Pentheus

A play

Part two of

City of Wine

A cycle in three trilogies

by
Ned Dickens

The Grape Trilogy
HARMONIA
PENTHEUS
THEBE

The Vine Trilogy
CADMEA
ELIS
JOCASTA

The Wine Trilogy
OEDIPUS
CREON
SEVEN

Commissioned by Nightswimming
Agent: Kensington Literary Representation

"Thebes is famous everywhere, for wine and welcoming."
City of Wine is a nine-play cycle telling the story of the Greek city of Thebes—best known as the home of Oedipus. It begins with the founding of Thebes by Cadmus and Harmonia, and ends with the death of six of its last seven citizens on the battlefield of Troy.

The *City of Wine* cycle is a powerful portrayal of leadership and civic life. This contemporary epic breathes new life into these magnificent stories while portraying the citizens of Thebes as distinct yet familiar individuals, unique to playwright Ned Dickens' vision of this legendary city. Brian Quirt.

Playwright's Notes

The UnNamed
City of Wine features great names: Zeus, Athena, Harmonia, Laius, Jocasta, Oedipus, Dionysus, and Tiresias, to mention only a few. Such names are so powerful that I felt I could not introduce fictional ones into the mix. At the same time, I very much wanted to find a new approach to the idea of the Chorus. I wanted to show a diversity of interacting personalities which, taken together, would represent the ordinary people—the citizens—of the *City of Wine*.

The result is a group of seven personalities (often related from play to play but not always the same individuals) who, although distinct and real, are never named. Throughout *City of Wine* they are always present, reacting to and affecting the actions of the Named.

The UnNamed are "the aching, dancing body of my town." In order to keep them straight in the text I gave them "tags". The truth of my premise that names are powerful things is borne out by the fact that many people persist in thinking of these tags as names. You, of course, will not make that mistake.

Synopsis

The Grape Trilogy

Harmonia
This is the story of how Harmonia, daughter of the gods Ares and Aphrodite, and her mortal husband Cadmus, become the founders of the city that will become Thebes. In the kitchen of Ares' palace on Mount Olympus, surrounded by the desires and games of both gods and mortals, Cadmus wins the love of Harmonia but incites the fury of the gods. Harmonia gives up her immortality to pursue her love as she and her new husband are driven from Olympus. They vow to found a great city dedicated to equality and truth—and thus the city is born."Nothing begins in history." As I scratched around for a point of entry into the story of Thebes I tripped over the idea that two gods would give Harmonia, their goddess daughter, to marry an enslaved mortal who had not only offended them but had failed at everything he had tried to do so far. Equally intriguing was that she might fall in love with him. "There has to be a story behind that!" I told myself, and here it is.

Pentheus
The second play introduces us to Harmonia and Cadmus' grandson Pentheus, who finds himself chosen king just as the city is undergoing an unexpected transformation. Also brought to life are the magical characters of Tiresias, the seer whose prophecies play a pivotal role in city's story, and Dionysus, the god whose gift of wine brings both joy and chaos to Thebes. In this alternative

version of the events of The Bacchae, the tragedy of King Pentheus (and a hidden love story!) brings our city into a new era.

While HARMONIA can be said to deal with the conception of the city, this play looks at its adolescence. It swirls with sexual infatuation, questions of emerging identity, and a tragic loss of innocence. Robert Graves (poet and scholar) suggests that the real root of all the problems which beset Thebes (called Cadmea at this point in the story) is the institution of patrilineal monarchy, the idea that the crown must pass from father to son. He argues that this idea offends the powerful female energy in the ancient world and sets off "the war of the sexes" with a bang. I have tried to show how, in context, that idea, called here Pentheus' Law, might make sense to a young man who unexpectedly finds himself on a throne for which he feels completely unprepared.

Thebe
The character and story of Thebe have grown organically over the years. Exploring and unpacking both was a huge part of the impetus behind the last expansion of *City of Wine* from seven to nine plays. In HARMONIA, Poseidon, spurned by her, spits into Thebe's mouth (a particularly nasty assault that echoes the story of Apollo and Cassandra) and he decrees that her kiss will always give instant forgetfulness. The dynamic between memory and forgetfulness is central to our story, and storytelling. It also allows me to introduce narrative elements that have no basis in traditional versions, as long as I arrange to have them forgotten, such as Thebe's being the mother of Tiresias and, eventually, Laius.

The Vine Trilogy

Cadmea
The city has grown, but so has distrust and fear between the sexes. Lycus and Dirce rule in luxury while Laius waits impatiently to take the crown. Amphion and Zethus, the twin unacknowledged sons of Lycus, arrive. They use Laius to punish Lycus for his treatment of their mother, Antiope, unleashing assassination, riot, and massacre. Laius escapes into exile and the brothers arrange to be elected twin kings. Thebe fulfills the prophesy that she will be queen.

Fairly late in the 30+ year *City of Wine* writing process it occurred to me that the Theban plays of Sophocles et al. weren't Theban at all: they were created and celebrated in a city trying to be a democracy (Athens). They are stories about the horrifically dysfunctional monarchy, and military rival, next door. They are deeply political. The city of Cadmea/Thebes is the protagonist of *City of Wine*, and her challenges, growth, triumphs, disasters, and her journey from an intentional settlement to a city state, take centre stage in the Vine Trilogy. Here she becomes a place familiar to a modern audience, shaped by familiar characters: grifters, schemers, dreamers, and traditionalists.

Elis
Elis is a nearby city in the mountains, where Laius has sought refuge in exile. Wine has also arrived in town and a dis-used slaughterhouse is becoming a tavern, with help from Bowl. Laius festers in bitterness and self-pity, abusing the hospitality and the vulnerable son of his hosts until he, Laius, commits a crime that will haunt Thebes and its people for generations.
ELIS is the middle play of the cycle and, like the first and last, it doesn't take place in Cadmea/ Thebes. Elis is a mountain city based heavily on cattle farming. Their main festival celebrates the semi-annual slaughter. Dionysus is the god of wine, of course, but he is also god of the theatre. One theory suggests that public theatre emerged as a way to contain and control the rites of the riotous god. The need for that containment shows when bacchanalia meets slaughter festival.

Jocasta
This play illuminates the story of Jocasta, one of the great figures of ancient mythology, familiar to us largely for her death scene in the play Oedipus. The exiled Laius returns to Thebes, marries Jocasta and she bears him a son. The first act of Jocasta traces the descent of the city, under King Laius' rule, into dictatorship and despair. Act two brings with it a much-discussed moment in Greek mythology/legend: the magnetic first meeting between Jocasta and Oedipus. With no idea what their relationship portends (for themselves or Thebes) their happy marriage restores peace to the city.

Tragedy is often an architecture of unfortunate choices, many of which make sense in context, but which add up to disaster. The impulse to write this play (fourth in the cycle but the second written, after Oedipus) came from the realization that many of the critical choices which inform that story were made before it begins, by Jocasta and Laius, rather than by Oedipus. I wanted to find out why, and what those situations may have looked like. The more I explored and imagined my way backwards into hypothetical time, the more enthralled I became with this extraordinary woman. Wanting to understand her is the seed crystal around which the entire *City of Wine* has grown.

The Wine Trilogy

Oedipus
Oedipus attempts to relieve Thebes of a plague, and the curse that brought it to the city, and in doing so brings the famous story of Jocasta, Laius, and Oedipus to its disastrous and horrifying conclusion.

OEDIPUS was the first play written, and still marks the grand climax of the cycle. Much of the motivation for writing the larger project was rooted in a desire to fully contextualize what happens here. In the modern world we have tended to think of ourselves as moral singularities, responsible only for our own choices and actions. Seen through that frame, Oedipus becomes a victim of cruel and irrational fate, doomed to suffer despite his best efforts. I offer him rather as a point in a larger narrative curve, paying the cost of his father's crimes and his family's unfolding pattern of well-intentioned error.

Creon

On a pleasant evening, years after the events of Oedipus, a visiting stranger enters a peaceful tavern and acquaints himself with the Thebans savouring the local wine. His questions about their city and its history result in an impromptu and often comic reconstruction of the story of Antigone. Its controversial story about leadership is re-evaluated and the fate of Thebes is explored, disputed and reinvented. Once again, wine points the way, bringing both chaos and, finally, good cheer in its wake.

Throughout *City of Wine* the Unnamed are always present, responding to and influencing the actions of the Named, but in CREON they take over, and the cycle enters a new stage. Increasingly it is less about history and more about story. BOWL says "I have just listened to the stories that wounds tell." I wanted to look at how communities define, heal, and even re-create themselves through the sharing of narratives. I also wanted to introduce an element of suspense to an ancient tale. Since I have chosen to wander from the path of received mythology from time to time, in this play I decided to offer my characters the same opportunity, and then see where they would take the story.

Seven

During the siege of Troy, seven scruffy Theban citizens, all that remain of Thebes, sit drinking around a campfire in their makeshift outdoor tavern. After receiving orders to go on a futile and certainly fatal mission the next morning, the seven spend their last night trying to make sense of their lives, their place in history and in memory. Will wine offer insight or blindness? How will they meet the challenge that dawn brings? What will remain of Thebes after they are gone?
The Iliad is such a detailed account of the Trojan War that some scholars surmise that the author was actually present for the great events and not just passing on an oral tradition, thus marking a transition from myth to history. How stories, and through them societies, evolve and survive, or not, up to and then through such a massive transition fascinates me. Theatre itself, in a way, sits on the threshold between written and remembered narratives. Indeed, it pushes backwards from written into oral narrative. Beyond all that however, I could not resist the temptation to spend one last night with the UnNamed.

Characters

Named Mortals

AGAVE
CADMUS (AGAVE's father)
ECHION (PENTHEUS's father, a Sown Man, who sprang fully grown, armed, and fighting from the dirt where CADMUS threw down serpent teeth.)
HARMONIA (AGAVE's mother)
LABDACUS (a boy, Agave's nephew)
PENTHEUS (Agave's son)
SEMELE (Agave's sister)
AUTONOE (Agave's sister)
TIRESIAS (the forgotten son of BOWL and THEBE, a young man struck blind and gifted prophesy, then transformed into a young woman)
ACTAEON (a young man, Agave's nephew)

The Unnamed
BLOOD
BOWL
BREAD
CLOTH
FIREWOOD
GLASS
WATER

Gods
ATHENA
ZEUS
DIONYSUS as a child and as a young adult
APHRODITE
HERA
ERIS

THEBE (a Naiad)

6

Pentheus

Olympus above, with a view of Cadmea *(Later renamed Thebes).* In and around Cadmea: A sheep barn, a public square, a path in the woods, Athena's bathing pool, the royal bath chamber.

Act One

(From Olympus, ATHENA peers intently down into the main playing area. A child, DIONYSUS, plays with the set design model for the current production. HARMONIA enters below, reading and making changes on a list. She is agitated, but also weary and feeling her age.)

ATHENA *(reaching out)*
Harmonia…?

(HARMONIA does not hear her.)

DIONYSUS
Athena?

ATHENA
Yes, Dionysus, dear.

DIONYSUS
Are you not bored?

ATHENA
Can we not talk, just now?

DIONYSUS
But, but—

ATHENA
This flow of sequence into consequence intrigues me so:

Life, death, and all that growing old.

DIONYSUS
But, I—

ATHENA
Amuse yourself.

DIONYSUS
That, I can do.

(He returns to playing with his model. AUTONOE and AGAVE enter below.)

AGAVE
Mother, I beg of you.

HARMONIA
No. Never beg.

AUTONOE
So proud? Are you still goddess after all?

HARMONIA
Must you be cruel, Autonoe, dear?

AUTONOE
Forgive.

AGAVE
The whole world knows—

HARMONIA
My Cadmus was, and is, worth all of it.

AUTONOE
You gave up immortality for him.

HARMONIA
I did.

AGAVE
And built this city on your love.

HARMONIA
Well, started it.

AUTONOE
And does Cadmea not deserve the very best of leadership,

As good as yours, when you are...?

HARMONIA
Dead? Of course she does.

AUTONOE
I am your oldest child. My husband is—

HARMONIA
A god.

AUTONOE
A minor one.

AGAVE
Of cheese and beekeeping and useful household arts.

AUTONOE
Would he not be a kind and gentle king, as father is?

AGAVE
He would.

Better than mine by far.

HARMONIA
If he were not a god.

Will Aristaeus first surrender to mortality,

As I have done?

AUTONOE
You cannot ask.

HARMONIA
Oh, yes I can.

If you had wed a mortal man...

AUTONOE
We wed for love.

HARMONIA
And so did we.

Love has its costs.

Do you, Autonoe, want the crown so much?

AUTONOE
I? No. But our Cadmea needs—

AGAVE
No gods.

HARMONIA
Go with him to your fruitful farm.

Grow old within his ever youthful arms.

AUTONOE
I will.

Be well.

And write to me when there is news to tell. *(Exit)*

HARMONIA
You have a request?

AGAVE
I do. Pentheus is—

HARMONIA
Stop there.

AGAVE
No. He...

You need to know...

HARMONIA
We know our family.

We will decide together

What happens to the crowns

Just as, together, we have led the town.

AGAVE
Mother, I—

Yes, of course you will.

As you decided long ago that I would not be queen,

Not with a Sown Man as my king.

HARMONIA
My love,

With four such splendid daughters

We never doubted that our town

Would have a splendid queen.

The question was the king,

But now, with Io...

AGAVE
Mad.

HARMONIA
Yes.

And Autonoe gone,

And you... as you say.

AGAVE
You put your hopes on Semele?

HARMONIA
Agave, trust—

AGAVE
Do what you think you must.

HARMONIA
I love you, child.

AGAVE
I know.

DIONYSUS
This is all mud to me.

(DIONYSUS tosses an invisible pebble into the stream in front of her causing a ripple lighting effect perhaps. Perhaps what is on stage is scattered. ATHENA is annoyed.)

A public green space

(Below, enter two young men running. They begin to wrestle joyfully. TIRESIAS, a little older and more athletic, throws PENTHEUS and pins him down.)

TIRESIAS
Conquered again, Pentheus.

PENTHEUS
Completely, I confess.

It must be at least a little true, Tiresias,

Older than Aunt Autonoe, and yet look at you,

Divine.

TIRESIAS
Who, me?

I am like other men,

No, less.

For most men know their parents' names.

(He wipes the sweat from his body.)

I am surprised you waste your time with me,

When you are poised for royalty.

PENTHEUS
You would not tease me if Actaeon were in town.

TIRESIAS
Big cousin would protect you, then?

PENTHEUS
When he is king he will protect us all.

TIRESIAS
Perhaps.

A hunter king, so many dogs.

What do I know?

My teasing gets you wrestling though.

PENTHEUS

As most things do with you, Tiresias.

TIRESIAS

Too much?

PENTHEUS

Not yet. Again?

(PENTHEUS takes a crouching stance with all his fingers extended forward. He closes his eyes and breathes deeply.)

TIRESIAS

Are your eyes really closed?

I sometimes feel that you are watching me.

PENTHEUS

How would you know unless you looked yourself?

(Silently TIRESIAS positions himself in an opposite stance. Enter SEMELE, unheard. She watches. Meanwhile the boys play a familiar game. What begins as a skirmish of fingers becomes, by degrees, a wrestling match.)

SEMELE

Watching you two,

I think that I might wrestle too.

But I must go.

I have a job to do.

TIRESIAS

Bathing Athena.

Tell me, what help does she require

That takes so many women to provide?

And while you bathe,

Will you remember what you saw just now?

SEMELE *(Touching him)*

The male body, such as yours, is beautiful:

See how this vein wraps like a leg around this muscle here.

And yet, the female body has its charms.

Would you not say?

TIRESIAS
I say—

SEMELE
I must go now to bright Athena's pool.

Where, with the other naked women, I...

But, no, I must not say.

What will you think of while I am away?

(Exit SEMELE.)

TIRESIAS
I worship her.

PENTHEUS
I know.

I watched you cut her name and yours into a cypress root.

TIRESIAS
What would you give to watch her bathe?

PENTHEUS
She is my aunt.

TIRESIAS
Not mine.

Athena then, and all the rest.

If that one vision were to be my last I would be glad of it.

PENTHEUS
It is a secret place.

TIRESIAS
But she is late, and has no time for secrecy.

PENTHEUS
But I—

TIRESIAS
I want to go.

PENTHEUS
All right.

(Exeunt TIRESIAS and PENTHEUS.)

on Olympus

DIONYSUS

(Still watching, he throws another pebble.)

Cadmea just might be the place for me,

I smell a great consuming of virginities.

(Enter ZEUS.)

ZEUS
You asked to speak with me?

ATHENA
Yes. Zeus. I did.

ZEUS
Who is the child?

ATHENA
Your son, of course.

ZEUS
Be more specific, please.

ATHENA
Do you remember Semele?

ZEUS
Ah, yes. I felt something for her.

(He rubs his thigh. It hurts.)

I feel it still, sometimes, when it is cold.

Could I be getting old?

ATHENA
Perhaps, in a way.

ZEUS
What did you want to say?

ATHENA
The mortals.

ZEUS
Yes?

ATHENA
They are, of course, no use to us.

ZEUS
Not really, no. Although—

(The thigh again.)

ATHENA
We are not good for them.

ZEUS
What? Well...

ATHENA
So, should we not complete what you began?

It was such a wise and simple plan.

ZEUS
Yes. When?

ATHENA
With Cadmus and Harmonia and the slaves?

Sending them all away?

ZEUS
Yes, yes. And so?

ATHENA
I think we need to finish letting go.

ZEUS
If you think so.

ATHENA I do.

DIONYSUS
But, Father? What of me?

ZEUS
What do you mean?

DIONYSUS
My mother was a mortal, was she not?

So, I am caught between Olympus and the world below.

Although. *(He touches the sore spot on Zeus' thigh)*

You could say I was borne from you and not from her at all.

ZEUS *(Tries to pick up the boy, but cannot.)*
You are a god, my son, of course you are.

ATHENA
Come Dionysus,

Time to put your toys away.

DIONYSUS
But, but... the boys.

ZEUS
You heard me, son,

The time for gods below is done.

You must now learn to play in other ways.

Ways wise Athena has no knowledge of,

Despite my willingness to share what I have learned.

ATHENA
Oh father, no.

ZEUS
Life fascinates you, so you like to say,

Yet when it touches you, you turn away.

For wisdom, child, if not for pleasure, then

You need to taste the sweat of living men,

Just once, at least, before we let them go.

(Exeunt ATHENA and ZEUS. On a Path in the woods.)

CADMUS *(Off)*
This way, Harmonia,

No one is here to look at you but me.

(Enter HARMONIA, veiled and fully covered.)

DIONYSUS
This stream is cold, boring, and old.

HARMONIA
Cadmus.

How can a body fail so?

CADMUS
Sit here and rest.

If, as the people said, the boys went up this path

They must pass here on their return.

So let us wait.

HARMONIA
And so I hide my wrinkles in these folds.

Unlike my mother, I keep growing old.

CADMUS
If any others come you can retire behind these trees.

HARMONIA
You are so good to me.

There is no louder crowd than family.

CADMUS
You are my wife, the goddess of my heart.

HARMONIA
I was.

Now I am just this dry, cracked, crumbling bag of skin,

Scarcely enough to keep my old bones in.

CADMUS

You are my love eternally as I am yours.

So, look at me.

I am still young.

(He tries to demonstrate with some leap or other and fails comically. She laughs.)

HARMONIA

If you were young we would not now be here,

Waiting to catch a boy and make him king.

CADMUS

Not second thoughts?

You spent a year convincing me

The time has come for us to...

HARMONIA

Step aside.

But what comes next still worries me. *(She takes out her notes)*

Sweet Semele is like a butterfly,

She cannot balance anything.

So we best serve our half built town

By starting with the other crown.

CADMUS

No, gods, we are agreed on that.

The thought of an immortal king ...

HARMONIA

Yes, for that reason too.

A mother's heart must ask again,

Our son?

CADMUS

Good Polydorus is a man to write, not do.

HARMONIA

As I am queen, Actaeon never shall be king.

That grandson shows my father in his blood.

CADMUS

And so, again,

Pentheus is the only choice.

His eager energy will fill our town with life.

My great ambition is just this,

To spend my evenings with my wife.

HARMONIA

Before she dies.

CADMUS

Well, yes, before is better I suppose.

(CADMUS embraces her.)

HARMONIA

Stop that.

CADMUS

Is this not where you used to tend Athena, love?

HARMONIA

More up the hill.

She is forever near,

But keeps her word to never interfere.

CADMUS

So, why not go?

You used to love it so.

HARMONIA

Oh, Cadmus, no.

Sweetest of men.

To share my nakedness with anyone is more than I could bear.

CADMUS

I know.

HARMONIA

But there, with all that youth and beauty, least of all.

Come, hold me gently in the shade a while.

(Exeunt CADMUS and HARMONIA.)

on Olympus

(DIONYSUS, bored, kicks something into the stream still further upstream, splash and ripple. Below **the Barn** *is revealed)*

DIONYSUS

What have I here?

Well built and ripe with musk, like Hera's lap,

Yet cold and empty as Athena's is.

the Barn

(Enter BOWL and BREAD with a lamp or candle. DiIONYSUS watches and enjoys.)

BREAD

Where are you leading me?

BOWL

Astray, I hope.

BREAD

Oh good.

What is this place?

BOWL

My barn and home.

I keep my sheep from harm, they keep me warm.

We offer you what hospitality we can.

Some food: grapes, bread,

My bed.

Come here, my pretty lamb.

(They tumble eagerly into the straw. Noises continue.)

DIONYSUS

Well, this is fun, and yet...

The least of living things do this.

BREAD *(Feeling something wet)*
So soon?

BOWL
What? No.

Oh, Aphrodite grant that never... *(He pulls out crushed grapes)*

No. See. A minor sacrifice.

BREAD
So let the rites continue.

Lie back and dance with me.

(They do.)

DIONYSUS
Sweet stickiness that all that is,

Something is missing.... Me.

(A second DIONYSUS, a handsome young man, enters the Barn unseen.)

DIONYSUS *(The child)*
Not bad. (*Exit)*

DIONYSUS *(The young man)*
My father says I am a god, and yet, unlike the rest,

I have no temples, rites, or sacrifices...

Until now.

I will, I think, be worshipped here.

You know, I thirst prodigiously.

(He reaches into the couple and produces a grape as in a magic trick.)

Dionysus be praised.

“I am so wise,

the least of life”, I said,

See here, I introduce a little yeast into some juice

And there...

(Crushes the grape and watches the drops fall.)

Now that is fine.

So town, your great god Dionysus gives you—

BOWL
Stop!

BREAD
Again?

BOWL
No, something hard, back there.

BREAD
I am impressed.

(BOWL digs around in the straw.)

BOWL
A bottle.

BREAD
Good.

We will want water soon enough. *(He passes it to her)*

The colour is of blood, and fire. *(Smells)*

BOWL
It once was grapes, I think.

BREAD
“Once was”?

Then it was garden rot.

BOWL
Just smell the stuff. *(Hesitantly, BREAD does.)*

Is that the smell of death?

BREAD
A little, yes.

BOWL
What else?

BREAD

New broken ground, dry wood,

Cypress, and oak, I think... The sun.

Imagine that, to smell the sun.

How does it taste?

BOWL *(Tasting the wine.)*

Not bad at all.

BREAD *(Also tasting)*

But there is something more than taste or smell.

I feel my blood.

I like this feeling very much.

BOWL

Me too,

It is like kissing you.

BREAD

You almost make me blush.

(They fall back into the straw. Enter GLASS and FIREWOOD, separately. DIONYSUS, unseen, dances gleefully about, arranging, even caressing the growing group.)

BOWL

Be still.

BREAD

Not me, not now..

FIREWOOD

Who is in here?

GLASS

I saw a light and feared a fire.

FIREWOOD

I heard a laugh.

(BREAD and BOWL emerge.)

BREAD

We came for... warmth.

FIREWOOD

May I build us a small, safe fire?

BOWL

Of course.

The roof leaks well enough, I think.

And here, try this.

GLASS What is it?

BREAD

Wet fire.

GLASS

Let me.

(Enter WATER.)

WATER

Is everything all right?

(GLASS is drinking with growing appreciation.)

GLASS

You know, for once, I can say simply **“**yes”.

This stuff is wonderful.

WATER

What stuff?

BREAD

We found it here.

Smell first, then taste,

And then drink from your heart.

(Enter CLOTH.)

GLASS

Well, Zeus, or somebody, be praised.

Is your fire hotter than it looks?

I feel my blood swell up.

CLOTH
May I come in?

BOWL
This was my little barn, but now such warmth and beauty

Swell its walls that there is room for all.

FIREWOOD
Come by the fire.

WATER
Here, sit by me.

(They gather convivially.)

BOWL
Well, this is nice.

So many women and just me,

And this now empty bottle.

BREAD
What?

DIONYSUS
And, enter... me

(DIONYSUS appears, carrying a bucket or basket of bottles.)

You have my bottle, sir.

And you have emptied it.

This will not do.

BOWL
But—

DIONYSUS
Fortunately, I have much more,

And so, all drink.

BOWL
I like you, lad.

BREAD
Yes, sit with us.

DIONYSUS
Gladly.

I have come far and feel the mountain chill.

FIREWOOD
As do we all tonight.

(DIONYSUS joins their cozy group.)

WATER
This stuff we drink?

DIONYSUS
They call it... wine.

FIREWOOD
Who does?

WATER
How is it made?

DIONYSUS
Grape juice and time.

GLASS
It tastes divine.

BOWL
Too bad.

DIONYSUS
Now why sat that?

BOWL
If **“**wine” is even one small part divine,

It cannot ever wear our crown.

CLOTH *(To DIONYSUS)*
He jests.

27

BOWL
I do?

WATER
Did you make this?

DIONYSUS
I did.

And there is time enough to teach you how.

But now, drink it and feel like goddesses.

(Enter BLOOD.)

BLOOD
I think, or should I say, I know, It never has been as cold today,

I mean on this day, but in other years,

BOWL
All warmth is here.

BLOOD
Yes, so I see.

(To the women) Should you not bathe?

GLASS
Are we unclean?

BLOOD
I cannot say.

But should you women not be in the forest now,

Attending to Athena's needs?

Warming the pool where she will bathe

With your own natural heats?

Or so I understand.

DIONYSUS
Not now.

FIREWOOD
Cadmea welcomes you, but we must go.

(The women stand and begin to leave.)

DIONYSUS
But, but—

(He is ignored.)

Athena, once again you spoil my fun. (*BREAD returns)*

But no. See, here, it has only begun.

(BREAD and GLASS linger.)

GLASS *(to BLOOD)*
Will you be here when we return

All wet and wanting warmth?

BLOOD
I... Yes.... I.... *(Exit GLASS)* ...oh.

BREAD
Make sure the fire still burns.

(Kisses BOWL and exits. DIONYSUS vanishes in disgust.)

BLOOD
She could be yours.

BOWL
She almost was.

BLOOD
Your child I mean,

For you are old enough.

BOWL
And so is she.

What do you want?

This lad and I have things to talk about.

BLOOD
What lad?

(DIONYSUS is still present but no longer visible to them.)

29

BOWL

He—

Well, now, that is strange. He was right here.

Oh well, he left the wine.

(Perhaps DIONYSUS pisses into what becomes…)

Athena's grove and pool

(… and then withdraws. Enter WATER, followed by FIREWOOD, AUTONOE, CLOTH, and CLOTH.)

WATER

Oh good, she is not here.

(They relax in the pool.)

GLASS

Then we have time for wine. *(Two bottles)*

AUTONOE

For what?

CLOTH

You stole all that?

GLASS

No. It came willingly.

The Youth said there was more.

AUTONOE *(Tasting wine)*

What Youth?

CLOTH

The handsome, muscled like a sailor, one.

GLASS *(To AUTONOE)*

Your sister will be coming soon.

AUTONOE

Now, she could use a drink of this.

GLASS

Or two.

CLOTH
A handsome youth.

GLASS
Again, or two.

AUTONOE
Instead she has that cold and clanking…

(Enter AGAVE.)

AGAVE
Are we all here?

Hello Autonoe, dear.

Where is our sister Semele?

GLASS
Agave?

AGAVE
Yes?

(CLOTH offers wine to AGAVE who smells it.)

AGAVE
What is this?

AUTONOE
Something new.

GLASS
I have a question, many do,

That normally I would not ask, but,

Now, somehow, my tongue runs free. *(Drinks)*

Your husband...

AGAVE
Yes.

GLASS
Why him?

(AGAVE examines the wine carefully, then sips, and then drinks deeply.)

AGAVE

When they came down together...

It was a time of beautiful ideas.

They were set free and left alone.

My parents had, the whole world knew,

The greatest love, and I was, am, we are,

The living fruit of it.

They all believed, with cause,

That love could build or conquer anything,

Or anyone.

GLASS

But, Echion?

AGAVE

Be kind.

His mother was a dragon tooth.

He stands in my childhood memories as he does now,

On guard against the world.

And yet, in his way, he was a child too,

His birth was from the earth into the arms of war.

He killed before he learned to speak, or even ate.

He did not love or hate:

He simply fought his brothers and the world.

In our small hopeful camp there was my family,

The slaves, set free, Thebe, and those five broken blades of Are's wrath.

Somehow, together, we would find a common path

Toward the city we all hoped could be.

My parents thought that, for Cadmea to be truly free,

The Sown Men must, some how,

Be partners in the Beautiful Idea.

So I...

32

FIREWOOD
Poor thing.

AGAVE
I thought it too.

Somewhere I want to hope that I still do.

(Enter SEMELE flushed and a little breathless. Enter also ATHENA, elsewhere and unseen.)

SEMELE
Am I too late, Agave, sister dear?

AGAVE
No, just in time.

ATHENA
How curious. So this is loss.

I made a choice, there is a cost. It feels so cold.

CLOTH
See? There. Athena comes.

(Enter ATHENA.)

ATHENA
Good morning all.

Release me from my hair. *(They undress and bathe her)*

I love my friends.

CLOTH *(Aside)*
To think that this is all that she will ever know of love.

AGAVE
In that, I keep her company.

GLASS
Not me.

I have outgrown virginity.

ATHENA *(Hearing the word "virginity")*
Look, Semele is smiling, head to toe.

Tell us all, girl, what makes you tingle so?

(Laughter. Enter TIRESIAS unseen. He watches from hiding, PENTHEUS holds back further still.)

PENTHEUS
This is not right.

TIRESIAS
So little is.

(He sees SEMELE.)

Oh Zeus, forgive me, you would understand.

Such beauty is beyond the hope of man.

(ZEUS, elsewhere and also unseen.)

ZEUS
A charming invocation, I must say. Oh yes, I see.

(He watches.)

PENTHEUS
I cannot look.

TIRESIAS
I cannot turn my eyes away.

(Exit PENTHEUS.)

ATHENA
Who else is full of smiles today?

What of Cadmea down below,

What swells her common heart?

AUTONOE
Athena?

ATHENA
Yes?

AUTONOE
Are you sad?

ATHENA
What? Well...

Yes, I suppose I am.

Dear friends,

I am, as you say, sad, sad to say

That I must go away.

AGAVE
Oh.

AUTONOE
For how long?

ATHENA
Why, for forever, dear.

The time has come, no, more exactly,

Time never comes or goes,

GLASS
What?

ATHENA
My family, dear.

Chronos and Ananke, the web of cause and consequence

That knits the universe together,

have, of course been here always,

And they will stay.

But we, Zeus, Hera and the rest,

The last, best thing that we can do

Is leave, and so we will.

AGAVE
And Chronos and Ananke...?

ATHENA
Yes?

AGAVE
Where did they come from?

ATHENA
Why, from the Chaos, dear. It too is always near.

(BREAD enters in a hurry.)

CLOTH
Where have you been?

BREAD
A ram got loose.

CLOTH
I know that ram, it has a crooked horn.

SEMELE
Perhaps a little straighter now.

(Laughter. DIONYSUS snaps a stick. TIRESIAS looks at his feet in dismay, then up to see the women all staring at him. TIRESIAS tries to flee.)

ATHENA
Stop, boy.

And do not turn around. Let us now mimic modesty.

(To TIRESIAS.)

Now, look at me.

What is your name?

TIRESIAS
Tiresias.

ATHENA
Ah, yes. Of course you are.

AUTONOE
What are you doing here?

TIRESIAS
My hot young heart had run away.

ATHENA
Go on.

TIRESIAS
I heard it calling me from here and so I came,

Unable to survive without its strength.

ATHENA
Your heart had wandered off and lost itself?

TIRESIAS
It knew its way.

It flew straight here in service of yourself.

SEMELE
Of her?

ATHENA (*To the women.*)
My bath is over. You may leave.

(They begin to leave.)

BREAD
Perhaps she is a woman after all.

SEMELE
More so than I, it seems.

WATER
We are, apparently, at liberty today.

What shall we do?

(DIONYSUS, still unseen, strikes a drum.)

BREAD
My hot young body says we find that handsome youth.

Come, Semele, and laugh with us.

SEMELE
No, I will stay.

I cannot laugh today.

(Exeunt the women. SEMELE hides and watches.)

ATHENA
You are ambitious, boy.

Come out into the light.

(He does. ATHENA approaches him.)

But no, you are a man in form at least.

And you have seen a goddess naked now,

I hope your heart is strong enough.

TIRESIAS

For now, I think.

It has had exercise today.

ATHENA

It may have more.

TIRESIAS

Oh great Athena, hear me from my knees.

ATHENA

I might.

TIRESIAS

I swear on Love herself that I saw nothing of your nakedness.

My eyes went only where my heart had gone before

And tied my gaze on Semele.

ATHENA

On Semele?

SEMELE *(To herself)*

On me?

ZEUS *(Laughing)*

“Athena, naked, is ignored”

ATHENA

Great Zeus?

ZEUS

I was invoked. Go on.

TIRESIAS

Athena. I am—

ATHENA

Punished, boy.

(TIRESIAS is thrown to the ground, clutching his eyes in agony. ATHENA is horrified.)

This, this is done, and done by me.

Believe me, father.

We must leave, and now. *(Exit)*

ZEUS *(Admiring SEMELE)*
And yet, somehow.

(His thigh twinges. SEMELE approaches TIRESIAS.)

SEMELE
Tiresias.

TIRESIAS
Help me, sweet Semele.

ZEUS
Ah, yes.

Hear me, sweet Semele.

Could you love that?

Could it love you?

He cannot see nor say each day how much your beauty grows.

Great Zeus himself holds out his hand to you.

TIRESIAS
My Semele?

ZEUS
Choose me and I will love eternally.

TIRESIAS
Love now.

ZEUS
I do not wait.

SEMELE
Great Zeus, can you be kind?

ZEUS
Perhaps.

39

SEMELE

I come.

ZEUS

Wise girl.

(While TIRESIAS speaks, ZEUS seduces and SEMELE flirts. She asks. He offers. They agree.)

TIRESIAS

Oh, Semele.

No god can love you as I can.

What is eternity to him?

He sleeps, and eats, and combs his beard eternally.

Am I alone?

Where are you Semele?

Have you abandoned me?

SEMELE

Not quite.

Not yet.

I cannot give my love to you,

Great Zeus has claimed it now.

TIRESIAS

I see.

SEMELE

He sends this gift through me.

(She kisses him and leaves. He is filled with Prophesy.)

TIRESIAS

Is this a gift?

This hurricane of deeds and deaths and names?

So many names, each one a bottle of bright blood:

Cadmea, Thebes, Jocasta, Laius, and Antigone,

And there, just out of reach from now, my sweet, beloved Semele...

Gone like a butterfly across a candle flame.

Was this eternal love?

(He falls.)

Stop turning time.

I cannot find the world beneath my feet.

Somewhere, not far from here,

my name and Semele's are entwined.

If I can find and feel that cypress' root

I may yet find myself in all of this. *(Exit crawling)*

(HERA, ERIS, and APHRODITE voices off and above.)

ERIS

"Gone like a butterfly across a candle flame." How nice.

APHRODITE

She is a pretty thing, you know, Hera, my dear.

(Enter SEMELE, hair and clothing disarrayed, face flushed etc. She cannot see the Goddesses.)

HERA

Yes, Aphrodite, so I see.

But, Eris, tell me this.

How does he choose?

There are so many pretty virgins in the world.

APHRODITE

Fewer by one, at least, today.

HERA

Why her and not some other girl?

ERIS

When you pluck grapes,

Do you discern between the fruit that crowd the vine?

Or do you taste the one that finds your hand?

APHRODITE
Or squeeze them all and lap the juices up?

ERIS
Let us appear to be her mortal friends.

Perhaps, then, we will see what great Zeus sees.

HERA
I half hope not.

(The goddesses enter as UnNamed women, adjusting the "fit" of the mortal bodies: HERA as CLOTH, ERIS as GLASS, and APHRODITE as BREAD.)

HERA/CLOTH
Ah, Semele.

You want to have fun after all.

BREAD/APHRODITE
I know that look.

You have been riding rams already.

SEMELE
I have, I must confess, just come down off a mighty mount.

BREAD/APHRODITE
The old sheepherder wastes no time I see.

SEMELE
How could you think that I would ride with him?

BREAD/APHRODITE
You could do worse.

CLOTH/HERA
This mighty mount of which you speak was who?

GLASS/ERIS
A younger man?

BREAD/APHRODITE
Tiresias, I hope.

He is so...

Well, Pentheus has his charms.

SEMELE
My sister's son?

I have some pride.

CLOTH/HERA
We know you do. Who then?

BREAD/APHRODITE
We ache to know.

To look at you might make me guess

That he is more than many men.

SEMELE
He is.

BREAD/APHRODITE
Of course.

You have had many men at once!

CLOTH/HERA
Enough.

So, Semele, confess.

Who is your love? Tiresias?

SEMELE
I do confess, it is not he.

When great Athena struck him blind—

CLOTH/HERA
She did?

SEMELE
I saw him groping on the ground,

Moaning and begging like a child ...

CLOTH/HERA
I see.

Who then?

SEMELE
Well, friends, would you believe?

43

I have been filled with fire by...

No less than Zeus himself, I have.

GLASS/ERIS
Is that all?

SEMELE
Oh, friends.

I have no words to say.

Both dawn and sunset rose and fell between my—

CLOTH/HERA
Yes. Well, and good for you.

Since, as you say, there are no words,

Please do not try.

Tell us instead how he appeared to you.

SEMELE
Why, as himself of course.

GLASS/ERIS
And how was that?

SEMELE
A little taller than the average man, well muscled,

With a thick—

BREAD/APHRODITE
Yes?

SEMELE
Beard.

CLOTH/HERA
Oh, as a man. How curious.

SEMELE
What do you mean?

CLOTH/HERA
Well, as you know, of course,

He can appear in any form,

GLASS/ERIS
As all gods can.

CLOTH/HERA
An eagle, swan, or thunderstorm,

BREAD/APHRODITE
Or lion, goat, and frequently a bull.

Just ask the king.

His sister once rode off on Zeus disguised as one

And never did return.

CLOTH/HERA
And so you see, it is a little...

GLASS/ERIS
Small?

CLOTH/HERA
...Of him to come as just a man.

Perhaps he did not care enough to think of more.

SEMELE
He cares.

GLASS/ERIS
Of course he does.

CLOTH/HERA
How do you know?

SEMELE
He says he does. *(The goddesses laugh)*

He swears his love. *(Less polite laughter)*

He put his seed in me.

CLOTH/HERA
He what?

SEMELE
I know, as surely as a woman can, I bear his child.

45

CLOTH/HERA
I see.

GLASS/ERIS
I cannot wait to see what form it takes when it appears.

SEMELE
He will be beautiful. He is pure love.

CLOTH/HERA
Of course it is.

And yet, would pure love need to go disguised?

Well friends.

Great Semele, lover of Zeus, must need some rest.

Come, let us leave her now.

SEMELE
The gods be with you all.

(Exeunt HERA, APHRODITE, and ERIS.)

I know, as surely as I know myself to be,

That he loves me.

All other loves will be forgotten,

Yes, Hera herself must yield to me.

And yet... that smile, those eyes,

How much is truth and how much mere disguise?

(Exit SEMELE. Enter AGAVE and PENTHEUS separately.)

AGAVE
What are you doing here?

PENTHEUS
Oh, mother. I am lost.

AGAVE
So close to home?

Your face is wet again.

Did you come with Tiresias?

It cannot be, this love of yours.

PENTHEUS
He is my friend, and that is all.

AGAVE
He is, and that is why it cannot be.

You know, for all his youthful beauty,

He was the first child born when we came here.

PENTHEUS
Yes.

AGAVE
He is older than me, my dear.

He was my friend when I was young.

Come here my little boy and hold my hand.

Unlike Tiresias,

You must grow up and be a man.

PENTHEUS
I know I must, but how?

AGAVE
I am, I know, the only woman in your heart.

And part of me would have it always so.

But somehow, son, you must, as father did,

Find balance in the love of someone not like you

In fundamental ways.

I do not understand this love of yours,

But I know this, even to save your life

Tiresias can never be your wife.

PENTHEUS
And yet my love is true.

What would you have me do?

AGAVE
Come with me now.

47

PENTHEUS
To where?

AGAVE
A place where your green manhood may take root and grow.

So many women: warm, and welcoming.

PENTHEUS
What?

Thank you, no.

I will return to town.

(Exit AGAVE. Enter CADMUS and HARMONIA.)

PENTHEUS
Hello grandfather and—

HARMONIA
Just use my name, dear boy,

That other sounds so old.

PENTHEUS
Of course, Harmonia, Queen.

I trust that you are well?

HARMONIA
You would be wise to trust in other things.

CADMUS
Yes, yes.

But what of you?

Where is your friend, Tiresias?

PENTHEUS
I lost him.

CADMUS
Oh? Some boyish game?

Ah, well, enough of those.

HARMONIA
We want to speak to you alone.

PENTHEUS
You do?

Is something wrong?

CADMUS
We—

HARMONIA
Have decided that the time is right,

CADMUS
To slip from our grey heads the crowns and rest them,

HARMONIA
His, at least,

CADMUS
Upon a younger one.

HARMONIA
On yours, in fact.

PENTHEUS
But, but.

HARMONIA
Say yes or no, but do not flutter in between.

PENTHEUS
But, may I ask?

Cadmea has, as you observe, a double crown.

It is her greatest wealth.

Can I now rule alone?

HARMONIA
No. Not for long.

You must soon have a queen,

CADMUS
it is our way.

HARMONIA
But I suspect a handsome lad like you must have a love.

49

I see you do.

What is her family?

PENTHEUS
I thought Actaeon—

HARMONIA
No.

PENTHEUS
My father then.

CADMUS
Echion is, well, a little lacking

In the subtlety of thought that government requires,

Perhaps a bit...

PENTHEUS
Trust me, I know.

My cousin Labdacus?

CADMUS
A child.

No. You are the man—

HARMONIA
To lead Cadmea well, in peace—

CADMUS
And, if it comes, in war.

Do you accept?

Please, take your time.

HARMONIA
But not too much of ours.

CADMUS
We ask, but history demands.

PENTHEUS
It is my duty, and I have such trust in both of you

That I accept your trust in me as proof that I can do this thing.

HARMONIA
His tongue is turned for politics.

CADMUS
Yes. Good. Enough.

Come with us to the square.

HARMONIA
No, Cadmus, please. Not I. Not there.

PENTHEUS
You will not come to see me crowned?

HARMONIA
I do not dare.

CADMUS
You once dared everything.

(He takes her hand.)

Together we will end what we began,

And then, together, leave.

(She withdraws her hand.)

HARMONIA
You promised me.

I want to be alone.

CADMUS
Yes, so I see.

(HARMONIA withdraws to one side.)

All this she bears for love of me, you know?

PENTHEUS
It is a famous love.

CADMUS
I fear she now regrets her choice

And sees in my old folded face

Both what she lost and what she gave it for.

So. You are young and to be king.

Let us go celebrate these glorious things.

(Exeunt CADMUS and PENTHEUS.)

The Barn

(Enter BOWL. He rummages around until he finds a full bottle.)

BOWL

(He pours himself a drink, sets it in the middle of the floor, steps back and speaks to it.)

What a delight to find you here.

(Enter BLOOD, unseen.)

This blush becomes you, dear.

I must confess, my thoughts have been of you alone. *(He picks up the drink)*

Give me a little kiss. *(He goes to drink)*

BLOOD

Not yet.

(BOWL jumps and spills the wine.)

BLOOD *(Cont'd)*

Sing me a song and hold me tight,

And then I might.

BOWL

I ought to strike you, boy.

BLOOD

I did not think to find you here alone…

BOWL

The women have not yet returned.

BLOOD

What? Still?

BOWL

No one has seen them since they went to tend Athena's bath.

BLOOD

Are you concerned?

(Gales of female laughter off.)

BOWL

I almost was. *(Drinks deeply)*

Now I just hope to be prepared.

(Enter AGAVE, CLOTH, GLASS, FIREWOOD, WATER, and BREAD carrying DIONYSUS who is blindfolded.)

DIONYSUS

Closer, closer, always closer.

That way *(He points)*

Oh yes, much warmer now.

And I smell wine,

(He flings off the blindfold and leaps to the ground.)

Wine warmed with breath.

(He takes the bottle from BOWL and drains it.)

I told you so.

Just as a newborn finds its mother's milk

Across its dreams I can find someone drinking wine

Here in a cattle barn.

BLOOD

Not cattle, sheep.

BOWL

He drank my wine.

DIONYSUS

I did? Well then, drink mine.

(WATER and FIREWOOD produce a plentiful supply.)

For wine belongs to no one in the end. (*Pisses)*

All drink together.

Do we now need a hotter fire?

I think we do.

Here, friend, *(To BOWL, whose cup is empty)*

I see your cup leaks heavily.

Fill it again,

And you, and you. *(He pours liberally)*

BREAD *(To BOWL in semi- private)*

Are you content that we come here like this?

BOWL

What? Beauty, warmth, and wine all flowing free?

Where else would I desire that you should be?

BREAD

We have been, some of us, with him...

BOWL

You body is your own,

To do with as you please.

I am just happy that you did with me.

BREAD

Give me a kiss and help me with the fire.

DIONYSUS

Now, this is better, friends.

Thus is a barn transformed into a temple of a kind.

(A toast, perhaps the first ever.)

Come, drink with me to Dionysus, god of wine,

And other things, yet to be seen.

BOWL

Drink to?

54

DIONYSUS
Like this. Dionysus!! *(Drinks)*

ALL *(except BLOOD)* Dionysus!!

BLOOD
Dionysus?

I do not know this god. Do you? *(To BOWL)*

BOWL *(Still drinking)*
Who? I? No.

Never heard of him before today,

But I am now devoted to his rituals.

GLASS
We all have been discovering his mysteries,

BLOOD
You have?

BREAD
The more that we uncover, though, the deeper they become.

(The women laugh knowingly. TIRESIAS, now a young woman, slips in unnoticed.)

FIREWOOD
But truly, friends, are we not happier?

And I, at least, feel something more than all this—

GLASS
Lust?

FIREWOOD
Something shared.

I find myself fill up with tales I long to tell.

AGAVE
Yes, excellent.

But do we want another god?

My parents left Olympus to escape from them.

BLOOD

No, they were being punished.

Perhaps they have forgiven us.

DIONYSUS

He is a god.

GLASS

What does it matter if he is or not,

As long as he leaves us alone,

And sends instead this splendid representative?

(To DIONYSUS)

Oh. Sorry, did I spit on you?

(All but DIONYSUS laugh.)

BLOOD

But, but…

WATER

See how the spirit of his name gives life to everything?

BLOOD *(to DIONYSUS)*

And who are you, exactly, Sir?

WATER

A guest.

FIREWOOD

A friend.

BREAD

A beautiful young man.

GLASS

And welcome as all three.

BLOOD

Yes, so I see. More so than me. I go.

(Exit BLOOD.)

BOWL

Yet, still, I want to know. Who are you, sir?

DIONYSUS

One question at a time.

Great Dionysus is a god, conceived not far from here.

His mother was a woman of this town.

CLOTH

Who?

TIRESIAS

Semele.

AGAVE

What did you say?

TIRESIAS

His mother was your sister, Semele.

AGAVE

Impossible.

She is a virgin, or was yesterday.

BREAD

Oh? Are you sure?

AGAVE

I am her older sister, yes,

Despite her eagerness to drop that crown.

You both said “was”.

Where is she now?

(To TIRESIAS.)

And who are you?

TIRESIAS

Please sit, Agave.

For I have news to break a sister’s heart.

First, it is true that Dionysus is at least half god.

His father is no less than Zeus himself.

Your sister bore his child.

AGAVE

How can that be?

TIRESIAS

Think what it is to be a god.

They are not swept along by time as we weak mortals are

But lie beside the stream, indifferent to its flow.

So Dionysus always is and was.

His birth is just a ripple in the stream.

BOWL

How else could he have sent this boy

To bring us wine from far away?

DIONYSUS

And yet was just born, when?

TIRESIAS

Today.

DIONYSUS

Today?

Well, think of that.

TIRESIAS

Yes, I was there.

DIONYSUS

You were?

TIRESIAS

I was a witness to the birth,

If birth describes what I beheld.

CLOTH

But you are blind.

TIRESIAS

That too is new today.

Sweet Semele.

She was the last thing that my eyes embraced.

Since last the stars were seen,

Your sister gave her love to Zeus.

He took it, eagerly, and she conceived a son.

She begged of him a gift.

He, thinking, I suppose, that she was just a simple girl

Swore happily to give her anything,

But then she said she wished to see him as he really is.

He squirmed and blustered but she pressed her point

Until, frustrated, he agreed.

There was a flash so terrible my dead eyes caught its glow,

Then heat, as from Hephaestus' forge.

The girl began a scream and then...

A smell like... of... a funeral pyre,

And silence fell.

AGAVE

Oh mercy.

TIRESIAS

None.

BREAD

What of the child?

TIRESIAS

Zeus, muttering frustrated rage,

Next drew a blade and plunged it

Deep into his own broad thigh.

CLOTH

I hope it hurt.

TIRESIAS

He then addressed the tiny life spark in his hand,

Which he had snatched out of the ashes in the air,

And, with some tears I think, he called it son

And set it in the wound, which he sewed up.

WATER

With what?

GLASS

His other hand. Go on.

TIRESIAS

How long, for him, he bore it there, no-one can say,

But in my little life it was a breath or two at most

Before I heard a hearty baby cry

Its first, raw thirst out to the sky,

And Dionysus was on earth.

AGAVE

And Semele is gone.

TIRESIAS

She has become a memory so full of beauty, joy, and love

That she is more alive than many who yet walk and breathe.

AGAVE

You knew her well?

TIRESIAS

More than myself.

DIONYSUS

A loss, of course,

But think how much is gained with Dionysus in the world.

AGAVE

This child deserves my love as family,

But still, I cannot call him god.

DIONYSUS

No mortal says who is a god.

AGAVE

My broken heart is still my own,

And I am free to give or hold devotions,

Am I not?

DIONYSUS

You are.

But choices carry consequences.

AGAVE

Do they?

What consequences will there be for Zeus,

That lying, raping, murdering—

DIONYSUS

God.

He is a god, and all the rest is meaningless,

But saying it will bring such punishment—

AGAVE

What will they do, those clever gods?

Perhaps, instead of simply killing me

They will force me to watch while those I love

Are tortured, torn, and blasted from the world.

Or will they take my first great best intentioned choice,

Made in my youthful heart, and twist it into something

Hard and empty, cold and blistering.

My life already is a punishment.

Can they do more?

DIONYSUS

We can—

GLASS

We?

DIONYSUS

You and I.

All we poor mortals can do now

Is fall upon our knees

And beg for mercy.

AGAVE
Justice.

(AGAVE kneels.)

I cry beyond the gods to beg the sky,

The universe, and truth itself

To render justice now: clear and exact.

May Dionysus, if he is a god,

Be least and last of all of them

And lock whatever door allows

Them access to our world,

On his way out.

(She starts to go.)

DIONYSUS
No.

Stay.

Agave, please.

AGAVE
Well?

DIONYSUS
I did not know your sister, but I can see she lived life joyfully.

Let us declare a joyful festival to honour her, her life, and son,

Who was just born today.

To Dionysus, drink!

(The group gathers around DIONYSUS. AGAVE stands alone. TIRESIAS comes to her. Enter BLOOD.)

BLOOD
Come all. Come now.

BOWL
Later, a festival has been declared.

BLOOD

Come to the square.

BREAD

Perhaps after a while.

BLOOD

No. Now.

King Cadmus asks us all to come attend some great event.

WATER

And we will come.

BOWL

But first, more wine.

DIONYSUS

Always, my friend, in all that happens here,

You have my word, there will always be more.

The king commands that all must come,

So let us dance, and play our drums

Throughout the town, and call the people to the square,

Eventually.

(Exeunt Omnes.)

End of Act One

63

Act Two

the Public Square

(Enter CADMUS and PENTHEUS.)

PENTHEUS
No one is here.

CADMUS
Not yet, but they will come, eventually.

Cadmea is a gentle town, an even tempered town,

But not a very active place.

PENTHEUS
It is like you.

CADMUS
And that is fine, up to a point.

PENTHEUS
Why now?

CADMUS
That puddle where the children swim

Was meant to carry water to the fields.

That pile of stones once hoped to be a gate.

We must wake up and dream again,

And I must rest.

My love demands.

PENTHEUS
The people love you.

CADMUS
Yes, I know, and I love them,

Perhaps too much to be their king.

And so, grandson, I give you now my crown.

It is no prize,

64

It is, at best, a chance to fail disastrously.

Be firm, but clear, first with yourself,

Then in all things,

And you will know what you must do,

And knowing, do it then.

(Enter ACTAEON.)

PENTHEUS

I will, I swear.

ACTAEON

What will you do?

Tidy your room?

You look so grim, Pentheus.

Is someone teasing you again?

CADMUS

Actaeon, good.

I want you here for this.

ACTAEON

Grandfather, naturally.

CADMUS

Harmonia and I

Have chosen to retire.

ACTAEON

Announce it, anyway.

You have not ruled for years.

PENTHEUS

Actaeon.

CADMUS

No, he roughly offers truth.

ACTAEON

Will there be time to finish this year's hunt

65

Before I take the crown?

CADMUS

Pentheus, say the words.

PENTHEUS

Actaeon, cousin, friend almost.

I am to be the king.

ACTAEON

Pentheus? King?

Grandfather, are you mad?

This is absurd, the crown is mine.

I have prepared—

PENTHEUS

For what?

The hunt, and nothing else.

How long since last you read, or bathed,

Or even spent a night in town?

How would you judge a subtle case of property?

By skinning all involved?

ACTAEON

Enough.

You whining boy.

Cadmus, you have some plan I cannot see.

My cousin king, you will see more of me.

(Exit ACTAEON.)

PENTHEUS

That went quite well, I think.

CADMUS

It was a royal start.

See, as I said, they come.

Your father first of all,

66

To see you wear the crown.

The crown.

We need the crown itself.

We talk of it so much and yet...I left it, where?

I will return.

Wait here.

(Exit CADMUS. PENTHEUS watches him going away.)

PENTHEUS

Am I the last disastrous blunder of a mind decayed?

(Enter ECHION.)

Hello father.

I am to be the king.

You are content?

ECHION

My feelings are so small I rarely notice them.

PENTHEUS

I know.

Is there now anything you wish to say?

ECHION

Like what?

PENTHEUS

Advice perhaps, good wishes, fears,

A father's wisdom, no? *(Silence)*

(ECHION moves suddenly aggressively and draws his weapon.)

ECHION

Dad.

PENTHEUS

Son?

(ECHION demonstrates three fighting postures as he names them.)

ECHION

Defend.

Attack.

Destroy.

This much I have to give you, boy.

PENTHEUS

And... nothing more?

(Enter AGAVE.)

I have been told that I must "be a man".

ECHION

Perhaps.

PENTHEUS

You disagree?

ECHION

What is a man?

I am more blade than hand.

I make no choices,

And, without commands,

Have no idea what to do.

You will be king today,

And you will say what I should do.

And I will do it then.

Does that make either of us men?

AGAVE

You will be king?

PENTHEUS

Cadmus has asked.

AGAVE

And Harmonia?

Where is her balance now?

I cannot see how this can be a good idea.

PENTHEUS
Are you not proud of me?

AGAVE
My son, my little love that was,

You are not being asked to welcome guests

Or lead in ceremonials.

We are attacked by gods.

My pretty little sister Semele is now just ash and agony.

This Dionysus, in the name of **“**god”,

Ignites all fires at once.

PENTHEUS
Both Cadmus and Harmonia believe in me

Can you?

AGAVE
They do not know you as I do.

The crown will strangle you.

Please, for your mother, child, say no.

You are kind, good, and beautiful, and yet

You are no king.

PENTHEUS
It is my duty, honour, and my opportunity

To serve Cadmea and—

(AGAVE seizes PENTHEUS’ clothing and shakes him.)

AGAVE
You are no king.

PENTHEUS
Mother, believe in me.

AGAVE
You are no king.

69

PENTHEUS
I AM the king, and I say stop.

AGAVE
You are no king!!!

(ECHION steps in and pulls her off, restraining her. Enter the crowd from the previous scene, drumming, dancing, and laughing. They fall silent.)

AGAVE
Too much.

Too much. *(She weeps.)*

DIONYSUS
All hail our noble king.

Please, someone comfort her.

If you will let her go?

PENTHEUS
What? Yes of course. Please do.

(ECHION releases AGAVE. Several of the women take her aside.)

CLOTH
Poor heart.

BREAD
To treat his mother so.

(During the following the crowd reacts with increasing disbelief and disdain to PENTHEUS. Some laugh, other mimic him. The drumming begins as an underscore.)

PENTHEUS
Echion—

ECHION
Yes, sir?

PENTHEUS
Go.

(ECHION salutes and leaves.)

I did not hurt her.

FIREWOOD
No, of course.

PENTHEUS
Tell me...

GLASS
Yes, mighty king.

We tremble at your word.

PENTHEUS
I am not king.

Not yet.

What else has happened here?

What have I lost today?

Will no-one speak?

Is all Cadmea mad?

TIRESIAS
Not yet.

PENTHEUS
And who are you?

And all the rest, be still.

Stop dancing,

Stop those foolish drums *(They do not stop)*

Go on.

TIRESIAS
Tiresias is blind and Semele is dead.

PENTHEUS
Oh gods.

Go on.

Say who is guilty of these crimes and I will punish them.

TIRESIAS
Athena struck Tiresias blind.

71

PENTHEUS
What?

TIRESIAS
And Zeus killed Semele.

DIONYSUS
Shall we send word for their arrest?

PENTHEUS
Silence. I see.

Those laughing eyes will never smile at me again.

Tiresias.

TIRESIAS
-is not dead.

PENTHEUS
My sweet aunt Semele...?

TIRESIAS
Consumed by fire.

PENTHEUS
There is a child, my mother said?

TIRESIAS
The son of Zeus.

PENTHEUS
It lives?

TIRESIAS
He does, and Dionysus is his name.

DIONYSUS
Dionysus!

The people celebrate him now.

He is much loved.

Dionysus be praised!!

(At the saying of the name the crowd becomes louder, wilder. Some shout it out.)

72

PENTHEUS *(Struggling to hear and to be heard)*
Where is Tiresias now?

TIRESIAS
Before you, king.

PENTHEUS
I did not hear.

Can you not look at me and speak?

What did you say?

DIONYSUS
Dance daughters, sisters, lovers, dance.

Let us entwine like vines

And mount the steaming slopes of Cithaeron,

A festival cries out to be,

Follow your flesh, and feel it follow me.

(Exeunt Dionysus and women. The sounds of the Bacchanal fade.)

TIRESIAS
I am Tiresias.

PENTHEUS
You are a woman and he is a man.

TIRESIAS
I am now what you see.

As you well know,

I watched the bathing Semele,

And, loving her, saw no-one else.

Naked Athena punished me for that

With ...this... *(Gestures at eyes.)*

Zeus plucked my pretty love

And, in exchange, I think,

Tossed me some ragged shards of prophesy

Which pierce my darkness with a light both strange and terrible.

73

PENTHEUS
Completely mad.

TIRESIAS
Lost in this blaze of truth I sought some solid thing.
As you well know, I cut into a root my name
And that of Semele.

PENTHEUS
A cypress root.
He did.
Both names entwined like—

TIRESIAS
Wrestlers.
I crawled through mud and thorns to find that root.
My fingers gripped two things entangled on the ground,
The things convulsed.
Two biting snakes.
I fell.
When I awoke I was what you see now.
At first I thought it was a dream,
Such dreams I had when last I slept
In which I touched a body much like this,
But now I touch myself.

PENTHEUS
I too had dreams.

(She holds up her fingertips as for the boy's wrestling game.)

TIRESIAS
One touch, I beg of you.

PENTHEUS
No. *(To a non-existent crowd)* Go home.
All go away.
The coronation is postponed.

74

Come back at dawn, now go.

(Exit PENTHEUS. Exeunt all but TIRESIAS.)

TIRESIAS

I am alone it seems,

Just me and everything. *(Exit)*

The square, dawn the next day.

(Enter BLOOD.)

BLOOD

Now this is nice.

It is so quiet when the women are away.

(Enter PENTHEUS.)

Good morning, sir.

It looks to be a sunny day.

Although I think I said that yesterday

And then it rained, a little,

Or at least was grey.

So much for prophesy.

Although—

PENTHEUS

Please stop.

I have been walking all around the town since darkness fell.

She could not bear attack by half a dozen children throwing grapes.

There are great stages built to celebrate the opening of gates

And yet there are no walls.

BLOOD

There were some in King Cadmus' plans, I think.

PENTHEUS

Oh, good.

His half remembered dreams will keep us safe

When one or other of our neighbour states attacks us then?

BLOOD

Are we at war?

PENTHEUS

Who is this stranger with the drums and this odd drink?

BLOOD

He calls it wine.

He says he is a priest of Dionysus, sir.

PENTHEUS

A priest of whom?

BLOOD

This upstart god the women blush about.

The stranger claims he is the son of Semele,

Your aunt, and Zeus.

And therefore cousin to yourself.

She does not claim that part, but he would be

If all the rest were true.

PENTHEUS

Which stranger?

He who mocked me so?

BLOOD

No, her, the young, blind, pretty one.

PENTHEUS

The son of Zeus?

BLOOD

No. No. You were not listening,

I mean, forgive me, sir, let me repeat.

He—

PENTHEUS

Who?

BLOOD
Why Dionysus, sir, of course, is said, by some—

PENTHEUS
When was he born?

BLOOD
Today, well, yesterday.

And I should say he was not actually born.

PENTHEUS
Enough.

I do not care about some boy who may or may not be.

This other one, the bold, young man who stirs up all this madness,

And defies me openly,

No, it is him I must control.

BLOOD
Oh, he is gone.

I would not worry, sir.

PENTHEUS
Gone? Where?

BLOOD
Into the hills with all our women,

Your mother too.

Fires burned all night,

Wild drums and laughter, singing has been heard.

They will return today.

PENTHEUS
How do you know?

BLOOD
They must.

They have much work to do.

Both pots and children need attending to.

By dinnertime they will be back, I think.

77

No, I am sure.

PENTHEUS
I do not share your confidence.

I am the king.

There must be something I can do.

Where is the Civil Guard?

BLOOD
The what?

PENTHEUS
Cadmea's manhood, bound by honour

To protect the town

And to enforce all laws

Enacted by her king.

BLOOD
Oh.

Let me see.

Well, for a year or so, two times each month,

Except at harvest time, or if it rained,

A hundred volunteers, almost,

Have gathered in this very square

To train for... well, to train.

PENTHEUS
And who commands this awful force of arms?

BLOOD
Your father, sir.

PENTHEUS
Of course.

BLOOD
Of all the men whom Cadmus conjured from the ground

That fateful day—

PENTHEUS
Yes, yes, I know.

BLOOD
He is a Sown Man, Sir.

PENTHEUS
He fought his brothers for an hour one day.
And every day I hear about that hour.
Go now and call the guard.
However that is done.

BLOOD
Yes, sir, my king, of course, I will, I go.

(Exit BLOOD.)

PENTHEUS
What else did he say?
Something about an upstart god?
Do we not have enough?

(Enter Dionysus, unseen.)

Ares' blind wrath and Zeus' raw lechery
And now Athena too delights in cruelty.
We dare to ask them almost anything,
This love, that job, sweet rain but not today,
Why not just ask for nothing then?
That we be left alone?
Like children leaving home when they are grown,
Prepared, or not, but ready none the less,
To live and die.

DIONYSUS
Athena? Zeus?
Is no one listening?
Surely we must destroy this upstart king.

79

(Enter BOWL, drunk and disheveled. He prepares to piss.)

PENTHEUS
This is a public place.

BOWL
Where are they then?

PENTHEUS
What? On their way.

BOWL
Oh, good.

Their way to where?

PENTHEUS
To here. To me.

My coronation is today.

BOWL
Well, good for you, young man.

(He shakes PENTHEUS' hand, then wipes his own hand on his clothes.)

Your mother must be very proud.

(He lies down.)

Now run along and let me sleep.

(PENTHEUS pokes BOWL with his foot as CADMUS enters.)

PENTHEUS
I am Pentheus, soon to be your king, wake up.

CADMUS
The ceremonies have begun, I see.

PENTHEUS
Where is the crown? Give it to me.

(PENTHEUS puts the crown on his own head.)

We have no time for festivals.

The sun is up and I have much to do.

CADMUS

What? Oh, well,

I suppose this is the eager energy we talked about.

But, I...

PENTHEUS

Cadmus, please go.

Your clear example guides me now.

CADMUS

How nice, but—

PENTHEUS

My first choice in all things

Will be to be the king

You could not, would not be.

CADMUS

I see.

Good luck.

I will go find my wife. *(Exit)*

(The sound of out of step marching and clanking weapons approaches.Enter BLOOD.)

BLOOD

The army of Cadmea comes.

BOWL *(Waking)*

Is that what shakes the ground unpleasantly?

I thought it was just me.

ECHION *(Shouting, off)*

Keep up, keep up, and stay in line. And... STOP!

Now... TURN!

(A clattering and shuffling of feet.)

You, turn around.

(ECHION marches on stage a few paces and stands at attention.)

PENTHEUS

I am your king.

Me.

Over here.

(Gradually they attend.)

We are Cadmea's men: her sons and husbands,

Fathers, even lovers, I suppose.

(Male laughter from off.)

The women of our town have been abducted,

Yes, that is the word,

By that strange, handsome youth,

With fire, dance, and drunken nakedness.

BOWL

I wish him energy.

PENTHEUS

Oh, he has energy, enough to force

The most revolting violations onto them.

(Pointing at different men offstage, he wins them over.)

His little sister and your promised bride,

Our mothers, grandmothers,

Wild animals and strangers.

What kind of man can stand for it?

This one brave day will say for years to come,

What happens every day in every home.

Be good. Be brave. Be strong.

Go bring your women back where they belong!

(Loud cheers etc. off.)

ECHION

Into the hills!

(Muddled marching off.)

But wait for me.

(Exit.)

PENTHEUS

I saw a thing to do and did it.

I am the king.

I will now bathe and think.

Have someone bring me food and drink.

You! *(To BLOOD)*

BLOOD

But, but.

Perhaps I should... the hills.

PENTHEUS

Do as I say, and bring it to me in my bath.

BLOOD *(Hesitating)*

I come, of course I come... I mean, I go.

PENTHEUS

Do it today!

(Exit PENTHEUS.)

BOWL

I had a dog once, shook like that when I would call.

BLOOD

Where is it now?

BOWL

Trampled by cats.

Well, boy, which will you do?

BLOOD

I will go serve the king, I think.

BOWL

And I will serve myself and drink. *(Exit BLOOD and then BOWL.)*

Athena's pool.

(Enter HARMONIA, tentatively at first.)

HARMONIA

Athena?

Gone yet, or just observing me?

What does a queen do now?

Send me a cow at least.

No?

So, I am alone, again.

Just me and...

(*She glimpses her reflection in the pool and is cautiously drawn to it. She is surprised to like what she sees. She undoes her hair, scoops up water to wash her face. As the ripples settle she smiles at herself. THEBE emerges face first out of the reflection. She reaches to kiss HARMONIA, but HARMONIA pulls back, startled.*)

THEBE

So beautiful.

HARMONIA

Oh, gods. You frightened me.

Thebe, hello.

THEBE

Hello. Do I know you?

HARMONIA

Harmonia, dear.

I have been queen for many years,

And before that…

Olympus? No?

THEBE

May I kiss you?

HARMONIA

I dare not.

THEBE
Why?

HARMONIA
Forgetfulness?

Your kisses, so they say,

Can take all memories away.

THEBE
They do? How strange.

But that explains...

HARMONIA
What, dear?

THEBE
I feel I often kneel right here,

Where you kneel now,

And kiss my own face in the pool.

But I remember... nothing... actually.

HARMONIA
How nice for you.

THEBE
Nice? Why?

HARMONIA
Oh, just to let all losses go,

And so to stay forever young.

THEBE
But...

HARMONIA
What?

THEBE
How many children have you had?

HARMONIA
Four daughters and a son.

85

THEBE
Grandchildren?

HARMONIA
Yes. I am that old.

THEBE
What is it like?

HARMONIA
Ask your own heart,
For somewhere you must know
You had a son.

THEBE
I did?

HARMONIA
And I have watched him grow
In my own home, as close companion
To all my daughters, one by one,
You have a fine and handsome son, Tiresias.

THEBE
You have him more than I.
And you are Queen? Of what?

HARMONIA
Cadmea, there.

TIRESIAS *(Off)*
This is the place. I know it well,
The water sounds, and now.... that bitter smell.

THEBE *(Agitated)*
I cannot face this... no.
My whole heart shrieks to go,
But have no fear, Harmonia,
I am still here. *(Submerges)*

(Enter TIRESIAS.)

TIRESIAS

Oh, Semele, can you be really gone, my love?

(HARMONIA gasps.)

What goddess mocks me now?

HARMONIA

No goddess, only me.

TIRESIAS

Harmonia, my queen.

HARMONIA

Do I know you?

You speak my daughter's name, you call her **"**love".

Explain yourself.

TIRESIAS

Our Semele is dead.

HARMONIA

What? No.

My little girl.

I thought at least that I would die

Before my children did.

Mortality should have that much to give.

Can this be true?

How?

TIRESIAS

Zeus.

HARMONIA

Say no more.

Spare me the rape.

TIRESIAS

She loved him willingly.

HARMONIA

Thank you for saying so at least.

TIRESIAS
Harmonia, you have seen much.

HARMONIA
I have.

TIRESIAS
See this.

I am Tiresias.

HARMONIA
Tiresias? But how?

TIRESIAS
Athena first... my eyes.

Then Zeus... the blinding light of prophesy.

HARMONIA
Cadmus glimpsed that.

TIRESIAS
Then snakes...

I do not really know.

Harmonia, I learned the truth of welcome in your home.

Can you accept me now?

For here I am.

HARMONIA
Somehow you are.

Blind prophetess *(TIRESIAS nods)*

And beautiful, like Semele.

My baby, gone.

You loved her?

TIRESIAS
Yes.

HARMONIA
And now?

TIRESIAS
I am... transformed.

HARMONIA
What is it like?

TIRESIAS
What?

HARMONIA
Prophesy.

TIRESIAS
A midnight sky,
Where every star shines on a different truth,
And yet, near me is darkness absolute.

HARMONIA
What do you know?

TIRESIAS
Oh, almost everything, but all at once,
And without order, context, or design.

HARMONIA
About yourself?

TIRESIAS
My name. Some memories.

HARMONIA
Go on.

TIRESIAS
I am a woman now in every part.

HARMONIA
Think now of Semele.
So young, so beautiful.
Think how she touched you, teased you.

TIRESIAS
Yes.

89

HARMONIA
Are you ... stirred to touch her so?

TIRESIAS
Oh Semele forgive me, no.

HARMONIA
And now, think of Pentheus.
Wrestle with him and—

TIRESIAS
Oh. How strange. I am. I do.

HARMONIA
This too is part of who you are.
I wonder, no, I think,
This, all of this that has been done to you,
Is neither curse nor punishment,
But rather, vital to Athena's plans.

TIRESIAS
How so?

HARMONIA
What if she saw Pentheus,
King alone, without that balance
That the people name for me?
What if, knowing his love, and yours,
She wants you to be queen,
Your goodness wed to prophesy would be—

TIRESIAS
The blindness?

HARMONIA
Yes, well,
A balance can require, at times,
Taking away from one side of the scale.

90

TIRESIAS

But nowhere do I see—

HARMONIA

But might you feel the possibility?

(HARMONIA playfully mimes taking a crown from her head and placing it on TIRESIAS'.)

HARMONIA

So, go, to your love.

TIRESIAS

I will.

And you?

HARMONIA

Not yet, but soon.

(TIRESIAS begins to leave. THEBE surfaces silently to watch him go. Exit TIRESIAS.)

THEBE

Such suffering, such loss and pain.

To think that with one kiss,

I could bring peace.

(THEBE stands in the pool and looks at her reflection.)

Again.

(She kisses her own reflection and slips under the water.)

HARMONIA

I am, it seems, too old to run away.

I must attend a royal wedding day.

(Exit.)

Pentheus' bath

(Enter PENTHEUS. He tests the water.)

PENTHEUS
Now this is good.

(PENTHEUS enters his bath.)

But what a start.
My whole life long and longer Cadmus ruled
Without a ripple in his royal bath,
And then, the very day I am made king...all this.

(PENTHEUS closes his eyes, perhaps covering them with the crown.)

Are we at war, he asks?
We just might be,
With all the gods at once, apparently.
But not just yet.
No gods at all for now,
No women for a while,
And no men either actually.
No one but unattended children,
The old, the weak, and mad.
Where is that nervous fool?
Hello! I am the king.

(Enter DIONYSUS, unseen.)

DIONYSUS
I tire of my mother's family.

(DIONYSUS, from behind.)

DIONYSUS
Pentheus.

PENTHEUS
Good. At last. And call me king.

(DIONYSUS begins to massage PENTHEUS, Who still has his eyes closed.)

Yes, there, and further... Yes.

(Enter BLOOD, who cannot see or hear Dionysus.)

I wanted you to write things down.

DIONYSUS

Trust me, I will remember everything you say,

PENTHEUS

But I speak law, and every word is history.

So, you, instead.

BLOOD

Who else my lord?

PENTHEUS

Can you write? I never learned.

Where to begin?

DIONYSUS *(In PENTHEUS's ear)*

Women are weak.

PENTHEUS

First, we have seen, are seeing now,

How weak all women are.

Poor silly Semele is gone,

My mother, lost in suffering,

And even great Harmonia could not last.

DIONYSUS *(In PENTHEUS's ear)*

They cannot rule.

PENTHEUS

They cannot rule themselves and therefore,

Logically, they cannot rule at all.

Do you agree?

BLOOD

Who? Me?

DIONYSUS
If you say so. You are the king.

PENTHEUS
I am.

And you are strong.

BLOOD
I am?

PENTHEUS
Where was I, man?

BLOOD
Women are weak and cannot rule.

PENTHEUS
Yes, yes, of course.

And yet, even a man must be prepared, as I was not, to rule.

DIONYSUS *(In PENTHEUS's ear)*
Fathers create their sons.

PENTHEUS
I have it now.

He should know from the moment of his birth,

And only if his father...

The one fit father for a king must be another king,

And so the crown must pass from man to man,

Father to son.

So write the law out properly, "Pentheus' Law",

And let the future see it done.

Yes, good.

Now, go, I need to rest. *(Exit BLOOD)*

DIONYSUS
Pentheus' Law.

It has a certain sound.

94

PENTHEUS
It has.

DIONYSUS
So. You must have a son.

PENTHEUS
Yes, I suppose I must.

DIONYSUS
Some grapes, Pentheus?

PENTHEUS
It is not easy being king, you know.

DIONYSUS
So much to do.

PENTHEUS
There really is.

(Dionysus moves around in front of PENTHEUS.)

You!

DIONYSUS
Yes. And no-one else.

(PENTHEUS snatches up the knife and stands.)

PENTHEUS
Help! Guards!

DIONYSUS
What guards?

You sent what little strength you have

Off wandering the countryside,

Looking for me, I think.

(PENTHEUS leaps from the bath.)

PENTHEUS
Who do you think you are?

95

DIONYSUS

Oh good, I like this game.

But you go first.

PENTHEUS

Oh, you will go and take your ways

And influences with you when you do,

Or I am not Pentheus, king.

DIONYSUS

A wager, better still.

But, to be fair,

You ought to know these ways you speak of

Are the sacred rites of Dionysus, god of Thebes,

No wait, when are we now?

Cadmea, I suppose.

PENTHEUS

Dionysus is nothing.

Whatever gods there may or may not be,

I have now set Cadmea free of them,

But this absurd invention,

This dirty minded, drunken boy,

Insults the simple impulse in our hearts

That made us wish for gods.

In truth, if Dionysus is a god, they all are meaningless,

Or worse; pathetic, pouting, mockeries of man.

DIONYSUS

I am not mortal! I am—

PENTHEUS

How sad.

The youth is mad.

You have my leave to go, poor lad, I will not punish you.

(Exit PENTHEUS.)

DIONYSUS

Why do I care?

I, to Olympus born?

These mortals are beneath my scorn,

I will amuse myself with other things.

Like trapping flies and tearing off their wings. *(Exit)*

Athena's pool

(Enter BREAD and GLASS.)

GLASS

Oh good. No one is here.

I have been dancing, drinking—

BREAD

Everything. I know.

(They relax together, perhaps they bathe.)

GLASS

It is exhausting, though.

(Enter AGAVE, CLOTH, and WATER.)

WATER

I thought the dance was getting thin.

AGAVE

Move over, please. *(She joins them.)*

And so?

What happens next?

(Enter FIREWOOD.)

FIREWOOD

This cannot last and so must end.

AGAVE

What do you mean?

97

WATER

I think we must consider well how much has changed.

Already, now, could you go back?

AGAVE

There is no back.

I was a mother, once, you know.

Pushing his silly head against that rigid ring

Has changed him so.

He is no more my son.

And little Semele, so suddenly a name in history.

CLOTH

Poor Semele.

GLASS

Why poor?

She lay with Zeus before she died.

How many girls can say they lived as much?

BREAD

More than a few.

AGAVE

And is that life?

All that I loved is lost to me.

FIREWOOD

Not all.

AGAVE

My husband? Ha.

Did you not hear him braying at those boys

Who tried to chase us earlier?

WATER

We led them into knots.

AGAVE

And he herds them like frightened cats.

They will be lost for days.

(They laugh.)

As beautiful as all this is

The future cannot all be so.

(Enter DIONYSUS.)

DIONYSUS

Ah, here they are,

The sweetest fruits of any vine on earth.

More wine, more pleasures of all kinds

And let your juicy bodies rule your minds.

Come celebrate a thirsty god with me.

CLOTH

You must be careful, sir.

Ripe fruit can bruise so easily.

WATER

We come, of course we come.

(Exeunt WATER, FIREWOOD, GLASS, and CLOTH.)

DIONYSUS *(To AGAVE)*

Join us.

AGAVE

I will come presently.

DIONYSUS

I said, come now.

AGAVE

What? You command?

DIONYSUS

I do.

AGAVE

I am Cadmean, free.

I do not serve, obey, or worship anyone.

DIONYSUS

What then is happening through there?

Are they not worshiping a god?

AGAVE

That?

That is life honouring itself.

DIONYSUS

I say that Dionysus is a god.

AGAVE

To you perhaps.

Do you not see?

We are now free of kings and gods.

DIONYSUS

No, you must worship me!

AGAVE

What? You?

You are not what I thought at all.

DIONYSUS

And what was that?

AGAVE

I thought you were what men could be.

DIONYSUS

But I am not a man.

AGAVE

Not yet, apparently.

If men cannot be more than you,

Let them go with the gods, Away. *(Exit)*

DIONYSUS

Oh, my great father, give me strength.

This arrogance will find exquisite punishment.

(Exit DIONYSUS, in sputtering rage.)

the Public Square

(Enter BLOOD and TIRESIAS, separately.)

BLOOD

Ah, oh.

You... well, I mean...

Excuse me, is it true?

TIRESIAS

Yes, most things are, eventually.

BLOOD

You are... and were... and now...?

TIRESIAS

I am Tiresias, once man, now as you see.

While I cannot see you, I see much more.

BLOOD

Much more than me is nothing much.

TIRESIAS

I disagree.

(Enter CADMUS.)

You love?

BLOOD

I dare to say I do.

TIRESIAS

Then you dare anything.

Go to your love, wherever it may be.

BLOOD

I will. *(Exit)*

CADMUS

My love is here.

TIRESIAS

Harmonia?

CADMUS

Make no mistake, I love my wife.

We built a city of our love and this is it.

I cannot leave Cadmea without her by my side.

I will go to the square.

(Exit CADMUS. Enter PENTHEUS, dressing and arming himself.)

TIRESIAS

Pentheus.

PENTHEUS

What?

Oh, you.

Why have you not gone to the hills?

Madness is welcome there.

TIRESIAS

I am Tiresias, whom you love, and I love you.

PENTHEUS

You cannot say—

TIRESIAS

I can. I am.

Touch me and you will know.

Forget your eyes and trust your fingertips.

You wrestle with yourself, wrestle with me.

PENTHEUS

How can you know so much?

TIRESIAS

Belief begins.

PENTHEUS

I have no time for all of this,

I must go bring my people home.

TIRESIAS *(Staggered by a vision)*

Stop! No!

You cannot go.

PENTHEUS
What is this now?

TIRESIAS
Each word a window wide.

You speak and I see death reach out for you

With many hands.

So near, I smell its breath.

You cannot hear your heart,

So, listen to your fear.

I can do this, reach into darkness and pull out the truth.

Actaeon's ghost, new born to death, is here.

PENTHEUS
Actaeon, dead? But—

ACTAEON *(Appearing)*
Silence, boy.

I hang in agony.

I have one chance to move beyond this moment of my death

By pushing you back into life.

Listen to me and learn.

I was so furious with you, and Cadmus too,

I drove my hounds into the hills, hungry to kill.

Blood thirst grew cold and real thirst took hold.

I heard a waterfall,

I found a grove, a cave.

I slipped, and stumbled on a stag, new slain;

The empty eyes, the fat full flies,

The golden arrow through the neck,

The long, well muscled thigh, spattered with blood,

And there stood Artemis,

As red and naked as the dawn,

Glaring at me.

I could not help but see, and seeing, stare.

TIRESIAS

Just so.

ACTAEON

“How dare you, dog?” she cried.

She raised her bloody hand

And something seized my heart.

In every part of me I ...

How to say?

TIRESIAS

You were transformed.

ACTAEON

Just so.

I had become the stag,

My self was gone.

I staggered to my feet, and heard my hungry hounds

Approaching, all around.

Black Paw, my favourite, tore my throat,

While Faithful sank her fangs into my leg.

I went down with the weakness and the weight.

Pentheus, I beg of you,

Hear this and set me free.

Do not go to the fire,

For there you will, I know it, cousin,

Suffer as I do.

No one should ever know such pain.

Goddess, have mercy, here they come again!

Pentheus, flee the fire!

(Exit.)

PENTHEUS

Can this be real?

TIRESIAS

It is.

Death is.

Listen to one who knows and flee the fire.

PENTHEUS

That was Actaeon, this I know,

I recognize the chill his voice puts into me.

I also know he hates me so,

Alive or dead, how can I trust his word?

TIRESIAS

Believe in something, sweet Pentheus, please.

Unless you do you are already dead.

(Reaching out) Just touch me.

PENTHEUS *(Recoiling)*

No.

TIRESIAS

I am unarmed and blind.

What do you fear?

The truth? Yourself?

Answer one question at a time.

Am I Tiresias?

(TIRESIAS offers her fingertips exactly as in the first scene. As in the opening scene, their tentative touch grows expressively through stages. Instead of becoming a full-scale wrestling match it becomes the tender embrace that was always implied.)

PENTHEUS

Tiresias.

But how?

TIRESIAS

No words.

The only truth is now.

We love, that is enough.

(They slip out of sight to make love. Enter BLOOD, elsewhere, higher up.)

BLOOD

This is exciting now,

The mud is much impressed by feet.

I must be close to,

Something.

I feel the fire's heat.

This way I think. *(Exit)*

(PENTHEUS and TIRESIAS emerge from loving.)

PENTHEUS

Tiresias, that was...

It was exactly, more or less, no more,

As I have dreamed a thousand times.

TIRESIAS

It was?

PENTHEUS

Oh yes,

But better, love, of course.

TIRESIAS

How so?

PENTHEUS

Do you not see?

I have, you know, loved you as long as—

TIRESIAS

As a man.

PENTHEUS

Yes. As Tiresias.

But then, this thing *(The crown)*

Demands that I must have a Queen. Impossible.

And then somehow.

TIRESIAS

Some god?

PENTHEUS

Who knows? Who cares?

Somehow you are... like this.

It all is perfect now, at last.

Together we will wear the double crown

And have a son to whom to pass them down.

TIRESIAS

What do you mean that you have dreamed

Of this, of that, a thousand times?

PENTHEUS

I do not understand.

TIRESIAS

Tell me, in truth,

When have you ever dreamed of lying with a woman?

Kissing her?

PENTHEUS

I dreamed of kissing you.

Is any of you man at all?

TIRESIAS

Think of me, love.

Not as the answer to your needs,

But me, and love me, if you can

Not as a man, but me.

PENTHEUS

I am confused.

TIRESIAS

I know.

But ten, a thousand times, more great

Is the confusion that consumes me now.

Two things I know about myself.

That I love you,

And that I am a woman now.

PENTHEUS

So I must find a way to love you as you are?

TIRESIAS

You must.

PENTHEUS

How can you be so clearly you?

And yet, just look at you.

TIRESIAS

Would I be pleased?

PENTHEUS

You would adore yourself.

TIRESIAS

Can you?

PENTHEUS

I am the king.

I need a son.

For that I need a queen.

TIRESIAS

And queens are women.

PENTHEUS

Yes.

TIRESIAS

I am a woman now.

PENTHEUS

And prophet?

TIRESIAS
Yes.

PENTHEUS
What do you see?

TIRESIAS
I stand here staring down more paths of probabilities
Than moments I have lived.
In most, you die today.

PENTHEUS
I do?
In all?

TIRESIAS
Not yet.
But, wait.
Stop spinning stars. No, Oedipus!
With every word my tongue
Unties the lines of strict necessity
And sets the chaos free.

PENTHEUS
You are no help to me.

TIRESIAS
I cannot be.

PENTHEUS
I see.
And I see there,
At that far flickering light,
The hot heart of my city throbs.
For me to be her king,
I need to see what happens at that fire.

TIRESIAS
What of Actaeon's ghost?

109

PENTHEUS

He hates me so, that this I also know,

My one sure path must be away from where he leads.

I will go to the fire.

TIRESIAS

What have I done?

Hope flickers and goes dark.

Yes, yes you will.

I dare to tell you this.

I see a son for us in me,

And all the world will tell about your family.

PENTHEUS

Our family.

TIRESIAS

No, yours.

I see myself beside the path,

Old and still blind.

PENTHEUS

This all must be?

TIRESIAS

No.

But it will.

PENTHEUS

Will you be with me?

TIRESIAS

In your heart, I hope.

PENTHEUS

Always.

(Exit PENTHEUS.)

TIRESIAS *(Touching her own abdomen)*

So, shall we go, Menaeceus?

(Exit TIRESIAS. Enter DIONYSUS, taking an impossibly huge drink of wine.)

DIONYSUS *(speaking towards Olympus)*
My fellow gods.

I know you all are watching this.

I feel the prickling of your pride.

Do they respect and love us now?

The crimes of Cadmus and Harmonia were nothing

When compared with what this family has done, is doing still.

More than defiant, they deny that we exist at all.

We need to punish them.

(The other gods appear above.)

ATHENA
Not knowing us is their punishment.

DIONYSUS
That makes no sense.

Their suffering must equal their offence.

ZEUS
Enough.

You both are right.

An emptiness must fall between Olympus and the mortal world.

ERIS
We cannot simply vanish in the air,

Let us leave with, at least, a little flair.

APHRODITE
I think that we should go and join this dance.

ZEUS
And stir things up a bit before we go?

ATHENA
Please, no.

ZEUS

It is a kindness, dear, to let them live a little, once,

Before they die.

HERA

So, shall we dance?

ERIS

I think we must.

(The gods, other than ATHENA, leave Olympus.)

DIONYSUS

That went quite well, I think.

ATHENA

You will destroy them all. *(Exit)*

DIONYSUS

Perhaps, but as they burn they will all worship me. *(Exit)*

The Square

(BOWL throws the Stones. TIRESIAS enters unseen.)

BOWL

Aha!

What are the odds?

TIRESIAS

Not good.

What is that sound?

BOWL

Oh, just a game Athena gave to me.

TIRESIAS

I used to worship her.

BOWL

Hello, Tiresias.

TIRESIAS
So you believe in me?

BOWL
Why not?

What happens next?

TIRESIAS
My sweat is frost to think of what I see,

But I see also that I cannot, must not, say.

I have already said too much today.

BOWL
If you say so.

Then sit in silence, have a drink,

And play Athena's game.

TIRESIAS
I will, so do we all.

(Enter HARMONIA.)

HARMONIA
Have I come late?

(Enter CADMUS.)

CADMUS
Never too late for me, my queen.

Together we came here to build this town.

Together we laid down

The deepest stone of its foundation.

HARMONIA
Our own sure love.

CADMUS
Together we passed on the crown.

HARMONIA
And then I left.

I have been weak and vain.

I will not leave your side again.

What is the news?

CADMUS
None knows.

TIRESIAS
He will.

(Enter BLOOD.)

BLOOD
I saw, I saw it all.

CADMUS
Take my hand, now, Harmonia. I feel a chill.

BLOOD
I went, to find my love.

HARMONIA
Did you succeed?

(The sounds of drumming and women chanting approach from a distance. The Chant, indistinguishable at first.)

WOMEN (Off)
Out of the fire, the womb, the birth.

Into the fire, the tomb, the earth.

BLOOD
For one sweet moment, yes.

CADMUS
And then?

(Directorial/design opportunity here: I can equally see the following being enacted as it is described or simply as narration.)

BLOOD
I tried to follow her back to the fire,

But found myself entangled in the trees.

I could not move,

Lucky for me.

The fire was huge, I think.

Thick heat and bodies blurred the air.

The smoke was everywhere.

But still, I glimpsed the king.

Pentheus, up another tree.

I do not think he noticed me,

There was so much to see.

CADMUS

What is that sound?

BOWL *(Looking Off)*

The women come, the men straggle behind.

HARMONIA

Go on.

BLOOD *(Gradually getting louder to be heard over the drums and chanting)*

Limbs swam like serpents in the clinging soil,

And then, worthy of Zeus himself,

A slash of lightning.

Thunder slammed the flames,

And rain like surf rattled the trees

And licked the mud away.

And for one hard held breath

The women of Cadmea stood,

Shining,

And faced the sky together.

They were magnificent.

Then dance itself reached upward from the drumming ground.

The mud climbed with it, up around their flashing limbs,

Skin straining to contain the blood within.

Another flash, and through the trees,

I saw Agave come.
She climbed the living circle,
Which, with a furious gentleness,
Soon took her in.
But then the lightning fell like rain
And something changed.
Some new great energy arrived.
The crowd grew thick.
Both sounds and movements jarred,
And wild beasts, strange and un-natural,
Transformed the festival into a brutal sacrifice.
A shining bull, two eagles, and a bear
Snatched up a little girl and flung her in the fire.
Agave dived in after her.
She tore the blazing limbs apart
But could not find the girl.
The scattered fire,
The beasts, blood wild,
The murdered child,
And all that went before,
Compounded in her heart,
And with a cry like birth
She grasped a branch, crusted with coals,
And threw it at the stars.
It spun spectacular and then it fell
Into the cedar where Pentheus hid.
It flared, as summer cedars will.
He leaped, or fell, I could not tell,
But landed heavily before his mother's feet.
Agave first, then others, seized on him.

116

CADMUS
Go on.

BLOOD
Your daughter took her son

And somehow found the strength

HARMONIA
Go on.

BLOOD
To pull his strong young body

Into strips and splinters each so small...

(Led by AGAVE brandishing a sharpened stick like a sword in one hand, the other raised in a fist, the women, wild, half naked, still chanting, covered in blood and mud, sweep triumphantly into the square. They wildly cheer her every statement, shouting her name.)

AGAVE
We have returned.

Cadmea, you are free.

Free of the gods.

Free of all tyranny.

No man can ever rule you now.

Raise up your fists with me

And cry out LIBERTY!!!

(Wild cheering. Chanting. HARMONIA steps up. Gradually the women defer to her and fall quiet.)

HARMONIA
Agave.

AGAVE
Mother?

HARMONIA
What have you done?

AGAVE
I have set us free.

I plucked a god down from the sky

And punished it.

HARMONIA

You killed your son.

AGAVE

I have no son.

HARMONIA

You have none now.

What are you holding there in your triumphant fist?

Wash it and see.

(AGAVE rinses her hand and its contents with wine until she realizes what she holds. She shrieks her pain.)

AGAVE

No, no.

This cannot be.

This finger used to fit my hand so perfectly.

My baby boy,

My son.

So, this is done, and done by me?

This is my liberty?

No.

This, I see it now. *(She falls onto her sharpened stick)*

CADMUS

Agave, daughter, no.

TIRESIAS

Let it unfold.

BREAD

Gods grant her peace**.**

TIRESIAS

A piece of earth waits for us all.

This piece for me.

(She pries open AGAVE's hand and takes the finger. She kisses it.)

Come love and lead me far away from here.

How many ways can one heart break? *(Exit)*

HARMONIA *(Cradling AGAVE's corpse)*
My child.

What have you done?

CADMUS
What has been done to her?

Something more powerful than error brings us here.

She and Pentheus both defied the gods.

BLOOD
So this is punishment?

CADMUS
Or spite.

It is still possible that they were right.

What have they ever done for us?

HARMONIA
Athena set us free.

CADMUS
Did she?

See how she treated good Tiresias,

And Zeus our Semele.

We left Olympus once and we walked here

Together, hand in hand,

And here we stand, steeped in our family's blood,

But still, Cadmea is alive,

Our city must survive.

We two are crushed by pain and cannot rule again.

Where is the only grandson I have left?

Where is young Labdacus?

119

(The crowd parts to reveal LABDACUS, a very small child. Exit BOWL.)

LABDACUS
Here, sir.

CADMUS
Good boy, come here to me.

Now child, what do you know?

LABDACUS
Why, nothing, grandpapa.

CADMUS
Good boy, there is some chance for you.

Listen to me.

Your cousins, Pentheus and Actaeon are dead,

As are your aunts, our daughters:

Semele, and here Agave, as you see.

Now, try not to be too afraid,

But you will be made king

As soon as you can be prepared.

(To the Un Named.)

I charge you, friends and citizens, do this:

Make him the king you need and you deserve.

HARMONIA *(To LABDACUS)*
Forget the gods, they are no help to you,

Trust in yourself,

Study and learn,

And do the best you can.

LABDACUS
I will.

HARMONIA
Good boy, all will be well.

We go, this is your city now,

And somewhere in this blood soaked mud

Lie seeds of hope and happiness**.**

CADMUS

Remember what we dreamed,

The gates and glorious avenues,

Just laws and civic decency?

HARMONIA

Do this for us, and for yourselves - finish our town.

She has some stories yet to tell.

CADMUS

Yes, build her up with stones of law and sand of pain,

Good faith for mortar, all tight bound with tears,

HARMONIA

And when, in future years, you tell our tale,

Be kind to us.

Goodbye.

(Exeunt CADMUS and HARMONIA.)

CLOTH

What now?

BREAD

What do you think?

WATER

Could they be right?

BLOOD

About the gods?

GLASS

The old gods, possibly, but Dionysus is quite different.

BREAD

He was born here.

CLOTH

Yes, he is one of us, and has brought us such joy and celebration.

(Enter BOWL, rolling a cask.)

BOWL

And best of all,

Dionysus brings us wine, sweet wine,

(BOWL taps the cask and begins handing around the wine.)

So let him be our one true god.

And with his help we will defy all odds.

In Dionysus's name,

All drink, and drink again,

Enough to wash our souls and drown our pain.

What do you say?

LABDACUS

All drink.

ALL

All drink!!

End of play

122