

*Acontius testifies by this image of an apple
that what was written on it has now come true.*

240

Lest too long a letter weary your ailing body
and so it may come to an accustomed close:

Farewell!

HEROIDES XXI: CYDIPPE TO ACONTIUS

*Cydippe replies to Acontius, expressing her fears that she has fallen gravely ill
because of her failure to uphold the accidental vow.*

I was frightened and read your words without a murmur,
lest my oblivious tongue swear oaths by some god.
And I think you would have set another trap, but, you've admitted,
you knew that one promise was enough.
I didn't want to read it, either, but if I had treated you callously,
the savage goddess's rage could have been worse.
Despite all that I have done for Diana, despite all my pious incense,
she still favors you more than is due,
and she avenges you with indelible rage (if we believe you)—
she barely treated her own Hippolytus this way. 10
It would be better for the virgin goddess to support a virgin's years,
years I fear she wants me to have few.
For I am feeble without discernible reason;
I'm exhausted and no healer brings relief.
How thin do you think I am, as to barely write this letter?
How pale, as to barely lift my limbs?

Now, a fear draws near that someone other than my nursemaid
might learn of our corresponding back and forth.
She sits before my doors, and if they ask what I'm doing,
she says, "She's sleeping!" so I can write in peace. 20
But soon when sleep, the best excuse for my long absence,
stops working as an alibi for delay,
when she sees the men coming who won't take no for an answer,
she coughs, gives the signal we've rehearsed.
I abandon my unfinished words as they are. The letter
is aborted, squirreled away in my trembling breast.
When it is brought out again, once more it wearies my fingers.
You see how great a labor you are.

To be honest, I would die if only you were worth it,
 but I'm better than the woman you deserve.
 Is it for you, then, that I've paid—and still pay!—the penalties
 of your schemes, always unsure of my health?
 Is this the reward for my beauty, which you once lauded?
 Does that which once pleased you now do harm?
 If you had found me grotesque—if only you would have!—
 then my body would be condemned but not weak.
 Now I am praised but lament, now by pursuing me
 you lose me, and I am wounded by my own gift.

As long as you don't surrender and he won't take second,
 you will hinder his prayers, and he yours.
 I am tossed like some ship thrust by steady Boreas
 to the deep, pulled back in by the tide;
 just as the day draws near which my parents have long hoped for,
 an intolerable fire settles over my frame.
 Oh god! At the moment of my marriage, Persephone
 comes banging at my door, bitter and cruel.
 Now I am ashamed and afraid, although I am not guilty,
 lest I seem to deserve a divinity's wrath.
 One man claims it is fate that has sent me this sickness,
 another says the gods don't approve of my groom.
 And in case you think that you are not the subject of rumors,
 know that some think I've been poisoned by you.
 Though its cause lurks in hiding, my ailment is clear.
 You start battles and I'm the one struck.

Tell me, then—and don't deceive me in the way you are used to—
 what are you like when you hate, if you harm when in love?
 If you hurt what you love, you'd be wiser to love an enemy.
 You could save me if you wanted me dead.
 Either you don't care at all for the girl you once wanted, and will cruelly
 let her wither in a death undeserved,
 or if your prayers on my behalf have proved futile,
 then you have none of the grace that you claim.

Either (1) you don't want to please Diana, (2) you forgot me,
 (how could you!), or (3) she's forgotten about *you*!
 I would rather that Delos and the surrounding Aegean
 had never been known to me—or at least not then!
 It was then that my ship was led out to hard sea,
 an inauspicious hour to start a trip.
 Oh, my stride when I stepped out! And when I moved from the
 threshold,
 when I touched the swift ship's painted frame!
 Twice, my sails were pushed back by a wind that was hostile.
 No, I misspoke—that wind was my friend!
 A *friendly* wind pushed me backward, thwarting
 a course that could only bring little joy.
 If only that wind had stayed firm against my sails . . . but how silly
 to bemoan the mutability of wind.

Set in motion by the stories of the place, I rushed to Delos,
 and felt I was on a slow-moving ship.
 How often I raised a fuss, chastising slow oars, and lamenting
 how little sail we gave the winds.
 And then I had sailed past Myconos, now Tenos and Andros,
 and then Delos was glistening in my eyes!
 I saw it from afar and said: "Why do you flee me, island?
 Do you still glide across the sea, as before?"

I set foot upon the land when day's light was near its end,
 when the sun frees purple steeds from their yoke.
 And when he's summoned them back to the place of their rising,
 my mother guides the styling of my hair.
 She herself places the gold in my hair and the jewels on my fingers,
 she herself drapes my shoulders in cloth.
 We set out to greet the gods for whom the island is sacred,
 we offer golden incense and wine yet unmixed.
 And while my mother wets the altars with votive bloodshed
 and piles smoking hearths with cut entrails,
 my diligent nurse leads me away to the high temple.
 We wander sacred places, we let our feet roam.

Now I'm strolling through porticos, admiring the gifts of monarchs
and the statues standing everywhere you look.
I admire, too, the altar built of horn—horns innumerable—
and the tree a goddess leaned on to give birth, 100
and all the other things Delos holds. I could neither remember
nor recount all that I saw in that place.

Perhaps you gazed at me while I gazed at these wonders,
and it seemed my simplicity could be trapped.
Once again, I climb the steps to Diana's sublime temple.
Should any place have been safer than this?

An apple rolled to my feet and on it were these verses . . .
Oh god! I almost swore your oath again!

My nurse lifted it up and, marveling, she said, "Read it!"
So I read out your ambush, you great poet, you! 110
When I spoke the word "marriage," I was confounded by shame.
I felt a blush stretch across both my cheeks.
I held my eyes fixed on my own lap as though glued there,
my eyes that were servants to what you proposed.

Wicked man, why rejoice? What glory are you gaining?
What praise does a man get from tricking girls?
I did not stand my ground armed with a shield, axe-wielding,
like a Penthesilea on Ilia soil.
You won't bring back as prize some gold-engraved girdle
from the Amazons, or Hippolyta herself. 120

What are you gloating about? Your words put the words in my mouth,
and I—careless girl!—was caught by your guile.
An apple caught Cydippe, an apple caught Schoeneus's daughter.
Now, another Hippomenes you'll be!

It would be better—if that boy really held you in his clutches,
the boy you say has some kind of torch—

if you did as good men do, and not spoil hope through deception.
I was meant to be won over, not caught!
Why, while pursuing me, did you never think to mention
any reasons that made you worth *my* pursuit? 130
Why choose force over persuasion? You might have won me
if only I had heard your proposal.

The formula for swearing oaths, the tongue that called a goddess
there to witness—what good are they now?
It is the mind that swears oaths, and with my mind, I've sworn nothing!
Only the mind imbues words with true faith.
It is the intention, the inner thoughts of one's soul that swear oaths,
and only our own judgment's chains can hold sway.
If I have promised myself in marriage, and of my own volition,
then claim the rights that are owed you in bed! 140

But if all that I gave you was my voice, and my heart wasn't in it,
then in vain, you have my words without their strength.
I did not swear an oath—it's the words I read that were swearing.
You shouldn't be chosen to be my husband like this.
Go deceive other girls!—let my letter succeed your apple.
If your method works, go steal wealth from the rich.
Make kings swear that they will give you their kingdoms.
Whatever pleases you on earth can be yours.
In this—believe me—you are greater than even Diana,
if your letters have such divinity within. 150

Though I have spoken these words, though I have rejected you (firmly!),
though I've defended my promise's cause well,
still I admit I'm afraid. I fear the wrath of Leto's cruel daughter,
and I suspect it is her wrath that does me harm.

For why is it every time the rites of marriage are made ready,
all of a sudden the bride's body falls slack?
Now, three times Hymenaeus has advanced on my altars,
reached the threshold of my wedding and then fled.
And the lights so often lit by his lazy hand barely
rise again—he scarcely picks up the torch. 160
Anointed droplets often trickle from his hair, wreath-encircled,
his splendid cloak, heavy with saffron, skims the floor.

With his foot on the threshold, he sees tear-streaks and terror,
 and many things that are far from his domain.
 He himself throws the wreaths down from his forehead,
 rubs black cardamom from his glittering hair.
 He is ashamed to stand out, a cheerful face in a sad crowd,
 and the red of his cloak moves up into his cheeks.
 But oh me! Oh wretched! My limbs are parched with fever, my blanket
 weighs me down much more than it should, 170
 and I see my parents crying above me, and it's not wedding torchlight
 but the death torch that glows at my side.
 O goddess who takes joy in the painted quiver! Pity a girl suffering,
 bestow your brother's healing on me now.
 It's a disgrace that while *he* is busy expelling death's causes,
 you are here taking credit for my death.
 Could it be that while you were in a shaded font washing,
 I caught an unwitting glimpse of your bath?
 Or, out of so many gods' altars, was it yours I overlooked?
 Or has your mother been slighted by mine? 180

I have committed no sin except a false oath-reading,
 and literacy in an ill-fated verse.
 You, too, if you do not lie about your love, should light incense.
 The hands that harmed me should be put to good use.
 Why are you angry that the girl you were promised is not yours,
 but you act like she could never *become* yours?
 If your hopes lie in my being alive, then why does the cruel goddess
 rob me of my life and you of your hope?
 And you shouldn't be believed when you say my fiancé
 has caressed my sick limbs with his hand. 190
 No, he sits by my side as often as they let him,
 but never forgets that this is a virgin bed.
 But even now he seems to sense something within me,
 his tears fall often but their cause is concealed,
 he's less brazen with his flirtations, and he kisses me seldom,
 and when he calls me "his," now his face is unsure.
 I'm not surprised that he has sensed it. I'm betrayed by my own signals.
 When he comes, I roll over on my side,

I do not speak, shut my eyes, pretend that I am sleeping,
 throw back his hand when he reaches for my touch. 200
 He groans to himself, from quiet breast sighing softly,
 he endures all my snubs, though not deserved.
 Oh god, how you rejoice, how my intentions have pleased you!
 Oh god, that I've confessed my feelings to you!

But if I have anger, *you* deserve it more rightly,
 since it was you who set out these snares.
 You write asking if you can visit my feeble body.
 You're not near, and yet you harm me from afar.
 I had wondered why they named you Javelin-Boy, Acontius.
 Well, your acumen inflicts wounds from afar. 210
 No, I've not yet recovered from such a wound. Your words struck me
 like a javelin thrown at long range.

But why should you come? So you can look at my miserable body,
 the great trophy your genius has won?
 I collapse from emaciation, all my skin a bloodless color,
 like your apple when I see it in my mind.
 My face exudes a faint light, a white entirely without redness,
 the complexion of marble freshly cut,
 or of silver that is spread over the tables for a banquet
 and blanches when touched by cold water. 220

If you see me now, you will say you don't know me.
 "I've never pursued that girl in my life."
 And afraid we'd be married, you would free me from my promise,
 and cross your fingers that the goddess would forget.
 Maybe you'll make me swear an oath to the opposite,
 and will send me new words to read aloud.
 If only you would sit by my side like you've asked! If only
 you'd see your fiancée's limp limbs.
 Your heart may be harder than iron, but even you, Acontius,
 would beg to hear forgiveness in my voice. 230
 You should know that the god who sings fates out at Delphi
 is being asked by what means I can be cured.

And he, as now the rumors come whispering, describes a promise
that was broken while his sister was witness.

This the god, this the seer, this the begotten verses have spoken—
oh!—there's no god who ignores your prayers!
But why do they favor you? Unless you've discovered new letters
that in their reading can ensnare even gods?

Well, while you bridle gods, I will follow their divinity,
and I lift conquered hands to your prayers.

I have confessed to my mother my deceived tongue's covenant,
held my eyes fixed to the ground, filled with shame.

The rest is up to you. My work here surpasses a virgin's:
my letter did not fear to speak to you.

Enough, now. My feeble limbs are exhausted by the reed pen,
my poor hand simply cannot go on.

But now that I want to be joined to you in marriage,
nothing remains but for my letter to say:

FAREWELL.

240

GLOSSARY OF NAMES

Acas'tus: Greek prince; sailed with Jason and the Argonauts; participated in the Calydonian boar hunt; 13.25

Achae'ans: see Greeks; 8.13

Ache'lous: god of the Achelouïs River; suitor of Deianira; 9.139

Achil'les: son of the goddess Thetis and the mortal Peleus; fought in the Trojan War for the Greeks and renowned for his divine strength and speed; killed by Paris; 1.17, 35; 3.41, 87, 137; 8.3, 45, 83, 85; 20.69

Ac'o'ntius: young man from the island of Ceos; tricked Cydippe into marriage; 20.239; 21.209, 229

Actae'on: son of Autonoë and grandson of Cadmus; killed by his hounds after seeing Diana as she was bathing; 20.103

Ado'nis: son of his grandfather Cinyras and his sister Myrrha; beloved by Venus; memorialized as a flower; 4.98

Ae'acus: son of Jupiter and Aegina; father of Peleus; king of the island Aegina; 8.33, 55

Aeë'tes: father of Medea; king of Colchis; set tasks for Jason to complete in exchange for the Golden Fleece; 6.50, 103; 12.29, 51

Aege'us: father of Theseus; king of Athens; 10.131

Aegi'des: child of Aegeus; refers to Theseus; 2.67; 4.60

Aegi'na: nymph of the island Aegina; mother of Aeacus by Jupiter; 3.73

Aegis'thus: son of Thyestes and cousin of Agamemnon; lover of Clytemnestra, whose children killed him as revenge for their father's murder; 8.53

Aene'as: son of Venus and Anchises; father of Ascanius; Trojan hero and legendary founder of Rome; lover of Dido; 7.25, 26, 29, 195

Ae'olus: son of Hippotes; father of Athamas; warden of the winds, who gave Ulysses the gift of the winds in a bag; 10.66; 11.5, 34, 65, 74, 91, 95; 18.46

Ae'son: father of Jason; king of Iolcus; 6.103, 109

Aeso'nian: child of Aeson; refers to Jason; 12.66, 134; 17.230