

## HEROIDES XIV: HYPERMESTRA TO LYNCEUS

*Hypermestra is one of the fifty daughters of Danaus. Their father ordered them all to kill their husbands, the fifty sons of his brother, Aegyptus, on their wedding night, and Hypermestra is the only one who does not. She writes to her husband, Lynceus, in fear of her father's retaliation.*

Hypermestra sends this letter to one of once many brothers.

Brides' crimes killed the others, murdered en masse.

Leaden chains weigh me down, I am locked in the palace,  
my piety the cause of my distress.

Since my hand was afraid to pierce your throat with the iron,

I am blamed. If I did the crime, I would be praised.

Yet it is better to be accused than to have obeyed my father's orders;

I'm not sorry I have hands untaxed by blood.

He can burn me with fire, the flames I did not violate,

thrust the torches that heard my vows in my face.

He can slit my throat with the sword he entrusted in error:

the bride facing the death her husband escaped.

But he won't get me to repent, not even while dying.

She is not pious if she is sorry to be so.

It is Danaus and my cruel sisters who should repent for their evil.

That's how it works. That's what should follow a crime.

My heart trembles to remember that night, fouled by bloodshed,

a shiver runs through the bones of my hand.

She whom you think capable of murdering her husband,

is afraid to write the murder she didn't commit.

But I will try.

The lands had just been touched by dusk's darkness,

the last moments of daylight, the first of the night.

We, daughters of Inachus, are led beneath the roof of Pelasgus.

Our father-in-law greets us, brides in arms.

Golden lanterns are everywhere, glistening brightly.

Profane incense is placed on unwilling hearths.

The crowds chant, "Hymen, Hymenae!" But he flees those who call him.

Jove's wife quits her own city and leaves.

And look! Swaying with wine, crowding each other and shouting,

a fresh blossom holding back drunken hair,

they go to their marriage beds happy—the beds, their own burial!—

their bodies press cushions worthy of death.

And now with food and wine and sleep they lie heavy

and there settles over Argos a deep hush.

I seemed to hear all around me the groans of the dying—

no, I *did* hear it, and was in awe of what was.

My blood withdrew, the warmth left my mind and my body,

and I just lay there, cold, in my new bed.

As slender awns are rustled in their fields by soft Zephyrus,

as a cold breeze shakes the poplar tree's leaf,

I trembled like this or even more while you lay quiet,

deep in the doze bestowed on you by wine.

But the commands of my violent father shake out all timidity.

I sit up straight, take the weapon in trembling hand.

I won't lie: my hand raised that sharp blade three times, but three times

the blade recoiled while only half-raised.

I moved toward your throat—let me confess to you the truth—

I moved my father's weapon toward your throat.

But piety and fear stood in the way of that cruel crime,

and my chaste hand fled from its task.

Tearing the purple folds of my clothing, and tearing at my hair,

I spoke these words in a tiny, frail voice:

"Hypermestra, your father is cruel. Fulfill his commands;

let this man accompany his kin.

Yes, I'm a woman and a virgin, mild in years and in nature.

Soft hands do not take up cruel arms.

But go on! While he lies there sleeping, just copy your sisters!

I bet their husbands have already been killed!

If this hand were capable of murdering anything,  
 it would be bloodied by its own mistress's death. 60  
 They deserve this death, pawing at their uncle's kingdom.  
 We, poor throng, roam with our poor, aging sire.  
 But suppose they *did* deserve to die—what have we ourselves done?  
 What crime of mine bars me from being pious?  
 Me? With iron? Why are weapons of war in a girl's hands?  
 My fingers fit better around spindles, around wool."

So I speak, and while I lament, tears follow their words  
 as they fall from my eyes down to your skin.  
 When you fumbled for my embrace, flung your drowsing arms around me,  
 my blade almost wounded your hand. 70

And then I feared my father and his servants and daylight.  
 So I dispelled your sleep with my words,  
 "Get up! Come, Belides, one of once many brothers!  
 Unless you hurry, this is perennial night."

You leap up terrified, all sloth of sleep vanished, and you look to  
 the brave weapon in my cowardly hand.  
 You search for reason, I interrupt you, "Flee while night still allows it!"  
 And you flee in black night, but I delay.

Then morning. Danaus counts his sons-in-law lying in massacre.  
 You are the only one missing from the scene. 80  
 He doesn't take well to the loss of one kindred death  
 and he complains of too little spilt blood.  
 I'm dragged away, by my hair, from the feet of my father.  
 This is what piety has earned me: this cell.  
 It is clear that Juno's rage has endured from the moment  
 human was made bovine, and bovine divine.  
 But it's punishment enough for the sweet girl to be mooing.  
 And that she, lovely once, can no longer please Jove.  
 The new heifer stands on the banks of her own flowing parent,  
 she sees in daddy's waters horns not her own. 90

When she moves her lips to lament, a moo tumbles out,  
 and she fears her own body, fears her voice.  
 Why do you rage, unhappy? Why marvel at your reflection?  
 Why count the feet at the ends of new legs?  
 You, the whore of great Jove, the nightmare of his sister,  
 assuage constant hunger with leaves, grassy clumps,  
 and you drink from the spring, look at your body in horror,  
 fear the weapons on your head will do you harm.  
 And you who were so rich as to seem worthy of Jupiter,  
 lie buck-naked on the buck-naked ground. 100  
 You run over the sea, the lands, the familial rivers.  
 The sea, the streams, the lands grant a path.  
 What's the cause of your flight? Why do you wander the long straits?  
 You cannot ever escape your own face!  
 Where are you rushing, child of Inachus? Following and fleeing,  
 guide to your companion, companion to your guide.  
 The Nile, sent out into the sea at seven harbors,  
 strips the whore's face to reveal a mad cow.

But why speak of the distant past, tales told by gray elders?  
 My own years give me reason to complain. 110  
 My father and uncle wage wars. We are expelled from our kingdom  
 and home, cast to the far reaches of the globe.

*[two spurious lines omitted]*

Of the nation that was your brothers, a small scrap continues. 115  
 I grieve for the killers as well as those killed.  
 As many brothers as I've lost, so many sisters I've lost too.  
 Let both throngs receive my tears now.

You live, so I am tortured. What lies in store for the guilty,  
 when I have been charged for being good? 120  
 And, once a kindred throng's hundredth member, unhappy  
 and with one brother left, take my fall?

But if you, Lynceus, have any care for your pious sister,  
 if you are worthy of the gift I gave,  
 either save me or deliver me to death, place my body  
 on a secret pyre, deprived of its life.  
 Bury my bones wet with faithful tears and have my sepulcher  
 engraved with a brief epitaph:  
 "Here lies exiled Hypermetra, unjust the price paid for piety.  
 The death she kept from her brother, she bore herself."  
 I want to write more, but my hand slips under chains' weight,  
 and terror has sapped all my strength.

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## HEROIDES XV: SAPPHO TO PHAON

*Sappho, the historical poet from the island of Lesbos, writes to Phaon, a young man and her former lover.*

So, did you recognize my diligent hand  
 as soon as your eyes fell on this page?  
 Or if you hadn't read the author's name—Sappho—  
 would you not have known whose work this is?  
 Perhaps you're curious about these elegiac lines,  
 since my métier is lyric verse.  
 My love needs tears: an elegy is a poem that weeps.  
 No lyre will do for the tears I must shed.

I am on fire like wheat burning in a field  
 fanned by a wild oriental wind.  
 The fields Phaon haunts are near Typhoean Aetna's  
 volcanic fire: my heat is no less.  
 My lyre's strings are tuned, but the songs won't come:  
 songwriting's work for a carefree mind.  
 The girls of Pyrrha, girls of Methymna? No, thanks.  
 None of that Lesbian crowd for me.  
 Anactoria? Cheap. Ditto pale Cydro. And Arthis,  
 my ex? I want her out of my sight,  
 along with the hundred others I loved. You now possess  
 what once belonged to a bevy of girls.

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You have a face, and you're at the right age for love-play.  
 (O your face caught me looking all right).  
 Grab a lyre and quiver, you could pass for Apollo,  
 sprout horns on your head, presto, you're Bacchus.  
 But Apollo loved Daphne, and Bacchus Ariadne,  
 and neither girl knew how to tune a lyre.  
 Yet Pegasus's daughters recite to me the sweetest poems.  
 Now my name is sung through all the world.