

Though with her body she had forfeited
 Her former feelings, still she weeps and down
 The tree the warm drops ooze. Those tears in truth
 Have honour; from the trunk the weeping myrrh
 Keeps on men's lips for aye the name of her.

The child conceived in sin had grown inside
 The wood and now was searching for some way
 To leave its mother and thrust forth. The trunk
 Swelled in the middle with its burdened womb.
 The load was straining, but the pains of birth
 Could find no words, nor voice in travail call
 Lucina. Yet the tree, in labour, stooped
 With groan on groan and wet with falling tears.
 Then, pitying, Lucina stood beside
 The branches in their pain and laid her hands
 Upon them and pronounced the words of birth.
 The tree split open and the Sundered bark
 Yielded its living load; a baby boy
 Squalled, and the Naiads laid him on soft grass
 And bathed him in his mother's flowing tears.
 Envy herself would praise his looks; for like
 The little naked Loves that pictures show
 He lay there, give or take the slender bow.

VENUS AND ADONIS

Time glides in secret and his wings deceive;
 Nothing is swifter than the years. That son,
 Child of his sister and his grandfather,
 So lately bark-enswathed, so lately born,
 Then a most lovely infant, then a youth,
 And now a man more lovely than the boy,
 Was Venus' darling (Venus'!) and avenged
 His mother's passion. Once, when Venus' son
 Was kissing her, his quiver dangling down,
 A jutting arrow, unbeknown, had grazed
 Her breast. She pushed the boy away.
 In fact the wound was deeper than it seemed,
 Though unperceived at first. Enraptured by
 The beauty of a man, she cared no more

For her Cythera's shores nor sought again
 Her sea-girt Paphos nor her Cnidos, famed
 For fish, nor her ore-laden Amathus.
 She shunned heaven too: to heaven she preferred
 Adonis. Him she clung to, he was her
 Constant companion. She who always used
 To idle in the shade and take such pains
 To enhance her beauty, roamed across the hills,
 Through woods and brambly boulders, with her dress
 Knee-high like Dian's, urging on the hounds,
 Chasing the quarry when the quarry's safe—
 Does and low-leaping hares and antlered deer—
 But keeping well away from brigand wolves
 And battling boars and bears well-armed with claws
 And lions soaked in slaughter of the herds.
 She warned Adonis too, if warnings could
 Have been of any use, to fear those beasts.
 "Be brave when backs are turned, but when they're bold,
 Boldness is dangerous. Never be rash,
 My darling, to my risk; never provoke
 Quarry that nature's armed, lest your renown
 Should cost me dear. Not youth, not beauty, nor
 Charms that move Venus' heart can ever move
 Lions or bristly boars or eyes or minds
 Of savage beasts. In his curved tusks a boar
 Wields lightning; tawny lions launch their charge
 In giant anger. Creatures of that kind
 I hate." And when Adonis asked her why,
 'I'll tell", she said, "a tale to astonish you
 Of ancient guilt and magic long ago.
 But my unwonted toil has made me tired
 And, look, a poplar, happily at hand,
 Drops shade for our delight, and greensward gives
 A couch. Here I would wish to rest with you"
 (She rested) "on the ground", and on the grass
 And him she lay, her head upon his breast,
 And mingling kisses with her words began.

ATALANTA

"You may perchance have heard how in the races
 A girl outran the men who ran to win.
 That was no idle tale; she always won.
 Nor could one say her gift of glorious speed
 Was more surpassing than her loveliness.
 An oracle that once she had consulted*
 About a husband had declared 'No husband,
 Fair Atalanta, is for you; refuse
 A husband's kisses; yet you'll not refuse,
 And you, while still you live, yourself shall lose.'
 The fate foretold appalled her, and she lived
 Alone, unwedded in the shady woods,
 And angrily repulsed the pressing throng
 Of suitors with a challenge: 'No man's wife
 Am I', she said, 'unless he wins the race.
 Contend with me in speed. For speed the prize
 Is wife and wedlock; for the slow the price
 Is death: upon that rule the race is run.'
 Her heart was pitiless, yet, such the power
 Of beauty, on that rule rash lovers thronged.

To watch the unequal race Hippomenes
 Sat in his seat and scoffed 'Would any man
 At such dire peril wish to win a wife?'
 And blamed the young men for their love's excess.
 But when he saw her face and, now unrobed,*
 Her body's beauty, beauty such as mine,
 Adonis, or as yours were you a girl,
 He marvelled and, with hands upraised, exclaimed
 'Forgive my censuring words; I had not known
 The peerless prize you seek.' And with his praise
 Love burgeoned and he prayed that none would run
 Faster than she, and fear and envy filled
 His heart. 'But why', he thought, 'do I not try
 Myself my fortune in this rivalry?
 The gods help those who dare.' And, while he mused,
 On wingèd feet the glorious girl flew by.
 And though her speed seemed like an arrow's flight,
 Yet more he marvelled at her glowing grace—

And running gave her grace; the breeze blew back
 The ribbons* from her ankles and her knees
 In fluttering colours; down her ivory back
 Her long hair streamed behind; a rosy flush
 Painted the girlish pallor of her limbs,
 As when a scarlet awning in the sun
 Is drawn above a marble vestibule*
 And dyes, or seems to dye, the coloured shade.
 These things the newcomer Hippomenes
 Marked well; and then the final lap was run
 And Atalanta with the festal wreath
 Of victory was crowned; the losers groaned
 And duly paid the appointed penalty.

But young Hippomenes was undismayed
 By the others' fate and in the midst stood forth
 And fixed his eyes upon the girl, and said
 'Why seek an easy fame defeating sluggards?
 Contend with me. If fortune favours me,
 There'll be no shame to yield the victory.
 My father's Megareus of Onchestus,*
 His grandfather was Neptune; great-grandson
 Of Ocean's king am I, nor does my birth
 Exceed my prowess—or, if I should fail,
 The victor of Hippomenes shall win
 A memorable name, a great renown.'
 And as he spoke King Schoeneus' daughter gazed
 With tender eyes and doubted in her heart
 Whether this time she wished to win or lose.
 'What god', she thought, 'who envies beauty's charms,
 Desires his death and bids him seek a bride
 At hazard of his own dear life? So much
 Is more than I am worth. It's not his beauty
 That touches me (though that could touch me too);
 But he is still a boy; it's not himself
 That moves me but his tender years, his youth.
 Think of his courage, unafraid of death,
 His lineage, fourth from Ocean's mighty lord,
 His love that counts our wedlock worth so much
 That he would die, if fate denied my love.
 Go, stranger, while you may! Blood stains my bed;*

Oh cruel bane were I your bride! But you
 None will refuse; some wiser girl than I
 One happy day will wish to be your bride.—
 But why do I care for you, when other men
 Have died before, so many, for my sake?
 So fend then for yourself! Yes, let him die
 Since by so many deaths he is not warned
 And wearies of his life!—Then shall he perish
 Because he longed to live with me, and pay
 The price of love in death so undeserved?
 My victory will bring more bitterness
 Than I can bear! And yet the fault's not mine!
 Would that your heart might change, or, since your heart
 Is crazed, you might outrun me in the race!
 Oh, how his boy's fair face is like a girl's!
 Oh, poor Hippomenes, that you should ever
 Have looked on me! How you deserved to live!
 Were I not so ill-starred, would fate but yield
 And not deny me marriage, you alone
 I'd choose to be companion of my bed.'
 Artless she was, and when at last love came,
 She burned, but never thought it was love's flame.

And now her father and the townspeople
 Called for the usual race, and Neptune's prince,
 Hippomenes, with anxious voice, invoked
 My help and prayed: 'Come, lovely Cytherea,
 Prosper the deed I dare and with thy grace
 Nourish the flame of love that thou hast lit.'
 A kindly breeze wafted his charming prayer;
 It moved me, I admit, and little time
 Was left to succour him. There is a field
 The people call the close of Tamasus,
 The richest part of all the isle of Cyprus,
 Which long ago was hallowed in my name
 And added as endowment to my shrine.
 A tree stands in the close with leaves of gold
 And golden branches* rustling in the breeze.
 On my way thence it chanced that in my hand
 I held three golden apples I had picked
 And I stood by Hippomenes, unseen

Except by him, and taught* the apples' use.

The trumpets sound the start; both crouching low
Flash from their marks and skim the sandy course
With flying feet; it seemed that they could race
Dry-shod across the surface of the sea*
And over the standing heads of harvest corn.
The shouting crowd cheered on the newcomer:
'Run, run, Hippomenes! Now is your chance!
Now! Faster! Faster! Run with all your speed!
You're going to win!' And hard it was to know
Who liked their words the more, Hippomenes
Or Atalanta. Many a time she slowed
When she might pass and gazed into his eyes,
And with a heavy heart left him behind.
And now he flagged, his breath came fast and dry
And there was far to go; so then he threw
One of the three gold apples from the tree.
She was amazed and, eager to secure
The gleaming fruit, swerved sideways from the track
And seized the golden apple as it rolled.
He passed her and the benches roared applause.
She with a burst of speed repaired her waste
Of time and soon again left him behind.
He threw the second apple and again
She stopped, and followed, and again ran past.
And so the last lap came. 'Be with me now,
Goddess', he prayed, 'who gavest me the gift.'
And then with all the strength of youth he threw
The shining gold far out across the field,
The longer to delay the girl; and she
Seemed undecided, but I made her chase
The rolling apple and increased its weight,
And by its weight alike and loss of speed
I hindered her. And, not to make my tale
More lengthy than the race, she lost the day
And he, victorious, led his prize away.

And I, Adonis, did I not deserve
Especial thanks and incense in my honour?
But he forgot; he gave no thanks and burnt
No incense; then to sudden wrath I turned.

Stung by his scorn and lest I be despised
 In days to come, I set my heart against
 Them both, to warn the world by their example.
 A temple stands hidden in shady woods,
 Which once Echion* to fulfil a vow
 Had raised to the great Mother of the Gods.
 There they had journeyed and were glad to rest;
 And there ill-timed importunate desire,
 Roused by my power, possessed Hippomenes.
 Beside the temple was a dim-lit grotto,
 A gloomy cavern, roofed with natural rock,
 An ancient holy shrine, filled by the priest
 With wooden statues* of the gods of old.
 He entered here and with forbidden sin
 Defiled the sanctuary. The holy statues
 Turned their shocked eyes away and Cybele,
 The tower-crowned Mother, pondered should she plunge
 The guilty pair beneath the waves of Styx.
 Such punishment seemed light.* Therefore their necks,
 So smooth before, she clothed with tawny manes,
 Their fingers curved to claws; their arms were changed
 To legs; their chests swelled with new weight; with tails
 They swept the sandy ground; and in their eyes
 Cruel anger blazed and growls they gave for speech.
 Their marriage-bed is now a woodland lair,
 And feared by men, but by the goddess tamed,
 They champ—two lions—the bits of Cybele.
 And you, my darling, for my sake beware
 Of lions and of every savage beast
 That shows not heels but teeth; avoid them all
 Lest by your daring ruin on us fall.”

Her warning given, Venus made her way,
 Drawn by her silver swans across the sky;
 But his bold heart rebuffed her warning words.
 It chanced his hounds, hot on a well-marked scent,
 Put up a boar, lying hidden in the woods,
 And as it broke away Adonis speared it—
 A slanting hit—and quick with its curved snout
 The savage beast dislodged the bloody point,
 And charged Adonis as he ran in fear

For safety, and sank its tusks deep in his groin
 And stretched him dying on the yellow sand.
 Venus was riding in her dainty chariot,
 Winged by her swans, across the middle air
 Making for Cyprus, when she heard afar
 Adonis' dying groans, and thither turned
 Her snowy birds and, when from heaven on high
 She saw him lifeless, writhing in his blood,
 She rent her garments, tore her lovely hair,
 And bitterly beat her breast, and springing down
 Reproached the Fates: "Even so, not everything
 Shall own your sway. Memorials of my sorrow,*
 Adonis, shall endure; each passing year
 Your death repeated in the hearts of men
 Shall re-enact my grief and my lament.
 But now your blood shall change into a flower:
 Persephone of old was given grace
 To change a woman's form to fragrant mint;*
 And shall I then be grudged the right to change
 My prince?" And with these words she sprinkled nectar,
 Sweet-scented, on his blood, which at the touch
 Swelled up, as on a pond* when showers fall
 Clear bubbles form; and ere an hour had passed
 A blood-red flower arose, like the rich bloom
 Of pomegranates* which in a stubborn rind
 Conceal their seeds; yet is its beauty brief,
 So lightly cling its petals, fall so soon,
 When the winds blow that give the flower its name.'*