



The Royal Cousins

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Dramatic comedy in three acts after Geoffrey Chaucer

by Christian Lanciai (2009)

Dramatis personae:

King Theseus of Athens
Queen Hippolyta
Emilia, her sister
Peirithous
Four grieving mothers
Artides
Palamon
Creon
A prison guard
his daughter
servants

The action is in ancient Athens and Thebes.

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Act I scene 1. Athens.

Theseus Tell me now, my dear Peirithous, how we could make Thebes unite with us in a union as a paragon example of a united state for all Hellas?

Peirithous There certainly are many in Thebes who would gladly join Athens in a twin state, especially among the more educated and knowledgeable, but the problem is Creon.

Theseus The old villain.

Peirithous He holds Thebes in an iron grip and refuses to let go. The state is weakened after the traumatic civil war between the sons of Oidipus, which saw a bitter end to all involved.

Theseus The city can never recover after such a tragedy. That's why it would need Athens for a supporting backbone.

Peirithous Very true. But Creon must first be overthrown.

Theseus Is it true that Polyneikes and his friends are still allowed to lie naked and unburied in the battlefield outside the walls?

Peirithous It's a symptom of Creon's critical illness. He fears a rebellion although everyone is dead. Oidipus' last child Antigone was not even allowed to bury her own brother.

Theseus I know. A tremendous scandal.

Hippolyta (enters) There is a strange gathering outside asking for an audience with the king of Athens.

Theseus What kind of people are they?

Hippolyta Grieving mothers and widows dressed in black.

Theseus Asking for protection? What is their predicament?

Hippolyta They are from Thebes.

Theseus Show them in immediately. Here, Peirithous, is perhaps the answer to our prayers.

(Hippolyta let in a group of mothers dressed in black.)

1 We ask for mercy, great king Theseus.

2 There is no mercy for us in our own country, which is why we have to wander abroad

3 with our painful prayers of appeals for mercy

4 for the bodies of our sons and fathers left unburied!

Theseus (shaken) Do I understand it right, that you are the mothers of the fallen by Thebes who are still allowed to lie unburied?

1 Polyneikes had as great a right of the crown as Eteocles!

2 Capaneus and the others fought with the same right and valour as the defendants of Thebes!

3 The civil war and its disasters were only the fault of Eteocles!

4 We who are here present are just a small number of all those uncountable mothers whose sons were as desecrated and abused as Hector's body!

Theseus You move me to tears. But why did not Creon let you care for and bury the bodies of your sons?

1 Because he suffers from paranoia!

2 He wants to leave the bodies unburied as a warning to all who wish to overthrow him.

3 Only the more everyone wants to overthrow him.

4 He sees a potential enemy in every citizen of Thebes who was not of Eteocles' party.

Theseus And what do you wish me to do about it?

1 Destroy Thebes!

2 Overthrow Creon!

3 Deliver us from his tyranny!

4 Liberate Thebes from its only enemy!

Theseus I will carefully consider your appeal, but I think I can already now promise you, that no childless mother in Thebes shall be refused the burial of her son's body.

1 That's all we ask for.

2 Pardon our rude importunity, but we had no other choice.
3 We couldn't accept this outrageous injustice.
4 We only demand our motherly right from a higher authority, when
Creon unreasonably refused it.
Theseus Your appealing prayers have been accepted, and my Queen Hippolyta
here is herself a witness. Such a comprehensive desecration cannot be allowed to
pass unpunished, can it, Peirithous?
Peirithous I am of the same mind. It is naturally obvious.
Theseus We shall not rest until Creon is overthrown. Could that satisfy you for
the moment?
1 Our gratitude is without end.
2 The sons we have left would gladly join up with you.
3 We could send a secret message to all concerned.
4 No one will regret it, but everyone will rejoice when Creon is gone.
Theseus Be calm, my ladies. We refuse to wait and hesitate.

Scene 2. Thebes.

Artides Why are we stuck in this blind alley. Palamon? We should go out and
about in the world to make ourselves useful.
Palamon The crisis isn't over yet, *Artides*.
Artides The war is over, all enemies are fallen or executed, all Thebes is stifling
from the stench of corpses, and still Creon fears new upheavals!
Palamon It's that Antigone business that has disturbed his mind.
Artides And are we then to suffer for it? If only Polyneikes had prevailed! Then
at least we would have got rid of Creon!
Palamon But now we will not be rid of Creon as long as he remains in office, and
he is likely to remain as long as he insists on letting the stench of corpses dominate
the whole country of Thebes.
Artides I would gladly give up everything I own and my position just to get
away from here.
Palamon Perhaps you won't have to. I heard rumours that a mission of wronged
women with unburied sons have appealed to Athens for help.
Artides And what did Athens answer?
Palamon What do you think? Could the reasonable prayers of mothers of
unburied heroic sons be ignored and silenced anywhere but to the ears of Creon?
Artides You are right.
Creon (enter suddenly) My friends, it is confirmed. We have another war to expect,
and I will need your help.
Palamon Will you then never have enough of war, uncle Creon?
Creon It's not my fault. Athens is the aggressor. What else can I do than defend
our freedom? Your motherland needs you. You must stand by her. No one can be

exempted from the final crisis. Report immediately in the barracks for further orders. (*leaves*)

Artides That's it, and here we go again.

Palamon Our country needs us, and we can't say no.

Artides Do you think Creon stands any chance?

Palamon Against Theseus? Never! The question is whether we will survive Creon's last war ourselves.

Artides That's what we must fight for.

Palamon For Creon's last war?

Artides No, for surviving it and Creon.

Palamon Agreed, my best cousin! (*They grasp each other's hands along the elbows, both with the other's hand closest to him.*)

Scene 3.

Peirithous Congratulations to a successful campaign, Theseus! Everyone is principally grateful.

Theseus Still it surprises me that Creon could muster such a strong resistance.

Peirithous Like all tyrants he was well organized.

Theseus And he had good officers, who fought bravely for the lost cause of their country.

Peirithous Here are the widows again to gratefully bring you their homage.

Widow 1 Be praised, liberator of Thebes!

2 Now at last the country will have peace, when her mothers finally may bury their sons!

3 King Theseus, your action for the cause of the women will never be forgotten.

4 You have made yourself the redeemer of the wronged innocent victims that were refused the human rights of law.

Theseus Yes, yes, that's all very good, now go ahead and bury your sons, so that you'll be free from the stench of corpses all over the country. – Those two generals, who put up the bravest fights, were Creon's relatives, were they not?

Peirithous Yes, they are related with the royal house.

Theseus What were their names again?

Peirithous Artides and Palamon.

Theseus Yes, exactly. What shall we do with them?

Peirithous It's entirely up to you to decide.

Theseus I am afraid that we can't let them go.

Peirithous Yes, since they are now the only heirs to Oidipus and Creon.

Theseus We must keep them in custody in Athens until further. Then we'll see. Perhaps they are smart enough to escape to go abroad and create completely different lives for themselves elsewhere.

Peirithous That would be the best for all.

Theseus You may remain in Thebes to take care of the city. It will need some reconstruction and rehabilitation after all those terrible scandals.
Peirithous Indeed. You said it.
Theseus Can I trust you?
Peirithous Of course.
Theseus So be it. Palamon and Artides will be my own prisoners in Athens until further.

Scene 4. A garden outside the castle in Athens.

Emilia So Thebes is crushed forever.
Hippolyta That's overstating it, my sister. Theseus has only performed a necessary operation. Creon was a villain who applied himself to unlimited desecration of the fallen in battle, which none of his citizens could tolerate at length. Finally they came here complaining and asked for a necessary intervention.
Emilia Was Thebes allowed to keep her independence?
Hippolyta To some degree, yes.
Emilia But I have heard that Theseus brought the last heirs of the Cadmean royal family here in captivity.
Hippolyta That's correct. They are imprisoned together here in the castle.
Emilia For how long?
Hippolyta You'll have to ask Theseus about that. He probably doesn't know himself. Thebes as a state is completely devastated by the civil wars and its misuse of power, so that an entirely new administration must be appointed, and it could take some time until Thebes could be back to normal operation again.
Emilia Is then the order not directly restored by Creon's death?
Hippolyta It's not that simple. All political processes take longer time than what is good for anyone, for they are usually completed too late. That's the way of the world as the men run it.
Emilia Thank heavens for not being a man. That sex seems to exist only to constantly go too deep into the water and commit disastrous mistakes.
Hippolyta But we need the men.
Emilia Do we? Didn't you manage better as a free Queen of the Amazons?
Hippolyta You can never forgive me that I surrendered to Theseus.
Emilia It's human for a woman to fall for a man, and I know how dashing and irresistible Theseus was in his glory of youth, but I can never understand that you gave up your freedom.
Hippolyta All relationships consist of compromises.
Emilia But you should never have to compromise away yourself. Then you have lost and given up.
Hippolyta I am better off as Queen of Athens than out there in the wilderness.
Emilia But there you were your own.

Hippolyta One day you will also find just the right man for you.

Emilia Never in my life. I would rather die.

Hippolyta You are more beautiful than I. How then do you think you at length could put up a longer resistance than I?

Emilia Perhaps because Theseus is already taken. The only other men I have met have been ninnies and sheep you could lead by the nose. If I ever get a man, he should at least have a will of his own, an independent mind, character and passion.

Hippolyta Still you tolerate Theseus.

Emilia I have to. He is my brother-in-law.

Hippolyta I would never have given in to a man if it wasn't obviously the best man in the world.

Emilia That's what I mean. Then I would rather be without.

(The scene is moved to the other side, where Artides and Palamon dwell in comfortable imprisonment.)

Artides Everything we did was wrong, Palamon. How shall we get out of this misfortune?

Palamon We have actually done nothing wrong but fought for our right. All we have to do is to wait with patience, and we shall probably be released by Theseus by and by.

Artides But I can't stand it! My soul is languishing! I see my entire life as only a gross catastrophic failure, and if I have to stay here much longer I will hang myself in a sheet!

Palamon You must take it easy, Artides. Discipline yourself. Meditate. Philosophise. Use your time for studies and knowledge. We are royally treated after all and get whatever we ask for.

Artides But my life is running away from me!

Palamon You are not alone.

Artides Without you I would have hanged myself long ago.

Palamon Perhaps it's the meaning of destiny, that we should learn humility and patience. So far we were only spoiled knaves, who grabbed whatever we wanted without scruples by right of our royal descent. Perhaps the contrary will be wholesome. And think of the old parable, that if you only wait patiently long enough, you will one day see your enemy's body come floating down the river.

Artides I can't wait. I get more desperate every day. We can't control our own lives any more, and that is unacceptable!

Palamon Of course. But what is this?

Artides What is it?

Palamon That's what I wonder.

Artides What do you see?

Palamon Something that immediately gives me something to live for.

Artides Share it with me. Are you having a fit or something?

Palamon That's the least you could say. I hope it will last forever.

Artides You have been caught in the world of dreams. Come back! I need someone to talk with!

Palamon I am here but exalted to reality. I never thought such dreams could exist. Suddenly I have something both to live and to die for.

Artides Explain yourself then!

Palamon A wondrously beautiful lady has revealed herself down in the garden.

Artides Who could it be if not the Queen or one of her maids?

Palamon No, this is someone else. She is more beautiful than the Queen.

Artides (*following Palamon's view from the aperture*) Yes, I can see. No, it's not the Queen, but it could be some relation of hers.

Palamon Then she is royal.

Artides I must get out of here to give her my love!

Palamon I saw her first.

Artides But I love her.

Palamon I did so long before you set eyes on her.

Artides You only dreamed and philosophized.

Palamon No, I found the meaning of my life.

Artides That's what I mean. You only dreamed and philosophised.

Palamon But I saw her first. You can't deny that.

Artides She just has to be mine. Not all nature could stop me.

Palamon Cousin, you have sworn me foster-brotherhood for life. Then we can't be rivals.

Artides That's what we already are.

Palamon Over my dead body!

Artides Mine also!

Palamon (*collecting himself*) Brother, this is ridiculous. We are imprisoned as political prisoners maybe for life, and we almost start fighting over a woman out there at liberty whom we don't even know.

Artides You are right. This must be remedied.

Palamon How?

(*Some sudden rattling in the door, and Peirithous show up with a guard.*)

Peirithous Prince Artides? I have succeeded in procuring your release. You may return to Thebes.

Palamon And what about me?

Peirithous Palamon, I pleaded for both of you indeed, but the negotiations were rough. I could only have one of you released but on the strict condition, that if he ever showed himself within the borders of Attica, he would be subject to execution.

Artides Hard luck.

Peirithous There is hope also for you, Palamon, but only in good time. I know you have a better patience than your impulsive cousin, why it was appropriate to have him released first.

Palamon We have been sitting here long enough. How much longer?

Peirithous No one knows.

Artides Still I believe you will be happier than me, Palamon, for you may go on living in her vicinity. I might myself never get the opportunity to see her again.

Palamon Hard luck.

Artides For both of us.

Peirithous You are expected in Thebes, Artides. Someone must take charge of the administration.

Artides I will be there. We'll see each other, brother. None of us will ever give up, and we now have an aim in common but with different obstacles in the way. Let's see who reaches her first.

Palamon The challenge of our lives! Our life's meaning, worth living and dying for!

Peirithous What are you talking about?

Artides We have a sweetheart in common. The problem is that she is in Athens.

Peirithous I understand. A bet.

Artides Something in that way.

Palamon Farewell, Artides! See you out there in liberty!

Artides Definitely! (*leaves with Peirithous. The door is locked.*)

Palamon (*hurries to the aperture*) She is still there! My love! Yes, I will gladly endure imprisonment for life, if only my singular comfort will be to daily be able to rest my eyes on your beauty!

Hippolyta (*joins her*) I just heard that one of the royal prisoners have been returned to Thebes.

Emilia And the other?

Hippolyta Remains. Peirithous managed to obtain the release of only one of them on hard conditions, that he must never again show himself in Attica.

Emilia A strange condition. You could then suspect, that his intention is to keep the two royal cousins separated for good.

Hippolyta Who can understand the reasonings of men? (*They leave together.*)

Palamon Sweetest maid! That you would appear to me in the darkest moment of my life, just before I was separated from my brother! Your beauty and your sweetest grace provide the extreme contrast to our bottomless despair and misfortune! And how would we then not both fall for you and forever? (*retreats into the cell, falling down on his bed*)

Girl (*through the aperture of the door*) Tsst, Sir!

Palamon (*believes he heard wrong*) Who is it?

Girl It's me, the guard's daughter.

Palamon Then it was real! (*rising*) What do you want, little friend?

Girl Do you wish to escape?

Palamon If? Can you doubt it?

Girl But we must be careful. It's not safe yet, but be patient.

Palamon You are risking your life by helping me to escape.

Girl I know. It's because I love you. Haven't you noticed?

Palamon (*embarrassed*) No.

Girl Well, now you know. Just wait for the right moment. (*disappears*)

Palamon Another redeeming female figure in my life, who promises me more than gold and green forests as means for me to reach my love! What a fairy tale I have ended up in! And it's only getting better! Just you wait, Artides! The race has only started! (*lies down with more confidence and more comfortable on the bed with his hands under his head.*)

Act II scene 1.

Theseus You raise my curiosity about the new groom. He seems too good to be true.

Peirithous Yes, he is a miracle man indeed, and he knows his business, although his courtesy gives the impression of the contrary to what he is.

Theseus Grooms are usually blunt in their speech and foul-mouthed, and more often than not insult their superiors in unnecessary exaggerated honesty.

Hippolyta Not this one. He is the contrary, I assure you. He is all amiability.

Theseus That's what makes me wonder. Who is he? I hope we haven't got a god in the stables.

Emilia He is absolutely normal as a mortal being, I can assure you, but he is really unusually gentle and submissive for a groom.

Peirithous Try him yourself, Theseus. Even you will be pleased by him.

Theseus Very well. Fetch him here. (*A servant is sent out.*) How did you find the miracle man?

Peirithous He turned up all by himself and applied for any service. Your constantly added horses need constantly new grooms.

Theseus And he is not some planted spy from Thebes with secret orders to assassinate me?

Peirithous (*laughs*) Now you sound exactly like Creon. Creon is dead. Let him be dead.

Hippolyta Here he is.

Artides (*in simple disguise*) You called for my presence.

Theseus I just wanted to have a look at you. Where do you come from?

Artides The Peloponnese, Sparta.

Theseus That's why you are such a knowledgeable horseman. You have worked with horses all your life.

Artides Yes.

Theseus In whose service?

Artides The king of Sparta.

Theseus Of course. That's why you are so familiar with royal ways. We just wished to express our appreciation.

Artides Thank you, king Theseus.

Theseus Is there anything you want?

Artides Only to continue serving you and your court.

Theseus No problem. Nothing else?

Artides No.

Theseus Then you can go. (*enter a prison guard*) What are you doing here, you hangman's groom?

Guard Pardon me, good lord Theseus, but I had better come to you directly to tell you that a prisoner has escaped.

Theseus (severely) Aren't prisoners escaping all the time from your so poorly guarded prison?

Guard Yes.

Theseus And naturally you were not sober when it happened.

Guard That's not the worst of it. I am afraid it was my own daughter who let him out.

Theseus Isn't she the one who always falls in love with your misfortunate prisoners and are conned by them to let them out?

Guard Yes, but this was not just any prisoner.

Theseus Who was it then?

Guard It was the royal prisoner from Thebes himself, the noble Palamon.

Theseus That's a pity. He and your daughter could have saved themselves the trouble, for I would have released him anyway one of these days. Well, be it as it is. Guard your daughter better in the future, and don't let her flirt with your prisoners.

Guard Alas, I can never guard her behind my back.

Theseus Because you are always drinking, poor man. Well, go back to your work.

Guard I thought it best that you should know it directly, lord Theseus.

Theseus So now I know it. No harm is done. Go back, poor man, to your wanton daughter and your bottle.

Guard Thank you, my lord. (*bows humbly and leaves*)

Hippolyta You had kept him locked up far too long anyway.

Theseus Thank you, I know.

Emilia Prisoners only make extra burdens of trouble, especially if they are political.

Theseus I agree.

Peirithous He will probably escape back to Thebes. I'll go there and see if there will be any consequences.

Theseus Do so, Peirithous. I will come along with you, by the way. I could need some change and stretch of legs.

Hippolyta Come, Emilia. Let the men mind their own political mistakes.

(*All leave except Artides.*)

Artides Palamon at large! What does it mean? Nothing! All that means anything is that I may continue basking in the sun of Emilia's splendour. As long as I just may enjoy that faint hope, so long my happiness is consummate even as a simple groom, I ask for no more, for nothing more means anything. Now for the forest to bind garlands for my love!

Scene 2. In the forest.

Palamon Where shall I escape? Out in nature, out to freedom, out to love, it doesn't matter where, for my love embraces all the world! I am at home everywhere, even in the most desolate wilderness, for my love comprises everyone without reservations... But hold it! There seems to be another fool of a colleague out here in the wayward forest.

(reaches a glade, where Artides is fooling around an altar)

Artides You are my only divinity, my love, and soon you will be mine! Receive my sacrifice in the shape of all the flowers of the forest in unlimited multitude!
(drowns the altar with flowers)

Palamon It's my own cousin! Dressed up as a lackey! What is he up to?

Artides No one suspects anything! Imagine that I fooled the entire court! I have daily been able to stay closer to my beloved than the poor Palamon in jail! I can love her in liberty and almost touch the fringe of her dress, while that poor devil is locked up and hardly even able to catch glimpses of her except by that narrow aperture behind bars! But now he is also at large, so I had better make haste before I am discovered!

Palamon He has disguised himself and joined the service of the King, that scoundrel! But she can never belong to anyone but me! *(steps forth)* Do you hear that, you villain and arch traitor! She is mine! I saw her first!

Artides Palamon! Of course you had to come by and disturb me! How on earth did you find your way here?

Palamon I just escaped from prison.

Artides Yes, I heard about that, but why did you have to find your way here to my secret most sacred blooming altar!

Palamon Some god must have guided me here. I have no better explanation.

Artides Put the blame on Pan! You disturb my altar service!

Palamon That's my intention!

Artides Do you want a fight?

Palamon If I want!

Artides Shall we settle at once?

Palamon Why not! I'll be glad to!

Artides May the best man win! *(pulls his sword)*

Palamon Exactly! And may the worst man lose! That's you!

Artides Come to the point!

Palamon Come on, you slowfox!

Artides How could you ever think you could have her, you jailbird?

Palamon And you were too late from the start! She was mine before you had even seen her!

Artides But I love her the most! That beats you!

Palamon Prove it! My right of way is proved!

Artides You can't prove that I don't love her the most!

Palamon That has nothing to do with it!
Artides It has indeed!
Palamon No!
Artides Yes!
Palamon No!
Artides Yes!
Palamon We could go on like this for years.
Artides You started it!
Palamon No, I saw her first!
Artides That's what I am saying! You started it!
Palamon Not the quarrel! You started the row!
Artides I love her!
Palamon She doesn't love you!
Artides How do you know?
Palamon Because I am the one who loves her!
Artides How childish you are!
Palamon What about you then, you naïve moron!
Artides You are the only moron here!
(They go on abusing each other interminably without getting anywhere. Theseus and Peirithous happen to pass by.)
Theseus Hold it, Peirithous! What is this?
Peirithous Two rivals trying to settle things.
Theseus But not just any rivals.
Peirithous By heaven! It's Artides! In my groom's outfit!
Theseus He has pulled us by the nose! And the other is no one less than the escaped Palamon!
Peirithous Both have forfeited their lives!
Theseus Shall we let them murder each other?
Peirithous Never! That would not be fair!
Theseus Exactly! *(steps forth)* Gentlemen, you seem to have an argument about a woman.
Palamon (doesn't recognize him at first) And what business is that of yours?
Artides Idiot! Can't you see it's king Theseus!
Palamon My goodness!
Peirithous You have both been caught in flagrancia on Attic soil. Do you understand what that means?
Palamon We don't have to kill each other, Artides. They will do it for us.
Theseus Take it easy now! Who is the lady you are fighting about?
Palamon (to Artides) Do we dare to reveal it?
Artides We can't get away with it, cousin. – It's your own Queen's own cousin, the outstandingly excellent Emilia.
Theseus Emilia!
Peirithous (tries some severity) What insolence!

Theseus Wait a moment, Peirithous! They are actually both worthy of her, since they are both of royal family.

Peirithous You are right. I had forgotten about that.

Palamon The problem is that we are two.

Theseus And you are too obviously set on reaching a settlement. Well, gentlemen, let's make the best of it and in a royal way. You are both welcome to Athens to fight honestly and honourably about it, and the winner will have my sister-in-law. Will that do as a special offer?

Palamon We thank you for such a royal honour.

Artides But what does it mean practically? A deadly duel? With an audience?

Theseus We can't do without an audience on such a royal occasion, since Emilia actually is the most courted and desired virgin in Hellas, and you are the two hottest royal subjects in Hellas, which makes it the more important that your settlement is staged the more royally with honour.

Peirithous (cautiously) What is on your mind?

Theseus The simplest possible solution. Emilia will have to choose.

(All are astounded.)

Don't you think she herself should have a word on the matter? It is after all only about her.

Palamon (stoically) Fair enough!

Aristides We accept the royal arbitration.

Peirithous One problem: What happens if Emilia can't make up her mind?

Theseus We will have to ask her to begin with. That problem is not actual yet.

– You have exactly equal chances, gentlemen. None of you has known her intimately, and none of you have been able to court her. She doesn't know anyone of you except by hearsay and name – she knows that you fought for Thebes and were captured, and she was actually the one who first of all called for your release. She knows who you are, but she doesn't know you.

Palamon She knows Artides, who falsely acted as her groom!

Theseus She never knew who he was, and he consistently kept a proper distance, didn't you?

Artides Yes. I never dared even to touch her, for if I had been caught, my life would have been forfeited.

Theseus So he risked his life just to be close to her, and you, Palamon, risked your life by your daring escape. Now you have both been caught, and according to the law, both your lives are forfeited. So, obey my will, or die!

Artides We have to, Palamon.

Palamon We have no choice.

Theseus Very well, gentlemen. Come with us then as our guests of honour in the capacity of princely suitors to my beautiful sister-in-law. In this case, the highest law and sentence is the woman's.

Palamon We subordinate ourselves to it.

Artides Wholeheartedly.

Theseus Very well. So at last there is an end to your ridiculous quarrel. Now we are in for some serious business.

(Exeunt all four, back towards Athens.)

Act III scene 1. Emilia by the altar of Artemis.
She is dressed in white with her long blonde hair let loose.

Emilia O virgin goddess of freedom and proudest purity, I invoke thee as a virgin in distress, whom authority and autocracy wants to force into marriage, but I am neither willing nor able to decline, for the two men I have to choose between are the foremost of our country, irresistible royal princes both of them and paragons of beauty and general ability – none of them have the slightest fault to present but only deserts. Therefore I turn unto you three leading virgin goddesses, Artemis, Athena and Hestia, invoking you to help me manage this hopeless situation. I never wanted to marry, I never asked for any suitor, and still they have always beset me in hundreds, maybe just because of my sexual disinterest. I have nothing against love, but I could never favour only one man with it. I therefore renounce all you more promiscuous goddesses, like Aphrodite, Hera and even the motherly Demeter, since I can only view sex as a humiliation and debasement and a restricting trap as an enemy to my freedom and independent love for all and everyone. Let me remain virgin, goddesses, and free and independent as such, but let me not make my family and my suitors disappointed. – So, now I am ready to face the court and the demanding family.

Scene 2.

Peirithous Who do you think she will choose? Honestly speaking, I myself would not have been able.

Hippolyta You don't have to, Peirithous, since you are a man.

Theseus She faces an impossible choice. Both are equally royal, both are equally handsome, and both are equally potent.

Hippolyta What happens if she refuses to choose anyone of them? If she chooses one, she discards the other, which I don't think she will be able to do.

Theseus She must choose someone, or we must send both away into permanent banishment.

Peirithous Here she comes.

Hippolyta Well, my sister, have you reached a decision?

Emilia I would like to discuss the matter.

Peirithous It starts well.

Theseus I just said, that your only choice is either one of them, or both have to be exiled permanently.

Emilia Who can say no to a lover? Who can say no to love? Not even the most dried out of old maids would not thaw and melt by just the slightest glimpse of love. And here you have faced me with an impossible choice, and I haven't even been allowed to get to know either of them. What manner of a procedure is that? You are the worst possible procurers, who want to force on me an obligatory love relationship without even giving me permission to identify the candidates!

Theseus It's their fault. They are so importuning, that they would have finished each other off if we hadn't interfered, which would have made your choice easier. Now the case is as it is, and I can only regret the inconvenience of the situation.

Emilia Can none of them be made to abstain from love? That would make it easier for me. They are cousins, they love each other, and they have lived all their life as foster brothers.

Theseus If one of them would sacrifice himself for the other, which one would you then choose?

Emilia Naturally the self-sacrificing part, for he would love the most.

Theseus Good, let's try them! Let them enter!

Let the noble royal heirs to Thebes, Artides and Palamon, be brought in!

(The servants are activated.)

Peirithous (cautiously) And if both insist on sacrificing himself for the other?

Theseus That problem is not actual yet.

Hippolyta Here they are.

Artides It pleased you to call on our presence.

Palamon We are ready to face our final judgement.

Artides We promise to obey Emilia.

Palamon The loveliest and worthiest of all virgins.

Theseus (to Emilia) To make it easier for you, Emilia, I ask your permission to let me speak for you. Correct me if I am wrong. My dear candidates, Emilia has refused to choose any one of you, since you are both equally worthy and she therefore impossibly could decline one for the other. This means, that we must exile you both permanently from Attica with a sentence of death if the exile is violated. If anyone of you would willingly give up your candidature, the problem could be solved.

Artides How? Which one would she choose in that case?

Palamon Artides, I give her up for you. I would rather love you both than lose any of you. In that case I could in some way still keep the love of both of you.

Artides You say so only because you think she in that case will choose you. In that case I also give her up.

Palamon I did it first!

Artides I give her up just as much as you!

Palamon You are unfair as usual!

Artides You started!

Palamon My resolution was honest!

Artides So was mine but even more!

Theseus Separate them! This will not do! My friends, if you will go on like this, I see no other choice than to send you both in permanent exile!

Emilia It won't be necessary, brother-in-law. Palamon is right. I have understood, that he was the first of the cousins to fall in love with me, and when he now also was the first to willingly resign from me, I could see on his eyes that his love was honest. I choose him.

Hippolyta and Peirithous Hurray!

Emilia But on one condition. I don't want Palamon and Artides to become enemies for my sake, and I don't want any of them to ever have any reason to fear or antagonise the other. Therefore I propose the following. I will marry Palamon, but also Artides shall have access to my bed now and then, but only when I wish for it myself. Could you accept that condition, Palamon?

Theseus (to Hippolyta) Your sister never ceases to surprise me. No one was a more obnoxiously determined virgin than she, and now she would directly be the bride of several.

Peirithous What says the law of bigamy?

Emilia Love is above the law. Palamon is due to answer. I have made my condition. The word is now with him.

Palamon (falling on his knees) You make me happier than I deserve and far more than I ever could wish. Your generous suggestion is received with unreserved gratitude. I welcome my cousin into my marriage, on the condition presented by Emilia, since I then may keep him close to me as my only beloved cousin.

Emilia Then the word is yours, Artides.

Artides (also falling on his knees) Such a beatitude I could never have dared to dream about. I embrace you both, Palamon and Emilia, since your wise verdict actually implies a possibility for all three of us to love and remain loved by each other. *(Rises, as does also Palamon, who embraces Emilia, inviting Artides to join, and so they all three embrace each other.)*

Peirithous (to Theseus) But who will then be the father of eventual children?

Theseus That problem is not actual yet, Peirithous, and so far actually all unsolvable problems have been able to be solved.

Hippolyta This pleases me enormously, and I ask to be the one to arrange the wedding festivities. No bloodshed and no exile has been necessary, Emilia has avoided the agony of having to turn anyone down, and the cousins are reconciled. Could it be better? You handled this most awfully well, Emilia! *(embraces her)*

Emilia Thank you, sister, but it was only an improvisation. An hour ago I prayed to the virgin goddesses Hestia, Artemis and Athena for me to remain a virgin at any price.

Hippolyta Not even that possibility is excluded. You are the bride, and you decide!

Theseus Let us now celebrate this overwhelming and surprising reconciliation with a proper and considerable banquet! What about it?

All Hurray!

Theseus Excellent! Let's immediately start the party!

(Exeunt all, Emilia between Palamon and Artides with her arms in theirs, and Hippolyta between Theseus and Peirithous with her arms in theirs. Those servants who are present applaud.)

The End.

*(Dharamsala 24.10.2009,
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