

Sanchez Pezeshki Per.2, English 2 Tuesday, December 24, 1996 MYTHOLOGY: DIONYSUS AND SEMELE Semele was the daughter of Cadmus and Harmonia, king and queen of Thebes, and the mother of Dionysus, god of wine. Zeus fell madly in love with her and made an oath to do anything that she asked. Hera, the jealous wife of Zeus, realized Zeus was in love with Semele and tricked Semele into asking Zeus to let her see him in his majesty. Bound by an oath, Zeus appeared before the unfortunate woman in all his divine glory. (Morford-Lenardon 187) As she looked at him, she was consumed by the lightning bolts and light that radiated from him. Zeus was able to rescue her unborn child, Dionysus, and hid him in his side until it was ready to be born. Hermes carried Dionysus to be cared for by the nymphs of Nysa—the loveliest of earth's valleys. (Hamilton 65) When Dionysus had grown up, he wandered to many far and strange places. Everywhere he went he taught men the culture of the vine and mysteries of his worship and everywhere he had been, he was accepted as a god. Dionysus went to Thebes to establish his worship, since that was his mother's city. He was accompanied by the Maenads. Pentheus, the King of Thebes, was not happy with the behavior of this group of strangers. He ordered his soldiers to imprison the visitors, but he had no idea that Dionysus was a new god. The soldiers tried to imprison the maidens but said that the doors were unbarred themselves. Pentheus was furious. He ordered his soldiers to imprison Dionysus but the prison could not hold him. Dionysus tried to show that the wonders of this new worship of a new and great god was divine but when Pentheus only heaped insults and threats upon him, Dionysus left him to his doom. (Hamilton 71) When Pentheus went to pursue the maidens that had escaped his prison, many Theban women joined him, and that is when Dionysus made them mad and they thought Pentheus was a wild beast and tore him apart. That is when Pentheus realized that he had fought with a god and must now pay with his life. Some time during his wanderings, Dionysus came upon the princess of Crete, Ariadne, when she was utterly desolate, having been abandoned on the shore of the island of Naxos by the Athenian prince, Theseus, whose life she had saved. (Hamilton 67) Dionysus rescued her and later fell in love with her. When she died, Dionysus took her crown and put it among the stars. His mother, Semele, whom he had never seen, was not forgotten. He longed for her so much that he went to the lower world, defied the power of Death and brought her to live on Olympus. Even though she was a mortal, the gods accepted her as one of themselves since she gave birth to a god. The Maenads, or the Bacchantes, were women frenzied with wine. They were the followers of Dionysus. The most important festival, the Greater Dionysia, was held in Athens for five days each spring. They were days of pure enjoyment. It was held in a theater, and the ceremony was the performance of a play. The greatest poetry in Greece was written for him. Dionysus died with the coming of a cold, but he was always brought back to life. It was this joyful resurrection celebrated in his festivals.

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