Hour 21 on Euripides Bacchae
Key word agōn, pl. agōnes ‘coming together; competition, antagonism; agony; ordeal; trial’

A) Euripides Bacchae 912-976

[Dionysus:]
You there! Yes, I'm talking to you, to the one who is so eager to see the things that should not be seen and who hurries to accomplish things that cannot be hurried. I'm talking to you, Pentheus. Come out from inside the palace. Let me have a good look at you

915 wearing the costume of a woman who is a Maenad Bacchant, spying on your mother and her company. The way you are shaped, you look just like one of the daughters of Kadmos.

{Pentheus:}
What is this? I think I see two suns, and two images of Thebes, the seven-gated polis.

920 And you seem to lead us like a bull and horns seem to have sprouted on your head. Were you ever before a beast? You have certainly now become a bull.

[Dionysus:]
The god accompanies us, now at truce with us, though formerly not propitious. Now you see what it is right for you to see.

925 {Pentheus:}
So how do I look? Don't I strike the dancing pose [stasis] of Ino or the pose struck by my mother Agaue?

[Dionysus:]
Looking at you I think I see them right now. Oh, but look: this strand of hair [plokamos] here is out of place. It stands out, not the way I had secured it underneath the headband [mitra].

{Pentheus:}
While I was inside, I was shaking it [= the strand of hair] forward and backward, and, in the Bacchic spirit, I displaced it [= the strand of hair], moving it out of place.

[Dionysus:]
Then I, whose concern it is to attend to you, will arrange it [= the strand of hair] all over again. Come on, hold your head straight.

{Pentheus:}
You see it [= the strand of hair]? There it is! You arrange [kosmein] it for me. I can see I'm really depending on you.

[Dionysus:]
And your waistband has come loose. And those things are not in the right order. I mean, the pleats of your peplos, the way they extend down around your ankles.

{Pentheus:}
That's the way I see it from my angle as well. At least, that's the way it is down around my right foot, but, on this other side, the peplos does extend in a straight line down around the calf.

[Dionysus:]
I really do think you will consider me the foremost among those dear to you when, contrary to your expectations, you see the Bacchants in full control of themselves [= sōphrones].

{Pentheus:}
So which will it be? I mean, shall I hold the thyrsus with my right hand or with this other one? Which is the way I will look more like a Bacchant?

[Dionysus:]
You must hold it in your right hand and, at the same time, with your right foot you must make an upward motion. I approve of the way you have shifted in your thinking.

{Pentheus:} 945 Couldn't I carry on my shoulders the folds of Kithairon, Bacchae and all?
[Dionysus:]
You could if you should so wish. Your earlier phrenes were not sound, but now they are the way they should be.

{Pentheus:}
Shall we bring levers, 950 or throwing a shoulder or arm under the mountain-tops shall I lift them up with my hands?

[Dionysus:]
Please don't destroy the seats of the Nymphs and the place where Pan plays his pipe.

{Pentheus:} You're right. The women are not to be taken by force; I'll hide in the pines.

[Dionysus:]
955 You will hide yourself in hiding as you should be hidden, coming as a crafty spy on the Maenads.

{Pentheus:} I imagine that they are in the bushes held in the closest grips of love, like birds.

[Dionysus:]
You have been sent as a guard against this very event. 960 Perhaps you will catch them, if you yourself are not caught before.

{Pentheus:} Bring me through the midst of the Theban land. I am the only Theban who dares to perform this deed.
Dionysus: You alone enter the struggle for this polis, you alone. Therefore the ordeals [agōnes] which have to be awaited you.

Pentheus: Yes, my mother.

Dionysus: And you will be remarkable [having a sēma] to all.

Pentheus: I am going for this reason.

Dionysus: You will return here being carried...

Pentheus: You allude to my luxuriants [habrotēs].

Dionysus: ...in the arms of your mother.

Pentheus: You even will compel me to be in luxury [truphē].

Dionysus: You are terrifying, terrifying, and you go to terrifying sufferings [pathos], with the result that you will attain a kleos that reaches heaven. Extend your hands, Agave, and you too, her sisters, daughters of Kadmos. I lead the youth 975 to this great agôn, and Bromius and I will be the victors. The rest the affair itself will signal [sēmainō].

B) Euripides Bacchae 135-167

He is sweet in the mountains, whenever after running in the sacred band he falls on the ground, wearing the sacred [hieron] garment of fawn-skin, hunting the blood of the slain goat, the pleasure [kharis] of living flesh devoured, rushing to the 140 Phrygian, the Lydian mountains, and the leader of the dance is Dionysus. Evohe! The plain flows with milk, it flows with wine, it flows with nectar of bees. 145 Like the smoke [G.N. adopts the manuscript καπνός, arousing the stragglers with his racing and hieros pipe sings out the sacred [hieros] hair to the air. And among the Maenad cries his voice rings deep: “Onward, Bacchants, onward Bacchants, with the luxury of Tmolos that flows with gold, 155 sing and dance of Dionysus, accompanied by the heavy beats of kettle-drums, glorifying the god of delight with Phrygian shouts and cries, 160 when the sweet-sounding sacred [hieros] pipe sings out the sacred [hiera] tunes 165 for those who wander to the mountain, to the mountain!” And the Bacchant, rejoicing like a foal with its mother, rouses her swift foot in a gambling dance.

C) Euripides Bacchae 677-716

I was just driving the herd of cattle up the hill, at the time when the sun sends forth its rays, warming the earth. 680 I saw three companies of women’s khoroi, one of which Autonoe led, the second your mother Agave, and the third khoros, Ino. All were asleep, their bodies relaxed, some resting their backs against pine foliage, 685 others in a sōphrōn manner laying their heads at random on the oak leaves, not, as you say, drunk with the goblet and the sound of the pipe, hunting out Kypris [= Aphrodite] through the woods in solitude. Your mother raised a cry, 690 standing in the midst of the Bacchants, to wake them from sleep, when she heard the lowing of the horned cattle. And they threw deep sleep from their eyes and sprang upright - a marvel of orderliness to behold - old, young, and still unmarried virgins. 695 First they let their hair loose over their shoulders, and as many of them as had released the fastenings of their knots, secured their fawn-skins, girding the dappled hides with serpents licking their jaws, and some, as many as had abandoned their new-born infants and had their breasts still swollen, holding in their arms a gazelle or wild wolf-pup 700 gave them white milk. They put on garlands of ivy, and oak, and flowering yew. One took her thyrsos [narthēx] and struck it against a rock, 705 whence a dewy stream of water sprang forth. Another let her thyrsos strike the ground, and there the god sent forth a stream of wine. All who desired the white drink scratched the earth with the tips of their fingers and obtained springs of milk. 710 Sweet streams of honey dripped from their ivy thyrsoi. Had you been present and seen this, you would have approached with prayers the god whom you now blame. We herdsmen and shepherds gathered [= literally sunēthomen ‘we came together’] in order to 715 wrangle [give eris] with one another concerning this strange behavior, full of marvel.

D) Socrates says in Plato’s Phaedo (69c): ‘For many, as they say in the mysteries [teletai], are the bearers of the thyrsus [narthēx], but few are the bakkhai [-devotees of Bacchus]; Compare the Christian aphorism: “many are called but few are chosen” (Matthew 22:14).