DIONYSUS

God of Wine

There she was again: Semele. Zeus' mouth watered. But Semele was human. He followed, intoxicated by her beauty. Mortal mortal—did it matter?

The moon goddess Selene's love of the human Endymion had incited a spate of such unions. But Zeus was the king of gods. It would be humiliation to have a child that grew old and feeble, lost teeth, hair, sight, hearing.

Still, that girl, that little snip of a mortal girl, ooh, he loved that girl. Ha! Zeus would simply make any child that came of this union immortal. Ha ha! He instantly declared himself to her.

Semele, daughter of King Cadmus of Thebes, was just as instantly enthralled.

Bang! Zeus had another wife. And, against expectations, something about Semele got to him. The blueness of her veins, the dark circles that formed under her eyes when she'd missed a night’s sleep because of cavorting with him, the strange sour-sweet of her meat-eating breath. She wouldn't last. The heart of the king was actually touched. He swore he'd grant her any wish.

Boom! Hera went ballistic. She visited Semele, all sisterly and loving. “Isn’t Zeus astonishing? If only he’d let you see him in full splendor as Lord of the Thunderbolt. That would make you truly understand who he is.”
Semele was sweet and pretty but far from bright; she asked Zeus to come to her in bursting glory.

Zeus knew what the outcome would be. He begged Semele to change her mind, but she wouldn’t believe the danger. Alas, he had to honor his promise. Trapped in a melodrama, he granted her wish.

Semele burst into flames.

The distraught god snatched the baby inside her and nestled him in his own thigh until birth. Then Zeus traveled to the valley of Nysa, and there the nymphs raised his divine son, Dionysus.

Dionysus taught farmers to grow vines, pick their grapes according to the autumn stars, hold them a fortnight for further ripening, then press them into wine stored in earthen jars. The wine flowed like a deep purple river, and the farmers drank gratefully, toasting the generosity of Dionysus.

One day pirates saw the young god on shore. They judged him a prince from his clothing, so they dragged him aboard for ransom. They went to tie him to the mast, but the ropes

---

**THE GIVING Grape**

Dionysus is the god of wine. Wine originated in the Caucasus and Iran. It appeared in Greece around 4500 B.C. Greece is rocky, so olive trees grow easily. Though there is little soil soft enough to be plowed, Greece’s climate helps.

For many months it’s dry and sunny, then it’s humid and cool (typically mild, but it can snow in the mountains). Greeks quickly learned to grow grapes on sunny terraces and make wine. They taught these arts to the rest of Europe.
fell away. The helmsman guessed he was a god. But the crew didn’t listen. With one breath from Dionysus, the sails filled, and perfumed wine streamed across the ship deck. The crew finally understood, but before they could put Dionysus back on land, he changed into a lion and charged. They jumped overboard and became dolphins forever after.

Such were the two sides of Dionysus: graceful and jarring, clear and filthy, bliss-bearing and tormenting. He brought men some of the most carefree moments of their lives, and he brought men to despondency.

But it was women he most affected. He excited them to frenzy. Some abandoned their children to follow him. Pentheus, King of Thebes, didn’t believe Dionysus was a god. He put him in prison. But Dionysus broke out and crazed the women of Thebes so they came with him. When Pentheus followed, Dionysus robbed the women of their senses completely, so that they attacked him—his mother among them. They ripped Pentheus limb from limb. Then Dionysus freed them from their insanity, and they saw what they had done. Wicked tragedy.

Dionysus traveled in a chariot bearing the most delicious harvest of his vines, but pulled by panthers. The message was clear: Beware, beware.

Dionysus was changeable—from calm and sweet to wild and hateful. Here his rage at being disrespected transformed him into a lion. The frightened crew dove overboard and became dolphins.