

“But now, wrapped in a hollow cloud, she [Minerva] left Seriphus, and, passing Cythnus and Gyarus on the right, by the shortest course over the sea she made for Thebes and Helicon, home of the Muses. On this mountain she alighted, and thus addressed the sisters versed in song: “The fame of a new spring has reached my ears, which broke out under the hard hoof of the winged horse of Medusa. This is the cause of my journey: I wished to see the marvellous thing. The horse himself I saw born from his mother’s blood.” Urania replied: “Whatever cause has brought thee to see our home, O goddess, thou art most welcome to our hearts. But the tale is true, and Pegasus did indeed produce our spring.” And she led Pallas aside to the sacred waters. She long admired the spring made by the stroke of the horse’s hoof; then looked round on the ancient woods, the grottoes, and the grass, spangled with countless flowers. She declared the daughters of Mnemosyne to be happy alike in their favourite pursuits and in their home. And thus one of the sisters answered her: “O thou, Tritonia, who wouldst so fitly join our band, had not thy merits raised thee to far greater tasks, thou sayest truth and dost justly praise our arts and our home. We have indeed a happy lot—were we but safe in it. But (such is the licence of the time) all things affright our virgin souls, and the vision of fierce Pyreneus is ever before our eyes, and I have not yet recovered from my fear. This bold king with his Thracian soldiery had captured Daulis and the Phocian fields, and ruled that realm which he had unjustly gained. It chanced that we were journeying to the temple on Parnasus. He saw us going, and feigning a reverence for our divinity, he said: ‘O daughters of Mnemosyne’—for he knew us—‘stay your steps and do not hesitate to take shelter beneath my roof against the lowering sky and the rain’—for rain was falling—‘gods have often entered a humbler home.’ Moved by his words and by the storm, we yielded to the man and entered his portal. And now the rain had ceased, the south wind had been routed by the north, and the dusky clouds were in full flight from the brightening sky. We were fain to go on our way; but Pyreneus shut his doors, and offered us violence. This we escaped by donning our wings. He, as if he would follow us, took his stand on a lofty battlement and cried to us: ‘What way you take, the same will I take also’; and, quite bereft of sense, he leaped from the pinnacle of the tower. Headlong he fell, crushing his bones and dyeing the ground in death with his accursed blood.”

While the muse was still speaking, the sound of whirring wings was heard and words of greeting came from the high branches of the trees. Jove’s daughter looked up and tried to see whence came the sound which was so clearly speech. She thought some human being spoke; but it was a bird. Nine birds, lamenting their fate, had alighted in the branches, magpies, which can imitate any sound they please. When Minerva wondered at the sight, the other addressed her, goddess to goddess: “‘Tis but lately those creatures also, conquered in a strife, have been added to the throng of birds. Pierus, lord of the rich domain of Pella, was their father, and Euippe of Paeonia was their mother. Nine times brought to the birth, nine times she called for help on mighty Lucina. Swollen with pride of numbers, this throng of senseless sisters journeyed through all the towns of Haemonia and all the towns of Achaia to us, and thus defied us to a contest in song: ‘Cease to deceive the unsophisticated rabble with your pretence of song. Come, strive with us, ye Thespian goddesses, if you dare. Neither in voice nor in skill can we be conquered, and our numbers are the same. If you are conquered, yield us Medusa’s spring and Boeotian Aganippe; or we will yield to you the Emathian plains even to snow-clad Paeonia; and let the nymphs be judges of our strife.’

“It was a shame to strive with them, but it seemed greater shame to yield. So the nymphs were chosen judges and took oath by their streams, and they set them down upon benches of living rock. Then without drawing lots she who had proposed the contest first began. She sang of the battle of the gods and giants, ascribing undeserved honour to the giants, and belittling the deeds of the mighty gods: how Typhoeus, sprung from the lowest depths of earth, inspired the heavenly gods with fear, and how they all turned their backs and fled, until, weary, they found refuge in the land of Egypt and the seven-mouthed Nile. How even there Typhoeus, son of earth, pursued them, and the gods hid themselves in lying shapes: ‘Jove thus became a ram,’ said she, ‘the lord of flocks, whence Libyan Ammon even to this day is represented with curving horns; Apollo hid in a crow’s shape,

Bacchus in a goat; the sister of Phoebus, in a cat, Juno in a snow-white cow, Venus in a fish, Mercury in an ibis bird.'

"So far had she sung, tuning voice to harp; we, the Aonian sisters, were challenged to reply—but perhaps you have not leisure, and care not to listen to our song?" "Nay, have no doubt," Pallas exclaimed, "but sing now your song in due order." And she took her seat in the pleasant shade of the forest. The muse replied: "We gave the conduct of our strife to one, Calliope; who rose and, with her flowing tresses bound in an ivy wreath, tried the plaintive chords with her thumb, and then, with sweeping chords, she sang this song:"

*Met.* 5.662-678

"Our eldest sister here brought to an end her able recital; then the nymphs with one voice agreed that the goddesses of Helicon had won. When the conquered sisters retorted with reviling, I made answer: 'Since it was not enough that you have earned punishment by your challenge and you add insults to your offence, and since our patience is not without end, we shall proceed to punishment and indulge our resentment.' The Pierides mocked, and scorned her threatening words. But as they tried to speak, and with loud outcries brandished their hands in saucy gestures, they saw feathers sprouting on their fingers, and plumage covering their arms; each saw another's face stiffening into a hard beak, and new forms of birds added to the woods. And while they strove to beat their breasts, uplifted by their flapping arms, they hung in the air, magpies, the noisy scandal of the woods. Even now in their feathered form their old-time gift of speech remains, their hoarse garrulity, their boundless passion for talk." (end of Book 5)

*Met.* 6.1-7

"Tritonia had listened to this tale, and had approved of the muses' song and their just resentment. And then to herself she said: "To praise is not enough; let me be praised myself and not allow my divinity to be scouted without punishment." So saying, she turned her mind to the fate of Maeonian Arachne, who she had heard would not yield to her the palm in the art of spinning and weaving wool..."