

Myrtle Leaves

Lyrics¹

Agathi Dimitrouka

Translated into English by Agathi Dimitrouka and Natasha Bershadsky

1. Hippolytus and Phaedra²

To Gregory Nagy

narration

Hippolytus, young, beautiful and modest, son of Theseus and some Amazon, was devoted to Artemis, scorning Aphrodite. The offended goddess of love inspired in Phaedra, his stepmother, a vehement passion for him: she used to go from Athens to Troezen, hiding herself behind a myrtle tree and peeking at him during his athletic exercises; and as the desire was driving her insane, she kept piercing the myrtle leaves with her hairpin. But Hippolytus preferred to stay faithful to the goddess of purity and to the filial respect for his father, and rejected Phaedra's love. She, in fear of her passion becoming known to Theseus, and with her love turning into hate, accused Hippolytus of having attacked her to violate. Blinded by the anger at his son, Theseus asked Poseidon for his death. Phaedra, once she realized what she had done, hanged herself in her royal chamber; and as she was hanging, she passed to the underworld, still to sway and to plead.

song

Love hasn't taught you to change
 The guilt of beauty into the beauty of guilt;
 and if I challenge you, you hold back
 from drinking out of the spring for fear of getting wet.

¹ The poems 1, 2, 3 and 4 are in the book of Agathi Dimitrouka entitled *Κήπος με γιασεμάκια ο ουρανός* [A garden with jasmine flowers is the sky] from Patakis Publishers (2019). The poems 5, 6, 7 and 8 are in the book of A. D. entitled *Τα ηδονικά* [Hedonics], 18 songs based on Erotic Epigrams, from Patakis Publishers (2019). The poems 9 and 10 are from the manuscript of a new work in progress.

² Set to music by George-Emmanuel Lazaridis and sung by Maria Farantouri, presented in 2008 at the Small Theater of Ancient Epidaurus and in 2017 at the National Opera.

Hippolytus, Hippolytus,
a complete hypocrite.

I'm piercing the leaves, the myrtle-leaves,
like the body, like the heart, that the desire pierces;
illicitly, I know, I love you
illicitly, insanely, absurdly, darkly.

You egoist, you narcissist,
Your death has started off.

"The rejection of love kills"
I'll write, I'll cry before I meet you in the void.
I was a pawn of Aphrodite,
And you of Artemis, that's why we both got trapped.

Hippolytus, come back to light,
for another woman, be dazzling.

3. Selinunte

To Giovanna Vacca

How tame grew the gods of ruins,
when the earth swallowed their wrath!
Stones that embrace, scattered trees,
and nearby a necropolis, overgrown with shrubs.

There I saw you. You said: "I am Aлыпion.
I teach joy to neophytes."
Me, a neophyte? Thus far, I've been martyred
in love with the double deaths.

4. Emporium

The cypresses are tall to define
 the way from Phocaea to Rome:
 on the one side the light that still shines,
 on the other, it's us with the nights that blossom.
 Your skin smells like jasmine.
 Horizons, head-high,
 sown with the pottery of imperishable souls,
 and the sun rises up at the end of a straight line
 across from our secret love spot.
 At this time, don't betray me.

5. Charito³

Charito completed sixty winters,
 but yet her hair is long
 and reaches down to her waist in waves.

No wrinkles, and ambrosia-sweet,
 She wins everyone over with many graces,
 and myriad charms that she trickles drop by drop.

She has breasts small like pinecones,
 bare, no bandeau, but strong
 and white, standing firm in the pleasure's battle.

That's why you, lovers, who seek
 the carnal desires, the fires of passion,
 you'll find them in her. Disregard the years.

³ Based on the Epigram [13] by Philodemus.

6. Our witness the oil lamp⁴

My chest to her chest
 My breast to her breast
 My lips to her sweet lips I joined
 My mouth in her mouth
 My flesh in her flesh
 I felt like I was one with Antigone.
 That's why I won't tell you what our bodies tried
 While an oil lamp bore witness the entire night.

8. How much do we suffer, Sappho⁵

I want to die, really.
 She has gone away crying,
 saying to me this and beyond it:
 "How much do we suffer, Sappho!
 Fate has it that I got to leave you
 though I myself do not want it."

Next I gave her my answer:
 "Farewell, remember me,
 you know I loved you madly.
 And if you don't know it, I'll tell you,
 to recall there where you'd be
 how nice it had been with us two.

What garlands you had in your hair,
 intertwined violets and roses,
 around your neck, what fragrant flowers.
 You rubbed the divine myrrh
 over your body to come close to me,
 to find me on a soft mattress.

⁴ Based on the Epigram [128] by Marcus Argentarius.

⁵ Based on the poem [94] by Sappho.

Like this, we took pleasure together,
 desiring and delighting each other,
 until the morning would find us.
 Then there would be no altar,
 nor grove nor a place of dances
 where the two of us wouldn't go.

What garlands you had in your hair,
 around your neck, what fragrant flowers.

9. The Charioteer

The Charioteer: the gaze.
 A pair of omniscient eyes.
 I am not
 I wasn't
 in the chariot of the gods.
 I chomp on my bit for centuries
 chewing chthonic voices
 and laurels of silence.
 The Charioteer: the gaze.

10. Dioscuri

The bodies, sturdy,
 in their sinewy
 nature, there is a symmetry.
 Their youth is a sacrifice to the goddess
 and the goddess recompensed it.
 If death were a recompense
 there would be no living
 to remember the dead
 and the exertion of the heroes
 toward the immortality
 would be equally pointless
 like the heart

of the consoled mother.