

64. OF THE ARGONAUTS AND AN EPITHALAMIUM FOR PELEUS AND THETIS



nce they say pine-trees born on the heights of *Pelion* [p. 225]
floated through *Neptune's* [p. 222] clear waves,
to the River *Phasis* [p. 226] and *Aeetes's* [p. 196] borders,
with chosen men, oaks of the *Argive* [p. 199] people,
hoping to steal the Golden Fleece of *Colchis* [p. 207]
daring to course the salt deeps in their swift ship,
sweeping the blue waters with fir-wood oars.
The goddess [p. 200] herself who guards the heights of the city,
who joined the curving fabric to pinewood keel,
made their ship speed onwards with light winds.
That vessel was first to explore the unknown sea:
so, as she ploughed the windblown waters with her prow,
and whitened the churning waves with foam from the oars,
the *Nereids* [p. 222] lifted themselves from the dazzling white
depths of the sea, amazed at this wonder of ocean.
In those, and other days, mortal eyes saw the sea-nymphs
raise themselves, bodies all naked, as far as their nipples,
from the white depths.
Then *Peleus* [p. 224], they say, was inflamed with love of *Thetis* [p. 235],
then Thetis did not despise marriage with a mortal,
then Jupiter himself agreed to Thetis's marriage.
O heroes, born in a chosen age, hail, godlike race!
O offspring of a blessed mother, hail once more.
Often I'll address you, in my song.

And I address you, so blessed in your fortunate marriage,
 chief of Pelian Thessaly, to whom Jupiter himself
 creator of gods, yielded his beloved:
 did not Thetis possess you, loveliest of Nereids?
 Did not *Tethys* [p. 234] allow you to lead off her grand-daughter,
 and *Oceanus* [p. 222], who embraces the whole world with sea?
 When at the time appointed the longed-for flames arise,
 all of Thessaly crowds together to the palace,
 the halls are filled with a joyful assembly:
 they bring gifts with them, declaring their joy in their looks.
Cieros [p. 206] is deserted: they leave *Phthiotic Tempe* [p. 227],
Crannon's [p. 208] houses, and *Larissa's* [p. 217] walls,
 they gather in *Pharsalia* [p. 226], crowd under Pharsalia's roofs.
 No one farms the fields, the necks of bullocks soften,
 nor does the curved hoe clear beneath the vines,
 nor does the ox drag earth outward with the blade,
 nor does the sickle thin the shade of leafy trees,
 coarse rust attacks the neglected plough.
 But the palace gleams bright with gold and silver
 through all the rich receding halls.
 The ivory chairs shine, cups glisten on tables,
 the whole palace gladdened with splendour of royal wealth.
 In the midst of the palace a sacred couch, truly joyful
 for the marriage of the goddess, gleaming with Indian ivory,
 stained with the red dyes won from purple murex.
 The cloth depicts in ancient forms, with marvellous art,
 in all their variety, the excellence of gods and men.
 Here are seen the wave-echoing shores of *Naxos* [p. 221],

Theseus [p. 235], aboard his ship, vanishing swiftly, watched
by *Ariadne* [p. 199], ungovernable passion in her heart,
not yet believing that she sees what she does see,
still only just awoken from deceptive sleep,
finding herself abandoned wretchedly to empty sands.
But uncaring the hero fleeing strikes the deep with his oars,
casting his vain promises to the stormy winds.
The *Minoan* [p. 220] girl goes on gazing at the distance,
with mournful eyes, like the statue of a *Bacchante* [p. 219],
gazes, alas, and swells with great waves of sorrow,
no longer does the fine turban remain on her golden hair,
no longer is she hidden by her lightly-concealing dress,
no longer does the shapely band hold her milk-white breasts
all of it scattered, slipping entirely from her body,
plays about her feet in the salt flood.
But, not caring now for turban or flowing dress, the lost girl
gazed towards you, Theseus, with all her heart, spirit, mind.
Wretched thing, for whom bright *Venus* [p. 237] reserved the thorny
cares of constant mourning in your heart,
from that time when it suited warlike Theseus,
leaving the curving shores of *Piræus* [p. 227],
to reach the *Cretan* [p. 212] regions of the unbending king.
For then forced by cruel plague, they say,
as punishment, to absolve the murder of *Androgeos* [p. 198]
ten chosen young men of Athens and ten unmarried girls
used to be given together as sacrifice to the *Minotaur* [p. 220].
With which evil the narrow walls were troubled until
Theseus chose to offer himself for his dear Athens

rather than such *Athenian* [p. 205] dead be carried un-dead to Crete.
 And so in a swift ship and with gentle breezes
 he came to great *Minos* [p. 220] and his proud halls.
 As soon as the royal girl cast her eye on him with desire,
 she whom the chaste bed nourished, breathing
 sweet perfumes in her mother's gentle embrace,
 even as *Eurotas's* [p. 211] streams surround a myrtle
 that sheds its varied colours on the spring breeze,
 she did not turn her blazing eyes away from him,
 till she conceived a flame through her whole body
 that burned utterly to the depths of her bones.
 Ah sadly *the Boy* [p. 208] incites inexorable passion
 in chaste hearts, he who mixes joy and pains for mortals,
 and *she* [p. 237] who rules *Golgos* [p. 212] and leafy *Idalia* [p. 215],
 even she, who shakes the mind of a smitten girl,
 often sighing for a blonde-haired stranger!
 How many fears the girl suffers in her weak heart!
 How often she grows pallid: more so than pale gold.
 As Theseus went off eager to fight the savage monster
 either death approached or fame's reward!
 Promising small gifts, not unwelcome or in vain,
 she made her prayers to the gods with closed lips.
 Now as a storm uproots a quivering branch of oak,
 or a cone-bearing pine with resinous bark, on the heights
 of Mount *Taurus* [p. 234], twisting its unconquered strength
 in the wind (it falls headlong, far off, plucked out
 by the roots, shattering anything and everything in its way)
 so Theseus upended the conquered body of the beast

its useless horns overthrown, emptied of breath.
Then he turned back, unharmed, to great glory,
guided by the wandering track of fine thread,
so that his exit from the fickle labyrinth of the palace
would not be prevented by some unnoticed error.
But what should I relate, digressing further
from my poem's theme: the girl, abandoning
her father's sight, her sisters' embraces, and lastly
her mother's, she wretched at her lost daughter's joy
in preferring the sweet love of Theseus to all this:
or her being carried by ship to Naxos's foaming shore,
or her consort with uncaring heart vanishing,
she conquered, her eyes softening in sleep?
Often loud shrieks cried the frenzy in her ardent heart
poured out from the depths of her breast,
and then she would climb the steep cliffs in her grief,
where the vast sea-surge stretches out to the view,
then run against the waves into the salt tremor
holding her soft clothes above her naked calves,
and call out mournfully this last complaint,
a frozen sob issuing from her wet face:
'False Theseus, is this why you take me from my father's land,
faithless man, to abandon me on a desert shore?
Is this how you vanish, heedless of the god's power,
ah, uncaring, bearing home your accursed perjuries?
Nothing could alter the measure of your cruel mind?
No mercy was near to you, inexorable man,
that you might take pity on my heart?

Yet once you made promises to me in that flattering voice,
 you told me to hope, not for this misery
 but for joyful marriage, the longed-for wedding songs,
 all in vain, dispersed on the airy breezes.
 Now, no woman should believe a man's pledges,
 or believe there's any truth in a man's words:
 when their minds are intent on their desire,
 they have no fear of oaths, don't spare their promises:
 but as soon as the lust of their eager mind is slaked
 they fear no words, they care nothing for perjury.
 Surely I rescued you from the midst of the tempest
 of fate, and more, I gave up my half-brother,
 whom I abandoned to you with treachery at the end.
 For that I'm left to be torn apart by beasts, and a prey
 to sea-birds, unburied, when dead, in the scattered earth.
 What lioness whelped you under a desert rock,
 what sea conceived and spat you from foaming waves,
 what *Syrtis* [p. 233], what fierce *Scylla* [p. 232], what vast *Charybdis* [p. 206],
 you who return me this, for the gift of your sweet life?
 If marriage with me was not in your heart,
 because you feared your old father's cruel precepts,
 you could still have led me back to your house,
 where I would have served you, a slave happy in her task,
 washing your beautiful feet in clear water,
 covering your bed with the purple fabric.
 But why complain to the uncaring wind in vain?
 It is beyond evil, and without senses, unable
 to hear what is said, without voice to reply.

It is already turning now towards mid-ocean,
and nothing human appears in this waste of weed.
So cruel chance taunts me in my last moments,
even depriving my ears of my own lament.
All-powerful *Jupiter* [p. 216], if only the Athenian ships
had not touched the shores of *Cnosos* [p. 207], from the start,
carrying their fatal cargo for the ungovernable bull,
a faithless captain mooring his ropes to Crete,
an evil guest, hiding a cruel purpose under a handsome
appearance, finding rest in our halls!
Now where can I return? What desperate hope
depend on? Shall I seek out the slopes of *Ida* [p. 215]?
But the cruel sea with its divisive depths
of water separates me from them.
Or shall I hope for my father's help? Did I not leave him,
to follow a man stained with my brother's blood?
Or should I trust in a husband's love to console me?
Who hardly bends slow oars in running from me?
More, I'm alive on a lonely island without shelter,
and no escape seen from the encircling ocean waves.
No way to fly, no hope: all is mute,
all is deserted, all speaks of ruin.
Yet still my eyes do not droop in death,
not till my senses have left my weary body,
till true justice is handed down by the gods,
and the divine help I pray for in my last hour.
So you *Eumenides* [p. 211] who punish by avenging
the crimes of men, your foreheads crowned

with snaky hair, bearing anger in your breath,
 here, here, come to me, listen to my complaints,
 that I, wretched alas, force, weakened, burning,
 out of the marrow of my bones, blind with mad rage.
 Since these truths are born in the depths of my breast,
 you won't allow my lament to pass you by,
 but as Theseus left me alone, through his intent,
 goddesses, by that will, pursue him and his with murder.'
 When these words had poured from her sad breast,
 the troubled girl praying for cruel actions,
 the chief of the gods nodded with unconquerable will:
 at which the earth and the cruel sea trembled
 and the glittering stars shook in the heavens.
 Now Theseus's mind was filled with a dark mist
 and all the instructions he had held fixed in memory
 before this, were erased from his thoughts,
 failing to raise the sweet signal to his mourning father,
 when the harbour of Athens safely came in sight.
 For they say that when *Aegeus*^[p. 196] parted from his son,
 as the goddess's ship left the city, he yielded him
 to the wind's embrace with these words:
 'Son, more dear to me than my long life,
 son, whom I abandoned through chance uncertainty,
 lately returned to me in the last days of my old age,
 since my fate and your fierce virtue tear you away
 from me, against my will, whose failing eyes
 are not yet sated with my dear son's face,
 I don't send you off happily with joyful heart,

or allow you to carry flags of good fortune,
but start with the many sorrows in my mind,
marring my white hairs with earth and sprinkled ashes,
then hang unfinished canvas from the wandering mast,
so the darkened sail of gloomy Spanish flax
might speak the grief and passion in my mind.
But if the one who dwells in sacred *Iton* [p. 215], who promised
to defend the people and city of *Erectheus* [p. 210], allows you
to wet your hand with the blood of the bull,
then make sure this command is done, buried in your
remembering heart, not to be erased by time:
that as soon as you set eyes on our hills,
strip the dark fabric fully from the yards,
and hoist white sails with your twisted ropes,
so that seeing them from the first, I'll know joy
in my glad heart, when a happy time reveals your return.'
These words to Theseus, once held constantly in mind,
vanished like clouds of snow struck by a blast of wind
on the summits of high mountains.
But when his father, searching the view from the citadel's height,
endless tears flooding his anxious eyes,
first saw the sails of dark fabric,
he threw himself head first from the height of the cliff,
believing Theseus lost to inexorable fate.
So fierce Theseus entered the palace in mourning
for his father's death, and knew the same grief of mind
that he had caused neglected Ariadne,
she who was gazing then where his ship had vanished

pondering the many cares in her wounded heart.

But bright *Bacchus* [p. 201] hurries from elsewhere
with his chorus of *Satyrs* [p. 232] and *Silenes* [p. 232] from *Nysa*, [p. 222]
seeking you, Ariadne, burning with love for you.

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In rapture his *Bacchantes* [p. 219] raved madly, crazed in mind,
with cries of ‘*euhoë*’ and tossing heads,
some brandished the thyrsus with hidden tip,
some flourished the torn limbs of bullocks,
some wreathed themselves with twining snakes,
some celebrated the secret rites of the hollow box,
rights they wished the profane to hear in vain:
others beat the drums with the flat of their hands,
or raised a clear ringing from rounded cymbals:
they blew endless strident calls on the horns
and the barbarous flute shrilled with fearful tunes.
Such the splendid workings of figured tapestry
covering the sacred couch its cloth embraced.
The people of Thessaly after gazing eagerly
were satisfied, they began to leave the goddess’s sanctuary.
As *Zephyr* [p. 238] stirs the willing waves, ruffling
the placid sea with morning breeze,
while *Aurora* [p. 201] rises to the wandering Sun’s threshold,
so that at first they move slowly struck by a gentle blast,
and their splashing resounds with slight lamentation,

while afterwards they increase, swelling more and more,
and reflect the red of the sunrise far-off as they rise:
so, here and there, with wandering feet the crowd disperse
to their homes, leaving the courtyard of the royal palace.
After their departure *Chiron* [p. 206], the Centaur's leader,
arrived from steep *Pelion* [p. 225] carrying woodland gifts:
since what the fields bear, whatever the country of Thessaly
yields on high peaks, whatever the flowers by the river's waves
the fecund breath of the warm west wind produces,
he brought woven together in confused garlands,
so that the palace smiled, charmed by happy fragrances.
At once *Penens* [p. 225] came to green *Tempe* [p. 227],
Tempe, whose hanging woods encircle it above,
leaving *Pasiphae* [p. 224] to be honoured by the sea's dance:
not empty-handed, since he carried a tall beech
by the roots, and long-leafed laurel from a straight trunk,
and was not without nodding plane, and pliant poplar,
scorched *Phaethon's* [p. 226] sister, and airy cypress.
He placed them woven, here and there, round the house
till the courtyard was green, veiled with fresh foliage.
Prometheus [p. 229] followed after him, skilled in mind,
showing faint traces of his ancient punishment,
when once he suffered, hung in tight chains
from the high ledge of rock.
Then the father of the gods with his sacred consort,
and his sons, came down from the heavens,
leaving behind only you, *Phoebus* [p. 198], and the one born
together with you, she who lives on the slopes of *Ida* [p. 215]:

Peleus is still disdained by both you and *your sister*^[p. 199],
 and you will not celebrate Thetis's wedding torches.
 Then the gods seated their limbs at the white benches,
 at tables richly heaped with various foods,
 while, moving their bodies in trembling dance,
 the *Fates*^[p. 223] began to utter their prophetic song.
 Quivering seized their bodies, their white ankles
 wholly covered by the red hem of their dresses,
 and a red headband circling their white hair,
 and their hands were busy, as ever, at their eternal work.
 The left hand held the distaff, wound with soft wool,
 then the right, drawing out the thread lightly, shaped it
 with upturned fingers, then, twisting it under the thumb,
 turned the level spindle in smooth rotation,
 and often a plucking tooth made the strands equal,
 and fragments of wool, that once projected
 from the light threads, clung to their dry lips:
 and, before their feet, bright wool from a soft fleece
 was guarded by a basket woven of willow.
 Then in a clear voice, pushing away the fleece,
 they poured out these prophecies in divine song,
 song not to be proven wrong, by any amount of years.
 'Defence of *Thessaly*^[p. 210], dearest of *Jupiter's*^[p. 216] scions,
 adding marvellous glory to your great powers,
 accept what the glad sisters bring to the light,
 true oracles: but you who accompany fate,
 fly, guiding threads: fly, spindle.
 Now *Hesperus*^[p. 237] comes to you bearing the longed-for

bride, the wife approaches beneath a fortunate star,
who pours out her heart to you with tender love,
and prepares to lie with you in languid sleep,
spreading her delicate arms beneath your strong neck.

Fly, guiding threads: fly, spindle.

No house has ever sheltered such love,
no love has ever joined lovers in such a union,
even as harmony comes to Thetis, and Peleus.

Fly, guiding threads: fly, spindle.

A child *Achilles* [p. 196] is born to you, free of fear,
noted for never turning his back on an enemy, strong
of heart, who, often the victor in the fickle foot-race,
outstrips the swift deer with fiery hooves.

Fly, guiding threads: fly, spindle.

No hero dare confront him in battle,
when the *Phrygian* [p. 227] rivers flow with the blood of *Tenueer's* [p. 234]
people,

and the third heir of deceitful Pelops lays waste
the walls of *Troy* [p. 236], besieged in the weary war.

Fly, guiding threads: fly, spindle.

Often women at the funerals of their sons lament
his illustrious powers and bright deeds,
as neglected hair streams down from their white heads,
and weak hands mark their withered breasts.

Fly, guiding threads: fly, spindle.

Now, as a reaper prematurely mowing the dense stalks,
scythes the golden fields under his eager feet,
he destroys the Trojan bodies with his fierce blade.

Fly, guiding threads: fly, spindle.

Scamander's [p. 232] waves that pour down in cascade to the swift
Hellespont will bear witness to his great courage,
its passage narrowed by the heaped bodies of the dead,
the deep waters mixed with warm blood.

Fly, guiding threads: fly, spindle.

At last it will be witness also to a death-prize paid,
when a heaped tomb by the high rampart receives
the smooth white body of a sacrificed virgin girl.

Fly, guiding threads: fly, spindle.

Then as luck grants the riches of the *Trojan* [p. 209] city
to the weary *Greeks* [p. 196], loosening *Neptune's* [p. 222] bond,
the high mound will be soaked with *Polyxena's* [p. 228] blood:
who bowing like a sacrifice to the two-edged blade
will fall to her knees, a maimed corpse.

Fly, guiding threads: fly, spindle.

So perform the wishes of your hearts, join in love.
Let the husband accept his goddess in joyful contract,
now the bride be given to her loving partner.

Fly, guiding threads: fly, spindle.

The nurse returning at daybreak will not
encircle her neck with yesterday's ribbon,
nor the anxious mother by the sad bed of a troubled daughter,
forgo the hope of dear grandchildren.

Fly, guiding threads: fly, spindle.'

Such the song once sung of happy prophecy
to Peleus, from the *Parcae's* [p. 223] divine hearts.
Once the gods in person visited the pure houses of heroes,

and showed themselves to the mortal crowd,
the gods were not yet used to men's scorn for piety.
Often the father of the gods revisiting his bright temple,
when the annual rites came round on the holy days,
saw a hundred bulls lying on the ground.
Wandering *Bacchus* [p. 201] often led the shouting *Bacchantes* [p. 219],
with their flowing hair, on the high peak of *Parnassus* [p. 224],
when all rushing in emulation from the happy town
of *Delphos* [p. 209] received the god with smoking altars.
Often in the fatal struggles of war, *Mars* [p. 219], or swift *Minerva* [p. 200]
the lady of Lake Tritonis, or virgin *Artemis* [p. 199]
appeared to exhort the crowds of armed men.
But afterwards earth was tainted by impious wickedness
and all fled from justice with eager minds,
the brother's hand was stained with a brother's blood,
the child ceased to mourn for its dead parents,
the father chose the younger son's death to acquire
a single woman in her prime, the impious mother
spread herself beneath the unknowing son,
not afraid of desecrating the household shrine.
All piety was confused with impiety in evil frenzy
turning the righteous will of the gods from us.
So such as they do not visit our marriages,
nor allow themselves to approach us, in the light of day.



'Bacchanale'

Alessandro Magnasco (Italian, 1667 - 1749)

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