

“But under the bark, the infant conceived in such haste
continued to grow and now sought a way out of Myrrha;
the pregnant trunk bulged in the middle and its weighty burden
pressed on the mother, who could not cry out in her sorrow
nor summon Lucina with charms to aid those in childbirth.
So, like a woman exerting herself to deliver,
the tree groaned and bent over double, wet from its weeping.
Gentle Lucina stood by the sorrowing branches,
laid her hands onto the bark and recited the charms that
aid in delivery; the bark split open; a fissure
ran down the trunk of the tree and its burden spilled out,
a bawling boychild, whom naiads placed in soft grasses
and bathed in the tears of its mother. Not even Envy
could have found fault with his beauty, for he resembled
one of the naked cherubs depicted by artists,
and would have been taken as one, if you had provided
him with a quiver or else removed one from those others.

[*Venus and Adonis*]

“Time swiftly glides by in secret, escaping our notice,
and nothing goes faster than years do: the son of his sister
by his grandfather, the one so recently hidden
within a tree, so recently born, a most beautiful infant,
now is an adolescent and now a young man
even more beautiful than he was as a baby,
pleasing now even to Venus and soon the avenger
of passionate fires that brought his mother to ruin.

“For while her fond Cupid was giving a kiss to his mother,
he pricked her unwittingly, right in the breast, with an arrow
projecting out of his quiver; annoyed, the great goddess
swatted him off, but the wound had gone in more deeply
than it appeared to, and at the beginning deceived her.

“Under the spell of this fellow’s beauty, the goddess
no longer takes any interest now in Cythera,⁵
nor does she return to her haunts on the island of Paphos,
or to fish-wealthy Cnidus or to ore-bearing Amathus;⁶
she avoids heaven as well, now—preferring Adonis,
and clings to him, his constant companion, ignoring
her former mode of unstrenuous self-indulgence,
when she shunned natural light for the parlors of beauty;
now she goes roaming with him through woods and up mountains
and over the scrubby rocks with her garments hitched up
and girded around her waist like a nymph of Diana,⁷
urging the hounds to pursue unendangering species,
hoppety hares or stags with wide-branching antlers,

5. Island south of the Peloponnesus, and like Cyprus sacred to Venus.

6. All three were important centers of Venus’s cult: Paphos and Amathus were cities on the

island of Cyprus, and Cnidus was a city in Asia Minor.

7. As a virgin and huntress, the antithesis of Venus.

or terrified does; but she avoids the fierce wild boars and
rapacious wolves and bears armed with sharp claws,
and shuns the lions, sated with slaughter of cattle.

"And she warns you also to fear the wild beasts, Adonis,
if only her warning were heeded. 'Be bold with the timid,'
she said, 'but against the daring, daring is reckless.'
Spare me, dear boy, the risk involved in your courage;
don't rile the beasts that Nature has armed with sharp weapons,
lest I should find the glory you gain much too costly!
For lions and bristling boars and other fierce creatures
look with indifferent eyes and minds upon beauty
and youth and other qualities Venus is moved by;
pitiless boars deal out thunderbolts with their curved tusks,
and none may withstand the frenzied assault of the lions,
whom I despise altogether.'

"And when he asked why,
she said, 'I will tell you this story which will amaze you,
with its retribution delivered for ancient wrongdoing.

"But this unaccustomed labor has left me exhausted—
look, though—a poplar entices with opportune shade, and
offers a soft bed of turf we may rest on together,
as I would like to.' And so she lay down on the grasses
and on her Adonis, and using his breast as a pillow,
she told this story, mixing her words with sweet kisses:

"Perhaps you'll have heard of a maiden able to vanquish
the swiftest of men in a footrace; this wasn't a fiction,
for she overcame all contestants; nor could you say whether
she deserved praise more for her speed or her beauty.
She asked some god about husbands. 'A husband,' he answered,
'is not for you, Atalanta: flee from a husband!
But you will not flee—and losing yourself, will live on!'

"Frightened by his grim prediction, she went to the forest
and lived there unmarried, escaping the large and persistent
throng of her suitors by setting out cruel conditions;
'You cannot have me,' she said, 'unless you outrun me;
come race against me! A bride and a bed for the winner,
death to the losers. Those are the rules of the contest.'

"Cruel? Indeed—but such was this young maiden's beauty
that a foolhardy throng of admirers took up the wager.
As a spectator, Hippomenes sat in the grandstand,
asking why anyone ever would risk such a danger,
just for a bride, and disparaging their headstrong passion.
However, as soon as he caught a glimpse of her beauty,
like mine or like yours would be if you were a woman,'
said Venus, 'her face and her body, both bared for the contest,
he threw up both hands and cried out, 'I beg your pardons,
who only a moment ago disparaged your efforts,
but truly I had no idea of the trophy you strive for!'

"Praises ignited the fires of passion and made him
hope that no young man proved to be faster than she was

and fear that one would be. Jealous, he asked himself why he was leaving the outcome of this competition unventured: "God helps those who improve their condition by daring," he said, addressing himself as the maiden flew by him. Though she seemed no less swift than a Scythian arrow, nevertheless, he more greatly admired her beauty, and the grace of her running made her seem even more lovely; the breezes blew back the wings attached to her ankles while her loose hair streamed over her ivory shoulders and her brightly edged knee straps fluttered lightly; a russet glow fanned out evenly over her pale, girlish body, as when a purple awning covers a white marble surface, staining its artless candor with counterfeit shadow.

"She crossed the finish line while he was taking it in, and Atalanta, victorious, was given a crown and the glory; the groaning losers were taken off: end of *their* story. But the youth, undeterred by what had become of the vanquished, stood on the track and fixed his gaze on the maiden: "Why seek such an easy victory over these sluggards? Contend with me," he said, "and if Fortune makes me the winner, you will at least have been beaten by one not unworthy: I am the son of Megareus, grandson of Neptune, my great-grandfather; my valor is no less impressive than is my descent; if you should happen to triumph, you would be famous for having beaten Hippomenes."

"And as he spoke, Atalanta's countenance softened: she wondered whether she wished to win or to *be* won, and asked herself which god, jealous of her suitor's beauty, sought to destroy him by forcing him into this marriage: "If I were judging, I wouldn't think I was worth it! Nor am I moved by his beauty," she said, "though I could be, but I *am* moved by his youth: his boyishness stirs me—but what of his valor? His mind so utterly fearless? What of his watery origins? His relation to Neptune? What of the fact that he loves me and wishes to wed me, and is willing to die if bitter Fortune denies him?"

"Oh, flee from a bed that still reeks with the gore of past victims, while you are able to, stranger; marrying *me* is certain destruction! No one would wish to reject you, and you may be chosen by a much wiser young lady!"

"But why should I care for you—after so many have perished? Now *he* will learn! Let him die then, since the great slaughter of suitors has taught him nothing! He must be weary of living! So—must he die then, because he wishes to wed me, and is willing to pay the ultimate price for his passion? He shouldn't have to! And even though it won't be *my* fault, my victory surely will turn the people against me!"

"If only you would just give it up, or if only, since you're obsessed with it, you were a little bit faster! How very girlish is the boy's facial expression! O poor Hippomenes! I wish you never had seen me!"

You're worthy of life, and if only my life had been better,
 or if the harsh Fates had not prevented my marriage,
 you would have been the one I'd have chosen to marry!"

"She spoke, and, moved by desire that struck without warning,
 loved without knowing what she was doing or feeling.
 Her father and people were clamoring down at the racecourse,
 when Neptune's descendent Hippomenes anxiously begged me:

"Cytherian Venus, I pray you preside at my venture,
 aiding the fires that you yourself have ignited."
 A well-meaning breeze brought me this prayer, so appealing
 that, I confess, it aroused me and stirred me to action,

though I had scant time enough to bring off his rescue.
 "There is a field upon Cyprus, known as Tamasus,
 famed for its wealth; in olden days it was given
 to me and provides an endowment now for my temples;

and there in this field is a tree; its leaves and its branches
 glisten and shimmer, reflecting the gold they are made of;
 now, as it happened, I'd just gotten back from a visit,
 carrying three golden apples that I had selected,
 and showing myself there to Hippomenes only,

approached him and showed him how to use them to advantage.
 "Both of them crouched for the start; when horns gave the signal,
 they took off together, their feet barely brushing the surface,
 you would have thought they were able to keep their toes dry
 while skimming over the waves, and could touch on the ripened
 heads of wheat in the field without bending them under.

"Cries of support and encouragement cheered on the young man;
 "Now is the time," they screamed, "go for it, go for it, hurry,
 Hippomenes, give it everything that you've got now!
 Don't hold back! Victory!" And I am uncertain whether
 these words were more pleasing to him or to his Atalanta,
 for often, when she could have very easily passed him,
 she lingered beside, her gaze full of desperate longing,
 until she reluctantly sped ahead of his features.

"And now Hippomenes, dry-mouthed, was breathlessly gasping,
 the finish line far in the distance; he threw out an apple,
 and the sight of that radiant fruit astounded the maiden,
 who turned from her course and retrieved the glittering missile;
 Hippomenes passed her: the crowd roared its approval.

"A burst of speed now and Atalanta makes up for lost time:
 once more overtaking the lad, she puts him behind her!
 A second apple: again she falls back, but recovers,
 now she's beside him, now passing him, only the finish
 remains: "Now, O goddess," he cries, "my inspiration, be with me!"

"With all the strength of his youth he flings the last apple
 to the far side of the field: *this* will really delay her!
 The maiden looked doubtful about its retrieval: I forced her
 to get it and add on its weight to the burden she carried:
 time lost and weight gained were equal obstructions: the maiden
 (lest my account should prove longer than even the race was)
 took second place: the trophy bride left with the victor.