

THE SHIELD OF HERACLES

...or resembling

The maid who left Mycenae, following
Warlike Amphitryon; she travelled on
To Thebes, the daughter of Electryon,
Alcmene. She surpassed all womankind
In beauty and in stature, while her mind
Was sharper than all women's who had wed
A mortal. Her face and her dark eyes had spread
Such charm as Aphrodite has, and she
Gave honour to her spouse more lovingly 10
Than any had before her. He indeed
Had slain her noble father in his greed
And wrath about his oxen. So he came
To Thebes from his own country and became
A suppliant to Cadmus' men who carried
Their shields, and with the modest maid he'd married
He dwelt without the joys of love till when
He would avenge the death of those great men,
Her brothers, burning down in conflagration
The hamlets of the Teleboean nation 20
And Taphos. For this labour had been laid
On him – the gods were witnesses. Afraid
To face their wrath, as quickly as could be
He hastened to complete the task that he
Was forced by Zeus to do. With him went, too,
The horse-driving Boeotian warriors, who
Panted above their shields, the hand-to-hand

Locrian fighters and the gallant band
Of Phocians, ever keen for battle and war.
The son of noble Alcaeus went before 30
Them all, rejoicing in his fighting men.
However, Zeus was contemplating then
Another scheme to spawn one to defend
All gods and men from a disastrous end.
One night he left Olympus, pondering
Guile deep within his heart while hankering
For a well-girdled woman. Rapidly
He came to Typhaonium, then he
Came to the summit of Mt. Phicium's height
To plot great things, and thus in just one night 40
With the trim-legged child of Electryon
He lay, and glorious Amphitryon,
His folk's heroic shepherd, after he,
His task completed, gained his victory,
Went home. Before his men he visited,
The ones who worked his fields, he went instead
With speed to his dear wife. Then was he gripped
With passion, and as one who's happily slipped
From sore affliction or the misery
Of cruel bondage, just the same did he 50
Come home, and with his modest wife he lay
All night, delighting in the fine array
Of golden Aphrodite's great largess.
A god and a fine man's loving tenderness
Produced in Thebes a brace of sons: although
Brothers, they were not of one spirit – no,

One was the dread, strong, mighty Heracles,
Far better than his brother Iphicles,
Spearsman Amphityron's lad. The former one
She bore from the embrace of Cronus's son, 60
The Lord of the Dark Clouds, and he would slay
Brave Cycnus, son of Ares, for one day
In far-shooting Apollo's land he spied
Him and Ares, who's never satisfied
With war. Their armour gleamed like blazing flame
As, standing in their chariots, on they came,
Their swift steeds pawing the earth, while all around
The dust rose up like smoke; over the ground
The well-built chariot-rails were rattling;
The horses' hooves headlong were thundering. 70
Fine Cycnus smiled, for he had hopes to see
His slaying the dynamic progeny
Of Zeus and his charioteer and take away
Their splendid arms. But Phoebus would not pay
Attention to his vaunting flummeries,
Having stirred against him mighty Heracles.
Apollo's grove and altar flared in dread
Of him and of his armour; from his head
His eyes flashed fire. Ah, what mortal man
Would have dared to oppose him other than 80
Heracles and Iolaus? For those two
Were strong and had invincible arms which grew
From powerful shoulders. To the charioteer,
Strong Iolaus, Heracles spoke out clear:
"Iolaus, best loved of men, Amphitryon

Has sinned against the gods who dwell upon
Olympus. Leaving Tiryns, he went to
The sweet-crowned, well-built Thebes, because he slew
Electryon for his wide-browed oxen. He
Came to Creon and long-robed Enioche. 90

They then embraced him, giving him largess
Such as is due to suppliants, and no less
Praised him, nay even more. He happily
Lived with trim-legged Alcmene. Presently
Your father and I were born, each from the other
So different, though birthed by the same mother.
Zeus made your father unintelligent,
And so he left his family and went
To honour vile Eurystheus – such a shame!

In latter days the poor man surely came 100
To grieve his folly. One can't take away
A deed that's done. But Zeus prepared to lay
Hard tasks on me. But come, friend, instantly
Grab the red reins, augment your bravery
And in your chariot urge your swift steeds on,
And have no fear of murderous Ares – none –
Who round the holy grove of Lord Apollo,
Far-Shooter, rage with his angry 'hollo'.

Surely he's had enough of killing men,
Though strong." Fine Iolaus answered then: 110
"My friend, the almighty Father honours you
And the Earth-Shaker, Lord Poseidon, too,
Who guards the veil of Thebe's walls. They bring
To you a man so overpowering

That you may win great glory. Straightaway
Put on your warlike armour that we may
Join Ares' chariot with our own and fight.
The dauntless son of Zeus he will not fright,
Nor Iphicles' son: I think he'll rather flee
The blameless Heracles' twin progeny 120
When at close quarters; for the cry of war
They're keen to raise, loving it so much more
Than feasting." Heracles was well content
At this: he smiled and, answering him, he sent
Him winged words: "Iolaus, nurtured by
A god, tempestuous battle now is nigh.
As you have shown your expertise before
At other times, apply it now once more
And mount Arion, your great black-maned steed,
And roam about to aid me in my need." 130
He donned the greaves of shining bronze which he
Was given by Hephaestus famously.
And then his fine, gold breastplate on his chest
He placed, a gift from Pallas when his test
Of toil he was about to bear, and then
Across his back the steel that saves all men
From doom he fastened and behind him slung
His quiver so that round his frame it hung
With many chilling arrows which deal death
And make a man incapable of breath. 140
Their points were lethal, and tears from them ran;
Their shafts were smooth and of a lengthy span,
Their butts with feathers covered, which once shook

Upon a red-brown eagle. Then he took
His sturdy spear, and on his head he placed
A helmet made of adamant, finely chased
And closely shaped. His bronze shield, all aglow,
He seized, which no-one ever with a blow
Had smashed or crushed, a wonder to behold,
The whole orb glistening with shining gold, 150
Gypsum, electrum and white ivory,
While forged upon the layers one could see
Dark-blue enamel. At its core was Dread
In adamant, unspeakable, his head
Turned back, his eyes afire; his teeth shone white,
All in a row, daunting, provoking fright;
Feared Strife hovered about his shaggy face,
She who assembled all the warrior race:
She snatched the minds and senses pitilessly
Of those poor folk who brought hostility 160
To Zeus's son, and they went down below
Into the house of Hades; their bones, though,
After the skin round them had rotted quite,
Crumbled away beneath the parching light.
And gathered all around the prince Caeneus
And Dryas and Perithous and Hopleus,
Exadius, Prolochus and Phalereus
And Mopsus, son of Ares, and Theseus
Were all the Lapith spearsmen, keen for strife.
The prince's ranks looked like the gods whose life 170
Is endless, all of silver, and upon
Their frames was armoured gold, assembled on

The other side the prophet Asbolus,
The black-haired Mimas, Ureus, Arctus,
Dryalus and Perimedes, progeny
Of Peuceus, all of silver equally,
Gold pine-trees in their hands. It was as though
They lived that, hand-to-hand, they battled so
With spears and pines; grim Ares' horses raced,
In gold, while that fierce Ares could be traced 180
There, too, the creator of the spoils, and he
Held in his hands a spear and urgently
Was spurring on his men. As if he would
Be slaying live men, he reeked blood. He stood
Upon his chariot, while beside him Flight
And Panic hovered, eager for the fight.
There, too, was Tritogeneia, child of Zeus,
Spoil-winner, who seemed anxious to let loose
The battle, with her weapon in her hand,
Gold helmet on her head, while round her spanned 190
The aegis, as she headed for the strife.
The gods, too, who enjoy eternal life
Were there, and Zeus' and Leto's progeny
Played on a golden lyre harmoniously
Amongst them all. The gods abode was there,
Holy Olympus, and, spread everywhere,
Was boundless wealth; a limpid melody
The Muses sang. A harbour, sanctuary
From the fierce sea, was painted there as well,
Which seemed to heave about the ocean's swell, 200
Made of refined tin, finished as a sphere,

With many hunting dolphins rushing here
And there. Two silver dolphins in that team
Were eating up the mute fish as a stream
Of water left their mouths, and, furthermore,
Some bronze fish trembled. Sat upon the shore,
A fisherman watched them, and he seemed to be
About to cast the fishing-net that he
Held in his hands. There was the progeny
Of rich-haired Danaë, a cavalry 210
Master named Perseus, whose feet did not touch
The shield, though they were very near. O such
A thing to speak of! For in not one place
Was it sustained – the Lamè One thus had chased
The gold himself. Around his feet were shaped
Black sandals and across his back was draped,
Tied with a bronze cross-belt, a black-sheathed sword,
And, quite as swift as thought, he roamed abroad
In flight. Across the broad of his back the head
Was seen of the monster Gorgon, causing dread 220
To everyone. A marvel to behold,
A silver pouch held it. Bright crests of gold
Hung from it. On the hero's head there lay
A thing which never sees the light of day,
The dreadful cap of Hades. Shuddering
With horror, he himself was hastening,
Chased by the Gorgons, whom none would make bold
To near or speak of, eager to take hold
Of him. As they set foot on the pale steel,
The shield rang with a sharp and piercing peal. 230

Two serpents, with their heads curved forwards, hung
From tassels: each one showed a flickering tongue
And teeth that gnashed with fury, eyes alight,
And on their heads there quaked prodigious Fright.
Beyond them armed men fought, some to defend
Their town and parents from a tragic end,
Others to sack it. Many people lay
Slaughtered, but more continued in the fray.
Upon the well-built towers of bronze, with shrieks
That rent the air, the women tore their cheeks. 240
By famed Hephaestus had all this been made.
The elders, on whom old age had been laid,
Amassed outside the city gates to pray
To the gods in fear for their own sons. But they
Engaged in battle. The dark Fates, fierce-eyed,
Grim, bloody, unapproachable, all vied,
With pearl-white fangs that gnashed and snapped, to seize
Those who had fallen; thus, when one of these
Had dropped or had received some injury,
They caught him and, in her avidity 250
To drink dark blood, one of them would append
Her great claws on him, and he'd then descend
To Hades and chill Tartarus, and when
They were replete with human blood, they then
Went back into the fray once they had flung
The man behind them, while above them hung
Lachesis, Clotho and Atropos (less tall
Than her companions, indeed quite small
And yet the eldest one and nonpareil),

And over the poor wretch a frenzied fray 260
They caused. They eyed each other fearsomely,
Fighting with hands and talons equally.
And there stood mournful, pale Unhappiness,
Dry, shrunk with hunger, causing great distress,
Knees swollen, long-nailed, dripping snot, cheeks red
With blood that down upon the ground she shed,
Ad hideously she leered, her shoulders wet
With much dust mixed with tears. One's eyes then met
A well-built city: seven gold gates were fit
Upon its towers' joists, thus guarding it. 270
The men with dances and festivities
Were holding celebrations, some of these
Conveying a new bride up to the house
Where she will live in harmony with her spouse,
Their means a well-wheeled car, the bridal song
Increasing, while in waves afar a throng
Of handmaids waved their torches, pivoting
About: they went ahead, all revelling
In the hilarity; there followed then
Frolicsome choirs; to the shrill pipes young men 280
Sang softly while the echo shook around
Them all. The maidens, to the lovely sound
Of lyres, led the dance, while flutes were played
Upon the other side where a parade
Of youths in laughing mood were revelling
And causing the whole area to ring
With mirth, dance and frivolity. Again,
Folk galloped on horseback, while husbandmen

Broke up the rich soil, tunics in a band
Swathed round their loins. There was a wide cornland 290
Where some with sharp hooks reaped the stalks which bent
Beneath their weight, while others were intent
On binding sheaves with strips, the threshing-floor
Then spreading out; and there were yet some more
Who reaped the vintage with a reaping-hook,
While from them others into baskets took
Black and white clusters from the many vines
Which were weighed down with leaves and hung in lines
Of silvery strands. Others were gathering
Them into baskets. Near them was a string 300
Of vines in gold: all this had been designed
By talented Hephaestus; it was lined
With shivering leaves and silver stakes, and they
Surrounded grapes that turned black. An array
Of men were treading grapes while others drew
Them off. Men boxed, men wrestled; huntsmen, too,
Chased hares, while sharp-toothed hounds ran in the lead,
Eager to catch their quarry by their speed,
The hares keen to escape. Horsemen, astride
Their charges, strove in contest as they vied 310
To win a prize, and charioteers stood on
Their well-built chariots while urging on
Their swift steeds with a slack rein: as they flew,
The jointed chariots, as they clattered, drew
A loud shriek from the naves. Thus endlessly
Their toil continued, and no victory
Was gained. A large gold tripod had been laid

Out for them, which had brilliantly been made
By clever Hephaestus. Round the rim there ran
Full-flowing Ocean all around the span 320
Of the shield. Above it swans called out and trailed
The sky while on the water's face there sailed
Many more. Beside them fish were tumbling.
To see that great shield was a wondrous thing,
Even for Thunderer Zeus who had decreed
Hephaestus make it. Heracles indeed,
The valiant progeny of Zeus, could wield
Exquisitely this masterpiece, this shield.
He leapt upon his chariot with a spring
Resembling great Zeus's lightning. 330
Then Iolaus, that strong charioteer,
Guided the curving chariot. Coming near,
Grey-eyed Athena spoke encouraging
And wingèd words: "Hail to you, o offspring
Of far-framed Lynceus! On this very day
Our lord, great Zeus gives you the power to slay
Cycnus and then strip the arms that splendidly
Glittered. And yet you shall hear more from me,
Mightiest of the people of this land:
When you have slaughtered Cycnus, I demand 340
That you leave him behind, his armour too,
And, as he joins the fight, I order you
To watch Ares and, when he is revealed
As powerless beneath his well-wrought shield,
Then wound him with your spear and then retreat,
For it is not ordained that you should cheat

Him of his steeds and arms. Then the goddess
Leapt on the chariot with illustriousness
And victory in her hands. The charioteer
Rebuked his steeds and, at his cry, in fear 350
They sped the chariot along the ground,
And from it dust was scattered all around.
The bright-eyed goddess shook her aegis then,
Thus putting dauntlessness into both men;
The earth groaned all around them. Like a flame
Or hurricane, horse-taming Cycnus came
Against Ares. The steeds neighed piercingly,
Facing each other, and reverberantly
The noise vibrated. "Cycnus, my good friend,"
Said mighty Heracles, "why do you send 360
Your steeds against me in our sore dismay?
Guide your swift horses clean out of the way.
I'm travelling to Trachis and the man
Who rules there, Ceyx, him whom no-one can
Outdo in power and honour in that land,
A thing that you yourself can understand,
For you wed dark-eyed Themistinoë.
His daughter. You'll have no delivery
From death, you fool, if we should meet in war.
Indeed he has made trial of me before, 370
Standing against me, hankering to be
My victor. Three times was he hit by me:
Each time his shield was pierced, but then I struck
His thigh with all my strength, and now it stuck
Deep in his flesh. Headlong into the dust

He fell beneath the force of my spear-thrust.
He would then have encountered the disdain
Of all the gods by leaving on the plain
His bloody spoils." But Cycnus did not pay
Him any mind, and he refused to stay 380
His steeds. The two then leapt to the ground
From their well-structured chariots in one bound.
The fine-maned steeds were driven near to those two:
Their hoofs rang out as over the ground they flew.
As rocks from some great mountain way up high
Come leaping down and tumble, as they fly,
Upon each other, while oak-trees, once tall,
And pines and towering poplars break and fall
Beneath that mighty avalanche before
They reach the plain, so did they, with a roar, 390
Fall on each other. Famed Iolaus, Arne,
Aegina, green Althea and Helice
Echoed out loud. They closed with a great shout.
Clear-sighted Zeus then rained down many a gout
Of blood and thundered loudly. This was done
To signal battle to his dauntless son.
As in the mountain-glens a well-tusked boar
Will feel afraid to see a man before
His eyes, resolving then to make assay
Against the huntsmen, turning his head away 400
To whet his teeth while foam begins to flow
About his mouth, his eyes with fire aglow,
His shaggy mane now bristling around

His neck, so Heracles leapt to the ground.
Just when the grasshopper with his dusky wings,
Perched on a verdant shoot, of summer sings
To men, the dainty dew his nourishment,
And all day long from dawn he is content
To pour his voice out at the very height
Of summer's heat, when Sirius can blight 410
The flesh with scorching, when the beards which grow
Upon the millet men in summer sow,
When the crude grapes which Phoebus gave to men –
Both joy and sorrow – start to colour, then
They battled and a mighty din arose.
Just as two lions in their wrath oppose
Each other for a deer that has been killed –
They snarl and clash - , or else like crooked-billed
Vultures who claw each other as they screech
Aloud on some high rock that they may reach 420
A mountain-goat or else a fat, wild buck
Which with his bow a vigorous man has struck
But, ignorant of the place, has roamed away,
But readily they mark it and the fray
Is keen between them, they thus, with a yell,
Against each other make assault pell-mell.
The Cycnus, passionate to have a chance
To kill his foe, struck with his brazen lance
His shield but did not break it. It was so
That Zeus's benefaction saved his foe. 430
But mighty Heracles, the progeny
Of Amphitryon, struck Cycnus violently

Upon the neck, where it was unprotected
Beneath helmet and shield, and thus bisected
The sinews. Like a rock, down Cycnus came,
Or like a lofty pine zapped by the flame
Of Zeus's thunderbolt, and all about
His frame his armour clashed, and then the stout
Heracles let him alone as he took care
To watch for Ares. With a glowering stare, 440
Just like a lion who rips ferociously
The hide of a corpse he's found and rapidly
Tears it apart in anger, fiercely glaring
And with his paws the earth he falls to tearing,
Lashing his flanks and shoulders with his tail
So that whoever sees him there will fail
To draw near and give battle, even thus
Amphitryon's son, for fight still gluttonous,
Stood face-to-face with Ares eagerly,
Nursing within his heart his bravery. 450
Ares drew near and in his heart he wept,
Then with a cry they at each other leapt.
As when a rock shoots from a great rock-face
And rolls in lengthy whirls, bounding apace
And roaring, clashing with a high bluff, where
They grapple with each other, thus this pair
Engaged with a battle shout. Athena, though,
With her dak aegis, went to meet his foe:
She glowered and these wingèd words she spoke:
"Ares, hold back your matchless hands and choke 460

Your fearful anger. There are no decrees
That you should slay bold-hearted Heracles
Or strip his splendid armour. Come then, stay
Your fighting and do not stand in my way.”
So said she, but she couldn’t make him hear:
He spoke out loudly, brandishing each spear
Like fire and rushed headlong, eager to slay
His foe, and with a spear he made assay
Upon his shield, galled that his son had died,
But from her chariot Athena, gleaming-eyed, 470
Deflected his spear’s force. Then bitter woe
Seized Ares, who then leapt upon his foe,
His keen sword drawn. The son of Amphitryon,
Still keen for battle, as Ares came on,
Forcefully stabbed his thigh, which lay revealed
Beneath the base of his well-structured shield.
Deep down into his flesh he thrust his spear
And cast him flat upon the ground. Then Fear
And Panic caused the steeds to race ahead
And pull the smooth-wheeled chariot, as they sped, 480
Close to him. Lifting him from the wide ground
Into the chariot he lashed them, bound
For Olympus. Heracles and glorious
Iolaus stripped the armour from Cycnus.
Upon their chariot their swift steeds led
Them straight tot Trachis. The goddess, though, instead
Went to Olympus. As for Cycnus, he
By Ceyx and the large community
Ruled by that king was buried; in that place

Were Anthe and Aegina and the race 490
Of famed Iolcus, Helice and Arne.
There gathered there a multiplicity
Of folk to honour Ceyx, the good friend
Of all the blessed gods, but in the end
The Anaurus doomed the grave to oblivion
When swelled by a rain-storm: this by Leto's son,
Apollo, was decreed, for regularly
Cycnus would watch for and then violently
Despoil rich hecatombs which folk would bring
To Pytho as a holy offering. 500

