

The Role of Bacchus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* Book 3

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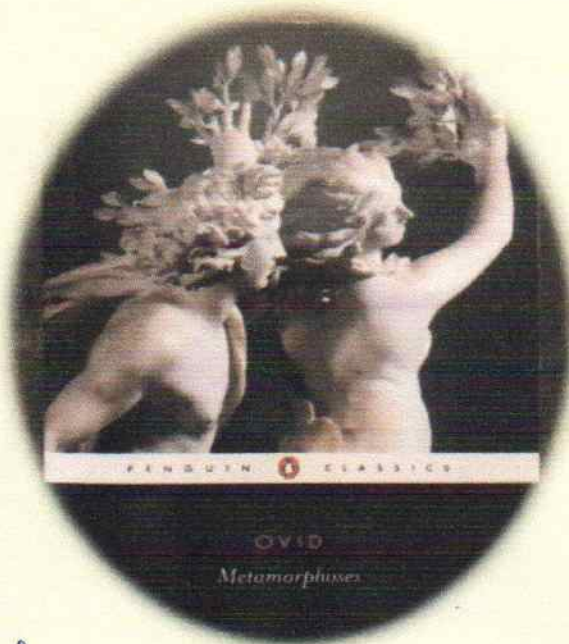
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- **Introduction**

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is a rich resource of myriad myths from Greco-Roman traditions. The stories deal with a close interaction between gods and humans. Different modes of transformation, both **physical** and **psychological**, take place as a result of that interaction.

In these stories the gods behave almost like men, have similar emotional changes like human beings. Gods behave like humans. They are lustful, selfish, jealous, quarrelsome and revengeful. Ovid portrays them with a mock-heroic tone. Gods come down to the mundane world and interact with mankind. But their power is felt whenever they have confrontation with humans. Enraged gods transform human beings into stones, trees and beasts as punishment.



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Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (8th Century A.D.)

- **Bacchus and Pentheus: Their Shadow War**

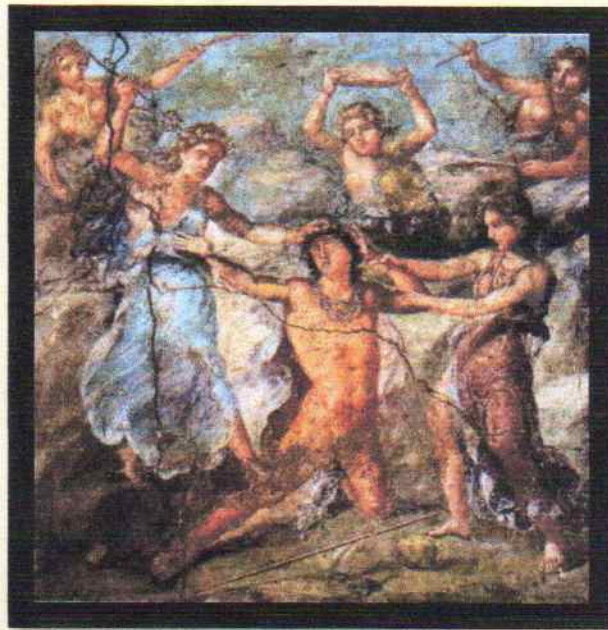
In *Metamorphoses*, Book 3 the reader is acquainted with Bacchus and Pentheus, who are engaged in a **shadow war**. Pentheus was a sceptical man who doubted Teiresias' prophetic

abilities. He mocked at Teiresias' blindness. So the blind man prophesied that Pentheus would be punished for disrespecting the power of Bacchus as a god and he would be ripped apart by the hands of his own mother and her sisters. But Pentheus did not believe him.

Pentheus was angry at the way the citizens of Thebes engaged themselves in wanton dresses and drunken orgies during their worship of Bacchus. He rebuked his countrymen saying, Bacchus was not a real god and he sent out his soldiers to capture the imposter. They could not capture the god but captured only a follower of the cult. His name was Acoetes.

He narrated a long story that described how Bacchus had punished Acoetes' fellow sailors who tried to kidnap Bacchus in disguise of a boy. Under the spell of Bacchus the Lydian sailors had metamorphosed into dolphins. Thus Acoetes sang the glory of Bacchus through his tale.

However, Pentheus was not convinced and he ordered his soldiers to torture and kill Acoetes. But as the soldiers threw Acoetes inside a dark chamber and were preparing iron and fire as weapons of torture, the doors of the dark chamber threw open magically and Acoetes was set free by the grace of Bacchus. Furious, Pentheus set out into the woods himself at Mount Cithaeron to capture Bacchus. When he stepped into a valley, he secretly spied on the worship of Bacchus. Pentheus, a non-believer was accidentally seen by his own mother, who was a member of the cult of Bacchus. In a state of frenzy Pentheus' mother Agave and her sisters killed this intruder. They hunted him down, because under the spell of Bacchus Pentheus appeared to them as a wild boar. Though he helplessly pleaded for mercy, they failed to recognize him. Pentheus is punished for stumbling upon the secret act of worship that no men are allowed to witness. This was a bloody and tragic end to the shadow war between Bacchus and Pentheus.



**Pentheus being killed by his mother Agave and her sisters in a bacchanalian frenzy
(Ancient wall-painting from Pompeii, Rome)**

The way Pentheus' body was mangled to pieces was a reminder of Actaeon's fate. Actaeon, the predecessor of Pentheus, was too killed by his own dogs as the enraged goddess Diana transformed him into a stag.

Bacchus had infected the women with madness so that Pentheus appeared to them as a boar. This transformation of the women is not physical but a 'mental transformation'. Unlike the metamorphoses of the Lydian Sailors (into dolphins), which has a comic tone, the transformation of Pentheus into a wild boar brought tragic and macabre consequences. **This story thus justifies Bacchus' bloody way of taking revenge upon non-believers.**

- **The Significance of the Story of Acoetes**

Acoetes was a fisherman-turned-sailor. He and his crew met Bacchus for the first time at the island of Chios, where they were stranded because of a shipwreck. Bacchus first appeared to them in the guise of a boy in a drunken stupor. Through this innocent and harmless appearance Bacchus made himself vulnerable to abuses of the sailors. As other sailors plan to kidnap the boy, Acoetes opposed them and he was hit for that. Then Bacchus revealed his godly self and exercised his divine spell. Under the spell of Bacchus all sailors except Acoetes were transformed into Dolphin. Since then Acoetes became a follower of Bacchus.



The Lydian Sailors are turned into Dolphins (Ancient Greek Painted Pottery)

The story of *Acoetes and the Lydian Sailors* appears as a **digression** (added story) and it intercepts the long narrative of tension concerning Bacchus and Pentheus. Ovid introduces this story as a narrative device and through this digression **he emphasizes the power of Bacchus beneath the god's apparent harmless and wanton looks.** Thus the story of *Acoetes and the Lydian Sailors* **strengthens the glory of Bacchus** in Book 3 of *Metamorphoses*.

- **The Role of Bacchus**

In *Metamorphoses*, Book 3 Bacchus establishes himself as a god through his confrontation with Pentheus, King of Thebes, who was a non-believer.

Bacchus was not a canonical god among the Olympian Pantheon. His divinity was disputed among the Olympian hierarchy of gods and goddesses. Initially, he was not as prominent as Apollo but gradually he exerted his power over the non-believers and his glory was sung and his mysteries were practised by women throughout Thebes.

Bacchus was the son of **Semele**, a beautiful mortal and **Jupiter**, King of Gods and therefore he had a **partly human heritage** and connection. As a foetus he was attached to the thigh of Jupiter to gain maturity, after the sudden destruction of Semele. Bacchus is the god of wine and tragic music. Due to his partly human heritage Bacchus has **the ability to move back and forth between reality and illusion**. He can be an endearing youth, a part of folk culture and an avenging god.

Book 3 represents Bacchus as a god of the masses (common people). The way he became popular among the Theban people is a marker of his democratic portrayal by Ovid. As a god he is quite down-to-earth and dynamic because his spell induces frenzy, which is a potential element of **chaos** in society.



Bacchus is a God of the Masses: *The Triumph of Bacchus* by Velazquez (17th Century)

Pentheus' death is ironic for three reasons:

First, his threat to kill Acoetes is turned against him when he himself is killed for impiety. Secondly, Bacchus' worshippers mistook Pentheus for an animal, which is ironic because

Pentheus was not an animal. This debate between **appearance and reality** adds to the complexity of symbolism in this book. Finally, despite his refusal to worship Bacchus, Pentheus becomes a central figure in worship rite, as he is sacrificed at the hands of his mother and her sisters. Thus Pentheus witnesses the rites and unwillingly takes part in the secret rites of Bacchus. **He becomes the sacrificial animal of religious rites.**



The Violent Death of Pentheus: Ancient Greek Red and Black painted Potteries

In Book 3 Bacchus appears as an effeminate boy, wantonly dressed in Purple robe, embroidered with golden thread, has perfumed hair and wear garland in his hair. He has drunken behaviour as well. He is surrounded by his frenzied followers, the satyrs who dance to the sound of curling horn-pipes, clashing brass cymbals and beating drums.



Young Bacchus: God of Wine by Caravaggio (16th Century)

But when he realized the sailors abusing him, he revealed his real form, which was both destructive and aggressive, surrounded by tigers, lynxes and panthers, and with a spear in his hand and bunches of grapes in his hair. It is he who turns the mother of Pentheus into a frenzied killer.



Avenging Bacchus: Ancient wall-painting in Pompeii, Rome

Incidentally, both Bacchus' mother Semele and Pentheus' mother Agave were daughters of Cadmus and from that perspective both Pentheus and Bacchus were cousins. Thus **Bacchus' destruction of Pentheus is in a way the god's revenge upon his own family.**

Thus throughout the story the character of Bacchus appears both as a soft, tender and wanton god of wine and music and as a powerful destroyer of transgressors and disbelievers and a god of frenzy who can bring potential change in a structure.

The rise of Bacchus resembles the rise of **Krishna** from his humble origin into a god in the *Book of the Assembly Hall of Mahabharata*. Both Bacchus and Krishna exerted their divine powers to destroy non-believers. In the case of Bacchus it is the destruction of Pentheus and in the case of Krishna it is the destruction of Shishupala. Just as Bacchus destroyed Pentheus to establish his identity as a god, Krishna, a shepherd boy, destroyed Shishupala and rose as the most prominent deity in *Mahabharata*.



The Triumph of Bacchus: Ancient Roman Wall Painting (3rd Century A.D.)

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