Baucis and Philemon

A 10-minute play

by

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## Characters:

Major characters are indicated with boldface:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **ZeusHermes**AthenaAriesUnnamed Goddess (or Hera—see Production Notes) | **BaucisPhilemon** | The Archetypal MotherThe Archetypal Daughter**DamienSylvia**Priest |

The Roman names of the Olympian deities may be substituted: Jupiter, Mercury, Minerva, and Mars.

## Suggested minimal casting:

**Zeus**/Priest

**Hermes/Damien**

Athena/**Philemon**/Archetypal Mother

Aries/**Baucis**

Unnamed Goddess/Archetypal Daughter/**Sylvia**

## Settings:

Mt. Olympus. The cottage of Baucis and Philemon in Tiana, Greece. A rustic shrine outside of Tiana.

# Scene 1

(Lights.)

(On Mount Olympus, ZEUS sits on his elevated throne with other deities—HERMES, ATHENA, ARIES, and an UNNAMED FEMALE GODDESS—standing before him or reclining on cushions. Only ZEUS has the honor to be seated.)

ZEUS: (Seeming to look down to Earth.) Their sinfulness and impiety are intolerable! What has happened? We endowed human beings with reason and an instinct for decency and kindness. But they have turned to depravity. I do not ask for absolute virtue. We ourselves have moral failings. But what we see here—everywhere on Earth—is intolerable. I will eradicate humankind—and perhaps start over.

HERMES: Zeus, you are rash. This is the act of a tyrant, a mass murderer. You cannot see *all* of humankind from here on Olympus. Surely you will be destroying many upright men and women. The slaughter you have in mind is Divine injustice. Your cruelty would forever be condemned on Olympus.

ATHENA: Hermes speaks truly. You are indeed rash. You cannot know the deeds and the heart of every human being. How can there not be enough upright mortals to require your forbearance? Punish individuals. But do not exterminate them all.

ARIES: You are Zeus, Lord of Olympus, King of the Gods. You can do anything, and anything you do is just. You do not need to listen to these whiners. Destroy the entire planet—humans and beasts as well. In war, I joyfully destroy whole armies of mortal men, their horses too, and any civilians who get in the way. I have never a qualm or a regret.

ATHENA: Aries, your brutality is a stain upon Olympus. Zeus, this is not the deity whose behavior you should emulate.

HERMES: Yes.

ZEUS: I will not be called rash or unjust, but I will prove my point *and* have my way. Hermes, we will visit Earth for three days disguised as poor beggars. We will invoke the ancient obligation of hospitality toward strangers. We will ask nothing but a crust of bread a cup of water, and a night’s shelter—if only in a shed or barn. If we cannot find one decent man or woman during three days of travel, I will declare the depravity of mortals sufficiently widespread that extermination is justified.

HERMES: Lord Zeus, you are showing restraint. I will make preparations. I am confident that this trip will dissuade you from the action you are contemplating.

ATHENA: As am I.

ZEUS: We will see.

ATHENA: And, Zeus, since you are visiting Earth as the judge of mortals, you should yourself refrain from dalliances—or worse—with mortal women. Remember yourself, Zeus.

ARIES: Foolish woman!

ATHENA: Not so, Zeus. Heed me. There may be powers in the Universe greater than our own. We may yet be held to account for our unruly behavior.

(Blackout.)

# Scene 2

(Lights.)

(ZEUS and HERMES, dressed as poor beggars, are walking through the countryside and talking. Each carries a branch or stick with a sack tied to the end of it—a hobo’s “bindle.”)

ZEUS: Without even looking our eyes have beheld swindles, robberies, assaults, and a fratricidal murder. We have seen shrines and temples left to collapse from neglect. Some practice strange new rites. Impious! They call us the “Old Gods.”

HERMES: Alas, this is true.

ZEUS: And they violate the sacred obligation of hospitality. We came to them as humble, impoverished travelers, and they dumped garbage on us from upstairs windows. They sic’d their hounds on us.

HERMES: My Lord, I confess that my argument for preserving humankind does indeed seem weak.

ZEUS: I think we are justified in returning to Olympus. The three days I promised are very nearly done.

HERMES: No. Let us abide by the agreement we made before the Olympian gods. If we return home with a death sentence for humankind, Athena will upbraid us for cutting even an hour off the agreed-upon duration of our visit.

ZEUS: Look, there is a cottage on that hillside. If we beg hospitality, get turned away, the full three days will have elapsed. Then no one can blame me for eradicating human beings from Earth. They do but defile this beautiful world I created for them. Yes, we will visit that worn-out cottage. My, but the roof beam sags badly, and the ground around it looks barren.

(ZEUS and HERMES approach the cottage, whose walls and door are imaginary. The interior is represented by a simple table, two crude chairs, and a small serving/cooking table. PHILEMON, very plainly dressed, is within sweeping. BAUCIS, also plainly dressed, is behind the cottage working the ground with a hoe. Both are very old and infirm.)

(HERMES knocks hard on the door. PHILEMON sets down her broom and slowly makes her way to the door. She opens it.)

PHILEMON: Welcome strangers. . . May I ask why you have left the main road to visit here? (*Pausing now with momentary suspicion.*) If you have thoughts of robbery, I tell you plainly, there is nothing in this cottage worth taking.

HERMES: We are travelers, returning to our far-off home. We have been ill and have little strength and no money. We are tired, sore, and hungry. Can you help us?

BAUCIS: (From without.) Philemon, I hear voices. Do we have guests?

(BAUCIS enters from the imagined back door.)

PHILEMON: Dear Baucis, we have tired travelers seeking food and rest at our door.

BAUCIS: Welcome, gentlemen. We have little, but what we have we will gladly share.

(BAUCIS begins moving two extra chairs to their table.)

PHILEMON: You have come at a good time. Our meal is ready to serve. It is nothing but a thin vegetable stew, intended only for two plates. But it *will* make a dinner for the four of us.

(PHILEMON, with BAUCIS helping, brings her cooking pot, two extra plates or bowls, two extra spoons, two extra glasses and a pitcher to the table. ZEUS and HERMES take their seats and set down their bindles close by.)

BAUCIS: Tonight, you will sleep in our bed. Philemon and I will do fine on the floor of this cottage. We will sleep in a close embrace to stay warm. Tomorrow, we can serve you some bread and cheese to start you on your journey.

HERMES: Thank you. We are very grateful.

BAUCIS: Tiana is known for fine wine. But my wife and I can offer you only water from our well.

ZEUS: We ask for no more.

PHILEMON: Let us all sit. Our custom is for my husband to begin each meal with a brief prayer of thanksgiving to the Gods.

(All freeze to suggest the brief passage of time. The action resumes well into the meal.)

HERMES: This meal has done much to revive us. But I would have more stew.

PHILEMON: I am sorry, but there is no more. I carefully spooned out every bit from the bottom of my cooking pot.

HERMES: Look again.

(BAUCIS and PHILEMON are surprised by HERMES’ pre-emptory tone, but PHILEMON complies. She immediately sees that the serving bowl is full. Astonished, she shows it to BAUCIS. Realizing that something supernatural has occurred, they fall to their knees before their guests. ZEUS and HERMES sit regally in their seats. Optionally: From their bindles, ZEUS and HERMES draw out and put on royal robes.)

PHILEMON: We are speechless before the Gods of Olympus. Forgive our poor cottage and the meager dinner we have served.

ZEUS: We have not dined better. Please kneel no more. We begged this meal from you, and you have been the kindest of hosts, the most gracious and pious of mortals.

BAUCIS: We do only what we know we should. What the holy texts have taught us.

(BAUCIS and PHILEMON rise and take their seats.)

(Blackout.)

# Scene 3

*(The action resumes the following morning on an empty set. ZEUS and HERMES are taking leave of BAUCIS and PHILEMON, presumably just outside of their cottage. BAUCIS holds his hoe.)*

(Lights.)

ZEUS: Although you will not learn why, l tell you now that all of Humankind owes you a great debt. But I do wish to reward your virtue, hospitality, and graciousness. I cannot make you young again. That is beyond even the power of Zeus. But let me give you a palace and great wealth. You will live out your days in luxury and comfort, with servants to attend you.

BAUCIS: We need none of this. A visit from Olympian gods is reward enough. No, far *more* than we deserve. We will tell no one. No one would believe us. But this is the supreme moment of our lives.

ZEUS: I want to reward you.

BAUCIS: But we are content.

PHILEMON: Oh Zeus, there is something we want, something my husband has not thought to ask. What we dread most is that one of us will be left alone when the other dies. I therefore ask, may we complete our lives together, that we die at the same time.

ZEUS: This wish is granted. And so we take leave of you. Good-bye.

HERMES: Unasked, I have a final gift for you both. Here it is, in riddle form: Though you have had no children, you will be ancestors, remembered and beloved.

(BAUCIS and PHILEMON kneel in reverence. ZEUS and HERMES exit. BAUCIS returns to hoeing, slowly and painfully, and is now oblivious to anything around him. After a while he exits, still hoeing. At the same time, PHILEMON exchanges some of her garments, perhaps putting on a brightly colored peasant smock or shawl, and becomes younger. She is now the ARCHETYPAL MOTHER. A much younger woman enters and joins the ARCHETYPAL MOTHER as the ARCHETYPAL DAUGHTER. They turn in circles and chant.)

ARCHETYPAL MOTHER and ARCHETYPAL DAUGHTER:

Mothers, daughters Daughters, sons
Sons take wives and time flows on.

(DAMIEN enters. Without any pause, the chanting continues.)

 Mothers, daughters Daughters, sons
 Sons take wives and time flows on.

(The ARCHETYPAL DAUGHTER, now SYLVIA, joins DAMIEN and takes his hand lovingly. They walk leisurely across the stage. The ARCHETYPAL MOTHER exits.)

DAMIEN: Sylvia, the great love you bear me is shown by your willingness to leave Lemnos and start our married life here in Tiana. You have only been here a few days, but are you beginning to feel at home? Do you think you can be happy here?

SYLVIA: Yes, Damien, I am. Everyone I have met in Tiana has been kind and helpful—exactly as you promised. Also, the people in Tiana are so virtuous and so pious. I think I am fortunate to have come here . . . to be able to raise our children here.

DAMIEN: We have almost arrived. This is the shrine dedicated to the holy gods Zeus and Hermes. There are no walls, no columns, no sculptures, but it is our holiest shrine. It is very, very old. No one knows its origins.

*(Blackout.)*

# Scene 4

(Lights.)

(DAMIEN and SYLVIA enter, now reaching the shrine. It consists only of a small stone altar and, behind the altar, two ancient trees that were planted very close to one another and grow deeply intertwined. The trees are BAUCIS and PHILEMON with their arms raised and locked with one another at the wrists.

DAMIEN: See before you that linden tree and that lime tree, so wonderfully entwined? There is nothing else like this in all of Greece. Is it not something to behold!

SYLVIA: Yes, this is a very holy place that should inspire all men and women.

DAMIEN: Throughout the year our townspeople—and many strangers—visit, as we are doing now, to offer prayers to Zeus and Hermes. Here we renew our faith and our spirit. But just once each year, in late fall, when the lime tree bears its fruit, the people of Tiana come here for a special observance. You will see it when the time comes.

(A PRIEST enters wearing a loose ceremonial garment. He moves slowly in apparitional form. He places a tray full of lime slices on the altar. Then he spreads his arms ceremonially. As DAMIEN continues his speech, the PRIEST, carrying the tray, hands a slice of lime to each of the unseen people who approach the shrine. DAMIEN may need to pause in order to give the PRIEST enough time to do this.)

DAMIEN: Each man, woman, and child partakes of the lime from the ancient tree. . . The tree is much too old to bear fruit, but somehow it does. . . And there is always enough so that the priest can cut a slice of lime for everyone who attends the ceremony. . . Then we pray and we resolve to live virtuous and pious lives for another year.

SYLVIA: This shrine, this observance, is a great gift.

(The PRIEST now notices DAMIEN and SYLVIA, approaches them as worshippers, and gives each of them a slice from the tray he carries. They bow in thanks to the PRIEST and eat their slice. The PRIEST then exits.)

DAMIEN: You have seen the shrine that defines and renews life in Tiana. We can return now to our town, our home.

(SYLVIA and DAMIEN look at each other with love in their eyes and embrace, entwining themselves closely at shoulder and neck level. BAUCIS and PHILEMON’S age-old embrace has been restricted because their arms extend upward as tree branches. However, in response to the embrace of SYLVIA and DAMIEN, BAUCIS and PHILEMON lower their arms and mirror SYLVIA and DAMIEN.)

(SYLVIA notices that the embrace of the trees now mirrors their own. She gestures to DAMIEN.)

SYLVIA: Damien, a sign! The branches of the twinned trees mirror our embrace!

(DAMIEN acknowledges the wonder.)

SYLVIA: Who could doubt but that—long, long ago—something wondrous happened in Tiana! Some act of piety, some act of kindess or love that greatly pleased Zeus and Hermes. Perhaps these trees were once lovers like ourselves. Look how their loves has been preserved and how the example of their lives together speaks to future ages.

DAMIEN: Yes, Sylvia. Holiness abounds.

(The PRIEST, no longer apparitional, enters at the periphery of the stage, draws a crude wooden cross from his garments, and addresses the audience.)

PRIEST: Our time will come. But for now, I cannot deny the power of the Old Gods.

 (Blackout.)

## The End

# Production Notes

In the current doubling of roles, the actor playing Sylvia, the young wife, also plays the unnamed goddess in the opening scene on Mt. Olympus. If this actor can creditably play a middle-aged woman—the Goddess Hera—or if the director wishes to use another actor to play Hera, the script can be nicely enhanced, as follows:

HERMES: Lord ZEUS, you are showing proper restraint. I will make preparations. I am confident that this trip will dissuade you from the action you are contemplating.

ATHENA: As am I.

ZEUS: We will see.

HERA: And, Zeus, my dear husband, since you are visiting Earth as a judge of morality, you should yourself refrain from dalliances—or worse—with mortal women. Remember yourself, Zeus.