

HEROIDES XII: MEDEA TO JASON

After helping Jason obtain the Golden Fleece and defeat those standing in his way, including members of her own family, Medea has been betrayed by her husband and the father of her children. Alone in Corinth, she writes to Jason and hints at her revenge.

And yet for you, I remember, I, the Colchian queen, cleared my schedule
when you sought out my art, needing help.
It was then that the sisters who measure mortal thread into rations
should have taken my spindle and unwound.
Then I, Medea, could have died a good death! All the life I have led
since that moment has been torture, nothing more.

Oh god! Why did Pelias's ship ever seek the ram of Phrixus,
thrust forward by the arms of young men?
Why did we Colchians ever look upon Magnesian Argo?
Why did Greeks swarm Phasian waters and drink?
Why did your blond hair captivate me, your glamour,
and the lying grace of your tongue?
Otherwise, as soon as that strange ship struck our shoreline,
and unloaded brazen men onto the sand,
Jason would have been heedless of the bulls' flaming gullets,
with no potions to shield him from exhaled fire.
He would have sown as many seeds as he sowed enemies,
and the farmer would be killed by his own field.

Cruel man, how much treachery could have died along with you!
How much evil could my head have been spared!
There is some pleasure in being righteous, in chastising the thankless.
This I will relish, the only joy you can bring me.
Commanded to turn an unpracticed stern toward Colchos,
you entered the blessed realms of my land.
I, Medea, was in my country what your new bride is here.
My father was as rich as her father is now.

Hers holds Ephyris's twin seas, mine all the land to snowy Scythia,
where lies the Pontus's portside expanse.

You, Aeëtes, offer Pelasgian youths hospitality,
Greek bodies weigh down the painted couch.
It was then that I saw you, then that I began to know what you were.
And this was the first ruin of my mind.
I saw, and I perished. An unknown fire burned within me,
like a pine torch burned to the gods.
You were beautiful, and my fate dragged me onward.
I looked into your eyes and was robbed of sight.
Faithless man, you could sense it—for who can hide love well?
Its flame juts out and betrays itself.

It's decreed you must yoke the bulls that are feral
and as of yet unaccustomed to the plow.
These are Mars's bulls, more savage than their horns,
who inhale and exhale harrowing fires.
Their feet are solid bronze, and there is bronze around their nostrils,
all marred black by their own sooty breath.
In addition, your oath-sworn hand has been ordered
to sow the broad fields with seeds that grow men—
men who would raise against your body weapons they were born with,
a farmer facing a hostile crop.
Your final labor is to deceive, through any means necessary,
the eyes of the watchman that do not know sleep.

This was the word of Aeëtes. All your men rise in mourning,
the high table abandons its purple settees.
How far were you then from Creusa's dowry kingdom,
your father-in-law, and great Creon's daughter!
You leave a sad man. My wet eyes watch you leaving,
and my tongue murmurs a weak "Goodbye."

As soon as I reached the bed in my room, deeply wounded—
what a night was whiled away in my tears!
Before my eyes stood the bulls and the cursed harvest rising,
before my eyes stood the vigilant serpent!

Here there is love, here fear, and the fear only makes the love flourish.

Then morning. My dear sister comes into my room.

She finds me lying on my side, hiding my face, hair in shambles,
and everything is soaked in my tears.

She begs help for the Minyans. One seeks, the other accomplishes.

For the young Aesonian, I grant what she asks.

There is a grove black with spruce and with leafy ilex.

On rare occasions do the sun's rays gain entrance.

Within this grove is—at least, there *was*—a shrine to Diana.

The goddess stands gold, shaped by barbarous hands.

Do you know it? Or has the place been forgotten along with me?

We were there. You spoke first with your treacherous mouth:

"Fate has decreed to you its ruling on my safety.

Both my life and my death rest in your hands.

Destruction is enough for the person obsessed with power.

Save me, and a greater glory will be yours.

I pray, by all my misfortune—to which you can bring solace—

by your birth and your grandpa, the god who sees all,

by the faces and hallowed secrets of threefold Diana,

and if your race has any gods, by them too.

O virgin, pity me, have pity on my people.

For your service, make me yours for all time!

But if by chance you don't reject this Pelasgian . . .

but why should my gods be so helpful to me?

My breath will vanish onto the delicate breezes

before anyone but you will be a bride in my bed.

May Juno be our marriage rites' confidante and captain,

and the goddess whose marble temple we're in!"

These words—I've only written part of them here—moved a simple

girl's heart; these words joined together our hands.

I saw tears, too, playing their part in your deception.

I was just a girl, easily caught by your words.

Your body goes unburned, yoking the bronze-footed bulls,

and as ordered, you cleave solid ground with the plow.

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Instead of seed, you impregnate the fields with venom-laced teeth.

A soldier is born with his shield and his sword.

I myself, the one who gave you those drugs, sit there pallid

as I watch these sudden men gripping arms,

until the brothers who were born of earth (wicked miracle),

drew arms against each other in combat.

100

Behold the sleepless sentry, shackles up, scales crackling

and he's hissing, sweeps the earth with writhing breast . . .

Where then was the wealth of your dowry? Where then the royal marriage,
and the Isthmus, which severs twin seas?

No, it was I. I who at last became a barbarian,

who am poor to you now and seem to do harm.

I who lowered flaming eyes into drug-induced slumber,

I who handed you the fleece that you "stole."

I was a traitor to my father, abandoned kingdom and country.

The gift of exile is all that I receive.

110

My virginity became the spoils of a foreigner, a pirate.

Beloved sister and mother left behind.

But I did not leave *you* behind to live without me, my brother!

In this one place, I am at a loss for words.

My hand dared a crime it would never dare to write down . . .

I should have been torn up like that, and you should have too.

Nor was I scared to trust myself to the sea, a woman now wicked.

For what was left to fear after all I had seen?

Where is the divine? Where the gods? Let us face our due punishments

on the deep: me for credulity, you for deceit.

120

If only we'd been crushed by the Symplegades and shattered

and my bones had clung tight to your bones.

Or greedy Scylla had drowned us to be eaten by her mongrels.

Scylla should have done it, done thankless men harm.

And she who vomits as many waves as the waves she re-swallows

should have dragged us under Trinacrian water!

You return to Haemonian cities unharmed and a victor,

golden wool placed before your father's gods.

Why mention Pelias's daughters made wicked by piety?

A father's limbs cut down by virgin hand?

130

While others would blame me, by necessity, you praise me,
since I have been forced to do great harm for you.

You dared—oh! I can't find words to describe this just sorrow.
You dared to say, "Leave the Aesonian house!"
So I left as I was ordered, accompanied by both of our children
and what follows me always: my love for you.

When all of a sudden I hear a song about Hymen,
and lanterns are lit, glittering with fire,
and for you, the marriage flute pours out its melody,
but for me, the wailing of a funeral horn. 140
I was terrified. Such crime still lay beyond imagination,
and yet a chill settled over my chest.
The crowd hurtles forward and often, "Hymen!" is shouted, "Hymenae!"
The closer the voice came, the worse it was.
Some of the slaves began weeping, they covered tear-streaked faces—
who wants to play messenger to bad luck?
It was better for me not to know what was happening,
but my mind grieved as if I *did* know . . .
when the younger of our boys, by chance or eager for spectacle,
stood at the double door's threshold and said, 150
"Come quick, Mama! Papa leads the parade, it's Jason!
He's driving joined horses, and he's gold!"

I was beating my breast, tearing at my clothing,
and my face was not safe from my own nails.
My mind urged me to join the crowded procession,
to snatch the garland from her neatly coiffed hair!
And with my own hair in shreds, I could barely keep from shouting,
"He's mine!" and throwing out my hands.
Rejoice, betrayed father! Rejoice, abandoned Colchis!
Make sacrifice for my brother's young ghost. 160

I'm deserted by my kingdom and country and household
and husband, who was all these in one!
I was able to vanquish serpents and bulls in their raging,
but I could not vanquish one single man.

I who drove off savage fires with the medicines I've studied
am not strong enough to escape my own flames.
The incantations and the herbs and the art all have left me.
Nothing from my goddess, from mighty Hecate's rites.

There is no grace for me in day. My nights are bitter, restless,
my wretched breast untouched by tender sleep. 170
I could lull to sleep a dragon, but not my own self.
My remedies work for everyone else.
A whore now embraces the limbs I saved from peril,
and it is she who holds the fruits of my toil.
Maybe while you're bragging about yourself to your stupid consort,
telling her exactly what she wants to hear,
you invent new slander against my face and demeanor.
Well, let her laugh! Let her rejoice in my flaws.
Let her laugh. And then lie back, sublime on Tyrian purple—
she will weep, conquer my love's flames but be burned. 180
As long as iron and fire are with me, and venomous juices,
no enemy of Medea will be unavenged.

If, by any chance, iron hearts can be touched by a prayer,
then hear my words now, words inferior to my mind:

Now I am your supplicant just as you have been mine often,
I don't hesitate to lie prostrate at your feet.
If I am vile to you, at least think of our shared children.
Their dire stepmother will rage against my sons.
They are far too similar to you, I am moved by their image,
and every time I look, my eyes grow wet. 190
By the gods I beg, by my grandfather's sunlight,
by my husband and two sons, our pledge—
return to our bed, the bed I left so much behind for in madness.
Add faith to your words, pay back my help.
I don't ask you to face bulls and men, or for your assistance
in making the serpent fall fast asleep.
I only ask for *you*, the man I have earned, the man you yourself gave me,
who made me a parent along with yourself.

Where is my dowry, you ask? That field is my dowry,
 the one you had to plow before taking the fleece. 200
 The golden ram, a sight to behold, now *that* is my dowry,
 and if I asked for its return, you would say no.
 My dowry is you and your safety, is the youth of your Greek comrades.
 Compare this to your Sisyphean wealth, cruel man.
 That you live, that you have a wife and a father-in-law with power,
 that you even have the luxury of thanklessness: mine.
 Which I will . . . but no, why should I tell you your punishment?
 My rage is pregnant with powerful threats.
 Wherever my rage takes me, I will follow! Perhaps I will regret my
 actions—
 but I regret now that I helped a faithless man. 210

God will have to look on, God who sets my heart churning.
 Surely something greater moves my mind.

HEROIDES XIII: LAODAMIA TO PROTESILAUS

Laodamia writes to her husband, Protesilaus, after he has left their home to fight at Troy. He will end up being the first to reach the Trojan shore and the first to die.

Haemonian Laodamia sends to her Haemonian husband
 loving greetings, and hopes they go where they're sent.
 Word is that the wind kept you holed up at Aulis,
 but where was that wind when you deserted me?
 That's when the water should have resisted your oars,
 high time then for a raging stormwind.
 I could have given my man more kisses, pled with him more—
 and there was a lot I wanted to say to you then.
 But poof, you were gone, and the wind that whisked you away
 was one that your sailors prayed for, not I, 10
 a wind suited to seafarers, but not to a lover.
 I had to leave your embrace, Protesilaus,
 my tongue had to leave unsaid all that I wanted to say,
 and I barely had time for a sad, last goodbye.

No sooner had Boreas swooshed down and billowed your sails
 than my Protesilaus was far away.
 While I could still see my husband, seeing was all my joy,
 and I kept my eyes fixed on your own.
 When you faded from sight, I could still see the sails,
 and those sails detained my eyes a long time. 20
 When I could no longer see you or your receding sails
 and what I could see was only the water,
 the light disappeared along with you, the world turned dark,
 and I'm told I sank bloodless onto the ground.
 Your father, Iphiclus, mine, old Acastus, and my grief-stricken mother
 could scarcely revive me with splashing cold water.
 They did their duty, but it didn't really help me.
 Wretched as I was, I should have had the right to die.