

Ovid and Theocritus: Galatea the Sea Nymph

Women feature strongly in Ovid's compilation of mythological stories, Metamorphoses—often bearing the burden of decisions made by men, and thereby becoming the origin of important elements of the later Greek and Roman world. The work is Roman, from the first century BCE.¹

From Ovid, *Metamorphoses*

XIII:705-737 Aeneas's journey to Sicily

From there, remembering that they, the Teucrians, came originally from the blood of Teucer, they made for his Crete. But, unable to endure Jove's plague, they left Crete with its hundred cities, hoping to reach the harbours of Ausonian Italy. Tempests raged, and tossed the heroes on stormy seas, and taking refuge in the treacherous harbour of the Strophades, they were terrified by the harpy, Aëlo.

Now they were carried past Dulichium's anchorage; past Same, and the houses of Neritos; and Ithaca, cunning Ulysses's kingdom. They saw Ambracia, famous now for its Apollo of Actium, once contended over by quarreling gods; and saw the image of the judge who was turned to stone; Dodona's land with its oracular oaks; and Chaonia's bay, where the sons of Munichus, the Molossian king, escaped the impious flames on new-found wings.

Next they headed for the country of the Phaeacians, set with rich orchards, and touched at Buthrotus in Epirus, a miniature Troy, ruled by Helenus, the Trojan seer. From there, certain of their future, all of which Helenus, Priam's son predicted, with reliable warnings, they entered Sicilian waters. Three tongues of this land run down into the sea. Of these Pachynos faces the rainy south, Lilybaeon fronts the soft western breeze, and Peloros looks to the northern Bears that never touch the waves. Here the Teucrians came, and rowing, with a favourable tide, their fleet reached the sandy beach of Zancle, as night fell.

Scylla attacks from the right-hand coast, restless Charybdis from the left. The latter sucks down and spits out ships she has caught: the former has a girdle of savage dogs round her dark belly. She has a girl's face, and if the tales of poets are not all false, she was once a girl also. Many suitors wooed her, whom she rejected, and she would go and tell the ocean nymphs, being well loved by the ocean nymphs, of the thwarted desires of young men.

XIII:738-788 Acis and Galatea

Once while Galatea let Scylla comb her hair, she addressed these words to her, sighing often: 'At least, O virgin Scylla, you are not wooed by a relentless breed of men: and you can reject them without fear, as you do. But I, whose father is Nereus, and whose mother is sea-green Doris, I, though protected by a crowd of sisters, was not allowed to flee the love of Polyphemus, the Cyclops, except through sorrow', and tears stopped the sound of her voice. When the girl had wiped away the tears with her white fingers, and the goddess was comforted, she said: 'Tell me, O dearest one: do not hide the cause of your sadness (I can be so trusted).' The Nereid answered Crateis's daughter in these words: 'Acis was the son of Faunus and the nymph Symaethis, a great delight to his father and mother, but more so even to me, since he and I alone were united. He was handsome, and having marked his sixteenth birthday, a faint down covered his tender cheeks. I sought him, the Cyclops sought me, endlessly. If you asked, I could not say which was stronger in me, hatred of Cyclops or love of Acis, both of them were equally strong.'

¹ Source: Ovid, and A.S. Kline. 2014. *Ovid: The Metamorphoses – A Complete English Translation and Mythological Index*. CreateSpace. <https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/Ovhome.php>.

Oh! Gentle Venus, how powerful your rule is over us! How that ruthless creature, terrifying even to the woods themselves, whom no stranger has ever seen with impunity, who scorns mighty Olympus and its gods, how he feels what love is, and, on fire, captured by powerful desire, forgets his flocks and caves. Now Polyphemus, you care for your appearance, and are anxious to please, now you comb your bristling hair with a rake, and are pleased to cut your shaggy beard with a reaping hook, and to gaze at your savage face in the water and compose its expression. Your love of killing, your fierceness, and your huge thirst for blood, end, and the ships come and go in safety.

Meanwhile, Telemus the augur, Telemus, the son of Eurymus, whom no flight of birds could deceive, came to Sicilian Mount Aetna, addressed grim Polyphemus, and said: "Ulysses will take from you, that single eye in the middle of your forehead." He laughed, and answered: "O most foolish of seers, you are wrong, another, a girl, has already taken it." So he scorned the true warning, given in vain, and weighed the coast down, walking with giant tread, or returned weary to his dark cave.

A wedge-shaped hillside, ending in a long spur, projects into the sea (the waves of the ocean wash round it on both sides). The fierce Cyclops climbed to it, and sat at its apex, and his woolly flocks, shepherd-less, followed. Then laying at his feet the pine trunk he used as a staff, fit to carry a ship's rigging, he lifted his panpipes made of a hundred reeds. The whole mountain felt the pastoral notes, and the waves felt them too. Hidden by a rock, I was lying in my Acis's arms, and my ears caught these words, and, having heard them, I remembered:'

XIII:789-869 The song of Polyphemus

'Galatea, whiter than the snowy privet petals,
taller than slim alder, more flowery than the meadows,
friskier than a tender kid, more radiant than crystal,
smoother than the shells, polished, by the endless tides;
more welcome than the summer shade, or the sun in winter,
showier than the tall plane-tree, fleeter than the hind;
more than ice sparkling, sweeter than grapes ripening,
softer than the swan's-down, or the milk when curdled,
lovelier, if you did not flee, than a watered garden.
Galatea, likewise, wilder than an untamed heifer,
harder than an ancient oak, trickier than the sea;
tougher than the willow-twigs, or the white vine branches,
firmer than these cliffs, more turbulent than a river,
vainer than the vaunted peacock, fiercer than the fire;
more truculent than a pregnant bear, pricklier than thistles,
deafier than the waters, crueller than a trodden snake;
oh, what I wish I could alter in you, most of all, is this:
that you are swifter than the deer, driven by loud barking,
swifter even than the winds, and the passing breeze.

But if you knew me well, you would regret your flight, and you would condemn your own efforts yourself, and hold to me: half of the mountain is mine, and the deep caves in the natural rock, where winter is not felt nor the midsummer sun. There are apples that weigh down the branches, golden and purple grapes on the trailing vines. Those, and these, I keep for you. You will pick ripe strawberries born in the woodland shadows, in autumn cherries and plums, not just the juicy blue-purple, but also the large yellow ones, the colour of fresh bees'-wax.

There will be no lack of fruit from the wild strawberry trees, nor from the tall chestnuts: every tree will be there to serve you.

This whole flock is mine, and many are wandering the valleys as well, many hidden by the woods, many penned in the caves. If you asked me I could not tell you how many there are: a poor man counts his flocks. You can see, you need not merely believe me, how they can hardly move their legs with their full udders. There are newborn lambs in the warm sheepfolds, and kids too, of the same age, in other pens, and I always have snow-white milk: some of it kept for drinking, and some with rennet added to curdle it.

You will not have vulgar gifts or easily found pleasures, such as leverets, or does, or kids, or paired doves, or a nest from the treetops. I came upon twin cubs of a shaggy bear that you can play with: so alike you can hardly separate them. I came upon them and I said: "I shall keep these for my mistress."

Now Galatea, only lift your shining head from the dark blue sea: come, do not scorn my gifts. Lately, I examined myself, it's true, and looked at my reflection in the clear water, and, seeing my self, it pleased me. Look how large I am: Jupiter, in the sky, since you are accustomed to saying some Jove or other rules there, has no bigger a body. Luxuriant hair hangs over my face, and shades my shoulders like a grove. And do not consider it ugly for my whole body to be bristling with thick prickly hair. A tree is ugly without its leaves: a horse is ugly unless a golden mane covers its neck: feathers hide the birds: their wool becomes the sheep: a beard and shaggy hair befits a man's body. I only have one eye in the middle of my forehead, but it is as big as a large shield. Well? Does great Sol not see all this from the sky? Yet Sol's orb is unique.

Added to that my father, Neptune, rules over your waters: I give you him as a father-in-law. Only have pity, and listen to my humble prayers! I, who scorn Jove and his heaven and his piercing lightning bolt, submit to you alone: I fear you, Nereid your anger is fiercer than lightning. And I could bear this contempt of yours more patiently, if you fled from everyone. But why, rejecting Cyclops, love Acis, and prefer Acis's embrace to mine? Though he is pleased with himself, and, what I dislike, pleases you too, Galatea, let me just have a chance at him. Then he will know I am as strong as I am big! I'll tear out his entrails while he lives, rend his limbs and scatter them over the fields, and over your ocean, (so he can join you!) For I am on fire, and, wounded, I burn with a fiercer flame, and I seem to bear Aetna with all his violent powers sunk in my breast, yet you, Galatea, are unmoved.'

XIII:870-897 Acis is turned into a river-god

'With such useless complaints he rose (for I saw it all) and as a bull that cannot stay still, furious when the cow is taken from it, he wanders through the woods and glades. Not anticipating such a thing, without my knowing, he saw me, and saw Acis. "I see you," he cried, "and I'll make this the last celebration of your love." His voice was as loud as an angry Cyclops's voice must be: Aetna shook with the noise. And I, terrified, plunged into the nearby waters. My hero, son of Symaethis, had turned his back, and ran, crying: "Help me, I beg you, Galatea! Forefathers, help me, admit me to your kingdom or I die!"

Cyclops followed him and hurled a rock wrenched from the mountain, and though only the farthest corner of the stone reached him, it still completely buried Acis. Then I, doing the only thing that fate allowed me, caused Acis to assume his ancestral powers. From the rock, crimson blood seeped out, and in a little while its redness began to fade, became the colour of a river at first swollen by rain, gradually clearing. Then the rock, that Polyphemus had hurled, cracked open, and a tall green reed sprang from the fissure, and the mouth of a chamber in the rock echoed with leaping waters, and (a marvel) suddenly a youth stood, waist-deep in the water, his fresh horns wreathed with rushes. It was Acis, except that he was larger, and his face dark blue: yet it was still Acis, changed to a river-god, and his waters still retain his former name.

from Theocritus, *Idylls* 11

"In days of old, my countryman, the Kyklops Polyphemos (Cyclops Polyphemus), fared best with them, for one: he barely had a beard on lip or cheek, when he fell in love with the sea nymph Galatea. He wooed her, not with apples and roses and lovelocks, but with so fine a frenzy that all beside seemed pointless. Often enough his sheep had to find their own way home to the fold from the green pastures, while he sang of Galatea, sitting alone on the beach amid the sea wrack, languishing from daybreak, with a deadly wound which mighty Kypris [Aphrodite] dealt him with her arrow, fixing it under his heart. Nevertheless, he found the cure, and seated high on a rock, looking out to sea, this is how he would sing.

'O white Galatea, why do you spurn my love?--whiter than curds to look on, softer than a lambkin, more skittish than a calf, tarter than the swelling grape! How do you walk this way, so soon as sweet sleep laps me, and are gone as soon, whenever sweet sleep leaves me, fleeing like a sheep when she spies the grey wolf coming! I fell in love with you, maiden, the first time you came, with my mother, eager to cull the bluebells from our hillside: I was your guide. Once seen, I could not forget you, nor to this day can I yet; not that you care: God knows you do not, not a whit!

'O, I know, my beauty, the reason why you shun me: the shaggy eyebrow that grins across my forehead, unbroken, ear to ear; the one eye beneath; and the nose squat over my lips. For all my looks, I'd have you know, I graze a thousand sheep, and draw the best milk for myself to drink. I am never without cheeses, summer or fall: even in midwinter my cheese nets are laden. There's not another Kyklops can play the flute as I can, and I sing of you, my peach, always of me and you, till dead of night, quite often. I'm rearing eleven fawns, all with white collars, for you, and four bear cubs. come to us, then; you'll lack for nothing. Leave the green sea gulping against the dry shore. You'll do better o' nights with me, in my cave; I've laurels there, and slender cypresses; black ivy growing, and the honey-fruited vine; and the water's fresh that tree-dressed Aitna sends me, a drink divine, distilled from pure white snow. Who'd choose instead to stay in the salt sea waves? And if my looks repel you, seeming over-shaggy, I've heart of oak within, and under the ash a spark that's never out. If you will fire me, gladly will I yield my life, or my one eye, the most precious thing I have.

'O, why did not my mother bring me to birth with gills! Down I'd dive and kiss your hand--your lips if you'll allow--and bring you white narcissus flowers, or soft poppies, with wide, red petals--not both at the same time for one's, you see, a winter, the other a summer flower. Even so, sweetheart, I've made a start : I'm going to learn to swim, if some stranger comes this way, sailing in a ship, and find out why it is you nymphai like living in the deep. O, won't you come out, Galatea, and coming out forget, as I, as I sit here, forget to go back home! You'd learn to like to shepherd sheep with me, and milk, and set the curds for cheese, dropping in sharp rennet. Only my mother does me wrong, and it's her I blame. She's never said a single word on my behalf to you, for all she sees me growing thin, day after day. I shall tell her that my head and both my feet are throbbing: so I'll be even, making her suffer, even as she makes me.

'Kyklops, Kyklops! Where is this mad flight taking you? You'd surely show more sense if you'd keep at your basket weaving, and go gather the olive shoots and give them to the lambs. Milk the ewe that's at hand: why chase the ram that's fleeing? Perhaps you'll find another Galatea, and more fair. Many a girlie calls me out to play with her by night, and when I do their bidding, don't they giggle gleefully! I too am clearly somebody, and noticed--on dry land!'

In this way did Polyphemos shepherd his love with song; and he found a readier cure than if he had paid hard cash."