

OVID METAMORPHOSES VII

The Argonauts sailed in their ship to where
 King Phineus, who was blind and needed care,
 Reigned. Boreas's sons came to that shore
 And saw the Harpies stealing the king's store
 Of food and drove them off. Eventually,
 After much toil beneath the authority
 Of noted Jason they came to the land
 Of Colchis and the muddy Phasis' strand.
 Before Aeetes, he who was the king
 Of Aea, they then stood, importuning 10
 Him to return the golden fleece, which they
 Were well aware had been carried away,
 Shorn from the sacred ram that that he'd obtained
 From Phrixus. Cunningly the king maintained
 That he was very willing to restore
 The fleece to those who would come back once more
 To him after their toil. Close to the throne,
 Medea looked at Jason – sight alone
 Caused the king's child to fall deeply in love.
 Although she struggled hard to rise above 20
 This feeling, she said, 'I have bootlessly
 Tried to suppress this thing that's gripping me.
 Is it a god who's trying hard to quell
 My hapless life? Indeed I cannot tell
 Or is it love or what we designate
 As such? My father's law I truly hate -
 It is too harsh. But why, then, do I dread
 That he I've seen but once will soon be dead?
 Suppress these flames, unhappy girl, and be
 Wiser! But a strange power entices me. 30
 Between desire and commonsense I'm split.
 I see the latter and approve of it,
 But choose the former. Has the foreign man
 Stolen your heart, royal maid? Is it your plan
 To marry him when in this land there dwell
 So many men to please you very well?
 The gods decide upon his mortal span,
 As is the case with every mortal man,
 But may he live! I pray without the stress
 Of love. I ask what sort of wickedness 40
 He has committed.. His nobility,
 His youthfulness and his integrity
 Could move a heart of stone. If I deny
 My timely succour, he is doomed to die
 Or meet his enemy, sprung from the earth
 And from the seeds he sowed given their birth
 Or be the target of the dragon's greed.

Should I allow this, I should be indeed
 A tigress. Therefore let me see him die!
 Shall I betray my father's reign? Shall I 50
 Allow the foreigner his sails to spread
 And find another maiden in my stead
 And leave me to my fate? So if he can
 Prefer another maid, ungrateful man,
 Then let him die! His noble dignity
 And looks don't make me fear some trickery
 Or spurning what I've done for him. Oh no!
 I'll call the gods to witness that he'll show
 His loyalty. Get ready! Don't delay!
 He'll be your own until your dying day. 60
 So take him as your husband! And all through
 The cities of Pelasgus' kingdom you
 Will hear all women's praise. I'll cross the sea
 And leave my land behind, my family,
 My gods. The king, my father, is severe,
 My native land is barbarous, I fear,
 My brother is a child. The charity,
 However, that my sister shows to me
 Is a great aid, and I within my heart
 Preserve Lord Jupiter. When I depart, 70
 I'll not be leaving excellence behind
 But reaching it, honoured for being kind
 By rescuing these Grecians, who possess
 A better land than mine – and nobleness.
 For Jason I would barter everything
 Existing in the world: by marrying
 Jason I will be called a happy maid
 And round my head stars will be duly laid.
 Is it because huge shipwrecks bar the way
 And clash together that I make delay? 80
 Is it Charybdis that I fear maybe,
 That sucks large vessels deep into the sea
 And spouts up high, or Scylla, hemmed about
 With howling, raging hounds? No! There's no doubt
 That in the arms of him I love I'll lie,
 And over wild and hostile seas will I
 Be borne, nor will I feel an ounce of fear
 Except for him. Medea, do you hear
 Yourself? Yours is a specious argument
 For sin - it breaks the holy sacrament
 Of marriage. Come, Medea, then, while you
 Still may, deny your guilt and bid adieu
 To passion.' Once she'd said these words, her eyes 90
 Were opened to observe modesty's prize.
 Defeated, Cupid fled immediately.
 Then to the ancient shrine of Hecate

Within a shadowy wood Medea went,
 Possessed now of a resolute intent.
 Her vanquished appetite had now abated.
 However, it was reinvigorated 100
 When she saw him again. Her face grew red,
 Then pallid; as a small spark that is fed
 By a breath of wind regains its strength and grows,
 Her passion, once but smouldering, now rose.
 He seemed more handsome still than heretofore,
 And one could pardon her that she once more
 Burned for him. For to her he seemed to be
 As glorious as a god, so fixedly
 Did she gaze on his features. In this bout
 Of frenzy she believed there was no doubt 110
 He was a god. She could not look away,
 Enraptured, and when he began to say
 He wished to wed her, she in her reply,
 Her eyes suffused with flowing tears, said, 'I
 Not by the unfamiliarity
 Of truth am caught but love. Setting you free
 Is in my gift, so keep your vow!' Therefore
 By the triple goddess' sacred rites he swore,
 And by the groves and by the Sun, who sees
 All things, and by his own experiences. 120
 She gave to him her herbs, now confident.
 He learnt their use, withdrawing, jubilant,
 Into his house. At dawn the people ran
 Out to the Field of Mars that they might scan
 The hills. In purple pomp there came the king,
 Holding his ivory sceptre in a ring
 Of followers. Brass-footed bulls below
 Breathed fire on the grass. As forges glow,
 Resounding, or as quick-lime makes the sound
 Of crackling and hissing as if drowned 130
 In rage and, sprayed with water, vigorously
 Will liberate its heat, similarly
 Their chests and throats told of what pent-up flame
 Was burning in them. When brave Jason came,
 They glared at him, their horns with iron crowned.
 They pawed the earth and with a fiery sound
 Bellowed. The Minyans were stark with fear;
 Jason approached them and, even so near,
 He did not feel their breath at all, so strong
 Had been the drugs. He ran his hand along 140
 Their dewlaps, yoked them and taught them to bear
 The heavy plough and cut through meadows where
 The steel had never ventured in the past.
 The Colchians were silent and aghast.
 But Jason was encouraged by the shout

Raised by the Minyans. Then, taking out
 The serpent's teeth, he sowed them in the field
 That had been newly ploughed. The seeds would yield
 To the soft earth, and they were inundated
 With poison as they grew and generated 150
 New forms, and as an infant gradually
 Within the womb employs the anatomy
 Of humans and will not be brought to birth
 Until it's fully formed, so from the earth
 The men rose up, and what was even more
 Amazing was the weapons that they bore
 And clashed. When his companions saw that they
 Were poised to aim at Jason's head, dismay
 Assailed the bravest of them all, and she
 Who'd aided Jason with her sorcery, 160
 When she observed her lover hemmed about
 By angry foes – one man against a rout
 Of many – she grew ashen, and her face
 Was bloodless as she sat there. And in case
 Her herbs needed a boost, an incantation
 She chanted, calling on her occupation.
 He threw a large rock at his enemies,
 Which caused them to employ hostilities
 Against each other. The Greeks gladly pressed
 Around him and embraced him breast to breast. 170
 Medea, too, despite the modesty
 That she was feeling, wanted eagerly
 To fold him in her arms but stood apart
 To keep her good name, holding in her heart
 Her silent love, and showed her gratefulness
 To all the gods above for her prowess.
 The dreadful dragon, though, would never rest,
 With its great triple tongue and gorgeous crest
 And fangs barbed like a spear, the sentinel
 Of the golden fleece. Jason knew very well 180
 That his crusade he'd only realize
 If he could seal through sleep the monster's eyes.
 Then on its crest he cast Lethean juice,
 Three times reciting words that would induce
 Deep slumber, words that would becalm a sea
 That's tossed about with storms, successfully
 Halting swift rivers. This technique prevailed
 And, as he slept, he took the fleece and sailed
 Away with pride, and with him went the maid,
 Who'd saved him from destruction with her aid, 190
 And reached Iolkos with his company
 Of Argonauts who, reaching Thessaly,
 Greeted their parents, who began to praise
 The gods and with their hallowed bounty raised

The flames with frankincense, and then, to thank
 Lord Jupiter, a sacred bullock sank
 Before the altar. But, unfortunately,
 Aeson did not come down delightedly
 To greet his son, for he was old and death
 Awaited him. Jason, with many a breath 200
 Of grief, said to Medea, 'Dearest one,
 Although I'm grateful for what you have done
 For me, more than I have the right indeed
 To ask for, there is one more thing I need
 To ask of you – if your enchantments can
 Accomplish my desire, from my life's span
 Remove some years and have them supplement
 My father's life.' And he could not prevent
 His tears from falling. Though moved by his plea,
 She thought about the less despondency 210
 'That's wicked! Am I able to divide
 Two people's life-spans? Even Hecate
 Would not consider so unjust a plea.
 I'll give you something greater, if I can -
 By the powers of Night, I'll add to Aeson's span
 But won't subtract your own. Queen Hecate,
 Allow me to have the ability
 To do this deed!' There were three nights to go
 Before the moon would form a perfect O, 220
 And then, alone, Medea went outside,
 Barefoot, in flowing clothes, her hair untied
 And unadorned. The world was slumbering,
 And not a single leaf was rustling,
 The air was still. Only the stars were found
 To shine. Three times Medea paced around,
 Three times besprinkled her long hair and she
 Held out her hands to Heaven imploringly.
 She knelt a moment on the cold, bare ground
 And then three times let out a piercing sound: 230
 'Regard my mysteries, o faithful night,
 Stars, Moon, succeeding daytime with your light,
 O three-faced Hecate, who's well aware
 Of magic charms, o fruitful Earth whose care
 Is potent herbs, winds, breezes, mountains, you
 Lakes and sacred groves and rivers, too,
 And every dreaded god of Night, give ear!
 When I give my command, the rivers veer,
 Reversing from their customary course,
 And backward roll to find their secret source. 240
 The wild and troubled sea is calm when I
 Order it so and waters rise up high
 At my command. The clouds can I broadcast
 And summon, and I smooth winds' wintry blast

And halt their rage, the serpents' teeth I break,
 Mountains at my command tremble and quake,
 I move the rocks and woods, and ghosts by me
 Are brought out of their granite tombs, set free.
 I draw you down as well, o Moon, despite
 The gongs and brazen vessels. I recite 250
 My spells at which the Sun's chariot grows wan,
 My poisons have a similar influence on
 Phoebus's chariot and quench the flame
 Of Dawn. At my command those poisons tame
 The stubborn bull and turn to savagery
 The serpent-born, who then accordingly
 Slaughter each other, and they lull to sleep
 The creature that has been assigned to keep
 His watch, and thus by their deceit the fleece
 That Jason stole was taken off to Greece. 260
 I wish for herbs so that I might restore
 The bloom of youth to age. You won't ignore
 My plan, o Moon – the stars don't fruitlessly
 Twinkle, nor do the dragons pointlessly
 Bring down my chariot.' And then indeed
 From Heaven came a chariot, and when she'd
 Caressed the dragons' necks and in each hand
 Shaken the reins, immediately she spanned
 The skies. While sailing over Thessaly,
 She looked on Tempe's vale extensively 270
 Covered with crumbling chalk. She turned aside
 And saw the herbs that Ossa's fields provide
 And those of Pelion and Othrys and those
 Of vast Olympus, and from here she chose
 Some roots and there some blossoms she then lopped
 With a brass sickle, and wild woods she cropped
 In Apidanus and near Amphrysus,
 Enipeus, Peneus and the Spercheus
 And Boebe. In Euboea, at Anthedon,
 She picked a long-lived plant that worked upon 280
 Glaucus in later years.. Strong herbs she sought
 For nine whole days and nights, and she was brought
 By the swift, winged beasts wherever she
 Desired to go until eventually
 They reached her home. Although each beast had felt
 Nothing at all, despite that it had smelt
 The odour of the herbs, its ancient skin
 It shed. Once home, she would not venture in
 Her house, but stood beneath the canopy
 Of Heaven in the field and totally 290
 Spurned every man, then from the turf created
 Two shrines, the right one being dedicated
 To Hecate, the left to Hebe, she

Who honours youth that lives eternally,
 And then with sacred branches from the wood
 She wreathed them and, in order that she could
 Make sacrifice, she dug two pits and drew
 A knife with which a black-faced sheep she slew,
 And over it she poured warm milk and wine,
 Thus paying honour to all the divine 300
 And heavenly deities. As she did so,
 She made entreaties to the gods below,
 Lord Pluto and Proserpina, that they
 Should not let Aeson's body waste away.
 When once she was assured that she had caught
 The gods' regard, she bade Aeson be brought
 Outside. Then with her magic sorcery
 She put him in a slumber so that he
 Seemed dead, then on a bed of herbs she laid
 Him out, and Jason and his son she bade 310
 To leave with their attendants so that they
 Might keep their sacrilegious eyes away
 From secret rites. They left, at which she strode
 About the shrines in Bacchanalian mode,
 Her hair dishevelled, and into each pit
 She lowered down the torches, which she lit.
 Three times the aged man she purified
 With flames, water and sulphur, and the tide
 Of all three seethed in the cauldron, whither she threw
 Acerbic juices, roots and flowers, too, 320
 Hemonian seeds, potions and sifted sand
 Delivered by the ebbing ocean and
 Stones from the East and hoar-frost, from the ground
 Accumulated when the moon was round,
 Owl-flesh and -wings, the guts of a wolf that can
 Change all its features to those of a man,
 A snake's skin and the liver from a weak
 And long-lived stag, a raven's head and beak
 That had existed centuries before
 Her time on earth, and there were thousands more 330
 Provided by that foreign sorceress,
 Which with an olive-branch would coalesce,
 And while this withered olive-branch she churned
 With all the other elements, it turned
 From brown to green, when luscious olives grew
 Therefrom, and then the rising fire threw
 The froth beyond the cauldron's rim. The ground
 Was covered with green verdure – all around
 Were plants and grasses. Once she'd taken note
 Of this, Medea cut the old man's throat. 340
 She let the old blood out and then imbued
 His dry veins with the juices, which renewed

The man, for all those juices soon immersed
 Into his mouth and neck; the grey dispersed
 From both his hair and beard – instead, a hue
 Lustrous and dark replaced it and a new
 Man started to appear. He was amazed
 When from his heavy slumber he was raised
 And saw his youthful frame: his memory
 Told him that forty years previously 350
 He had been such a man. From Heaven's height
 Bacchus observed this monumental sight
 And realized the nymphs of Nysa, who
 Had nursed him, could have youth rekindled, too,
 And so he begged Medea to restore
 His nurses' youth and he agreed once more.
 Her spells were endless: now she feigned a fight
 With Jason and to Pelias' realm took flight.
 Because old age had undermined the king,
 His daughters gave her quite a welcoming, 360
 And since she gave a show of friendliness,
 They soon prevailed upon the sorceress.
 Among the things that she'd effectuated
 She told them how she had rejuvenated
 Aeson, dwelling on this primarily,
 And thus they hoped that their father would be
 Made young again as well, and therefore they
 Begged for this boon, agreeing that they'd pay
 Whatever price she named. She hesitated,
 Increasing their suspense; at last she stated 370
 That she would do it: 'So that you may be
 Assured of what I've promised, bring to me
 The oldest leader of your flock – that ram
 I by my drugs will change into a lamb
 Again.' They brought him to her straightaway,
 A ram who'd lived on earth for many a day,
 With massive horns curved round his head. She slit
 His throat with a knife while barely staining it
 With his thin blood. Into a kettle she,
 Along with juices of great potency, 380
 Tossed him, at which he burned, becoming small,
 His old traits disappearing, horns and all.
 Now bleats were heard and, wondering at the sound,
 They saw a lamb jump out and frisk around
 And search for milk. The daughters wonderingly
 Looked on, their first request more eagerly
 Now urged. Three days Phoebus had travelled on
 His steeds and now, as all the bright stars shone.
 Aeetes' daughter, planning her deceit,
 Put fake drugs in some water set to heat. 390
 The king and all his guards were comatose,

Thus rendered by her chants and all of those
 Effective herbs. The sad king's daughters, whom
 Medea bade to go into the room,
 Stood round the bed. 'Why do you hesitate?'
 Medea shouted. 'Draw your swords! Don't wait
 To fill his veins with youthful blood! It's you
 Upon whom rests the prospect to renew
 His life. Display your filial piety
 If you don't hold your fancy fruitlessly! 400
 Drive out the old blood! Cure him with the stroke
 Of iron!' Then the daughters, when she spoke
 Those words, though dutiful, at her command
 Did a most impious deed. No-one could stand
 To see her blows and so they looked away
 And then, unseeing, violently they
 Struck him. The old man streamed with blood and yet
 On one elbow he rose and tried to get
 Up from his bed. With all those swords about
 He raised his pallid arms and shouted out, 410
 'My daughters, what is this you aim to do?
 Is it your dearest father's death that you
 Are seeking?' Then they quit, and just as he
 Prepared to speak again, most cruelly
 Medea cut the old man's throat and threw
 His corpse into the cauldron. Then she flew
 Off with her winged dragons through the skies -
 She would have suffered penance otherwise.
 She sailed above the shady Pelion,
 That long had been the residence of Chiron, 420
 And Othrys, and the valley celebrated
 For being where Cerambus was mutated
 Into a beetle by the nymphs, and where
 He missed Deucalion's flood, for through the air
 He fled. And then through Pittane she went
 Where is a massive serpent monument,
 Past Ida's grove, where Lord Bacchus concealed
 The stolen bullock and thereby revealed
 It as a stag, and then she passed the land
 Where Paris had been buried in the sand, 450
 And then where Maera's bark echoed across
 The fields and past Urypyle's town on Cos,
 Whose women, when Hercules' herd had gone,
 Sported the horns of cattle, and then on
 To Rhodes and Ialysus, where the Telchines
 Corrupted everything (enraged with these,
 Jupiter plunged them deep into the sea),
 Across Carthaea's walls, where history
 Tells us Alcidamas, with great surprise,
 Observed a dove from his own daughter rise. 440

And also in Temeria's vale she noted
 The lakes of Hyrie on which there floated
 A flight of swans. It was there Phyllius,
 At the command of the young boy Cynus,
 Presented him with birds and a lion he
 Had tamed, and then he gained the mastery
 Of a great bull, but was infuriated
 That many times the boy repudiated
 His love and so held back the bull. The lad
 Then angrily said, 'You will wish you had' 450
 And leapt off a high cliff, but through the air
 He changed into a swan. In her despair,
 Thinking him dead, his mother Hyrie
 Dissolved in tears, and to this very day
 The lake there bears her name. Medea flew
 Over Pleuron where Combe managed to
 Escape her sons by flying through the air,
 And then looked on Celaurea's isle, so fair
 And sacred to Leto, whose royalty,
 Both king and queen, were changed to birds, and she 460
 Came to Cyllene, where Menephon once lay
 With his mother, like a beast, while far away
 She saw Cephisus, who mourned his grandson
 For many days for what Phoebus had done,
 For he became a seal. And then she went
 Where King Eumelus was a resident,
 Who killed his son, Botres, and then was torn
 With grief – Botres was as a bird reborn..
 Borne on the dragons' wings she flew away
 To Corinth, where the people, so they say, 470
 Were born of watered mushrooms. When at last,
 When Glaucé, Jason's second wife, was cast
 Into the flames by Colchian witchcraft, she,
 Drawing her sword, butchered her progeny,
 Those two small sons, in her vindictiveness,
 Then fled her husband, in her hastiness
 Flying away. The city of Pallas
 She reached, which once saw aged Periphas
 And Phene flying high into the air,
 Alcyone, as well, with her new pair 480
 Of wings. She was received there by the king
 Of Athens, Aegeus, now discovering
 Protection from her enemies. Then he
 Added a sin to hospitality,
 Uniting her in marriage. To the throne
 Came Theseus, Aegeus' son though yet unknown
 To him. He had established peace on all
 The isthmus. She, in plotting his downfall,
 Then brewed some aconite brought from the land

Of Scythia, which we're to understand	490
Had once dripped from the mouth of Cerberus.	
There is a cave, dark and precipitous:	
There Hercules from the obscurity	
Of Hell hauled it, though it could barely see,	
Unused to light, turning its eyes away	
To keep them from the light of dazzling day.	
Maddened and furious, it shook the air	
With triple howls and dribbled everywhere,	
Turning the green fields white. It was presumed	
That they found nutriments that they consumed	500
And gained strength from the fecund soil below	
The ground, wherefrom a plant began to grow,	
Called aconite by rustics. Cunningly	
She made Aegeus believe his progeny	
Was not a friend and gave Theseus therefore	
A cup that he might drink, but just before	
His lips touched it, Aegeus identified	
The sword that rested on Theseus's side,	
Whose ivory hilt displayed a known device,	
The emblem of his race. Then in a trice	510
He knocked it from his lips. Then in a haze	
That her own incantations caused to raise	
She vanished. Though elated that his son	
Was safe, that a foul deed was almost done	
Astounded Aegeus, who then gratefully	
Kindled the shrines and gave a treasury	
Of offerings to the gods, and then he sliced	
The throats of oxen which he sacrificed,	
Horns decked with flowers. Never has such fame	
Existed in that land: the people came,	520
Both rich and poor, to the festivities.	
With wit-inspiring wine and melodies	
They sang, 'Immortal Theseus, Marathon	
Is pleased that you've inflicted death upon	
The Cretan bull. In Cromyon's meadows now	
The farmers know that it is safe to plough.	
You slew Vulcan's club-wielding progeny:	
Procrustes met his final destiny	
Beside the rapid river, matched with you,	
And in Eleusis even Cercyon, too,	530
When he went up against you, met his end,	
And the gigantic Sinis, who could bend	
Tree-trunks and with the pine-trees slaughtered men.	
The Lelegeian walls are safe again	
Because the robber Scyron you have thrown	
Over the cliffs – no land and sea will own	
His bones! Long tossed about there, they became	
The cliffs themselves and now they bear his name.	

Should we add up your deeds and years, we'd see
 The deeds exceed your years. Brave hero, we 540
 Quaff cups of wine and offer up our prayers.'
 Now all the palace rang with happy airs.
 But joy and grief all mingle and therefore
 While they rejoiced, Minos prepared for war.
 His army and his navy both were great
 And he was angry to retaliate
 Upon the king, Aegeus, because he slew
 His son Androgeus, thus trying to
 Find friends for aid, and so he scoured the sea
 With his swift fleet, and he found Anaphe 550
 And Astypalaea – the first through compensation
 Agreed, the second through intimidation.
 Low-lying Mykonos he also found
 And Cimolos, which lies on chalky ground,
 Thyme-flowing Syros and flat Seriphos;
 He also found the marble-cliffed Paros,
 And Siphnos, which by Arne was betrayed,
 Who for her greed for gold was swiftly made
 Into a jackdaw that delights in gold,
 As she did. Oliaros, though, was cold 560
 To pleas, as were Didymae and Tenos,
 Andros, Gyaros and Preparethos,
 Rich with fine olives. Straight across the sea
 To Oenopia he sailed (though history
 Had given it that name, yet Aeacus
 Called it Aegina, titling it thus
 After his mother). As he docked, there came
 An eager crowd to see this man of fame.
 Telamon, his younger brother and Phocus,
 The youngest, met him. Even Aeacus 570
 Appeared, burdened with years, and asked him why
 He'd come. The ruler answered with a sigh
 (Seeing Aeacus' sons made him recall
 His own son and his heartbreaking downfall),
 'I came here to implore you for your aid
 Against my foes. Be comfort to the shade
 Of my poor son whose blood they shed!' Then he
 Replied, 'Oh no, it is a fruitless plea
 You make. No city has a closer tie
 To Athens than us: we're a firm ally 580
 Of theirs. Minos replied, 'You will regret
 Your treaty,' as he left them with that threat,
 Thinking that it is less worthwhile to fight
 Than to delay until the time is right.
 Before the fleet had vanished, they could see
 An Athenian ship with a wide canopy
 Of sails advancing to that friendly strand.

Soon the great Cephalus, known through the land
 For all his deeds, declared the amity
 Of those he ruled. Aeacus' progeny 590
 Remembered him, although for many a year
 They'd not seen him. Their father gave them cheer
 Within his residence. With Cephalus
 There were two comrades, Butes and Clytus.
 Once all formalities were duly made,
 The hero begged the citizens for their aid.
 Then Aeacus, his sceptre in his hand,
 Said, ' Do not ask for help but understand
 You should assume it! Do not hesitate
 To take us as your own and (let this state 600
 Of fortunes last!) we are not lacking power -
 I've men enough and, thank the gods, the hour
 Is opportune. Said Cephalus in reply,
 'I hope so! May your city multiply.
 As I was landing, I was pleased to see
 Some handsome youths, though when I previously
 Was here there were yet more.' Aeacus sighed
 To hear these words and sadly he replied,
 'We started badly, but our fortune grew
 In happiness. Would I could tell to you 610
 The one without the other. But I'll be
 Both brief and simple, chronologically
 Telling my tale. Those you have mentioned lie
 As bones and ashes now, and much that I
 Possessed went with them. Since our island bore
 A rival's name, June sent to our shore
 A dire plague. This great calamity
 First seemed to be a mortal malady,
 The cause unknown – with medical skill we tried
 To fight it, and yet since more people died 620
 We failed, and terror rampaged everywhere.
 Thick darkened gathered in the heavy air.
 Sickness and heat enveloped our sad land
 For four full months: we saw the moon expand.
 Hot south winds blew with pestilential breath
 On us, and the disease that carried death
 Our needed fountains and our lakes imbued;
 In our deserted fields a multitude
 Of serpents, crawled, our rivers poisoning.
 At first we saw it only visiting 630
 The animals. The ploughman gawked to see
 His mighty bulls, while at their drudgery,
 Collapsing; sheep would feebly bleat while they
 Lost all their fleecy wool and pined away.
 The proud racehorse now lost his vital spark,
 His fame forgotten, groaning in the dark

Of his shut stable, doomed to die. The boar
 Forgot to rage, the stag ran fast no more,
 The bear no match for cattle. Everywhere
 Death threatened all, and in the heavy air 640
 The corpses stank. The dogs, the carrion,
 The wolves, all of them would not feast upon
 The dead, which fouled the air until they died
 While spreading the contagion far and wide.
 The plague would soon the luckless farmers find
 And prey upon the mighty folk behind
 The city walls. One's guts with flames were seared,
 Then scarlet blotches on the frame appeared;
 The lungs would heave, the tongue was rough and red,
 The patient gasped. Even the softest bed 650
 Gave no relief; he'd lie upon the ground
 To cool his burning chest but never found
 Comfort. No doctor could be found to heal
 The sick, for doctors were the first to feel
 The symptoms. For the ones who had the skill
 To cure the ailing would themselves fall ill.
 The answer was to leave. One's family,
 Those who could tend the ailing selflessly
 Would swiftly meet the self-same fate: as they
 Began to lose all hope, they in dismay 660
 Saw only death before them – recklessly,
 Abandoning hope of recovery,
 By wells and streams and cool fountains they lay,
 And yet no water ever could allay
 Their thirst, for death alone could nullify
 Their wants. Too feeble to arise, they'd die
 In waters that they had polluted, though
 Others would come to drink it, too, and go
 The self-same route to death. Insanity
 Attacked them in their beds as irksomely 670
 Their nerves were wrenched. They couldn't bear the pain
 And leapt out from the covers, quite insane,
 And rolled around in their anxiety
 To leave their home, for this calamity
 They blamed upon the house, because the source
 Was yet unknown. Half-dead you'd see them course
 The streets as long as they could barely stay
 Upright, weeping, others, stretched out, lay
 Upon the ground, turning their weary eyes,
 As they lay dying, to the star-filled skies 680
 I felt a deep despair that seized on me,
 The sovereign of that wretched citizenry.
 I wished to die like them. No matter where
 I cast my eyes, their gruesome forms were there,
 In ghastly attitudes, strewn all around,

Like rotten apples fallen to the ground
 Or acorns round an oak. Look up and see
 Great Jove's long-dedicated sanctuary!
 Who has not prayed in vain here? Who's not pled
 For wife or son and suddenly dropped dead, 690
 The incense in his hand? How frequently
 Have bulls been brought into this sanctuary,
 Where priests were pouring wine between
 Their horns and, waiting for the stroke, were seen
 To fall down dead! While I prepared to make
 A sacrifice to Jove for my own sake,
 My country's and my sons', before the blow
 The moaning beast at once dropped dead below
 The shrine, the knives stained by the blood that flowed
 From him but thinly, while his entrails showed 700
 No marks of prophecy - so sick was he
 That warnings were impossible to see.
 I've noticed rotten corpses where they lay
 Before the gates or where they passed away,
 An insult to the gods. I have caught sight
 Of those who've hanged themselves so that they might
 Dismiss their fear of death. Indecently
 The bodies were cast out, the customary
 Rites overlooked – the exits could not bear
 So many dead. So they would languish there 710
 Unburied or be casually tossed
 Upon a heap. All reverence was lost.
 The plague-struck victims staggered to the pyres
 And were consumed by other people's fires.
 The ghosts of parents and their progeny,
 The young the old would wander wretchedly,
 For none was left to mourn them, and the land
 Could not contain all of the burials, and
 The trees were stripped of wood. Grieved at this woe,
 I wailed, 'O Jove, if I could truly know 720
 That you adored Aegina and for me,
 Your son, you never felt ignominy,
 Inter me, too, or else bring back my nation!'
 His lightning-flash gave me my confirmation
 And thunder followed. 'May these signs,' I said,
 'Be pledges of your purpose!' Just ahead
 An oak-tree stood, sacred to Jove. A string
 Of ants went round its bark while carrying
 Grain in their mouths: amazed at this long train,
 I said, 'Father, allow me to obtain 730
 As many citizens as these ants I see
 And fill these empty walls!' The tall oak-tree
 Quivered, its branches making sounds, though there
 Was heard no wind. I shook with fear, my hair

Standing on end. My knees were tottering,
 Although I still could stand there, worshipping
 The soil and sacred tree. Perhaps I thought
 Of something yet unrecognized that brought
 Some hope. Each night a heavy sleep would claim
 My care-worn body. I could see the same 740
 Oak-tree, its boughs, its ants – it seemed that they
 Were scattered by its motion till they lay
 Upon the ground. They grew exceedingly,
 Rose from the soil and stood up vertically,
 Becoming human. I awoke and spurned
 My dream, sad that the Heavens had not turned
 To me with aid. There was some murmuring then
 Within and I believed I heard the men
 I'd heard before. It was a dream, I thought,
 Until my Telamon hastily sought 750
 Me out and said, 'Come quickly, father! See
 A sight that's surely extraordinary!'

I went out then and saw what I had seen
 When I was dreaming – men who once had been
 But ants. They hailed me as their king, and when
 I'd vowed to Jove, I parcelled to these men
 All the deserted farms, and therefore hence
 These men, the very living evidence
 Of what I dreamed of, are called by the name
 Of Myrmidons because from ants they came. 760
 You've seen these men and know they still possess
 Their ant-like qualities, bearing the stress
 Of labour, keeping what they gain in store:
 Gallant and young, they'll follow you to war
 When south winds blow to favour their intent.
 This tale and many others would content
 The hearers on that day. Then at twilight
 Festivities were blended in the night,
 Which brought to everyone a sweet repose.
 The east wind blew still as the sun arose, 770
 Keeping the ships in port. To Cephalus
 Came Pallas' sons: they went to Aeacus,
 Who was asleep. The progeny of the king
 Met them because they both were gathering
 The men for war. He led them both inside
 The fair sanctum, where they sat down beside
 Each other. It was then that young Phocus
 Observed within the hand of Cephalus
 A javelin that had a golden head
 And shaft of some rare wood. To him he said, 780
 'I know about the woods and love to chase
 Wild beasts, but long I've wondered from what place
 You cut that shaft. Were it from an ash-tree

It would be yellow and would surely be
 Knotted if from a cherry-tree. The name
 Of this eludes me, though – there never came
 Into my sight a fairer weapon.' He
 Was answered by one of the company
 Of Cephalus: 'You'll wonder even more
 When it shows what it was created for. 790
 No weapon can surpass its accuracy,
 And once it's made its mark it instantly
 Flies back itself.' Phocus was keen to know
 All he could glean from him – why this was so,
 Where it was from and who had given him such
 A gift. Then Cephalus told him as much
 As he had asked him, but there was one thing
 That so absorbed him that he could not bring
 Himself to mention the high price that he
 Had paid for it. He stood there silently, 800
 Lamenting his lost wife, eyes filled with tears.
 He said, 'If Fate should grant me many years,
 I still shall weep each time that I regard
 This weapon which has made my life so hard,
 Killing my wife. Would it had never crossed
 My path! Procris, the wife that I have lost,
 Was fairer than her sister whom you may
 Have heard of, she who with the North Wind lay,
 Orithyia. We were in love indeed
 And I was happy till the gods decreed 810
 Otherwise. Two joyful months had almost passed
 When, as the shades of night had all been cast
 Away, on Mt. Hymettus, Dawn found me
 Casting my nets, and I unwillingly
 Was carried off by her, and though her face
 Blushes like roses and she keeps the place
 That is the border of both night and day
 And quaffs moist nectar, yet I have to say
 That I loved Procris – she was solidly
 Within my heart and I would constantly 820
 Speak of her, and I told Aurora this,
 Our recent marriage and our wedded bliss
 And our now empty couch. 'Keep her,' said she.
 'But if you want to heed my prophecy,
 You will no longer wish for her.' And so
 She sent me back to her. I, in my woe,
 Long brooded on her words, which made me doubt
 My lovely wife. So many things about
 Procris suppressed those doubts. I'd been away,
 However, for so long, and lovers stray, 830
 Their partners think. If Dawn could seem so pure
 Until she's tempted, how could I be sure

Of Procris? So, to test her loyalty,
 With a disguise Aurora gave to me
 I went back to my house to try to ply
 My wife with gifts. Unknown to others, I
 First paced the streets in hopes to find some ground
 Of guilt, but, once inside the house, I found
 That I'd been missed because there seemed to be
 An air or sorrow there. With difficulty 840
 I tried to find her: seeing her, I stayed
 Quite rooted to the spot and almost laid
 Aside my plan, confessing everything.
 I hardly kept from kissing her, a thing
 I should have done. I saw unhappiness
 In her but blent with so much loveliness.
 She grieved for me. Ah, Phocus, what a thought
 Had come to me that her sorrow had wrought
 More beauty yet! How often she'd rebuff
 My foul advances. 'One man is enough 850
 For me,' said she, 'and him I serve. Though he
 Is far away, I'll love him endlessly.'
 To what sane man is this not quite the test?
 But madly I'd go on and never rest,
 To my discomfort, till to her I said
 That I'd give her for one night in her bed
 A rich gift, even more. She hesitated!
 My guise I cast off, then angrily stated,
 'I'm no adulterer! No, I'm your spouse!'
 And then in silent shame she left the house. 860
 At me, and every man, so full of pique,
 She roamed the mountains so that she might seek
 Diana's skill. But now a greater flame
 Of love burned in my bones as I, in shame,
 Begged her forgiveness. I was quick to say
 That I might yield if coaxed in the same way.
 Her wounded honour now revenged, to me
 She then returned, and in sweet harmony
 We lived thereafter. Then, as though it were
 A little present, I received from her 870
 The hound that Cynthia, who was her goddess,
 Gave her while saying, 'He in speediness
 Will best all other dogs.' A spear as well
 She gave me – here it is! Shall I, though, tell
 What happened to the hound? It's marvellous,
 And you'll be stirred by its outlandishness.
 Once Oedipus had solved the mystery
 The Sphinx had posed to foil humanity
 And then had fallen down from the high hill,
 Thenceforth recalling nothing of her skill, 880
 Themis would wreak revenge. Without delay

She raised another savage beast to prey
 On Thebes, whereby the herds of cows were fated
 To die and all the country devastated
 And all its people put to death. And then
 There came the region's young and gallant men,
 Whom I accompanied, to hem around
 The fields their nets, but in a single bound
 She dodged the nets. Our hounds were loosed, but she
 Outran them with a bird's rapidity, 890
 Mocking them, Now there came a hollering
 To loose Tempest, who'd long been struggling
 To loose himself, straining his neck,. Yes, he
 Was Procris' gift. Once he was properly
 Released, he then was lost from sight, although
 Wherever he on rapid feet would go
 The hot dust whirled about. No spear was cast
 So rapidly, no lead shot was so fast,
 No Cretan arrow. I watched, from a height
 Above the plain, a yet-unequaled sight: 900
 Now caught, now surely free, the beast would bound,
 Elusive in her flight, then twist around
 To fool her hunter, running here and there.
 The hound kept pace and snapped the empty air
 In his frustration. But then, while I tried
 To poise my javelin, I turned aside.
 When I turned back again that I might fling
 My spear, I saw a most amazing thing -
 Two statues stood, transformed, upon the plain.
 While one of these two statues seemed to strain 910
 In rapid flight, the other seemed to be
 In close pursuit of her. Assuredly,
 A god would wish for victory in the race
 To both.' Once all of this had taken place,
 He stopped. But Phocis said, 'What was the sin
 The spear committed?' Then did he begin
 To tell him. He said, 'Phocus, my delight
 Began my woes, and so I will recite
 It first. Oh what a joy it is to dwell
 Upon our wedded bliss, sweet , too, to tell. 920
 She would not have preferred Jupiter's bed
 To mine, and it may truthfully be said
 No woman could have ever captured me,
 Not even Venus: we were equally
 In love. When on the hills the dawn's bright rays
 Began to shine, I'd rise to spend my days
 In hunting. I would take no hounds, no steeds,
 No servants and no nets to serve my needs,
 Only a spear, and when I longed to rest
 From slaughter, I would leave the woods in quest 930

Of shade. "O Aura," (that is what I'd say)
 "Come, soothe me with your breezes and allay
 The burning heat!" I added, too, maybe,
 Some more endearments. "Ah, you cherish me,"
 I'd say. "Through you I love each lonely nook
 And all the woods. Your breath I always took
 Upon my lips." The ambiguity
 Of what I said was heard by somebody
 Who had decided "Aura" was the name
 Of a nymph I love and took my fictive shame 940
 To Procris. Well, love is a credulous thing -
 She swooned (or so I heard). Awakening,
 She kept on wailing an invented act,
 Grieving a fiction posing as a fact.
 Yet she had doubts and in her wretched woe
 She had a feeling that this was not so,
 Unless she witnessed it herself. Next day
 I ranged the woodlands, seeking out my prey
 Successfully. "Aura, grant me relief,"
 Said I, and then a whispered moan of grief 950
 I heard and said, believing nought amiss,
 "Come hither, my delightful one!" At this,
 I heard a gently uttered sound nearby
 And, thinking it must be a wild beast, I
 Propelled my spear at where I'd heard the sound,
 But it was Procris, my own wife, I found.
 "Aah! Aah!" she cried aloud, and when I heard
 That well-known voice I ran, by panic stirred,
 And found her dying from the spear that she
 Had given me, and in her agony 960
 She pulled it out. I put my arm around
 Her frame and raised her up, and then I bound
 The damage with my tunic, which I tore
 In pieces that I might arrest the gore,
 Moaning, "Do not forsake me, dear one, slain
 By these accursed hands!" Weak from the pain
 And loss of blood, she barely muttered, "By
 The bed we shared and by the gods that I
 Entreat, and if my love may move your heart,
 The love that caused my death, as I depart, 970
 Don't wed this Aura!" Then I understood
 Her error and explained it. But what good
 Could come of that? Her strength was withering
 Within her but, while she was lingering,
 She kept her gaze on me. Then she was gone,
 And as I saw the sweet content upon
 Her face, it seemed that she possessed no fear
 Of death, 'He told all this with many a tear.
 With his sons and his army Aeacus

Entered, met by heroic Cephalus.