

OID METAMORPHOSES IX

The hero Theseus asked him why he'd sighed
And why his head was damaged. He replied,
His long hair wreathed with reeds, "The thing you ask
Of me requires a very painful task.
Why tell of this disgrace? But truthfully
The loss I had in battle ought to be
A glory. Even to fight with such a foe
Brings comfort. Deianeira (you may know
Some tales of her) was once extremely fair,
Pursued by many suitors. I was there 10
Among them, and I begged her father to
Consider all my claims that I might woo
The maid and marry her, as did the son
Of Alceus, Hercules. Then every one
Of all the other suitors backed away.
Then Hercules began to brag and say
That he was Jove's descendant and proclaim
His labours and how Juno, his stepdame,
He had outwitted when she wickedly
Announced her orders for him. As for me, 20
Since he was not a god yet, in reply
I said, "Gods should not yield to men, and I
Am master of the winding waves that run
Throughout your kingdom. Therefore, as your son-
-In-law I'd be a native of your land
And not a stranger on a foreign strand.
Because Queen Juno did not punish me
With labours, do not say my pedigree
Is less than royal! How can you profess
That you're Jove's child? Hah, some adulteress 30
Bore you! Prove that from Jupiter you came
Or else confess that you're the son of shame!"
But Hercules scowled as I spoke, then he
With overwhelming anger answered me:
"My hands prove better than my tongue – therefore
In lieu of our engaging in a war
Of words, let's fight! I'll leave the victory
In words to you!" He came on angrily.
After the words I'd uttered, to take flight
Was shameful, so I readied for the fight, 40
Arms raised, fists clenched; some sand he took and threw
At me, although some of it struck him, too.
Now at my neck, now at my swift legs he
Would ever seem about to vanquish me,
But as a huge cliff is lambasted by
The sea and yet remains unmoving, I
Was safe in my great size. Then for a spell

We rested then rushed back again pell-mell,
 Determined not to yield, until I placed
 My forehead against his forehead and laced 50
 My fingers around his – I've often spied
 Two giant bulls in combat thus collide
 When fighting for a cow, then, hovering,
 The herd stands round, uncertain, trembling
 And waiting for the hour of victory.
 Three times did Hercules strive fruitlessly
 But then unloosed my grip and, drawing back,
 He raised his hand and gave me such a crack
 It twisted me about, so instantly
 He clung upon my back. I truthfully 60
 Have spoken. Yes, it's true what I've professed -
 It seemed that on my back a mountain pressed!
 I thrust my arms beneath him, but it took
 Much sweat and mighty effort to unhook
 His hold. Gasping for breath, I could not find
 My strength, and then he seized me from behind
 And bent my neck, and down upon my knee
 I went, losing all my tenacity.
 I sought diversion with a cunning trick
 And changed into a serpent – being slick, 70
 I slipped from his fast grip. But when I wound
 My sinuous body in tight coils around
 His frame and hissed at him with my forked tongue,
 He laughed at me and said, “When I was young
 And in my cradle, similar snakes I slew,
 But what small part of Lerna's snake are you?
 Although it had one hundred heads at first,
 Each time I severed one of them, two burst
 To life and gained in strength, and then they grew
 And branched out. Every one of them I slew. 80
 What will become of you, do you surmise,
 With your deceitful, serpent-like disguise
 And secret borrowed weapons?” Thus said he,
 And at these words he tried to strangle me.
 His grip like forceps had me in great pain.
 A third form left to me, I once again
 Changed shape and now became a bull. Once more
 In this way I was able to restore
 My strength. About my bulging neck he threw
 His arms on the left side and held on to 90
 My frame as off I ran. He grappled me
 And I was turned and twisted helplessly
 As he gripped both my horns; into the sand
 He thrust me, then he raised his fierce right hand
 And tore one horn from my disfigured brow.
 The Goddess of Abundance is rich now

Because the naiads took that horn and made
 It sacred, since within it they have laid
 Both fruits and scented flowers: thus was born
 Ever since that day the consecrated Horn 100
 Of Plenty." Then a lovely nymph, arrayed
 Like fair Diana, whose locks gently strayed
 Down to her breast, came to the board to bring
 Fall's plenty in a horn while offering
 A second course of apples. To have lost
 The horn that Hercules removed had cost
 The river dear, who hid his sad disgrace
 In reeds and boughs entwined about his face.
 Nessus, the self-same maiden captivated
 You, too, and so your frame was penetrated 110
 By a swift dart. Hercules, with his bride,
 Went to his native land: on the bankside
 Of swift Evenus, which was swollen by
 The winter rains, its flooding very high,
 Beyond the norm, frequently eddying,
 Impassable. Bravely but worrying
 About his bride, Hercules was standing there
 When the centaur Nessus, strong and well aware
 Of what those fords could do, came up to him
 With this advice: "Plunge in the flood and swim. 120
 Your bride will safely land there with my aid,
 And so without an ounce of doubt the maid
 He trusted to his care, though she was wan
 With fear as. trembling, she looked upon
 The river and the centaur equally.
 Then Hercules, weighed down considerably
 With lion's skin and quiver (for his bow
 He'd thrown across the stream), said, "I'll do so
 Since I've begun." And then the waves he sought
 Immediately without a single thought 130
 Of where he might cross with the greatest ease,
 Scorning the easy way. Then Hercules,
 Once he had gained the river's other side,
 Picked up his bow, but Deianeira cried
 To him for help, for Nessus was about
 To rape her, and so Hercules yelled out,
 "Where are you taking her, you rapist? Do
 You think your rapid feet will profit you?
 If you have no respect for me, instead
 Think of your father Ixion and dread 140
 That whirling wheel, for that may well avert
 Your filthy deed. Although you are expert
 In galloping, you can't escape from me -
 Though I can't catch you, with an injury
 I'll bring you down!" And so it proved indeed -

He shot him in the back, the arrow's speed
 Thrusting it through his chest. His blood contained
 The bane of Hydra's snake once he'd regained
 The arrow, gushing out from either side.
 Nessus took it and said, "I'll not have died 150
 Without revenge." He then gave to the maid
 His tunic, warm with his own blood, as an aid
 To waning love. Hercules' deeds became
 To all the world examples of great fame,
 And Juno ceased her hate. Victorious
 After his vengeance on King Eurytus,
 He went back home. Set for an offering
 In Ceneum to Jupiter, the king
 Of all the gods, he now was talked about
 By vicious Rumour, who was ever out 160
 To utter lies. The story reached his bride,
 Who'd heard that Hercules, her husband, sighed
 For the king's child, Iole. Scared to hear
 This news, his wife dissolved in many a tear,
 Then said, "Why do I weep? She'll laugh at me.
 She's coming here! I must immediately
 Make plans while I am able to. Should I
 Complain or hold my tongue? Am I to fly
 To Calydon or stay? Leave home? Maybe,
 If there's no other possibility, 170
 I'll challenge her. I must recall the shade
 Of Meleager and slaughter the maid
 That the astonished world may be aware
 Of injured women's rage." Torn here and there,
 Her mind fixed on one single thought – that she
 Might keep her love alive or, certainly,
 Restore it if she sent to him a piece
 Of Nessus' clothing so that she might cease
 Her new affair. What caused her fatal woe
 She gave her servant, whom she urged to go 180
 With it to Hercules, who donned it then
 And there with all its serpent's poison, when
 He cast incense while on the marble shrine,
 While praying to the gods above, the wine
 He poured. The heated bane began to melt
 Into his flesh: the torture that he felt
 Throughout his frame he withstood just as long
 As he was able, for his mind was strong.
 But finally his suffering prevailed
 Over his mind and through the wilds he wailed 190
 And overturned the shrines. He tried to strip
 The tunic from his back but felt it rip
 His flesh. The more he pulled, the more the thing
 Tightened around his frame, exhibiting

His massive bones beneath his shrivelled skin.
 His blood hissed like hot blades when they're plunged in
 Water. Sweat streamed from every single pore
 And heat consumed his entrails; furthermore,
 His sinews cracked, his marrow liquefied.
 He raised his hands to Heaven's vault and cried, 200
 "Juno, you cruel one, look down on me
 And laugh! But if even an enemy
 May pity me, dispatch me! Take away
 This toilsome life of torment and dismay -
 A fit stepmother's gift! For *this* I fought
 And murdered King Busiris, he who brought
 Violation on his temples with the gore
 Of strangers sacrificed?? What was it for
 That I dispatched Antaeus?? Yes, I slew
 Geryon and two-formed Cerberus! Don't you 210
 Believe my hands were able, not long ago,
 To best the Cretan bull? The Eleans know
 My cleaning of the stables of their king
 And Stymphalus knows of my massacring
 Man-eating birds. Parthenius is not blind
 To how I caught the Ceryneian hind.
 I took the gold belt of Hippolyte
 And from the sleepless dragon secretly
 I stole the golden fruit. What was it for
 I fought the centaurs and entrapped the boar 220
 Of Erymanthus in rich Arcady?
 It's thanks to me the Hydra's energy
 Did not increase. And what about the day
 I slew the Thracian steeds (so fat were they
 With human blood, their mangers heaped up high
 With mangled bodies): in my anger I
 Threw them onto the ground, their master, too.
 And with these arms the Nemean beast I slew
 Inside its cave. Then I upheld the sky
 On my strong shoulders, and the labours I 230
 Performed Juno herself eventually
 Tired of decreeing, but relentlessly
 Did I perform them. But behold my plight!
 My weapons, strength not valour cannot fight
 Against it. Flames upon my body prey
 And heat is shrivelling my flesh away.
 Eurystheus, though, my enemy, is well!
 So do men think that gods in Heaven dwell?
 And so he wandered over Oeta's heights,
 Just like a bull in whom a javelin bites, 240
 Its thrower having fled. His cries rang out
 Against the cliffs, at times thrashing about
 To doff the shirt. He razed trees furiously

And scattered mountain rocks. Imploringly
 He reached out to the sky. He came upon
 The man who'd given him the shirt, who'd gone
 Into a hollow, trembling with dread.
 In savage fury to this man he said,
 "Lichas, was it not you who gave to me
 This fatal gift? Are you not doomed to be 250
 My killer?" Lichas, terrified, cried out
 For mercy. Hercules whirled him about
 Three or four times and shot him like a sling
 And into the sea he sent him hurtling.
 While in the air he hardened, for we know
 That rain when frozen then turns into snow;
 Compressed by winds, it twists, becoming hail -
 So ancient law declares that, without fail
 As Lichas was progressing through the air,
 His blood with fear was curdled so that there 260
 Was then no moisture left and he became
 Hard flint, and there exists, bearing the name
 Of Lichas, a rock that rises from the sea
 In the Euboean gulf which seems to be
 A mortal man, and sailors fear to go
 Upon that seeming-human rock, as though
 It senses them. Illustrious Hercules,
 How many of those overspreading trees
 On Oeta did you level to the ground
 And then pile up into a giant mound? 270
 Then Philoctetes at your stern command
 Ignited it, receiving from your hand
 Your bow in recompense which was replete
 With countless arrows and thus would repeat
 Its work upon the plains of Troy. The pyre
 Began to kindle with the greedy fire,
 The lion-skin on top, and down you lay,
 Your club as pillow, there to sleep away
 Your life, as if you were there as a guest
 Reclining with full cups of wine and blessed 280
 With wreaths. The flames crackled ferociously
 Upon him, but he scorned their potency.
 The gods feared for him, and Jove understood
 Their minds and said, "My friends, your fear is good,
 And I am gratified that I am he
 Who's ruler of this sacred family,
 And my beloved son is safe with you.
 You honour him, but I'm obliged to you
 As well, so do not fear! You should forget
 The flames of Oeta – he will triumph yet 290
 As he has done before – he'll equally
 Conquer the spreading fires that you see.

He is immortal – death cannot defeat
 My son, who's not subject to poison's heat.
 His life on earth is finished and therefore
 I will convey him to the celestial shore
 And purify him, trusting that I'll please,
 By doing this, you other deities.
 If any grudge his immortality,
 Know it was granted him deservedly. 300
 They all concurred, and even the goddess
 Juno herself appeared to acquiesce,
 Though somewhat hurt. His immortality
 Was burned away, though a periphery
 Of Hercules's spirit still remained;
 The semblance of his father he retained,
 None of his mother. As a snake will slough
 His skin when old and, once it's been cast off,
 Its vigour glitters in new scales, just so,
 All doss removed, with an illustrious glow 310
 He was majestic. High up in the sky
 Jove drove a mighty chariot, drawn by
 Four rapid steeds, so that he might convey
 His son to live among the stars' array.
 Once he was there, even Atlas felt the weight
 Of Heaven increase, but still relentless hate
 Plagued King Eurystheus, which he'd ever vent
 On Hercules, whose mother Alcmene, spent
 With age and fear, would tell to Iole
 Long tales of Hercules' nobility 320
 And her own sadness. Hercules had said
 That Iole to Hyllus must be wed,
 And in her womb a child of a noble race
 Was planted. "May the gods afford you grace,"
 Alcmene said to her. "May they curtail
 The time before, in childbirth, you must wail
 And call Lucina, labour's own goddess,
 Through whom Juno brought me unhappiness.
 For when my hour was very, very near,
 The child I bore was large, so it was clear 330
 That it was Jupiter's. Eventually,
 Unable to endure such agony,
 A cold sweat seized me – even as I speak,
 The very thought of it makes me feel weak
 In pain for seven nights and seven days,
 I lay exhausted in a dreadful haze
 Of woe. I prayed to Lucina and to three
 Nixian deities of delivery.
 Lucina came, but she had before now
 To cruel Juno guaranteed her vow 340
 To give my life. Upon the altar she

Sat near the door and listened, her right knee
 Over her left, her fingers interlocked,
 And as she heard my groans the birth she blocked.
 In a low voice she murmured spells as well;
 Maddened, I strove and gave out many a yell
 Against ungrateful Jove, though uselessly.
 I wished to die – my moans of misery
 Were so replete with grief that every word
 That I gasped out would certainly have stirred 350
 The very rocks. Anxious to succour me,
 The Theban dames called out imploringly
 To Heaven. Beside me was my red-haired maid
 Galanthis, who most faithfully obeyed
 My orders, and I cherished her. She had
 A feeling Juno plotted something bad,
 And when she saw Lucina as she sat
 So strangely on the altar, it was that
 Which caused her qualms. She cried, 'Congratulate
 Our mistress, all of you now here! For Fate 360
 Has brought to her a child.' Then her surprise
 At this prompted Lucina to arise,
 Unclenching both her fists. Delivery
 Was thereby eased from stricture – I could see
 The bonds unfasten, causing birth, It's said
 Galanthis laughed, and Juno, seeing red,
 Grabbed at her hair and dragged her down. She tried
 To rise, but Juno straightway was astride
 The maid, and, just as fast, her arms became
 Forelegs. Her energy remained the same, 370
 Her hair the same it always was, but she
 Became a weasel. Since delivery
 Was aided by her untruths, since that day
 She gives birth through her mouth and came to stay
 With me." And when she told this tale, she sighed
 A heavy sigh in memory of her tried
 And trusted servant. Iole, in reply,
 Uttered these words: "Dear mother, if you cry
 For your Galanthis, could you tolerate
 The true report of my stepsister's fate? 380
 I cannot tell it – sadness hushes me.
 Her mother's only child was Dryope
 (The same father begot us). Everyone
 Knew my stepsister as a paragon
 Of beauty. She lost her virginity
 To Phoebus, and then to Andraemon she
 Was happily wed. There are sweet lawns around
 A lake, a lovely spot, and on a mound
 Grow myrtles in fair, sunny groves. Without
 A thought of danger Dryope stepped out 390

To gather garlands for the nymphs, when she
 Held at her breast her darling progeny,
 A boy not yet one year old, suckling
 Her milk. Not far away, a flowering
 Lotus tree poked out from the swampy ground,
 Seeming to vow more fruit would soon abound.
 There Dryope for the sweet babe at play
 Plucked blossoms. I was there to pick a spray
 When to my shock those fruits began to shed
 Some drops of blood. Even the trees with dread 400
 Were shaken. Those who live there still relate
 The story of the nymph Lotis – they state
 That, fleeing Priapus, Lotis became
 That very tree, although she kept its name.
 My sister did not know of this, and so,
 Once praying to the nymphs, she meant to go
 Back home, but when she tried to move, she found
 Her feet caught in a root upon the ground.
 She struggled hard but was inert below
 Her waist, and then the bark began to grow 410
 And gather slowly upwards as it spread
 Around her till it reached her loins. In dread,
 She saw its growth and would have torn her hair
 But with her hands she found that leaves were there
 Upon her head. The baby at her breast
 Discovered that it hardened as he pressed
 His lips upon it. Sister, helplessly
 I was a witness to your tragedy!
 I held the growing trunk in my embrace
 And longed to be enveloped in that place. 420
 Her husband and her father came to see
 What had become of her. Their Dryope
 I showed them was the tree. There on the ground
 They lay prostrate and kissed it, but they found
 That but her face remained, and I could see
 Tears falling from the leaves upon that tree,
 And while the lips upon her mouth lay bare,
 Her cries of woe echoed throughout the air:
 If wretched women's oaths have force, then I
 Am innocent, and if I've told one lie 430
 In my complaint, let me wither away
 And let my leaves all shrivel and decay
 And chop me down. Now give my babe to be
 Bred by a nurse, and let him frequently
 Play here and drink his milk. But after a year
 Or two when he can talk, let him come here
 And sadly say, 'My mother is that tree!'
 Let him fear fateful ponds, and let him be
 Aware that every shrub may well possess

The actuality of a goddess! 440
 Farewell, my husband, sister, father, too!
 If you still have your love for me, may you
 Protect my life! So from my branches keep
 The pruning-knife and hold the browsing sheep
 Far from my leaves! My wooden form bars me
 From bending down to you – consequently
 Lift up your lips and let me, just once more,
 Be kissed by you and kiss you, too, before
 I'm wholly lotus! Raise my babe to me
 That I may kiss him! Bark now steadily 450
 Is creeping up my neck to hide my brow,
 And there is little I can utter now.
 Don't cover up my eyes, for there's no need -
 The bark will spread and darken them indeed
 Before I die! Those few words were the last
 She uttered, for she changed so very fast.
 And for a long time after was she warmed
 By her new boughs, and thus was she transformed.
 Alcmene for her sister felt much grief
 And, weeping, tried to offer some relief. 460
 Then there occurred a marvellous event
 Which wrought in them a great astonishment.
 Alcmene wiped away her tears, while they
 Saw aged Talaus in the doorway,
 Now young again – he seemed almost a lad,
 Light down upon his cheeks, for Hebe had
 Done this to satisfy her Hercules,
 Though in the future favours such as these
 Themis would disallow. She prophesied
 That, now that Thebes would soon endure the tide 470
 Of civil war, the hand of Jove would be
 The only one to mar the victory
 Of Capaneus, her foe. Eteocles
 And Polyneices these hostilities
 Would not survive, for each would slay the other,
 The sad result of brother against brother.
 In Hell Amphiaraus was to see
 His ghost, though living, and Eriphyle
 Would by their son be in retaliation
 Slaughtered, in both an act of profanation 480
 And piety. Made mad and far away
 From home, he would be dogged day after day
 By the Eumenides and his mother's shade,
 Until his wife Callirrhoë has made
 A plea for the fatal necklace and until
 His father-in-law's weapon begins to spill
 His blood. He asked Jove to extend the life
 Of her young sons and to avenge the knife

Of the avenger. And Lord Jove consented
 And those young boys' life-span he then augmented." 490
 The gods of Heaven now complained that they
 Could not grant many others in this way
 The gift of youth. Because her spouse possessed
 White hair, Aurora wept; Ceres, distressed,
 Grieved her Iasion's age; then Vulcan, too,
 Demanded that his son should start anew
 His youth; the goddess Venus, as she thought
 On future days, said that Anchises ought
 To have his years restored. Each god preferred
 His favourite till Jupiter was heard 500
 To say to them, "If you respect me, wait
 A while! You think that you can conquer Fate?
 Through Fate Iolaus is a youth once more,
 Living the years that he has lived before;
 Callirrhoë's sons must grow from infancy,
 Not through ambition nor hostility,
 To manhood. It's a fact that Fate holds sway
 Over us both as well, if what I say
 May comfort you. If I could change the course
 Of Fate, I would make it that she'd not force 510
 My son into old age; Rhadamanthus, too,
 Would constantly be living life anew,
 And Minos, well-known in his prime, who warred
 Against great lands, who trembled at his sword,
 Though now he is enfeebled by his years
 And of Miletus he is filled with fears,
 The latter young and strong, a quality
 Drawn from his father Phoebus. Although he
 Knows well Miletus wished to be the king
 Of Crete, he did not have the nerve to fling 520
 Him from his realm, though the man willingly
Did fly and swiftly sailed across the sea
 To Asia, where he, when he landed there,
 Began to build the city that would bear
 His name. Cyane, Meander's daughter, who
 Was known to be most fair, gave birth to two,
 Fair Byblis and Caunus. Not sisterly
 Was Byblis' love for Caunus – oh no, she
 Lusted for him illicitly. At first
 She did not really think about the thirst 530
 She had for him, not thinking it was wrong
 To give him kisses, passionate and long,
 Or throw her arms about his neck, and thus
 For long she thought all this innocuous.
 But as the habit grew, this love regressed
 Till she approached him, sumptuously dressed
 So that in any way she might be seen

As very beautiful. She would be green
 With envy of all other women who
 Showed rival beauty, and she had no clue 540
 About those thoughts that brought her such distress:
 Though she did not want passion, nonetheless
 She burned for him, calling him lord, and said,
 "Don't ever call me sister, but instead
 Say 'Byblis!'" While awake, she would not dwell
 On her illicit hopes, but once she fell
 Asleep she saw the man she loved and crushed
 Him in her arms while dreaming, though she blushed.
 She lay there for a moment silently
 And thought about her welcome reverie 550
 Until she said, 'What does this indicate,
 This vision in the night? How I would hate
 It to be true! Why do I see it? He
 Is handsome, even to an enemy.
 If he were not my brother, I would be
 Able to be his paramour, and he
 Would be a worthy lover. Sadly, though,
 It is my curse to be his sister. So,
 When I'm awake let me be virtuous,
 But when I sleep let me be rapturous 560
 And dream of him! When I behold my brother
 In dreams he can't be noticed by another.
 O Cupid, Venus, oh how I delight
 In visions of my brother in the night!
 My transport, as if in reality,
 Is to my very marrow melting me,
 Although the night is short and swiftly flees
 Away, resentful of my reveries.
 Caunus, if I could change my name, how good
 A daughter-in-law, instead of daughter, would 570
 I be, and you a son! If Heaven agreed,
 We'd have shared everything, except indeed
 Our grandparents, for I would surely pray
 That you'd be nobler than me. One day
 You'll wed another, for we're doomed to be
 Brother and sister – ah, the misery!
 What does my night-born vision indicate?
 What weight have dreams? Do dreams have any weight?
 The gods forbid it! Gods have sisters, too.
 Saturn wed Ops, his own blood-kin – that's true! 580
 Oceanus wed Tethys, Jove Juno,
 And all the gods have their own laws. And so,
 Why liken human ways to theirs? I'll be
 Released from my mad lust or else my plea
 Is that I die and, when I am laid out,
 Caunus can kiss me there, though he may doubt

That what to me would be an ecstasy
 Would not appear an impropriety.
 It's known the sons of Aeolus would kiss
 Their sisters. Yet why should I look at this 590
 As an example? Must I do as they
 Did long ago? Not, not in any way!
 Quench these illicit flames! Then I'll be free
 Of this improper love, although I'll be
 A loving sister only. Had he been
 In love with me before, I might have seen
 Him as my love as well. Therefore let me
 Woo him, whom I would not reject were he
 The wooer! Can I speak of it? Can I
 Confess it properly? Well, I should try 600
 But if my lips should be closed up in shame,
 A sealed-up note will tell my secret flame."
 She leaned on her left elbow. "Let him see
 Me here," she said, "as my mad ecstasy
 I tell. I'm burning with my hot desire!
 Alas, where am I heading? Ah, what fire
 I feel!" A pen held in her trembling hand,
 She set down all the words that she had planned
 To write. She started off, then hesitated,
 Then wrote some more, discovering that she hated 610
 The words, erased, made changes here and there,
 Condemned and then approved, then, in despair,
 She tossed the scroll, then picked it up again,
 Then hating all she'd written with her pen.
 Shame, fear and coolness showed upon her face,
 Mingled together. She began to trace
 The words 'Your sister', then decided she
 Could not write down those words, immediately
 Amending them. She wrote, "I hope you're well,
 Though she who loves you cannot truly tell 620
 You that *she* is unless you grant the same
 To her. I am ashamed to tell my name
 To you. If I were nameless, possibly
 I would prevail, and then reliably
 I'd say I'm Byblis. You may know my heart
 Is wounded since sad tears will often start
 To fall across my features, and without
 Apparent cause I sigh, and you may doubt
 My unfit kisses. I've tried everything
 (Gods, be my witness!) so that I may bring 630
 Myself to sanity. I've struggled so,
 Both night and day, to overcome the woe
 Of love too harsh for one in such distressed
 As me, a frail, young girl. I must confess
 My passion while with timid prayers I plead,

For only you can save me in my need.
 Make up your mind! I'm not your enemy
 But one who's close to you and longs to be
 Yet closer. Let old men obey decrees
 And hold to all the strict laws' niceties. 640
 To what is fitting Love does not take heed
 At our age, for what is allowed indeed
 We don't yet know, believing everything
 Permissible while we are following
 The gods' examples. We do not possess
 A rigid father nor do we profess
 That we give deference to reputation,
 And we do not hold back through trepidation.
 For siblings surely are at liberty
 To converse with each other privately, 650
 And we may kiss in public. What's amiss?
 Pity a maid whose love leads her to this
 Confession! Don't write on her tomb 'She died
 For Caunus' sake, her love for him denied.'"
 The scroll was filled with words penned fruitlessly,
 The last line near the edge. Immediately
 She sealed the scroll, her teardrops moistening
 The seal (her tongue was dry!) and with her ring
 She stamped it, then slyly and coaxingly
 She called a servant and declared, "To me 660
 You're the most faithful of them all. Now take
 This to my - ", then, after a lengthy break
 In speaking, " - brother." When she was about
 To give it to the servant, it slipped out
 Of her hands and fell. Though troubled, nonetheless
 She sent it. Caunus, though, in an excess
 Of anger, threw the scroll, but partly read:
 Yearning to wring the servant's neck, he said,
 "Begone, you wicked servant! I would kill
 You now if that did not add further ill 670
 To me." He fled in terror, carrying
 The news to Byblis, who, once listening
 To what Caunus had said, found that her face
 Turned ashen as she shook in the embrace
 Of icy chill. Her reason speedily
 Returned, and her mad passion equally
 She soon regained and managed to gasp out,
 "It's all my fault! Why did I rashly spout
 My pain to him? I shouldn't have revealed
 My feelings but kept everything concealed. 680
 I should have felt my way with hints imbued
 With caution till I knew his attitude
 Towards myself. I should have checked to know
 The winds' velocity that I might go

Across the sea in safety. Now, instead,
 I find that I am tossed, with sails full spread,
 By unexpected winds, and now I see
 I'm on the rocks and by the mastery
 Of Ocean overwhelmed. I can't go back
 That I might find the thing I now still lack. 690
 An omen clearly told me not to tell
 My love so soon because my letter fell,
 Meaning my hopes would also fall away.
 Is it not clear I should have changed the day?
 Or my intent? The day, though, certainly!
 The god himself gave definite signs to me.
 If I had not been so deranged, I should
 Have spoken to him face to face: I would
 Have then confessed it all. He would have seen
 My passion, for my face would then have been 700
 Immersed in tears. I would then have declared
 Much more than I had penned and would have dared
 To throw my arms about his neck, and, should
 He have rejected me, I surely would
 Have seemed about to die, and I'd have pled
 For life – so many things I might have said
 Which would have won his stubborn heart! Maybe
 My stupid servant acted foolishly,
 Neglecting a fit time, or even sought
 An hour when Caunus' mind was filled with thought. 710
 And all of this has harmed my situation
 And it's the only real justification.
 A tigress did not bear him and of iron
 His heart's not made and it was no she-lion
 That suckled him. I'll win him, I am sure,
 But I must try as long as I endure
 In life. I've started on my course, and so
 I must go on and win him. Even though
 I were to give him up, my bravery
 He would remember, though he'd label me 720
 Fickle or devious, but, all the same,
 He'll not believe some god has caused this flame
 In me but know that I was motivated
 By my own passion. For it must be stated
 I've lost my innocence, even if I
 Do nothing more. I wrote a letter – aye,
 And wooed him, too, and ill-consideredly
 Thought this alone would make him think of me
 As guilty. I do not fear any ill
 And harbour hopes that I will win him still. 730
 She argued back and forth, uncertainty
 So great that she felt censure for what she
 Had done, determined to succeed. She tried

All ways but constantly was pushed aside
 Until she was unable to hold sway
 Over herself. Her brother ran away,
 Ashamed of her, and in another land
 Built a new city. She then lost command
 Of all reason, wrenching from her breast
 Her clothes, and bruised her arms, greatly distressed, 740
 Proclaiming to the world the love she bore
 To her own brother. Growing more and more
 Reckless, she left her country, following
 Her brother, like those Bacchus-worshipping
 Maenads. In Bubasos she howled all through
 The open fields. She roamed in Caria, too;
 Through Cragus and through Lemyre would she go,
 And to the streams of Xanthus's plateau,
 To where Chimaera lived, who breathed out flame,
 Having both snake and lion in her frame. 750
 Above the woods she tumbled, tresses spread
 Upon the earth, in weariness her head
 Upon the fallen leaves. Her malady
 The Lelegeian nymphs kind-heartedly
 Advised her to shake off. The nymphs then tried
 To lift her, but their aim was nullified
 And silently upon the grass she lay
 While down into the earth her tears would stray
 As the green herbs she clutched. It has been said
 The nymphs created from the tears she shed 760
 An ever-flowing spring. What more could they
 Provide for her? And then without delay,
 Consumed by tears, Byblis became a spring
 Herself, as resin drops come trickling
 From pine or bitumen out of the ground
 Or water frozen by the cold but bound
 To melt beneath the sun and wind. In those
 Valleys it's still called Byblis and it flows
 Beneath a holm-oak tree. This tale maybe
 Would be a Cretan one if recently 770
 Crete had not had a wonder of her own -
 In Phaestus a certain Ligdus, not well-known
 (In fact he had a common pedigree
 And little wealth but lived life blamelessly);
 When his wife's birthing time was drawing near,
 He told her what he needed her to hear:
 "I pray that with few pains all this is done
 And that we will be favoured with a son,
 For girls are very troublesome. And they
 Possess such little strength, and therefore (may 780
 Heaven refuse the thought!) if it should be
 A girl (may Heaven spare my impiety!)

We must kill her." At this, great tears were shed
 By both of them, but Telethusa said
 Imploringly that he to Destiny
 Should yield, but he stood firm. Impendingly
 Her time approached, and then, next to her bed,
 One night Isis appeared, horns on her head
 And round her brows a fulgent garland made
 Of grain, so perfectly was she arrayed, 790
 Circled with other shades, and Anubis,
 Her dog, was by her side and Bubastis,
 And Apis and Hermocrates, whose thumb
 Was in his mouth to urge all to be mum,
 And she observed the sacred sistrum there
 And him for whom she searches everywhere,
 Osiris, and the snake whose rapid bite
 Brings sleep. All this in her imagined sight
 Was there. The goddess said, "Don't be dismayed -
 Your husband's orders will not be obeyed. 800
 When you give birth, despite its gender, rear
 The child! For I'm the goddess who is here
 To succour everyone who calls on me:
 I'll never be a thankless deity."
 She joyfully arose from her sad bed
 And raised her arms up high above her head
 And prayed to Heaven her vision might come true.
 And when she gave birth, Telethusa knew
 She had a girl (the father was not there).
 Deceitfully, the mother said, "Take care 810
 Of *him* and feed him!" Her deceit prevailed -
 All but the trusted nurse had clearly failed
 To know the truth. Vows paid, the father named
 The child after its grandfather, the famed
 Iphis. Then Telethusa felt delight
 Because the name Ligdus had chosen might
 Fit boy or girl and that no trickery
 Was further needed. But she cleverly
 Dressed her in boys' clothes, and upon her face
 There always was displayed a neutral grace. 820
 Full thirteen years had gone by while you grew,
 Iphis, when Ligdus found a bride for you -
 Gold-haired Ianthe, honoured everywhere
 By all the Phaestian women for her fair
 Appearance, Telestes's progeny,
 A maid of Crete. The young Iphis and she
 Were equal in age and looks, and both had learned
 From the same teachers and each maiden yearned
 One for the other but each expectation
 Was different. Then in anticipation 830
 Ianthe thought that she would soon be wed

To a man, while Iphis' passion was to spread
 Despite the fact that she was well aware
 Ianthe was a girl. She, in despair
 And almost weeping, said, "Ah, what way out
 Have I? No-one has ever known about
 This monstrous love before! Decidedly,
 If they had wished, the gods would have saved me,
 But if they would infect me with distress,
 They should, I feel, without inhumanness 840
 Have ruined me. A passion does not flare
 In one cow for another, and no mare
 Yearns for a mare. The ram inflames the ewe;
 Each doe pursues her chosen stag; birds, too,
 Mate with each other, and it's not the fashion
 That females for each other harbour passion.
 Why is it, then, with me? Monstrosities
 In Crete, however, everybody sees.
 A bull was loved by the daughter of the Sun,
 But *my* love is a more demented one 850
 But she had prospects for gratification,
 Much greater than my own, through transformation
 Into a cow. If every subtlety
 Were here, if Daedalus could ever be
 Brought back on waxen wings, even his art
 Could not transform Ianthe. Iphis, start
 To pull yourself together! Cast away
 This foolish, useless passion! Iphis, stay
 As you have been since birth! Seek out what's true
 In love and be a woman through and through! 860
 By hope is love averted and sustained,
 And you've lost that. No guardian has restrained
 You from her, nor a spouse nor father. She
 Does not deny your wooing. Yet you'll be
 Forlorn, though gods may toil and men may sweat
 For you. My prayers have not been turned down yet;
 My father helps in all I plan to do;
 She and her father always helped me, too.
 But Nature is most powerful, and she,
 And only she, works for my misery. 870
 It is not long until the wedding-day,
 Then she'll be mine, although, I have to say,
 Not so! Though I'll not lack for water, I
 Will still be thirsty. I must question why
 Juno and Hymen come to a wedding when
 No groom appears but both are brides." Just then
 She stopped. The other maid was equally
 Aflame and often prayed that Hymen be
 A celebrant. Telethusa, though, delayed,
 In fear of what Ianthe sought, and made 880

Pretense of sickness, omens, visions seen
Until through all excuses she had been.
One day remained, and she was in dismay,
Unable to prevent the wedding-day.
She took the fillets from her daughter's head
And hers, her long hair flowing down, and said,
As she embraced the shrine, "Isis, goddess,
Pharos and Nile, help us in our distress!
Goddess, you and your symbols I recall,
Your sistrum jingling, and love them all. 890
My daughter's living, as was your intent.
Pity us both and let us be content!"
She wept. The altar trembled (was it she -
Isis - who made it happen?). Equally
The temple doors shook, and her horns shone bright;
The sistrum rattled loudly. But, not quite
Assured, the mother left, and Iphis, too,
Walking more quickly, with a rosy hue
Upon her face; her strength had now returned,
Her features sharp, her hair short, and she burned 900
With greater vigour than she had displayed
Before. And why? Because she had been made
A man. Iphis, rejoice and have no fear!
Take gifts up to the temple, full of cheer!
They did so, with a votive plaque which read:
IPHIS, WHO'S NOW A BOY, GIVES GIFTS HE SAID
HE'D GIVE WHEN STILL A GIRL. At next cockcrow
Venus, Juno and Hymen met to show
Their happiness on the wedding-day, for now
Iphis to *his* Ianthe makes *his* vow.

