BOOKS BY ALLEN MANDELBAUM

POETRY

Journeyman, 1967
Leaves of Absence, 1976
Chelmaxioms: The Maxims, Axioms, Maxioms of Chelm, 1978
A Lied of Letterpress, 1980
The Savantasse of Montparnasse, 1988

VERSE TRANSLATIONS/Editions

Life of a Man by Giuseppe Ungaretti, 1958
Selected Writings of Salvatore Quasimodo, 1960
The Aeneid of Virgil, 1972 (National Book Award, 1973), 1981
Selected Poems of Giuseppe Ungaretti, 1975
Inferno of Dante, 1980
Purgatorio of Dante, 1982
Paradiso of Dante, 1984
Ovid in Sicily, 1986
Ungaretti and Palinurus, 1989
The Odyssey of Homer, 1990

The METAMORPHOSES of OVID

A NEW VERSE TRANSLATION BY
Allen Mandelbaum

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BOOK X

Orpheus & Eurydice · Cyprissus ·

Orpheus' Prologue · Ganymede · Hyacinthus · The Cerastes ·

The Propoetides · Pygmalion · Myrrha & Cinyras · The Birth of Adonis ·

Venus & Adonis · Atalanta & Hippomenes ·

The Fate of Adonis
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 Danaiads 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 Avermus. 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.

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.

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 Chonians, 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 Carthaean 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 Ceanst, 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 Phaegrean 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 asire 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.

"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 Euritas' 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 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..."
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—Al,
Al—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, Ceraestes.
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,
a female figure more exquisite than
a woman who was born could ever match. 
That done, he falls in love with his own work.
The image seems, in truth, to be a girl;
one could have thought she was alive and keen
to stir, to move her limbs, had she not been
too timid: with his art, he’s hidden art.
He is enchanted and, within his heart,
the likeness of a body now ignites
a flame. He often lifts his hand to try
his work, to see if it indeed is flesh
or ivory; he still will not admit
it is but ivory. He kisses it:
it seems to him that, in return, he’s kissed.
He speaks to it, embraces it; at each
caress, the image seems to yield beneath
his fingers: and he is afraid he’ll leave
some sign, some bruise. And now he murmurs words
of love, and now he offers gifts that girls
find pleasing: shells, smooth pebbles, little birds,
and many-colored flowers, painted balls,
and amber tears that the Heliades
let drop from trees. He—after draping it
with robes—adorns its fingers with fine gems,
its neck with a long necklace; light beads hang
down from its ears, and ribbons grace its breast.
All this is fair enough, but it’s not less
appealing in its nakedness. He rests
the statue on the covers of his bed,
on fabric dyed with hues of Sidon’s shells;
he calls that form the maid that shares his couch
and sets its head on cushions—downy, soft—
delicately, as if it could respond.

"The day of Venus’ festival had come—
the day when, from all Cyprus, people thronged;
and now—their curving horns are sheathed with gold—
the heifers fall beneath the fatal blows

that strike their snow-white necks; the incense smokes.
Pygmalion, having paid the honors owed
to Venus, stopped before the altar: there
the sculptor offered—timidly—this prayer:
'O gods, if you indeed can grant all things,
than let me have the wife I want'—and here
he did not dare to say 'my ivory girl'
but said instead, 'one like my ivory girl.'
And golden Venus (she indeed was there
at her own feast-day) understood his prayer:
three times the flame upon her altar flared
more brightly, darting high into the air—
an omen of the goddess’ kindly care.
At once, Pygmalion, at home again,
seeks out the image of the girl; he bends
over his couch; he kisses her. And when
it seems her lips are warm, he leans again
to kiss her; and he reaches with his hands
to touch her breasts. The ivory had lost
its hardness; now his fingers probe; grown soft,
the statue yields beneath the sculptor’s touch,
just as Hymetian wax beneath the sun
 grows soft and, molded by the thumb, takes on
so many varied shapes—in fact, becomes
morepliant as one plies it. Stupefied,
delighted yet in doubt, afraid that he
may be deceived, the lover tests his dream:
it is a body! Now the veins—beneath
his anxious fingers—pulse. Pygmalion
pours out rich thanks to Venus; finally,
his lips press lips that are not forgeries.
The young girl feels these kisses; blushing, she
lifts up her timid eyes; she seeks the light;
and even as she sees the sky, she sees
her lover. Venus graces with her presence
the wedding she has brought about. And when
the moon shows not as crescent but as orb
for the ninth time, Pygmalion’s wife gives birth
to Paphos—and in honor of that child, 
Cyprus has since been called the Paphian isle.

“And Paphos’ son was Cinyras, a man 
who, if he’d not had children, might have found 
some happiness. The tale I now would sing 
is dread indeed: o daughters, fathers, leave; 
or if your minds delight in listening, 
do not put trust in me, do not believe 
the truth that I will tell; or if you must 
believe it, then believe the penalty 
that punishes such acts. In any case, 
if nature can permit so foul a sin 
to see the light, I do congratulate 
this region of the world, my Thracian race; 
I’m grateful that we are so far away 
from lands where such obscenities take place.

“Panchaea’s land is rich in balsam and 
in cinnamon and unguents; and its trees 
drip incense, and its soil has many flowers. 
What need had it for myrrh? Did it deserve 
so sad a plant? O Myrrha, Cupid had 
no part in your undoing—for he says 
his arrow did not strike you; he declares 
his torches innocent. The firebrand 
and venom-swollen snakes were brought from Styx 
by one of the three Sisters: she did this 
to crush you. Yes, to hate a father is 
a crime, but love like yours is worse than hate.

“Young lords from every land, the noblest men 
from all the Orient, have sought your hand; 
among all these, choose one as your dear husband. 
But, Myrrha, there is one who can’t belong 
to those from whom you choose.

“And she, in truth, 
knows that; she strives; she tries; she would subdue 
her obscene love: ‘Where has my mind led me? 
What am I plotting? Gods, I do beseech, 
and, too, I call upon the piety 
I owe my parents: check my sacrilege, 
prevent my sinning—if it is a sin. 
Parental piety does not exclude 
such love: the other animals pursue 
delight and mate without such niceties. 
There’s nothing execrable when a heifer 
is mounted by her father; stallions, too, 
mate with their daughters; and a goat can choose 
to couple with his child; the female bird 
conceives from that same seed which fathered her. 
Blessed are those who have that privilege. 
It’s human scruples that have stifled us 
with jealous edicts; law is envious—
what nature would permit, the law forbids. 
And yet they say that there are tribes in which 
the mother mates with her own son, the daughter 
with her own father, and the loving bonds, 
so reinforced, make families more fond. 
But I—to my misfortune—was not born 
among those tribes; instead I am—forlorn—
denied the very man for whom I long. 
But why do I keep coming back again, 
again, to this? I must dismiss such thoughts: 
blot out my lust. Yes, Cinyras deserves 
much love—but as a father. Were I not 
his daughter, I could lie with him; but since 
I’m his, he can’t be mine; and that close link 
dictates my loss. If I were but a stranger, 
I would have had some chance. But now I want 
to leave my native land: nothing but flight 
can save me from so foul a flaw. And yet 
I stay: this evil ardor holds me here, 
that I may gaze at Cinyras, and touch
and speak to him, and give him kisses if I cannot hope for more. Would you transgress beyond that? Can you let such sacrilege incite you? Do you know what holy ties and names would be confronted by your crimes? Would you be your own mother's rival and your father's mistress? Would you want to be a sister to your son? Your brother's mother? And those three Sisters, don't they make you fear? Their hair is wreathed with serpents, and they bear barbaric brands when they appear before the eyes and faces of unholy souls. Come now, your body's still unstained: do not debauch your soul with lust, defile the code of nature with a lawless mating. Though you will it, nature will not have it so; for Cinyras is pious in his ways, a man of virtue. Would that he were prey to my same frenzy, to that passion's sway!

"These were her words. Now Cinyras, confused, does not know what to do: the suitors crowd—so many worthy men. He calls upon his daughter to select the one she wants, and he lists all their names. At first, the girl is silent: staring at him, she's in doubt; and warm tears veil her eyes. Her father thinks these tears are simply signs of modesty, forbids her weeping, dries her cheeks; and then he kisses her. She takes too much delight in this; and when he asks what kind of man she'll have her husband be, she answers: 'One like you.' Not understanding what is hid beneath her words, he praises her for this: 'And may you always be so filial.' When she hears him say 'filial,' the girl lowers her eyes: she knows she's criminal.
what grief had brought her Myrrha to this pass?
But Myrrha turns aside those pleas; she groans.
The nurse is set on finding out, and so
she promises not only to hold close
the secret but to help her: 'I am old,
but I'm not useless. If it is a stroke
of madness that afflicts you, my dear girl,
I know a woman who has charms and herbs
to heal you; and if anyone has cast
an evil spell upon you, magic rites
can purify you; and to cure your plight,
you can bring offerings, a sacrifice
unto the gods, and so appease their wrath
if they, in anger, led you to this pass.
I've thought of all that could have brought distress.
This house can only bring you happiness:
yes, all things here go well; your mother and
your father are alive and prosperous.'
As soon as she has heard those words, 'your father,'
the girl sighs deeply; but the nurse—although
she has begun to sense that Myrrha's soul
is sick with love—does not as yet suspect
a passion so profane. And stubbornly,
she probes: she wants to hear in full the cause
of Myrrha's pain—whatever it might be.
She hugs the tearful girl to her old breast
and, holding Myrrha in her frail arms, says:
'I know, I know: you are in love. But set
your fears aside; you'll find that I can help;
and I shall keep your secret; Cinyras
won't hear a word of this. But, come, confess.'
The frenzied girl breaks loose and, on her bed,
collapses, helpless; as she sinks her head
into the cushions, Myrrha cries: 'Don't seek
the source of this! Stop probing, I beseech!
The thing you want to find is my foul crime!'
without his lawful wife, she tells the king that a young girl is now in love with him; but she does not reveal the girl’s true name—the girl whose beauty she is quick to praise. And when he wants to know the young girl’s age, she says, ‘the same as Myrrha’s.’ When he tells the nurse to fetch that girl, she runs to find her Myrrha and, ‘My dear, we’ve won,’ she cries; ‘you can rejoice!’ The wretched girl is stirred, and yet her joy is not complete; a sad foreboding grips her heart, but she is glad: the virgin’s mind is torn by such discord.

“The hour when all is silent now is here. And, seen between the stars of the two Bears, Boötes, veering downward with his wain, inclines his guide-pole. Myrrha makes her way to her misdeed. The golden moon now flees the sky; black clouds conceal the stars; the night has lost its flaring lights. The first to hide their faces at the shameless sight were you, o Icarus, and dear Erigone, your daughter, she whose holy love for you won her a starry place—her sacred due. Three times young Myrrha stumbles on her path, an omen telling her she should turn back; three times the screech-owl, with his eerie chant, warns her. But still the longing daughter moves ahead; her shame is muted by the black of night. Her left hand grips her nurse hard fast, and with her right she gropes and probes. At last she’s at the threshold, opening the door; and now she is inside the room. Her knees are trembling; and as blood and color flee, her face is pale; her courage leaves; as she draws closer to her crime, her fears increase; the girl repents of her audacity: she would turn back if she could go unseen.

As Myrrha hesitates, her old nurse takes her hand; she draws her toward the high bed’s side—consigns her to the king and says: ‘Take her, o Cinyras; she’s yours.’ And she unites those two in dark damnation. Cinyras obscenely welcomes to his bed the flesh of his own flesh; he helps her to defeat her virgin’s shame; he sets her fears at ease. Perhaps because she is so young, the king calls timid Myrrha ‘daughter,’ even as she calls him ‘father’; so do they complete their sacrilege; they name their guilt in speech.

“Filled with her father, Myrrha leaves that room; she bears his impious seed within her womb. And on the second night, again they lie together; so it went, time after time, until the father, keen to recognize the girl he’d held so often, carried in a lamp—and saw his daughter and his sin. Struck dumb by grief, he pulls his gleaming sword out of its sheath, which hung along the wall.

“And Myrrha fled. The night was kind; the shades and darkness favored her; the girl escaped her death; she crossed the open fields; she left palm-rich Arabia and Panchaea’s lands. Nine times the moon had shown its crescent horns, and still she wandered on. At last she stayed her weary steps in the Sabaeans’ land. Her womb was heavy now—so hard to carry. Not knowing what to hope for—torn between her fear of death and the fatigue of living—she gathered up her wishes and beseeched: ‘Oh, if there is some god to hear the plea of one who knows that she is guilty, I accept the death that I deserve. But lest I, in my life, profane the living and,
in death, profane the dead, do banish me from both these realms; transform me, and deny both life and death to me."

"And some god heard the girl confess her guilt: her final plea was answered. As she spoke, the earth enclosed her legs; roots slanted outward from her toes; supported by those roots, a tall trunk rose. Her bones became tough wood (although her marrow remained unchanged); her blood was turned to sap; her arms became long boughs; her fingers, twigs; her skin was now dark bark. And as it grew, the tree had soon enveloped her full womb; then it submerged her breasts and was about to wrap itself around her neck; but she—impatient—met the rising bark: she sank down, down, until her face was also bark. Her flesh had lost the senses it once had, but she still wept—and, trickling down the tree, tears fell. But even tears can gain long fame: myrrh, dripping from that trunk, preserves the name of Myrrha, mistress of that tree; and she will be remembered through the centuries.

"But when the misbegotten child had grown inside the wood, it wanted to come forth to leave its mother. Halfway up the trunk, the pregnant tree was swollen; all the bark was taut with that full burden. But the pain and pangs could not find words; though this is birth, there is no speech that can beseech Lucina. And yet the tree trunk bends and moans in labor; the bark is wet with fallen tears. Lucina takes pity: standing near the groaning boughs she lays her hands upon them, even as

she speaks that spell which shepherds safe childbirth. At that, the tree trunk cracked, the bark was torn; the tree delivered what had weighed it down; a living thing, a wailing boy was born: Adonis. And the Naiads set him on the tender meadow and anointed him with myrrh, his mother's tears. And even Envy would praise his beauty, for indeed his body is like the naked Cupid artists paint. And to remove the only difference, just add a quiver to Adonis or remove the quiver from the Cupid's form.

"The flight of time eludes our eyes, it glides unseen; no thing is swifter than the years. Yes, he who is the son of his own sister and his grandfather, was but recently enclosed within a tree. But recently a newborn, then a handsome baby boy, Adonis has become a youth, a man; his beauty now surpasses what he was, inflaming even Venus' love, and thus avenging that dread fire—incestuous—which Venus made his mother, Myrrha, suffer. And this is how that vengeance came about.

"One day, as Cupid, son of Venus, kissed his mother, unaware, he scratched her breast: an arrow jutting from his quiver chanced to graze her. Though the goddess felt the prick and pushed her son aside, the wound was far more deep than it had seemed to her at first.

"And Venus now is taken by the mortal Adonis' beauty: she no longer cares for her Cythera's shores; she cannot spare
to such hard labors—let us profit by
the poplar, here at hand; its shade invites,
and here, along the grass, we can recline.
I want to rest beside you. She stretched out
along the ground and held him close—for he
had stretched out, too. And pillowing her head
upon his chest, the goddess—even as
she mingled kisses with her words—began:

"You may have heard of Atalanta: one
who, when she ran, would beat the fastest men.
That was no idle rumor, for she won
in truth. And, too, you would have found it hard
to say if she was worthier of praise
for her amazing speed or splendid grace.

"Now she had gone to ask the oracle
about a husband. "No, you have no need
of any husband"—so the god replied—
"you must shun any marriage. This advice
will not be taken; though you stay alive,
you will have lost yourself." Then, terrified
by what the god had said, she lived unwed
within the shadowed forests; to hold off
the crowd of her insistent suitors, she
set harsh conditions for her matrimony:
"Whoever hopes to have me," so she said,
"must first defeat me in a footrace; bed
and wife are what await the man who wins;
for all of those who are too slow, it's death
they'll get. These are the terms of this contest."
Yes, she showed little pity; but her beauty
was so entrancing that, despite the terms
that Atalanta set, a reckless crowd
of suitors came to race that fateful course.
"Of those who took their seats to watch the race, one was Hippomenes. He had exclaimed: "Can anyone be fool enough to risk his life to gain a wife?" So he condemned those young fanatics' love. But when she sheds her clothes and shows her splendid form (much like my own, or what your beauty, too, would be were you a woman), then Hippomenes, astonished, lifts his hands and cries: "Forgive me, you whom I just rebuked! I did not know the value of the prize you wanted so." And even as he praises her, love grows: his hope, that none would outrace Atalanta; his fear, that some young suitor now may win—and this spurs jealousy in him. "But why don't I risk, too? Why not compete?" he cries; "the god helps those who dare." Hippomenes is pondering this course, when she flies by as if her feet were wings. She seems to speed as swiftly as a Scythian arrow, but the young Aonian is even more astonished by the splendor of her form—a grace that is enhanced as she competes. She wears gold sandals on her rapid feet; her hair is fluttering over her white shoulders as, at her knees, the ribbons with white borders are fluttering; and all her young, fair body is flushed with rose, just as a purple awning within a marble hall will lend white walls a darker hint, a veil, a shadowed tint. The stranger notices all this; and now they cross the finish line; and she has won; a victor, she receives the festal crown of garlands. The defeated suitors go with heavy groans, to pay the deaths they owe.

"And yet Hippomenes is not dismayed and not delayed by their sad fate. He makes his way to her; eyes fixed upon her face; "Why seek such easy glory, why outtrace such sluggish men?" he says. "Contend with me, for then, if fortune gives me victory, your losing to so grand an enemy would not bring shame to you. For I can claim Megareus of Onchestus as my father, and he had Neptune as grandfather: thus, I am the great-grandson of one who rules the waters; and my worth does not belie my lineage. And if I meet defeat, for having outraced me, Hippomenes, you'll gain unending fame." And as he speaks, the eyes of Atalanta take him in most tenderly. Oh, does she want to win or does the virgin long to lose to him?

"So Atalanta wonders, inwardly: "Is there some god who, wishing to destroy fair youths, has willed the ruin of this boy and prods him now to seek me out as wife and risk his own dear life? Were I to judge, I'd hardly say that I was worth that much. It's not his self that stirs me—it's his years: he's young—and yet he's bold, a fearless soul! He's young, yet he can claim that he is fourth within the line of sons descended from the monarch of the seas! And he loves me and wants so much to marry me that if an evil fate should foil him, he will live no more! No, stranger, leave while you still can; forget this savage marriage; wedding me means sure fatality. No woman would refuse to marry you; you'll surely find a wiser girl to welcome you. But why must I, who've sent so many to their deaths, feel such distress for you? He can take care of his own self. Then let him perish, too,
since, after all, the death of those who wooed
was not enough to warn him off; he must
be weary of this life. But that would mean
he died because he wished to live with me;
is that a just, a seemly penalty
to pay for having loved? My victory—
if I should win—is not a thing to envy.
Yet that is not my fault. Can’t you renounce?
But if you’re mad enough to try, I would
that you might be more swift than me. Yes, yes,
his gaze, his face have charm and tenderness.
Ah, poor Hippomenes, I would that you
had not set eyes on me. You were so worthy
of life. If I were just more fortunate,
if wretched fate had not forbidden me
to marry, you would be the only one
with whom I’d ever want to share my couch.”
Such were her troubled words; a neophyte
whom Cupid now has touched for the first time,
indeed she loves—but knows not that she does.

‘But now the people and her father—all
call for another trial—as usual.
Hippomenes, a son of Neptune’s race,
prays urgently to me: “O Venus, may
I count upon your favor as I dare
to face this test; and may you treat with care
the love that she has stirred in me.” His plea
was gentle, and it was a gentle breeze
that bore that prayer to me. And I confess,
it moved me—but so little time was left.

‘There is a field the Cypriots have called
the field of Tamasus; within that isle
there is no place more fair. In ancient times
that field was set aside as sacred site:
a holy place they added to my shrines.
Within that field there grows a tree with leaves
of gold; its crackling branches also gleam
with tawny gold. And when his gentle plea
reached me, I was, by chance, returning from
that sacred site—my hands were carrying
three golden apples gathered from that tree.
Invisible to all but him, I drew
close to Hippomenes; I taught him how
to use the apples. Blaring trumpets now
announce the race’s start: and from their crouch,
those two flash out; they skim the sandy course
with flying feet. Indeed, one might have thought
that she and he could even graze the sea
yet leave their feet still dry; or speed across
a field of standing rain and leave the stalks
untouched. Applause and shouts are loud; the crowd
cheers on Hippomenes, and some cry out:
“Go, go; this is the time to take the lead,
to give it all you have, Hippomenes!
Don’t spare your speed! Don’t slack—and you will win!”
It’s hard to say if this applause brought more
delight to Megareus’ heroic son
or Scheneus’ virgin daughter. As they sped,
how many times did she, about to pass
Hippomenes, relent and gaze at length
upon his face until, at last, she raced
ahead—reluctantly? And now his throat
is weary; he is parched; he pants, and yet
the run is long, the goal is still far off.
And finally, he drops the first of those
three golden apples. Even as it rolls,
she is enchanted by the gleaming gold;
she veers off course to pick it up. The crowd
applauds Hippomenes, who takes the lead.
But she recoups her loss; a surge of speed—
one more the girl has gained the lead. And when
he throws the second apple, she retrieves
that apple, too, but passes him again.
The final stretch is all that’s left. He pleads:
"O goddess, giver of this gift to me, 
do stand beside me now." With all the force 
of youth he throws the gleaming golden fruit— 
obliquely, distantly—off course. The girl 
seemed hesitant—uncertain of her choice: 
for it to lie or pick it up. But I 
compelled her: she went off; she picked it up. 
So she lost time—and, too, the weight of three 
gold apples hampered her. So that my story 
not take much longer than that race, I say 
she was outstripped; the winner led away 
his prize, his wife.

"But now, Adonis, I 
must ask you this: did I not merit thanks 
for all I did? Did I not earn sweet incense 
to honor me? But he forgot completely: 
I had no incense and no thanks from him. 
At that offense, my wrath was spurred; and lest in time to come I ever suffer such 
a slight again, I saw that I would have 
to make them serve as an example: I 
incited my own self against that pair. 
One day, they chanced to pass before the shrine that, to fulfill a vow that he had pledged, 
Echion built: a temple for Cybele, 
the Mother of the gods, a shrine that stood 
concealed within the shadows of deep woods. 
The pair had journeyed long; they needed rest; 
and I ignited him: Hippomenes— 
such is my power as a deity— 
was struck with an indecent, sudden need 
for Atalanta's body. Near that shrine, 
there was a cavelike cell where little light 
could filter; it was vaulted by soft rock, 
the pumice of that place—a sacred cave, 
where men had venerated deities 
for age on age, beyond all memory:

Indeed a priest had set within that cell 
the wooden statues of the ancient gods. 
Hippomenes, on entering that cave, 
was quick to desecrate the sacred place 
with lust. The hallowed statues turned away 
their eyes; the Mother goddess, turret-crowned, 
was set to plunge the obscene lovers down 
into the waves of Styx. But then that seemed 
too slight a penalty: instead, she wraps 
their necks in tawny manes; their fingers take 
the shape of cunning claws; their arms are changed 
to legs; their weight moves forward to their chests; 
and they grow tails that sweep along the ground; 
their faces harden now; they speak in growls, 
not words; the wild woods are their mating place. 
As lions, they strike terror into all; 
but they indeed are tame when, yoked, they draw 
Cybele's chariot: they champ tight bits.

"Avoid those beasts, dear boy, and any sort 
of animal that will not turn its back 
and flee from you but, ready to attack, 
stands firm, chest forward; no, I would not have 
your daring damage you and ruin me."

"So did the goddess warn Adonis; then 
she yoked her swans, rode off across the air. 
But daring is not keen to heed such warnings. 
By chance, Adonis' hounds had caught a scent 
that led them to a wild boar's hidden den; 
the trail was sure. The boar was roused 
out of the woods: Adonis' spearhead caught 
the boar—a slanting thrust. With his curved snout, 
the savage beast worked free—he had torn out 
the spearhead stained with his own blood. The chase 
is on: he charges at Adonis now.
The youth, in fear of his own life, runs hard, but he is caught: the boar sinks his long tusks into Adonis' groin; he tells him—and the boy lies prone along the yellow sands.

"On her light chariot, Venus, who was drawn across the middle air by her winged swans, had not reached Cyprus yet; she heard, far off, the dying boy—his moans. She turned around her white swans and rode back. When, from the heights, she saw him lifeless there, a bleeding corpse, she leaped down to the ground. And Venus tore her hair, and—much unlike a goddess—beat her hands against her breast. She challenged fate: 'But destiny does not rule all. Adonis, your memory will live eternally: each year they will repeat this final scene—your day of death, my day of grief, will be enacted in a feast that bears your name.

"'I shall transform your blood into a flower. If you, Proserpina, were once allowed the metamorphosis of Mentha, when you changed that nymph into a fragrant plant—the mint—can anyone begrudge me if I change the form of Cinyras' dear son?' That said, she sprinkled scented nectar on his blood, which then fermented, even as bright bubbles form when raindrops fall on mud. One hour had yet to pass when, from that gore, a bloodred flower sprang, the very color of pomegranates when that fruit is ripe and hides sweet seeds beneath its pliant rind. And yet Adonis' blossoms have brief life: his flower is light and delicate; it clings too loosely to the stem and thus is called Anemone—'born of the wind'—because winds shake its fragile petals, and they fall."

Latin [714-39]
SUCH WERE THE SONGS of Orpheus: with these
the Thracian poet charmed the woodland trees
and souls of savage beasts; even the stones
were held in thrall by Orpheus' tender tones.

But now the Thracian women—all had cast
the hides of beasts around their frenzied breasts—
down from a high hilltop, spied Orpheus
as he attuned his lyre and his sweet voice.
And one of these—hair streaming loose beneath
light winds—cried out: "He's there! The man who dares
to scorn us." Through the air she hurled her staff
against Apollo's poet; it was meant
to smash his singing mouth; but since its tip
was wreathed with leaves, it left a glancing mark,
but that did no deadly work. At that,
another woman cast a stone; but as
it cleaved the air, it yielded to the spell
of his enchanting voice and lyre: it fell
at Orpheus' feet as if compelled to seek
forgiveness for its mad audacity.

But nothing now can check the wild attack;
fanatic Fury whips their rage. In truth,
the song of Orpheus could have subdued
all of their weapons; but his lyre is drowned
by shrieks and caterwauls, the raucous sounds
of drums and twisted Berecynthia flutes,
bacchantes pounding hands, and strident howls.
And so, at last, the stones were stained with blood,
the blood of one whose voice could not be heard.

Then the bacchantes chose to slaughter first
the countless birds, the serpents, and the throng
of savage beasts—all who were still spellbound
by Orpheus: the trophies he had won,
the living proof of his triumphant song.
Then, with their gory hands, those women turned
to Orpheus himself. They circled him
as birds will do when they catch sight—by day—
of some nocturnal bird of prey. The poet
was like the stag who, in a spectacle,
is doomed to die by morning light, when dogs
surround him in the bounds of the arena.
Some women, rushing at him, hurled their staffs,
their thyrsi wreathed with green leaves—hardly meant
to serve this purpose. Others cast thick clods,
and some flung branches ripped from trunks, while rocks
served others. And to stock the armory
of frenzy with true weapons, there—nearby—
by chance yoked oxen plowed the soil; not far
from these, well-muscled, sweating peasants toiled.
And when those peasants saw the women rush,
when they caught sight of the fanatic crowd,
those peasants fled at once, and on the ground
they left behind their tools. Deserted fields
were strewn with mattocks, heavy shovels, hoes.
The women—crazed—rushed off, picked up those tools;
and having torn apart the oxen—who
had menaced with their horns—they hurried back
to kill the poet. He, with arms outstretched,
for the first time spoke words without effect;
for the first time his voice did not enchant.
And they—in desecration—murdered him;
and from that mouth whose speech had even held
the stones and savage beasts beneath its spell—
o Jupiter—the soul, with its last breath,
was driven out.

The birds, in mourning, wept,
o Orpheus—the throngs of savage beasts,
and rigid stones, and forests, too—all these
had often followed as you sang; the trees
now shed their leafy crowns—as sign of grief,
their trunks were bare. They say that even streams
were swollen; yes, the rivers, too, shed tears;

Naiads and Dryads fringed their veils with black
and left their hair disheveled. Orpheus' limbs
lay scattered, strewn about; but in your flow,
you, Hebrus, gathered in his head and lyre;
and (look! a thing of wonder) once your stream
had caught and carried them, the lyre began
to sound some mournful notes; the lifeless tongue,
too, murmured mournfully; and the response
that echoed from the shores was mournful, too.
Borne by your seaward flow, they leave their own
dear Thracian stream; they're carried to the coast.
And there, a savage snake attacked the head
that had been cast unto that foreign shore—
a head still drenched and dripping, damp with spray.
But Phoebus intervened: just as that snake
was set to bite, the god froze his spread jaws,
converting him to stone just as he was:
with open mouth.

The Shade of Orpheus
descends beneath the earth. The poet knows
each place that he had visited before;
and searching through the fields of pious souls,
he finds Eurydice. And there they walk
together now: at times they are side by side;
at times she walks ahead with him behind;
at other times it's Orpheus who leads—
but without any need to fear should he
turn round to see his own Eurydice.

But Bacchus would not leave that crime unscourged.
His grief was great; and to avenge the loss
of Orpheus, the poet who had sung
of Bacchus' sacred mysteries, the god
at once bound fast with twisting roots all those
who'd shared in such a crime. And when their toes