

The Madmen of the Greek Theatre. By J. R. GASQUET, M.B.*(Continued from page 482 vol. xviii.)*

No. 4. PENTHEUS AND THE BACCHÆ.

The tale of Pentheus had long been familiar to the Greeks, and had been already handled by Æschylus, when Euripides was led to undertake it. Towards the end of his life he resided at the court of Archelaus of Macedon, and was evidently greatly impressed by the fresh scenery and customs which came before him; like a true poet, he was inspired by these to choose a theme in which he might best represent his newly gained experience, and produce one of the most striking and beautiful of his plays, in which both the subject itself and his mode of treating it are to my purpose.

It describes an attempt made by a King of Thebes to check the worship of Dionysus (Bacchus) in his dominions, and the fate which it drew down on him.

Such legends, which are to be found in Homer, as well as in later Greek writers, no doubt have an historical basis, and testify to forcible resistance against the demoralizing effects upon women of orgies introduced from the East. So far, I go entirely with Mr. Gladstone in his excellent account of the Dionusos of Homer,* but I doubt if there are grounds for following his belief that the novel features connected with this god are merely the use of wine by women, and the excitement thus occasioned. We know, indeed, from other sources than those relied upon by him, that the mysterious power of certain intoxicating drinks had long before led the Indian Vedas to extol the Soma-juice as their chief sacrament, and had ended at last in the deification of Homa among the Parsees;† and this would account for the most prominent feature of Dionusos-worship as derived from India; but it offers no explanation of its occasional and epidemic character. It is more probable that, as the Asiatic Bacchus was primarily “simply the God of excitement or enthusiasm, whether physical, mental, or religious,”‡ so the Bacchanalia were festivals in which, under the influence of wine, dancing

* “Studies on Homer,” vol. ii., p. 265, sqq. *Juventus Mundi*, cap. 8, sec. 16.

† Döllinger. “Gentile and Jew,” vol. i., p. 400.

‡ Paley. Introduction to Bacchæ. Horace, *Carm.* ii., 19, iii., 25.

and other potent causes of excitement, women were wrought into a state of enthusiasm which was considered religious. That this should frequently pass on into positive madness, all who have read the accounts of the flagellants in the middle ages, or of camp-meetings and revivals in modern times, will readily suppose; but unless we remember that to religious excitement were added in Pagan times all the varied stimulants of licensed vice, we can hardly believe that the Bacchanalia implied, for many hundred years, a recurrence, at stated intervals, of epidemics of insanity among such as joined in them. The evidence for this is abundant; to take merely such authors as come first to hand, the philosophers of Greece * speak casually of the madness of the Bacchanalia as a matter of course; many centuries later Roman historians do the same,† the Christian apologists tax the heathen with permitting it, and the defenders of polytheism admit the imputation.‡ Considered from this point of view, the Dionysiac festivals have a close relation to my subject. They are most prominent instances of the way in which Paganism, by giving a religious character to the lowest instincts of our nature, both laid the foundations of a madness and produced outbursts of frenzy which were more foul and frequent than we, who live in a world tempered by Christianity, can well conceive. The true history of these epidemics of religious madness in the ancient world has yet to be written; I may not dwell on it now any longer, but I cannot refrain from quoting a fragment from the most vivid and faithful description in our language of some such procession.

“ There you might see the devilish emblems of idolatry borne aloft by wretches from the great Punic Temple, while frantic forms, ragged and famished, wasted and shameless, leapt and pranced around them. There, too, was a choir of Bacchanals ready at a moment with songs as noisy as they were unutterable. And there, moreover, was a band of fanatics, devotees of Cybele, or of the Syrian Goddess, if, indeed, the two rites were distinct. They were bedizened

* Plato, *Phædrus*, *Leges*, ii. Aristotle, viii. *Pol.* 6.

† Hispalas' speech, in Livy's account of the suppression of the Bacchanalia in Rome, is well worth notice; so, too, Tacitus' casual remark, “*Bacchæ sacrificantes vel insanientes*” (xi., *Ann.*, 31).

‡ Especially remarkable are the words of St. Clement of Alexandria (*Cohort*: ad *Gentes*, cap. 2). *Διόνυσον μανιώλην ὀργιάζουσι Βάκχοι ὁμοφαγία τὴν ἑερομανίαν ἀγοντες*. See, too, St. Augustine, *Civ. Dei*, vi. 9, vii. 21, xviii. 14.

with ribbons and rags of various colours, and smeared over with paint; they had long hair like women, and turbans on their heads; they pushed their way to the head of the procession, being quite worthy of the post of honour, and, seizing the baker's ass, put their goddess on the back of it. Some of them were playing the fife, others clashing cymbals; others danced, others yelled, others rolled their heads, and others flogged themselves."*

It was with some such frenzy as this, the play tells us, King Pentheus had to deal, and in resisting it he met his death. He had succeeded to the throne of his grandfather, Cadmus, who was still living, and, through him, was of kin to Bacchus, whose mother, Semele, was a daughter of Cadmus. His character comes out well in the play as that of a quick, imperious, decided man, accustomed to absolute rule, and determined to preserve public order in his dominions. Bacchus came from Eastern lands, and visited Thebes to take vengeance upon the sisters of his mother Semele, because they had slandered her, and denied his own divine origin. One of these sisters, Agave, was the mother of Pentheus, and she, with all the women of the race of Cadmus, had been driven forth by a madness sent from the God, and impelled to join the Bacchic orgies on Mount Cithæron; for Pentheus himself a heavier punishment has been prepared, should he persist in disregarding the divine power. Teiresias, the blind old prophet, and the aged Cadmus himself, are going out hand in hand, crowned with ivy, and thyrsi in their hands, to join the Bacchanals on the mountain, when they meet the King, who has been much disturbed at finding the women have left their homes and have gone forth to join in these sham orgies to the new-fangled god Dionysus, which, he thinks, are a mere pretext for excesses of all kinds. He has first determined that his mother and her sisters, as the chief offenders, shall be most severely punished; and he is even more troubled at what he considers the folly of these two venerable old men. They endeavour to persuade him to join them, but their arguments only serve the purpose of showing that he is confirmed in his impiety, for he gives orders for the destruction of the augural seat of Teiresias, and for the seizure of Bacchus himself, who, as the author of all the mischief, is to be stoned to death. With sad forebodings of the fate that is in store for the house of Cadmus, the two

* J. H. Newman's *Callista*, chap. 17.

old men go off with stumbling, feeble steps, to join the sacred band.*

Presently Dionysus is brought bound before Pentheus, who proceeds to examine him after the manner of a police magistrate interrogating a criminal, giving occasion to one of those passages of verbal fence and retort in which Euripides delights. He is remanded for further enquiry, but substitutes a bull for himself, and performs various wonders to delude his persecutor. A messenger now arrives from Mount Cithæron to tell Pentheus what he has seen, and, in one of the most picturesque descriptions in the whole range of classical poetry, he relates how, as he reached, with his cattle, the summit of the mountain at sun-rise, he saw three parties of women, under the leadership of Agave and her two sisters, wearied and asleep, leaning against the branches of the firs, or resting on the oak-leaves which strewed the ground. The lowing of the kine aroused Agave and her companions, and we are told how they rose from their sleep, let their hair flow over their shoulders, girded up their deer-skin garments, and wreathed around them snakes that licked their faces. The earth yielded them water, wine, and milk at their desire, and all was peaceful, until the herdsmen sought to seize Agave, and bring her to Pentheus, when she turned upon them with her followers, tore their cattle limb from limb, and fairly put them to rout. The king is told these things, as so many proofs of the power of the new divinity, whom he is conjured to receive into his city; but he is roused to more decisive action by them, and orders his whole army to prepare for an immediate attack upon the Bacchæ. Dionysus makes a last attempt to check him; but, finding him obstinate, proposes that he shall go to reconnoitre the state of things, and induces him to disguise himself as a woman. As soon as Pentheus has entered the palace, the god tells the chorus that "the man has now fallen into the net, and will go to the Bacchæ, where he shall suffer death;" and, apostrophizing himself, he says, "Disturb his reason, casting on him an easy madness" (*ἐλαφρὰ λύσσα*), so that he may put on the women's garments needed for the success of the plot. In a few moments Pentheus comes out from the house, dressed as a woman, and with a thyrsus in his hand; his mind is already troubled, as his first words are that he seems to see two suns and two

* The beginning of Teiresias' reply; *μέμνηνας ἤδη, καὶ πρὶν ἐξέστης φρενῶν*. "You are mad now, and before you were out of your mind," is curious, as being so closely similar to our English phrase.

Thebes, and that Bacchus himself appears to be changed into a bull. After a short dialogue, which gives occasion for an ample display of that "irony" in which an Athenian audience delighted, the two depart to look for Bacchæ; and the chorus chant a strophe, in which they call on the "swift dogs of madness" to go to the mountains, and rouse the daughters of Cadmus to fury against the impious spy.

After a time, a slave appears, who had followed his master on his expedition, and informs them that Pentheus has been slain.

The Bacchæ had been found reposing in a shady valley, and the King desired to climb to a height to observe them. Dionysus, accordingly, with superhuman strength, bent down a silver fir, in the topmost branches of which the King took his seat. No sooner had it risen up again, than the god pointed out to his votaries their derider; they attacked him, and, uprooting the tree, brought him violently to the ground. Then

"His mother first begins the sacrifice,
And rushes on him, while his mitra he
Casts off, that she may know him and not slay.
His wretched mother's knees in fast embrace
He holds, and says, 'I, Pentheus, am thy son,
Whom erst in Echion's house thou didst bring forth.
Have pity on me, and slay not thy son
For these my trespasses.' But she,
Foaming with rage, and rolling her wild eyes,*
Knew naught, nor spared her son, for she
By Bacchus was possessed."

Agave and her sisters tear the wretched Pentheus limb from limb, and she fixes his head on a thyrsus, believing it to be that of a young lion. She is presently seen approaching "with rolling eyes," by the chorus; she still holds aloft her son's gory head, as the glorious spoil of a successful combat. She calls for her father, and for her son Pentheus, that he may nail to the cornice the head she has taken.†

The aged Cadmus is now seen with attendants, bearing the mangled remains of his grandson; his daughter advances to meet him, boasting of her deed, and still calling for her son.

* Η δ' ἀφ' ὀν̄ ἐξίεσσα, καὶ διαστρόφους κόρας ἐλισσοῦσ'. Euripides noted this symptom before, it will be remembered, in Orestes.

† Paley quotes a passage from Dr. Wordsworth's "Athens and Attica," which is to my purpose. "The marble lion-head antefixa, which still terminate the northern angles of the western pediments of the Parthenon, indicate that Euripides has not neglected, in the delineation of her character, one of the most natural and pathetic elements of madness, viz., its partial saneness and sense of propriety."

Cadmus attempts to recall her to her senses, and the following dialogue ensues:—

“C. First look up into the air.

A. I have done so. Why do you ask it?

C. Is it the same, or does it seem to you to have changed?

A. It is brighter and clearer than before.*

C. Is this wandering still in your mind?

A. I do not understand that word; but I am somehow becoming conscious, and have changed from my late condition.

C. Can you then hear me, and answer clearly?

A. I have forgotten what I said before, father.

C. Into what house did you come with nuptial songs?

A. You married me to Echion, sprung (as they say) from the dragon's teeth.

C. What son, then, was born to your husband?

A. Pentheus, from the union between me and his father.

C. Whose head now do you hold in your arms?

A. A lion's, as the huntresses told me.

C. Look at it now carefully; it is an easy task.

A. Alas! what do I see? What am I carrying in my hands?

C. Look at it, and study it more carefully.

A. Wretched me! I see the greatest sorrow.

C. Does it seem to you like a lion's head?

A. No, I am holding the head of Pentheus.

C. Which had been bewailed before you recognized it.

A. Who slew him? How came it in my hands?

C. Sad truth, at what an unfit time thou'rt come!†

A. Speak; how my beating heart fears what is to come.

C. You and your sisters slew him.”

(vv. 1265-1290.)

She has now returned to reason, and, although much of the latter part of the play has been lost, probably nothing concerning my purpose is missing. I have quoted at such length, that I can only leave what seems to me an exquisite sketch of gradually returning reason to the judgment of my readers.

Nor need I dwell on what is called in the play the madness

* I do not find the same difficulty in this reply as Mr. Paley: it seems to me simply to imply that she sees more clearly as consciousness returns.

† “He wishes truth had come at any moment than the present, when the shock may retard her recovery from madness.”—PALEY.

of Pentheus. I suppose the poet merely meant, in the scene where he comes forth dressed as a woman and seeing double, to exhibit the state of man under the influence of wine, the chief gift of the god Bacchus; and the whole scene, though in perfect taste, is evidently comic.

But if the drunkenness which comes from wine is thus pourtrayed in the King, we see no trace of it in his mother; she is simply drunk with the god, and in a state of ecstatic madness.* This brings me to a point which needs comment; editors and critics have generally considered this play as a recantation of the rationalistic opinions which appear in the poet's other tragedies; while I would, on the contrary, say that Euripides is nowhere more consistent with his general philosophy. He was the friend and disciple of Socrates, and must often have heard the master, weary of the strife of opinions and schools, speak of the blessings of a heaven-sent madness. Mr. Paley has pointed out that there are several close parallels between passages in this play and others in the *Phædrus* of Plato; he might, I think, have said with correctness, that the teachings of Socrates, in that most beautiful dialogue, give us the key to the purpose of the Bacchæ, which, hidden from the vulgar, would be open to the Socratic school.

The greatest disciple of that school puts into his master's mouth these words, that "there are two kinds of madness, one from human disease, and the other from a supernatural disturbance of the ordinary mode of life,"† but in saying so, he had been anticipated by the poet who said—

" Μάντις ὁ δαίμων ὄδει τὸ γὰρ Βακχεύσιμον
Καὶ τὸ μανιώδες μαντικὴν πολλὴν ἔχει."

This play may, then, be looked upon as the first explicit statement in Greece of the mystical principle in philosophy; a principle which is responsible for as grave excesses as those the poet here lays to its account, but which has ever since had a charm for many great minds, and has been associated with the highest aspirations and true progress of the human race.

* The two functions of Bacchus, first as the inventor of wine, and then as the sender of madness upon men, are well put in Teiresias' apology, vv. 298-308.

† *Phædrus*, cap. 48.