

EPISTLE X. ARIADNE TO THESEUS

Ovid, *The Heroides*

- [1] Gentler than you I have found every race of wild beasts; to none of them could I so ill have trusted as to you. The words you now are reading, Theseus, I send you from that shore from which the sails bore off your ship without me, the shore on which my slumber, and you, so wretchedly betrayed me—you, who wickedly plotted against me as I slept.
- [7] 'Twas the time when the earth is first besprinkled with crystal rime, and songsters hid in the branch begin their plaint. Half waking only, languid from sleep, I turned upon my side and put forth hands to clasp my Theseus—he was not there. I drew back my hands, a second time I made assay, and o'er the whole couch moved my arms—he was not there. Fear struck away my sleep; in terror I arose, and threw myself headlong from my abandoned bed. Straight then my palms resounded upon my breasts, and I tore my hair, all disarrayed as it was from sleep.
- [17] The moon was shining; I bend my gaze to see if aught but shore lies there. So far as my eyes can see, naught do they find but shore. Now this way, and now that, and ever without plan, I course; the deep sand stays my girlish feet. And all the while I cried out “Theseus!” along the entire shore, and the hollow rocks sent back your name to me; as often as I called out for you, so often did the place itself call out your name. The very place felt the will to aid me in my woe.
- [25] There was a mountain, with bushes rising here and there upon its top; a cliff hangs over from it, gnawed into by deep-sounding waves. I climb its slope—my spirit gave me strength—and thus with prospect broad I scan the billowy deep. From there—for I found the winds cruel, too—I beheld your sails stretched full by the headlong southern gale. As I looked on a sight methought I had not deserved to see, I grew colder than ice, and life half left my body. Nor does anguish allow me long to lie thus quiet; it rouses me, it stirs me up to call on Theseus with all my voice's might. “Whither doest fly?” I cry aloud. “Come back, O wicked Theseus! Turn about thy ship! She hath not all her crew!”
- [37] Thus did I cry, and what my voice could not avail, I filled with beating of my breast; the blows I gave myself were mingled with my words. That you at least might see, if you could not hear, with might and main I sent you signals with my hands; and upon a long tree-branch I fixed my shining veil—yes, to put in mind of me those who had forgotten. And now you had been swept beyond my vision. Then at last I let flow my tears; till then my tender eyeballs had been dulled with pain. What better could my eyes do than weep for me, when I had ceased to see your sails? Alone, with hair loose flying, I have either roamed about, like to a Bacchant roused by the Ogygian god, or, looking out upon the sea, I have sat all

chilled upon the rock, as much a stone myself as was the stone I sat upon. Oft do I come again to the couch that once received us both, but was fated never to show us together again, and touch the imprint left by you—'tis all I can in place of you—and the stuffs that once grew warm beneath your limbs. I lay me down upon my face, bedew the bed with pouring tears, and cry aloud: "We were two who pressed thee—give back two. We came to thee both together; why do we not depart the same? Ah, faithless bed—the greater part of my being, oh, where is he?"

[59] What am I to do? Whither shall I take myself—I am alone, and the isle untilled. Of human traces I see none; of cattle, none. On every side the land is girt by sea; nowhere a sailor, no craft to make its way over the dubious paths. And suppose I did find those to go with me, and winds, and ship—yet where am I to go? My father's realm forbids me to approach. Grant I do glide with fortunate keel over peaceful seas, that Aeolus tempers the winds—I still shall be an exile. 'Tis not for me, O Crete composed of the hundred cities, to look upon thee, land known to the infant Jove. No, for my father and the land ruled by my righteous father—dear names—were betrayed by my deed¹ when, to keep you, after your victory, from death in the winding halls, I gave into your hand the thread to direct your steps in place of guide—when you said to me: "By these very perils of mine, I swear that, so long as both of us shall live, thou shalt be mine."

[75] We both live, Theseus, and I am not yours—if indeed a woman lives who is buried by the treason of a perjured mate. Me, too, you should have slain, O false one, with the same bludgeon that slew my brother; then would the oath you gave me have been absolved by my death. Now, I ponder over not only what I am doomed to suffer, but all that any woman left behind can suffer. There rush into my thought a thousand forms of perishing, and death holds less of dole for me than the delay of death. Each moment, now here, now there, I look to see wolves rush on me, to rend my vitals with their greedy fangs. Who knows but that this shore breeds, too, the tawny lion? Perchance the island harbors the savage tiger as well. They say, too, that the waters of the deep cast up the mighty seal. And who is to keep the swords of men from piercing my side?

[89] But I care not, if I am but not left captive in hard bonds, and not compelled to spin the long task with servile hand—I, whose father is Minos, whose mother the child of Phoebus, and who—what memory holds more close—was promised bride to you. When I have looked on the sea, and on the land, and on the wide-stretching shore, I know many dangers threaten me on land, and many on the waters. The sky remains—yet there I fear visions of the gods. I am left helpless, a prey to the maws of ravaging beasts; and if men dwell in the place and keep it, I put no trust in them—my hurts have taught me fear of stranger-men.

[99] O, that Androgeos were still alive, and that thou, O Cecropian land, hadst not been made to atone for thy impious deeds with the doom of thy children.² and

would that thy upraised right hand, O Theseus, had not slain with knotty club him that was man in part, and in part bull; and I had not given thee the thread to show the way of thy return—thread oft caught up again and passed through the hands led on by it. I marvel not—ah, no—if victory was thine, and the monster smote with his length the Cretan earth. His horn could not have pierced that iron heart of thine; thy breast was safe, even didst thou naught to shield thyself. There barest thou flint, there barest thou adamant; there hast thou a Theseus harder than any flint.

- [111] Ah, cruel slumbers, why did you hold me thus inert? Or, better had I been weighed down once for all by everlasting night. You, too, were cruel, O winds, and all too well prepared, and you breezes, eager to start my tears. Cruel the right hand that has brought me and my brother to our death, and cruel the pledge—an empty word—that you gave at my demand. Against me conspiring were slumber, wind, and treacherous pledge—treason three-fold against one maid.
- [119] Am I, then, to die, and, dying, not behold my mother's tears; and shall there be no one's finger to close my eyes? Is my unhappy soul to go forth into stranger-air, and no friendly hand compose my limbs and drop them on the unguent dew? Are my bones to lie unburied, the prey of hovering birds of the shore? Is this the entombment due to me for my kindnesses? You will go to the haven of Cecrops; but when you have been received back home, and have stood in pride before your thronging followers, gloriously telling the death of the man-and-bull, and of the halls of rock cut out in winding ways, tell, too, of me, abandoned on a solitary shore—for I must not be stolen from the record of your honors. Neither is Aegeus your father, nor are you the son of Pittheus' daughter Aethra; they who begot you were the rocks and the deep.
- [133] Ah, I could pray the gods that you had seen me from the high stern; my sad figure had moved your heart. Yet look upon me now—not with eyes, for with them you cannot, but with your mind—clinging to a rock all beaten by the wandering wave. Look upon my locks, let loose like those of one in grief for the dead, and on my robes, heavy with tears as if with rain. My body is a-quiver, like standing corn struck by the northern blast, and the letters I am tracing falter beneath my trembling hand. 'Tis not for my desert—for that has come to naught—that I entreat you now; let no favor be due for my service. Yet neither let me suffer for it. If I am not the cause of your deliverance, yet neither is it right that you should cause my death.
- [145] These hands, wearied with beating of my sorrowful breast, unhappy I stretch toward you over the long seas; these locks—such as remain—in grief I bid you look upon. By these tears I pray you—tears moved by what you have done—turn about your ship, reverse your sail, glide swiftly back to me. If I have died before you come, 'twill yet be you who bear away my bones.

1. Her aid to Theseus in his slaying of the Minotaur her brother, and his escape from the Labyrinth.
2. Androgeos, Ariadne's brother, was accidentally killed at Athens.