

## SCENE SELECTION 1: 1-75 (PROLOGUE, DIONYSUS)

(Dionysus enters.)

**Dionysus:**

Here I am, Dionysus, Zeus's son,  
the god whom Semele, the daughter of Cadmus,  
birthed, with a bolt of lightning for a midwife.<sup>1</sup>  
I am back home in the land of Thebes.

My sacred form exchanged for this mere mortal  
disguise, I have arrived here where the Springs  
of Dirce and the River Ismenos<sup>2</sup>  
are flowing. I can see my lightning-blasted  
mother's tomb right there beside the palace,  
and I can see as well her former bedroom's  
rubble giving off the living flame  
of Zeus' fire—Hera's immortal grudge  
against my mother. I am grateful Cadmus  
has set the site off as a sanctuary  
to keep her memory. I am the one  
who covered it on all sides round with grape vines  
and ripe grape clusters.

I have left behind  
the gold-rich countries of the Lydians  
and Phrygians, the Persians' sun-struck plains,  
the battlements of Bactria, and passed through  
wealthy Arabia and Asia Minor,  
where, all along the salty ocean, towns  
with handsome circuit walls enclose non-Greeks  
and Greeks alike. I came to this Greek city  
first of all, made it dance and established  
my rituals so that the people here  
see my divinity with their own eyes.

I have compelled this town to rant and howl,  
dressed it in fawnskin, put my sacred staff  
into its hands, my ivy-vested spear,  
and all because my mother's sisters claim  
that Zeus is not the father of Dionysus—

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<sup>1</sup> Zeus incinerates the pregnant Semele when he reveals himself to her in his full glory. His lightning is thus, metaphorically, "midwife" to the fetal Dionysus when he is born, prematurely, for the first time. Zeus then stitches this fetus into his thigh and brings it to term.

<sup>2</sup> Dionysus continues to establish that Thebes is the setting by referring to well-known geography. The daughter of the river god Achelous, Dirce was a devotee of Dionysus, who caused a spring to jet forth where she died at Thebes. "Dirce" is often used metonymically to refer to the city of Thebes. Having its headwaters in the western foothills of Mount Cithaeron (see note to line 74), the Ismenos flowed east past the town of Thebes, before turning north and emptying into Lake Hylica.

how could they speak such slander? They allege  
some mortal sired the child on Semele,  
and she blamed Zeus for her disgraceful error  
on Cadmus's advice. That's why (they say)  
Zeus smote my mother with a lightning bolt—  
because she lied about the pregnancy.

So I have made them crazy in revenge,  
driven them from their homes, and they, unhinged,  
have occupied a mountain. I have forced them  
to don the vestments of my rites. In fact,  
the women of Thebes—all of them, every one—  
under my influence have fled their homes  
in madness. Mixed among the daughters of Cadmus,  
they lounge about in broad daylight on cliffs  
beneath the green fir trees. Since Thebes is still  
ignorant of my rites, it needs to learn them—  
even against its will. I must defend  
the honor of Semele by teaching mortals  
it was a god she bore to Zeus.

What's more,

Cadmus has handed down the privilege  
of kingship to his grandson Pentheus,<sup>3</sup>  
who, as I see it, wars against the gods—  
he bars me from the honors owed to me  
and never names me in his prayers. My godhood  
therefore must be driven home to him  
and all of Thebes. I will be off again,  
once matters have been settled here, to show  
my glory elsewhere. If the city of Thebes  
attempts to rout the Maenads<sup>4</sup> from the mountain  
with spears and anger, I shall lead my Bacchants  
against it like a general. To that end  
I have disguised my superhuman form  
beneath the trappings of a mortal man.

(A chorus of Bacchants from Asia enters. Dionysus turns and addresses them.)

You who have left Mount Tmolus,<sup>5</sup> the bulwark

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<sup>3</sup> With his wife, Harmonia, Cadmus, the founder and first king of Thebes, has four daughters (Semele, Autonoe, Ino, and Agave) and one son, Polydorus, who is banished. In this play Cadmus has abdicated and handed royal authority over to his grandson Pentheus, the son of Agave.

<sup>4</sup> Maenads and Bacchants are both ecstatic worshippers of Dionysus. The terms are interchangeable, though "Maenad" emphasizes their madness. Both Maenads and Bacchants typically wear fawn-skin clothing and carry a sacred fennel staff (a *thyrsus*). They at times weave live snakes into their hair, as described in lines 109-10.

<sup>5</sup> Mount Tmolus (modern Bozdağ in Turkey) rises to 3,725 feet. It was in the ancient kingdom of Lydia, and the Lydian capital, Sardis, was at its base. It is "sacred" to Dionysus as the Lydian Bacchants do their "mountain-dancing" on it.

of Lydia, all you devotees whom I  
have led out of exotic lands to serve  
as fellow travelers in peace and war,  
take up the drum they use in Phrygia,  
the one that Rhea and myself invented,<sup>6</sup>  
and gather round the royal house of Pentheus!  
Beat time until the townsfolk understand!  
I meanwhile will go up to Mount Cithaeron,<sup>7</sup>  
join my Bacchantes and enjoy their dances.

(Dionysus exits.)

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<sup>6</sup> The sister and the wife of the Titan Cronus, Rhea is associated with Crete in that she conceals the infant Zeus, her son, from Cronus there. She is assimilated with the Phrygian goddess Cybele and, in this guise, is the focus of ecstatic worship, in which the flute and the tympanum (a hoop covered by hide) are the most common instruments. We are given an etiology (origin story) of the tympanum at lines 127-32.

<sup>7</sup> Cithaeron is a mountain ten miles south of Thebes; it rises to 4,623 feet. The roughly ten-mile-long range to which it belongs marks the physical boundary between Boeotia in the north and Attica in the south.

## SCENE SELECTION 2: 398-445 (STASIMON 2, CHORUS)

### Chorus:

#### Strophe 1

Sanctity, you queen of gods, as you  
go flying over earth on golden wings,  
do you take in the sacrilegious things  
King Pentheus has been promulgating, how  
he scorns the Roaring God, Semele's son,  
who, during banquets decked in bright bouquets,  
is first among the blest divinities?  
He has the power to bring outsiders in,  
to laugh when pipes play and to deaden care  
when grape-joy visits sacred feasts  
and the abounding wine-bowl casts  
sleep over men with ivy in their hair.

#### Antistrophe 1

An unchecked mouth and wild stupidity  
mean ruin, but a peaceful, prudent life  
remains untossed by storms and keeps homes safe.  
Although the gods live far away on high,  
they watch the deeds of mortals all the same.  
Smart talk is hardly wisdom; it's unwise  
for men to think big and forget their place.  
Our lives are short. Given our dearth of time,  
who, in pursuing all-too-distant goals,  
would lose out on what lies at hand?  
That way of living, to my mind,  
is for misguided dolts and crazy fools.

#### Strophe 2

I want to go to Cyprus, island of  
The foam-born goddess,<sup>8</sup> where the gods of love  
reside, the sweet bewitchers of our wits;  
to Paphos, where a hundred rivulets  
water the plain and there are no rain showers.  
Bull-Roarer, Keeper of Ecstatic Powers,  
and Leader of Bacchants, take me to sublime  
Pieria where Muses spend their time,<sup>9</sup>  
to a divine Olympian mountain slope.  
There, there at last we Bacchants will have scope

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<sup>8</sup> Aphrodite, whose name means "goddess of the foam" (*aphros*), had a major center of worship on Cyprus at Paphos, a city on the island's southwest coast. In this "escape-prayer," the Chorus members wish they were rather at the eastern edge of the Greek world (Cyprus) in the company of agreeable deities.

<sup>9</sup> Pieria, a region in ancient Macedonia, contained a spring, the Pierian Spring, sacred to the Muses. It is on a slope of Mount Olympus, which marks the northern edge of the Greek world.

to hold, among the Graces and Desire,<sup>10</sup>  
the secret rites whose celebrants we are.

#### Antistrophe 2

Our son of Zeus delights in feasts, and Peace,  
the youth-nurse, the purveyor of success,  
is precious to him. He distributes wine,  
the grief-cure, both to blest and unblest men.  
Oh, but Dionysus can despise  
the stubborn ones, the people who refuse  
to live their whole existence, every day,  
every sweet night, in a state of joy  
and fail to keep the thoughts that make one wise  
safe from the prying of inquiring eyes.  
What simple people practice and believe—  
that's what I welcome, that's the way I live.

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<sup>10</sup> The Graces (*Charites*) are three daughters of Zeus who embodied the joys and pleasures of life. Desire (*Pothos*) is an allegorical deity of sexual attraction. Traditionally part of Aphrodite's retinue, they are here added to the train of Dionysus.

### SCENE SELECTION 3: 465-537 (EPISODE 2, PENTHEUS AND THE STRANGER)

**Pentheus:**

Release his hands. The prey is in my net,  
and he is not so swift as to escape me.

(Turning to The Stranger)

Well, stranger, you are hardly unattractive,  
to women—that's why you have come to Thebes.  
Your hair is far too long to be a wrestler's—  
look how it flows down past your cheeks, abounding  
in lust. And your complexion, look how fair  
you keep it—by design, no doubt. No, no,  
it's not by daylight but at night that you  
go hunting Aphrodite with your beauty.

First of all I must know your ancestry.

**The Stranger:**

An easy answer that I freely give you:  
I'm sure you've heard of flowery Mount Tmolus.

**Pentheus:**

Yes, its spurs surround the city of Sardis.

**The Stranger:**

That's where I come from: Lydia is my homeland.

**Pentheus:**

From what source come these rites you bring to Greece?

**The Stranger:**

From Dionysus son of Zeus—he taught me.

**Pentheus:**

Is there some Zeus out there who sires new gods?

**The Stranger:**

No, he's the Zeus who lay with Semele.

**Pentheus:**

Did Bacchus find you in a dream or waking?

**The Stranger:**

We saw each other when he gave the rites.

**Pentheus:**

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Yes, these rites of yours—what is their nature?

**The Stranger:**

Only initiates may know about them.

**Pentheus:**

How do they benefit those who observe them?

**The Stranger:**

It's not for you to know, but they are worthy.

**Pentheus:**

You shaped your answer smartly just to tempt me.

**The Stranger:**

The godhead's rites detest impious men.

**Pentheus:**

What does he look like, since you say you saw him?

**The Stranger:**

However he wishes—I do not control him.

**Pentheus:**

You dodge again by saying nothing smartly.

**The Stranger:**

The wise come off as foolish to a fool.

**Pentheus:**

Is this the first place you have brought the god?

**The Stranger:**

No, all of Asia dances in his honor.

**Pentheus:**

Because they think far worse than do we Greeks.

**The Stranger:**

In this case better. But their ways are different.

**Pentheus:**

Do you observe these rites by day or night?

**The Stranger:**

Mostly at night, since darkness makes them solemn.

**Pentheus:**

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That's a licentious trick designed for women.

**The Stranger:**

People can shame themselves by daylight, too.

**Pentheus:**

You'll pay for your evasive clevernesses.

**The Stranger:**

And you for your thick-headed blasphemy.

**Pentheus (aside):**

A brash Bacchant, and not unskilled in speaking.

**The Stranger:**

Tell me: what awful punishment is mine?

**Pentheus:**

First I will cut off those luxuriant curls.

**The Stranger:**

My hair is holy: I grow it for the god.

**Pentheus:**

Next, you will give that fennel staff to me.

**The Stranger:**

You come and take it—it belongs to Bacchus.

**Pentheus:**

We will hold you locked up under guard.

**The Stranger:**

The god himself will free me when I wish.

**Pentheus:**

Call on him from your cell next to the Bacchants.

**The Stranger:**

He's near us now—he sees what I endure.

**Pentheus:**

Where is he, then? My eyes cannot discern him.

**The Stranger:**

Where I am. You, a godless man, are blind.

**Pentheus (to the guards):**

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#### SCENE SELECTION 4: 786-880 (EPISODE 3, PENTHEUS AND THE STRANGER)

**Pentheus:**

The Bacchants' outrage like a conflagration  
blazes near us now, a great disgrace  
in Greece's eyes. There must be no delay.  
You go to the Electran gate<sup>11</sup> and muster  
the infantry, the cavalry who ride  
on swift-hooved steeds, the bearers of the light shield  
and all those men who make the bowstring sound.  
There will be all-out war against the Bacchants!  
No, we cannot endure continuing  
to suffer what we suffer from these women.

**The Stranger:**

You've heard me speaking, Pentheus, and yet  
you just won't change your mind. Though I have suffered  
ill-treatment from you, still I will advise you  
not to take up arms against a god.  
Keep calm; the Roaring God will not abide  
any attempt to drive his tribe of Bacchants  
down from the mountains that resound his name.

**Pentheus:**

Don't lecture to me. You have once escaped  
the chains we bound you in, protect your freedom.  
Or should I punish you a second time?

**The Stranger:**

Rather than fighting angrily against  
the goad that drives you, you should, as a man,  
offer up sacrifice to him, a god.

**Pentheus:**

I'll give him sacrifice—blood-sacrifice  
of women, that's what they have earned. I'll spatter  
lots of it all along Cithaeron's valleys.

**The Stranger:**

You and all your soldiers will be routed.  
It will be shameful when the Bacchants use  
their fennel stalks to break your bronze-backed shields.

**Pentheus (to the guards):**

How slippery is this stranger I am wrestling!

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<sup>11</sup> Thebes, in myth, has seven gates, each with a name. Ancient sources attribute the name of the "Electran gate" to an Electra who is the sister or mother of Cadmus (see note to line 53).

Doing or suffering, he just won't hush!

**The Stranger:**

My friend, you still can fix this situation.

**Pentheus:**

How, though? By taking orders from a slave?

**The Stranger:**

No need for spears: I'll bring the women here.

**Pentheus:**

Nonsense. That's just a ploy you are devising.

**The Stranger:**

What ploy? This is the one way I can save you.

**Pentheus:**

You've schemed to dance forever with the Bacchants

**The Stranger:**

Yes, if that scheme's our pact with Dionysus.

**Pentheus:**

(to the guards)

Servants, my armor!

(to the Stranger)

You there, shut your mouth!

**The Stranger:**

Ah!

You want to see them gathered in the mountains?

**Pentheus:**

Greatly. I'd pay a ton of gold to see them.

**The Stranger:**

What, has so great a lust to see them struck you?

**Pentheus:**

It would disturb me if I saw them drunk.

**The Stranger:**

Still, you would gladly see what might 'disturb' you?

**Pentheus:**

Yes, if I sat there hushed beneath the pine trees.

**The Stranger:**

They will hunt you if they catch you spying.

**Pentheus:**

Openly, then: you give me good advice.

**The Stranger:**

Come, let me guide you. You will make the journey?

**Pentheus:**

Take me there now, right now—I just can't wait.

**The Stranger:**

First, you must don a gown, a long and sheer one.

**Pentheus:**

What, must I play a woman and not a man?

**The Stranger:**

Yes, otherwise the women there will kill you.

**Pentheus:**

A prudent warning! You are always clever.

**The Stranger:**

Yes, the god I serve has taught me well.

**Pentheus:**

How can we put your teachings into practice?

**The Stranger:**

Let's go inside, and I will dress you up.

**Pentheus:**

What kind of clothes? A woman's? Shame forbids it.

**The Stranger:**

So you no longer burn to see the Maenads?

**Pentheus:**

How exactly do you plan to dress me?

**The Stranger:**

First I will stretch your close-cropped hair out long.

**Pentheus:**

What will come next, my costume's second part?

**The Stranger:**

A gown down to your ankles, then a headband.

**Pentheus:**

Will you give me something more to wear?

**The Stranger:**

A spotted fawnskin and a sacred staff.

**Pentheus:**

I just can't bear to put on woman's clothing.

**The Stranger:**

There will be bloodshed if you fight the Bacchantes.

**Pentheus:**

Yes, I should go and scout them out beforehand.

**The Stranger:**

That's wiser than pursuing bad with worse.

**Pentheus:**

How shall I go in secret from the townsfolk?

**The Stranger:**

Through empty streets—I'll be the one to guide you.

**Pentheus:**

That's better than the Bacchantes laughing at me.

**The Stranger:**

Let's go inside and get you all dressed up.

**Pentheus:**

Wait. I myself will choose what's best for me.

**The Stranger:**

Of course. My aid is wholly at your service.

**Pentheus:**

Let's go in. I will either march out dressed  
in weaponry or yield to your advice.

(Pentheus enters the palace followed by the guards)

**The Stranger** (to the chorus):

Women, our net is closing round the man.  
He will go join the Bacchantes where his sentence,

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death, will meet him. Everything depends  
on you, now, Dionysus—you are near.  
Come, let us punish Pentheus. First, though, drive him  
out of his wits, afflict him with a dizzy  
insanity. If he is in his right mind,  
he won't agree to put on women's clothing;  
but, driven far outside his senses, he  
will put it on. I want the people of Thebes  
to laugh at him as he is led through town  
in feminine attire, because of all  
the ugly threats he made. Now I will go  
dress Pentheus in the gown that he will wear  
to Hades' house,<sup>12</sup> slain by his mother's hands.  
The man will learn that Dionysus is  
a god indeed, a god most dangerous  
to mortals, though he can be very gentle.  
(The Stranger enters the palace.)

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<sup>12</sup> Refers to the underworld and, more generally, death.

## SCENE SELECTION 5: 881-924 (STASIMON 3, CHORUS)

Chorus:

*Strophe*

Should I, my roused feet gleaming, dance all night  
in sacred exaltation? Should I shake  
my neck in dewy air, exultant like  
a fawn that dashes through the green delight  
of meadows? She has shaken dread pursuit,  
slipped from the hunters and their woven nets.  
Their leader spurs the mastiffs on with shouts,  
but she, in headlong haste, with storm-swift speed,  
races beside the river, through the plain,  
relishing her escape from men,  
exulting in the thickets of the leaf-dark wood.

*Refrain*

What, then, is wisdom? What finer prize  
do gods bestow on humankind  
than to hold a mighty hand  
over the heads of enemies?  
People always should acclaim  
whatever gives a noble name.

*Antistrophe*

The gods are slow to mete out discipline  
but certain when they strike. They come down hard  
on those who live in foolish disregard  
and those mad souls who outrage the divine.  
While hunting down unholy men,  
how cleverly they hide the slow way time  
moves ever onward. One must never scheme  
anything that would overthrow their laws.  
It costs so little to believe that all  
that is divine is powerful,  
that every sacred inborn edict never dies.

*Refrain*

What, then, is wisdom? What finer prize  
do gods bestow on humankind  
than to hold a mighty hand  
over the heads of enemies?  
People always should acclaim  
whatever gives a noble name.

Epode

Happy the man who cruises to a dock  
after a stretch of nasty weather.

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Happy the man who overcomes hard luck.  
One person will surpass another  
in this or that, in wealth or influence.  
A thousand souls, a thousand different plans.  
Some end up prosperous;  
others only fail. I say  
that man is a success  
whose life is happy day by day.

## SCENE SELECTION 6: 1268-1384 (EPISODE 6, CADMUS and AGAVE)

### **Cadmus:**

Follow along behind me, servants, lugging  
the burdensome remains of Pentheus  
inside the palace. After looking for him  
endlessly, after endless toil, I found  
his body strewn all over Mount Cithaeron.  
The forest proved an awkward place to search,  
and no two pieces lay in the same place.  
When I had left the Bacchants and returned  
inside the city walls with old Teiresias,  
I learned of what my girls had perpetrated,  
so I had to go back up the mountain  
and gather up the boy the Maenads killed.  
There I saw Ino and Autonoe,  
both of them still out of their minds, still raving  
among the thickets. Someone said Agave  
was gallivanting homeward like a Bacchant—  
news that now has proved to be correct,  
since I can see her, an unholy sight.

### **Agave:**

Father, you have the right to boast, and loudly,  
that you have sired by far the greatest daughters  
in all the world. Yes, all of us are great,  
but me especially: I left the shuttle  
and loom behind and rose to greater things:  
hunting a savage beast with my bare hands.  
Look what I'm holding in my arms—a trophy  
worthy to be nailed up on your roof.  
Come take it in your hands and celebrate  
the hunt and ask your friends to feast with us.  
You are a very blessed man because  
we have accomplished deeds of such renown.

### **Cadmus:**

A grief past measure. Can you not perceive  
the crime you and your sisters have committed  
with your appalling hands? You are inviting  
the gods and me and Thebes to take part in  
a handsome sacrifice indeed. I grieve  
first for your miseries, then for my own.  
The god has justly but excessively  
destroyed our house, whatever we deserved.

### **Agave:**

Here among humankind old age is always

sour and peevish-faced. I wish my son could, like his mother, be a consummate hunter whenever he goes off with young men chasing wild beasts. But, no, he's only good at waging war on gods. Talk to him, father. Will someone please go summon Pentheus so that he can admire my lucky catch?

**Cadmus:**

Ah, if you ever grasp what you have done, how great will be the torment you will suffer. But, if you stay just as you are forever, though you will not be truly fortunate, you will at least not ever feel accursed.

**Agave:**

What here is not quite right? What here is painful?

**Cadmus:**

First, direct your gaze up to the sky.

**Agave:**

I have. What do you want me to observe?

**Cadmus:**

Does all appear the same to you or changed?

**Agave:**

The sky is brighter than before and clearer.

**Cadmus:**

And is there still a fluttering in your mind?

**Agave:**

I don't quite understand you but I think I'm coming round. My former thoughts have altered.

**Cadmus:**

Will you listen well and answer clearly?

**Agave:**

Father, I can't recall what I was saying.

**Cadmus:**

Whose house became your own when you were married?

**Agave:**

Echion's, they say, a Sown Man's house.

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**Cadmus:**

Who was the son you bore there to your husband?

**Agave:**

Pentheus, my son and Echion's.

**Cadmus:**

Whose head is there, the head between your hands?

**Agave:**

My fellow hunters said it is a lion's.

**Cadmus:**

Look rightly. Does it seem to be a lion?

Agave:

What's this I see? What's this that I am holding?

**Cadmus:**

Look at it closely; understand more clearly.

**Agave:**

I see great agony. Oh, I am wretched.

**Cadmus:**

Does the head still seem to be a lion's?

**Agave:**

Oh, wretched! It is Pentheus' head.

**Cadmus:**

I mourned the loss before you ever knew it.

**Agave:**

Who murdered him? Why is he in my hands?

**Cadmus:**

Sad truth, you have come round with ugly timing.

**Agave:**

Speak. My heart leaps up to hear what's coming.

**Cadmus:**

You killed your son—you and your sisters killed him.

Agave:

Where did he die? At home or somewhere else?

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**Cadmus:**

Where Actaeon was shredded by his dogs

**Agave:**

Why did my curst son go to Mount Cithaeron?

**Cadmus:**

To ridicule both god and ritual.

**Agave:**

But how did all of us end up there, too?

**Cadmus:**

You were all raving, you and the whole city.

Agave:

Bacchus has destroyed us—now I know.

Cadmus:

You angered him when you denied his godhood.

Agave:

Father, where is my son's dear body now?

Cadmus:

Here—I have gathered it with difficulty.

Agave:

Has it been pieced together, limb to limb?

*[Cadmus' reply and most of Agave's subsequent speech are missing from the text.]*

Agave:

Why did he have to share in my mistake?

Cadmus:

Pentheus, like the rest of you, did not  
respect the god and so the god has linked you,  
all of you, in one catastrophe,  
one that has ruined both my house and me.  
I never had a son and now have seen  
your fruit, poor woman, the product of your womb,  
murdered in utter shame and agony.  
Grandson, daughter's child, in you the house  
had learned to see again. You were protecting  
our lineage from decay. The city feared you.  
When you were present, no one dared disparage

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my age, since you would surely make him pay.  
I will be cast out of the house, shamed—me,  
Cadmus the Great, who sowed and harvested  
the handsome crop that is the people of Thebes.

*(to the remains of Pentheus)*

Child most dear to me (since you are still  
among those whom I hold most dear to me),  
how will you stroke my beard now, hug me, call me  
grandfather and inquire, “What man has wronged you?  
Who has offended you? What wicked person  
has pained your heart. Tell me, and I will punish  
the perpetrator.” No, I now am helpless;  
you are dead; your mother pitiable;  
her sisters wretched. If there is a man  
who doubts the gods’ existence, let him look  
upon this man and know that they are there.