

And yielded to his hands, as in the sun  
Wax of Hymettus softens and is shaped  
By practised fingers into many forms,  
And usefulness acquires by being used.  
His heart was torn with wonder and misgiving,  
Delight and terror that it was not true!  
Again and yet again he tried his hopes—  
She was alive! The pulse beat in her veins!  
And then indeed in words that overflowed  
He poured his thanks to Venus, and at last  
His lips pressed real lips, and she, his girl,  
Felt every kiss, and blushed, and shyly raised  
Her eyes to his and saw the world and him.  
The goddess-graced the union she had made,  
And when nine times the crescent moon had filled  
Her silver orb, an infant girl was born,  
Paphos, from whom the island takes its name.

## MYRRA

Her son was Cinyras, who might have been  
Numbered among the fortunate, had he  
Been childless. Terrible my tale will be!  
Away, daughters! Away, parents! Away!  
Or, if my singing charms you, hold this tale  
In disbelief; suppose the deed not done;  
Or, with belief, believe the punishment.  
If nature does allow such crimes at least  
How happy are our countrymen, this land  
Of Thrace, \* this world of ours, to be so far  
From realms that rear such sin. Panchata \* may  
Enjoy her wealth of mace and cinnamon,  
Her oozing incense and her balsam's balm,  
And all her spicy blooms, so long as she  
Grows myrrh as well! That new tree cost too much!  
Cupid himself denies his arrows hurt  
Myrrha and clears his torch of that offence.  
One of the three dread Sisters \* blasted her  
With viper's venom and firebrands of Hell.  
To hate one's father is a crime; this love

A greater crime than hate.

From everywhere

The eager suitors came; the golden youth  
Of all the Orient vied to win her hand.  
Choose, Myrrha, one among that company  
So long as one among them shall not be!  
In truth she fought the love she felt was foul.  
"What are these thoughts?" she asked herself; "My aim,  
What is it? May the gods, may duty's bond,  
The sacred rights of parents, stop this crime,  
If it is crime. Yet surely duty's bond  
They say does not condemn such love as this.  
Why, other creatures couple as they choose  
Regardless. If a heifer's mounted by  
Her father, that's no shame; a horse becomes  
His daughter's husband; goats will mate with kids  
They've sired themselves; why, even birds conceive  
From seed that fathered them. How blest are they  
That have such licence! Human nicety  
Makes spiteful laws. What nature will allow,  
Their jealous code forbids. Yet there exist \*  
Peoples, it's said, where sons will marry mothers  
And daughters fathers, and their doubled love  
Increases duty's bond. But I, poor me,  
Was not so lucky—I was not born there.  
The chance of birthplace injures me.—Oh, why  
Hark back to things like that? Away, away,  
Forbidden hopes! He's worthy of my love,  
Yes, but as father.—Well then, were I not  
Great Cinyras's daughter, I could lie  
With Cinyras. But now because he's mine,  
He isn't mine! Propinquity itself  
Does damage; I'd do better not so near.  
I'd wish to go away and leave afar  
My native borders, could I flee from crime.  
But evil fires hold my heart here, to keep  
Beloved Cinyras before my eyes,  
To touch him, speak with him, and kiss him too,  
If nothing more's allowed. What more? Can you  
Set more before your eyes, you wicked girl?

Think of the tangled knot of ties and names!  
 Will you become your father's concubine,  
 Your mother's rival? Shall men label you  
 Your brother's mother, sister of your son?  
 Surely the snake-haired Sisters frighten you,  
 Whom guilty souls see aiming at their eyes  
 Their fiendish flaming torches. Come, while yet  
 No sin's committed, banish thoughts of sin,  
 Nor ever foul great nature's covenant  
 By that forbidden act! Wish as you may,  
 The facts forbid. He's righteous! Yes, he'll not  
 Forget the claim of duty. Oh, to see  
 In him the same mad fire that flames in me!"

Now Cinyrās, confronted with a crowd  
 Of worthy suitors, doubting what to do,  
 Asked Myrrha herself, enquiring name by name  
 Whom she would have for husband. She at first  
 Was silent, gazing in her father's face, her thoughts  
 In turmoil, hot tears welling in her eyes.  
 And Cinyrās, who thought her tears were but  
 A girl's misgiving, told her not to cry,  
 And dried her cheeks and kissed her on the lips.  
 His kisses! Joy too thrilling! Then he asked  
 What kind of husband she would like, and she  
 Said "One like you". He did not understand  
 And praised her: "May you never lose your love  
 So dutiful!" At "dutiful" the girl  
 Lowered her eyes, too conscious of her guilt.  
 Midnight had come and sleep relaxed the limbs  
 And cares of men, but Myrrha lay awake,  
 A prey to ungoverned passion, and resumed  
 Her frenzied longings, sometimes in despair,  
 Sometimes resolved to try, at once ashamed  
 And yearning, vainly groping for some plan.  
 And as a huge tree, wounded by an axe,  
 Only the last stroke left, will wait in doubt  
 Which way to fall and every side's in fear,  
 So Myrrha's mind, weakened by wound on wound,  
 Wavered uncertainly this way and that,  
 Nodding on either side and found no end,

No respite for her love except in death.  
 Death it shall be! She rises up resolved  
 To hang herself. Tying her girdle to  
 A beam, "Goodbye, dear Cinyrās!" she moans,  
 "Goodbye, and understand why I must die",  
 And fits the noose around her death-pale neck.

They say some sound, some whisper of her words  
 Came to her nurse's ears, her faithful nurse,\*  
 Guarding her Myrrha's room. The old nurse rose,  
 Opened the door and saw the means of death.  
 She shrieked and beat her breast and tore her robe,  
 And in the same short moment, seizing the noose,  
 Snatched it from Myrrha's neck. Then she had time  
 At last for tears, and took her in her arms  
 And asked the reason for the rope. The girl  
 Was silent, dumb, her gaze fixed on the ground,  
 Distraught that her attempt had been found out  
 And death too late. The old nurse pressed her hard,  
 Baring her white locks and her empty breasts,  
 And begged her by her cradle, by the feeds  
 Of her first days, to trust her with the cause  
 Of her distress. She groaned and turned away.  
 Resolved to find the truth, the old nurse pledged  
 Not only secrecy. "Tell me", she said,  
 "And let me help you. My old age is not  
 Inactive. If your mind's unhinged, my herbs  
 And spells can cure it; if you've been bewitched,  
 You shall be purified with magic rites;  
 If it's gods' anger, angry gods may be  
 Appeased by sacrifice. What else, I wonder?  
 Your fortunes and your home are safe, I'm sure,  
 And all goes as it should. Your mother's well,  
 Your father too." At "father" Myrrha sighed,  
 Sighed from the bottom of her heart. But still  
 The nurse imagined nothing villainous,  
 But sensed some love affair, and persevered  
 And begged the girl, whatever it might be,  
 To tell it her; and raised her as she wept  
 To her old bosom and, enfolding her  
 Thus in her feeble arms, "I know", she said,

"You are in love. Don't be afraid! In this  
 My diligence may serve you very well.  
 Your father shall know nothing." With a bound  
 Myrrha, beside herself, sprang up and sank  
 Face-down among the pillows. "Go away!"  
 She pleaded, "Spare my misery and shame!"  
 And, as the nurse pressed, "Go!" she screamed, "or stop  
 Asking what tortures me. It is a crime  
 You work so hard to know." Shocked and agast,  
 The good old woman stretched her trembling hands,  
 Shaking with age and dread, and falling on  
 Her knees before her darling's feet she tried  
 Now winning words, now fear to make her share  
 Her secret, threatening to report the noose  
 And death-attempt, and promising her best  
 Service if she'll confide her love to her.  
 Then Myrrha raised her head; her gushing tears  
 Rained down her nurse's bosom. Many a time  
 She attempted to confess and many a time  
 Bit her words back, and held her dress to hide  
 Her face of shame. Then "Mother", came the words,  
 "How happy in your husband!" Nothing more  
 Except a groan. An icy shudder ran  
 Through the old woman's frame (she understood)  
 And every hair upon her snowy head  
 Stood stiff on end; and many many words  
 She poured to expel that passion if she could,  
 So terrible. The girl well knew the truth  
 Of what she warned; but still her purpose held  
 To die unless she had her heart's desire.  
 "Live then", the nurse replied, "and have your—" not  
 Daring to utter "father", she stopped short  
 In silence, then she called the gods of heaven  
 To ratify the promise she had given.  
 The time of Ceres' festival had come,  
 In duty kept by mothers every year,  
 When, robed in white, they bring their firstfruit gifts  
 Of wheat in garlands, and for nine nights count  
 Love and the touch of men forbidden things.  
 The king's wife Cenchreis was there among

The worshippers and joined the sacred rites.  
 So while the king's bed lacked a lawful wife,  
 The old bad-busy nurse found Cinyras  
 Well-wined and gave him tidings of a girl  
 Who loved him truly (naming a false name),  
 And when he asked her age, "The same", she said,  
 "As Myrrha's". So he bade her bring the girl,  
 And she, returning home, "My darling child,  
 Rejoice!" she said, "we've won." The ill-starred girl  
 Felt no whole-hearted joy. Forebodings filled  
 Her soul with sadness; even so joy too  
 Was there—her warring thoughts were so confused.  
 It was the hour when all the world is silent,  
 And high between the Bears the Wagoner\*  
 With slanting shaft had turned his starry Wain.  
 Now to her deed she went. The golden moon  
 Fled from the sky; \* the stars lay hid behind  
 A canopy of cloud; night's fires were lost.  
 (The first to hide his face was Icarus,  
 And with him dutiful Erigone,  
 Who loved her father and was raised to heaven.)  
 Three times a boding stumble warned her back,  
 Three times a screech-owl, bird of doom, declared  
 The omen with its deadly threat.  
 Yet on she went, the darkness of the night  
 Dwindling her shame. Her left hand held her nurse,  
 Her right groped the blind passage. Now she's reached  
 The room, now found the door and opened it,  
 And now she's led inside. Her shaking knees  
 Give way, blood fails her cheeks, and as she goes  
 Her senses reel. The nearer to her crime,  
 The more her horror. Would she'd never dared!  
 Would she could steal away unrecognized!  
 As she hung back, the old nurse took her hand  
 And led her to the high-raised couch and said  
 "She's yours, \* your Majesty. Take her", and joined  
 The pair in doom. In that incestuous bed  
 The father took his flesh and blood, and calmed  
 Her girlish fears and cheered her baseness.  
 Maybe, to suit her age, he called her "daughter"

And she him "father"—names to seal the crime.  
 Filled with her father Myrrha left the room,  
 His wicked seed within her tragic womb,  
 The crime conceived. The next night saw the deed  
 Doubled, and that was not the end. At last,  
 After so many times, eager to know  
 Who was the girl who loved him, Cinyras  
 Brought in a lamp\* and saw his crime and her,  
 His daughter. Dumb in agony, he drew  
 His flashing sword that hung there. Myrrha fled.  
 The darkness and the night's blind benison  
 Saved her from death. Across the countryside  
 She wandered till she left the palm-fringed lands  
 Of Araby and rich Panchaia's fields.  
 Nine times the crescent of the moon returned  
 And still she roamed, and then she found at last  
 Rest for her weariness on Saba's\* soil:  
 She scarce could bear the burden of her womb.  
 And then, not knowing what to wish, afraid  
 Of death and tired of life, she framed these words  
 Of prayer: "If Powers of heaven are open to  
 The cries of penitents, I've well deserved—  
 I'll not refuse—the pain of punishment,  
 But lest I outrage, if I'm left alive,  
 The living, or, if I shall die, the dead,  
 Expel me from both realms; some nature give  
 That's different; let me neither die nor live!"\*  
 Some Power is open to a penitent;  
 For sure her final prayer found gods to hear.\*  
 For, as she spoke, around her legs the earth  
 Crept up: roots thrusting from her toes  
 Spread sideways, firm foundations of a trunk;  
 Her bones gained strength; though marrow still remained,  
 Blood became sap, her fingers twigs, her arms  
 Branches, her skin was hardened into bark.  
 And now the growing tree had tightly swathed  
 Her swelling womb, had overlapped her breast,  
 Ready to wrap her neck. She would not wait,  
 But sinking down to meet the climbing wood,  
 Buried her face and forehead in the bark.

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 baeks 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 winged feet the glorious girl flew by.  
 And though her speed seemed like an arrow's flight,  
 Yet more he marvelled at her glowing grace—