

## OVID *METAMORPHOSES* 2

TRANSLATED BY A. S. KLINE © 2000

*[Dr. D's note: These are excerpts from Ovid's Metamorphoses, which may be found complete at [Poetry in Translation](#), where the text has a number of helpful explanatory hyperlinks. If possible, read the poems on that web site, and use this version (1) to note the poems we will discuss and (2) print out for reference in class.]*

### **Bk IV:55-92 Arsippe tells the story of Pyramus and Thisbe**

‘Pyramus and Thisbe, he the loveliest youth, and she the most sought after girl, the East held, lived in neighbouring houses, in the towering city of Babylon, that Semiramis is said to have enclosed with walls of brick. Their nearness and their first childhood steps made them acquainted and in time love appeared. They would have agreed to swear the marriage oath as well, but their parents prevented it. They were both on fire, with hearts equally captivated, something no parent can prevent. They had no one to confide all this to: nods and signs were their speech, and the more they kept the fire hidden, the more it burned.

There was a fissure, a thin split, in the shared wall between their houses, which traced back to when it was built. No one had discovered the flaw in all those years – but what can love not detect? – You lovers saw it first, and made it a path for your voices. Your endearments passed that way, in safety, in the gentlest of murmurs. Often, when they were in place, Thisbe here, and Pyramus there, and they had each caught the sound of the other's breath, they said “Unfriendly wall, why do you hinder lovers? How hard would it be for you to let our whole bodies meet, or if that is too much perhaps, to open to the kisses we give each other? Not that we are not grateful. We confess that we owe it to you that words are allowed to pass to loving ears.” So they talked, hopelessly, sitting opposite, saying, as night fell, “Farewell”, each touching the wall with kisses that could not reach the other side.

One morning when Aurora had quenched the fires of night, and the sun's rays had thawed the frosty grass, they came to their usual places. Then they decided, first with a little murmur of their great sorrows, to try, in the silence of night, to deceive the guards, and vanish outside. Once out of the house they would leave the city as well, and they agreed, in case they went astray crossing the open country, to meet by the grave of Ninus, and hide in the shelter of a tree. There was a tall mulberry tree there, dense with white berries, bordering a cool fountain. They were satisfied with their plan, and the light, slow to lose its strength, was drowned in the waters, and out of the same waters the night emerged.’

### **Bk IV:93-127 The death of Pyramus**

‘Carefully opening the door, Thisbe, slipped out, deceiving her people, and came to the tomb, her face veiled, and seated herself under the tree they had agreed on. Love made her brave. But a lioness fresh from the kill, her jaws foaming, smeared with the blood of cattle, came to slake her thirst at the nearby spring. In the moonlight, Babylonian Thisbe sees her some way off, and flees in fear to a dark cave, and as she flees, she leaves behind

her fallen veil. When the fierce lioness has drunk deeply, returning towards the trees, she chances to find the flimsy fabric, without its owner, and rips it in her bloodstained jaws. Leaving the city a little later, Pyramus sees the creature's tracks in the thick dust, and his face is drained of colour. When he also discovers the veil stained with blood, he cries, "Two lovers will be lost in one night. She was the more deserving of a long life. I am the guilty spirit. I have killed you, poor girl, who told you to come by night to this place filled with danger, and did not reach it first. O, all you lions, that live amongst these rocks, tear my body to pieces, and devour my sinful flesh in your fierce jaws! Though it is cowardly to ask for death"

He picks up Thisbe's veil, and carries it with him to the shadow of the tree they had chosen. Kissing the token, and wetting it with tears, he cries, "Now, be soaked in my blood too." Having spoken he drove the sword he had been wearing into his side, and, dying, pulled it, warm, from the wound. As he lay back again on the ground, the blood spurted out, like a pipe fracturing at a weak spot in the lead, and sending long bursts of water hissing through the split, cutting through the air, beat by beat. Sprinkled with blood, the tree's fruit turned a deep blackish-red, and the roots, soaked through, also imbued the same overhanging mulberries with the dark purplish colour.'

#### **Bk IV:128-166 The death of Thisbe**

'Now Thisbe returns, not yet free of fear, lest she disappoint her lover, and she calls for him with her eyes and in her mind, eager to tell him about the great danger she has escaped. Though she recognises the place and the shape of the familiar tree, the colour of the berries puzzles her. She waits there: perhaps this is it. Hesitating, she sees quivering limbs writhing on the bloodstained earth, and starts back, terrified, like the sea, that trembles when the slightest breeze touches its surface, her face showing whiter than boxwood. But when, staying a moment longer, she recognises her lover, she cries out loud with grief, striking at her innocent arms, and tearing at her hair. Cradling the beloved body, she bathes his wounds with tears, mingling their drops with blood. Planting kisses on his cold face, she cries out 'Pyramus, what misfortune has robbed me of you? Pyramus, answer me! Your dearest Thisbe calls to you: obey me, lift your fallen head!' At Thisbe's name, Pyramus raised his eyes, darkening with death, and having looked at her, buried them again in darkness.'

'When she recognised her veil and saw the ivory scabbard without its sword, she said, "Unhappy boy, your own hand, and your love, have destroyed you! I too have a firm enough hand for once, and I, too, love. It will give me strength in my misfortune. I will follow you to destruction, and they will say I was a most pitiful friend and companion to you. He, who could only be removed from me by death, death cannot remove. Nevertheless I ask this for both of us, in uttering these words, O our poor parents, mine and his, do not deny us the right to be laid in one tomb, we whom certain love, and the strangest hour have joined. And you, the tree, that now covers the one poor body with your branches, and soon will cover two, retain the emblems of our death, and always carry your fruit darkened in mourning, a remembrance of the blood of us both."

Saying this, and placing the point under her heart, she fell forward onto the blade, still warm with his blood. Then her prayer moved the gods, and stirred her parents' feelings, for the colour of the berry is blackish-red, when fully ripened, and what was left from the funeral pyres rests in a single urn.'

### **Bk VI:401-438 The marriage of Procne and Tereus**

From such tales as these the company turns immediately to the present, and mourns the loss of Amphion and his children. The mother was blamed, though even then one man, her brother Pelops, is said to have wept for her and, after taking off his tunic, to have shown the ivory, of his left shoulder. This was of flesh, and the same colour as his right shoulder, at the time of his birth. Later, when he had been cut in pieces, by his father, it is said that the gods fitted his limbs together again. They found the pieces, but one was lost, between the upper arm and the neck. Ivory was used in place of the missing part, and by means of that Pelops was made whole.

The princes, of countries to the southwest, near neighbours of Thebes, gathered, and the cities related to Thebes urged their kings to go and offer sympathy. Argos and Sparta, and Peloponnesian Mycenae, Calydon not yet cursed for rejecting Diana, fertile Orchomenos, and Corinth famous for bronze; warlike Messene, Patrae, and low-lying Cleonae, Nelean Pylos, and Troezen not yet ruled by Pittheus; and whichever of the other cities were southwest of the Isthmus, lying between its two seas, or seen to the northeast of the Isthmus, lying between its two seas. But who can believe this? Athens, alone, did nothing. War prevented them doing so. A Barbarian army had crossed the sea and brought terror to the walls of the city of Mopsopius.

Tereus of Thrace routed these Barbarians, with his army of auxiliaries, and won a great name by his victory. Since Tereus was a master of men and riches, and happened to trace his descent from mighty Mars himself, Pandion, king of Athens, made them allies, by giving him his daughter Procne in marriage. Neither Juno, who attends on brides, nor Hymen, nor the three Graces, was there. The Eumenides, the Furies, held torches snatched from a funeral. The Eumenides, the Furies, prepared their marriage bed, and the unholy screech owl brooded over their house, and sat on the roof of their chamber. By this bird-omen, Procne and Tereus were joined. By this bird-omen, they were made parents. Thrace of course rejoiced with them, and they themselves gave thanks to the gods, and the day when Pandion's daughter married her illustrious king, and the day on which [Itys](#) their son was born, they commanded to be celebrated as festivals: so, always, our real advantages escape us.

### **Bk VI:438-485 Tereus's passion for Procne's sister Philomela**

Now, Titan, the sun, had guided the turning year through five autumns when Procne said, coaxingly to her husband, 'If any thanks are due me, either send me to see my sister, or let my sister come here. You can promise my father she will return after a brief stay. It would be worth a great deal to me, if you allowed me to see Philomela.' Tereus ordered his ship to sea, and with sail and oar reached the harbour of Cecrops, and landed on the shore of Piraeus.

As soon as he gained access to his father-in-law, right hand was joined to right hand, and they began by wishing each other favourable omens. Tereus had started to tell of the reason for his visit, his wife's request, and promise a speedy return if she were sent back with him, when, see, Philomela entered, dressed in rich robes, and richer beauty, walking as we are used to being told the naiads and dryads of the deep woods do, if only one were to give them, like her, culture and dress. Seeing the girl, Tereus took fire, just as if someone touched a flame to corn stubble, or burned the leaves, or hay stored in a loft. Her beauty was worthy of it, but he was driven by his natural passion, and the inclination

of the people of his region is towards lust: he burnt with his own vice and his nation's. His impulse was to erode her attendants care, and her nurse's loyalty, even seduce the girl herself with rich gifts, to the extent of his kingdom, or rape her and defend the rape in savage war. There was nothing he would not dare, possessed by unbridled desire, nor could he contain the flame in his heart.

Now he suffered from impatience, and eagerly returned to Procne's request, pursuing his own wishes as hers. Desire made him eloquent, and whenever he petitioned more strongly than was seemly, he would make out that Procne wished it so. He even embellished his speeches with tears, as though she had commissioned him to do that too. You gods, what secret darknesses human hearts hide! Due to his efforts, Tereus is viewed as faithful, in his deceit, and is praised for his crime. Moreover Philomela wishes his request granted, and resting her forearms on her father's shoulders, coaxing him to let her go to visit her sister, she urges it, in her own interest, and against it. Tereus gazes at her, and imagining her as already his, watching her kisses, and her arms encircling her father's neck, it all spurs him on, food and fuel to his frenzy. Whenever she embraces her father, he wishes he were that father: though of course his intentions would be no less wicked. The father is won over by the twin entreaties. The girl is overjoyed, and thanks her father, and thinks, poor wretch, that what will bring sorrow to both sisters is actually a success for both.

### **Bk VI:486-548 Tereus forces Philomela**

Now little was left of Phoebus's daily labour, and his horses were treading the spaces of the western sky. A royal feast was served at Pandion's table, with wine in golden goblets. Then their bodies sated, they gave themselves to quiet sleep. But though the Thracian king retired to bed, he was disturbed by thoughts of her, and remembering her features, her gestures, her hands, he imagined the rest that he had not yet seen, as he would wish, and fuelled his own fires, in sleepless restlessness. Day broke, and Pandion, clasping his son-in-law's right hand, in parting, with tears welling in his eyes, entrusted his daughter to him. 'Dear son, since affectionate reasons compel it, and both of them desire it (you too have desired it, Tereus), I give her over to you, and by your honour, by the entreaty of a heart joined to yours, and by the gods above, I beg you, protect her with a father's love, and send back to me, as soon as is possible (it will be all too long a wait for me), this sweet comfort of my old age. You too, as soon as is possible (it is enough that your sister is so far away), if you are at all dutiful, Philomela, return to me!'

So he commanded his daughter and kissed her, and soft tears mingled with his commands. As a token of their promise he took their two right hands and linked them together, and asked them, with a prayer, to remember to greet his absent daughter, and grandson, for him. His mouth sobbing, he could barely say a last farewell, and he feared the forebodings in his mind.

As soon as Philomela was on board the brightly painted ship, and the sea was churned by the oars, and the land left behind them, the barbarian king cried 'I have won! I carry with me what I wished for!' He exults, and his passion can scarcely wait for its satisfaction. He never turns his eyes away from her, no differently than when Jupiter's eagle deposits a hare, caught by the curved talons, in its high eyrie: there is no escape for the captive, and the raptor gazes at its prize.

Now they had completed their journey, and disembarked from the wave-worn ship, on the shores of his country. The king took her to a high-walled building, hidden in

an ancient forest, and there he locked her away, she, pale and trembling, fearing everything, in tears now, begging to know where her sister was. Then, confessing his evil intent, he overcame her by force, she a virgin and alone, as she called out, again and again, in vain, to her father, her sister, and most of all to the great gods. She quivered like a frightened lamb, that fails to realise it is free, wounded and discarded by a grey wolf, or like a dove trembling, its feathers stained with its blood, still fearing the rapacious claws that gripped it.

After a brief while, when she had come to her senses, she dragged at her dishevelled hair, and like a mourner, clawed at her arms, beating them against her breasts. Hands outstretched, she shouted 'Oh, you savage. Oh, what an evil, cruel, thing you have done. Did you care nothing for my father's trust, sealed with holy tears, my sister's affection, my own virginity, your marriage vows? You have confounded everything. I have been forced to become my sister's rival. You are joined to both. Now Procne will be my enemy! Why not rob me of life as well, you traitor, so that no crime escapes you? If only you had done it before that impious act. Then my shade would have been free of guilt. Yet, if the gods above witness such things, if the powers of heaven mean anything, if all is not lost, as I am, then one day you will pay me for this! I, without shame, will tell what you have done. If I get the chance it will be in front of everyone. If I am kept imprisoned in these woods, I will fill the woods with it, and move the stones, that know of my guilt, to pity. The skies will hear of it, and any god that may be there!'

### **Bk VI:549-570 Philomela is mutilated**

The king's anger was stirred by these words, and his fear also. Goaded by both, he freed the sword from its sheath by his side, and seizing her hair gathered it together, to use as a tie, to tether her arms behind her back. Philomela, seeing the sword, and hoping only for death, offered up her throat. But he severed her tongue with his savage blade, holding it with pincers, as she struggled to speak in her indignation, calling out her father's name repeatedly. Her tongue's root was left quivering, while the rest of it lay on the dark soil, vibrating and trembling, and, as though it were the tail of a mutilated snake moving, it writhed, as if, in dying, it was searching for some sign of her. They say (though I scarcely dare credit it) that even after this crime, he still assailed her wounded body, repeatedly, in his lust.

He controlled himself sufficiently to return to Procne, who, seeing him returned, asked where her sister was. He, with false mourning, told of a fictitious funeral, and tears gave it credence. Procne tore her glistening clothes, with their gold hems, from her shoulders, and put on black robes, and built an empty tomb, and mistakenly brought offerings, and lamented the fate of a sister, not yet due to be lamented in that way.

### **Bk VI:571-619 The truth is revealed**

The sun-god has circled the twelve signs, and a year is past. What can Philomela do? A guard prevents her escape; the thick walls of the building are made of solid stone; her mute mouth can yield no token of the facts. Great trouble is inventive, and ingenuity arises in difficult times. Cleverly, she fastens her thread to a barbarian's loom, and weaves purple designs on a white background, revealing the crime. She entrusts it, when complete, to a servant, and asks her, by means of gestures, to take it to her mistress. She, as she is asked, takes it to Procne, not knowing what it carries inside. The wife of the

savage king unrolls the cloth, and reads her sister's terrible fate, and by a miracle keeps silent. Grief restrains her lips, her tongue seeking to form words adequate to her indignation, fails. She has no time for tears, but rushes off, in a confusion of right and wrong, her mind filled with thoughts of vengeance.

It was the time when the young Thracian women used to celebrate the triennial festival of Bacchus. (Night knew their holy rites: by night, Mount Rhodope rang with the high-pitched clashing of bronze). By night the queen left her palace, prepared herself for the rites of the god, and took up the weapons of that frenzied religion. Tendrils of vine wreathed her head; a deerskin was draped over her left side; a light javelin rested on her shoulder. Hurtling through the woods with a crowd of her companions, terrifying, driven by maddening grief, Procne embodies you, Bacchus. She comes at last to the building in the wilderness, and howls out loud, giving the ecstatic cry of *Euhoe*, breaks the door down, seizes her sister, disguises her with the tokens of a wild Bacchante, hides her face with ivy leaves, and dragging her along with her, frightened out of her wits, leads her inside the palace walls.

When Philomela realised that she had reached that accursed house, the wretched girl shuddered in horror, and her whole face grew deathly pale. Procne, once there, took off the religious trappings; uncovered the downcast face of her unhappy sister, and clutched her in her arms. But Philomela could not bear to lift her eyes, seeing herself as her sister's betrayer. With her face turned towards the ground, wanting to swear by the gods, and call them to witness, that her shame had been visited on her by force, she made signs with her hands in place of speech. Procne burned, and could not control her anger, reproaching her sister for weeping, saying 'Now is not the time for tears, but for the sword, or for what overcomes the sword, if you know of such a thing. I am prepared for any wickedness, sister; to set the palace alight with a torch, and throw Tereus, the author of this, into the midst of the flames; or to cut out his eyes and tongue, and the parts which brought shame to you; or to force out his guilty spirit through a thousand wounds! I am ready for any enormity: but what it should be, I still do not know yet.'

### **Bk VI:619-652 The pitiless feast**

While Procne was going over these things, Itys came to his mother. His arrival suggested what she might do, and regarding him with a cold gaze, she said 'Ah! How like your father you are!' Without speaking further, seething in silent indignation, she began to conceive her tragic plan. Yet, when the boy approached, and greeted his mother, and put his little arms round her neck, and kissed her with childish endearments, she was moved, her anger was checked, and her eyes were wet with the tears that gathered against her will. But, realising that her mind was wavering through excess affection, she turned away from him, and turned to look at her sister's face again, till, gazing at both in turn, she said 'Why should the one be able to speak his endearments, while the other is silent, her tongue torn out? Though he calls me mother, why can she not call me sister? Look at the husband you are bride to, Pandion's daughter! This is unworthy of you! Affection is criminal in a wife of Tereus'

Without delay, she dragged Itys off, as a tigress does an un-weaned fawn, in the dark forests of the Ganges. As they reached a remote part of the great palace, Procne, with an unchanging expression, struck him with a knife, in the side close to the heart, while he stretched out his hands, knowing his fate at the last, crying out 'Mother! Mother!', and reaching out for her neck. That one wound was probably enough to seal his fate, but

Philomela opened his throat with the knife. While the limbs were still warm, and retained some life, they tore them to pieces. Part bubble in bronze cauldrons, part hiss on the spit: and the distant rooms drip with grease.

The wife invites the unsuspecting Tereus to the feast, and giving out that it is a sacred rite, practised in her country, where it is only lawful for the husband to be present, she sends away their followers and servants. Tereus eats by himself, seated in his tall ancestral chair, and fills his belly with his own child. And in the darkness of his understanding cries 'Fetch Itys here'.

### **Bk VI:653-674 They are transformed into birds**

Procne cannot hide her cruel exultation, and now, eager to be, herself, the messenger of destruction, she cries 'You have him there, inside, the one you ask for.' He looks around and questions where the boy is. And then while he is calling out and seeking him, Philomela, springs forward, her hair wet with the dew of that frenzied murder, and hurls the bloodstained head of Itys in his father's face. Nor was there a time when she wished more strongly to have the power of speech, and to declare her exultation in fitting words.

The Thracian king pushed back the table with a great cry, calling on the Furies, the snake-haired sisters of the vale of Styx. Now if he could, he would tear open his body, and reveal the dreadful substance of the feast, and his half-consumed child. Then he weeps, and calls himself the sepulchre of his unhappy son, and now pursues, with naked sword, the daughters of Pandion.

You might think the Athenian women have taken wing: they have taken wings. One of them, a nightingale, Procne, makes for the woods. The other, a swallow, Philomela, flies to the eaves of the palace, and even now her throat has not lost the stain of that murder, and the soft down bears witness to the blood. Tereus swift in his grief and desire for revenge, is himself changed to a bird, with a feathered crest on its head. An immoderate, elongated, beak juts out, like a long spear. The name of the bird is the hoopoe, and it looks as though it is armed.

### **Bk X:243-297 Orpheus sings: Pygmalion and the statue**

'Pygmalion had seen them, spending their lives in wickedness, and, offended by the failings that nature gave the female heart, he lived as a bachelor, without a wife or partner for his bed. But, with wonderful skill, he carved a figure, brilliantly, out of snow-white ivory, no mortal woman, and fell in love with his own creation. The features are those of a real girl, who, you might think, lived, and wished to move, if modesty did not forbid it. Indeed, art hides his art. He marvels: and passion, for this bodily image, consumes his heart. Often, he runs his hands over the work, tempted as to whether it is flesh or ivory, not admitting it to be ivory. He kisses it and thinks his kisses are returned; and speaks to it; and holds it, and imagines that his fingers press into the limbs, and is afraid lest bruises appear from the pressure. Now he addresses it with compliments, now brings it gifts that please girls, shells and polished pebbles, little birds, and many-coloured flowers, lilies and tinted beads, and the Heliades's amber tears, that drip from the trees. He dresses the body, also, in clothing; places rings on the fingers; places a long necklace round its neck; pearls hang from the ears, and cinctures round the breasts. All are fitting: but it appears no less lovely, naked. He arranges the statue on a bed on which cloths dyed

with Tyrian murex are spread, and calls it his bedfellow, and rests its neck against soft down, as if it could feel.

The day of Venus's festival came, celebrated throughout Cyprus, and heifers, their curved horns gilded, fell, to the blow on their snowy neck. The incense was smoking, when Pygmalion, having made his offering, stood by the altar, and said, shyly: "If you can grant all things, you gods, I wish as a bride to have..." and not daring to say "the girl of ivory" he said "one like my ivory girl." Golden Venus, for she herself was present at the festival, knew what the prayer meant, and as a sign of the gods' fondness for him, the flame flared three times, and shook its crown in the air. When he returned, he sought out the image of his girl, and leaning over the couch, kissed her. She felt warm: he pressed his lips to her again, and also touched her breast with his hand. The ivory yielded to his touch, and lost its hardness, altering under his fingers, as the bees' wax of Hymettus softens in the sun, and is moulded, under the thumb, into many forms, made usable by use. The lover is stupefied, and joyful, but uncertain, and afraid he is wrong, reaffirms the fulfilment of his wishes, with his hand, again, and again.

It was flesh! The pulse throbbed under his thumb. Then the hero, of Paphos, was indeed overfull of words with which to thank Venus, and still pressed his mouth against a mouth that was not merely a likeness. The girl felt the kisses he gave, blushed, and, raising her bashful eyes to the light, saw both her lover and the sky. The goddess attended the marriage that she had brought about, and when the moon's horns had nine times met at the full, the woman bore a son, Paphos, from whom the island takes its name.'

### **Bk X:298-355 Orpheus sings: Myrrha's incestuous love for Cinyras**

'Cinyras was the son of Paphos, and he might have been counted amongst the fortunate, if he, in turn, had been childless. I speak of terrible things. Fathers and daughters, keep away: or if your mind takes pleasure in my song, put no faith in this story of mine, and imagine it did not happen. Or, if you do believe it, believe in the punishment also, that it brought. If nature, however, allows such crimes to be visible, then I give thanks that the people of Thrace, this city, and this land, are far from the regions where such sin is born. Let the land of Panchaia, beyond Araby, produce its balsam, cinnamon, costmary; its incense, exuded from the trees; its flowers different from ours; if it produces myrrh: a strange tree is not worth such a price.

Cupid denies that his arrows hurt you, Myrrha, and clears his fires of blame for your crime. One of the three sisters, the Furies, with her swollen snakes, and firebrand from the Styx, breathed on you. It is wrong to hate your father, but that love was a greater wrong than hatred. The pick of the princes, from everywhere, desire you: young men, from the whole of the East, come to win you in marriage. Out of the many, choose one for your husband, Myrrha, but let one man not be amongst the many.

Indeed, she knows it, and fights against her disgraceful passion, and says, to herself: "Where is my thought leading? What am I creating? You gods, I pray, and the duty and sacred laws respecting parents, prevent this wickedness, and oppose my sin, indeed, if sin it is. But it can be said that duty declines to condemn such love. Other creatures mate indiscriminately: it is no disgrace for a heifer to have her sire mount her, for his filly to be a stallion's mate: the goat goes with the flocks he has made, and the birds themselves conceive, by him whose seed conceived them. Happy the creatures who are allowed to do so! Human concern has made malign laws, and what nature allows, jealous duty forbids.



Yet they say there are races where mother and son, and father and daughter, pair off, and affection is increased by a double bond. Alas for me, that I did not happen to be born there, and that I am made to suffer by an accident of place! – Why do I repeat these things? Forbidden hopes, vanish! He is worth loving, but only as a father. – I could lie with Cinyras, if I were not Cinyras’s already. Now, he is not mine, because he is already mine, and the nearness of our relationship damns me: I would be better off as a stranger. I would be happy to go far away, and leave the borders of my homeland behind me, if I might run from evil: but even if nothing more is permitted, a wicked desire to see Cinyras, touch him, speak to him, and kiss him, face to face, prevents my leaving. But then, what more might you look to have, impious girl? Do you realise how many names and ties you are throwing into confusion? Would you be, then, your mother’s rival, and your father’s mistress? Would you be known, then, as your son’s sister, your brother’s mother? Do you not fear the three sisters, with black snaky hair, that those with guilty hearts, their eyes and mouths attacked with cruel torches, see? Since you have still not committed sin in the flesh, do not conceive it in your mind, or disregard the prohibitions of mighty nature, in vile congress! Grant that you want it: the reality itself forbids it. He is a good man, and mindful of the moral law – but, O, how I wish the same passion were in him!’

### **Bk X:356-430 Orpheus sings: Myrrha and her nurse**

‘She spoke: Cinyras, however, who was made doubtful of what to do by the crowd of noble suitors, naming them, asked her whom she wanted, as a husband.

At first she is silent, and staring at her father’s face, hesitates, her eyes filling with warm tears. Cinyras thinking this to be virgin shyness, forbids her to cry, dries her cheeks, and kisses her on the lips. Myrrha is overjoyed at this gift, and, being consulted as to what kind of husband she might choose, says: “Someone like you”. Not understanding this, however, he praises her, saying: “Always be so loving.” At the word “loving”, the girl, lowers her glance, conscious of her sin.

It was midnight, and sleep had released mortal flesh from worldly cares, but Cinyras’s daughter, wakeful, stirring the embers, reawakens her ungovernable desires, one moment despairing, at another willing to try, ashamed and eager, not yet discovering what to do. As a tall tree, struck by the axe, the last blow remaining, uncertain how it will fall, causes fear on all sides, so her fickle mind, swayed this way and that, her thought taking both directions, seeing no rest for or end to her passion, but death. She felt ready to die.

She got up, determined, to fix a noose round her throat, and, fastening a cord to the doorway’s crossbeam, she said: “Goodbye, dear Cinyras, and realize the reason for my death!” And she tied the rope around her bloodless neck. They say that the murmured words came to the ears of her loyal nurse, who watched at her foster-child’s threshold.

The old woman gets up, and opens the door, and, seeing the equipment of death, cries out, and in the same moment, strikes her breast, snatches at the folds of her robe, and tearing the noose from the girl’s neck, pulls it apart. Then, finally, she has time to cry, to embrace her, and demand the reason for the rope. The girl is mute and still, looking, fixedly, at the ground, and unhappy that her belated attempt at death has been discovered. The old woman insists on knowing, baring her white hair and withered breasts, and begs her to say what grieves her, invoking her infant cradle, and first nurturing.

The girl turns away from her pleading, with a sigh. The nurse is determined to know, and promises more than loyalty. “Tell me,” She says, “and let me bring you some

help: age does not slow me. If it is some frenzy, I have herbs and charms that heal: if someone is seeking your harm, I will purify you with magic rites: if the gods are angry, anger is appeased by sacrifice. What else could it be? The destiny of your house is fortunate, and on course: they are well, your mother and father.”

Hearing the word “father”, Myrrha sighed deeply. Even then the nurse had no idea of the sin in her mind, though she guessed it might be some love affair. She begged her, tenaciously, to tell her what it was, and took the weeping girl to her aged breast, and holding her with trembling arms she said: “I know, you are in love! And in this matter (have no fear) my diligence can serve you, your father will never know.” The frenzied girl leapt from her arms, and burying her face in the bed, said, urgently: “Go, I beg you, and forgo the knowledge of my wretched shame! Go, or stop asking why I am grieving. What you are striving to know, is wickedness.” The old woman shuddered, and stretching out her hands that trembled with age and fear, she fell at her foster-child’s feet, pleading, then coaxing, then frightening her, into making her party to it. She threatens her with the evidence of the noose, and the attempt on her life, and promises her help in her love affair. The girl raises her head, and her welling tears rain on her nurse’s breast. She often tries to confess, and often stops herself, and hides her face, in shame, in her clothing: then gets as far as “Mother, you are happy in your husband!” and sighs.

A shudder of cold penetrated the nurse’s flesh and bone (now she understood) and her white hair stiffened all over her head. She told her at length, to banish, if she could, this fatal passion. Though the girl knew she was being advised rightly, she was still determined to die, if she could not possess her love. “Live,” said the nurse, “possess your...” - and did not dare say: “father”. She was silent, and confirmed her promise in the sight of heaven.’

### **Bk X:431-502 Orpheus sings: Myrrha’s crime and punishment**

“The married women were celebrating that annual festival of Ceres, when, with their bodies veiled in white robes, they offer the first fruits of the harvest, wreathes of corn, and, for nine nights, treat sexual union, and the touch of a man, as forbidden. Cenchreis, the king’s wife was among the crowd, frequenting the sacred rites. Finding Cinyras drunk with wine, the king’s bed empty of his lawful partner, the nurse, wrongly diligent, told him of one who truly loved him, giving him a fictitious name, and praised her beauty. He, asking the girl’s age, she said: “Myrrha’s is the same.” After she had been ordered to bring her, and had reached home, she said: “Be happy, my child, we have won!” The unhappy girl felt no joy at all in her heart, and her heart prophetically mourned, yet she was still glad: such was her confusion of mind.

It was the hour, when all is silent, and Boötes, between the Bears, had turned his wagon, with downward-pointing shaft: she approached the sinful act. The golden moon fled the sky; black clouds covered the hidden stars; night lacked its fires. You, Icarius, and you, Erigone, his daughter, immortalised for your pious love of your father, hid your faces first. Myrrha was checked by an omen, three times, when her foot stumbled: three times, the gloomy screech owl gave her warning, with its fatal cry: she still went on, her shame made less by blindness and black night. With her left hand, she kept tight hold of her nurse, groping with the other she found a way through the dark.

Now she reaches the threshold of the room, now she opens the door, now is led inside. But her trembling knees give way, her colour flees with her blood, and thought vanishes as she goes forward. The closer she is to her sin, the more she shudders at it,

repents of her audacity, and wants to be able to turn back, unrecognised. When she hesitated, the old woman took her by the hand, and, leading her to the high bed, delivered her up, saying: "Take her Cinyras, she is yours", uniting their accursed flesh. The father admitted his own child into the incestuous bed, calmed her virgin fears, and encouraged her timidity. Perhaps he also said the name, "daughter", in accordance with her age, and she said, "father", so that their names were not absent from their sin.

She left the room impregnated by her father, bearing impious seed in her fatal womb, carrying the guilt she had conceived. The next night the crime was repeated: nor did it finish there. Eventually, Cinyras, eager to discover his lover after so many couplings, fetching a light, saw his daughter and his guilt, and speechless from grief, he snatched his bright sword out of the sheath it hung in. Myrrha ran, escaping death, by the gift of darkness and secret night. Wandering the wide fields, she left the land of Panchaea, and palm-bearing Arabia, behind, and after roaming through nine returns of the crescent moon, weary, she rested at last in the land of the Sabaeans.

Now she could scarcely bear the weight of her womb. Tired of living, and scared of dying, not knowing what to pray for, she composed these words of entreaty: "O, if there are any gods who hear my prayer, I do not plead against my well deserved punishment, but lest, by being, I offend the living, or, by dying, offend the dead, banish me from both realms, and change me, and deny me life and death!" Some god listened to her prayer: certainly the last request found its path to the heavens. While she was still speaking, the soil covered her shins; roots, breaking from her toes, spread sideways, supporting a tall trunk; her bones strengthened, and in the midst of the remaining marrow, the blood became sap; her arms became long branches; her fingers, twigs; her skin, solid bark. And now the growing tree had drawn together over her ponderous belly, buried her breasts, and was beginning to encase her neck: she could not bear the wait, and she sank down against the wood, to meet it, and plunged her face into the bark.

Though she has lost her former senses with her body, she still weeps, and the warm drops trickle down from the tree. There is merit, also, in the tears: and the myrrh that drips from the bark keeps its mistress's name, and, about it, no age will be silent.'

### **Bk X:503-559 Orpheus sings: Venus and Adonis**

'The child, conceived in sin, had grown within the tree, and was now searching for a way to leave its mother, and reveal itself. The pregnant womb swells within the tree trunk, the burden stretching the mother. The pain cannot form words, nor can Lucina be called on, in the voice of a woman in labour. Nevertheless the tree bends, like one straining, and groans constantly, and is wet with falling tears. Gentle Lucina stood by the suffering branches, and laid her hands on them, speaking words that aid childbirth. At this the tree split open, and, from the torn bark, gave up its living burden, and the child cried. The naiads laid him on the soft grass, and anointed him with his mother's tears. Even Envy would praise his beauty, being so like one of the torsos of naked Amor painted on boards. But to stop them differing in attributes, you must add a light quiver, for him, or take theirs away from them.

Transient time slips by us unnoticed, betrays us, and nothing outpaces the years. That son of his grandfather, sister, now hid in a tree, and now born, then a most beautiful child, then a boy, now a man, now more beautiful than he was before, now interests Venus herself, and avenges his mother's desire. For while the boy, Cupid, with quiver on shoulder, was kissing his mother, he innocently scratched her breast with a loose arrow.

The injured goddess pushed her son away: but the wound he had given was deeper than it seemed, and deceived her at first. Now captured by mortal beauty, she cares no more for Cythera's shores, nor revisits Paphos, surrounded by its deep waters, nor Cnidos, the haunt of fish, nor Amathus, rich in mines: she even forgoes the heavens: preferring Adonis to heaven.

She holds him, and is his companion, and though she is used to always idling in the shade, and, by cultivating it, enhancing her beauty, she roams mountain ridges, and forests, and thorny cliff-sides, her clothing caught up to the knee, like Diana. And she cheers on the hounds, chasing things safe to hunt, hares flying headlong, stags with deep horns, or their hinds. She avoids the strong wild boars, the ravening wolves, and shuns the bears armed with claws, and the lions glutted with the slaughter of cattle. She warns you Adonis, as if it were ever effective to warn, to fear them too, saying: "Be bold when they run, but bravery is unsafe when faced with the brave. Do not be foolish, beware of endangering me, and do not provoke the creatures nature has armed, lest your glory is to my great cost. Neither youth nor beauty, nor the charms that affect Venus, affect lions or bristling boars or the eyes and minds of other wild creatures. Boars have the force of a fierce lightning bolt in their curving tusks, and so does the attack of tawny lions, in their huge anger: the whole tribe are hateful to me."

When he asks her why, she says: "I will tell, and you will wonder, at the monstrous result of an ancient crime. But now the unaccustomed effort tires me, and, look, a poplar tree entices us with its welcome shade, and the turf yields a bed. I should like to rest here on the ground," (and she rested) "with you." She hugged the grass, and him, and leaning her head against the breast of the reclining youth, she spoke these words, interspersing them with kisses:

### **Bk X:560-637 Venus tells her story: Atalanta and Hippomenes**

' "Perhaps you have heard of a girl who beat the fastest men at running: that was no idle tale, she did win. Nor could you say whether her speed or her beauty was more deserving of high praise. Enquiring of the god, about a husband, the god replied: 'You don't need a husband, Atalanta: run from the necessity for a husband. Nevertheless, you will not escape, and, still living, you will not be yourself.' Afraid of the god's oracle, she lived in the dark forests, unmarried, and fled from the crowd of insistent suitors, setting harsh conditions: 'I will not be won, till I am beaten in running. Compete in the foot-race with me. Wife and bed will be given as prizes to the swift, death to the tardy: let those be the rules.'

Truly she was pitiless, but (such was the power of her beauty) a rash crowd of suitors came, despite the rules. Hippomenes had taken his seat as a spectator at the unjust contest, and said 'Who would try for a wife at such a risk?' condemning the young men for their excess of passion. But when he saw her face and her unclothed body, one like mine, Adonis, or like yours if you were a woman, he was stunned. Stretching out his hands, he said: 'Forgive me, you, that I just blamed! I had not yet realised what the prize was you were after.' Praising her, he falls in love with her, and hopes none of the youths run faster, afraid, through jealousy. 'But why, in this competition, is my luck left untested?' he says. The god himself favours the bold!

While Hippomenes was debating with himself like this, the virgin girl sped by on winged feet. To the Aonian youth she flew like a Scythian arrow, yet it made him admire her beauty all the more. The race gave her a beauty of its own. The breeze blew the

streaming feathers on her speeding sandals behind her, and her hair was thrown back from her ivory shoulders. Ribbons with embroidered edges fluttered at her knees, and a blush spread over the girlish whiteness of her body, just as when a red awning over a white courtyard stains it with borrowed shadows. While the stranger was watching this, the last marker was passed, and the victorious Atalanta was crowned with a festive garland, while the losers, groaning, paid the penalty according to their bond.

Undeterred by the youths' fate, Hippomenes stepped forward and, fixing his gaze on the girl, said 'Why seek an easy win beating the lazy? Race me. If fortune makes me the master, it will be no shame for you to be outpaced by such a man as me, since Megareus of Onchestus is my father, and his grandfather was Neptune, so I am the great-grandson of the king of the ocean, and my courage is no less than my birth. Or if I am beaten, you will have a great and renowned name for defeating Hippomenes.' As he spoke Schoeneus's daughter looked at him with a softening expression, uncertain whether she wanted to win or lose, and said to herself: 'What god, envious of handsome youths, wants to destroy this one and send him in search of marriage, at the risk of his own dear life? I am not worth that much, I think. Nor is it his beauty that moves me (yet I could be touched by that too) but that he is still only a boy. He does not move me himself: it is his youth. What if he does have courage, and a spirit unafraid of dying? What if he is fourth in line from the ruler of the seas? What if he does love, and thinks so much of marriage with me, that he would die, if a harsh fate denies me to him? While you can, stranger, leave this blood-soaked marrying. Wedding me is a cruel thing. No one will refuse to have you, and you may be chosen by a wiser girl. – Yet why this concern when so many have already died before you?

Let him look out for himself! Let him perish, since he has not been warned off by the death of so many suitors, and shows himself tired of life. – Should he die, then, because he wants to live with me, and suffer an unjust death as the penalty for loving? My victory would not avoid incurring hatred. But it is not my fault! I wish you would desist, or if you are set on it, I wish you might be the faster! How the virginal expression of a boy clings to his face! O! Poor Hippomenes, I wish you had never seen me! You were so fitted to live. But if I were luckier, if the harsh fates did not prevent my marriage, you would be the one I would want to share my bed with.' She spoke: and inexperienced, feeling the touch of desire for the first time, not knowing what she does, she loves and does not realise she loves."'

### **Bk X:638-680 Venus tells her story: The foot-race**

“Now her father and the people were calling out for the usual foot-race, when Hippomenes, Neptune's descendant invoked my aid, as a suppliant: 'Cytherea, I beg you to assist my daring, and encourage the fire of love you lit.' A kindly breeze brought me the flattering prayer, and I confess it stirred me, though there was scant time to give him my help. There is a field, the people there call it the field of Tamasus, the richest earth in the island of Cyprus, which the men of old made sacred to me, and ordered it to be added to my temples, as a gift. A tree gleams in the middle of the field, with rustling golden leaves, and golden branches. Come from there, by chance, I was carrying three golden apples, I had picked, in my hands, and I approached Hippomenes, showing myself only to him, and told him how to use them.

The trumpets gave the signal, and, leaning forward, they flashed from the starting line, and skimmed the surface of the sand, with flying feet. You would think them capable

of running along the waves without wetting them, and passing over the ripened heads of the standing corn. The young man's spirit was cheered by shouts and words of encouragement: 'Run, Hippomenes! Now, now is the time to sprint! Use your full power, now! Don't wait: you'll win!'

Who knows whether Megareus's heroic son, or Schoeneus's daughter, was more pleased with these words? O how often, when she could have overtaken him, she lingered, and watching his face for a while, left him behind against her will! Panting breath came from his weary throat, and the winning post was far off. Only then did Neptune's scion throw away one of the fruits from the tree. The girl was astonished, and, eager for the shining apple, she ran off the course, and picked up the spinning gold. Hippomenes passed her: the stands resounded with the applause. She made up for the delay and the lost time by a burst of speed, and left the youth behind once more. Again she delayed when a second apple was thrown, followed, and passed the man. The last section of track was left. 'Now,' he said, 'be near me, goddess who made me this gift!' He threw the shining gold vigorously, sideways, into the deep field, from where she would take longer to get back. The girl seemed to hesitate as to whether she should chase it: I made her pick it up, and added weight to the fruit she held, and obstructed her equally with the heaviness of the burden and the delay. And lest my story be longer than the race itself, the virgin was overtaken: the winner led away his prize."'

### **Bk X:681-707 Venus tells her story: The transformation**

' "Adonis, did I deserve to be thanked, to have incense brought me? Unthinking, he neither gave thanks, nor offered incense to me. I was provoked to sudden anger, and pained by his contempt, so as not to be slighted in future, I decreed an example would be made of them, and I roused myself against them both.

They were passing a temple, hidden in the deep woods, of Cybele mother of the gods, that noble Echion had built in former times fulfilling a vow, and the length of their journey persuaded them to rest. There, stirred by my divine power, an untimely desire to make love seized Hippomenes. Near the temple was a poorly lit hollow, like a cave, roofed with the natural pumice-stone, sacred to the old religion, where the priests had gathered together wooden figures of the ancient gods. They entered it, and desecrated the sanctuary, with forbidden intercourse. The sacred images averted their gaze, and the Great Mother, with the turreted crown, hesitated as to whether to plunge the guilty pair beneath the waters of the Styx: but the punishment seemed too light. So tawny manes spread over their necks, that, a moment ago, were smooth; their fingers curved into claws; forelegs were formed from arms; all their weight was in their breast; and their tails swept the surface of the sand. They had a fierce expression, roared instead of speaking, and frequented the woods for a marriage-bed. As lions, fearful to others, they tamely bite on Cybele's bit. You must avoid, them, my love, and with them all the species of wild creature, that do not turn and run, but offer their breasts to the fight, lest your courage be the ruin of us both!"'

### **Bk X:708-739 Orpheus sings: The death of Adonis**

'She warned him, and made her way through the air, drawn by harnessed swans, but his courage defied the warning. By chance, his dogs, following a well-marked trail, roused a wild boar from its lair, and as it prepared to rush from the trees, Cinyras's

grandson caught it a glancing blow. Immediately the fierce boar dislodged the blood-stained spear, with its crooked snout, and chased the youth, who was scared and running hard. It sank its tusk into his groin, and flung him, dying, on the yellow sand.

Cytherea, carried in her light chariot through the midst of the heavens, by her swans' swiftness, had not yet reached Cyprus: she heard from afar the groans of the dying boy, and turned the white birds towards him. When, from the heights, she saw the lifeless body, lying in its own blood, she leapt down, tearing her clothes, and tearing at her hair, as well, and beat at her breasts with fierce hands, complaining to the fates. "And yet not everything is in your power" she said. "Adonis, there shall be an everlasting token of my grief, and every year an imitation of your death will complete a re-enactment of my mourning. But your blood will be changed into a flower. Persephone, you were allowed to alter a woman's body, Menthe's, to fragrant mint: shall the transformation of my hero, of the blood of Cinyras, be grudged to me?" So saying, she sprinkled the blood with odorous nectar: and, at the touch, it swelled up, as bubbles emerge in yellow mud. In less than an hour, a flower, of the colour of blood, was created such as pomegranates carry, that hide their seeds under a tough rind. But enjoyment of it is brief; for, lightly clinging, and too easily fallen, the winds deflower it, which are likewise responsible for its name, windflower: *anemone*.