

Perseus and the suitors

While Danaë's heroic son regaled
 the Ethiopians surrounding him
 with his adventures, raucous tumult filled
 the hall of the palace: this was not the clamor
 which signifies a wedding feast in progress,
 but that which tells of warfare breaking out,
 as, unexpectedly, the marriage banquet
 became a riot, which you might compare
 to when the sea's calm waters, angered by
 the rabid winds, make agitated waves.

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Phineus was the first to take up arms,
 the instigator of this thoughtless action,
 who shook his bronze-tipped ash-wood spear, and said,
 "Look over here at me, come to avenge
 my stolen bride: your wings will not avail you,
 nor Jupiter, transformed into fool's gold,
 defend you from the havoc I will wreak!"

As Phineus prepared to cast his spear,
 his brother Cepheus cried out to him,
 "What are you doing? What insanity
 is urging you to perpetrate this outrage?
 Do his great services deserve such thanks?
 Will you repay the saving of a life
 with such a dowry? For to tell the truth,
 it was not Perseus who took her from you,
 but the grim deity of the Nereids,
 and Ammon of the horns, and the sea monster
 who came to sate his hunger on my child;
 you lost her at the moment she was taken
 to be destroyed—unless your cruelty
 would have her dead to cover up your shame,
 and ease *your* grief at the expense of mine!

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"That you, her uncle and her fiancé,

could see her bound and not attempt a rescue,
that should have ended any claim *you* had.
But now, because another saved the girl,
will you cry foul and try to take his prize?
If his reward now seems excessive to you,
you should have tried to win it on the rocks,
when she was chained to them. Now let that man,
who has delivered me from an old age
that would have lacked the comfort of a daughter,
keep what his actions—and my pledge—have won him,
and realize that he has been preferred
not to you, merely, but to certain death.”

He made no answer, but looked back and forth
to Perseus and to the other man,
unable to decide which one should get it,
but after a few moments' hesitation,
he hurled his mighty spear at Perseus.

It stuck out from the couch beside the hero,
who, when he noticed it at last, leapt up
ferociously, and sent it whizzing back;
it would have torn the breast of Phineus
were he not hiding out behind the altar,
where, shamefully, that criminal found refuge.

Nevertheless, his throw could not be said
to be entirely without effect:
the spear caught Rhoetus full in the face,
and after it was plucked out of his skull,
he lay there writhing in his agony,
and spattered the table settings with his gore.

The crowd went totally ballistic, then;
spears filled the air, and there were those who said
that Cepheus should die with Perseus,
but the old man had already slipped away,
swearing by Faith and Justice and the gods

of hospitality that this was done
 against his will. Warlike Athena appeared
 and covered up her brother with her shield
 and gave him courage.

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From India had come
 a youth named Athis, whom the nymph Limnaee
 (herself a daughter of the river Ganges)
 gave birth to, underneath its glassy surface,
 or so they say. The exceptional good looks
 of this still adolescent innocent
 were well enhanced by his distinguished wardrobe,
 especially his gold-fringed purple mantle;
 a golden necklace ornamented his neck,
 and a headband held his perfumed locks in place;
 he was a master of the javelin,
 quite capable of hitting a bull's-eye
 from far away, and even more accomplished
 with the bow, which, at that moment, he was bending,
 when Perseus snatched up a smoking brand
 from the sacrificial fires of the altar
 and struck him with it, shattering his face.

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Now when Assyrian Lycabas saw
 that much-admired beauty wallowing
 in his own blood, expiring beneath
 that bitter wound, he wept for his true love
 and closest mate, then took up his friend's bow
 and said, "I will provide you with a contest;
 you will not long rejoice in this boy's fate,
 which brings you far more odium than glory."

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He had not finished saying all of this
 when the penetrating dart leapt from its string
 to miss the mark and dangle helplessly
 from the robe of Perseus, who turned on him
 and thrust into his breast that scimitar

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first tested in the slaughter of Medusa.
His vision blurry with advancing night,
he sought a glimpse of Athis as he died,
and fell upon him, bearing to his grave
the solace that they were now joined in death.

But look, where Phorbas, son of Metion,
and Amphimedon, a Libyan, appear,
both eager to commit themselves to battle,
both skidding helplessly, then crashing down
into the blood that made the floor all slippery;
and as they struggled to regain their footing,
one caught it in the ribs, and one, the throat.

But Perseus did not employ his sword
when he found Eurytus, the son of Actor,
whose weapon was the double-headed axe;
he hoisted in both hands a huge and weighty
wine-mixing bowl, artistically engraved,
and sent it crashing down onto the man,
who fell upon his back, expiring
in the bright red blood that he had vomited,
and his head thumped in spasms on the floor.

Then Perseus struck down Polydegmon
(who was descended from Queen Semiramis),
Caucasian Abaris, Lycetus of Thessaly,
unbarbered Helices, Phlegyas, and Clitus,
and trod upon that heap of dying men.

Phineus did not dare engage in close
combat, but hurled a javelin instead,
which accidentally struck Idas, who
had vainly sought to maintain neutrality.
Idas, dying, glared at the man and said,
"Since I have been forced to take sides in this,
accept the enemy you've made of me,
and pay the price for that wound now, with *this* one—"

He had withdrawn that weapon from his body
and was about to hurl it back at him,
when he collapsed, completely drained of blood.

Then Hodites, the second in command
to Cepheus, was slain by Clymenus,
and Hypseus struck down Prothoenor,
and was himself transfixed by Lyncides. 140

There was an old man named Emathion,
a friend of justice and of piety;
since he was kept from combat by his age,
he warred with words, and boldly now stepped up
to execrate their irreligious arms;
as he clung tremulously to the altar,
a blow from Chromis' sword cut off his head
which dropped at once onto the altar stone,
and his half-conscious tongue continued to 150
upbraid them till his failing breath no longer
stirred sacrificial flames.

The next to fall
were Broteas and Ammon, who were twins;
unbeaten in the ring, they would have won,
if boxing gloves were any match for swords:
in close combat, Phineus slew them both.

Ampycus, priest of Ceres, with his brows
adorned in sacramental fillets, fell;
you also fell, Lampetides, not meant
to shine in situations such as these; 160
yours were the deeds of peace, reciting poems
which you accompanied upon the lute;
you had been summoned here to solemnize
the wedding feast with song.

Pedasmus, grinning,
saw how he kept himself and his instrument
out of harm's way, and shouted to him, "Sing

the remainder of your song to the shades below,"
lodging his shaft above the bard's left eye;
and as he fell, his dying fingers struck
the lyre's strings, and on that plaintive note
the poet and his song came to an end.

176

Infuriated by that sight, Lycormas
did not allow him to go unavenged,
but seized a beam from the right side of the door
and brought it crashing down upon the spine
of grinning Pedasus, and broke his neck,
and he collapsed like a sacrificial bull.

Pelates, a North African, attempted
to tear out a pillar on the left-hand side,
and as he struggled, his right hand was pinned
against the wooden beam with a spear cast
by Corythus, come from Marmarica.
And as he hung there, Abas cut him open
and bled him dry; he did not fall to the ground,
but dangled helplessly until he died.

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And Melaneus too was overcome,
one of the followers of Perseus;
and Dorylas as well, the wealthiest
in Libya, where no one else possessed
estates or heaps of spice as vast as his;
a spear cast from the side tore through his groin,
a fatal place.

190

When Halcyoneus
of Bactria, who'd given him that wound,
observed his victim gasping up his soul
and rolling his eyes in agony, he said,
"Of all the many properties you own,
you may keep only what you lie upon,"
and left his lifeless corpse.

But Perseus,

avenging him, snatched from the still-warm wound
 the bloody spear and flung it back at him; 200
 it broke his nose and drove right through his neck,
 projecting from the front and from behind.

While Fortune favored him, the hero slew
 Clytis and Clanis, who, though both were born
 of the same mother, died of different wounds,
 for Clytis had been shafted through both thighs
 while Clanis ate the spear that did him in.

Then Celadon of Mendes also fell,
 and Astreus (his mother Syrian,
 his father dubious) and Aethion, 210
 once shrewd enough at seeing what would come,
 now victimized by a deceptive omen;
 and Thoactes, the royal armorer,
 and Agyrtes, the ill-famed patricide.

Although worn-out by all that he had done,
 there was still more to do: it was one man
 against a mob united to destroy him;
 from all sides he was set on by opponents,
 a moving front, the servants of a cause
 assailing his merit and the promise made him. 220

On *his* side, he could count on the support
 of his father-in-law and his new bride
 and the bride's mother—all filling up the hall
 with pointless lamentation, now drowned out
 by the groans of the dying warriors,
 as fierce Bellona shames the household gods
 with fresh-spilled blood and stirs the conflict up.

Phineus and his thousand followers
 surround one man: past him the missiles whiz
 on either side, beyond his eyes and ears, 230
 thicker than hailstones in a winter storm.
 He leans his shoulders flat against a column,

and with his back safe, faces his opponents
massed on both sides and ready to attack:
Chaonian Molpeus leads the left
and Nabataean Ethemon, the right.

Just as a tigress, goaded by her hunger,
who has heard the lowing of two separate herds
in different valleys, cannot quite decide
which to take on, but burns to take on both,
so our Perseus is hesitant
as to which side he ought to strike at first:

Molpeus takes a spear shaft in the shin
and is permitted to remove himself,
but Ethemon cuts Perseus no slack,
and charges, with his sword held shoulder high,
aiming to wound our hero in the neck,
a powerful, though ill-considered thrust:
he strikes the column and his shattered blade
rebounds and lodges in its master's throat.

That wound was not sufficient to dispatch
the helpless man, who raised up trembling hands
in unsuccessful prayer as Perseus
now ran him through with Mercury's curved sword.

Then seeing that the mob would overwhelm him,
Perseus said, "You've forced me into this;
I will seek aid from my own enemies!
If there are any friends here, hide your eyes,"
and speaking, lifted up the Gorgon's head.

"Find someone else to worry with your wonders,"
said Thescalus, who raised his deadly spear
to cast it, but was frozen in that gesture,
as motionless as any marble statue.

And then came Ampyx, rich in self-esteem,
who, with his sword tip, sought the hero's heart,
and as he sought it, his right hand grew stiff

and powerless to move the sword it held.

But Nileus, who falsely claimed descent
from the Nile, whose seven mouths were all engraved
in gold or silver on his shield, cried out,

"Look, Perseus, upon my origin:

it will much comfort you when you are dead

and wandering among the silent shades,

that you were slain by such a one as I—"

but the last part of what he said was stifled;

it would have seemed to you as though his mouth

opened to speak, but words could not pass through.

Then Eryx scornfully rebuked them, saying

"Defective courage, not effect of Gorgon,

brings on this inertia—attack with me,

and cast him and his magic weapons down!"

He started in; the earth clung to his feet,

and he remained there, having turned to flint,

the immobilized shape of an armed man.

Now all of these deserved their punishment,

but one of them, a soldier on the side

of Perseus named Aconteus, didn't:

while he was fighting for our hero, he beheld

the Gorgon's face and hardened into rock;

supposing that the man was still alive,

Astyages struck him with his long sword

which leapt back, clanging shrilly from the blow.

While Astyages stood there all astounded,

the very same force turned him into marble

and left him an astonishment of stone.

It really would take far too long to name

the ordinary soldiers; when it ended,

two hundred men returned to their own side,

two hundred others were left petrified

from looking at Medusa's horrid visage.

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Now Phineus has finally repented
of his unjust war, but what is he to do?
He sees these likenesses in diverse poses,
and realizes that they are his men,
and calling each by name, asks for his help,
and reaches out to touch the nearest man
in disbelief—all are made of marble!

He turns his face away but holds his hands out
in supplication, confessing his defeat:

“O Perseus,” he cries, “you win! Just take away
that fright of yours, that petrifying head
of this Medusa, whatever she may be—
get rid of it, get rid of it, I beg you!

I *never* hated you! I *never* wanted
to rule in your place! What got me into this,
what moved me to take up arms against you,
was my promised bride—I had the prior claim,
but on the merits, you deserved to win.

I’m not at all ashamed at having lost;
grant me my life and nothing in addition—
yours be the spoils, greathearted Perseus!”

And as he spoke, he did not even dare
to look upon that other, who replied,
“Fear not, fainthearted Phineus: the gift
that lies within my power to bestow
(and what a tribute to your cowardice it is!)

I now confer: no sword will injure you.
You will remain a monument forever,
displayed in the house of my father-in-law;
my wife will find great solace,” said the hero,
“in gazing at her fiancé’s still form,”
and carried the Medusa’s head around
to the agitated gaze of Phineus.

Then, even as he strove to turn away,

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his neck grew rigid, and, upon his cheeks,
 the tears that he was shedding turned to stone,
 and fixed forever in the marble were
 the frightened face and suppliant expression,
 the pleading hands and abject attitude.

And now, accompanied by his new bride,
 triumphant Perseus returns to Argos,
 the high-walled city of his birth; and there,
 in order to avenge his undeserving
 grandfather, Acrisius, he wages war
 on his granduncle, Proetus, who drove
 Acrisius away by force of arms
 and seized his citadel. But neither arms
 nor the citadel that he had wrongly seized
 allowed Proetus to prevail against
 the fierce gaze of the serpent-bearing monster.

But you, O Polydectes, governor
 of tiny Seriphos, unmollified
 by the young man's excellence, so often shown
 in the trials and tribulations he went through—
 you were inflexible in hating him
 and unrelenting in your unjust anger;
 you went so far as to deny him praise,
 and claimed Medusa's death to be a lie.

"We'll give you evidence right now," said Perseus.

"Protect your eyes!" He raised Medusa's face
 up to the king's and turned him into stone.