus. In his list of grievances he nowhere mentions the old man. If Cadmus' crime was so minor as not to be mentioned, surely it would not justify his lamentable fate, even for such an excessively just god as Dionysus. We should not, however, explain this away by claiming Cadmus' weak faith is a recent development. Teiresias shows up at his door dressed for the occasion, saying, "He knows the things on account of which I have come and the things which I, an old man, planned (ξυνεθέμην) with the older man."³⁰ They planned this sojourn into the mountains as soon as the Bacchae showed up in Thebes. Cadmus' desire to bring his family honour by declaring Dionysus a true god is not something devised on the spur of the moment, but is a longstanding practice, going back to the consecration of Semele's tomb. If this was not a crime during Dionysus' opening speech, it is surely not a crime now. In fact, Dionysus even praised such practice (αἰνῶ δὲ

²⁶ 206-207.

²⁷ The messenger sees among the possessed Theban women "young, old and unmarried maidens" (νέαι παλαιαὶ παρθένοι τ' ἔτ' ἄζυγες), 694.

²⁸ 196.

²⁹ 195.

³⁰ 174-5.

Κάδμω³¹). It is perfectly acceptable to Dionysian judgement to honour one's family for pragmatic reasons. He is willing to accept such worship, regardless of its genuineness. To be sure, however, Cadmus' piety is derived from family honour. There is no contesting that. In trying to persuade Pentheus, Cadmus is more than willing to concede his doubts: "Even if he is not a god, as you say, let it be said by you: and lie nobly (καταψεύδου καλῶς) in order that Semele might seem to have borne a god, and honour (τιμῆ) come to us and our family (γένει)." ³² Cadmus's intentions are here revealed. He is concerned with the dignity of his family. Nor is this simply a ploy to convince Pentheus; 150 lines earlier when speaking with Teiresias alone, Cadmus says that he must magnify the god "since he is the son of my daughter" (ὄντα παῖδα θυγατρὸς ἐξ ἐμῆς³³). We see, then, that Cadmus really does worship Dionysus out of familial interest, but also that this is no crime in the eyes of the god.

Yet despite Cadmus's good intentions, Pentheus cannot tolerate this undignified activity. Seeing his own grandfather dressed up in such ridiculous garb, he shouts out "a big laugh!" (πολὸν γέλω³⁴), but this is a laugh not of mirth, but embarrassment.³⁵ He objects, asking Cadmus to leave the revelry. The indignity of the Bacchic paraphernalia is fitting neither for such age nor for the royal house. Pentheus feels that Cadmus' willingness to worship Bacchus will bring shame to his kingship. Pentheus is unwilling and unable to see the benefit that Bacchic worship would bring on his family and so objects. In doing so, however, he ends up undermining the very reputation he seeks to protect. He derides his own family and brings shame upon them all. By rejecting his grandfather and the worship of Bacchus (to say nothing of accusing his own mother of adultery), Pentheus divides and fragments the structure of his own οἶκος. Pentheus' familial failings are manifest.³⁶

The ridicule with which the king attacks his family is quickly returned in kind. After threatening to bear arms against the worshippers on the mountain, Pentheus is bewitched by Bacchus. The god 'convinces' the king to put on the female garb of a bacchant and to march up into the mountain. Feebly attempting to maintain his dignity, Pentheus offers some weak objections, but these are no match for the god's power.³⁷

³¹ 10.

³² 333-336.

³³ 181.

³⁴ 250.

³⁵ Winnington-Ingram, 47.

³⁶ Recall that in trying to persuade his grandson to leave off θεομαχεῖν, Cadmus recounts the story of Actaeon. Actaeon was torn apart by the dogs he himself raised because he claimed to be a better hunter than the goddess Artemis. The resemblance between the story of Actaeon and that of Pentheus is uncanny. Winnington-Ingram remarks, "Actaeon, like Pentheus, was a grandson of Cadmus, and had already met a terrible death... Artemis, like Dionysus, takes a cruel revenge for a slight... The scene is Cithaeron (1291); not only does διεσπᾶσαντο (339) relate to the *sparagmos* of Pentheus, but ὁμόσιτοι (338) suggests the omophagy of 138" (26 n. 4). Winnington-Ingram continues at some length, but suffice it to say that the list of similarities is extensive. The model for Pentheus' behaviour should be his own cousin, but he suffers from a serious case of familial ignorance.

³⁷ Euripides, *Bacchae*, pg. 176, Dodd's commentary on lines 821-838.

Pentheus and the audience both know the getup to be ridiculous, worthy of πολλὸν γέλω. Dionysus justifies it to the king by saying that the women would kill him otherwise.³⁸ This is, of course, a thin excuse. When Pentheus and Dionysus do reach the mountain, the young king does not approach the women in the open as the god advised,³⁹ but instead the two of them hide and keep silent.⁴⁰ Such hiding makes the costume thoroughly useless. If Pentheus does not parade openly as Dionysus earlier advised, there is no need for the costume nor even any pretense. Nor is the costume able to deceive any of the bacchantes for even a moment, for as soon as they see Pentheus in the tree, they begin to tear him out of it.⁴¹ The only function of the costume is to provide a laugh. Instead of taking the back road as once planned, Pentheus decides through the heavy influence of Dionysus to go “through the middle of the land of Thebes.”⁴² Pentheus is put on display in his ridiculous costume so that Dionysus might destroy his dignity.

Pentheus is brought up to the top of Cithaeron not only so that Dionysus can destroy the king who θεομαχεῖ, but so that he can complete the ceremony that will reveal him to all of Thebes. On Cithaeron, Pentheus will serve as the sacrificial victim in the παραγωγός that completes the Dionysian ritual.⁴³ Much like the cattle in the first messenger speech, Pentheus is torn limb from limb by the possessed women. They are completely overtaken by Dionysian ecstasy and complete their mountaintop celebration with a ritual rending. Dodds remarks that this culminating ritual, often linked with ὠμοφαγία, is “a rite in which the god was in some sense present in his beast-vehicle and was in that shape torn and eaten by his people.”⁴⁴ Pentheus here plays the role of the beast-god sacrifice, having become a lion in the eyes of the Bacchae.

First and foremost, Pentheus is killed by his own mother. When Pentheus falls to the ground, “first his mother, as the priestess of the slaughter (ιερέα φόνου), began and fell upon him.”⁴⁵ She leads the charge and is the head bacchant in this παραγωγός. When the chorus questions her, she notes that she was the first to attack: “the honour was mine first” (πρῶτον ἐμὸν τὸ γέρας⁴⁶).

This death marks the full and complete revelation of Dionysus. As argued above, the Dionysian ritual will serve as punishment, instruction and revelation. Dionysus will prove himself a god through the completion of this ritual. The chorus most of all know this. Upon hearing of Pentheus’ death, they immediately exult: “Oh lord Bromius, you

³⁸ 823.

³⁹ 817.

⁴⁰ 1050.

⁴¹ 1088ff.

⁴² 961.

⁴³ Euripides, *Bacchae*, introduction by Dodds, xvi.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, xvii.

⁴⁵ 1114-1115.

⁴⁶ 1179.

are revealed a great god!”⁴⁷ This is revelation and evidence that allows the chorus to openly and certainly declare that the godhead is now manifest.

This murder, however, marks not only the revelation of Dionysus, but also the destruction of the good order of the οἶκος. She who was to care for Pentheus more than anyone becomes the agent of his death. Instead of safeguarding his life and rearing him, she has torn him apart. With this death, not only has Agave committed the most egregious of crimes, but the family has come to an end. Cadmus tells her that he is now “bereft of male children” (ἄτεκνος ἀρσένων παίδων⁴⁸). There are no more heirs for Cadmus; his line will end. Pentheus is presented as the limit to the Cadmean line and now he is dead. This οἶκος has been completely and utterly destroyed.

Nevertheless, we must note that not all of Cadmus’ male descendants have perished. Dionysus remains more alive than ever. Technically, Cadmus still has one male heir, though he is a god. Cadmus has not, however, simply made some clerical error and forgotten to count his third grandchild. His desire to worship Dionysus depended specifically on counting him among the family. Additionally, Dionysus is now more manifest than ever; we get the impression that Cadmus has lost any secret scepticism about the god’s existence that he might have earlier harboured. In his lament, Cadmus even recognizes that Dionysus was a part of their family: “The lord god Bromius has destroyed justly (ἐνδίκως), but too much, although he was a part of our family (οἰκεῖος γεγώς).”⁴⁹ In calling himself ἄτεκνος, Cadmus is deliberately omitting Dionysus from the family register. He counts him no longer among his grandsons, though he did so some thousand lines earlier.

Dionysus has destroyed the family and dissolved its structure. In doing so, Dionysus has removed himself from the organization, renouncing his membership to the house of Cadmus. The whole family was bent on slandering each other, undermining one another’s dignity, and consequently attacking themselves. Dionysus could not tolerate his godhead being violated so egregiously, yet as long as he remained a member of the family the violation would continue. In order to free himself from disgrace unbecoming of a god, Dionysus destroyed the family while at the same time removing himself from their ranks. Because he dissolved this οἶκος, Dionysus was liberated from it.

Cadmus on the other hand, remains the only member of the family who has not yet committed a crime. As mentioned above, we cannot claim his ‘weak faith’ is an affront to Dionysus because the god himself does not consider it an affront. Cadmus is instead punished because he is held accountable for the actions of his family and city because he is the patriarch of both. The actions of one member of the family reflect on the others and the ὕβρις against Dionysus must be atoned for. The other side of his family—that of Ares—spares him in the end and brings him to the Isle of the Blessed.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ 1029.

⁴⁸ 1305.

⁴⁹ 1249-1250.

⁵⁰ 1339.

Cadmus expresses some regret at this fate, wishing he too could be rid of his family and go to Acheron instead.⁵¹ But unlike Dionysus he may not remove himself from his own οἶκος; such a luxury is reserved for the gods alone.

In coming to Thebes, Bacchus desires both to rebuff the attacks on his divinity and to correct the slander against his mother. He does so by revealing himself through instruction and initiation into his Bacchic rites. The shared honour of the οἶκος demands that he come to his mother's aid and that the house of Cadmus be dissolved. Although Cadmus acts prudently in worshipping the God out of familial interests, his daughters and his grandsons are not so careful. Their ὕβρις leads them to slander Semele. Such an attack on their own sister and aunt amounts to an attack on their own home and honour. By bringing Pentheus to the mountaintop as the victim in the παραγμός, Dionysus is able to complete the ritual and reveal himself, while at the same time dissolving the thoroughly corrupt house of Cadmus. He removes himself from this mess and leaves Cadmus to account for its sins. The sum of this Theban mutual-rejection is the total annihilation of the οἶκος from which only the divine escapes.

⁵¹ 1362.