

HEROIDES XI: CANACE TO MACAREUS

The incestuous love of Canace and her brother, Macareus, has been discovered by their father, Aeolus, due to the birth of their child. Aeolus orders the child to be exposed, and that a sword be sent to Canace. She laments the situation in a letter to Macareus.

Any blurs or stains on the words of this letter
are from its author's own blotted blood.
Pen in my right hand, naked sword in my left,
and in my lap, the scroll lies unrolled.
Picture Aeolus's daughter writing her brother
posed like this to please her harsh sire.
My death! I only wish he were here to look on,
the deed he ordered done in his sight.

Savage as he is and far wilder than his winds,
he could look on my wounds without a tear.
It means something, that he has lived among stormwinds:
his temper suits that of his people.
Notus, Zephyrus, Sithonian Aquilo,
and you, violent Eurus, he rules.
The winds he governs, but not his own swollen rage.
His empire's vice is less than his own.

Does it help that I have a divine family tree,
that Jove himself is my relative?
Does that make this steel any less lethal, make it
any less alien in a woman's hand?
O Macareus, the hour that united us
should have come only after my death!

Why, brother, did you love me more than a brother?
Why was I what a sister shouldn't be?

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I, too, felt the warmth—just as I had always heard—
some unknown god glowing in my heart.
My complexion paled, I lost my appetite,
eating only what was forced on me.
Sleep didn't come easily, each night was a year,
and I groaned with pain caused by no wound.
I had no idea why I did all this, didn't know
what love meant although I was in love.

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My old nurse was the first to guess at my trouble:
"Child of Aeolus, you are in love!"
I blushed with shame and lowered my eyes to my lap;
my silence was confession enough.
Then my violated womb began to swell, and
my secret burden weighed my weak frame.
What herbs and remedies did my nurse not bring home
and apply to me with daring hand
so that deep inside me—I've never told you this—
my growing burden might be flushed out.
All too alive, the infant resisted our arts,
concealed from its unseen enemy.

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Phoebus's loveliest sister had risen nine times,
and the tenth moon's horses drew in her light.
I was ignorant of the reason for the sudden
pains, a raw recruit in childbirth's war,
and did not stifle my cries. "Why betray your crime?"
nurse says, and clamps her hand on my mouth.
What can I do? The pain forces me to scream, while
fear, my nurse, and shame tell me not to.
I repress my groans, swallow back words that escape
and force myself to drink my own tears.
Death stares me down, and still Lucina does not help—
and death itself would be a grave crime—
and then you were on me, tore back my robe and hair,
and breast-to-breast brought warmth back to mine.
And you said, "Live, my sister, O dearest sister,
don't by your death be the death of two.

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Good hope give you strength: you will be your brother's bride,
wife to him who made you a mother!"

I was dead, believe me, but revived at your words.

My womb delivered its burden and crime.

No time for joy. In the main hall sits Aeolus.

Our crime must be smuggled past his eyes.

The old woman carefully conceals the baby
with fruit, ribbons, and pale olive sprigs,
simulates a ritual, mutters imprecations:

the crowd and even my father give way.

She was near the threshold when the baby's crying
betrays itself to my father's ears.

He snatches the child, lays bare the false sacrifice;
the palace echoes Aeolus's howl.

As the sea quivers when it's combed by faint breezes,
as an ash bough shakes in warm southern wind,
you might have seen my ashen-white limbs send tremors
through the bed on which my body lay.

He rushes in shouting and proclaims my shame, he
can scarcely keep from slapping my face.

Humiliated, I could do nothing but sob,
my tongue was cold with numbing terror.

He had already ordered that his tiny grandson
be left to dogs and birds in the wild.

The poor thing cried, as if he understood. He begged
his grandfather with what sounds he could.

How do you think I felt then, brother—you can judge
how I felt from your own feelings now—

when my enemy took my own flesh and blood
to be eaten by wolves in deep mountain woods?

Aeolus had left my room. I could beat my breasts now
and tear my cheeks with my fingernails.

One of father's attendants, sad-eyed, had entered
and uttered now these unworthy words:

"Aeolus sends you this sword"—he handed me the sword—
"know what it means from what you have done."

I know what it means and will use the sword bravely,
bury my father's gift in my breast.

Are these the gifts for my marriage, sire? With this
dowry, Father, will your daughter be rich?

Run, deluded Hymen! Take your wedding torches
far away from this impious house!

Dusky Avengers, bring the torches you carry,
and let my pyre glow with your flame.

Marry with better destiny, my sisters,
and remember me when I am gone.

How could an infant only a few hours old
have hurt his grandfather, done any harm?

Even if he could deserve death somehow, he should
not be punished, poor thing, for my crime.

O my son, your mother's sorrow, prey to wild beasts,
torn apart on the day of your birth,
my son, pitiful token of an ill-starred love,
this was the first and last day of your life.

I was not allowed to shed the tears that were due,
bring a lock of my hair to your grave.

I did not lean over you to kiss your cold lips.
Wild things claw at my own body's child.

Wounded myself, I will follow my baby's shade,
briefly called mother, briefly bereaved.

But you, whom your sister hoped for in vain, I pray,
gather the scattered bones of your son,
return them to their mother, place them in her tomb;
let one urn hold us, however close.

And remember me. Weep into my wounds. Do not
shrink from loving your lover's body.

Honor the last requests of your cherished sister.
I will execute our father's command.