

**Scripta 14.3: Pentheus is torn apart by his mother**

This text is taken from Ovid's Metamorphoses Book 3. Dionysus, the god of wild impulse, is angry because Pentheus, the young king of Thebes, has refused to recognise him as a god. Determined to prove his power, Dionysus has come to Thebes, disguised as a human priest. Under Dionysus' influence, the women of Thebes have been overcome by an ecstatic frenzy; they have left Thebes to worship Dionysus on Cithaeron, a nearby mountain.

In the extract below, Pentheus decides to go to Cithaeron to watch the women and try to regain control over them. His mother, in her maddened state, thinks that Pentheus is a wild boar and calls her sisters to come and hunt him. The women charge at him in a terrifying onrush and rip him apart, limb from limb.

The most famous version of the myth was written by Euripides, a Greek tragedian. Ovid's retelling is less serious and full of comic exaggeration. Ovid fast-forwards to the Pentheus' gory death scene, creating humour by Pentheus' farcical attempt to supplicate his aunt even after his arms have been torn off and to appeal to his aunt via grand literary references which she does not understand.

Echion's son's resolve stands firm: no longer does he order others to go to the mountain; instead, he ventures out himself to the place where Cithaeron, the mountain chosen for the sacred rites, was echoing with song and the distinct cry of the Bacchantes. Just the same as when a keen horse neighs when the war trumpeter has given the signal from his resounding bronze trumpet, and he takes on his lust for battle, so too the air, filled with loud shrieking, stirred Pentheus and - now he had heard the cry - his anger grew white-hot.

Almost in the middle of the mountain, there is a grassy plain. Woods surround its edges but the plain itself is free from trees and offers a good view from all directions. Here, Pentheus' mother was the first to see him as he watched the sacred rites with his uninitiated eyes, she was the first to dash with a mad charge, she was the first to hurl her thyrsus and harm her own son, Pentheus. She shouted, 'Sisters - both of you - come here! Here is an enormous wild boar which is roaming our fields; I must strike down this boar!' The whole, mad crowd rushed as one; the women all united and chased the terrified man, Pentheus, a man terrified now and now no longer offering such combative words.

But Pentheus was wounded and said 'Aunt Autonoe, help me! Think about the ghost of Actaeon!' But Autonoe did not know who Actaeon was and she ripped off Pentheus' right hand while he beseeched her; his other hand was torn apart by Ino's grip. The unlucky man did not have any arms which he could reach out to his mother, but showing her his wounds, mutilated where his limbs had been seized, he said, 'Mother! Look!'. Agaue looked, howled, tossed her head and shook her hair in the air; she tore off his head, gripped it with bloodied fingers and shouted, 'Io! Comrades! This trophy shows our victory!'

- 1) What was Cithaeron? Why do you think the Bacchic rituals are taking place here?
- 2) Describe in your own words what the Bacchantes are doing.
- 3) Describe in your own words how Pentheus' emotions change as the story progresses.
- 4) In this extract Ovid creates a fast-paced, intensely dramatic story: how does he do this?