

On every link a heart does dangle; or, Owed

by Tim J. Lord

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CHARACTERS

MELLIE	Late teens-early 20s, shy but precocious, severely disabled by a birth defect, and a boat builder with visions both imaginative and prophetic
AGA	Early-mid 20s, Mellie's older sister and Casta's secretary, though she's not allowed to acknowledge the relationship. Also plays CHORUS 1.
CASTA	late 30s-early 40s, the First lady of Thebes, married to Ode, stunning yet worn. Also plays CHORUS 3.
KREE	mid-late 40s, The Defender of Thebes, older sister to Casta, advisor to Ode. Also plays CHORUS 2.
ZEBULON	A golden young man, looks 25, feels much older. Also plays CHORUS 4, THE PRISONER and...
	ECK, early 20s, Aga's boyfriend
	HERD, elderly finder of lost animals
CHORUS LEADER	plays CHORUS 1, and most of the other roles, including: TARE, 60s, blind, wise, some say a seer, shunned by the town MESS, a mysterious young woman with a message to deliver ORA, late 20s, but near death, the mouthpiece of the gods, kidnapped and held captive by Missourian Mud-worshippers THE MONSTER ...and other Thebans

NOTES ON CASTING:

Thebes, Illinois, is a real place on the real-life Mississippi River. In real life Thebes, among its 200 or so inhabitants, you will likely find all of them to be of a single race. But this Thebes is a mythic, imaginative construction—another version of an American Heartland. It is peopled with citizens of every race, families too are more fluid, so I insist that the casting reflect a world that looks more like the America we all live in today.

The actors playing MELLIE and the CHORUS LEADER should be cast with actors with disabilities. Mellie's disability affects her mobility, the specific nature can be determined by

the actor playing her and that actor's specific disability. Other characters' descriptions of Mellie may be changed to fit the actor's reality. The Chorus Leader could be cast with an actor whose disability is very different from Mellie's, perhaps more subtle. Casting a visually impaired actor for the role is one such possibility.

SETTING

Various sites around Thebes, a prosperous small town in Southern Illinois on the banks of the Mississippi River. It is a meeting place between east and west, north and south.

TIME

A kind of post-WWII, Mid-Century, Middle America
The play should move seamlessly from scene to scene.

My daddy is a handsome devil
He's got a chain five miles long
On every link a heart does dangle
Of another mate he's loved and wronged
—Dolly Parton, “Silver Dagger”

SOURCES

This play contains text from the following sources, all of which are in the public domain:

Euripides, *The Bacchae*

Seneca, *Oedipus*

Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Ozymandias”

Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*

W.B. Yeats, “Byzantium”

The “Dream” Stele at the Great Sphinx of Giza

PROLOGUE: The Gingko Tree

A warm fall evening beside the Mississippi River. The sun is about to set. A young woman, MELLIE, sits below a large, ancient gingko tree, its leaves all golden with the autumn. She looks out at the river, a book in her lap. She is in her late teens or early 20s. Just offstage, we hear the sounds of a gathering of people, an electric kind of hum—a harvest celebration? Whatever it is, the whole town of Thebes has come out.

The sun sets. A wind rustles the leaves of the tree. A few of the leaves fall. But the quivering among them continues after the wind has ceased. Suddenly, all the leaves fall at once, covering MELLIE. She looks up, stunned and amazed.

And then the screams begin. First one, from one part of the town... And then another from another part. And another. Until there are some six voices crying out, surrounding MELLIE. With some difficulty and using the trunk of the tree she manages to stand. We see she is severely disabled: Her legs don't work right. One arm appears to be mangled, twisted into a claw-like shape. An uneasy feeling growing—

Blackout

ACT I: Beneath the Gingko Tree

I, i.

The grounds below the Courthouse. The whole town is present, standing. There may only be a few actors onstage, but there appear to be many, many more.

CHORUS

All: Ode

- 1: You see that all of Thebes has gathered,
A war party almost—fledglings hardly winged,
And graybeards bowed with years, faithful.
From the oldest families to the newest,
Rich and poor.
- 2: All of us are rich in spirit,
Enlightened by the ways you've taught us,
Ever since you came among us, and lifted us up,
Up from the mud, set our sights on the Mountaintops
Where the Gods long to see us reside.
- 3: But this cradle of the Gods, the place where They
come among us on Earth is
- 4: Sore buffeted, can no more lift her head,
Foundered beneath a weltering surge of blood.
A blight is on us
- 3: Twelve dead...
Six stillbirths last night, all at once.
- 1: And their six mothers,
3: grief-stricken and full of terror,
2: They hurled themselves from the rail bridge—gave back
to the Great River from which all life stems
- 1: Armed with his blazing torch, the God of Plague
Has swooped upon our town. The graves are quiet,
But we hear their whispers and moans.

Heads turn slightly, eyes track towards...

A face in the crowd: MELLIE.

Action around her freezes.

MELLIE

I, that am not shaped...
I, that am rudely stamped...
I, that am all twisted up

Cheated of feature,
Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time
...scarce half made up,
I have no delight. I don't get to pass away the time,
Barely get to see the sun
Lest... "they" have to see my deformity.
Now all the clouds lower.
Idle pleasures are traps.
Now drunken prophecies, libels, dreams,
are remembered, conveniently, and directed
In deadly hate against an Other. Against me.
And if Ode be "true" and "just"
Then I must be subtle, false, and treacherous,
So full of dismal terror is the time.

Action resumes. MELLIE exits.

KREE sees her go.

CHORUS

I: No one's seen you since the news came
Down the hill last night to the River and our Harvest Prayer.
So... we're settin' here,
Outside the place where you locked yourself away,
All: All of us;
I: not thinking you're God on Earth,
But not thinking ill of you neither. Just thinking
That you are the first of Men
Who lifted us up, and who knows better
How to find favor with the Gods?
Because, wasn't it you coming here that paid off the debt we owed?
(We always thought your name so perfect:
All: Ode paid the debt that was owed.)
I: But you've gone all quiet-like. Hide your face from
Those who love you—even your wife.
All we ask is that you're in there, still praying.
Find some succor, whether by a voice from Heaven
Whispered. Or just known by human wit.
You are the savior of men, you upbraid that we may
Live. Don't let the records record:
All: "He raised us up only to cast us down."
I: Lift us up again. Rebuild this city on the Mountaintops,
In the image of gods and men,
For all the world to wonder at.

They kneel.

*They wait.
And wait.
And wait.*

But no answer comes.

CASTA stands. She is in her late 30s-early 40s, and has the money to keep herself looking younger. She crosses to KREE, mid 40s. She has money too, but she's devoted to a more Spartan way of keeping herself.

CASTA
It's true, you know. He won't admit me. His wife.

KREE
I know.

CASTA
So do something about it.

KREE
He's your husband—

CASTA
But he still listens to you, still takes your advice.
It's not like when he first came here—the "Savior" we'd waited for,
the three of us working together for the betterment of Thebes. Now...
Only ever wants to see me if I'm taking my clothes off.
Only ever wants to stick it in me.
And when he's done—

KREE
Casta—

CASTA
It's true. The folly of marrying a younger man, I suppose.

KREE
(Hushed)
Stop this!

CASTA
Let me in, Kree. You're my sister—

KREE
He says it's what the gods want.

CASTA
He doesn't— I'm pregnant.

KREE
...Really—?

CASTA
I'm sure of it.
Lots of pregnant women in town. They're terrified. We're terrified.

KREE
They won't— You won't—

CASTA
I don't want your reassurances, Kree.
Go to him. He'll admit you. And if he's truly favored...
Make him make it all better.

KREE nods, goes to the door. She knocks.

Silence.

The door opens. KREE goes in.

CASTA watches. The townspeople exit.

I, ii.

Mellie's house by the river. One room with a basic kitchen in one corner. A bed, a simple table, two standard chairs, a large bookcase filled with books. MELLIE sits in a chair that doesn't look like the others—it's a homemade wheelchair, made with whatever scraps she could find.

She's fixing a simple meal.

Then a knocking that comes from the floor. MELLIE ignore it.

AGA (off)
Mellie?
Mellie!

MELLIE
Go away.

AGA (off)
No.

MELLIE, wheels herself to a spot near the bookcase, pulls away a rug and opens a trapdoor beneath it: AGA is there. She climbs into the room.

AGA
Mellie!

MELLIE
Aga!

They stare at each other for a moment. Then MELLIE wheels away.

AGA
Are you... Uh... What's going on?

MELLIE
What do you mean?

AGA
What is that?

MELLIE

It's a chair. With wheels. It makes getting around my home much easier.

AGA

But the ban against...anything that can help you walk—

MELLIE

What about the ban on anyone talking to me? What are you doing here? It's not dark yet—

AGA

It helps you get around?

MELLIE

A lot.

AGA

You're some kind of genius.

MELLIE

I can disguise it too, to make it seem like a regular chair. Not that anyone else except you ever comes in here. So don't say anything and no one will know.

AGA

Ok.

Are you all right?

MELLIE

I'm fine. Why?

AGA

You walked out in the middle of the meeting—

MELLIE

I didn't know it was happening. If I had I would've stayed far away. Oh, but no one's allowed to talk to me so...

AGA

You could've been less obvious about leaving.

MELLIE stands up, walks awkwardly across the room.

MELLIE

Would that have been less obvious?

AGA

I'm sorry—you know what I mean—

MELLIE

It's fine. No one wanted me there—

AGA

But they're talking.

MELLIE

They always talk—

AGA

This is different—

MELLIE

They've always thought I'm a monster.

AGA

But they're more scared now. Last night...

MELLIE

Yeah.

But you could have told me this later. What if someone saw you?

Maybe they can break the rules, but I can't. You can't—

AGA

People respect me.

MELLIE

...Good for you.

AGA

No, I mean, I know you're not a monster—

MELLIE

"Thanks."

AGA

—and I can change their minds.

I can!

MELLIE

How?

AGA

Casta. She's asked me to be her new secretary.

MELLIE

...And you think she'll listen to you?

AGA

I know she will. It's why she asked me.

"You have a head on your shoulders—not like these other girls who prattle and prate."

MELLIE

She never said that.

AGA

She did.

It's more than waiting on her. I'll be advising too.

MELLIE

...It's more than I expected.

AGA

Aren't you happy for me?

MELLIE

I guess?

AGA

Mellie!

MELLIE

What?

AGA

Can you pretend like we're related?

MELLIE

You're my sister, but we may as well come from different families.

AGA

We don't though—

MELLIE

Did you come in the front door, or did you sneak in through the rathskeller—?

AGA

That's just until I've secured my position. And changed everyone's minds about you

(MELLIE laughs.)

I'm serious!

MELLIE

I'm sure you are. But I'm not going to hold my breath waiting.

(silence)

AGA

Is that...? You have so much food.

MELLIE

I've been saving up. I can read the "signs" better than any of the priests. Are you hungry?

(AGA nods.)

Doesn't Casta let you eat? share her wealth?

AGA

She would—she will—but I don't want her to know I've been living on hardtack and whatever Eck can get from the river.

MELLIE

Here.

MELLIE sets the plate she was preparing on the table. AGA sits. MELLIE gets another plate for herself.

MELLIE

Eck, huh? You're spending a lot of time with him.

AGA

What are you doing?

MELLIE

Inquiring about your life.

AGA

You're usually trying to worry me about fantastical monsters—

MELLIE

Not fantastic—

AGA

Distant wars, local politics—

MELLIE

Ode has—

AGA

Not so loud.

MELLIE

None of the crops come in, no rain months, and now...

There are guards posted outside the town. To keep us from leaving.

AGA
There aren't

MELLIE
I've seen 'em!

AGA
Your imagination—

MELLIE
It's never been safe for me. It's less safe now. You have to look around you, listen.
The world is full of monsters—real ones.

AGA
I *am* listening, I know things are bad. That's why I'm trying to help, but you never let me.

MELLIE
If you say so.

AGA gives up, takes a bite of food.

AGA
Anyways, I am spending a lot of time with Eck—

MELLIE
Hm.

AGA
He's a good man—

MELLIE
He's a boy—

AGA
He loves me. Has promised to do so forever.

MELLIE
Is he a fighter? Can he protect you—?

AGA
Oh please—

MELLIE
I'm serious. You walk around with your head in the clouds, sit in Casta's mansion and braid her hair—

AGA

I do not braid her hair—

MELLIE

Bad times are coming—they're here already—this drought. What are we to eat?
What are the people doing for work? Bad times with bad men plotting—

AGA

You're so dramatic—

MELLIE

When times turn, like they are now, people go looking for those they can blame.
I'm a target, Aga. I'm easy prey.

MELLIE stumbles away from the table to a window that looks out over the river.

AGA

Are you thinking...?
Where would you go?

MELLIE

Better you don't know. If I were.

AGA

Mellie—!

MELLIE

Hush—

AGA

What are you up to?

MELLIE

...If I were, leaving, you could come with me.

AGA

But Casta, Eck. Our home—

MELLIE

Your home. This shanty is just the place I live—

AGA

Mellie—

MELLIE

Maybe things will turn out okay. Maybe you can make things better, actually better.
Maybe.

And maybe then I could...live here.
But maybe we'd all be better off...if I wasn't here.

AGA
You can't—

MELLIE
No, you can't. You can't say a thing. Not to no one. Not even Eck.
As much as they don't want me here, they won't let me leave, won't let the outside world that someone so "despised by the gods" could ever come fro Thebes.

AGA
Mellie—

MELLIE
Aga.
Promise.
Promise.

AGA
...I promise.

MELLIE
Thank you.

Outside a church bell chimes five o'clock.

AGA
I have to go. Casta will want her dinner soon.

MELLIE
Ok.

MELLIE wraps up the leftover food in a napkin for AGA to take with her.

AGA
...How? How would you leave?

MELLIE
I ain't tellin'.

A moment. And then AGA walks towards the front door.

MELLIE
Aga.

AGA
I could just—

MELLIE
Don't.

*AGA turns and goes to the trapdoor, opens it,
and descends.*

AGA
Sleep tight, little sister—

MELLIE
Make sure Eck is one who will fight for you. And maybe learn to fight yourself too.

MELLIE closes the trap after AGA.