

OVID

43 B.C.E.–17 C.E.

Ovid (whose full name was Publius Ovidius Naso) was one of the smartest, most prolific, and most consistently entertaining of the Roman poets. During his long and productive career, he wrote funny, perceptive poems about sex and relationships in contemporary Rome, as well as vivid retellings of ancient myths. His way of telling stories remains extraordinary for its subtlety and its depth of psychological understanding. His work had a massive influence on the poets and artists of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and beyond, and it is one of our most important and accessible sources for the rich mythology of ancient Greece and Rome.

LIFE AND TIMES

Ovid was born into an aristocratic ("equestrian") family, in the provincial Roman town of Sulmo, east of Rome. His father wanted him to become a lawyer, and therefore had him trained in rhetoric. Ovid's writing shows the influence of rhetorical technique, in its polished, witty style. But Ovid had no real interest in the law. He was a natural poet, and at the age of twenty, to his father's disappointment and disapproval, he quit his legal training. He held various minor governmental posts, but eventually became a full-time poet, with the financial aid of a rich patron called Messalla. Ovid became part of the literary circles of Rome: he knew the poets Propertius and Horace, and met Virgil, who was some twenty-seven years older.

Ovid married three times; he had been divorced twice before the age of

thirty. His third wife seems to have had a daughter by a previous husband, but Ovid had no children of his own. Beyond that, we know little of Ovid's personal life. He wrote a great deal about extramarital sex, but emphasized that his poetic persona should not be taken as autobiography, declaring, "My Muse is slutty, but my life is chaste."

Ovid's work included various collections of poems on mythological topics, such as the *Fasti* (never finished), on the Roman calendar, and a set of poetic letters, the *Heroides*, from mythical heroines like Helen of Troy to their boyfriends. But most notorious, in his own time and later, were his two books about sex and relationships: the *Amores* and the *Ars Amatoria*. These used the tradition of Roman love elegy, which had begun with Catullus and had been developed by Ovid's friend Propertius, who evoked the desperate, abject longing of a man for a beloved and unreliable girlfriend. Ovid's love poetry focuses less on feelings than on behavior, and less on love than on sex, which he treats in a light, knowing tone. He gives, for example, a titillating account of some hot afternoon sex: tells anecdotes about his girlfriend's had experiences with hair dye and about her attempted abortion; and offers advice about the best places to go and best lines to use for picking up a date.

All this was guaranteed to irritate the more conservative members of Roman society, who included—unfortunately for Ovid—the emperor, Augustus. Having seized power after winning the battle of Actium (in 31 B.C.E.), at the end of a long civil war, Augustus was eager to impose order on the fragmented

society of Rome. A key element in his domestic strategy was to reform the morals and increase the population of the Roman elite by promoting marriage and traditional family structures. New laws were imposed in 19–18 B.C.E. to encourage married couples to have children, and to punish adultery with exile. In this context, Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* seems deliberately calculated to enrage the emperor. The poem points up the hypocrisy of Roman sexual mores and suggests that, in fact, having lots of extramarital sex is far more traditional than Augustan family values, since the Romans have been doing it ever since the foundation of the city: it was through the rape of the Sabine women that the male inhabitants of the new city acquired wives and were able to supply Rome with future citizens.

Ovid seems to have gotten himself into even worse trouble by what he calls a mistake. We do not know exactly what happened; Ovid suggests that he saw something he should not have seen, perhaps involving the emperor's daughter, Julia, who was having an adulterous affair. Combined with the *Ars Amatoria* and Ovid's generally provocative stance toward Augustus, this mistake was the last straw; in 8 C.E., the emperor—acting, unusually, on his own initiative, without input from the Senate—condemned Ovid to permanent exile from Rome to Tomis, a remote town on the Black Sea, in modern Romania. He lived out the remaining eight years of his life in grim isolation, far from family and friends, in a cold, bleak place where, he claims, nobody even spoke Latin. Ovid wrote a series of poems from exile, mostly letters bemoaning his sufferings and pleading—to friends, family, acquaintances, the general public, and to the emperor himself—to be forgiven and to be allowed back home. All were unsuccessful; Ovid died in Tomis, alone and unforgiven.

METAMORPHOSES

At the time of his exile in 8 C.E., Ovid was finishing his greatest work, the *Metamorphoses* (Greek for "changes"). It is less obviously provocative than Ovid's love poetry, but it, too, provides a radical challenge both to Augustan moral and political values and to traditional poetic norms. Virgil had written what Augustus wanted to be the official epic of the new order. For all its innovations, the *Aeneid* focused on the deeds of a single hero, and it treated its culture's dominant values (such as duty, imperial power, and military honor) with respect. The *Metamorphoses* is recognizably epic; it is the only poem Ovid wrote in the epic meter, dactylic hexameter. But it can be seen as a critical response to Virgil, even an anti-*Aeneid*. Ovid produced a series of miniature stories strung together into a long narrative of fifteen books. The transitions between them, and the connections drawn by the narrator, are often transparently contrived—perhaps in mockery of the idea of narrative unity. There is no single hero, and no moral values are presented without irony. There is, however, an element common to these stories: change; and despite its leisurely and roundabout course, the narrative has a discernible direction—as Ovid says in his introduction, "from the world's beginning to the present day." Starting with the creation of the world, the transformation of matter into living bodies (the first great metamorphosis), Ovid tells of human beings changed into animals, flowers, and trees. He proceeds through Greek myth to stories of early Rome and so to his own time, culminating in the ascension of the murdered Julius Caesar to the heavens in the form of a star and the divine promise that Augustus too, far in the future, will become a god; it is tempting to speculate that Ovid hoped—vainly—to improve his relationship with the emperor by means of

→ written during exile

these few lines. The last change of all is that of Ovid himself, who will, he declares, be transformed from a mortal man into his own immortal poem.

Change underlies both the narrative style and the vision of the world of the poem projects. Virgil also told of a transformation, the new (Roman) order arising from the ruins of the old (Troy). But once the transformation was completed by the Augustan order, there was to be stability, permanence. Ovid tells of a world ceaselessly coming to be in a process that never ends. Augustan Rome is not the culminating point of history here, as it was in the *Aeneid*; indeed, the whole idea of a historical end or goal seems, in the *Metamorphoses*, impossible and absurd. Ovid's epic without a hero presents shifting perspectives and offers the reader no single point of view from which to judge his complex narratives. Against the forced imposition of political and moral unity he sets change itself.

Change is also central to the narrative manner of the *Metamorphoses*. Ovid constantly shifts his point of view, telling a story first from one character's perspective, and then from another's. One story is embedded in another, so that one narrative voice is piled on top of another, as when Venus tells Adonis the story of Atalanta. This story is set within the tale of Venus's love for Adonis and of his death, which is one of a series of stories sung by Orpheus in the poem's main narrative. In such cases, the immediate and the larger contexts give the same story different shades of meaning. And there are thematic connections between stories, so that motifs and images also change their meaning from one story to another, or over the course of a single story. Daphne and Syrinx are turned into plants (the laurel and the reed) that are henceforth attributes of the gods who tried to rape them, a form of appropriation that substitutes for sexual violence.

A common element of many stories in books 1 and 2 is the lust of male gods for female humans. On one level, the gods' desire is presented as ridiculous: when Jupiter turns himself into a bull, the narrator comments, "Majestic power and erotic love / do not get on together very well." But these stories are also focused on rape, and, at least some of the time, the narrator shows the terror and suffering of the human victim. These stories of rape may have political implications, for rape is the ultimate imposition of control. When powerful gods force themselves on defenseless women, the reader is invited to remember how easily authority can be abused.

But male gods are not the only sexual agents in the poem: women and goddesses, too, can be overwhelmed by desire, and can themselves become sexual predators. The stories selected here from later in the *Metamorphoses* bring out the complexity of Ovid's presentation of gender and sexuality. The story of Iphis and Ianthe is a reminder that social gender roles for women and men are more or less arbitrary: girls usually look different from boys, but their feelings may be exactly the same. That story has a happy ending, but the tales from book 10 show various ways in which desire causes pain, distorts our perceptions, and ends in disaster. The tale of Pygmalion may seem an exception, but we should remember that it begins with the artist's hatred of women for their loose morals, and that the story as a whole, whatever it may say about the power of art, can also be read as a fable of man's fabrication of woman—her person and her functions—according to his desires. These stories are narrated by Orpheus, the archetypal poet, after his failure to bring Eurydice back from the underworld. The pathology of desire is fundamental to Ovid's poem, since the lover hopes to stop time, to achieve permanent possession

of the beloved, but all these stories show us how impossible such a dream is. The girl is always running from the god; the boy is always running from the goddess; Orpheus's wife cannot be brought back from the land of the dead. Reaching for the body of another, the lover's own body is transformed. The closest any of these characters can get to permanence is to be transformed into a growing (living, changing) plant that will always represent their unfulfilled longings.

The Italian baroque sculptor Giovanni Bernini carved statue groups of Apollo and Daphne and of Hades and Proserpina—stunning translations of Ovid's poetry into marble. Milton and Dante frequently alluded to the *Metamorphoses*, and both used Ovid's version of the Proserpina story: Milton in book 9 of *Paradise Lost*, as an image of death's entry into the world; Dante in the *Purgatorio*, to emphasize redemption from death. It was surely not only the fact that the *Metamorphoses* draws into itself most of the major classical myths (and a number of lesser-known stories as well) that has made the poem a source of subjects for artists and poets ever since but also the memorable ways these stories are told and their rich potential for meaning. The poem shows, again and again, the irresistible



Giovanni Bernini's seventeenth-century interpretation in marble of the rape of Proserpina.

power of a well-told narrative to hold the attention and shape the imagination of those who read or listen to it.

From *Metamorphoses*¹

FROM BOOK 1

[*Proem*]

* My mind leads me to speak now of forms changed into new bodies: O gods above, inspire this undertaking (which you've changed as well) and guide my poem in its epic sweep from the world's beginning to the present day.

1. Translated by Charles Martin.

[The Creation]

Before the seas and lands had been created,
before the sky that covers everything,
Nature displayed a single aspect only
throughout the cosmos; Chaos was its name,
a shapeless, unwrought mass of inert bulk
and nothing more, with the discordant seeds
of disconnected elements all heaped
together in anarchic disarray.

The sun as yet did not light up the earth,
nor did the crescent moon renew her horns,
nor was the earth suspended in midair,
balanced by her own weight, nor did the ocean
extend her arms to the margins of the land.

Although the land and sea and air were present,
land was unstable, the sea unfit for swimming,
and air lacked light; shapes shifted constantly,
and all things were at odds with one another,
for in a single mass cold strove with warm,
wet was opposed to dry and soft to hard,
and weightlessness to matter having weight.

Some god (or kinder nature) settled this
dispute by separating earth from heaven,
and then by separating sea from earth
and fluid aether² from the denser air;
and after these were separated out
and liberated from the primal heap,
he bound the disentangled elements
each in its place and all in harmony.

The fiery and weightless aether leapt
to heaven's vault and claimed its citadel;
the next in lightness to be placed was air;
the denser earth drew down gross elements
and was compressed by its own gravity;
encircling water lastly found its place,
encompassing the solid earth entire.³

Now when that god (whichever one it was)
had given Chaos form, dividing it
in parts which he arranged, he molded earth
into the shape of an enormous globe,
so that it should be uniform throughout.

And afterward he sent the waters streaming
in all directions, ordered waves to swell
under the sweeping winds, and sent the flood
to form new shores on the surrounded earth;
he added springs, great standing swamps and lakes,

2. A region of refined air, fiery in nature,
believed to be above the "denser air" that was
closer to the earth and composed the breath-
able atmosphere.
3. From Homer on, the ancients conceived of
Ocean as a stream that surrounded the earth.

as well as sloping rivers fixed between
their narrow banks, whose plunging waters (all
in varied places, each in its own channel)
are partly taken back into the earth

and in part flow until they reach the sea,
when they—received into the larger field
of a freer flood—beat against shores, not banks.
He ordered open plains to spread themselves,
valleys to sink, the stony peaks to rise,
and forests to put on their coats of green.

And as the vault of heaven is divided
by two zones on the right and two on the left,
with a central zone, much hotter, in between,
so, by the care of this creator god,
the mass that was enclosed now by the sky
was zoned in the same way, with the same lines
inscribed upon the surface of the earth.

Heat makes the middle zone unlivable,
and the two outer zones are deep in snow;
between these two extremes, he placed two others
of temperate climate, blending cold and warmth.⁴
Air was suspended over all of this,
proportionately heavier than aether,

as earth is heavier than water is.
He ordered mists and clouds into position,
and thunder, to make test of our resolve,⁵
and winds creating thunderbolts and lightning.

Nor did that world-creating god permit
the winds to roam ungoverned through the air;
for even now, with each of them in charge
of his own kingdom, and their blasts controlled,
they scarcely can be kept from shattering

the world, such is the discord between brothers.
Eurus⁶ went eastward, to the lands of Dawn,
the kingdoms of Arabia and Persia,
and to the mountain peaks that lie below
the morning's rays; and Zephyr took his place
on the western shores warmed by the setting sun.

The frozen north and Scythia were seized
by bristling Boreas; the lands opposite,
continually drenched by fog and rain,
are where the south wind, known as Auster, dwells.
Above these winds, he set the weightless aether,
a liquid free of every earthly toxin.

4. The sky, that is, is divided into five horizon-
tal zones, and therefore so is the earth beneath
it. On either side of the earth's uninhabitable
torrid region, over which the sun passes, lies a
temperate zone, and the northern one con-
tains the inhabited, civilized lands on earth
(ancient writers were vague about what the
southern temperate zone contained). The two
outermost zones, farthest from the sun, were
too cold to live in.
5. Thunder was considered an omen.
6. The east wind. Zephyr, Boreas, and
Auster were the west, north, and south winds,
respectively.

No sooner had he separated all within defining limits, when the stars, which formerly had been concealed in darkness, began to blaze up all throughout the heavens; and so that every region of the world should have its own distinctive forms of life, the constellations and the shapes of gods occupied the lower part of heaven; the seas gave shelter to the shining fishes, earth received beasts, and flighty air, the birds.

An animal more like the gods than these, more intellectually capable and able to control the other beasts, had not as yet appeared: now man was born, either because the framer of all things, the fabricator of this better world, created man out of his own divine substance—or else because Prometheus took up a clod (so lately broken off from lofty aether that it still contained some elements in common with its kin), and mixing it with water, molded it into the shape of gods, who govern all.

And even though all other animals lean forward and look down toward the ground, he gave to man a face that is uplifted, and ordered him to stand erect and look directly up into the vaulted heavens and turn his countenance to meet the stars; the earth, that was so lately rude and formless, was changed by taking on the shapes of men.

[Apollo and Daphne]

Daphne,⁸ the daughter of the river god Peneus, was the first love of Apollo; this happened not by chance, but by the cruel outrage of Cupid; Phoebus, in the triumph of his great victory against the Python,⁹ observed him bending back his bow and said, "What art thou doing with such many arms, lascivious boy? That bow befits our drawn, and other mortal foes, unerringly: just now with our innumerable arrows

7. A god best known for stealing fire from the gods and giving it to mortals. In some stories he also created humans out of clay.
8. Literally, "Laurel" (Greek).

9. The enormous snake that Apollo (Phoebus) had to kill in order to found his oracle at Delphi. "Cupid", god of sexual desire.
1. The bow was one of Apollo's attributes.

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we managed to lay low the mighty Python, whose pestilential belly covered acres!

Content yourself with kindling love affairs with your wee torch—and don't claim our glory!"

The son of Venus² answered him with this: "Your arrow, Phoebus, may strike everything: mine will strike you as animals to gods."

He spoke, and soaring upward through the air on wings that thundered, in no time at all had landed on Parnassus³ shaded height; and from his quiver drew two arrows out which operated at cross-purposes,

for one engendered flight, the other, love; the latter has a polished tip of gold, the former has a tip of dull, blunt lead; with this one, Cupid struck Peneus' daughter, while the other pierced Apollo to his marrow.

One is in love now, and the other one won't hear of it, for Daphne calls it joy to roam within the forest's deep seclusion, where she, in emulation of the chaste goddess Phoebe,⁴ devotes herself to hunting; one ribbon only bound her straying tresses.

Many men sought her, but she spurned her suitors, loath to have anything to do with men, and rambled through the wild and trackless groves untroubled by a thought for love or marriage.

Often her father said, "You owe it to me, child, to provide me with a son-in-law and grandchildren!"

"Let me remain a virgin, father most dear," she said, "as once before Diana's father, Jove, gave her that gift."

Although Peneus yielded to you, Daphne, your beauty kept your wish from coming true, your comeliness conflicting with your vow: at first sight, Phoebus loves her and desires to sleep with her; desire turns to hope, and his own prophecy deceives the god.

Now just as in a field the harvest stubble is all burned off, or as hedges are set ablaze when, if by chance, some careless traveler should brush one with his torch or toss away the still-smoldering brand at break of day—just so the smitten god went up in flames until his heart was utterly afire, and hope sustained his unrequited passion.

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→ Apollo to Cupid:
Story usury from
my bow and my
accomplishments

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2. Goddess of love (Aphrodite in Greek).
3. Mountain in central Greece, near Delphi.

4. Diana (Artemis in Greek), Apollo's sister, virgin goddess of the hunt.

He gazes on her hair without adornment:

"What if it were done up a bit?" he asks, and gazes on her eyes, as bright as stars, and on that darling little mouth of hers, though sight is not enough to satisfy; he praises everything that he can see—her fingers, hands, and arms, bare to her shoulders—and what is hidden prizes even more.

She flees more swiftly than the lightest breeze, nor will she halt when he calls out to her: "Daughter of Peneus, I pray, hold still, hold still! I'm not a foe in grim pursuit! Thus lamb flees wolf, thus dove from eagle flies on trembling wings, thus deer from lioness, thus any creature flees its enemy, but I am stalking you because of love!

"Wretch that I am: I'm fearful that you'll fall, brambles will tear your flesh because of me! The ground you're racing over's very rocky, slow down, I beg you, restrain yourself in flight, and I will follow at a lesser speed.

"Just ask yourself who finds you so attractive! I'm not a caveman, not some shepherd boy, no shaggy guardian of flocks and herds—you've no idea, rash girl, you've no idea whom you are fleeing, that is why you flee! "Delphi, Claros, Tenedos are all mine, I'm worshiped in the city of Patara,⁵

love is my father. I alone reveal what was, what is, and what will come to be!

The plucked strings answer my demand with song! "Although my aim is sure, another's arrow

proved even more so, and my careless heart was badly wounded—the art of medicine is my invention, by the way, the source of my worldwide fame as a practitioner of healing through the natural strength of herbs.

"Alas, there is no herbal remedy for the love that I must suffer, and the arts that heal all others cannot heal their lord—"

He had much more to say to her, but Daphne pursued her fearful course and left him speechless, though no less lovely fleeing him: indeed, disheveled by the wind that bared her limbs and pressed the blown robes to her straining body even as it whipped up her hair behind her, the maiden was more beautiful in flight!

But the young god had no further interest in wasting his fine words on her; admonished

5. All centers of Apollo's cult.

by his own passion, he accelerates,

and runs as swiftly as a Gallic hound⁶ chasing a rabbit through an open field; the one seeks shelter and the other, prey—he clings to her, is just about to spring, with his long muzzle straining at her heels, while she, not knowing whether she's been caught, in one swift burst, eludes those snapping jaws, no longer the anticipated feast; so he in hope and she in terror race.

But her pursuer, driven by his passion, outspeeds the girl, giving her no pause, one step behind her, breathing down her neck; her strength is gone; she blanches at the thought of the effort of her swift flight overcome, but at the sight of Peneus she cries, "Help me, dear father! If your waters hold divinity, transform me and destroy that beauty by which I have too well pleased!"

Her prayer was scarcely finished when she feels a torpor take possession of her limbs—

her supple trunk is girdled with a thin layer of fine bark over her smooth skin; her hair turns into foliage, her arms grow into branches, sluggish roots adhere to feet that were so recently so swift, her head becomes the summit of a tree; all that remains of her is a warm glow.

Loving her still, the god puts his right hand against the trunk, and now can feel

her heart as it beats under the new bark; he hugs her limbs as if they were still human, and then he puts his lips against the wood, which, even now, is adverse to his kiss.

"Although you cannot be my bride," he says, "you will assuredly be my own tree, O Laurel, and will always find yourself girding my locks, my lyre, and my quiver too—you will adorn great Roman generals when every voice cries out in joyful triumph along the route up to the Capitol;

you will protect the portals of Augustus, guarding, on either side, his crown of oak;⁷

and as I am—perpetually youthful, my flowing locks unknown to the barber's shears—so you will be an evergreen forever

6. A hunting breed famous for speed.

7. The laurel tree, sacred to Apollo, was the symbol of victory not only in athletic contests but also in war; victorious Roman generals

honored with a triumphal procession through the city to the Capitol wore a laurel wreath. The oak was sacred to Jupiter.

There is still a sense of correction in this story, I would say. She becomes the "Other" but it simultaneously gives her

Metamorphosis as Protection

immortal purpose.

Apollo

Remember: Peneus is a river god.

bearing your brilliant foliage with glory!"
Phoebus concluded. Laurel shook her branches
and seemed to nod her summit in assent.

[Jove and Io]

There is a grove in Thessaly,⁸ enclosed
 on every side by high and wooded hills;
 they call it Tempe. The river Peneus,
 which rises deep within the Pindus range,
 pours its turbulent waters through this gorge
 and over a cataract that deafens all

its neighbors far and near, creating clouds
 that drive a fine, cool mist along, until
 it drips down through the summits of the trees.

Here is the house, the seat, the inner chambers
 of the great river; here Peneus holds court
 in his rocky cavern and lays down the law
 to water nymphs and tributary streams.

First to assemble were the native rivers,
 uncertain whether to congratulate,
 or to commiserate with Daphne's father:
 the Sperchios, whose banks are lined with poplars,
 the ancient Apidanus and the mild

Aeas and Amrysus; others came later—
 rivers who, by whatever course they take,
 eventually bring their flowing streams,
 weary of their meandering, to sea.

Inachus was the only river absent,
 concealed in the recesses of his cave:
 he added to his volume with the tears
 he grimly wept for his lost daughter Io,
 not knowing whether she still lived or not;
 but since he couldn't find her anywhere,
 assumed that she was nowhere to be found—
 and in his heart, he feared a fate far worse.

For Jupiter had seen the girl returning
from her father's banks and had accosted her:
 "O maiden worthy of almighty Jove

and destined to delight some lucky fellow
 (I know not whom) upon your wedding night,
 come find some shade," he said, "in these deep woods—"
 (showing her where the woods were very shady)
 "while the sun blazes high above the earth!

"But if you're worried about entering
 the haunts of savage beasts all by yourself,
 why, under the protection of a god
 you will be safe within the deepest woods—"

8. A region of central Greece.
 9. A river near Argos in the northeast Peloponnese.

and no plebeian god, for I am he
 who bears the celestial scepter in his hand,
 I am he who hurls the roaring thunderbolt—
don't run from me!

But run she did, through Lerna
 and Lyrcea,¹ until the god concealed
 the land entirely beneath a dense
 dark mist and seized her and dishonored her.

Juno,² however, happened to look down
 on Argos, where she noticed something odd:
 swift-flying clouds had turned day into night
 long before nighttime. She realized
 that neither falling mist nor rising fog
 could be the cause of this phenomenon,
 and looked about at once to find her husband,
 as one too well aware of the connivings
 of a mate so often taken in the act.

When he could not be found above, she said,
 "Either I'm mad—or I am being had."
 She glided down to earth from heaven's summit
 immediately and dispersed the clouds.

Having intuited his wife's approach,
love had already metamorphosed Io
into a gleaming heifer—a beauty still,
even as a cow. Despite herself,

Juno gave this illusion her approval,
 and feigning ignorance, asked him whose herd
 this heifer had come out of, and where from;
 Jove, lying to forestall all inquiries
 as to her origin and pedigree,
 replied that she was born out of the earth.

Then Juno asked him for her as a gift.
 What could he do? Here is his beloved:
 to hand her over is unnatural,
 but not to do so would arouse suspicion;

shame urged him onward while love held him back.
 Love surely would have triumphed over shame,
 except that to deny so slight a gift
 to one who was his wife and sister both
 would make it seem that this was no mere cow!

Her rival given up to her at last,
 Juno feared Jove had more such tricks in mind,
 and couldn't feel entirely secure
 until she'd placed this heifer in the care
of Argus, the watchman with a hundred eyes:
 in strict rotation, his eyes slept in pairs,
 while those that were not sleeping stayed on guard.
 No matter where he stood, he looked at Io,

→ Peeped her

→ 10 named by Juno
and protected under
Argus -

1. A mountain on the border between Argos the territory of Argos, near the coast,
 and Arcadia to the west. "Lerna": a marsh in
 2. Wife of Jupiter (Hera in Greek).

even when he had turned his back on her.

He let her graze in daylight; when the sun set far beneath the earth, he penned her in and placed a collar on her indignant neck.

She fed on leaves from trees and bitter grasses, and had no bed to sleep on the poor thing,

but lay upon the ground, not always grassy, and drank the muddy waters from the streams.

Having no arms, she could not stretch them out in supplication to her warden, Argus;

and when she tried to utter a complaint she only moaned—a sound which terrified her, fearful as she now was of her own voice.

To at last come to the riverbank where she had often played; when she beheld her own slack jaws and newly sprouted horns in the clear water, she fled, terrified!

Neither her naiad sisters³ nor her father knew who this heifer was who followed them and let herself be petted and admired.

Inachus fed her grasses from his hand; she licked it and pressed kisses on his palm, unable to restrain her flowing tears.

If words would just have come, she would have spoken, telling them who she was, how this had happened, and begging their assistance in her case;

but with her hoof, she drew lines in the dust, and letters of the words she could not speak told the sad story of her transformation.

"Oh, wretched me," cried Io's father, clinging to the lowing calf's horns and snowy neck.

"Oh, wretched me!" he groaned. "Are you the child for whom I searched the earth in every part?

Lost, you were less a grief than you are, found! "You make no answer, unable to respond

to our speech in language of your own, but from your breast come resonant deep sighs and—all that you can manage now—you *moor*!

"But I—all unaware of this—was busy arranging marriage for you, in the hopes of having a son-in-law and grandchildren.

Now I must pick your husband from my herd, and now must find your offspring there as well!

"Nor can I end this suffering by death; it is a hurtful thing to be a god,

for the gates of death are firmly closed against me, and our sorrows must go on forever.

And while the father mourned his daughter's loss,

3. River nymphs.

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Argus of the hundred eyes removed her to pastures farther off and placed himself high on a mountain peak, a vantage point from which he could keep watch in all directions.

The ruler of the heavens cannot bear the sufferings of Io any longer,

and calls his son, born of the Pleiades,⁴ and orders him to do away with Argus.

Without delay, he takes his winged sandals, his magic, sleep-inducing wand, and cap; and so equipped, the son of father Jove glides down from heaven's summit to the earth, where he removes and leaves behind his cap and winged sandals, but retains the wand;

and sets out as a shepherd, wandering far from the beaten path, driving before him a flock of goats he rounds up as he goes, while playing tunes upon his pipe of reeds.

The guardian of Juno is quite taken by this new sound: "Whoever you might be, why not come sit with me upon this rock," said Argus, "for that flock of yours will find the grass is nowhere greener, and you see that there is shade here suitable for shepherds."

The grandson of great Atlas takes his seat and whiles away the hours, chattering of this and that—and playing on his pipes, he tries to overcome the watchfulness of Argus, struggling to stay awake;

even though Slumber closes down some eyes, others stay vigilant. Argus inquired how the reed pipes, so recently invented, had come to be, and Mercury responded:

"On the idyllic mountains of Arcadia,⁵ among the hamadryads⁶ of Nonacris,

one was renowned, and Syrinx⁷ was her name. Often she fled—successfully—from Satyrs,⁸ and deities of every kind as well,

those of the shady wood and fruited plain. "In her pursuits and in virginity

Diana was her model, and she wore her robe hitched up and girt above the knees

just as her goddess did; and if her bow had been made out of gold, instead of horn,

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4. Mercury (Hermes in Greek) was the son of Maia, one of the Pleiades or daughters of Atlas.

5. Tree nymphs.

6. The name means "shepherd's pipe," a musical instrument made of reeds.

7. The name means "shepherd's pipe," a musical instrument made of reeds.

8. Woodland creatures—half man, half goat, bald, bearded, and highly sexed.

anyone seeing her might well have thought she *was* the goddess—as, indeed, some did.

"Wearing his crown of sharp pine needles, Pan⁹ saw her returning once from Mount Lycæus,¹ and began to say. . . ."

There remained to tell of how the maiden, having spurned his pleas, fled through the trackless wilds until she came to where the gently flowing Ladon stopped her in her flight. How she begged the water nymphs to change her shape, and how the god, assuming that he had captured Sýnux, grasped instead a handful of marsh reeds! And while he sighed, the reeds in his hands, stirred by his own breath, gave forth a similar, low-pitched complaint!

The god, much taken by the sweet new voice of an unprecedented instrument, said this to her: "At least we may converse with one another—I can have that much."

That pipe of reeds, unequal in their lengths, and joined together one-on-one with wax, took the girl's name, and bears it to this day.

Now Mercury was ready to continue

until he saw that Argus had succumbed, for all his eyes had been closed down by sleep. He silenced himself and waves his wand above those languid orbs to fix the spell.

Without delay he grasps the nodding head and where it joins the neck, he severs it with his curved blade and flings it bleeding down the steep rock face, staining it with gore.

O Argus, you are fallen, and the light in all your lamps is utterly put out:

one hundred eyes, one darkness all the same! But Saturn's daughter² rescued them and set filling his tail with constellated gems.

Her rage demanded satisfaction, *now*: the goddess set a horrifying Fury before the eyes and the imagination of her Grecian rival; and in her heart she fixed a prod that goaded Io on, driving her in terror through the world until at last, O Nile, you let her rest from endless labor; having reached your banks, she went down awkwardly upon her knees,

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9. A god of the wild mountain pastures and woods, with goat's feet and horns. He was particularly associated with Arcadia.

1. A high mountain in Arcadia.

2. Juno.

3. The peacock.

and with her neck bent backward, raised her face as only she could do it, to the stars;

and with her groans and tears and mournful moaning, entreated love, it seemed, to put an end to her great suffering.

Love threw his arms around the neck of Iuno in embrace, imploring her to end the punishment.

"In future," he said, "put your tears aside; never again will you have cause to worry—about *this* one." And swore upon the Styx.⁴

The goddess was now pacified, and Io at once began regain[ing] her lost looks, till she became what she had been before;

her body lost all of its bristling hair, her horns shrank down, her eyes grew narrower, her jaws contracted, arms and hands returned, and hooves divided themselves into nails;

nothing remained of her bovine nature, unless it was the whiteness of her body.

She had some trouble getting her legs back, and for a time feared speaking, lest she moo, and so quite timidly regained her speech.

She is a celebrated goddess now, and worshiped by the linen-clad Egyptians.⁵

Her son, Epaphus, is believed to be spring[ing] from the potent seed of mighty love, and temples may be found in every city wherein the boy is honored with his parent.

* * *

FROM BOOK II

[*Love and Europa*]

When Mercury had punished her for these impieties of thought and word,⁶ he left Athena's city, and on beating wings returned to heaven where his father Jove took him aside and (without telling him that his new passion was the reason) said:

"Dear son, who does my bidding faithfully, do not delay, but with your usual swiftness fly down to earth and find the land

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4. One of the rivers of the underworld; the gods swore solemn oaths by it.

to have a love affair with Herse, daughter of King Cécrops; promised help and then betrayed by her sister Aglauros, he took his revenge on Aglauros by turning her into a statue.

6. Mercury has been in Athens, where he tried

corrective?
made her goddess.

Juno is punishing Io and Love wants it to stop



10?

that looks up to your mother⁷ on the left, called Sidon⁸ by the natives; there you will see a herd of royal cattle some way off upon a mountain; drive them down to shore."

He spoke and it was done as he had ordered: the cattle were immediately driven down to a certain place along the shore where the daughter of a great king used to play, accompanied by maidens all of Tyre.⁹

Majestic power and erotic love do not get on together very well

nor do they linger long in the same place: the father and the ruler of all gods, who holds the lightning bolt in his right hand and shakes the world when he but nods his head, now relinquishes authority and power, assuming the appearance of a bull to mingle with the other cattle, lowing as gorgeously he strolls in the new grass.

He is as white as the untrampled snow before the south wind turns it into slush. The muscles stand out bulging on his neck, and the dewlap¹ dangles on his ample chest; his horns are crooked, but appear handmade, and flawless as a pair of matching gems.

His brow is quite unthreatening, his eye excites no terror, and his countenance is calm.

The daughter of King Agenor² admires him, astonished by the presence of peacefulness and beauty in the beast; yet even though he seems a gentle creature, at first she fears to get too close to him, but soon approaching, reaches out her hand and pushes flowers into his white mouth.

The lover, quite beside himself, rejoices, and as a preview of delights to come, kisses her fingers, getting so excited that he can scarcely keep from doing it!

Now he disports himself upon the grass, and lays his whiteness on the yellow sands; and as she slowly overcomes her fear he offers up his breast for her carresses and lets her decorate his horns with flowers; the princess dares to sit upon his back

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7. Maia, Mercury's mother, had been transformed into a star among the Pleiades in the constellation Taurus.

8. One of the principal cities of Phoenicia (in modern Lebanon).

9. Another city of Phoenicia, but here used of Phoenicia itself.

1. A fold of loose skin hanging from the neck.

2. Europa, Agenor was the Phoenician king.

not knowing who it is that she has mounted, and he begins to set out from dry land, a few steps on false feet into the shallows, then further out and further to the middle of the great sea he carries off his booty;

she trembles as she sees the shore receding and holds the creature's horn in her right hand and with the other clings to his broad back, her garments streaming in the wind behind her.

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FROM BOOK V

[Ceres and Proserpina]

As the Muse spoke,³ Minerva could hear wings beating on air, and cries of greeting came from high in the trees. She peered into the foliage, attempting to discover where those sounds, the speech of human beings to be sure, were emanating from: why, from some birds!

Remembering their sad fate, a flock of nine magpies, which mimic anyone they wish to) had settled in the branches overhead.

Minerva having shown astonishment, the Muse gave her a little goddess-chat: "This lot has only recently been added to the throngs of birds. Why? They lost a contest! Their father was Pierus, lord of Pella; their mother was a nymph of Paeonia; nine times she called upon Lucina⁴ and nine times she delivered. Swollen up with foolish pride because they were so many, that crowd of simpleminded sisters went through all Haemonia and through Achaea⁶ too, arriving here to challenge us in song:

"We'll show you girls just what real class is! Give up tryin' to deceive the masses Your rhymes are fake: accept our wager Learn which of us is minor and which is major There's nine of us here and there's nine of you And you'll be nowhere long before we're through

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3. Minerva (Athena in Greek) has come to Mount Helicon in central Greece, the home of the nine Muses (daughters of Zeus and Memory, they are patronesses of poetry and the other arts). One of the Muses has told her of an attempt recently made to trap and rape them by the wicked Pyreneus.

4. City of Macedonia, in northern Greece. The Paeonians were a tribe living north of Macedonia.

5. Goddess of childbirth.

6. Regions of central Greece (Haemonia is another name for Thessaly). The sisters are traveling south toward Helicon.

7. Although there is no basis for it in the Latin text, the translator uses dialect and rhyme in the speeches and song of Pierus's daughters to show how they challenge, and partially deflate, the "high-culture" assumptions and language of the Muses.

human speaking
but in the
form of birds

455 Nothin's gonna save you 'cuz your songs are lame
And the way you sing 'em is really a shame

So stop with, "Well I *never!*" and "This *can't* be real!"

We're the newest New Thing and here is our deal

If we beat you, obsolete you, then you just get gone

From these classy haunts on Mount Helicon

We give you Macedonia—if we lose

An' that's an offer you just can't refuse

So take the wings off, sisters, get down and jam

And let the nymphs be the judges of our poetry slam!"

"Shameful it was to strive against such creatures;

more shameful not to. Nymphs were picked as judges,

sworn into service on their river banks,

and took their seats on benches made of tufa.

"And then—not even drawing lots!—the one

who claimed to be their champion commenced,

giving the latter credit more than due

and deprecating all that the great gods did;

how Typhoeus,⁸ from earth's lowest depths,

struck fear in every celestial heart,

so that they all turned tail and fled, until,

exhausted, they found refuge down in Egypt,

where the Nile flows from seven distinct mouths;

she sang of how earthborn Typhoeus

pursued them even here and forced the gods

to hide themselves by taking fictive shapes!⁹

"In Libya the Giants told the gods to scream

The boss god they worship there has horns like a ram!

'Cuz Jupiter laid low as the leader of a flock

And Delius² his homey really got a shock

When the Giants left him with no place to go:

"*Fugedabout Apollo—make me a crow!*"

And if you believe that Phoebus was a wuss

His sister Phoebe turned into a puss

Bacchus takes refuge in the skin of a goat

And Juno as a cow with a snow-white coat

Venus the queen of the downtown scene, yuh know what her wish is?

"*Gimme a body just like a fish's*"

Mercury takes on an ibis's shape

And that's how the mighty (cheep cheep) gods escape!

"And then her song, accompanied on the lute,

came to an end, and it was our turn—

8. Monstrous son of Earth. Like the Earth-born Giants, he challenged Jupiter and the Olympian gods and was defeated.
9. An "explanation" of the Egyptian gods' animal forms.
1. Ammon, the chief Egyptian god, identified by the Greeks and Romans with Zeus/Jupiter. He had an important oracular cult in the Libyan desert (west of the Nile valley) and part of Egypt under Roman rule.
2. Apollo, who was born on the island of Delos.

but possibly you haven't got the time to listen to our song?"

"Oh, don't think that,"

Minerva said. "I want it word for word:

sing it for me just as you sang it then."

The Muse replied: "We turned the contest over

to one of us, Calliope,³ who rose,

and after binding up her hair in ivy

and lightly strumming a few plaintive chords,

she vigorously launched into her song:

"Ceres⁴ was first to break up the soil with a curved plowshare, the first to give us the earth's fruits and to nourish us gently, and the first to give laws: every gift comes from Ceres.

The goddess must now be my subject. Would that I could sing

a hymn that is worthy of her, for she surely deserves it.

"Vigorous Sicily sprawled across the gigantic body

of one who had dared aspire to rule in the heavens;

the island's weight held Typhoeus⁵ firmly beneath it.

Often exerting himself, he strives yet again to rise up,

but there in the north, his right hand is held down by Pelorus,

his left hand by you, Pachynus; off in the west, Lilybaeum⁶

weighs on his legs, while Mount Etna⁷ presses his head, as under it, raging, Typhoeus coughs ashes and vomits up fire.

Often he struggles, attempting to shake off the earth's weight

and roll its cities and mountains away from his body.

"This causes tremors and panics the Lord of the Silent⁷

who fears that the earth's crust will crack and break open,

and daylight, let in, will frighten the trembling phantoms;

dreading disaster, the tyrant left his tenebrous kingdom;

borne in his chariot drawn by its team of black horses,

he crisscrossed Sicily, checking the island's foundation.

"After his explorations had left him persuaded

that none of its parts were in imminent danger of falling,

his fears were forgotten, and Venus,⁸ where on Mount Eryx,⁸

observed him relaxing, and said, as she drew Cupid near her,

"My son, my sword, my strong right arm and source of my power,

take up that weapon by which all your victims are vanquished

and send your swift arrows into the breast of the deity

to whom the last part of the threefold realm⁹ was allotted.

"You govern the gods and their ruler; you rule the defeated

gods of the ocean and govern the one who rules them, too;

gods of the ocean and govern the one who rules them, too;

3. "Lovely Voice," the Muse of epic poetry.
4. Goddess of grain (Demeter).
5. Mountains on the northeast, southeast, and western promontories of Sicily, respectively.
6. The large (and still active) volcano near the center of the east coast of Sicily.
7. Pluto or Hades, king of the dead.
8. Mountain in western Sicily with an important cult of Venus.
9. The underworld, ruled by Pluto. The other parts of the "threefold realm" are the sea (ruled by Neptune) and the sky or Mount Olympus (Jupiter).

why give up on the dead, when we can extend our empire into their realm? A third part of the world is involved here!

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And yet the celestial gods spun out forbearance,

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and the prestige of Love is diminished, even as mine is.

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Do you not see how Athena and huntress Diana have both taken leave of me? The virgin daughter of Ceres

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desires to do likewise—and will, if we let her!

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But I have pride in our alliance, advance it

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by joining her to her uncle!"

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"Venus ceased speaking and Cupid

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loosened his quiver, and, just as his mother had ordered,

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selected, from thousands of missiles, the one that was sharpest

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and surest and paid his bow the closest attention,

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and using one knee to bend its horn back almost double,

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he pierces the heart of Dis with his barb-tipped arrow.

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"Near Henna's walls stands a deep pool of water, called Pergus:

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not even the river Cayster,⁴ flowing serenely,

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hears more songs from its swans; this pool is completely surrounded

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by a ring of tall trees, whose foliage, just like an awning,

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keeps out the sun and preserves the water's refreshing coolness;

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the moist ground is covered with flowers of a purple;

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here it is springtime forever. And here, Proserpina,⁵ a purple;

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was playfully picking its white lilies and violets,

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and, while competing to gather up more than her playmates,

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filling her basket and stuffing the rest in her bosom,

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Dis saw her, was smitten, seized her and carried her off;

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his love was that hasty. The terrified goddess cried out

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for her mother, her playmates—but for her mother most often,

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since she had torn the uppermost seam of her garment,

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and the gathered flowers rained down from her negligent tunic;

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because of her tender years and her childish simplicity,

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even this loss could move her to maidenly sorrow.

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"Her abductor rushed off in his chariot, urging his horses,

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calling each one by its name and flicking the somber,

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rust-colored reins over their backs as they galloped

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through the deep lakes and the sulphurous pools of Palike

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that boil up through the ruptured earth, and where the Bacchiadae,

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a race sprung from Corinth, that city between the two seas,

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had raised their own walls between two unequal harbors.⁵

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"There is a bay that is landlocked almost completely

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between the two pools of Cyane and Pisaean Arethusa,

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the residence of the most famous nymph in all Sicily,

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Cyane, who gave her very own name to the fountain.

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She showed herself now, emerged from her pool at waist level,

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and recognizing the goddess, told Dis, "Go no further!

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1. Both were perpetual virgins.

many swans.

2. Pluto (also called Dis) was the brother of Jupiter, the father by Ceres of Proserpina.

5. Syracuse, on the southeastern coast of Sicily, founded by Corinthian colonists in the 8th century B.C.E. The Bacchiadae were a leading family who then ruled Corinth.

3. A city in central Sicily.

4. River in Lydia in Asia Minor, famous for its

That it's a virgin

daughter of Ceres

lover

You cannot become the son-in-law of great Ceres against her will: you should have asked and not taken!

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If it is right for me to compare lesser with greater, I accepted Anapís⁶ when he desired to have me,

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yielding to pleas and not—as in this case—to terror."

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She spoke, and stretching her arms out in either direction,

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kept him from passing. That son of Saturn could scarcely

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hold back his anger; he urged on his frightening horses,

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and then, with his strong right arm, he hurled his scepter

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directly into the very base of the fountain;

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the stricken earth opened a path to the underworld

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and took in the chariot rushing down into its crater.

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"Cyane, lamenting not just the goddess abducted,

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but also the disrespect shown for her rights as a fountain,

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tactically nursed in her heart an inconsolable sorrow;

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and she who had once been its presiding spirit,

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reduced to tears, dissolved right into its substance.

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You would have seen her members beginning to soften,

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her bones and her fingertips starting to lose their old firmness;

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her slenderest parts were the first to be turned into fluid:

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her feet, her legs, her sea-dark tresses, her fingers

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(for the parts with least flesh turn into liquid most quickly);

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and after these, her shoulders and back and her bosom

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and flanks completely vanished in trickling liquid;

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and lastly the living blood in her veins is replaced by

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springwater, and nothing remains that you could have seized on.

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"Meanwhile, the terrified mother was pointlessly seeking

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her daughter all over the earth and deep in the ocean.

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Neither Aurora, appearing with dew-dampened tresses,

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nor Hesperus⁷ knew her to quit: igniting two torches

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of pine from the fires of Etna, the care-ridden goddess

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used them to illumine the wintry shadows of nighttime;

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and when the dear day had once more dimmed out the bright stars,

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she searched again for her daughter from sunrise to sunset.

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"Worn out by her labors and suffering thirst, with no fountain

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to wet her lips at, she happened upon a thatched hovel

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and knocked at its humble door, from which there came forth

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a crone who looked at the goddess, and, when asked for water,

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gave her a sweet drink, sprinkled with toasted barley.

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And, as she drank it, a boy with a sharp face and bold manner

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stood right before her and mocked her and said she was greedy.

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Angered by what he was saying, the goddess drenched him

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with all she had not yet drunk of the barley mixture.

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The boy's face thirstily drank up the spots as his arms were

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turned into legs, and a tail was joined to his changed limbs;

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so that he should now be harmless, the boy was diminished,

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and he was transformed into a very small lizard.

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6. A river that empties into the sea near

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7. The evening star "Aurora"; goddess of the

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Syracuse.

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dawn.

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Astonished, the old woman wept and reached out to touch him, but the marvelous creature fled her, seeking a hideout.

Helenus has a name appropriate to his complexion,
Stellio from the constellations spotting his body.

To speak of the lands and seas the goddess mistakenly searched would take far too long; the earth exhausted her seeking; she came back to Sicily; and, as she once more traversed it, arrived at Cyane, who would have told her the story had she not herself been changed; but, though willing in spirit, her mouth, tongue, and vocal apparatus were absent; nevertheless, she gave proof that was clear to the mother: Persephone's girdle (which happened by chance to have fallen into the fountain) now lay exposed on its surface.

Once recognizing it, the goddess knew that her daughter had been taken, and tore her hair into utter disorder, and repeatedly struck her breasts with the palms of both hands.

With her daughter's location a mystery still, she reproaches the whole earth as ungrateful, unworthy her gift of grain crops, and Sicily more than the others, where she has discovered the proof of her loss; and so it was here that her fierce hand shattered the earth-turning plows, here that the farmers and cattle perished alike, and here that she bade the plowed fields default on their trust by blighting the seeds in their keeping.

Sicilian fertility, which had been everywhere famous, was given the lie when the crops died as they sprouted, now ruined by too much heat, and now by too heavy a rainfall;

stars and winds harmed them, and the greedy birds devoured the seed as it was sown; the harvest of wheat was defeated by thorns and bennets and unappeasable grasses.

The Arethusa⁸ lifted her head from the Elean waters and swept her dripping hair back away from her forehead, saying, "O Mother of Grain—and mother, too, of that virgin sought through the whole world—here end your incessant labors, lest your great anger should injure the earth you once trusted, and which, unrelentingly pillaged, has done nothing ignoble; nor do I plead for my nation, since I am a guest here:

my nation is Pisa; I am descended from Elis, and live as a stranger in Sicily—this land that delights me more than all others on earth; here Arethusa dwells with her household gods. Spare the merciful goddess, and when your cares and countenance both have been lightened, there will come an opportune time to tell you the reason why I was taken from home and borne off to Orygia⁹

over a waste of waters. The earth gave me access, showed me a path, and, swept on through underground caverns, I raised my head here to an unfamiliar night sky.

8. A spring in Syracuse. Its waters are "Elean" because they were believed to originate in the district of Pisa in Elis, a region of the western Peloponnese in mainland Greece.

9. The island on which Syracuse was originally built and on which the Arethusan spring was located.

But while gliding under the earth on a Stygian river, I saw with my very own eyes your dear Proserpina; grief and terror were still to be seen in her features; yet she was nonetheless queen of that shadowy kingdom, the all-powerful consort of the underworld ruler.

"The mother was petrified by the speech of the fountain, and stood for a very long time as though she were senseless, until her madness had been driven off by her outrage, and then she set out in her chariot for the ethereal regions; once there, with her face clouded over and hair all disheveled, she planted herself before Jove and fiercely addressed him:

"Jupiter, I have come here as a suppliant, speaking for my child—and yours: if you have no regard for her mother, relent as her father—don't hold her unworthy, I beg you, simply because I am the child's other parent!

The daughter I sought for so long is at last recovered, if to recover means only to lose much more surely, or if to recover means just to learn her location!

Her theft could be borne—if only he would return her! Then let him do it, for surely Jove's daughter is worthy of a mate who's no brigand, even if my daughter isn't."

"Jupiter answered her, "She is indeed our daughter, the pledge of our love and our common concern, but if you will kindly agree to give things their right names, this is not an injury requiring my retribution,

but an act of love by a son-in-law who won't shame you, goddess, if you give approval: though much were lacking, how much it is to be Jove's brother! But he lacks nothing, and only yields to me that which the Fates have allotted.

Still, if you're so keen on parting them, your Proserpina may come back to heaven—but only on one condition: that she has not touched food, for so the Fates have required."

"He spoke and Ceres was sure she would get back her daughter, though the Fates were not, for the girl had already placated her hunger while guilelessly roaming death's formal gardens, where, from a low-hanging branch, she had plucked without thinking po' peregane, and peeling its pale bark off, devoured seven or six seeds. No one saw her but Ascalaphus

(whom it is said that Orpheus, a not undistinguished nymph among those of Avernus, pregnant by Acheron,¹ gave birth to there in the underworld's dark-shadowed forest); he saw, and by his disclosure, kept her from returning.

"Raging, the Queen of the Underworld turned that informer into a bird of ill omen: sprinkling the waters of the fountain into the face of Ascalaphus,

she gave him a beak and plumage and eyes quite enormous. Lost to himself, he is clad now in yellow-brown pinions,

1. Acheron ("Woe") is one of the rivers, and Orpheus means "darkness" in Greek. Avernus a lake, in the underworld. The name

2. Fiery river of the underworld.

his head increases in size and his nails turn to talons, but the feathers that spring from his motionless arms scarcely flutter; a filthy bird he's become, the grim announcer of mourning, a slothful portent of evil to mortals—the owl.

725

"'Tis because of his rattling tongue, seems quite worthy of punishment. But you, daughters of Acheloius,³ why do you have the plumage of birds and the faces of virgins? Is it because while Proserpina gathered her flowers, you, artful Sirens, were numbered among her companions? No sooner had you scoured the whole earth in vain for her than you desired the vast seas to feel your devotion, and prayed to the gods, whom you found willing to help you, that you might skim over the flood upon oars that were pinions, then saw your limbs turn suddenly golden with plumage. And so that your tunefulness, which the ear finds so pleasing, should not be lost, nor your gifts of vocal expression, your maidenly faces remain, along with your voices.

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"But poised between his sorrowing sister and brother, great Jove divided the year into two equal portions, so now in two realms the shared goddess holds sway, and as many months spent with her mother are spent with her husband. She changed her mind then, and changed her expression to match it, and now her fair face, which even Dis found depressing, beams as the sun does, when, after having been hidden before in dark clouds, at last it emerges in triumph.

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"Her daughter safely restored to her kindhearted Ceres wishes to be your lover now, Arethusa—what did you flee from and what changed you into a fountain? The splashing waters are stilled: the goddess raises her head from their depths and wrings dry her virid tresses, then tells the old tale of the river Alpheus' passion.

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"'Once I was one of the nymphs who dwell in Achaëa," she said, "and none had more zeal than I for traversing the mountain pastures or setting out snares for small game. But even though I did not seek to find fame as a beauty, men called me that, my courage and strength notwithstanding; nor was I pleased that my beauty was lauded so often, and for my corporeal nature (which most other maidens are wont to take pleasure in) I blushed like a rustic, thinking it wrong to please men.

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"'Exhausted from hunting, I was on my way back from the Symphalian forest,⁵ and the fierce heat of the day was doubled by my exertions.

3. The Sirens, familiar from book 12 of the *Odyssey* and often associated with death in post-Homeric literature and art. Acheloius is a large river in northwest Greece.

4. River that flows past Olympia in Elis.

5. The woods surrounding Lake Symphalius in Arcadia.

By chance I came on a stream, gently and silently flowing, clear to the bottom, where you could count every pebble, water so still you would scarcely believe it was moving. Silvery willows and poplars, which the stream nourished, artlessly shaded its banks as they sloped to the water.

765

"'At once I approach and wiggle my toes in its wetness, then wade in up to my knees—not satisfied wholly, I strip off my garments and hang them up on a willow, and, naked, merge with the waters. I strike and stroke them, gliding below and thrashing about on the surface, then hear a strange murmur that seems to come from the bottom, which sends me scampering to the near bank in terror: 'Why the great rustle? Alpheus cries from his waters, then hoarsely repeating, why the great rustle, Arethusa?' Just as I am, I flee without clothing (my garments were on the bank opposite); aroused, Alpheus pursues me, my nakedness making me seem more ripe for the taking.

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"'Thus did I run, and thus did that fierce one press after, as doves on trembling pinions flee from the kestrel, as kestrels pursue the trembling doves and assault them. To Orchomenus and past, to Psophis, Cyllene, the folds of Maenalia, Erymanthus,⁶ and Elis, I continued to run, nor was he faster than I was: but since Alpheus was so much stronger, I couldn't outrun him for long, given his greater endurance.

785

"'Nonetheless, I still managed to keep on running across the wide fields, up wooded mountains, on bare rocks, steep cliffs, in wastes wild and trackless; with the sun at my back, I could see his shadow before me, stretched out on the ground, unless my panic deceived me; but surely I *did* hear those frightening footsteps behind me, and felt his hot breath lifting the hair from my shoulders.

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"'Worn with exertion, I cried out, 'Help! Or I'm taken! Aid your armorer, Diana—to whom you have often entrusted your bow, along with your quiver of arrows!' The goddess was moved by my plea and at once I was hidden in a dense cloud of fine mist:⁷ the river god, clueless, circled around me, hidden in darkness, searching; twice he unknowingly passed by the place where the goddess had hidden me, and twice he called, 'Yo! Arethusa!' How wretched was I? Why, even as the lamb is, at hearing the howling of wolves around the sheepfold, or as the rabbit in the briar patch who glimpses the dog's fierce muzzle and feels too frightened to tremble.

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"'Alpheus remained there, for as he noticed no footprints heading away from the cloud, he continued to watch it. An icy sweat thoroughly drenched the limbs that he looked for,

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6. Towns and mountains of Arcadia.

7. Conventional means in ancient epic of making someone invisible.

and the dark drops poured from every part of my body; wherever my foot had been, there was a puddle, and my hair shed moisture. More swiftly than I can tell it, I turned into liquid—even so, he recognized me, his darling there in the water, and promptly discarded the human form he had assumed for the occasion, reverting to river, so that our fluids might mingle.

Diana shattered the earth's crust: I sank down, and was swept on through sightless caverns, off to Orygia, so pleasing to me because it's the goddess's birthplace,⁸ and here I first rose up into the air as a fountain."

"Here Arethusa concluded. The fruitful goddess summoned her team of dragons and yoked them onto her chariot; and guiding their heads with the reins, she was transported up through the middle air that lies between earth and heaven

until she ~~arrived in~~ Athens, and, giving her carriage to Triptolemus,⁹ ordered him to go off and scatter grain on the earth—some on land that had never been broken, and some on land that had been a long time fallow.

"The young man was ~~carried high up over~~ Europe and Asia until at last he came to the kingdom of Scythia. Lyncus, as king here; he brought him into his palace, and asked him his name, his homeland, the cause of his journey, and how he had come there.

"My well-known homeland," he answered, "is Athens; I am Triptolemus, neither by ship upon water nor foot upon land have I come here; the air itself parted to make me a path ~~on which~~ I coursed through the heavens. I bear you the gifts of Ceres, which, sown in your broad fields, will yield a bountiful harvest of nourishing produce."

"This the barbarian heard with great envy, and wishing that he himself might be perceived as the donor, took him in as a guest, and while the young man was sleeping, approached with a sword, and as he attempted to stab him, Ceres changed Lyncus to lynx, and ordered Triptolemus to drive her sacred team through the air back to Athens."

"When our eldest sister had concluded her superb performance, with one voice the nymphs awarded victory to . . . the Muses!

"And when the others, in defeat, reviled us, I answered them: 'Since you display such nerve in challenging the Muses, you deserve chastisement—even more so since you've added insult to outrage: our wise forbearance is not without its limits, as you'll learn

8. The Orygia where Arethusa ended up was in Syracuse, but Delos, the Aegean island where Diana was born, was also called Orygia.

9. Son of the king of Eleusis, the great cult center of Demeter (Ceres) near Athens.

when we get to the penalties, and vent our righteous anger on your worthless selves."

Then the Pierides¹ mock our threats, and as they try to answer us by shouting vulgarities and giving us the finger, their fingers take on feathers and their arms turn into pinions! Each one sees a beak replace a sister's face, as a new bird is added to the species of the forest; and as they try to beat upon their breasts, bewailing their new situation, they all hang suspended, flapping in the air, the forest's scandal—the P-Airides!²

"And even though they are all feathered now, their speech remains as fluent as it was, and they are ~~laughing for their noisiness as well as for their love of argument~~."

FROM BOOK IX

[Iphis and Isis]

Rumor might very well have spread the news of this unprecedented transformation³ throughout the hundred towns of Crete, if they had not just had a wonder of their own to talk about—the change that came to Iphis.

For, once upon a time, there lived in Phaestus, not far from the royal capital at Cnossus, a freeborn plebeian named Iridus, who was otherwise unknown and undistinguished, with no more property than fame or status, and yet devout, and blameless in his life.

His wife was pregnant. When her time had come, he gave her his instructions with these words: "There are two things I pray to heaven for on your account: an easy birth and a son.

The other fate is much too burdensome, for daughters need what Fortune has denied us: a dowry."

"Therefore—and may God prevent this happening, but if, by chance, it does and you should be delivered of a girl, unwillingly I order this, and beg pardon for my impiety—But let it die!"

He spoke, and tears profusely bathed the cheeks of the instructor and instructed both.

Telethusa continued to implore

1. The daughters of Pierus.

2. The translator's pun on the name Pierides.

3. The transformation of Byblis, who loved her brother Caunus, into a fountain.

if you have a girl, let her die. Iridus wife

her husband, praying him not to confine their hopes so narrowly—to no avail, for he would not be moved from his decision.

Now scarcely able to endure the weight of her womb's burden, as she lay in bed at midnight, a dream-vision came to her: the goddess Io³ stood (or seemed to stand) before her beddoled bed, accompanied with solemn pomp by all her mysteries.

She wore her crescent horns upon her brow and a garland made of gleaming sheaves of wheat, and a queenly diadem: behind her stood the dog-faced god Anubis, and divine

Hubastis who defends the lives of cats, and Apis a bull clothed in a hide of varied colors, with Harpocrates,

the god whose fingers, pressed against his lips, command our silence; and one often sought by his devoted worshippers Osiris, and the asp, so rich in sleep-inducing drops.

She seemed to wake, and saw them all quite clearly. These were the words the goddess spoke to her: "O Telethusa, faithful devotee,

put off your heavy cares! Disobey your spouse, and do not hesitate, when Lucina has lightened the burden of your labor, to raise this child, whatever it will be, I am that goddess who, when asked, delivers, and you will have no reason to complain that honors you have paid me were in vain." After instructing her, the goddess left.

The Cretan woman rose up joyfully, lifted her hands up to the stars, and prayed that her dream-vision would be ratified.

Then going into labor, she brought forth a daughter—though her husband did not know it. The mother (with intention to deceive) told them to *feed the boy*. Deception prospered, since no one knew the truth except the nurse.

The father thanked the gods and named the child for its grandfathers Iphis since this name was given men and women both, his mother was pleased, for she could use it honestly.

So from her pious lie, deception grew. She dressed it as a boy—its face was such that whether boy or girl, it was a beauty.

Meanwhile, the years went by, thirteen of them:

4. Identified with the Egyptian Isis, goddess of fertility, marriage, and maternity, whose cult was widespread in the Roman world.

5. Husband of Isis, killed by his brother Set and restored to life by Isis; he is thus a figure of rebirth.

your father, Iphis, has arranged for you a marriage to the golden-haired Ianthe, the daughter of a Cretan named Ielestes, the maid most praised in Phaestus⁶ for her beauty. The two were similar in age and looks, and had been taught together from the first.

First love came unexpected to both hearts and wounded them both equally—and yet their expectations were quite different: Ianthe can look forward to a time

of wedding torches and of wedding vows, and trusts that one whom she believes a man will be her man. Iphis, however, loves with hopeless desperation, which increases in strict proportion to its hopelessness, and burns—a maiden—for another maid!

And scarcely holding back her tears, she cries, "Oh, what will be the end reserved for Iphis, gripped by a strange and monstrous passion known to no one else? If the gods had wished to spare me, they should have: if they wanted to destroy me, they should have given me a natural affliction.

"Cows do not burn for cows, nor mares for mares; the ram will have his sheep, the stag his does, and birds will do the same when they assemble; there are no animals whose females lust for other females! I wish that I were dead!

"That Crete might bring forth monsters of all kinds. Queen Pasiphaë⁷ was taken by a bull, yet even *that* was male-and-female passion! My love is much less rational than hers, to tell the truth. At least she had the hope of satisfaction, taking in the bull through guile, and in the image of a cow, thereby deceiving the adulterer!

"If every form of ingenuity were gathered here from all around the world, if Daedalus⁸ flew back on waxen wings, what could he do? Could all his learned arts transform me from a girl into a boy?

Or could *you* change into a boy, Ianthe? "But really, Iphis, pull yourself together, be firm, cast off this stultifying passion: accept your birth—unless you would deceive yourself as well as others—look for love

6. A city in Crete.

7. Wife of King Minos of Crete, and mother by a bull of the Minotaur.

8. Fabled craftsman who devised the heifer disguise that enabled Pasiphaë to seduce the

bull and, later, built the labyrinth for the Minotaur. Forced to flee Crete, he made wings of feathers held together by wax, for himself and his son, Icarus.

where it is proper to, as a woman should!
Hope both creates and nourishes such love;
reality deprives you of all hope.

"No watchman keeps you from her dear embrace,
no husband's ever-vigilant concern,
no father's fierceness, nor does she herself
deny the gifts that you would have from her.

And yet you are denied all happiness,
nor could it have been otherwise if all
the gods and men had labored in your cause.

"But the gods have not denied me anything;
agreeably, they've given what they could;
my father wishes for me what I wish,

she and her father both would have it be;
but Nature, much more powerful than they are,
wishes I not—sole source of all my woe!

"But look—the sun has risen and the day
of our longed-for nuptials dawns at last!
lanthe will be mine—and yet not mine:

we die of thirst here at the fountainside.

"Why do you, Juno, guardian of brides,
and you, O Hymen, god of marriage, come
to these rites, which cannot be rites at all,
for no one takes the bride, and both are velle!"

She said no more. Nor did her chosen burn
less fiercely as she prayed you swiftly come,
O god of marriage.

Fearing what you thought,
Telethusa postponed the marriage-day
with one concocted pretext and another,
a fictive illness or an evil omen.

But now she had no more excuses left,
and the wedding day was only one day off.

She tears the hair bands from her daughter's head
and from her own, and thus unbound, she prayed
while desperately clinging to the altar:

"O holy Isis, who art pleased to dwell
and be worshiped at Paraetonium,
at Pharos, in the Mareotic fields,
and where the Nile splits into seven branches:
deliver us, I pray you, from our fear!"

"For I once saw thee and thy sacred emblems,
O goddess, and I recognized them all
and listened to the sound of brazen rattles"
and kept your orders in my memory.

"And that my daughter still looks on the light,
and that I have not suffered punishment,
why, this is all your counsel and your gift;
now spare us both and offer us your aid."

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Warm tears were in attendance on her words.
The altar of the goddess seemed to move—
it did move, and the temple doors were shaken,
and the horns (her lunar emblem) glowed with light,
and the bronze rattles sounded.

Not yet secure,
but nonetheless delighted by this omen,
the mother left with Iphis following,
as was her wont, but now with longer strides,
darker complexion, and with greater force,
a keener countenance, and with her hair
shorter than usual and unadorned,
and with more vigor than a woman has.

And you who were so recently a girl
are now a boy! Spring gifts to the goddess!
Now boldly celebrate your faith in her!
They bring the goddess gifts and add to them
a votive tablet with these lines inscribed:

GIFTS IPHIS PROMISED WHEN SHE WAS A MAID
TRANSFORMED INTO A BOY HE GLADLY PAID

The next day's sun revealed the great wide world
with Venus, Juno, and Hymen all together
gathered beneath the smoking nuptial torches,
and Iphis in possession of lanthe.

FROM BOOK X¹

[Pygmalion]

"Pygmalion observed how these women² lived lives of sordid
indecency, and, dismayed by the numerous defects
of character Nature had given the feminine spirit,
stayed as a bachelor, having no female companion.

"During that time he created an ivory statue,
a work of most marvelous art, and gave it a figure
better than any living woman could boast of,
and promptly conceived a passion for his own creation.
You would have thought it alive, so like a real maiden
that only its natural modesty kept it from moving:
art concealed artfulness. Pygmalion gazed in amazement,
burning with love for what was in likeness a body.

"Often he stretched forth a hand to touch his creation,
attempting to settle the issue: was it a body,

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9. Sistra, sacred rattles used in Isis's cult.

1. This selection of stories is part of the song sung by Orpheus, the legendary singer, after he has failed to redeem his wife, Eurydice, from the underworld. His theme, announced in the prologue of his song, is "young boys whom the gods have desired / and . . . girls seized by for-

bidden and blameworthy passions." 2. Orpheus has just told of the Propoetides of Cyprus, who, as punishment for having denied Venus's divinity, became the first women to prostitute themselves.

or was it—this he would not yet concede—a mere statue?³ He gives it kisses, and they are returned, he imagines; now he addresses and now he caresses it, feeling his fingers sink into its warm, pliant flesh, and fears he will leave blue bruises all over its body;

he seeks to win its affections with words and with presents pleasing to girls, such as seashells and pebbles, tame birds, armloads of flowers in thousands of different colors, lilies, bright painted balls, curious insects in amber; he dresses it up and puts diamond rings on its fingers, gives it a necklace, a lacy brassiere and pearl earrings, and even though all such adornments truly become her, she does not seem to be any less beautiful naked.

He lays her down on a bed with a bright purple cover and calls her his bedmate and slips a few soft, downy pillows under her head as though she were able to feel them.

"The holiday honoring Venus has come, and all Cyprus turns out to celebrate; heifers with gilded horns buckle under the deathblow⁴ and incense soars up in thick clouds; Pygmalion stood by and offered this fainthearted prayer:

"If you in heaven are able to give us whatever we ask for, then I would like as my wife—' and not daring to say, —my ivory maiden,' said, —'one like my statue!'

Since golden Venus was present there at her altar, she knew what he wanted to ask for, and as a good omen, three times the flames soared and leapt right up to the heavens.

"Once home, he went straight to the replica of his sweetheart, threw himself down on the couch and repeatedly kissed her; she seemed to grow warm and so he repeated the action, kissing her lips and exciting her breasts with both hands.

Aroused, the ivory softened and, losing its stiffness, yielded, submitting to his caress as wax softens when it is warmed by the sun, and handled by fingers, takes on many forms, and by being used, becomes useful.

Amazed, he rejoices, then doubts, then fears he's mistaken, while again and again he touches on what he has prayed for. She is alive! And her veins leap under his fingers!

"You can believe that Pygmalion offered the goddess

his thanks in a torrent of speech, once again kissing those lips that were not untrue; that she felt his kisses, and timidly blushing, she opened her eyes to the sunlight, and at the same time, first looked on her lover and heaven! The goddess attended the wedding since she had arranged it, and before the ninth moon had come to its crescent, a daughter was born to them—Paphos, who gave her own name to the island.

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Orpheus She had a son named Cinyras, who would be regarded as one of the blessed, if he had only been childless.

Being of dire events; depart from me, daughters, depart from me, fathers; or, if you find my poems charming, believe that I lie, believe these events never happened; or, if you believe that they did, then believe they were punished.

"If Nature allows us to witness such impious misdeeds, then I give my solemn thanks that the Thracian people and the land itself are far away from those regions⁶ where evil like that was begotten: let fabled Panchaea⁷ be rich in balsam and cinnamon, custom and frankincense, the sweat that drips down from the trees; let it bear incense and flowers of every description: it also bears myrrh, and too great a price was paid for that new creation.

Myrrha and swears that his darts ever harmed you, one of the three sisters,⁸ bearing a venomous hydra and waving a Stygian firebrand, must have inspired your passion. Hating a parent is wicked, but even more wicked than hatred is this kind of love. Princes elected from far and wide desire you, Myrrha; all Asia sends its young men to compete for your hand in marriage; choose from so many just one of these men for your husband, so long as a certain one is not the one chosen.

"She understood and struggled against her perversion, asking herself, 'What have I begun? Where will it take me? May heaven and piety and the sacred rights of fathers restrain these unspeakable thoughts and repel my misfortune, if this indeed is misfortune; yet piety chooses not to condemn this love outright: without distinctions animals copulate; it is no crime for the heifer to bear the weight of her father upon her own back; daughters are suitable wives in the kingdom of horses; the billy goats enter the flocks that they themselves sire, and birds are inseminated by those who conceive them; blessed, the ones for whom such love is permitted!'

"Human morality gives us such stifling precepts, and makes indecent what Nature freely allows us! But people say there are nations where sons and their mothers, where fathers and daughters, may marry each other, increasing the bonds of piety by their redoubled affections. Wretched am I, who hadn't the luck to be born there, injured by nothing more than mischance of location! Why do I obsess? Begone, forbidden desires; of course he is worthy of love—but love for a father! So, then, if I were not the daughter of great Cinyras, I would be able to have intercourse with Cinyras:

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3. Island in the eastern Mediterranean sacred to Venus.
4. I.e., as they are sacrificed.
5. One of the cities of Cyprus, whose name is often used for the island as a whole.
6. A reminder that Orpheus is singing in Thrace (the region stretching along the north coast of the Aegean Sea).
7. An imaginary island near Arabia, rich in spices.
8. The Furies.

though he is mine, he is not mine, and our nearness ruins me: I would be better off as a stranger.

"It would be good for me to go far away from my country, as long as I could escape from my wicked desires, for what holds me here is the passion that I have to see him, to touch and speak to Cinyras and give him my kisses—if nothing more is permitted. You impious maiden, what more can you imagine will ever be granted?

Are you aware how you confuse all rights and relations? Would you be your mother's rival? The whore of your father? Would you be called your son's sister? Your brother's own mother? Do you not shudder to think of the serpent-coiffed sisters⁹ thrusting their bloodthirsty torches into the faces

of the guilty wretches that those three appear to and torture? "But you, while your body is undefiled, keep your mind chaste, and do not break Nature's law with incestuous pairing.

Think what you ask for: the very act is forbidden, and he is devout and mindful of moral behavior—ah, how I wish that he had a similar madness!

"She spoke and Cinyras, whom an abundance of worthy suitors had left undecided, consulted his daughter, ran their names by her and asked whom she wished for a husband; silent at first, she kept her eyes locked on her father, seething until the hot tears spilled over her eyelids:

Cinyras, attributing this to the fears of a virgin, bade her cease weeping, wiped off her cheeks, and kissed her; Myrrha rejoiced overmuch at his gesture and answered that she would marry a man 'just like you.' Misunderstanding the words of his daughter, Cinyras approved them, replying, 'May you be this pious always.' Hearing that last word, the virgin lowers her head, self-convicted of evil.

"Midnight: now sleep dissolves all the cares of the body; Cinyras' daughter, however, lies tossing, consumed by the fires of passion, repeating her prayers in a frenzy; now she despairs, now she'll attempt it; now she is shamefaced, now eager: uncertain: *What should she do now?* She wavers, just like a tree that the axe blade has girdled completely, when only the last blow remains to be struck, and the woodsman cannot predict the direction it's going to fall in,

she, after so many blows to her spirit, now totters, now leaning in one, and now in the other, direction, nor is she able to find any rest from her passion save but in death. Death pleases her, and she gets up, determined to hang herself from a beam with her girdle: 'Farewell, dear Cinyras: may you understand why I do this!' she said, as she fitted the noose around her pale neck.

"They say that, hearing her murmuring, her faithful old nurse in the next chamber arose and entered her bedroom: at sight of the grim preparations, she screams out, and striking

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9. Again, the Furies.

her breasts and tearing her garments, removes the noose from around the girl's neck, and then, only then she collapses, and weeping, embraces her, asking her why she would do it.

"Myrrha remained silent, expressionless, with her eyes downcast, sorrowing only because her attempt was detected.

But the woman persists, baring her flat breasts and white hair, and by the milk given when she was a babe in the cradle beseeches her to entrust her old nurse with the cause of her sorrow. The girl turns away with a groan; the nurse is determined to learn her secret, and promises not just to keep it:

"Speak and allow me to aid you," she says, 'for in my old age, I am not utterly useless: if you are dying of passion, my charms and herbs will restore you; if someone wishes you evil, my rites will break whatever spell you are under; is some god wrathful? A sacrifice placates his anger.

What else could it be? I can't think of anything—Fortune favors your family, everything's going quite smoothly, both of your parents are living, your mother, your father—' Myrrha sighed deeply, hearing her father referred to, but not even then did the nurse grasp the terrible evil in the girl's heart, although she felt that her darling suffered a passion of some kind for some kind of lover.

"Nurse was unyielding and begged her to make known her secret. whatever it was, pressing the tearful girl to her bosom; and clasping her in an embrace that old age had enfeebled, she said, 'You're in love—I am certain! I will be zealous in aiding your cause, never you fear—and your father will be none the wiser!'

"Myrrha in frenzy leapt up and threw herself onto the bed, pressing her face in the pillows: 'Leave me, I beg you,' she said. 'Avoid my wretched dishonor; leave me or cease to ask me the cause of my sorrow: what you attempt to uncover is sinful and wicked!'

"The old woman shuddered: extending the hands that now trembled with fear and old age, she fell at the feet of her darling, a suppliant, coaxing her now, and now attempting to scare her; threatening now to disclose her attempted self-murder, but pledging to aid her if she confesses her passion.

"She lifted her head with her eyes full of tears spilling over onto the breast of her nurse and repeatedly tried to speak out, but repeatedly stopped herself short of confession, hiding her shame-colored face in the folds of her garments, until she finally yielded, blurring her secret: 'O mother,' she cried, 'so fortunate you with your husband!' and said no more but groaned.

"The nurse, who now understood it, felt a chill run through her veins, and her bones shook with tremor, and her white hair stood up in stiff bristles. She said whatever she could to dissuade the girl from her horrible passion, and even though Myrrha knew the truth of her warning, she had decided to die if she could not possess him.

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'Live, then,' the other replied, 'and possess your—' Not daring to use the word 'father,' she left her sentence unfinished, but called upon heaven to stand by her earlier promise.

"Now it was time for the annual feast day of Ceres, the pious, and married women clad in white garments, thronged to the celebration, offering garlands

of wheat as firstfruits of the season; now for nine nights the intimate touch of their men is considered forbidden.

Among these matrons was Cenchreis, wife of Cinyras, for her attendance during these rites was required.

And so, while the queen's place in his bed was left vacant, the overly diligent nurse came to Cinyras,

finding him drunk, and spoke to him of a maiden whose passion for him was real (although her name wasn't)

and praising her beauty; when asked the age of this virgin, she said, 'the same age as Myrtha.' Commanded to fetch her, nurse hastened home, and entering, cried to her darling,

'Rejoice, my dear, we have won! The unlucky maiden could not feel joy in her heart, but only grim sorrow, yet still she rejoiced, so distorted were her emotions.'

"Now it is midnight, when all of creation is silent; high in the heavens, between the two Bears, Botres¹

had turned his wagon so that its shaft pointed downward; Myrtha approaches her crime, which is fled by chaste Luna,²

while under black clouds the stars hide their scandalized faces; Night lacks its usual fires; you, Icarus,³ covered

your face and were followed at once by Erigone, whose pious love of her father merited heaven.

"Thrice Myrtha stumbles and stops each time at the omen, and thrice the funeral owl sings her poem of endings;

nevertheless she continues, her shame lessened by shadows. She holds the left hand of her nurse, and gropes with the other blindly in darkness: now at the bedchamber's threshold,

and now she opens the door: and now she is led within, where her knees fail her; she falters, nearly collapsing, her color, her blood, her spirit all flee together.

"As she approaches the crime, her horror increases; regretting her boldness, she wishes to turn back, unnoticed,

but even as she holds back, the old woman leads her by the hand to the high bed, where she delivers her, saying, 'Take her, Cinyras—she's yours,' and unites the doomed couple.

The father accepts his own offspring in his indecent bed and attempts to dispel the girl's apprehensions, encouraging her not to be frightened of him, and

addressing her, as it happened, with a name befitting her years: he called her 'daughter' while she called him 'father,' so the right names were attached to their impious actions.

"Filled with the seed of her father, she left his bedchamber, having already conceived, in a crime against nature which she repeated the following night and thereafter,

until Cinyras, impatient to see his new lover after so many encounters, brought a light in,

and in the same moment discovered his crime and his daughter; grief left him speechless; he tore out his sword from the scabbard; Myrtha sped off, and, thanks to night's shadowy darkness,

escaped from her death. She wandered the wide-open spaces, leaving Arabia, so rich in palms, and Panchaea,

and after nine months, she came at last to Sabaea,⁴ where she found rest from the weariness that she suffered, for she could scarcely carry her womb's heavy burden.

"Uncertain of what she should wish for, tired of living but frightened of dying, she summed up her state in this prayer: 'O gods, if there should be any who hear my confession,

I do not turn away from the terrible sentence that my misbehavior deserves; but lest I should outrage the living by my survival, or the dead by my dying,

drive me from both of these kingdoms, transform me wholly, so that both life and death are denied me.'

"Some god *did* hear her confession, and heaven answered her final prayer, for, even as she was still speaking,

the earth rose up over her legs, and from her toes burst roots that spread widely to hold the tall trunk in position; her bones put forth wood, and even though they were still hollow,

they now ran with sap and not blood; her arms became branches, and those were now twigs that used to be called her fingers,

while her skin turned to hard bark. The tree kept on growing, over her swollen belly, wrapping it tightly, and growing over her breast and up to her neck; she could bear no further delay, and, as the wood rose,

plunged her face down into the bark and was swallowed. "Loss of her body has meant the loss of all feeling;

and yet she weeps, and the warm drops spill from her tree trunk; those tears bring her honor: the distillate myrth preserves and will keep the name of its mistress down through the ages.

"But under the bark, the infant conceived in such baseness continued to grow and now sought a way out of Myrtha; the pregnant trunk bulged in the middle and its weighty burden pressed on the mother, who could not cry out in her sorrow

nor summon Lucina with charms to aid those in childbirth. So, like a woman exerting herself to deliver,

the tree groaned and bent over double, wet from its weeping. Gentle Lucina stood by the sorrowing branches, laid her hands onto the bark and recited the charms that

1. The Ox-herder, a constellation that was imagined as driving Ursa Major, the Great Bear.

2. The Moon, often associated with Diana, one of whose attributes was chastity.

3. More properly Icarus, a mythic Athenian.

He received Dionysus into the city, and the god rewarded him with wine, which he shared with his countrymen. Feeling its effect, they thought they had been poisoned and killed him. His daughter Erigone hanged herself in grief, and both were changed into stars.

4. Arabia Felix, the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula.

aid in delivery; the bark split open; a fissure
 ran down the trunk of the tree and its burden spilled out,
 a bawling boychild, whom naiads placed in soft grasses
 and bathed in the tears of its mother. Not even Envy
 could have found fault with his beauty, for he resembled
 one of the naked cherubs depicted by artists,
 and would have been taken as one, if you had provided
 him with a quiver or else removed one from those others.

[*Venus and Adonis*]

"Time swiftly glides by in secret, escaping our notice,
 and nothing goes faster than years do: the son of his sister
 by his grandfather, the one so recently hidden
 within a tree, so recently born, a most beautiful infant,
 now is an adolescent and now a young man
 even more beautiful than he was as a baby,
 pleasing now even to Venus and soon the avenger
 of passionate fires that brought his mother to ruin.

"For while her fond Cupid was giving a kiss to his mother,
 he pricked her unwittingly, right in the breast, with an arrow
 projecting out of his quiver; annoyed, the great goddess
 swatted him off, but the wound had gone in more deeply
 than it appeared to, and at the beginning deceived her.

Under the spell of this fellow's beauty, the goddess
 no longer takes any interest now in Cythera,
 nor does she return to her haunts on the island of Paphos,

or to fish-wealthy Chidus or to ore-bearing Amathus;⁵
 she avoids heaven as well, now—preferring Adonis,⁶
 and clings to him, his constant companion, ignoring
 her former mode of unstrutted self-indulgence.

when she shunned natural light for the parlors of beauty;
 now she goes roaming with him through woods and up mountains
 and over the scrubby rocks with her garments hitched up
 and girded around her waist like a nymph of Diana,⁷
 urging the hounds to pursue unendangering species,
 hoppey hares or stags with wide-branching antlers,
 or terrified does; but she avoids the fierce wild boars and
 rapacious wolves and bears armed with sharp claws,
 and shuns the lions, sated with slaughter of cattle.

"And she warns you also to fear the wild beasts, Adonis,
 if only her warning were heeded. 'Be bold with the timid,
 she said, but against the daring, daring is reckless.
 Spare me, dear boy, the risk involved in your courage;
 don't rile the beasts that Nature has armed with sharp weapons,
 lest I should find the glory you gain much too costly!

For lions and bristling boars and other fierce creatures
 look with indifferent eyes and minds upon beauty
 and youth and other qualities Venus is moved by;
 pitiless boars deal out thunderbolts with their curved tusks,
 and none may withstand the frenzied assault of the lions,
 whom I despise altogether.'

"And when he asked why,
 she said, 'I will tell you this story which will amaze you,
 with its retribution delivered for ancient wrongdoing.

"But this unaccustomed labor has left me exhausted—
 look, though—a poplar entices with opportune shade, and
 offers a soft bed of turf we may rest on together,
 as I would like to.' And so she lay down on the grasses
 and on her Adonis, and using his breast as a pillow,
 she told this story, mixing her words with sweet kisses:

"Perhaps you'll have heard of a maiden able to vanquish
 the swiftest of men in a footrace; this wasn't a fiction,
 for she overcame all contestants; nor could you say whether
 she deserved praise more for her speed or her beauty.

She asked some good about husbands. 'A husband,' he answered,
 'is not for you, *anantasia*! flee from a husband!
 But you will not flee, and losing yourself, will live on!'

"Frightened by his grim prediction, she went to the forest
 and lived there unmarried, escaping the large and persistent
 throng of her suitors by setting out cruel conditions;

"You cannot have me," she said, "unless you outrun me;
 come race against me! A bride and a bed for the winner,
 death to the losers. Those are the rules of the contest."

"Cruel? Indeed—but such was this young maiden's beauty
 that a foolhardy throng of admirers took up the wager.

As a spectator, Hippomenes sat in the grandstand,
 asking why anyone ever would risk such a danger,
 just for a bride, and disparaging their headstrong passion.

However, as soon as he caught a glimpse of her beauty,
 like mine or like yours would be if you were a woman,
 said Venus, 'her face and her body, both bared for the contest,
 he threw up both hands and cried out, "I beg your pardons,
 who only a moment ago disparaged your efforts,
 but truly I had no idea of the trophy you strive for!"

"Praises ignited the fires of passion and made him
 hope that no young man proved to be faster than she was
 and fear that one would be. Jealous, he asked himself why he
 was leaving the outcome of this competition unventured:
 "God helps those who improve their condition by daring,"
 he said, addressing himself as the maiden flew by him.
 Though she seemed no less swift than a Scythian arrow,
 nevertheless, he more greatly admired her beauty,
 and the grace of her running made her seem even more lovely;
 the breezes blew back the wings attached to her ankles
 while her loose hair streamed over her ivory shoulders

5. Island south of the Peloponnese, and like Cyprus sacred to Venus.

island of Cyprus, and Chidus was a city in Asia Minor.

6. All three were important centers of Venus's cult: Paphos and Amathus were cities on the

Venus.

and her brightly edged knee straps fluttered lightly; a russet glow flamed out evenly over her pale, girlish body, as when a purple awning covers a white marble surface, staining its artless candor with counterfeit shadow.

"She crossed the finish line while he was taking it in, and Atalanta, victorious, was given a crown and the glory; the groaning losers were taken off: end of *their* story.

But the youth, undeterred by what had become of the vanquished, stood on the track and fixed his gaze on the maiden:

"Why seek such an easy victory over these sluggards?"

Content with me," he said, "and if Fortune makes me the winner, you will at least have been beaten by one not unworthy:

I am the son of Megareus, grandson of Neptune,

my great-grandfather; my valor is no less impressive than is my descent: if you should happen to triumph, you would be famous for having beaten Hippomenes.

"And as he spoke, Atalanta's countenance softened: she wondered whether she wished to win or to *be* won, and asked herself which god, jealous of her suitor's beauty, sought to destroy him by forcing him into this marriage:

"If I were judging, I wouldn't think I was worth it! Nor am I moved by his beauty," she said, "though I could be, but I *am* moved by his youth: his boyishness stirs me—

but what of his valor? His mind so utterly fearless? What of his watery origins? His relation to Neptune? What of the fact that he loves me and wishes to wed me, and is willing to die if bitter Fortune denies him?"

"Oh, flee from a bed that still reeks with the gore of past victims, while you are able to, stranger; marrying *me* is certain destruction! No one would wish to reject you, and you may be chosen by a much wiser young lady!"

"But why should I care for you—after so many have perished? Now *he* will learn! Let him die then, since the great slaughter of suitors has taught him nothing! He must be weary of living! So—must he die then, because he wishes to wed me, and is willing to pay the ultimate price for his passion?"

He shouldn't have to! And even though it won't be *my* fault, my victory surely will turn the people against me!

"If only you would just give it up, or if only, since you're obsessed with it, you were a little bit faster! How very girlish is the boy's facial expression!

O poor Hippomenes! I wish you never had seen me! You're worthy of life, and if only *my* life had been better, or if the harsh Fates had not prevented my marriage,

you would have been the one I'd have chosen to marry!"

"She spoke, and, moved by desire that struck without warning, loved without knowing what she was doing or feeling.

Her father and people were clamoring down at the racecourse, when Neptune's descendant Hippomenes anxiously begged me:

"Cytherian Venus, I pray you preside at my venture,

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aiding the fires that you yourself have ignited."

A well-meaning breeze brought me *this* prayer, so appealing that, I confess, it aroused me and stirred me to action, though I had scant time enough to bring off his rescue.

"There is a field upon Cyprus, known as Tamasus, famed for its wealth; in olden days it was given to me and provides an endowment now for my temples;

and there in this field is a tree; its leaves and its branches glisten and shimmer, reflecting the gold they are made of; now, as it happened, I'd just gotten back from a visit, carrying three golden apples that I had selected:

and showing myself there to Hippomenes only, approached him and showed him how to use them to advantage.

"Both of them crouched for the start; when horns gave the signal, they took off together, their feet barely brushing the surface; you would have thought they were able to keep their toes dry while skimming over the waves, and could touch on the ripened heads of wheat in the field without bending them under.

"Cries of support and encouragement cheered on the young man; 'Now is the time,' they screamed, 'go for it, go for it, hurry, Hippomenes, give it everything that you've got now! Don't hold back! Victory!' And I am uncertain whether these words were more pleasing to him or to his Atalanta,

for often, when she could have very easily passed him, she lingered beside, her gaze full of desperate longing, until she reluctantly sped ahead of his features.

And now Hippomenes, dry-mouthed, was breathlessly gasping, the finish line far in the distance; he threw out an apple, and the sight of that radiant fruit astounded the maiden, who turned from her course and retrieved the glittering missile;

Hippomenes passed her: the crowd roared its approval. A burst of speed now and Atalanta makes up for lost time: once *more* overtaking the lad, she puts him behind her!

A second apple; gain she falls back, but recovers, now she's beside him, now passing him, only the finish remains: "Now, O goddess," he cries, "my inspiration, be with me!"

"With all the strength of his youth he flings the last apple to the far side of the field: *this* will really delay her!

The maiden looked doubtful about its retrieval: I forced her to get it and add on its weight to the burden she carried: time lost and weight gained were equal obstructions: the maiden (lest my account should prove longer than even the race was) took second place: the trophy bride left with the victor.

"But really, Adonis, wasn't I worthy of being thanked for my troubles? Offered a gift of sweet incense? Heedless of all I had done, he offered me *neither*!

Immediate outrage was followed by keen indignation; and firmly resolving not to be spurned in the future, I guarded against it by making this pair an example.

"Now they were passing a temple deep in the forest,

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Janet

not grateful

built long ago by Echion to honor Cybele,⁸
Mother of Gods, and now the length of their journey
urged them to rest here, where unbridled desire
possessed Hippomenes, moved by the strength of my godhead.

There was a dim and cave-like recess near the temple,
hewn out of pumice, a shrine to the ancient religion,
wherein a priest of these old rites had set a great many
carved wooden idols. Hippomenes entered that place, and
by his forbidden behavior defiled it;⁹ in horror,
the sacred images turned away from the act, and Cybele
prepared to plunge the guilty pair in Stygian waters,
but that seemed too easy: so now their elegant male necks

are cloaked in heavy masses, curved claws are their fingers;
arms are now forelegs, and all the weight of their bodies
shifts to their torsos; and now their tails sweep the arena;
fierce now, their faces; growls supplant verbal expression;
the forest now is their bedroom; a terror to others
meekly these lions champ at the bit of the harness
on either side of the yoke of Cybele's chariot.

"My darling, you must avoid these and all other wild beasts,
who will not turn tail, but show off their boldness in battle;
flee them or else your courage will prove our ruin!"



"And after warning him, she went off on her journey,
carried aloft by her swans; but his courage resisted
her admonitions. It happened that as his dogs followed
a boar they were tracking, they roused it from where it was hidden,
and when it attempted to rush from the forest, Adonis
pierced it, but lightly, casting his spear from an angle;
with its long snout, it turned and knocked loose the weapon
stained with its own blood, then bore down upon our hero,
and, as he attempted to flee for his life in sheer terror,
it sank its tusks deep into the young fellow's privates,
and stretched him out on the yellow sands, where he lay dying.

"Aloft in her light, swan-driven chariot, Venus
had not yet gotten to Cyprus; from a great distance
she recognized the dying groans of Adonis
and turned her birds back to him; when she saw from midair
his body lying there, lifeless, stained with its own blood,
she beat her breasts and tore at her hair and her garments,
and leapt from her chariot, raging, to argue with grim Fate:

"It will not be altogether as you would have it;
she said. 'My grief for Adonis will be remembered
forever, and every year will see, reenacted
in ritual form, his death and my lamentation;
and the blood of the hero will be transformed to a flower.

8. A fertility goddess of Asia Minor known as the Great Mother. She was often pictured wearing a crown that resembled a city wall with towers, and flanked by lions or riding in a cart drawn by them.
9. It was considered sacrilege to have sexual intercourse in the precinct of a temple.

Or were you not once allowed to change a young woman¹
to fragrant mint, Persephone? Do you begrudge me
the transformation of my beloved Adonis?"

"And as she spoke, she sprinkled his blood with sweet nectar,
which made it swell up, like a transparent bubble
that rises from muck; and in no more than an hour
a flower sprang out of that soil, blood red in its color,
just like the flesh that lies underneath the tough rind
of the seed-hiding pomegranate. Brief is its season,
for the winds from which it takes its name, the anemone,
shake off those petals so lightly clinging and fated to perish."

1. Mentha, Hades' mistress, trampled by the jealous Persephone and transformed into the mint (the meaning of her name).