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A New Translation of *Dionysiaca*, Book One

*Dionysiaca*, Book One (lines 1-68)

*In which Cronion seizes the nymph in a radiance and the hands of Typhon pound the firmament.*

Speak Goddess,

of Cronodies' bright herald,

the thunder rolling amid coital sparks

and the lightning flash,

bridegroom of Semele.

Speak of the line

of twice-born Bacchus,

a child half-formed

and born without midwife.

Zeus lifted him from flames

dripping wet

and carried him in his male womb

as father and sacred mother,

after he cut open his thigh

with flinching hands

and vividly recalled

another birth:

his brow was swollen

and his temples throbbed

with a pain immaculate

yet adulterous

 before Athene sprang forth,

her armor glinting in the light.

Muses,

bring me the fennel stalk,

clash the cymbals

and place in my hand

the thyrsus of Dionysus

infused with song.

For my partner in the cyclic dance,

summon quicksilver Proteus

from the nearby island of Pharos.

May he appear in myriad shapes

as I weave an intricate mercurial hymn.

If he slithers like a serpent

trailing a spiral path

I will celebrate the god's triumph,

how he destroyed with ivy-twined thyrsus

the shuddering race of snake-haired Giants.

If as a lion he shakes his flowing mane,

I will shout *Evoi* to Bacchus

in the arms of voluptuous Rhea,

nursing slyly at the breast

of the lion-rearing goddess.

If as a leopard he springs from his heels,

variegating his form in mid-air,

I will hymn the son of Zeus

who trampled elephants

upon his saddled leopards

when he slaughtered the race of India.

If he likens his body to the shape of a boar,

I will sing of Thyone's son sick at heart

for seductive Aura, boar killer

daughter of Cybele

and mother of the late-born third Bacchus.

If he is the image of water in a mirror

I will intone the name of Dionysus

and tell of how he plunged

beneath the rolling sea

with Lycurgus in armed pursuit.

If he becomes a tree rustling

in the breeze with artificial whispers,

I will remember Icarius,

when he crushed the divine grape

with zealous feet in the wine press.

Mimallons,

bring me the fennel stalk

and instead of the chiton

drape over my shoulders

and cinch about my chest

a mottled fawn-skin

awash in the sweet smell

of Maronian nectar.

Eidothea and Homer

can keep the burden

of Menelaus' sealskins,

grant for another the honeyed song

of the double aulos.

Give me Bacchic drums and goatskins.

For I do not wish to insult

my patron, Phoebus Apollo.

He has spurned the sound

of the humming reeds

ever since he humiliated Marsyas

and his god-combative aulos,

draping the skin of the flayed shepherd

on a tree

to ripple in the breeze.

But now Goddess begin

with wandering Cadmus and his quest.

Once upon the shores of Sidon,

Zeus appeared as a bull

with horns grazing the sky.

Shuddering sweetly,

he mimed a bellow of desire

in his deceptive throat.

Little Eros had plucked a woman.

He wrapped his arms around her waist

and intertwined his fingers.

Zeus, the sea-faring bull,

came near and lowered his curved neck.

He leaned forward, offered his back,

and lifted up Europa.

The bull departed.

His floating silent hoof traced

the water's worn salt path

with skimming steps.

The girl sat motionless and dry,

shaking with fear

as she sailed upon the bull's back.

If you saw her you might say

it was Thetis or Galatea

or the lover of Poseidon

or even Aphrodite upon Triton's neck.

Poseidon, his hair blue as the waves,

marveled at this sea voyage

that ambled with a bull's gait.

When Triton heard Zeus

and his seductive illusory bellow,

he answered in kind with a wedding song

from his spiral shell.

Nereus saw this horned sailor

new to the sea

and pointed out the girl to Doris,

his awe shading into fright.

So, the young girl sailed –

light freight upon the bull-vessel's back.

She shivered at the sea's lofty spray

and clutched the bull,

using a horn as a rudder.

Desire was aboard.

Translations

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