

I will achieve more than Phoenix, more than fluent Ulysses,
 more than Teucer's brother Ajax, you can be sure. 130
 It will mean something that I've touched his neck as a lover,
 and for him to see me in person again.
 You may be more violent than the waves of your mother,
 but my silence alone will wear you down.

But still—so may Peleus, your father, live to a ripe old age,
 and your son Pyrrhus match you in arms—
 show some pity, Achilles, for your anxious Briseis,
 and don't torment me with drawn-out delay.
 Or, if your passion for me has turned into tedium, 140
 force her death whom you force to live without you.
 That is what you are doing. My body and complexion are fading,
 my spirit sustained only by hope in you.
 If I lose that I will rejoin my brothers and husband,
 and bidding a woman die will be your great deed.
 But why bid me die? Why not just set steel to my body?
 Breast pierced, I have blood to let flow.
 Strike me with the same sword that if Athena had let it
 would have gone into the chest of Atreus's son!

No, spare my life. What you gave to your foe as victor,
 I now request from you as your friend. 150
 Neptunian Troy can provide you with better victims.
 Look to your enemy for someone to kill.
 Only, whether you decide to set sail or remain here,
 by your right as my lord, bid me to come!

HEROIDES IV: PHAEDRA TO HIPPOLYTUS

Phaedra is in love with her stepson, Hippolytus, who has pledged his chastity to the virgin goddess Diana. While her husband, Theseus, is away, Phaedra writes to Hippolytus to confess her love.

A Cretan girl wishes you well, O Amazonian man,
 although her own wellness lies in your hands.
 Read closely—what harm is there in letters being read?
 You might even find a word or two you like.
 Carried over land and sea, these notes contain my secrets.
 An enemy welcomes his enemy's every word . . .

Now, three attempts my tongue has made, and three times it clings useless.
 Three times the sound gets caught at the edge of my lip.
 Shame must be mixed with love wherever it is permitted.
 What shame forbids me to speak, Love demands I write, 10
 and those who spurn Love's commands find no asylum—
 he is king, and every god beholden to his law.
 As I was wavering unsure, he told me, "Write!" He told me,
 "Write! That iron man will lift conquered hands."
 Let Love now be close at hand, light his flames within my marrow
 and hammer my prayers deep into your thoughts.
 I will not break my wedding vows for mere frivolity.
 My reputation? Free of flaws, immaculate.

But Love comes just as fierce as he comes late. I am burning,
 burning, my chest is riddled with blind wounds. 20
 As colts first taken from the herd can scarce endure the bit,
 as calves' first yoke will chafe the tender flesh,
 a callow heart will only submit to its first love bucking.
 My soul squirms beneath the awkward weight.
 Love becomes an art when from a tender age it is studied.
 And she loves all the worse, whom Love finds late.

The first libation is for you, a well-kempt reputation
 at your lips, sip, sip, and we'll share the guilt.
 What a rush tugging fruit from orchards' ripe-bent boughs,
 to slip your nail beneath a budding rose and pluck! 30
 But if the innocent white canvas of my character
 must be marred by an unfamiliar stain,
 well, then, I burn in a worthy flame, and that is a triumph.
 Worse than adultery are adulterers who are foul.
 If Juno offered me her brother and her husband,
 I think I'd choose Hippolytus over Jove.

And now I'm flung into new arts—beyond imagination—
 some impulse drives me to walk with wild beasts.
 And now my goddess is Delia, who is known for her hooked bow.
 I copy your opinions, convictions, and taste: 40
 It brings me joy to step into the grove, coax the scampering
 deer into snares, my hounds up in the hills,
 to launch from brute-pitched arm the spear so it trembles,
 or just to feel my body on the grass.
 Delight, I turn my car, I turn up dust, I take a breathless
 horse and wrench his mouth with the bit.
 I'm moved like those who twitch the tambourine beneath Ida,
 moved like Eleleides are moved to Bacchic rage,
 I'm moved like those lit wild, infected by the divinity
 of half-god Dryads and double-horned Fauns. 50
 At least, this is what they tell me once the rage has receded.
 I stay silent, scalded hush by guilty love.

Perhaps this is the fate of all my family. Venus
 asks for tribute, and we each must pay in love.
 Europa, the first of my line, was chosen by Jupiter,
 a god hid in bull skin, all sinew and musk.
 My mother lay beneath an unobservant bullock,
 and from her womb pushed her burden and guilt.
 Out from the curving confines of the maze, my sister led
 unfaithful Aegides with guiding thread. 60
 And here I am, proving I'm a true daughter of Minos,
 latest heir to the laws governing my race.

This, too, was fated: your one house has won two hearts.
 I am caught by your beauty, my sister by your sire's.
 Theseus and Theseus's son have stolen away two sisters—
 claim your twin trophies from our house.

If only in that moment when I set forth for Eleusis,
 my Gnosian land had reached up to hold me back,
 for it was that moment above all, though I liked you before then,
 when corrosive love sank deep into my bones. 70
 Your robe was white, your mop of hair circled by flowers,
 and modesty blooming ruddy on gold cheeks.
 Your face, which others call stern and fearsome,
 to Phaedra was not stern, but strong.
 You youths stood far away, dolled up as though women.
 Man's beauty loves to be arrayed, within limit.
 But you are graced by your sternness, by your untamed
 hair, by the thin film of dust lit on your face.
 And if you wrench the straining neck of your wild stallion,
 I marvel at the neat circles made by his hooves. 80
 Your wild arm alone commands my attention
 whenever you hurl forth the limber shaft
 or grip the hunting spear, the horn with the wide iron.
 My eyes delight in everything you do.

But lay down your ruggedness only in ridged woodland,
 for I am not worthy of your crusade.
 Why do you practice the ways of wreathed Diana
 and pilfer from Venus's ranks?
 Nothing can survive that does not rest on occasion. 90
 Rest restores vigor and renews weary limbs.
 Your bow—for even your weapons echo Diana—
 will go soft if you never stop pulling it taut.

Many a beast fell dead in the grass by the hand of Cephalus,
 who in his time was very famous in the woods.
 Aurora would go to him from her wrinkled old husband.
 He gave himself as a lover and it was good.

Often was some patch of grass pressed flat under Venus
 and Adonis, two bodies splayed beneath the oaks,
 and Oenides burned for Maenalian Atalanta—
 she has the boar skin as pledge of his love. 100
 Let us join their numbers now, let us join them all quickly!
 Your forest without Venus is just a rustic place.
 I will come as your companion without a flinch at skulking
 craig or fearsome, crook-toothed boar.

An isthmus lies besieged by the heave of twin seas crashing.
 This ribbon of land listens to one in either ear.
 There I will tend Troezen soil by your side, the Pittheian kingdoms
 already dearer to me than my homeland.
 Neptune's hero is gone and will be gone for a long time now.
 The shores of his Pirithous hold him back. 110
 We cannot deny clear proof: Theseus chose Pirithous
 over me and Pirithous over you.
 Nor is this the only wrong he has inflicted.
 We both have been injured deeply by him.
 My brother, bludgeoned to death. His bones in shards on the ground.
 My sister, discarded, waiting prey for feral mouths.
 The woman who made you, la crème of the ax-swinging girls,
 a worthy mother to so vigorous a son,
 where is she now? Theseus drove his sword between her ribs!
 Your mother's pledge was not enough to keep her safe. 120
 She was not even married, not met by nuptial torch—why?
 So no bastard boy could take his father's throne.
 Through me and my womb he has given you brothers,
 but keeps the right to raise them for himself.
 If only my soft innards had burst in childbirth, the innards
 now bent on harming you, you gorgeous thing.
 Go now and honor the bed of your worthy father—
 the bed he flees and disowns through his deeds.
 I may look like a stepmother lusting after her stepson,
 but let your soul not be frightened by empty names. 130

This bygone piety, which will die in the coming ages,
 was old-fashioned even when Saturn was king.
 Jove himself has decreed: whatever's pleasing is pious,
 and sister wedding brother made all god's law.
 But the chain that would bend one lineage back on itself
 is only sound when it is Venus welding knots.

Even if we did stray and sin, concealing love is not difficult,
 for our guilt will be veiled by the name of kin.
 Any witness to our embraces will only bring us more praises.
 They will say I am a wonderful stepmother! 140
 For you, there'll be no dour husband's door that needs unlatching
 in the shadows, no guard you must deceive.
 Just as this house has held us both, it will go on doing so.
 Openly, you kissed me. Openly, you will kiss me.
 With me you'll be untouchable, and if they catch you
 in my bed, they'll praise you for your crime.

Now stop delaying and join me in a speedy covenant.
 May Love, which rages against me, pity you!
 I don't disdain to be a humble supplicant in prayer.
 Oh god! Where is my pride? My lofty words? 150
 I was resolute (if anything of love is resolute!)
 to endure, raise up my fists, never submit.
 But conquered now, I pray. A queen's arms are reaching
 for your knees. Lovers are blind to decorum.
 Shame has deserted me and abandoned its standards.
 Forgive my confession and tame your hard heart!
 What of Minos, who is lord of the seas and my father?
 What of lightning slung from my forefather's hand?
 Or my grandfather, who moves tepid day on shining axle,
 pointed sunbeams fencing in his brow? 160
 Nobility is pinned beneath Love. Pity those who came before us,
 and if you cannot spare me, spare my line.
 This island Crete, this land of Jove, is my dowry—
 let all my kingdom serve Hippolytus.

Turn your heart, wild man. A bull was seduced by my mother.
Will you be more unfeeling than a bull?

By Venus, the goddess greatest to me now, I pray that you have mercy.

May you never love a woman who would spurn you, yes,
may the nimble goddess join you, yes, deep in hidden glade,
may the forest bare for you her wild things to kill, 170
yes, may the Satyrs favor you, Pans, the mountain gods, too,
may the boar pierced by your spear fall dead,
may the Nymphs, although you hate girls, share their waters
and so lessen your withering thirst.
I add tears to my prayers. You can only read my prayers'
words, but try to picture me crying.

HEROIDES V: OENONE TO PARIS

The nymph Oenone writes to her husband, Paris, whom she had married before his royal heritage was recognized. Oenone discovers his betrayal with the arrival of his new wife, Helen.

Will you read this through, or does your new wife forbid it?

Just read it. It's not written by a Greek
but by Oenone the fountain nymph, well-known in Phrygia,
wronged by you but, if you will, still yours.

What divinity has decided to oppose me?

What have I done that I may not remain yours?

We must bear lightly whatever we deserve to suffer,
but unearned anguish is nothing but woe.

You weren't so mighty when I decided to wed you—

I, a nymph sprung from a truly great stream.

Let's not mince words. Though you are now a son of Priam,
you were then a slave, wed by me, a nymph. 10

We have often lain among our flocks in the forest
where grass mixed with leaves provided a couch,
often lain upon straw or upon the deep haystack
of a hut that sheltered us from the frost.

Who else but me showed you the best hunting grounds
and the dens where she-bears hid their cubs?

I have often helped you to stretch out the hunting nets
and to lead the hounds over the long ridge. 20

You can still see my name that you carved in the beeches,
OENONE inscribed there by your hunting knife,

[two spurious lines omitted]

and as the trees grow, my name also grows greater. 25
Grow high, trees, and make my name known!