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# The Metamorphoses of OVID

A NEW VERSE TRANSLATION BY

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And when, still muddy from the flood, the earth  
had dried beneath the sunlight's clement warmth,  
she brought forth countless living forms: while some  
were the old sorts that earth had now restored,  
she also fashioned shapes not seen before.

And it was then that earth, against her will,  
had to engender you, enormous Python,  
a horrid serpent, new to all men's eyes—  
a sight that terrified the reborn tribes:  
your body filled up all the mountainside.

That snake was killed by Phoebus; until then  
he had not used his fatal bow except  
to hunt down deer and goats in flight: he smashed  
that monster with innumerable shafts,  
a task that left his quiver almost bare  
before the Python perished in the pool  
of poisoned blood that poured out of his wounds.  
To keep the memory of his great feat  
alive, the god established sacred games;  
and after the defeated serpent's name,  
they were called Pythian. Here all young men  
who proved to be the best at boxing or  
at running or at chariot racing wore  
a wreath of oak leaves as their crown of honor.  
The laurel tree did not exist as yet;  
to crown his temples, graced by fair long hair,  
Phoebus used wreaths of leaves from any tree.

Now Daphne—daughter of the river-god,  
Peneus—was the first of Phoebus' loves.  
This love was not the fruit of random chance:  
what fostered it was Cupid's cruel wrath.  
For now, while Phoebus still was taking pride  
in his defeat of Python, he caught sight

of Cupid as he bent his bow to tie  
the string at the two ends. He said: "Lewd boy,  
what are you doing with that heavy bow?  
My shoulders surely are more fit for it;  
for I can strike wild beasts—I never  
miss. I can fell enemies; just recently  
I even hit—my shafts were infinite—  
that swollen serpent, Python, sprawled across  
whole acres with his pestilential paunch.  
Be glad your torch can spark a bit of love:  
don't try to vie with me for praise and wreaths!"  
And Venus' son replied: "Your shafts may pierce  
all things, o Phoebus, but you'll be transfixed  
by mine; and even as all earthly things  
can never equal any deity,  
so shall your glory be no match for mine."

That said, he hurried off; he beat his wings  
until he reached Pamassus' shady peak;  
there, from his quiver, Cupid drew two shafts  
of opposite effect: the first rejects,  
the second kindles love. This last is golden,  
its tip is sharp and glittering; the first  
is blunt, its tip is leaden—and with this  
blunt shaft the god pierced Daphne. With the tip  
of gold he hit Apollo; and the arrow  
pierced to the bones and marrow.

And at once  
the god of Delos is aflame with love;  
but Daphne hates its very name; she wants  
deep woods and spoils of animals she hunts;  
it is Diana, Phoebus' virgin sister,  
whom she would emulate. Around her hair—  
in disarray—she wears a simple band.  
Though many suitors seek her, she spurns all;  
she wants to roam uncurbed; she needs no man;  
she pays no heed to marriage, love, or husbands.

Her father often said: "You're in my debt: a son-in-law is owed me." And he said: "You owe me grandsons." But his daughter scorns, as things quite criminal, the marriage torch and matrimony; with a modest blush on her fair face, she twines her arms around her father's neck: "Allow me to enjoy perpetual virginity," she pleads; "o dear, dear father, surely you'll concede to me the gift Diana has received from her dear father." And in fact, Peneus would have agreed to Daphne, it's your beauty that will prevent your getting that dear gift. Your fair form contradicts your deepest wish. Phoebus is lovestruck; having seen the girl, he longs to wed her and, in longing, hopes; but though he is the god of oracles, he reads the future wrongly. Even as, when grain is harvested, the stubble left will burn, or as the hedges burn when chance has led some traveler to bring his torch too close, or to forget it on the road when he went off at dawn, so Phoebus burns, so is his heart aflame; with hope he feeds a fruitless love. He looks at Daphne's hair as, unadorned, it hangs down her fair neck, and says: "Just think, if she should comb her locks!" He sees her lips and never tires of them; her fingers, hands, and wrists are unsurpassed; her arms—more than half-bare—cannot be matched; whatever he can't see he can imagine; he conjures it as even more inviting. But swifter than the lightest breeze, she flees and does not halt—not even when he pleads: "O, daughter of Peneus, stay! Dear Daphne, I don't pursue you as an enemy! Wait, nymph! You flee as would the lamb before the wolf, the deer before the lion, or

the trembling dove before the eagle; thus all flee from hostile things, but it is love for which I seek you now! What misery! I fear you'll stumble, fall, be scratched by brambles; harm your faultless legs—and I'm to blame. You're crossing trackless places. Slow your pace; I pray you, stay your flight. I'll slow down, too. But do consider who your lover is. I'm not a mountain dweller, not a shepherd, no scraggly guardian of flocks and herds. Too rash, you don't know whom you're fleeing for in fact, that's why you run. I am the lord of Delphi's land, and Claros, Tenedos, and regal Patara. Jove is my father. Through me, all is revealed: what's yet to be, what was, and what now is. The harmony of song and lyre is achieved through me. My shaft is sure in flight; but then there's he whose arrow aimed still more infallibly, the one who wounded me when I was free of any love within my heart. I am the one who has invented medicine, but now there is no herb to cure my passion; my art, which helps all men, can't heal its master.' He'd have said more, but Daphne did not halt; afraid she left him there, with half-done words. But even then, the sight of her was striking. The wind laid bare her limbs; against the nymph it blew; her dress was fluttering; her hair streamed in the breeze; in flight she was more fair. But now the young god can't waste time: he's lost his patience; his beguiling words are done; and so—with love as spur—he races on; he closes in. Just as a Gallic hound surveys the open field and sights a hare,

and both the hunter and the hunted race  
more swiftly—one to catch, one to escape  
(he seems about to leap on his prey's back;  
he's almost sure he's won; his muzzle now  
is at her heels; the other, still in doubt—  
not sure if she is caught—slips from his mouth;  
at the last instant, she escapes his jaws):  
such were the god and girl; while he is swift  
because of hope, what urges her is fear.  
But love has given wings to the pursuer;  
he's faster—and his pace will not relent.  
He's at her shoulders now; she feels his breath  
upon the hair that streams down to her neck.  
Exhausted, wayworn, pale, and terrified,  
she sees Peneus' stream nearby; she cries:  
"Help me, dear father; if the river-gods  
have any power, then transform, dissolve  
my gracious shape, the form that pleased too well!"  
As soon as she is finished with her prayer,  
a heavy numbness grips her limbs; thin bark  
begins to gird her tender frame, her hair  
is changed to leaves, her arms to boughs; her feet—  
so keen to race before—are now held fast  
by sluggish roots; the girl's head vanishes,  
becoming a treetop. All that is left  
of Daphne is her radiance.

And yet

Apollo loves her still; he leans against  
the trunk; he feels the heart that beats beneath  
the new-made bark; within his arms he clasps  
the branches as if they were human limbs;  
and his lips kiss the wood, but still it shrinks  
from his embrace, at which he cries: "But since  
you cannot be my wife, you'll be my tree.  
O laurel, I shall always wear your leaves  
to wreath my hair, my lyre, and my quiver.  
When Roman chieftains crown their heads with garlands

*Latin [534-601*

as chants of gladness greet their victory, you  
will be there. And you will also be the faithful  
guardian who stands beside the portals of  
Augustus' house and keeps a close watch on the  
Roman crown of oak leaves.  
And even as my head is ever young,  
and my hair ever long, may you, unshorn,  
wear your leaves, too, forever: never lose  
that loveliness, o laurel, which is yours!"

In Thessaly there is a deep-set valley

Apollo's words were done. With new-made boughs  
the laurel nodded; and she shook her crown,  
as if her head had meant to show consent.

surrounded on all sides by wooded slopes  
that tower high. They call that valley Tempe.  
And the Peneus River, as it flows  
down from Mount Pindus' base—waves flecked with foam—  
runs through that valley. In its steep descent,  
a heavy fall, the stream gives rise to clouds  
and slender threads of mist—like curling smoke;  
and from on high, the river sprays treetops;  
its roar resounds through places near and far.  
This is the home, the seat, the sanctuary  
of that great stream. And here, within a cave  
carved out of rock, sat Daphne's father, god  
and ruler of these waters and of all  
the nymphs who made their home within his waves.  
And it was here that—though they were unsure  
if they should compliment or comfort him—  
first came the river-gods of his own region:  
Enipeus, restless river; poplar-rich  
Sperchios; veteran Apidanus  
and gentle Aeas and Amphrysus; then  
the other, distant rivers came—all those

*Low [561-81]*

knew love both as a woman and a man.

Tiresias had once struck with his staff  
two huge snakes as they mated in the forest;  
for that, he had been changed—a thing of wonder—  
from man to woman. Seven autumns passed,  
and still that change held fast. But at the eighth,  
he came upon those serpents once again.  
He said: "If he who strikes you can be changed  
into his counter-state, then this time, too,  
I'll strike at you." His stout staff dealt a blow;  
and he regained the shape he had before,  
the shape the Theban had when he was born.

And when he had been summoned to decide  
this jesting controversy, he took sides  
with Jove. The story goes that Juno grieved  
far more than she had any right to do,  
more than was seemly in a light dispute. And  
she condemned to never-ending night  
the judge whose verdict found her in the wrong.  
But then almighty Jove (though no god can undo  
what any other god has done),  
to mitigate Tiresias' penalty,  
his loss of sight, gave him the power to see  
the future, pairing pain with prophecy.

**7** He was famous: far and near, through all

Boeotian towns, they asked the seer for  
counsel; none could fault his prophecies.

The first to test him was Liriope,  
a nymph the river-god Cephissus had  
caught in his current's coils; within his waves  
he snared the azure nymph—and had his way.  
And when her time had come, that lovely nymph

*Latin [323-44]*

gave birth to one so handsome that, just born,  
he was already worthy of much love:  
Narcissus was the name she gave her son.

And when she asked the augur if her boy  
would live to see old age, Tiresias  
replied: "Yes, if he never knows himself "  
For many years his words seemed meaningless;  
but then what happened in the end confirmed  
their truth: the death Narcissus met when he  
was stricken with a singular, strange frenzy.

For when he reached his sixteenth year, Narcissus—  
who then seemed boy or man—was loved by many:  
both youths and young girls wanted him; but he  
had much cold pride within his tender body:  
no youth, no girl could ever touch his heart.

One day, as he was driving frightened deer  
into his nets, Narcissus met a nymph:  
resounding Echo, one whose speech was strange;  
for when she heard the words of others, she  
could not keep silent, yet she could not be  
the first to speak. Then she still had a body—  
she was not just a voice. Though talkative,  
she used her voice as she still uses it:  
of many words her ears have caught, she just  
repeats the final part of what she has heard.

It's Juno who had punished Echo so.  
Time after time, when Juno might have caught  
her Jove philandering on the mountaintops  
with young nymphs, Echo, cunningly, would stop  
the goddess on her path; she'd talk and talk,  
to give her sister nymphs just time enough  
to slip away before they were found out.  
As soon as Juno had seen through that plot,  
she menaced Echo: "From now on you'll not

*Latin (345-66)*

have much use of the voice that tricked me so."  
The threat was followed by the fact. And Echo  
can mime no more than the concluding sounds  
of any words she's heard.

BOOK III

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When Echo saw  
Narcissus roaming through the lonely fields,  
she was inflamed with love, and—furtively—  
she followed in his footsteps. As she drew  
still closer, closer, so her longing grew  
more keen, more hot—as sulfur, quick to burn,  
smeared round a torch's top bursts into flame  
when there are other fires close to it.  
How often, as she tracked him, did she pray  
that she might tempt him with caressing words  
and tender pleas. But she cannot begin  
to speak: her nature has forbidden this;  
and so she waits for what her state permits:  
to catch the sounds that she can then give back  
with her own voice.

One day, by chance, the boy—  
now separated from his faithful friends—  
cried out: "Is anyone nearby?" "Nearby,"  
was Echo's answering cry. And stupefied,  
he looks around and shouts: "Come! Come!"—and she  
calls out, "Come! Come!" to him who'd called. Then he  
turns round and, seeing no one, calls again:  
"Why do you flee from me?" And the reply  
repeats the final sounds of his outcry.  
That answer snares him; he persists, calls out:  
"Let's meet." And with the happiest reply  
that ever was to leave her lips, she cries:  
"Let's meet"; then, seconding her words, she rushed  
out of the woods, that she might fling her arms  
around the neck she longed to clasp. But he  
retreats and, fleeing, shouts: "Do not touch me!  
Don't cling to me! I'd sooner die than say

Latin [366-91] NARCISSUS &amp; ECHO

I'm yours!"; and Echo answered him: "I'm yours."  
So, scorned and spumed, she hides within the woods;  
there she, among the trees, conceals her face,  
her shame; since then she lives in lonely caves.  
But, though repulsed, her love persists; it grows  
on grief. She cannot sleep; she wastes away.  
The sap has fled her wrinkled, wretched flesh.

Her voice and bones are all that's left; and then  
her voice alone: her bones, they say, were turned  
to stone. So she is hidden in the woods  
and never can be seen on mountain slopes,  
though everywhere she can be heard• the power  
of sound still lives in her.

And even as  
Narcissus had repulsed that nymph, he scorned  
the other nymphs of waves and mountains and,  
before that, many men. Until, one day,  
a youth whom he had spurned was led to pray,  
lifting his hands to heaven, pleading: "May  
Narcissus fall in love; but once a prey,  
may he, too, be denied the prize he craves."

There was a pool whose waters, silverlike,  
were gleaming, bright. Its borders had no slime.  
No shepherds, no she-goats, no other herds  
of cattle heading for the hills disturbed  
that pool; its surface never had been stirred  
by fallen branch, wild animal, or bird.  
Fed by its waters, rich grass ringed its edge,  
and hedges served to shield it from the sun.

It's here that, weary from the heat, the chase,  
drawn by the beauty of the pool, the place,  
face down, Narcissus lies. But while he tries  
to quench one thirst, he feels another rise:  
he drinks, but he is stricken by the sight

Latin 1392-4161

he sees—the image in the pool. He dreams upon  
a love that's bodiless: now he  
believes that what is but a shade must be a  
body. And he gazes in dismay  
at his own self; he cannot turn away his eyes;  
he does not stir; he is as still as any statue  
carved of Parian marble  
Stretched out along the ground, he stares again,  
again at the twin stars that are his eyes;  
at his fair hair, which can compare with  
Bacchus' or with Apollo's; at his beardless  
cheeks  
and at his ivory neck, his splendid mouth, the  
pink blush on a face as white as snow; in sum,  
he now is struck with wonder by what's  
wonderful in him. Unwittingly,  
he wants himself he praises, but his praise is  
for himself; he is the seeker and the sought, the  
longed-for and the one who longs; he is the  
arsonist—and is the scorched.

How many futile kisses did he waste  
on the deceptive pool! How often had  
he clasped the neck he saw but could not grasp  
within the water, where his arms plunged deep!  
He knows not what he sees, but what he sees  
invites him. Even as the pool deceives  
his eyes, it tempts them with delights. But why,  
o foolish boy, do you persist? Why try  
to grip an image? He does not exist—  
the one you love and long for. If you turn away,  
he'll fade; the face that you discern is but a  
shadow, your reflected form.  
That shape has nothing of its own: it comes with  
you, with you it stays; it will retreat when you  
have gone—if you can ever leave!

But nothing can detach him from that place:  
no need for food, no need for rest. He's  
stretched

along the shaded grass; his eyes are set—  
and never sated—on that lying shape.  
It is through his own eyes that he will die.  
He lifts himself a little, then he cries—  
his arms reach toward the trees that ring that site:  
"O woods, you are the ones to testify:  
among your trees so many lovers hide  
their grief. Do you remember anyone  
in your long life—those many centuries—  
whose love consumed him more than mine wastes me?  
I do delight in him; I see him—yet,  
although I see and do delight in him,  
I cannot find him (love confounds me so!).  
And there's another reason for my sorrow:  
it's no great sea that sunders him from me,  
no endless road, no mountain peak, no town's  
high walls with gates shut tight: no, we are kept  
apart by nothing but the thinnest stretch  
of water. He is keen to be embraced;  
my lips reach down: I touch the limp wave,  
and just as often he, with upturned face,  
would offer me his mouth. You'd surely say  
that we could touch each other, for the space  
that separates our love is brief. Come now,  
whoever you may be! Why cozen me,  
you boy without a peer in all this world!  
When I would seek you out, where do you go?  
My age, my form don't merit scorn: indeed,  
the nymphs were lavish in their love of me.  
Your gaze is fond and promising; I stretch  
my arms to you, and you reach back in turn. I smile  
and you smile, too. And, often, I've seen tears  
upon your face just when I've wept, and when I  
signal to you, you reply; and I  
can see the movement of your lovely lips—  
returning  
words that cannot reach my ears.  
Yes, yes, I'm he! I've seen through that deceit:  
my image cannot trick me anymore.

I burn with love for my own self: it's I  
 who light the flames—the flames that scorch me then.  
 What shall I do? Should I be sought or seek?  
 But, then, why must I seek? All that I need,  
 I have: my riches mean my poverty.  
 If I could just be split from my own body!  
 The strangest longing in a lover: I  
 want that which I desire to stand apart  
 from my own self. My sorrow saps my force;  
 the time allotted me has been cut short;  
 I die in my youth's prime, but death is not  
 a weight; with death my pain will end, and yet  
 I'd have my love live past my death. Instead,  
 we two will die together in one breath."

Such were his words. Then he returns, obsessed,  
 to contemplate the image he had left:  
 his tears disturb the water; as he weeps,  
 they fall upon the surface. What he seeks  
 is darker, dimmer now—as if to flee.  
 "Where do you go?" he cries. "Do not retreat;  
 stay here—do not inflict such cruelty. Let  
 me still gaze at one I cannot touch; let  
 sight provide the food for my sad love."

As he laments, he tears his tunic's top;  
 with marble hands he beats his naked chest.  
 His flesh, once struck, is stained with subtle red;  
 as apples, white in one part, will display  
 another crimson part; or just as grapes,  
 in varied clusters, when they ripen, wear  
 a purple veil. But when the water clears  
 and he sees this, it is too much to bear.  
 Just as blond wax will melt near gentle fire,  
 or frost will melt beneath the sun, just so  
 was he undone by love: its hidden flame  
 consumes Narcissus: now he wastes away.

His color now has gone—that mix of white and  
 ruddiness; he's lost his sap and strength, all that  
 has been so beautiful to see:  
 there's nothing left of the entrancing flesh that  
 once had won the love of Echo. Yet,  
 faced with the sight of him, she feels deep pity; each  
 time he cries "Ah, me!" the nymph repeats "Ah, me!";  
 and when he flails his arms and beats his shoulders,  
 she repeats that hammering.  
 His final words at the familiar pool,  
 when once again he gazed into the waves,  
 were these: "Dear boy, the one I loved in vain!" And  
 what he said resounded in that place.  
 And when he cried "Farewell!" "Farewell!" was just what  
 Echo mimed. He set his tired head  
 to rest on the green grass. And then dark death shut  
 fast the eyes that had been captured by  
 the beauty of their master. Even when  
 the world below became his home, he still  
 would stare at his own image in the pool of  
 Styx. His Naiad sisters, in lament,  
 as offering for their brother, cropped their hair The  
 Dryads also wept. That choir of grief  
 was joined by Echo as she mimed their sounds. They  
 had prepared the pyre, the bier, the torches; but  
 nowhere could they find Narcissus' body: where it had  
 been, they found instead a flower, its yellow center  
 circled by white petals.

And once his prophecy had come to pass  
 and all the towns of Greece had heard of that,  
 renown-well earned—now crowned Tiresias.  
 The only one among the Greeks to scorn  
 the seer was Pentheus; he—Echion's son—  
 despised the gods and mocked the auguries  
 of old Tiresias; he even mocked





THEIR TALE WAS DONE. And now the Muses won  
Minerva's praise. She had listened carefully,  
and she applauded all their artistry  
in song—and justified what they had done  
in striking down their rivals' spite and scorn.  
But to herself she said "To praise is less  
rewarding than receiving praise: just as  
the Muses punished the Pierides,  
so, too, must I exact a penalty  
from anyone who dares disparage me."  
Her mind was set, intent on punishing  
Arachne, for the goddess had indeed  
heard that the Lydian girl would not concede  
Minerva's mastery in working wool:  
she claimed that she surpassed the goddess' skill.

Arachne was renowned—but certainly  
not for her birthplace or her family  
Her father, Idmon, came from Colophon;  
he dyed her porous wool with Phocæan purple.  
Her mother now was dead: but like her husband,  
she was lowborn: in sum, a simple couple.  
Arachne's home was in a humble village  
Hypæpa. Yet consummate work had won  
the girl much fame: through all the Lydian towns,  
her name was known. To see her wondrous art,  
the nymphs would often leave their own vineyards  
along Timolus' slopes, and water nymphs  
would leave Pactolus' shores. One could delight  
not only in her finished work but find  
enchantment as her art unfolded: whether  
she gathered the rough wool in a new ball,  
or worked it with her fingers, reaching back—  
with gesture long and apt—to the distaff  
for more wool she could draw out, thread by thread—  
Wool that was like a fleecy cloud—or twisted  
her agile thumb around the graceful spindle,

and then embroidered with a slender needle,  
one knew that she was surely Pallas' pupil.

And yet the girl denied this; and instead  
of taking pride in following so fine  
a mentor, she'd reply, as if offended:  
"Let her contend with me; and if I lose,  
whatever she demands of me, I'll do."  
To warn the girl against such insolence,  
Minerva took the form of an old woman:  
the goddess put false gray hair on her temples;  
to prop her tottering limbs, she gripped a staff  
and, in that guise, approached the girl and said:  
"Not all that old age offers is mere chaff:  
for one, the years bestow experience.  
Take my advice: it is enough to be  
supreme among all mortals when you weave  
and work your wool, but never do compete  
with an immortal goddess. Go, beseech  
Minerva's pardon for the words you spoke;  
ask humbly and she will forgive your boast."  
Arachne scowled; abrupt, aggrieved, morose,  
she dropped her threads; and though she kept her hand  
from striking out, her rage was clear—it showed  
upon Arachne's face as she replied  
to Pallas (who was still disguised): "Old age  
has addled you; your wits are gone; too long  
a life has left you anile, stale, undone.  
Your drivel might appeal to your dear daughter-  
in-law, if you have one, or else your daughter,  
if you have one. As for advice, I can  
advise myself. And lest you think your warning  
changed anything, be sure of this: I am  
still sure of what I said before. Your goddess—  
why doesn't she come here? Why not accept  
my challenge?" Pallas answered: "She has come!"  
She cast aside disguise, showed her true form.  
The nymphs bowed down before the deity, as did the

Lydian women. Only she, Arachne, showed no fear;  
she stood unawed.  
And yet, despite herself, her cheeks were flushed  
with sudden red, which faded soon enough—  
as when the sky grows crimson with firstlight,  
but pales again beneath the bright sunrise.  
Arachne still insists upon the contest:  
her senseless lust for glory paves her path  
to ruin—for the goddess does not ask  
for a delay, or warn her anymore.

Now each is quick to take her separate place  
and, on her loom, to stretch her warp's fine threads.  
On high, onto a beam, each ties her web;  
the tomblike reed keeps every thread distinct;  
sharp shuttles, with the help of fingers, serve  
for the insertion of the woof; notched teeth  
along the slay, by hammering, now beat  
into their place weft threads that run between  
the fleece that forms the warp.

Both women speed:

their shoulders free (their robes are girt about  
their breasts), they move their expert hands; and each  
is so intent that she ignores fatigue.  
Into the web they've woven purple threads  
of wool that has been dyed in Tyrian tubs,  
and hues so delicate that they shade off  
each from the other imperceptibly—  
as, when a storm is done, the rays of sun  
strike through the raindrops and a rainbow stains  
with its great curve a broad expanse of sky;  
and there a thousand different colors glow,  
and yet the eye cannot detect the point  
of passage from one color to the next,  
for each adjacent color is too like  
its neighbor, although at the outer ends,

the colors shown are clearly different.

Each rival weaves her pliant golden threads  
into her web—and traces some old tale.

Minerva chooses to portray the hill  
of Mars, a part of Cecrops' citadel,  
the icon of an ancient controversy—

which god would win the right to name the city.  
There twice-six gods—and one of them is Jove—  
majestic and august, sit on high thrones.  
Each god is shown with his own well-known traits;  
thus, Jove has regal features; and the god  
who rules the sea stands tall; with his long trident  
he strikes the hard stone cliff and from that rock  
a fierce horse leaps, as if to urge the city  
to take the name of Neptune. When Minerva  
shows her own self, she has a shield, a lance,  
a helmet on her head; to guard her breast  
there is her aegis. When the earth is struck  
by her sharp shaft, an olive tree springs up,  
pale green and rich with fruit; this prodigy  
astonishes the gods; and finally,  
we see Minerva crowned by victory.

To these, Minerva added at each corner—  
so that the girl be warned of what awaits her  
audacity—a painted scene of contest.  
Each pictured warning had its own bright colors  
and figures—each distinct—in miniature.  
One corner shows the Thracian Rhodope  
and Haemus: these are now bleak mountains, but  
they once were mortals who—presumptuous—  
took as their own the names of the highest gods.  
The second corner shows the sorry fate  
of the Pygmaean queen who challenged Juno:  
defeating her, the goddess changed that queen  
into a crane and had her war against  
the very people who had been her subjects.

*Latin (67-94)*

The third displays Antigone, who once  
dared set herself against great Jove's consort;  
Queen Juno changed her shape, made her a bird.  
Though she was daughter of the Trojan king,  
Laomedon, that did not help: the girl  
was forced to wear white feathers and compelled,  
with clattering beak—a stork—to applaud herself.  
The final corner pictures Cinyras  
bereft of all his daughters, who had boasted,  
too recklessly, of their great beauty: Juno  
changed them into her temple's marble steps;  
and clinging to those steps, King Cinyras  
embraces what were once his daughters' bodies,  
and weeps. Minerva, as a sign of peace,  
around the border of her work, now weaves  
a wreath of olive branches, and with that—  
her sacred tree—she finishes her task.

Arachne's scenes displayed Europa fooled  
by the feigned image of a bull: and you  
would think that both the bull and waves were true.  
The girl is shown as she looks back to land  
and calls on her companions, even as,  
in fear of spray, she timidly draws back  
her feet. She also draws Asterie  
gripped tightly by the eagle; she shows Leda,  
who lies beneath the swan's wings. And she adds  
those tales of Jove, who, in a Satyr's guise,  
filled fair Antiope with twin offspring;  
who, as Amphitryon, hoodwinked you, too,  
Alcmena; who, become a shower of gold,  
duped Danae; and in the form of fire  
deceived Aegina, daughter of Asopius;  
and as a shepherd, gulled Mnemosyne;  
and, as a speckled snake, Proserpina.

And, too, she showed you, Neptune, in the guise  
of a grim bull who takes the virgin daughter

*Latin (93-116)*

of Aeolus; and as Enipeus, you  
 beget the Aloids; and as a ram  
 you bluff Bisaltes' daughter. The kind mother  
 of harvests, golden-haired, knew you as stallion;  
 whereas the mother of the winged horse-she  
 whose hair was wreathed with snakes—knew you as bird;  
 and when you took Melantho, you were dolphin.  
 And each of these—the actors and the settings—  
 is rendered to perfection by Arachne.  
 Here's Phoebus, too, dressed like a countryman,  
 and then she shows him decked out in hawk's feathers,  
 then, in a lion's skin and we can see  
 how, in his shepherd's guise, he baited Isse,  
 the daughter of Macareus And here is Bacchus,  
 who fools Erigone with his false grapes;  
 and we see Saturn, in a horse's shape,  
 begetting Chiron. Then, to decorate  
 her web's thin border at the edge, Arachne  
 fills it with flowers interlaced with ivy.

Not even Pallas, even Jealousy,  
 could find a flaw in that girl's artistry;  
 but her success incensed the warrior-goddess.  
 Minerva tore to pieces that bright cloth  
 whose colors showed the crimes the gods had wrought;  
 a boxwood shuttle lay at hand—with that,  
 three and four times she struck Arachne's forehead.  
 That was too much: the poor girl took a noose  
 and rushed—still bold—to tie it round her neck.  
 But when she saw Arachne hanging there,  
 Minerva, taking pity, propped her up  
 and said: "Live then, but, for your perfidy,  
 still hang; and let this punishment pursue  
 all who descend from you: thus, you must fear  
 the future—down to far posterity."  
 That said, before she left, the goddess sprinkled  
 the juices of the herbs of Hecate  
 over Arachne; at that venom's touch,

*Latin [116-44*

her hair and then her eyes and ears fell off, and all her  
 body sank. And at her sides, her slender fingers  
 clung to her as legs. The rest is belly; but from this,  
 Arachne spins out a thread; again she practices

her weaver's art, as once she fashioned webs.

All Lydia is stirred by this; the news  
 runs through the Phrygian cities; all around,  
 this is the sole event that men recount.

Now Niobe, before she wed, had lived  
 close to Mount Sipylus; and she had known  
 Arachne—they were both Maeonians.  
 Yet Niobe refused to learn just what  
 her countrywoman's fate might well have taught:  
 do not compete with gods, and do not boast.  
 Yes, there was much that could incite her pride:  
 her husband's art, the noble lineage  
 that both could boast, their regal wealth and might—  
 all these pleased Niobe, but her delight  
 and pride in her own children fueled far  
 more overweening arrogance in her.  
 One could have said that she was the most blessed  
 of mothers—had she not said so herself.

Now Manto, daughter of Tiresias,  
 went through the streets of Thebes: the prophetess  
 was driven by divine impulse. She said.  
 "Wome<sub>n</sub> of Thebes, come all and offer incense  
 and pious prayers before Latona's shrine,  
 to honor her and her two children: wreath  
 Your hair with laurel. So Latona speaks,  
 'through me." And they obey. In all of Thebes,

*Latm 141-62j*



BUT HYMEN HAD TO LEAVE the isle of Crete.  
Clad in his saffron-colored cloak, he cleaved  
the never-ending air until he reached  
the home of the Cauconians in Thrace;  
for he had heard the voice of Orpheus,  
who was to wed—who pleaded for his presence.  
He came—but came in vain. He did not bless the  
rite with sacred utterance: his face  
displayed no joy; he brought no hope, no grace.  
Even the torch he held kept sputtering:  
eyes teared and smarted from the smoke; no flame,  
however much he shook that brand, would blaze.

The start was sad—and sadder still, the end.  
The bride, just wed, met death; for even as  
she crossed the meadows with her Naiad friends,  
she stepped upon a snake; the viper sank  
its teeth into her ankle.

Orpheus wept  
within the upper world; but when his share  
of long lament was done, the poet dared  
to cross the gate of Taenarus, to seek  
his wife among the Shades consigned to Styx.  
Among the fluttering clouds, the phantom forms  
of those who had been buried, he drew close  
to both Proserpina and Pluto, he  
who rules the dead, the joyless kingdom's king.  
Then Orpheus plucked his lyre as he sang:

"O gods who rule the world beneath the earth,  
the world to which all those of mortal birth  
descend—if I may speak the truth to you, without  
the subterfuge that liars use,  
I've not come here to see dark Tartarus,  
nor have I come to chain the monster-son  
Medusa bore, that horror whose three necks  
bear bristling serpents. This has brought me here:

I seek my wife: she stepped upon a viper,  
 a snake that shot his venom into her  
 young body, robbing her of years of life.  
 I'll not deny that I have tried: I wish  
 that I had had the power to resist.  
 But Love has won; to him I must submit.  
 Within the upper world, he has much fame,  
 but I'm not sure if here that god has gained  
 renown—though I do hope so; if the tale  
 they tell of an abduction long ago  
 is not a lie, why then you, too, do owe  
 your union to the force of Love. And now  
 I pray you, by these fearful sites and by  
 the silences of this immense abyss,  
 reknit the severed threads restore the life—  
 undone too quickly—of Eurydice.  
 For all of us are yours to rule by right;  
 our stay above is brief; when that is done,  
 we all must—sooner, later—speed to one  
 same dwelling place. We all shall take this way:  
 our final home is here; the human race  
 must here submit to your unending sway.  
 She, too, will yet be yours when she has lived  
 in full the course of her allotted years.  
 I ask you only this: lend her to me.  
 But if the Fates deny my wife this gift,  
 then I shall stay here, too, I won't go back;  
 and you can then rejoice—you'll have two deaths."

The bloodless shades shed tears: they heard his plea,  
 the chant the Thracian had accompanied  
 with chords upon his lyre. Tantalus  
 no longer tried to catch the fleeing waves;  
 Ixion's wheel stood still—entranced, amazed;  
 the vultures did not prey on Tityus' liver;  
 the Danaids left their urns; and Sisyphus,  
 you sat upon your stone. It's even said  
 that, moved by Orpheus' song, the Furies wept—

the only tears the Furies ever shed.  
 Nor could Proserpina, nor he himself,  
 the ruler of the lower world, refuse  
 the plea of Orpheus of Rhodope.

They called Eurydice. She was among  
 the recent dead; as she advanced, her steps  
 were faltering—her wound still brought distress.  
 The Thracian poet took her hand: he led  
 his wife away—but heard the gods' command:  
 his eyes must not turn back until he'd passed  
 the valley of Avernus. Just one glance  
 at her, and all he had received would be  
 lost—irretrievably.

Their upward path  
 was dark and steep; the mists they met were thick;  
 the silences, unbroken. But at last,  
 they'd almost reached the upper world, when he,  
 afraid that she might disappear again  
 and longing so to see her, turned to gaze  
 back at his wife. At once she slipped away—  
 and down. His arms stretched out convulsively  
 to clasp and to be clasped in turn, but there  
 was nothing but the unresisting air.  
 And as she died again, Eurydice  
 did not reproach her husband. (How could she  
 have faulted him except to say that he  
 loved her indeed?) One final, faint "Farewell"—  
 so weak it scarcely reached his ears—was all  
 she said. Then, back to the abyss, she fell.

And when that second death had struck his wife,  
 the poet—stunned—was like the man whose fright  
 on seeing Cerberus, three-headed hound  
 enchained by Hercules, was so complete  
 that he was not set free from fear until,  
 his human nature gone, he had become

a body totally transformed—to stone.  
 Or one might liken Orpheus instead  
 to Olenus, who took the blame himself  
 for his Lethaea's arrogance when she—  
 unfortunately—boasted of her beauty:  
 Lethaea, you and he were once two hearts  
 whom love had joined; but now you are two rocks  
 that Ida holds on its well-watered slopes.

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But then—when he had found his speech once more—  
 the poet pleaded, begging Charon for  
 a second chance to reach the farther shore;  
 the boatman chased him off. For seven days,  
 huddled along the banks of Styx, he stayed;  
 there he shunned Ceres' gifts—he had no taste  
 for food; he called on desperation, pain,  
 and tears—with these alone he could sustain  
 himself. But after Orpheus had arraigned  
 the gods of Erebus for cruelty,  
 he left; he sought the peak of Rhodope  
 and Haemus' heights, where north winds never cease.

Three times the ever-wheeling sun had come  
 to Pisces' watery sign. Three years had gone;  
 and Orpheus, in all that time, had shunned  
 the love of women; this, for his misfortune,  
 or for his having pledged his heart to one—  
 and to no other—woman. That did not  
 prevent their wanting him; and many sought  
 the poet—all those women met repulse  
 and grief. Indeed, he was the one who taught  
 the Thracian men this practice: they bestow  
 their love on tender boys, and so enjoy  
 firstfruits, the brief springtime, the flowers of youth.

## CYPARISSUS

There was a hill and, on that hill, a glade,

an ample span of meadow grass, a plain  
 that was endowed with green but had no shade.  
 Yet when the poet, heaven-born, would play  
 on his resounding lyre, shade on shade  
 would seek that glade. Together with the tree  
 of the Chaonians, these came to listen:  
 the tall and leafy oak, the tender linden;  
 the poplar, shape that suited Helios' daughters;  
 the willow, most at home near flowing waters;  
 the virgin laurel, beech, and brittle hazel;  
 the ash, so fit for fashioning spear shafts; the  
 silver-fir with its smooth trunk, the myrtle  
 with its two hues, and the delightful platan;  
 the maple with its shifting colors, and  
 the water-loving lotus, evergreen  
 boxwood, as well as slender tamarisk;  
 and with its deep-blue berries, the viburnum;  
 and bent beneath its acorns' weight, the ilex.  
 You, ivy, with your feet that twist and flex,  
 came, too; and at your side came tendrils rich  
 with clustered grapes, and elm trees draped with vines;  
 the mountain-ash, the pitch-pine, the arbutus  
 red with its fruits, the pliant palm, the prize  
 of victors; and that pine which tucks its boughs  
 up high to form its shaggy crown—the tree  
 dear to the mother of the gods, Cybele,  
 if it be true that Attis, for her sake,  
 shed his own human form, that he might take  
 the stiff trunk of that pine as his new shape.

The cone-shaped cypress joined this crowd of trees:  
 though now a tree, it once had been a boy—  
 the boy beloved by the god who makes  
 the bowstring and the lyre's strings vibrate.

For, sacred to the nymphs who make their home  
 on the Carthaeian plain, a stag once roamed—

a stately stag whose antlers were so broad  
 that they provided ample shade for him.  
 Those antlers gleamed with gold; down to his  
 chest, a collar rich with gems hung from his neck;  
 upon his forehead, dangling from thin thongs,  
 there was a silver boss, one he had worn  
 from birth; against his hollow temples glowed  
 pearl earrings. And that stag forgot his own  
 timidity and, without fear, approached  
 the homes of men; he let his neck be stroked  
 by all—yes, even those he did not know.  
 But, Cyparissus, it was you to whom  
 he was most dear. You, handsomest of all  
 the Ceans, let him out to pastures new  
 and to the waters of the purest springs.  
 Now you weave varied garlands for his horns;  
 or, seated like a horseman on his back—  
 now here, now there—you ride him joyfully  
 with purple reins that guide his tender mouth.

But once, at high noon on a summer day,  
 when, heated by the sun's most torrid rays,  
 the curving claws of the shore-loving Crab  
 were blazing on the grassy ground, the stag  
 lay down to rest, to seek cool woodland shade.  
 And it was then that, accidentally,  
 a javelin's sharp shaft—it had been cast  
 by Cyparissus—pierced the stag; the wound  
 was fierce, the stag was dying: and at that,  
 the boy was set on dying, too. Oh, Phoebus  
 tried words that could console the boy: indeed  
 he urged him to restrain his grief, to keep  
 some sense of measure. But the boy did not  
 relent; he moaned still more; he begged the gods  
 to grant this greatest gift. to let him grieve  
 forever. As his lifeblood drained away  
 with never-ending tears, his limbs began  
 to take a greenish cast; and the soft hair  
 that used to cluster on his snow-white brow

became a bristling crest. The boy was now  
 a rigid tree with frail and spiring crown  
 that gazes on the heavens and the stars.  
 The god, in sadness, groaned. He said: "I'll mourn  
 for you, and you shall mourn for others—and  
 beside the mourners, you shall always stand."

Such was the grove that gathered round the poet.  
 In that assembly of wild beasts and birds,  
 the Thracian singer sat. He tried the chords:  
 he plucked them with his thumb; and when he heard  
 that, although each note had a different sound,  
 it stood in right relation to the rest,  
 he lifted up his voice. This was his chant:

"O Muse, my mother, let my song begin  
 with Jove (he is the king of every thing).  
 I've often sung his power before: I've told  
 the story of the Giants; in solemn mode  
 I chanted of those smashing lightning bolts  
 that on Phlaegrean fields were hurled by Jove.  
 But now my matter needs more tender tones:  
 I sing of boys the gods have loved, and girls  
 incited by unlawful lust and passions,  
 who paid the penalty for their transgressions.

"The king of gods was once afire with love  
 for Phrygian Ganymede and hit upon  
 a guise that, just this once, he thought might be  
 more suitable than being Jove himself:  
 a bird. But of all birds, he thought that one  
 alone was worthiest; the bird with force  
 enough to carry Jove's own thunderbolts.



Without delay Jove beat the air with his  
deceiving wings, snatched up the Trojan boy.  
And even now, despite the wrath of Juno,  
he still fulfills his role: the page of Jove,  
the boy prepares Jove's nectar, fills his cups.

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"And you, too, Hyacinthus, would have been  
set high within the sky by Phoebus, if  
your wretched fate had not forestalled his wish.  
Yet, in your way, you are eternal now:  
whenever spring has banished winter and  
the rainy Fish gives way before the Ram,  
it's then you rise and flower once again  
where earth is green. My father loved you more  
than he loved any other; even Delphi,  
set at the very center of the earth,  
was left without its tutelary god;  
for Phoebus went instead to visit you  
in unwalled Sparta, on Eurotas' banks,  
neglecting both his lyre and his shafts.  
Not heeding who he was—his higher tasks—  
alongside you, the god did not refuse  
to carry nets, to hold the dogs in leash;  
he was your comrade on rough mountain peaks;  
and lingering beside you, he could feed  
his flame of love.

"And now the Titan sun  
was at midpoint—between the night to come  
and one that had already gone. And Phoebus  
and Hyacinthus shed their clothes, anoint  
their bodies; gleaming with smooth olive oil,  
the two are set to see which one can cast  
the discus farther. Phoebus is the first  
to lift and poise the broad and heavy disc,  
then fling it high; it bursts across the sky

Latin (139-79)

and rends the clouds along its path. Its flight  
is long: at last, the hard earth feels its fall,  
its weight—a throw that shows what can be done  
when strength and skill are joined. The Spartan boy  
is reckless: risking all for sport, he runs  
to pick the discus up. But the hard ground  
sends back the heavy bronze; as it rebounds,  
it strikes you in the face, o Hyacinthus!  
You and the god are pale: the god lifts up  
your sagging form; he tries to warm you, tries  
to staunch your cruel wound; and he applies  
herbs that might stay your soul as it takes flight.  
His arts are useless; nothing now can heal  
that wound. As lilies poppies, violets,  
if loosened as they hang from yellow stems  
in a well-watered garden, fade at once  
and, with their withered heads grown heavy, bend;  
they cannot stand erect; instead they must  
gaze at the ground: just so your dying face  
lies slack: too weak for its own weight, your neck  
falls back upon your shoulder. 'Sparta's son,  
you have been cheated,' Phoebus cries; 'you've lost  
the flower of your youth; as I confront  
your wound, I witness my own crime—my guilt  
my grief! It's my right hand that has inscribed  
your end: I am the author of your death.  
And yet, what crime is mine? Can play, can sport  
be blamed? Can having loved be called a fault?  
If I could only pay for what I've done  
by dying for or with you—you are one  
so worthy! But the law of fate denies  
that chance to me. Yet I shall always have  
You, Hyacinthus, in my heart, just as  
your name shall always be upon my lips.  
The lyre my fingers pluck, the songs I chant,  
shall celebrate you; and as a new flower,  
you'll bear, inscribed upon you, my lament.  
And, too, in time to come, the bravest man

Latin [179-207]

shall be identified with you—Ajax'  
own letters, on your petals, shall be stamped.'  
"As he spoke these true words, the blood that had  
been spilled upon the ground and stained the grass  
is blood no more; instead—more brilliant than  
the purple dye of Tyre—a flower sprang;  
though lily-shaped, it was not silver-white;  
this flower was purple. Then, not yet content,  
Phoebus—for it was he who'd brought about  
this wonder that would honor Hyacinthus—  
inscribed upon the petals his lament:  
with his own hand, he wrote these letters—AI,  
AI—signs of sad outcry. And Sparta, too,  
is not ashamed to have as its own son  
a Hyacinthus; they still honor him  
each year, just as their fathers always  
did: the Hyacinthia, their festival,  
begins with an august processional.

"But if you ever chance to ask the city,  
so rich with metals—Amathus—if she  
would lay proud claim to the Propoetides  
as daughters, she'd refuse to claim that brood.  
And she is just as ready to disown  
those other old inhabitants of hers  
whose foreheads were disfigured by two horns—  
from which they also took their name, Cerastes.  
Before their doors, there used to stand an altar  
of Jove, the god of hospitality;  
a stranger—ignorant of what had caused  
the bloodstains on that altar—might have thought  
that was the blood of sacrifices brought  
for Jove—of suckling calves or full-grown sheep  
from Amathian herds. In fact it was  
the blood of guests! Incensed, the generous

Venus was ready to desert her Cyprus,  
to leave her cities and her plains. 'And yet,'  
she said, 'these sites are dear to me, these towns—  
what crime is theirs? What evil have they done?  
This sacrilegious race—they are the ones  
to pay the penalty for profanation:  
exile or death—or else a punishment  
midway between their death or banishment.  
Can that be any penalty except  
a change of form?' But even as she asked  
that question, wondering what shape is best,  
her eyes fell on their horns. These can be left—  
so she reminds herself; and she transforms  
their massive bodies into savage bulls.

"And the obscene Propoetides had dared  
to stir the wrath of Venus: they declared  
that she was not a goddess. And—they say—  
this was the penalty that Venus made  
those girls of Cyprus pay for their outrage:  
they were the first to prostitute their grace,  
to sell their bodies; and when shame was gone  
and they could blush no more, they were transformed  
(the step was brief enough) into hard stones.

"Pygmalion had seen the shameless lives  
of Cyprus' women; and disgusted by  
the many sins to which the female mind  
had been inclined by nature, he resigned  
himself: for years he lived alone, without  
a spouse: he chose no wife to share his couch.

"Meanwhile, Pygmalion began to carve  
in snow-white ivory, with wondrous art,