

## 5. HYMN TO APHRODITE

Muse, tell me the deeds of golden Aphrodite,  
the Cyprian, who arouses sweet desire in gods,  
tames the tribes of deathbound people,  
the birds swooping from heaven and all creatures  
that land and sea nourish so well.

The work of richly crowned Cytheria affects everyone,  
except the three goddesses she cannot persuade or fool.  
The work of golden Aphrodite does not please Athena,  
the owl-eyed daughter of Zeus who bears the aegis.  
Athena rejoices in warfare and the work of Ares: 10  
combat, struggles, and glorious deeds.  
She first taught earthbound craftsmen  
to make carriages and chariots inlaid with bronze.  
She also taught glorious work in the house  
to young women, instilling skill in each one.

Smile-loving Aphrodite cannot tame Artemis with passion,  
not the one with baying hounds and the golden distaff.  
Artemis delights in bows, hunting beasts in the mountains,  
in lyres, dances, and the shrill songs of women,  
in shady groves and the cities of righteous men. 20

The work of Aphrodite does not please Hestia,  
the modest first born of conniving Kronos  
(last born, too, through the plan of Zeus).

Woody by Poseidon and Apollo, she was unwilling  
and hard, refusing their offers of marriage.

Touching the head of Zeus who bears the aegis,  
she swore a great oath, since then fulfilled,  
to remain forever virgin, divine among goddesses.  
Instead of marriage, Father Zeus gave her a prize:  
Hestia rests at the hearth, the highest honor. 30  
All people revere her in every temple,  
Hestia, the most august of the gods.

Aphrodite cannot persuade or deceive these three  
goddesses, but no others have ever escaped her—  
none of the blessed gods nor mortal folk.  
She even distracted Zeus, who delights in thunder,  
the greatest god allotted the greatest honor,  
deceiving even his strong mind whenever she wished,  
easily mating him with mortal women.

He would utterly forget Hera, sister and wife, 40  
the most beautiful of immortal goddesses,  
the sacred goddess whom conniving Kronos  
and mother Rhea bore. Zeus, wise in eternal plans,  
made her his honored wife, careful, and wise, too.  
Casting sweet desire into Aphrodite's own heart,  
Zeus made her long for a human man, so that  
even smile-loving Aphrodite herself could not keep out  
of a mortal man's bed. Then she could not tell—  
boasting among all the gods, laughing sweetly—  
how she made the gods mate with mortal women 50  
(who bore mortal sons to immortal fathers)  
and how she mated the goddesses with mortal men.

Zeus cast sweet desire in her heart for Anchises—  
his body like a god's—who often tended cattle  
in the high mountains of Ida, rich in springs.  
When smile-loving Aphrodite saw him,  
she wanted him: desire seized her beyond all measure.  
She went to Cyprus, entering her fragrant temple  
at Paphos, with its sacred precinct and altar;  
she went in and closed the shining doors. 60  
The Graces bathed and anointed her with oil  
divine, as on the gods who live forever,  
pleasant ambrosia, sweet scented for her.  
Covering her body with fine clothes  
adorned with gold, smile-loving Aphrodite  
left fragrant Cyprus in a hurry for Troy—  
high in the clouds, she quickly made her way.  
She landed on the mother of wild animals, Mount Ida,  
rich in springs, and headed toward the steading.  
Gray wolves wagging their tails, lions eyes flashing, 70  
bears and swift leopards hungry for deer, thronged about her.  
Seeing them delighted her heart and spirit,  
and she cast desire in their breasts. Instantly,  
they lay down together by twos in their shady lairs.  
Then she came upon the sturdy shelters  
and found the hero Anchises alone—  
the man whose beauty came from the gods.  
The other herders had followed the cattle  
to grassy pastures. Left alone at the steading,  
he strolled about, playing piercing notes on his lyre. 80

Aphrodite, daughter of Zeus, stood before him  
like an untouched virgin in form and stature,  
so he would not be afraid when he set eyes on her.

Seeing her, Anchises wondered, amazed  
at her beauty, her stature, her shining clothes!

Her robe blazed past the radiance of fire,  
spiral bracelets and earrings shining like flower buds,  
with brilliant necklaces gracing her soft throat,  
like the moon shining on her soft breast,  
beautifully inlaid in gold, a marvel.

90

Passion seized Anchises, face to face he spoke to her:

“Hail, Queen, whatever blessed one has reached this house,  
whether you are Artemis, Leto, or golden Aphrodite,  
noble Themis or owl-eyed Athena  
or perhaps one of the Graces come here,  
companions of all the gods and immortal,  
or one of the nymphs who haunt the fair forests,  
or nymphs who live here on this lovely mountain  
in river springs and grassy meadows.

I will build you an altar on a hilltop visible  
from all around and make a holy sacrifice  
to you every season. Gracious Goddess,  
make me a man eminent among Trojans,  
give me a flourishing son, let me live  
long and well, seeing the light of the sun,  
happy among my people, to the threshold of old age.”

100

Aphrodite, daughter of Zeus, replied:

“Anchises, most glorious of earthborn men,  
I am no goddess. Why compare me to the gods?

I am mortal, truly born from a human mother. 110  
Otreus is my father—have you heard of him?—  
a famous king, who rules all of Phrygia.  
And I know your language clearly as my own  
since my mother handed me to a Trojan nurse,  
who raised me from childhood in our great hall.  
That is why I speak your language so well.  
Just now Hermes stole me from a dance  
to Artemis of the golden distaff and baying hounds:  
as we danced, nymphs and budding girls  
richly wooed, the crowd in a circle around us, 120  
the gold-wand Slayer of Argos carried me off.  
My feet never seemed to touch the life-giving earth  
as he flew me over many plowed fields,  
over many lands where flesh-eating beasts roam,  
past shady dens, through wild, untouched country.  
I would be called Anchises' wedded wife  
and bedmate, declared Hermes, and bear you  
glorious children. Strong Hermes said this,  
then flew away, rejoining the race of immortals.  
But I came to you because a strong force overcame me. 130  
By Zeus, I beseech you, by your noble parents—  
for lowborn ones could not have had such a son!—  
take me, unwed and untried in love,  
show me to your father, to your careful, wise mother,  
to your brothers born from the same parents.  
I will be a suitable, not shameful, daughter-in-law.  
Send a messenger quickly to the Phrygians  
to tell my father and my worrying mother, too.  
They will send you gold in plenty and woven clothes—

accept the large, glorious dowry-payment. 140  
 After that, make a wedding feast for the marriage  
 longed for and honored by men and immortal gods.”  
 So saying, the goddess cast sweet desire in his heart.

Passion seized Anchises. He cried out:  
 “If you truly are mortal and a human woman bore you,  
 if Otreus is your father’s famous name, as you declare,  
 and you come here by the will of the immortal messenger  
 Hermes, and my wife you shall be forever more,  
 then none of the gods or mortal men here  
 will hold me back from mingling in love with you 150  
 this moment. Not even if the skillful archer, Apollo himself,  
 were to shoot arrows of grief from his silver bow.  
 Once I have mounted your bed, woman like a goddess,  
 then I would be willing to enter the house of Hades.”  
 So he said, and took her hand. Smile-loving Aphrodite  
 turned around, casting down her lovely eyes,  
 moving slowly to the bed richly spread  
 with soft cloaks ready for the master. Over the bed  
 lay the skins of bears and deep-roaring lions,  
 beasts he had slain in the high mountains. 160  
 When they climbed into the well-crafted bed,  
 first he removed all her shining jewelry: the brooches,  
 spiral bracelets, flower-bud earrings, and necklaces.  
 Anchises loosened her belt, slipped off her splendid clothes,  
 setting them down on a silver-studded chair. By the will  
 of the gods and fate, he lay down with an immortal  
 goddess—a mortal man uncertain of the truth.

At dusk, when herdsmen bring cows and fat sheep  
back to the fold from the blooming pastures,  
Aphrodite poured sweet sleep over Anchises, 170  
pleasant sleep, and dressed herself in her lovely robes.

Clad in all her finery, the most heavenly goddess  
stood up in the shelter. Her head nearly touched  
the strong roof beam; richly crowned Cytheria's  
cheeks shone with her immortal beauty.

She roused Anchises from sleep, calling his name:  
"Son of Dardanos, wake up! Why sleep so soundly?  
Tell me whether I now seem as I was  
when first you laid eyes on me?"

He heard her instantly out from his sleep. 180

When he saw the throat and lovely eyes of Aphrodite,  
he was frightened and turned his eyes from her.

Again he covered his handsome face with a cloak  
and his words flew out in prayer and pleading:  
"When my eyes first saw you, goddess, right away  
I knew you were divine, but you did not tell the truth.

Now I beg you, by Zeus who bears the aegis,  
do not let me live among men alive, but unmanned.  
Take pity! A man's life ceases to flourish  
if he lies in bed with an immortal goddess." 190

Then Aphrodite, daughter of Zeus, answered him:

"Anchises, most honored of mortal men,  
take courage; drive fear from your mind.

You will suffer no harm, not from me or any  
of the Blessed Ones, for you are dear to the gods.

No, you will have a son who will rule among Trojans

and children will be descended from his children forever.

Aeneas will be his name because a terrible grief  
possesses me since I fell into the bed of a mortal man.

Of all mortal men, those in your family always 200  
have been close to the gods in beauty and stature.

Wise Zeus seized Ganymede for his blond beauty.

Now he lives among the immortal gods  
and pours wine for them in Zeus' house—

amazing, a man honored by all the immortals,  
drawing the red nectar from a gold mixing bowl.

But unrelenting sorrow held father Tros: he did not know  
where the divine whirlwind had taken his dear son.

Every day, he grieved without end for his son.

At last, Zeus had pity on him: in payment for his son 210  
he gave him spirited horses, the kind the gods ride.

He gave Tros the horses to keep as a gift.

Hermes the Guide told him Zeus' command:

Ganymede would live forever, unaging, like the gods.

When Tros heard this message from Zeus,

he ceased grieving and his spirit rejoiced;

he joyfully rode the wind-footed horses.

And Eos on her golden throne stole Tithonos,  
a man like the gods, also from your own family.

Dawn begged the storm-cloud son of Kronos 220  
that Tithonos be immortal and live forever.

Zeus nodded to her, fulfilling her wish.

But foolish Dawn did not think to ask  
him for youth, to erase deadly old age.

So as long as beautiful youth held him,



he lived by Ocean's stream at earth's edge  
delighting in early-born Dawn on her golden throne.  
But when the gray hairs first rained down  
on his handsome head and noble chin,  
then Dawn completely avoided his bed. 230  
She tended him with bread and ambrosia,  
keeping him in her halls and giving him fine clothes.  
But when hateful old age weighed him down  
and he could not move his limbs or raise up,  
this plan appeared best in her heart:  
she set him in a chamber and closed the shining doors.  
His voice flows on without ceasing  
and the strength in his supple limbs is gone.

No, I would not choose such immortality for you,  
to be immortal, to live like that forever. 240  
If you could live as my husband,  
keeping the form and beauty you now have,  
then grief would not cloud my crowded mind.  
But soon distressing old age will shroud you,  
without pity, since it happens to all men,  
a deadly trouble that the gods themselves hate.  
As for me, I will be greatly shamed forever  
among the immortal gods because of you.  
When all the gods mingled with human women,  
my talk and plans always frightened them— 250  
my will always conquered them all.  
Now my mouth can no longer speak out  
on such things among the gods, once I so foolishly  
did a terrible, unspeakable thing—my mind went astray:

I put a child under my belt, bedding down with a man.  
 When the sun's light first sees the child,  
 the deep-breasted mountain nymphs will nurse him.  
 They live on this holy mountain  
 and are neither mortal nor immortal:  
 they live a long time and eat immortal food, 260  
 and dance lovely dances among the gods.  
 The Sileni and Hermes, the good Guide,  
 mingle with them in love, deep inside caves.  
 As the nymphs are born, pines and high-crowned oaks  
 grow with them on the man-nourishing earth,  
 fair trees flourishing in the high mountains.  
 They stand tall and men call them the grove  
 of the gods—no mortals fell them with axes.  
 But when their destined death has come,  
 first the lovely trees wither on the earth, 270  
 the bark dies and the branches fall away;  
 then the souls of the nymphs leave the sun's light.  
 These nymphs will raise my son themselves.  
 When precious youth first touches him,  
 they will bring your child here just to show you.  
 Now I will recount the things on my mind.  
 In his fifth year, I will bring back your son.  
 When your eyes first see this flourishing child,  
 you will rejoice at the sight—he will be godlike.  
 You will bring him right back to windy Troy 280  
 and if any mortal man asks you  
 what mother conceived your dear son,  
 you will say to him—remember what I command you—  
 say that a blossoming nymph living

on this wooded mountain bore him.

But if you should boast, foolishly saying  
you mingled in love with richly crowned Cytheria,  
angry Zeus will strike you with a smoldering thunderbolt.  
You have been warned. Knowing that, keep your silence  
and do not name me: fear the wrath of the gods.” 290  
When she finished, she flew off to windy heaven.

Hail, Goddess, ruler of well-built Cyprus!

I began with you and will turn to the rest of the hymn.