

HEROIDES XVI: PARIS TO HELEN

Paris, promised Helen as a reward for judging Venus the most beautiful goddess, has traveled to Sparta. Within the house of Menelaus, who is king of Sparta and Helen's husband, he writes to Helen and proclaims his love for her.

I, son of Priam, wish you good health, Leda's daughter,
 health that could be mine by your gift alone.
 Should I speak, or is there no need to rehearse my passion?
 Is my love already clearer than I would like?
 I wish it could stay hidden until my happiness
 were no longer mingled with anxious fear.
 But I can't pretend. Who could conceal a fire
 that betrays itself by its own light?
 If you want me to say more about my present condition—
 I'm on fire! Now you have words that speak my heart. 10
 Please forgive my confession, and do not frown as you read this,
 but read with a smile on your lovely face.

I've long cherished the thought that your accepting my letter
 means that I myself might be welcomed as well.
 What the Mother of Love, who persuaded me to take this journey,
 has decided, I hope will happen, her promise fulfilled.
 For, lest you unknowingly sin, a great goddess favors
 my sailing here. I come at divine behest.
 The prize I seek is great, but not undue. No less than Aphrodite
 has promised me that you will be my bedmate. 20
 With her as my pilot, I have sailed from the shores of Sigea
 across the long miles of the hazardous sea.
 She has given me gentle breezes and favoring tailwinds:
 born from the sea, she is its mistress.
 May she calm my heart's surges as she calmed the sea's billows
 and conduct my vows to their home port.

I have brought my passion with me, did not discover it later.
 It was the cause of my long voyage at sea.
 No gloomy storm blew me here, no poor navigation:
 Taenaris was always my destined port. 30
 And don't think I sail as a merchant marine. I pray only
 that the gods keep safe such goods as I have.
 And it is not as a tourist I come, to see the cities of Hellas.
 My own country's towns are wealthier by far.
 No, I come for you, promised to me by aureate Venus
 and whom I desired before I knew you.
 I saw your face with my soul before my eyes beheld it.
 Your beauty's fame first dealt me a wound.
 Yet it is no wonder that, when the bow is so potent,
 arrows from afar have pierced me with love. 40
 Such is the Fates' pleasure, and so you won't refuse them,
 listen to this story, faithfully told:
 I was still in my mother's womb, a long pregnancy,
 her belly swollen with a heavy load,
 when she had a vivid dream, a vision that from her belly
 there issued a torch, a brand all aflame.
 She bolted up in terror and described her dread vision
 to old Priam, who consulted his seers,
 one of whom sang that Troy would burn with fire from Paris.
 That fire has turned out to be my own heart. 50

My looks and my mind, though I seemed otherwise common,
 were in fact signs of a hidden noble birth.
 There is a place deep in the wooded valleys of Ida,
 pathless and overgrown with ilex and pine,
 where sheep never graze, nor cliff-loving she-goats,
 nor the wide-mouthed, lumbering herds of cows.
 I was leaning against a tree there, looking out toward
 Troy's rooftops and the sea beyond,
 when suddenly the earth seemed to tremble with footsteps—
 I will speak the truth though it won't be believed— 60
 when there stood before me, conveyed on swift pinions,
 mighty Atlas's and Pleione's grandson—

I was permitted to see this, and may I speak of my vision!—
 and in the god's fingers was a golden wand.
 And at the same time Venus, Athena, and Juno
 set their tender feet upon the green grass.
 I was speechless, and my hair stood on end in chill terror
 when "Fear not," said the winged herald to me.
 "You are beauty's judge. Decide the goddesses' contest.
 Which is more beautiful than the other two?" 70
 And so I couldn't refuse, he invoked Jove's injunction
 and took off through the ether up to the stars.

I calmed down then, and was suddenly emboldened,
 turning my gaze to observe them each.
 They were all worthy of winning, and as the arbiter
 I was sad that not all of them could win.
 Still, one of them was more pleasing to me than the others—
 the one, you might guess, who inspires love.
 They each yearn to win, and they are each ardent
 to offer me stupendous bribes. 80
 Jove's wife offers kingdoms, his daughter promises valor.
 Power or bravery? I found it hard to choose.
 Venus smiled sweetly. "Do not be moved by these gifts, Paris,
 each of them filled with anxiety," she says.
 "My gift will be love. Beautiful Leda's daughter,
 more beautiful herself, will come to your arms."
 She spoke, and with her gifts and beauty equally sanctioned,
 she retraced her victorious way to the sky.

Meanwhile, I suppose because my fate was improving,
 I am recognized as a son of the royal line, 90
 Taken back to my home amid much rejoicing,
 and Troy now has another festival day.
 And as I desire you, I become desired by women:
 you alone can have what many have longed for.
 I've been sought not only by the daughters of princes:
 even the nymphs have pined away for me.

Whose beauty could I admire more than that of Oenone,
 who after you is most fit to be Priam's son's bride?
 But I am weary of them all, Tyndarean lady,
 since I began to have hope of your being my wife. 100
 Awake, I saw you with my eyes; with my soul at nightfall,
 when eyes are overcome in peaceful sleep.
 What will it be like to see your face, when unseen you have won me?
 I've been on fire, though far away was the flame.
 I could no longer hold back, and so set out on the deep purple
 to seek out the object of all my vows.

Entire groves of Trojan pine are felled by Phrygian axes,
 and whatever tree might serve on the surging sea.
 Gargara's heights are despoiled of their towering forests,
 and Ida's ridge yields innumerable beams. 110
 Oak is bent for the hulls of swift sailing vessels,
 and curved keels are woven with sturdy ribs.
 We add yardarms and masts and hook up the rigging,
 and the sterns are adorned with painted gods.
 On my own ship stands painted, with a small Cupid,
 the goddess who sponsors your marriage to me.
 When all of the ships have had their finishing touches,
 and I am eager to set sail on the Aegean Sea,
 My father and mother delay me with their imprecations,
 delaying my departure with dutiful words. 120
 And my sister Cassandra, with her hair streaming,
 cried out when my ships were ready to sail:
 "Where are you rushing off to? You will bring back fires
 greater than you can imagine over these seas!"
 She was a truthful prophetess. I have found those fires:
 the fierce love raging in my tender heart.

I sail out of Troy's harbor and with the wind behind me
 put in at your shores, Oebalian nymph.
 Your husband receives me as a guest—not without the counsel
 and the approval of the immortal gods. 130

He showed me, of course, all around Lacedaemon,
 all of the sights that deserved to be seen;
 But all I wanted to see was your celebrated beauty;
 nothing else could hold my attention for long.
 When I finally did see you, I was speechless, astonished,
 and felt new emotions swell up in my chest
 You looked just like, to the best of my recollection,
 Venus did when she came to be judged.
 If you had come alongside her to that contest,
 Venus's victory would have been in doubt! 140
 Throughout the world your fame has been heralded;
 there is no land where your beauty's unknown;
 No other woman has your reputation for beauty,
 not one from Phrygia to the rising sun!
 But believe me in this: your looks exceed your glory,
 your beauty is superior to your fame.
 I find more here than the goddess Venus promised;
 your reputation is exceeded by its cause.

Theseus therefore had good reason to love you,
 acquainted as he was with your charms, 150
 when, following your people's customs, you competed
 nude with nude men in the wrestling rink!
 I commend the abduction, my only wonder being
 why he didn't keep such a valuable prize.
 My head would sooner from my bloody neck be severed
 than you would be dragged from a bedroom of mine!
 Would my hands willingly release one such as you are?
 Would I ever allow you to leave my embrace?
 And if I had to let you go I would at least have demanded
 a pledge from you that my love was not null; 160
 And would either have tasted your virginity, or stolen
 what I could from it and still have left it intact.

Just give yourself to me and you will find Paris constant.
 The pyre alone will quench my love's flame.
 I have valued you above the kingdoms that Juno,
 sister of Jove, once promised to me.

I have rejected the prowess promised by Pallas
 so I might wrap my arms around your neck.
 I have no regrets, will never judge my choice foolish:
 my mind is fixed, and is firm in its pledge. 170
 I pray only that you will not let my hope falter;
 O woman worthy of such toil!
 I am no base-born seeking marriage with a noble:
 you will not be disgraced by being my wife.
 You will find a Pleiad and a Jove in my lineage,
 to say nothing of my later ancestry.
 My father rules all Asia, than which no land is richer,
 a realm so vast it cannot be traversed.
 You will see innumerable cities and golden rooftops,
 and temples you will say are fit for the gods. 180
 You will see Ilion itself, fortified with soaring towers
 reared to the melodies of Phoebus's lyre.
 Why even mention its immense population,
 scarcely sustained by the earth itself?
 The Trojan women will stand in long lines to meet you,
 the ladies of Phrygia scarce contained by our walls.
 How often you will cry out, "How poor is Achaia!"
 One household will show you a city's wealth.

And yet, it wouldn't be right for me to disdain your Sparta.
 The land you were born in is blessed for me. 190
 But Sparta is poor, and you deserve wealth around you.
 The land is not fit for beauty like yours.
 Beauty like yours should enjoy lavish indulgence,
 luxuriating in ever-new delights.
 When you look at the clothes of the men of our country,
 what do you think Dardanian women wear?
 Come on now, don't disdain a Phrygian husband,
 you, a rural Therapnaean girl!
 A Phrygian born and bred is now on Olympus,
 mingling water with nectar for the gods to drink. 200
 Phrygian Tithonus is now the mate of Aurora,
 carried off by the goddess who ends the night.

Anchises too was a Phrygian, with whom Cupid's mother
 is delighted to sleep on Ida's ridge.
 And I doubt, when you compare looks and age, that Menelaus
 will in your eyes be preferable to me.
 Nor will I give you a father-in-law who dims the sunlight,
 who turns his frightened horses from the feast.
 Priam's father is not bloodied by his father-in-law's slaughter,
 has not stained Myrtoan waters with his crime. 210
 Nor does my ancestor clutch for fruits in the Stygian River,
 or grovel for water in receding waves.

But what's it to me if one of that brood is your husband,
 and Jove is this house's father-in-law?
 It's a crime! All through the night that unworthy husband
 holds you tight, enjoys your embrace.
 But I only get to see you when we're all at the table,
 and even that time brings me a world of pain.
 May our enemies have to endure such agonizing dinners
 as I do when the wine is finally poured! 220
 I regret being a guest when before my own eyes, that rustic
 entwines his arms around your shoulders and neck.
 And—why shouldn't I tell you everything?—I burst with envy
 when he lays his cloak on you to keep you warm.
 And when you openly bestow upon him delicate kisses
 I hold up my goblet to shield my eyes.
 And then I lower my eyes when he pulls you closer,
 and gag as I try to swallow my food.
 Too often I have groaned, and have seen you—what a rascal!—
 suppressing your laughter whenever I groaned! 230
 Many a time I tried to quench love's flame with the vintage,
 but drinking was like laying fire on fire.
 So as not to see too much, I would recline, eyes averted,
 but you would always pull my eyes back.

I don't know what to do. When I see all this I suffer,
 but I suffer more when I can't see your face.
 In whatever way I can, I try to conceal my passion,
 but the love I suppress always reappears.

I don't speak of it to you, but you know I am wounded.
 If only my wounds were only known by you! 240
 How often I have averted my face when the tears started
 so that he wouldn't ask me why I wept.
 How often, when a little drunk, I have told a story
 about some love affair that was actually mine.
 Hinting to you that my tale was self-referential,
 that I was that lover, in case you didn't know.
 And so I would be able to speak more freely,
 more than once, I feigned that I had too much wine.

I remember your loose robe once exposing your bosom,
 laying everything bare to my eyes, 250
 Breasts whiter than snow or milk, whiter even
 than Jove with your mother clasped in his wings.
 While I gaped at the sight, I happened to be holding a goblet,
 and the knurled handle fell from my hand.
 If you had just planted kisses on your child, Hermione,
 I eagerly snatched them from her tender lips.
 And then flat on my back I would croon of old lovers,
 nodding and making signs I should have suppressed.
 Your foremost companions, Clymene and Aethra,
 I dared to approach with flattering words. 260
 Their only response was that they were fearful;
 they left me while I was still pleading my case.

If only the gods would make you a prize in a contest,
 with the victor taking you home to his bed,
 Just as Hippomenes's sprinting won Atalanta,
 as Hippodamia was clenched by a Phrygian,
 As Hercules broke the horns of the Achelous River
 striving to win Deianira's embrace!
 I would be a bold competitor in such a contest,
 and you would know well how to be my reward. 270
 But now all I can do is entreat you, my lovely,
 to embrace your feet, if you will permit.
 O glory, O present honor of the Twin Brothers,
 O worthy of Jove's wooing were you not his child,

Either with you as my bride I will return to Sigea
 or in exile be buried in Taenarian soil!
 My breast has not been slightly pricked by Cupid's arrow.
 The point has penetrated deep into my bones.
 This, I now recall, is what was prophesied by Cassandra,
 that a celestial arrow would transfix my heart.
 Do not, O Helen, despise a love ordained in heaven,
 so may the gods smile on your prayers.

280

Many things come up, but so that we may talk more in person,
 welcome me to your bed in the silent night.
 Or are you ashamed, and fear to dishonor your marriage,
 to be false to the chastity of a lawful bed?
 Ah, that's too simple, Helen. Or should I say rustic?
 Do you think your beauty can be innocent?
 You must either not be so hard or change your appearance.
 Beauty and chastity are strongly at odds.
 Jupiter and Venus both delight in deception,
 which is the reason your father is Jove.
 It's hardly possible, if character comes from the parent,
 that there can be a chaste child of Leda and Jove.
 You can be chaste in Troy as my companion,
 and guilty there, I pray, with me alone.
 Let our sin now be absolved when we are married—
 if Venus's promise to me was not in vain.

290

Your husband himself presses you in this direction,
 his absence enabling his guest to steal you.
 He could have picked no better time to see Crete's kingdoms,
 this husband of yours, astute to a fault!
 "While I'm gone, take care of things here," he said as he was leaving,
 "and take care of our guest from Ida as well."
 I maintain you're neglecting your absent spouse's injunction.
 You're not taking care of your guest at all!

300

Do you hope that so insipid a man as this, my lady,
 is even aware of how lovely you are?

You're wrong, he doesn't. If he had any idea of what he has here,
 he wouldn't entrust it to a man from abroad.
 And though neither my words nor my passion should move you,
 I must take advantage of what he himself gives.
 Either that or surpass his considerable folly
 if so safe a time goes sluggishly by.
 It's as if with his own hands he has delivered your lover.
 Take advantage of your simpleminded husband's behest!

310

You lie asleep through the long night without a companion.
 I too lie alone in a widowed bed.
 If we allow mutual joys to join us together,
 brighter than noon that night will become.
 Then I will swear to you by any gods you desire
 a great oath to observe the rites of your choice.
 And after that, if my confidence does not desert me,
 I will plead with you to seek my home realms.
 If you feel shame at appearing to be a follower,
 I myself will take all the blame.
 For I will imitate both Theseus and your two brothers;
 you can be touched by no closer examples than these.
 For Theseus stole you, and they Leucippus's twin daughters.
 I will be fourth with these precedents.
 The Trojan fleet stands ready, manned by a small army.
 Oars and a tailwind will speed us along.
 You will go like a great queen through the towns of Dardania;
 the crowds will think a new goddess has come.
 Wherever you tread there will be cinnamon burning,
 and victims slain will stain the earth red.
 My father, my brothers, my sisters with their mother,
 and all the women of Ilion will bring you gifts.
 Ah, I am scarcely telling a small part of what awaits you.
 You will receive more than my letter can relate.

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340

And do not fear that if you're stolen fierce wars will follow,
 and that Hellas will martial all her strength.
 Have any stolen women ever been won back in battle?
 Believe me, there is no fear of that.

In Aquilo's name, Thracians captured Erechtheus's daughter,
 and Bistonia's shore remained safe from war.
 After Jason sailed off in his new ship with Medea,
 Thessaly was never threatened by Colchis.
 Theseus, who stole you, abducted Minos's daughter also,
 but Minos never called the Cretans to arms.
 Fear in these matters is greater than any actual danger,
 and it is shameful to fear all that can be feared.

350

But if you want to imagine that a great war is looming,
 I too have strength, and my weapons can kill.
 Nor are Asia's resources less than that of your country.
 It abounds with horses and is wealthy in men.
 Nor will Menelaus, son of Atreus, have spirit
 greater than Paris, or outstrip him in arms.
 While still only a child I killed the enemy and recovered
 our stolen flocks; hence my other name, Alexandros.
 And almost just a child I defeated among others
 both Ilioneus and Deiphobus.
 And if you think I am to be feared only in the thick of battle,
 my arrow can hit any spot you choose.
 Can you vouch for Menelaus such deeds in young manhood,
 claim for Atreus's son skill such as mine?
 And if you grant him everything, could he be Hector's brother?
 Hector alone has a multitude's might.
 You don't know what I can do, have never seen my prowess,
 do not know the man whose bride you will be.

360

370

So you will either be sought back without martial tumult,
 or the Greeks will succumb to our Trojan might.
 Nor would I disdain to take up arms for such a consort.
 Great prizes arouse great strife.
 And if the whole world went to battle to win you,
 your fame among men would be without end.
 Just take hope and leave with the gods' good graces;
 take what is offered with complete confidence.

HEROIDES XVII: HELEN TO PARIS

Helen replies to Paris and addresses his desire for her to travel to Troy with him.

Now that my eyes have been violated by your letter,
 to give no reply seems a glory too slight.
 You, a stranger, defiled sacred hospitality,
 dared to lead a bride's fidelity astray.
 Was it for this the Taenarian shores ushered you into their harbor
 when you had ridden the wind-rattled seas?
 Not a single closed door blocked your way in our palace,
 though you come from a race different from our own.
 All this for our courtesies to be paid back in injury?
 That was your entrance? Were you a guest or a foe?
 However justified my complaint may be, I do not question
 that you would consider it old-fashioned.
 Well, let me be old-fashioned if I can hold on to my honor,
 if the tenor of my life can be pure.
 If the look on my face is sincere in its sorrow,
 and I'm not sitting fiercely, brows set hard,
 my reputation sparkles still, I have lived a life of innocence,
 and no adulterer gets his laurels from me.

10

All the more I marvel. What confidence in your endeavor!
 How my bed's motivation gives you hope!
 Or is it because I was violated by Neptune's hero?
 Raped once and you think I deserve it again?
 If I'd been charmed into bed, the crime would belong to the both of us.
 Since I was raped, only my refusal was mine.
 Yet he did not obtain the joy he sought through his actions;
 No, I returned having suffered nothing but fear.
 The shameless man stole kisses as I struggled, but only a couple,
 and he took nothing beyond this from me.
 Yet your depravity would not be content with just kisses—
 treat me better, O gods!—he was not like you.

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