

You weren't there to raise me, and when I was to marry
 no mother helped me prepare the nuptial bed.
 I went to meet you when you came back, and I'm not lying,
 I didn't recognize my own mother's face.
 I knew you were Helen because of your great beauty,
 but you had to ask who your daughter was. 100

I've had one stroke of luck: being married to Orestes,
 but I'll lose him too if he doesn't fight for what's his.
 Pyrrhus holds me captive though my father returns a victor—
 this is my reward for the fall of Troy!
 When Titan drives his radiant steed through the heavens
 I am still wretched but somewhat free.
 But when the dark of night sends me wailing to my chamber
 and I fall lamenting on my bitter bed,
 then weeping overwhelms me rather than slumber,
 and I shrink from my bedmate as from a foe. 110
 I am often so distressed I forget with whom I am sleeping
 and unconsciously touch the Scyrian's limbs.
 But when I realize the sin, I draw away from the contact
 and feel that I have polluted my hand.
 Instead of "Neoptolemus," I often come out with "Orestes,"
 and treasure the mistake as a good omen.

By our unhappy lineage and by its Father,
 who shakes land and sea and His realms above,
 by the bones of your father—my uncle—which are indebted
 to your bravery that they lie entombed avenged— 120
 I swear that I will either die young or live as a Tantalid
 married to a man from Tantalus sprung!

HEROIDES IX: DEIANIRA TO HERCULES

Deianira has accidentally poisoned Hercules, her husband, fearing that he is going to marry his latest lover. She recounts the events that led to her mistake in a letter to Hercules.

I'm pleased that Oechalia has been added to our titles,
 but lament that the winner yields to the won.
 A sudden off-color rumor reaches Pelasgian cities,
 which must now be disproved through your deeds.
 He who couldn't be broken by Juno or the long chain of labors?
 They say Iole's put a yoke on his neck.
 Eurystheus would love this, the Thunderer's sister would love this.
 Your life's ruin makes your stepmother smile.

But *he* is not smiling, who was such a "masterful lover"
 that he needed more than one night locking limbs. 10
 Venus harms you more than Juno! Juno lifts you up by oppressing.
 The other holds her humble foot on your neck.

Don't forget that earth was brought to peace by your protection,
 where sky-blue Nereus skirts far-reaching soils.
 The land's peace owes itself to you, and so do the safe seas.
 Your merits fill both houses of the sun.
 The heaven that will hold you has already been held by you;
 the stars of Atlas twinkled on Hercules's back.

Are you trying to be famous for shamefulfulness,
 sealing your deeds with this foul, final stamp? 20
 Is it you, they say, strangled twin serpents in clenched fists,
 soft in the cradle, already worthy of Jove?
 You began things better than you are ending.
 This man is not the same as that boy.

A thousand beasts could not conquer him, not the Stheneleian enemy,
not Juno herself. But he's been conquered by love!

Still, they say I married well since I am called Hercules's wife
and my in-law thunders with swift horses on high.
As poorly matched bulls carry a plow unbalanced,
a bride inferior to her man will be crushed. 30
This is no honor, but a mirage, threatening the burden's holder.
If you want to wed well, wed your peer.
My husband is always absent, more like a guest than a husband,
he goes wherever there are monsters and beasts.

In a widowed home, I am devoted to chaste prayers,
I am tortured, in fear for his life.
I hurtle between serpents and boars, ravenous lions,
and the dog with three maws clamping down.
I'm haunted by the entrails of our herd, by my dream's hollow images,
and the omens I seek in furtive night. 40
Unhappily, I lie in wait for halting murmurs of gossip,
my fear fades to wavering hope, then hope fades to fear.
Your mother is absent and laments that she pleased god almighty,
your father and our boy Hyllus are away.
Eurystheus is lord by spiteful Juno's cunning—
I feel it—and by the goddess's long wrath.

Is all this too little for me to bear? You amass foreign lovers,
whatever woman you can impregnate.
I won't speak of Auge, raped in Parthian valleys,
or your labor, the Ormenian nymph; 50
We won't count the Teuthranians as a crime, throng of sisters,
although you left not one of them untouched.
One adulteress, a fresh crime, is brought to my attention,
and now I'm stepmother to Lydian Lamus.
Meander, who wanders so many times through the same lands,
often folding limp waters on themselves,
saw a necklace dangle from the neck of Hercules,
the neck on which heaven felt small.

Were you not ashamed to set gemstones on hard muscle,
and to hinder strong biceps with gold? 60
Under these arms, the Nemean pest poured out his spirit,
why your left shoulder is draped in his skin.
You dared to encircle your shaggy head with the turban
when the white poplar better suits Hercules's hair.
Don't you think it unbecoming to wrap the Maeonian girdle
around your body like some promiscuous girl?
Did the image not come to you of bloody Diomedes,
who fed his mares on banquets of men?
If Busiris had ever seen you in that outfit,
the conqueror would make the conquered ashamed. 70
Those necklaces would be snatched from your hard neck by Antaeus,
to avoid the pain of defeat by a soft man.

They say you carried wool baskets with the girls of Ionia,
and you were frightened by your mistress's threats.
One thousand labors won, and your hand is on the basket,
Alcides? Do you not run from this deed?
To weave with sturdy thumb the heavy fibers,
and reweigh your famous mistress's wool?
Ah, how many times while twisting thread with hard fingers
has the spindle crumbled in your hands! 80
Before the feet of your mistress . . .

[two and a half spurious lines omitted]

You told stories you should keep buried away: 84
enormous water snakes with strangled gullets, 85
tails coiling around your infant hand,
the Tegeaeon boar lodged deep in cypress-land, Eurymanthus,
its body's great mass wounding the soil.
The faces fixed to Thracian hearths, the mares fattened
on human gore. You don't leave these stories untold. 90
The triform wonder Geryon, wealthy in Iberian cattle,
like one man but split into three parts,

And into the same number of dogs Cerberus cleft at the torso,
 a viper looming tangled in his hair.
 And the serpent from the fecund wound blooming,
 fertile and by her own losses made rich.
 And hanging at your left between your flank and your arm,
 the burdensome weight with his airways crushed in.
 The equestrian herd, too sure of their double-limbed bodies,
 were expelled from the Thessalian ridge. 100
 Is your tongue not made silent, weighed down by such an outfit?
 Can you speak these words in a Sidonian cape?
 The nymph Omphale adorned herself in your armor and lifted
 famous trophies from her captured man.
 Go now, lift your spirits and count again your brave deeds.
 She did what you could not: be rightfully a man.
 As much as it was greater to conquer you than those you conquered,
 by so much are you lesser than she.
 Your past deeds' measure now passes to her—your girlfriend
 is heir to your glory. Surrender your goods. 110
 Oh shame! Stripped from the ribs of the bristle-haired lion,
 the rough hide now covers her soft flank.
 You've been deceived but don't know it—those spoils are yours,
 not the lion's.
 You are the wild beast's conqueror, and she is yours.
 A *woman* lifted your weapons, black with the Lernaean venom,
 though barely fit to lift a basket of wool.
 She filled her hand with your club, the tamer of wild beasts,
 and saw in the mirror the arms of my man.
 Yes, I had heard these things told, but chose not to believe rumors,
 and the pain traveled soft from my ear to my sense. 120
 But now before my eyes a foreign whore is paraded,
 and my suffering cannot be disguised.
 You won't let me turn away; she passes through midtown,
 a captive I must behold against my will.

She doesn't look like a captive woman, hair disheveled,
 whose fortunes are displayed on her face.
 Her stride is long and from a distance, she is golden, conspicuous,
 just like the outfits you wore out in Phrygia.
 Sublime, she gives her face to the people as though Hercules were
 conquered;
 you'd think Oechalia stood, her father alive. 130
 Maybe she'll be your wife when Deianira is banished
 and the name of "whore" has been set aside;
 an infamous marriage will join the foul bodies
 of Alcides and Iole, Eurytus's child.
 My mind shuns the thought, down my limbs runs a shudder,
 and my hand lies lifeless in my lap.
 I was one of many loves, but your love for me was blameless.
 Don't be sorry. You have fought for me twice.
 Achelous gathered his horns from the riverbank weeping,
 dipped his brow in the marsh waters, maimed. 140
 The half-man Nessus lay still in Evenus, floated with lotuses,
 and the water was darkened by horse blood.
 But why speak these words at all? The rumors have already reached me:
 my husband succumbs to my tunic's decay.
 Oh god! What have I done? Where does rage lead a lover?
 Impious Deianira! Why waver at death's door?
 Will your husband be mangled in the heart of Oeta
 and you, the cause of this evil, survive?
 If any act can prove that I am Hercules's wife,
 it will be my death, our union's pledge. 150
 And you, Meleager, will see your sister within me.
 Impious Deianira! Why waver at death's door?
 Oh! My home! Cursed. Upon our high throne sits Agrios.
 Oeneus is alone, crushed by naked old age.

My brother Tydeus walks some unknown coastline in exile.
The other brother? Placed in the death-fire alive.
My mother drove the iron right through her own middle.
Impious Deianira! Why waver at death's door?

I make this one prayer, by our bed's laws most sacred:

Let me not seem to have plotted your fate.

When Nessus's lusting breast was pierced through by your arrow,
he said: "This blood holds the power of love."

Yes, I sent you my weavings smeared with the venom of Nessus!

Impious Deianira! Why waver at death's door?

And now, goodbye, my old father and Gorge, my sister,
and country, and brother from country deprived,
and you, the freshest and last light in my eyes, today's light, and my
husband—

but oh!—if you could!—and my boy Hyllus, goodbye.

160

HEROIDES X: ARIADNE TO THESEUS

*Theseus has left Ariadne on an island after she helped him defeat the Minotaur.
Upon waking and discovering his absence, Ariadne writes to her lover.*

I've seen all species of beast be sweeter than you are!

I've found the single worst place for my trust.

What you read now, I send from that very same shore
where swollen sails carried you off without me.

That shore where my own sleep turned traitor as you did,
plotting against me while I lay in dreams.

It was that hour of morning when glassy frost smears the land,
and birds start to quibble, cached away in the leaves.

At the lip of consciousness but slow with sleep, I stir,
half on my back, and reach my hands for Theseus . . .

10

There is no one. My hands flinch back. I reach again,
sweeping my arms wide over the bed—no one.

Terror bludgeons out the sleep. I sit up panicking
and fall headlong from the widowed bed.

Clenched fists smack against my chest, fingers wind through hair
and tear at the unruly, matted bedhead.

The moon was there. I squint to see anything but beach,
but everywhere I turn my eye: nothing but beach.

Here, now there, now here again, I run in disarray
as the deep sands sink and slow a girl's feet,
all the while shouting "Theseus!" down the beach.

20

The hollow rocks roll back your name,
and as many times as I call you, so does this place,
lending its voice to a pitiable girl.

The mountains were there, the shrubs in scant tufts at the top,
an out-jutting rock nibbled away by the waves.

I climb, I climb, my mind gives me strength, and at the peak
I look out in panorama, scan the deep.