

Daphne and Apollo

(from the *Ovide Moralisé*)

translated by

Ross G. Arthur

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If anyone would like to know how and why the laurel first came into existence, I'll tell him without delay. Daphne was the first object of Phoebus' love; according to the story, he did not love her just by chance, but through the anger and the vengeance of the god of love, who hated him. For Cupid once was enjoying himself like a child full of delight, and was putting all his attention and efforts into feathering his arrows in order to aim them at lovers. He had a bow and a quiver full of arrows, and he was behaving nobly and elegantly.

Phoebus Apollo, who had recently killed the serpent Phiton, mocked him and said, "Why do you have that bow hanging from your neck, child? Tell me. I forbid it; put it down, and those arrows as well! Such equipment is not appropriate for you, for you are without doubt too weak. They suit me better. Give them to me, for I am stronger, and I can shoot better. With my arrows, just now, I killed the marvelous serpent Phiton, which ruled a whole acre of land. You should not have a bow or arrows; rather, let them be mine. You ought to be satisfied if I let you carry twigs and straws for inspiring passionate love: it isn't right for you to emulate me."

Cupid replied disdainfully: "Soon enough I'll make you aware of my power, and you'll be able to see for yourself whether my arrow can pierce. I think I will injure you so grievously that the wound will be hard to heal. If your arrow is sure, mine is good too, and it hits its mark! What madness has infected you so that you compare yourself to me? Your virtue and your deeds of arms, your prowess and your dignity, your valor and your divinity do not compare to mine! On this score, I want you to hear that as much as your valor is greater than that of dumb beasts, just so much is it less than my valor and glory. You are not my equal, and that's the truth."

Thereupon Cupid flew away up to Parnassus, and sat down. He drew two arrows from his quiver, which were differently made. They had been made in different ways, and so the arrows were different. The feathers were not alike; the point of one was made of purer gold than any from Arabia, sharper than a steel razor and pointed, to pierce better, and it was straight, well made and fine. Anyone who is pierced by that point is compelled to love. The other arrow is twisted and knotty, ugly and ill-made and splintered, smeared with hateful poison on its blunted leaden tip. Anyone who is touched by that arrow is completely infected with hate. With that arrow of hate the god of love struck Daphne, so that she never wanted to be a lover. He struck Phoebus too, but he did not strike him or wound him with that arrow: he pierced him, right to the heart with the pretty arrow of love.

Now Phoebus wants Daphne to be his mistress, if he can attract her to his love, but Daphne has no interest in love. It pleases her more to follow tracks in the woods, and to hunt wild beasts. She wants nothing to do with love affairs. She puts all her heart into hunting: she wishes to remain a virgin and a huntress, like Diana, her mistress. She has her hair tied back and thrown over her shoulders. Many men have asked for her in marriage, but she is so proud in heart that she will not give her love to any man or compromise her virginity: she does not want to be married.

Often her father asked and begged her to marry a lord: "Dear daughter, God help me, you ought to have a husband, from whom you might bear an heir!"

But the beautiful maiden hates marriage just as much as whoredom; her face blushes with shame; she embraces her father tightly, and says, "Dear father, I have no care or need to take a husband. In God's name, let me live a virgin and follow my lady Diana."

The father consents, and grants it to her: "Dear daughter, I would be willing, but it is a grievous thing, I think, for a woman to be both beautiful and chaste: the great beauty of your face is quite at odds with your intention."

So her father reasons with her, but the maiden replies: "I have no desire for marriage, I prefer to keep my maidenhood: virgin I am and virgin will I be; I will never give it up because of my beauty."

Phoebus burns hotter than fire in straw. Love for the beautiful Daphne troubles and torments him continually: he loves the maiden passionately, and goes about thinking his crazy thoughts with empty hope his only comfort.

Hope is indeed a great comfort: it makes a man persevere in suffering and never leaves him, all his life, but always keeps him company--unless he is one of those unfortunate creatures who has no hope in God. It does one good to have proper hope, but one who thoughtlessly puts his hope in vain foolishness is not very wise: foolish hope makes one act the fool.

Phoebus can not get enough of looking at the beautiful girl. She has unkempt blond hair, and when he sees her he says, "God, what beautiful hair, if only it were combed properly!" Her face is graced with laughing, sparkling eyes, which are flaming stars; he sees her tiny mouth, which seems to be made for kissing; but looking was not enough: he really would love to kiss her! He sees her white and rosy face, which resembles a rose and a hawthorn flower, he sees her breast and her neck, made to amuse a fool, her long fingers and her white hands her full, well-rounded, soft arms and her ribs, which were bare: he thinks everything he sees is beautiful. He puts great care into gazing at her; he thinks the rest, that he cannot see, must be more beautiful still: her soft, white flesh, her firm little breasts, round as apples. But the beautiful girl has placed her interests elsewhere, and flees more quickly than the wind: she has no interest in getting to know him.

Phoebus said: "Daphne, sweet creature, dear friend, wait for me! Why do you flee? Don't be afraid. I am not your enemy, I am your loyal friend. I have no desire to do you any harm. If I could only win your love, I would consider myself well rewarded. My heart is completely dismayed: I am so afraid that you may harm yourself! These fields you're going through are so full of thistles and thorns! Let's slow down our labor; run more gently, and I will follow you more slowly. At least look around and find out who is asking for your love: Perhaps you will be less resistant. I am not some backwoods peasant. I want you to know this much: I don't look after sheep or cattle. Foolish girl, you don't know me at all, if you refuse to be my lover! I am the lord and king of Claros, the king of Delphi, Patheros and Tenedos. If you refuse such a lover, you are

not very wise, in my opinion. I am the son of the great god Jove; I am the sun who illumines all. I discovered the art of medicine and all the power of physic and I discovered the art of music. My arrow is good and sure, but better and more piercing is the one which has wounded me in the breast. I know all the potency and the nature, the heat and the cold, of herbs and roots, and yet neither by herb nor potion could I be cured of the wound of love that I feel. My wisdom and my great knowledge are useful to all who are sick, but me alone it cannot help!" So spoke Phoebus to his love.

It often happens, I have no doubt, that someone helps and advises another but cannot solve his own problems. When a man is smitten with love, no matter how worthy, how wise or well-mannered he may be, still he acts foolishly for love. Love turns lovers to fools: the wisest have no understanding of it, and cannot help themselves. I am greatly perplexed by love, where it comes from and how it can be that love turns the wisest men into fools, but it holds them captive, just as this fable records.

Phoebus pleaded with her, and he would have said more if there were anyone willing to listen, but Daphne has no interest in words; she flees, for she is not reassured, and leaves him completely behind. He is even more dismayed, for her beauty seems twice as great to him because of the effort of her speed. Daphne runs against the wind, which often lifts her dress, and reveals her legs: they are full and tender and white. Her blond and brilliant hair swirls across her back. Phoebus sees that he's wasting his begging, for the beautiful girl in no way wishes to grant him her love: she won't listen to his entreaties any longer, so instead he follows her, running without stopping, just as love commands him. Hope and the great desire he has of accomplishing his pleasure give him the power and the will to run well. He does not go slowly, and the beautiful girl runs quickly, like one who has no desire to lose her virginity: fear gives her speed. She flees and he chases her. You never saw so hard a chase of hound and hare running neck and neck! Phoebus exerts himself to the utmost to overtake and catch the beautiful girl, and she strives to escape. Yet Phoebus is more powerful, lighter, and more anxious, for he has the help of love. So eagerly does he pursue the girl, so earnest is he in his purpose, that he lets her have no rest: he is just about to touch her back, and the breath from his mouth blows the maiden's hair.

The beautiful girl began to grow pale when she saw that she could not hold out, or endure the great effort. Running has exhausted and defeated her. She is greatly afraid that she will be defiled. She trembles and is at a loss for fear; she saw the waves of Peneus, her father, whose daughter she was. She feared Phoebus, who was pursuing her, and she cried out, with great emotion: "Dear father, help me! Open, earth, and swallow me up! Or change this face which puts me in great fear of corruption, and destroy it!"

She had scarcely spoken these words when all her body grew stiff: her belly, which was not pregnant, was all girdled with thin bark; her flaming golden tresses became lush foliage; her arms were changed into long branches: all her body was transformed: the maiden's swift feet were held by strong roots. If she was beautiful in body before, she is still just as beautiful a tree. Phoebus loves her as before. He feels her warm and throbbing breast, which trembles under the thin bark. He tried to kiss her, it seems, but the tree shrinks from his kiss.

Phoebus said: "Since Fortune so harms me that I may not have you as my wife, you will be my tree, and from you I will make a chaplet and a crown: you will be the laurel, and I will give you a very noble gift, for honor and for dignity, as sign of love and glory: those who win victories will make crowns from you for their heads. In great games and festivals you will be forever exalted, and your verdure will never wither: I will make you always be in leaf, and, as I cannot grow old, I want you never to be dry, but I want you to have the greenness of eternal leaves, in all seasons." The tree, as a sign that it is willing, lowers its crown and bows to him. So it was by divine power that the laurel was first created and now has greatly multiplied.

Now it is appropriate for me to explain this fable, and I will tell you what meaning it may hold. Daphne was the daughter of Peneus. Peneus is a river where there is a great abundance of laurels. Phoebus, who begged her for love, is the sun, it seems to me, whose heat, mixed together with moisture, caused these trees to multiply and flourish.

There may be another meaning in it, in a story in accordance with the truth. Daphne was a young girl, gentle, young, attractive and beautiful, wealthy and of great nobility, who wished to live in virginity, without violating her maidenhood; but the beauty of her face moved

many men to request her love. Daphne would not assent to love any man for anything on earth, nor to yield her virginity. Phoebus, by entreaties and by gifts, tempted her first in vain, for he could never move her enough that he might have a relationship with her, not for promises or prayers. Afterwards, he thought of taking her by force and deprive her of her maidenhood, but the maiden, innocent and wise, would sooner let herself be burned, fled, in order to guard her honor, so that he might not dishonor her, and deflower her against her will. She made such a great effort, this beautiful girl ran so much, that in fleeing she died, before he could deflower her. She was buried under a laurel. Thus the fable was created that she was changed into a laurel, because she was virgin and pure, and she kept her heart and body free from filth, living all her life in verdure of chastity.

But now let us give this fable another worthwhile interpretation. Daphne, who all her life wished to live in pure chastity and never wished to be corrupted, signifies virginity, which has no interest in corruption. Daphne was the daughter of the cold, which is signified by the river: she was so extremely cold that no natural heat could move to folly this girl, who wanted to live chastely. Daphne wanted to follow Diana, who is the clear, shining moon, in clean life and purity. Apollo loved her for a long time, and he is Phoebus, whom the Integument according to pagan belief, calls the god of wisdom, who teaches and instructs all things. He is the sun, which burns and illuminates--that is, wisdom and charity--which ought to be in virginity. I do not consider a virgin wise if she guards her body but in her heart is corrupted or perverted: her thought ought to be clean. She ought to live chastely and charitably for God: otherwise I do not value her continence one bit, if the mind has a desire to commit the carnal sins with which the body would be stained, if only there were an opportunity. I cannot believe that such virginity could be holy. If the determination is feigned, so that any woman from hypocrisy--in order to be praised and honored, or for a little vainglory, or to acquire human praise--shuns the company of the flesh, she is not well-bred. So says the Holy Scripture, and God has no care for such virgins. This is not virtue, rather it is guile. Concerning these women, God says in the gospel that their lights are extinguished, their works are false and feigned, full of foolish vanity, empty of true charity. She who has emptied her vessel

when she comes to midnight--that is, to the great Day of Judgment--will find, sadly, that marriage with the Spouse has been closed off, when God has closed the door which now is open and waiting. May God never hate us so much that he close us off from marriage to him! May the Enemy not stretch out his tail to lead us to the infernal cage where the damned are in a furnace!

Daphne, who fled so quickly from carnal touch and then was changed into a tree, signifies that whoever wants to be a perfect virgin must keep heart and body and thought entirely intact, with no physical stirring and no thought of corruption and with no lapse; then she will be made a tree which no wind can dislodge. Just as the wind cannot move the strong tree by its shaking, so too gifts, promises and entreaties should not move a virgin heart in any way--for all these are the winds of vanity which make her lose her virginity. Daphne was changed into a laurel rather than an oak or cherry tree or into any other tree one might imagine, because just as the laurel tree is green and does not ever lose its greenness for either heat or cold, but stays green in every season without bearing fruit, so too virginity should remain green, and live without bearing fruit

For it never happened and never will that virginity should bear offspring, except for that one who, contrary to nature, gave birth to her Father and Master, God, who was willing to be born of the Virgin. If a woman preserves her virginity, wisely and in charity, and manages to persevere in it until the end, God in His great and perfect glory will give her the crown of the heavenly virgins as a sign of her victory.

I can set forth another meaning for it. By Daphne I can understand and gloss that glorious Maiden, pure, attractive, beautiful Virgin, whom God chose above all others. Jesus, in Whom all good things abound, the Son of God, light of the world, the sun Who illuminates all men, master who invented all disciplines, every art, all wisdom and every science, the physician who knows all the cures and all the natures of the plants, who can bring every sick man to health and resurrect the dead, King of heaven, earth and sea, and King of hell, loved her so much that He wished to join Himself to her physically, and allowed Himself to be wounded and pierced in the heart with the point of love for the love of human nature. This blessed Mary, Virgin Mother in whom are married

virgin plenitude and plenteous virginity, she who without corruption was virgin in her conception, virgin in her childbearing and virgin afterwards perpetually--this maiden, virgin and pure is the laurel, full of greenness, with which the Son of God crowned himself. For the Virgin surrounded him in her body, for He was willing to descend into it and take human and mortal flesh. She pleased God, and God seated her in His high court in eternal glory, where she reigns with him worthily. The harp of Apollo (which means common and divine faith) keeps her in eternal remembrance. She is the one through whom God advances those who have the victory over the world and exalts them in his high glory.

Now I will tell you the meaning of the quarrel and the argument between Phoebus and the god of love, concerning their valor and their ways. From this comes the answer to a doubtful question which anyone who knows how to explain the fable is accustomed to make and propose. It is this: which has greater power, good love or wisdom? These two things are properly in God, Who is perfect good love and wisdom, unconditionally, without discord and without difference. Everything that there is in the Deity is one, without diversity; but with respect to the effect and the deeds of wisdom and love, and with respect to our understanding, there seems to be a difference between them. Wisdom properly made man and the world together, but man sinned by his folly, and so was condemned to mortal pain and eternally damned. If God in His pity and His love for man had not interceded, it's the truth, it would have been better for man never to have been made than that he should have later sinned against God and incur mortal damnation. In order to rescue man, the love of God fashioned wisdom from the dart of good love, and sent it to the world in human form to join itself to our nature. Cupid, the one who guides us and shows us the right way of good love, in my opinion, represents God, the King of paradise, who indoctrinates us in love if we hold well to His teaching. He certainly showed us a sign of love when he created sky and earth, world and sea and all the things in them for our benefit. God loved us well, without doubt, when He made us in His likeness and in His image, and when He caused his wisdom to descend to earth and take human flesh, to release us from servitude from pain and mortal suffering, where man placed himself by his folly, and when He had His body delivered to death to heal us and

deliver us from death and the infernal prison and to make us heirs and participants in the sovereign heritage.

Our God, our Saviour, Who loved and cherished us, is Cupid, the good archer, who well knows how to feather his arrows well to strike lovers. The arrow is the commandments of the law, which are made differently and of diverse workmanship; one part teaches us to love, the other to hate, one part to follow and the other to flee; the point is compunction of the heart and good intentions should be called the shaft. The arrow must be feathered with two feathers, in order to fly straight; these feathers, for whoever would pay close attention to them, are two divine commandments. Upon these two especially the law and the prophets depend, and all those who undertake to perform these two commandments loyally know well how to shoot these arrows. One of the feathers, as I understand it, is that in every hour and at all times, with heart and soul and will, we ought to do what pleases God and love Him more than all things with noble pure heart, without bitterness, like our father and our master: that is the feather which sits on the right. The other feather is that one must love one's neighbor as oneself, and not act unfaithfully toward him. He who has feathered his arrow in this way will accomplish the law which our lord has given. This arrow is named charity; from it come in truth all good things and all courtesy. Charity flees all villainy, all evil, all disloyalty; charity loves all loyalty. The one who is pierced with this point is bound to love all reason and all moderation, in all respects, if he has no tolerance for any outrage. God was willing to strike His son with this arrow when, in order to cure us, he was willing to offer up His Blessed Son to pain and death on our behalf. He will certainly show us the way of love. Charity, as God is my witness, is the best, the most certain and the sovereign arrow. I know that whoever has this arrow is in God and God is in him, for God Himself is charity, by witness of scriptural authority. He who lacks this arrow is surely lacking in all other good things. Little can he value his wisdom, his dignity or his power; for without the virtue of charity, all other good things are vanity. Charity is the enkindling flame, with which God enflames us with love for Him. It is the torch and the arrow with which God kindles and catches us.

The archer of filthy business, the devil, the enemy, draws another arrow, quite the opposite, and has put many people in misery with it. This arrow is twisted and knotty, rough and harsh and splintered; this one is tipped with hate. The soul which is touched by it hates all good and all moderation all reason, all law and right, all honor, all loyalty, and loves all disloyalty all sin, all villainy, all evil and all misconduct, all filth and all vileness, all evil and all iniquity. This arrow is named envy, and its feathers are the opposite of those of the one described before.

Source: *Ovide Moralisé*, ed. C. De Boer (Amsterdam, 1915; rpt. Wiesbaden, 1966) Book I, ll. 2737-3064