

and yet she weeps, and the warm drops spill from her tree trunk;
 those tears bring her honor: the distillate myrrh preserves and
 will keep the name of its mistress down through the ages. 600

"But under the bark, the infant conceived in such baseness
 continued to grow and now sought a way out of Myrrha;
 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
 aid in delivery; the bark split open; a fissure 610
 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 (1)

"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 620
 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. 630

"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 Cnidus or to ore-bearing Amethus; she avoids heaven as well, now—preferring Adonis, and clings to him, his constant companion, ignoring her former mode of unstrenuous 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, urging the hounds to pursue unendangering species, hopping 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:

Atalanta and Hippomenes

"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 god about husbands. "A husband," he answered, "is not for you, Atalanta; 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 unvented: "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
 and her brightly edged knee straps fluttered lightly; a russet
 glow fanned 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?
 Contend 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,
 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: again 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, built long ago by Echion to honor Cybele,

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; 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 pale necks are cloaked in tawny manes; 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!

Venus and Adonis (2)

"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,

Or were *you* not once allowed to change a young woman

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 rough 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."