

Heroides 12 (Medea to Jason)

And yet for you, I remember, I the queen of Colchis could find time, when you besought that my art might bring you help. Then was the time when the sisters who pay out the fated thread of mortal life should have unwound for aye my spindle. Then could Medea have ended well! Whatever life has been lengthened out for me from that time forth has been but punishment.

All me! why was the ship from the forests of Pelion ever driven over the seas by strong young arms in quest of the ram of Phrixus? Why did we Colchians ever cast eye upon Magnesian Argo, and why did your Greek crew ever drink of the waters of the Phasis? Why did I too greatly delight in those golden locks of yours, in your comely ways, and in the false graces of your tongue? Yet delight too greatly I did—else, when once the strange craft had been beached upon our sands and brought us her bold crew, all unanointed would the unremembering son of Aeson have gone forth to meet the fires exhaled from the flame-scorched nostrils of the bulls; he would have scattered the seeds—and as many foemen as the seeds—for the sower himself to fall in strife with his own sowing! How much perfidy, vile wretch, would have perished with you, and how many woes been averted from my head!

'Tis some pleasure to reproach the ungrateful with favours done. That pleasure I will enjoy; that is the only delight I shall win from you. Bidden to turn the hitherto untried craft to the shores of Colchis, you set foot in the rich realms of my native land. There I, Medea, was what here your new bride is; as rich as her sire is, so rich was mine. Hers holds Ephyre, washed by two seas; mine, all the country which lies along the left strand of the Pontus e'en to the snows of Scythia.

Aeëtes welcomes to his home the Pelasgian youths, and the Greek heroes rest their limbs upon the pictured couch. Then 'twas that I saw you, then began to know you; that was the first impulse to the downfall of my soul. I saw you, and I was undone; nor did I kindle with ordinary fires, but like the pine-torch kindled before the mighty gods. Not only were you noble to look upon, but my fates were dragging me to doom; your eyes had robbed mine of their power to see. Traitor, you saw it—for who can well hide love? Its flame shines forth its own betrayer.

Meanwhile the condition is imposed that you press the hard necks of the fierce bulls at the unaccustomed plow. To Mars the bulls belonged, raging with more than mere horns, for their breathing was of terrible fire; of solid bronze were their feet, wrought round with bronze their nostrils, made black, too, by the blasts of their own breath. Besides this, you are bidden to scatter with obedient hand over the wide fields the seeds that should beget peoples to assail you with weapons born with themselves; a baneful harvest, that, to its own husbandman. The eyes of the guardian that know not yielding to sleep—by some art to elude them is your final task.

Aeëtes had spoken; in gloom you all rise up, and the high table is removed from the purple-spread couches. How far away then from your thought were Creusa's dowry-realm, and the daughter of great Creon, and Creon the father of your bride! With foreboding you depart; and as you go my moist eyes follow you, and in faint murmur comes from my tongue: "Fare thou well!" Laying myself on the ordered couch within my chamber, grievously wounded, in tears I passed the whole night long; before my eyes appeared the bulls and the dreadful harvest, before my eyes the unsleeping serpent. On the one hand was love, on the other, fear; and fear increased my very love. Morning came, and my dear sister, admitted to my chamber, found me with loosened hair and lying prone upon my face, and everywhere my tears. She implores aid for the Minyae. The boon is begged by one, but extorted by another: it is to the Aesonian youth that I grant my sister's request. There is a grove, sombre with pine-trees and the fronds of the ilex; into it scarce can the rays of the sun find way. There is in it—there was, at least—a shrine to Diana, wherein stands the goddess, a golden image fashioned by barbaric hand. Do you know the place? or have places fallen from your mind along with me? We came to the spot. You were the first to speak, with those faithless lips, and these were your words: "To thy hand fortune has committed the right of choosing or not my deliverance, and in thy hand are the ways of life and death for me. To have power to ruin is enough, if anyone delight in power for itself; but to save me will be greater glory. By our misfortunes, which thou hast power to relieve, I pray, by thy line, and by the godhead of thy all-

seeing grandsire the sun, by the three-fold face and holy mysteries of Diana, and by the gods of that race of thine—if so be gods it have—by all these, O maiden, have pity upon me, have pity on my men; be kind to me and make me thine for ever! And if it chance thou dost not disdain a Pelasgian suitor—but how can I hope the gods will be so facile to my wish?—my spirit will vanish away into thin air before another than thou shall come a bride to my chamber! My witness be Juno, ward of the rites of wedlock, and the goddess in whose marble shrine we stand!”

Words like these—and how slight a part of them is here!—and your right hand clasped with mine, moved the heart of the simple maid. I saw also tears—they, too, played their part in the deception. Thus quickly was I ensnared, girl that I was, by your words. You yoke together the bronze-footed bulls with your body unharmed by their fire, and cleave the solid mould with the share, as you were bid. The ploughed fields you sow full with envenomed teeth in place of seed; and there rises out of the earth, with sword and shield, a warrior band. Myself, the giver of the charmed drug, sat pallid there at sight of men all suddenly arisen and in arms, until the earth-born brothers—O deed most wonderful!—drew arms and came to the grapple each with each.

Then, lo and behold! all a-bristle with rattling scales, comes the unsleeping sentinel, hissing and sweeping the ground with winding belly. Where then was your rich dowry? Where then your royal consort, and the Isthmus that sunders the waters of two seas? I, the maiden who am now at last become a barbarian in your eyes, who now am poor, who now seem baneful—I closed the lids of the flame-like eyes in slumber wrought by my drug, and gave into your hand the fleece to steal away unharmed. I betrayed my sire, I left my throne and my native soil; the reward I get is leave to live in exile! My maidenly innocence has become the spoil of a pirate from overseas; beloved mother and best of sisters I have left behind.

But thee, O my brother, I did not leave behind as I fled! In this one place my pen fails. Of the deed my right hand was bold enough to do, it is not bold enough to write. So I, too, should have been torn limb from limb—but with thee! And yet I did not fear—for what, after that, could I fear?—to trust myself to the sea, woman though I was, and now with guilt upon me. Where is heavenly justice? Where the gods? Let the penalty that is our due overtake us on the deep—you for your treachery, me for my trustfulness! Would the Symplegades had caught and crushed us out together, and that my bones were clinging now to yours; or Scylla the ravening submerged us in the deep to be devoured by her dogs—fit were it for Scylla to work woe to ingrate men! And she who spews forth so many times the floods, and sucks them so many times back in again—would she had brought us, too, beneath the Trinacrian wave! Yet unharmed and victorious you return to Haemonia’s towns, and the golden fleece is laid before your fathers’ gods.

Why rehearse the tale of Pelias’ daughters, by devotion led to evil deeds—of how their maiden hands laid knife to the members of their sire? I may be blamed by others, but you perforce must praise me—you, for whom so many times I have been driven to crime. Yet you have dared—O, fit words fail me for my righteous wrath!—you have dared to say: “Withdraw from the palace of Aeson’s line!” At your bidding I have withdrawn from your palace, taking with me our two children, and—what follows me evermore—my love for you. When, all suddenly, there came to my ears the chant of Hymen, and to my eyes the gleam of blazing torches, and the pipe poured forth its notes, for you a wedding-strain, but for me a strain more tearful than the funeral trump, I was filled with fear; I did not yet believe such monstrous guilt could be; but all my breast none the less grew chill. The throng pressed eagerly on, crying “Hymen, O Hymenaeus!” in full chorus—the nearer the cry, for me the more dreadful. My slaves turned away and wept, seeking to hide their tears—who would be willing messenger of tidings so ill? Whatever it was, ’twas better, indeed, that I not know; but my heart was heavy, as if I really knew, when the younger of the children (by chance, or perhaps eager for the sight, he was standing at the outer threshold of the double door) calls out: “Mother, just come over here. A procession is coming, and my father Jason leading it. He’s all in gold, and driving a team of horses!” Then straight I rent my cloak and beat my breast and cried aloud, and my cheeks were at the mercy of my nails. My heart impelled me to rush into the midst of the moving throng, to tear off the wreaths from my ordered locks; I scarce could keep from crying out, with my hair all torn, “He is mine!” and laying hold on you.

Ah, injured father, rejoice! Rejoice, ye Colchians whom I left! Shades of my brother, receive in my fate your sacrifice due; I am abandoned; I have lost my throne, my native soil, my home, my husband—who alone for me took the place of all! Dragons and maddened bulls, it seems, I could subdue; a man alone I could not; I, who could beat back fierce fire with wise drugs, have not the power to escape the flames of my own passion. My very incantations, herbs, and arts abandon me; naught does my goddess aid me, naught the sacrifice I make to potent Hecate. I take no pleasure in the day; my nights are watches of bitterness, and gentle sleep is absent from my wretched soul. I, who could charm the dragon to sleep, can bring none to myself; my effort brings more good to any one else soever than to me. The limbs I saved, a wanton now embraces; 'tis she who reaps the fruit of my toil.

Perhaps, too, when you wish to make boast to your stupid mate and say what will pleasure her biased ears, you will fashion strange slanders against my face and against my ways. Let her make merry, and be joyful over my faults! Let her make merry, and lie aloft on the Tyrian purple—she shall weep, and the flames that consume her will surpass my own! While sword and fire are at my hand, and the juice of poison, no foe of Medea shall go unpunished!

But if it chance my entreaties touch a heart of iron, list now to my words—words too humble for my proud soul! I am as much a suppliant to you as you have often been to me, and I hesitate not to cast myself at your feet. If I am cheap in your eyes, be kind to our common offspring; a hard stepdame will be cruel to the fruitage of my womb. Their resemblance to you is all too great, and I am touched by the likeness; and as often as I see them, my eyes drop tears. By the gods above, by the light of my grandsire's beams, by my favours to you, and by the two children who are our mutual pledge—restore me to the bed for which I madly left so much behind; be faithful to your promises, and come to my aid as I came to yours! I do not implore you to go forth against bulls and men, nor ask your aid to quiet and overcome a dragon; it is you I ask for,—you, whom I have earned, whom you yourself gave to me, by whom I became a mother, as you by me a father. Where is my dowry, you ask? On the field I counted it out—that field which you had to plough before you could bear away the fleece. The famous golden ram, sightly for deep flock, is my dowry—the which, should I say to you “Restore it!” you would refuse to render up. My dowry is yourself—saved; my dowry is the band of Grecian youth! Go now, wretch, compare with that your wealth of Sisyphus! That you are alive, that you take to wife one who, with the father she brings you, is of kingly station, that you have the very power of being ingrate—you owe to me. Whom, hark you, I will straight—but what boots it to foretell your penalty? My ire is in travail with mighty threats. Whither my ire leads, will I follow. Mayhap I shall repent me of what I do—but I repent me, too, of regard for a faithless husband's good. Be that the concern of the god who now embroils my heart! Something portentous, surely, is working in my soul!