

# Venus and Adonis

Trick father  
into sector (and Atalanta)  
blame victim

\* Giving  
Tree opening



A power in the air hears the last prayer  
Of the desperate. Myrrha's prayer to be no part  
Of either her life or her death was heard and was  
answered.

Earth  
into  
her →  
grasping  
puts Baby  
in her

The earth gripped both her ankles as she prayed.  
Roots forced from beneath her toenails, they burrowed  
Among deep stones to the bedrock. She swayed,

Living statuary on a tree's foundations.  
In that moment, her bones became grained wood,  
Their marrow pith,

Tree &  
mother  
own

Her blood sap, her arms boughs, her fingers twigs,  
Her skin rough bark. And already  
The gnarling crust has confined her swollen womb.

It swarms over her breasts. It warps upwards  
Reaching for her eyes as she bows  
Eagerly into it, hurrying the burial

Of her face and her hair under thick-webbed bark.  
Now all her feeling has gone into wood, with her  
body.

Yet she weeps,

The warm drops ooze from her rind.  
These tears are still treasured.  
To this day they are known by her name—Myrrh.

Meanwhile the meaty fruit her father implanted  
Has ripened in the bole. Past its term,  
It heaves to rive a way out of its mother.

Father impreg  
daughter?

But Myrrha's cramps are clamped in the heart-wood's  
vice.

Her gagged convulsions cannot leak a murmur.  
She cannot cry to heaven for Lucina.

Nevertheless a mother's agony  
Strained in the creaking tree and her tears drench it.  
For pity, heaven's midwife, Lucina,

Lays her hands on the boughs in their torment  
As she recites the necessary magic.  
The trunk erupts, the bark splits, and there tumbles

Out into the world with a shattering yell  
The baby Adonis. Nymphs of the flowing waters  
Cradle him in grasses. They wash him

With his mother's tears. Bittermost envy  
Could only glorify such a creature.  
A painter's naked Cupid to perfection—

The god's portrait without his arrow quiver  
Or his bow. Here, subtlest of things,  
Too swift for the human eye, time slips past.

And this miraculous baby of his sister,  
Sired by his grandpa, just now born of a bush,  
Barely a boy, in the blink of an eye is a man

] Incestuous

awe of  
Gods

Suddenly more beautiful than ever—  
So beautiful the great Venus herself,  
Hovering over the wonder, feels awe.

Then the boy's mother, pent by Venus  
In that shrub of shame, finds her revenge.  
The goddess falls helplessly for Adonis.

Venus plucking kisses from her Cupid  
Snagged her nipple on an unnoticed arrow  
Sticking from his quiver. She pushed him away—

But was wounded far worse than she feared.  
Pierced by the mortal beauty of Adonis  
She has forgotten Cythera's flowery island,

Forgotten the bright beaches of Paphos,  
Forgotten Cnidos, delicate as its fish,  
Amathus, veined with costly metals. Neglected

Even Olympus. She abstains from heaven  
Besotted by the body of Adonis.  
Wherever he goes, clinging to him she goes.

She who had loved equally the shade  
And her indolence in it, who had laboured  
Only as a lily of the valley,

Now goes bounding over the stark ridges,  
Skirts tucked high like the huntress, or she plunges  
Down through brambly goyles, bawling at hounds,

Hunting the harmless; the hare who sees best  
backwards,

Hinds with painful eyes like ballerinas,  
Tall stags on their dignity. She has nothing

To do with fatal boars. She shuns wolves,  
Their back teeth always aching to crack big bones.  
Bears with a swipe like a dungfork. Lions,

Lank bellies everlastingly empty,  
That lob over high bomas, as if weightless,  
With bullocks in their jaws. "These," she cried,

"O my beloved, are your malefic planets.  
Never hesitate to crush a coward  
But, challenged by the brave, conceal your courage.

moral/  
worldview

"Leave being bold, my love, to the uglier beasts.  
Else you stake my heart in a fool's gamble.  
Let Nature's heavier criminals doze on

"Or you may win your glory at my cost.  
The beauty, the youth, the charms that humbled  
Venus,  
Feel silly and go blank when suddenly a lion

self-reflect  
weakness  
lack of  
natural  
desire for  
longer  
lost in  
love

"Looks their way. They have no influence  
On whatever lifts a boar's bristles,  
Or on the interests or on the affections

"Of any of that gang. The tusk of the boar  
Is the lightning jag that delivers the bolt.  
The ignorant impact of solidified

"Hunger in the arrival of a lion  
Turns everything to dust. I abhor them!"

"But why should you abhor them?"

"There is a lesson  
These coarse brutes can teach us. But first,

This hunters' toil is more than my limbs are used to.  
Look, that kindly poplar has made cool

"A bed of shade in the grass, just for us."  
So Venus pillowed her head on the chest of Adonis.  
Then, to her soft accompaniment of kisses:

"Once the greatest runner was a woman—so swift  
She outran every man.  
It is true. She could and she did.  
But none could say which was more wonderful—  
The swiftness of her feet or her beauty.

"When this woman questioned the oracle  
About her future husband  
The god said: 'Atalanta,  
Stay clear of a husband.  
Marriage is not for you. Nevertheless

Why are  
the people  
so focused  
on future  
fate?

" 'You are fated to marry.  
And therefore fated, sooner or later, to live  
Yourself but other.' The poor girl,  
Pondering this riddle, alarmed,  
Alerted, alone in a thick wood,

"Stayed unmarried.  
The suitors who kept at her stubbornly  
She met  
With a fearful deterrent:  
'You can win me,' she told them,

" 'Only if you can outrun me.  
That is to say, if you will race against me.  
Whoever wins that race—he is my husband.  
Whoever loses it—has lost his life.  
This is the rule for all who dare court me,'

“Truly she had no pity.  
But the very ferocity  
Of this grim condition of hers  
Only lent her beauty headier power—  
Only made her suitors giddier.

“Hippomenes watched the race.  
‘What fool,’ he laughed, ‘would wager life itself  
Simply to win a woman—  
With a foregone conclusion against him?  
This is a scheme to rid the world of idiots.’ b1

“But even as he spoke he saw the face  
Of Atalanta. Then as her dress opened  
And fell to her feet  
He saw her dazzling body suddenly bared.  
A beauty, O Adonis, resembling mine

Is she  
trying to  
entice the  
men to  
their death?

“Or as yours would be if you were a woman.

“Hippomenes’ brain seemed to turn over. His  
arms,  
As if grabbing to save himself as he slipped,  
Were reaching towards her, fingers hooked,  
And he heard his own voice  
Coming like somebody else’s: ‘What am I saying?’

“‘I did not know, I never guessed  
What a trophy  
You run for—’ → break  
And there, as he stammered and stared,  
His own heart was lost.

“Suddenly he was terrified of a winner.  
He prayed that all would fail and be executed.

'But why,' he muttered, 'am I not out among  
them

*Gotta try  
to win*

Taking my chance?

Heaven helps those who give it something to  
help.'

"These words were still whirling in his head  
As her legs blurred past him.

Though her velocity was an arrow  
As from a Turkish bow of horn and sinew  
The shock-wave was her beauty.

"Her running redoubled her beauty.

The ribbon-ties at her ankles  
Were the wing-tips of swallows.  
The ribbon-ties at her knees  
Were the wing-tips of swifts.

*animal  
imagery*

"Her hair blazed above her oiled shoulders.  
And the flush on her slender body  
Was ivory tinted  
By rays that glow  
Through a crimson curtain.

*Stark  
jared  
awesome*

"And while this hero gazed with drying mouth  
It was over.

Atalanta stood adjusting her victor's chaplet  
And her defeated suitors, under the knife,  
Sprawled as they coughed up her bloody  
winnings.

"Hippomenes ignored the draining corpses.  
He stepped forward—his eyes gripping hers.  
'Why do you scry for fame, Atalanta,  
In the entrails  
Of such pathetic weaklings?

“ ‘Why not run against me?  
If I win  
You will not be shamed—only surpassed  
By the son of Megareus,  
Who was sired by Neptune, god of the sea.

“ ‘I am Hippomenes—  
A grandson of the god of the oceans.  
I have not disappointed expectations.  
If my luck fails, by the fame of Hippomenes  
Your fame shall be that much more resplendent.’

“Atalanta was astonished as she felt  
Her heart falter. Her legs began to tremble.  
Her wild rage to conquer seemed to have kneeled  
In a prayer to be conquered.  
She murmured:

limp  
self in  
face of  
God or  
man?

“ ‘Which god, jealous of beautiful youth,  
Plots now to slay this one?  
Putting it into his head to fling away life.  
As I am the judge:  
Atalanta is not worth it.

“ ‘It is not his beauty that makes me afraid  
Though it well might.  
It is his innocence, his boyishness  
Touches me, and hurts me.  
He is hardly a boy. He is a child.

Why does  
innocence  
hurt her?

“ ‘Yet with perfect courage,  
Contemtuuous of death.  
Also fourth in descent, as he claims, from the sea-  
god.  
Also he loves me  
And is ready to die if he cannot have me.



“ Listen, stranger,  
Get as far away from me as you can  
By the shortest route.  
Marriage with me is death.  
Go while you can move.

Reversal  
of image

“Crave you”  
Song.

“ My bridal bed, my virgin bed, is a sump  
Under the executioner’s block.

Go and go quickly.  
No other woman will refuse you.  
The wisest will do all she can to win you.

“ Yet why should I bother myself?  
After so gladly killing so many  
Why should I care now? Die if you must.  
If these poor corpses here cannot deter you,  
If you are so sick of your life—then die.

“ They will say: because he dared to love her  
She killed him. I shall have to hear:  
Her thanks for his fearless love was a shameful  
death.

This will bring me fame—but ill-fame.  
Yet none of it is my fault.

“ You cannot win, Hippomenes,  
Forget me.  
If only your insanity could shrink  
Into your feet as a superhuman swiftness!  
Look at him. His face is like a girl’s.

Truly he  
desire to  
kill him

“ In me there sleeps evil for both of us.  
Do not wake it up. Go quietly away.  
You belong to life. But believe me,  
If Fate had not made my favour lethal  
You alone would be my choice.’

“Atalanta knew nothing about love  
So she failed  
To recognise love’s inebriation  
As it borrowed her tongue to pronounce these  
words.

She was hardly aware of what they meant.

“But her father, and the crowd, demanded the  
race.

And Hippomenes was already praying: ‘O Venus,  
You gave me this great love—now let me keep it.’  
A quirk of air brought his prayer to my hearing.  
Moved, I moved quickly.

“The most precious acre in Cyprus  
Is my temple’s orchard. A tree grows there  
Of solid gold. With leaves of green gold  
On boughs of white gold. Among those leaves  
Hang apples of red gold. I picked three.

“Visible only to Hippomenes  
I taught him the use of these apples.  
Then at a blast from the trumpets  
Both shot from their marks.  
Their feet flickered away and the dust hung.

Why a  
foot race?  
Kid race  
in Hall  
to lead?

“They could have been half-flying over water  
Just marring the shine.  
Or over the silky nape of a field of barley.  
Hippomenes felt the crowd’s roar lifting him on:  
‘Hippomenes! You can win! Hippomenes!’

“And maybe Atalanta  
Was happier than he was to hear that shout  
As she leaned back on her hips, reining back  
The terrible bolt of speed in her dainty body,

And clung to him with her glance even as she left  
him

“Tottering as if to a halt, labouring for air  
That scorched his mouth and torched his lungs,  
With most of the course to go. This was the  
moment

For flinging one of my apples out past her—  
He bounced it in front of her feet and away to  
the left.

Why Gold?  
Why apple?  
& connect?

“Startled to see such a gorgeous trinket  
Simply tossed aside, she could not resist it.  
While she veered to snatch it up  
Hippomenes was ahead, breasting the crest  
Of the crowd’s roar.

“But Atalanta came back in with a vengeance.  
She passed him so lightly he felt to be stumbling.  
Out went the second apple.  
As if this were as easy she swirled and caught it  
Out of a cloud of dust and again came past him.

“Now he could see the flutter of the crowd at the  
finish.

‘O Venus,’ he sobbed, ‘let me have the whole of  
your gift!’

Then with all his might he hurled  
The last apple  
Past and beyond her—into a gulley

“Choked with tumbled rock and thorn. She  
glimpsed it

Vanishing into a waste  
Of obstacles and lost seconds.

With two gold apples heavier at each stride  
And the finish so near, she tried to ignore it.

“But I forced her to follow. And the moment she  
found it

That third apple I made even heavier.

Lugging her three gold prizes far behind

Her race was lost. Atalanta (belonged to) the  
winner.

So their story begins.

Temptation?  
win her  
through  
deception?  
seems like  
a bad  
marriage

“But tell me, Adonis, should he have given me thanks  
And burned costly perfumes in my honour?

Neither thanks nor perfumes arrived. He forgot my  
help.

“Anger overtook me. I was hurt.

I swore I would never again be slighted so.

My revenge would scare mankind for ever.

“Now hear the end of the story. This fine pair  
Worn out with their wanderings, in a deep wood  
Found a temple  
Built long since for Cybele, Mother of the Gods,  
Whose face is a black meteorite.

“Both thought they were tired enough that night  
To sleep on the stone paving. Till I kissed  
The ear of Hippomenes  
With a whisper. As my lips touched him he  
shivered  
Into a fit of lust like epilepsy.

“Under the temple was a cave shrine  
Hollowed in solid bedrock and far older

Than the human race. An unlit crypt.  
It was walled  
With wooden images of the ancient gods.

*Do it hang  
in sacred  
area*

“This was the sanctum doomed Hippomenes  
Now defiled,  
Sating himself on the body of Atalanta.  
The desecrated wooden images  
Averted their carved faces in horror.

“And the tower-crowned Mother of All, Cybele,  
Considered plunging both  
As they copulated  
Into Styx, the tarpit of bubbling hell.  
But that seemed insufficient to her.

*Then Hell...*

“Instead she dropped maned hides  
Over their sweating backs. Hardened and hooked  
Their clutching fingers into talons. Let  
Their panting chest-keels deepen. Let them sweep  
The dust with long tails. Gargoyle-faced,

“And now with speech to match, these godless  
lovers  
Rumble snarls, or cough, or grunt, or roar.  
They have the thorny scrub for a nuptial chamber  
And are lions—their loathsome fangs obedient  
Only to the bridle-bits of Cybele.

*Temptation  
destroys...*

“O dear love,  
These and the others like them, that disdain  
To give your hounds a run but come out looking  
for the hunter,  
For my sake, O dear boy, let them lie.  
Do not ruin our love with your recklessness.”

Her lesson done, the goddess climbed with her swans  
Towards lit clouds. Meanwhile, as Adonis  
Pondered her parable to find a meaning,

His hounds woke a wild boar in a wallow.  
When this thug burst out, his boar-spear's point  
Glanced off the bone into the hump of muscle.

The boar deftly hooked the futile weapon  
Out of the wound and turned on the hunter,  
Overtook the boy's panic scramble,

Bedded its dagger tusks in under his crotch  
Then ploughed him with all its strength as if  
unearthing

A tough tree's roots, till it hurled him aside, emptied.

Venus, afloat on swansdown in the high blue,  
Still far short of Paphos, felt the shock-wave  
Of the death-agony of Adonis.

She banked and diving steeply down through cirrus  
Sighted her darling boy where he sprawled  
Wallowing in a mire of gluey scarlet.

She leapt to the earth, ripping her garment open.  
She clawed her hair and gouged her breasts with her  
nails,  
Pressing her wounds to his wounds as she clasped him

And screaming at the Fates: "You hags shall not  
Have it all your way. O Adonis,  
Your monument shall stand as long as the sun.

"The circling year itself shall be your mourner.  
Your blood shall bloom immortal in a flower.  
Persephone preserved a girl's life

Wow, what?  
Too much  
fine thinking?  
Animal  
destroy-  
ing?

destroy  
mire parts

Live  
forever  
as you!

“And fragrance in pale mint. I shall not do less.”  
Into the broken Adonis she now dripped nectar.  
His blood began to seethe—as bubbles thickly

Bulge out of hot mud. Within the hour  
Where he had lain a flower stood—bright-blooded  
As those beads packed in the hard rind

Quick to  
die, but  
beautiful

Of a pomegranate. This flower's life is brief.  
Its petals cling so weakly, so ready to fall  
Under the first light wind that kisses it,

We call it “windflower.”