

HESIOD'S THE SHIELD OF HERACLES

Translated by Christopher Kelk

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...or resembling

The maid who left Mycenae, following  
Warlike Amphitryon; she travelled on  
To Thebes, the daughter of Electryon,  
Alcmene. She surpassed all womankind  
In beauty and in stature, while her mind  
Was sharper than all women's who had wed  
A mortal. Her face and her dark eyes had spread  
Such charm as Aphrodite has, and she  
Gave honour to her spouse more lovingly        10  
Than any had before her. He indeed  
Had slain her noble father in his greed  
And wrath about his oxen. So he came  
To Thebes from his own country and became  
A suppliant to Cadmus' men who carried  
Their shields, and with the modest maid he'd married  
He dwelt without the joys of love till when  
He would avenge the death of those great men,  
Her brothers, burning down in conflagration  
The hamlets of the Teleboean nation        20  
And Taphos. For this labour had been laid  
On him – the gods were witnesses. Afraid  
To face their wrath, as quickly as could be  
He hastened to complete the task that he  
Was forced by Zeus to do. With him went, too,  
The horse-driving Boeotian warriors, who  
Panted above their shields, the hand-to-hand  
Locrian fighters and the gallant band  
Of Phocians, ever keen for battle and war.  
The son of noble Alcaeus went before        30

Them all, rejoicing in his fighting men.  
However, Zeus was contemplating then  
Another scheme to spawn one to defend  
All gods and men from a disastrous end.  
One night he left Olympus, pondering  
Guile deep within his heart while hankering  
For a well-girdled woman. Rapidly  
He came to Typhaonium, then he  
Came to the summit of Mt. Phicium's height  
To plot great things, and thus in just one night 40  
With the trim-legged child of Electryon  
He lay, and glorious Amphitryon,  
His folk's heroic shepherd, after he,  
His task completed, gained his victory,  
Went home. Before his men he visited,  
The ones who worked his fields, he went instead  
With speed to his dear wife. Then was he gripped  
With passion, and as one who's happily slipped  
From sore affliction or the misery  
Of cruel bondage, just the same did he 50  
Come home, and with his modest wife he lay  
All night, delighting in the fine array  
Of golden Aphrodite's great largess.  
A god and a fine man's loving tenderness  
Produced in Thebes a brace of sons: although  
Brothers, they were not of one spirit – no,  
One was the dread, strong, mighty Heracles,  
Far better than his brother Iphicles,  
Spearsman Amphityron's lad. The former one  
She bore from the embrace of Cronus's son, 60

The Lord of the Dark Clouds, and he would slay  
Brave Cycnus, son of Ares, for one day  
In far-shooting Apollo's land he spied  
Him and Ares, who's never satisfied  
With war. Their armour gleamed like blazing flame  
As, standing in their chariots, on they came,  
Their swift steeds pawing the earth, while all around  
The dust rose up like smoke; over the ground  
The well-built chariot-rails were rattling;  
The horses' hooves headlong were thundering. 70  
Fine Cycnus smiled, for he had hopes to see  
His slaying the dynamic progeny  
Of Zeus and his charioteer and take away  
Their splendid arms. But Phoebus would not pay  
Attention to his vaunting flummeries,  
Having stirred against him mighty Heracles.  
Apollo's grove and altar flared in dread  
Of him and of his armour; from his head  
His eyes flashed fire. Ah, what mortal man  
Would have dared to oppose him other than 80  
Heracles and Iolaus? For those two  
Were strong and had invincible arms which grew  
From powerful shoulders. To the charioteer,  
Strong Iolaus, Heracles spoke out clear:  
"Iolaus, best loved of men, Amphitryon  
Has sinned against the gods who dwell upon  
Olympus. Leaving Tiryns, he went to  
The sweet-crowned, well-built Thebes, because he slew  
Electryon for his wide-browed oxen. He  
Came to Creon and long-robed Enioche. 90

They then embraced him, giving him largess  
Such as is due to suppliants, and no less  
Praised him, nay even more. He happily  
Lived with trim-legged Alcmene. Presently  
Your father and I were born, each from the other  
So different, though birthed by the same mother.  
Zeus made your father unintelligent,  
And so he left his family and went  
To honour vile Eurystheus – such a shame!  
In latter days the poor man surely came           100  
To grieve his folly. One can't take away  
A deed that's done. But Zeus prepared to lay  
Hard tasks on me. But come, friend, instantly  
Grab the red reins, augment your bravery  
And in your chariot urge your swift steeds on,  
And have no fear of murderous Ares – none –  
Who round the holy grove of Lord Apollo,  
Far-Shooter, rage with his angry 'hollo'.  
Surely he's had enough of killing men,  
Though strong." Fine Iolaus answered then:       110  
"My friend, the almighty Father honours you  
And the Earth-Shaker, Lord Poseidon, too,  
Who guards the veil of Thebe's walls. They bring  
To you a man so overpowering  
That you may win great glory. Straightaway  
Put on your warlike armour that we may  
Join Ares' chariot with our own and fight.  
The dauntless son of Zeus he will not fright,  
Nor Iphicles' son: I think he'll rather flee  
The blameless Heracles' twin progeny           120

When at close quarters; for the cry of war  
They're keen to raise, loving it so much more  
Than feasting." Heracles was well content  
At this: he smiled and, answering him, he sent  
Him winged words: "Iolaus, nurtured by  
A god, tempestuous battle now is nigh.  
As you have shown your expertise before  
At other times, apply it now once more  
And mount Arion, your great black-maned steed,  
And roam about to aid me in my need." 130

He donned the greaves of shining bronze which he  
Was given by Hephaestus famously.  
And then his fine, gold breastplate on his chest  
He placed, a gift from Pallas when his test  
Of toil he was about to bear, and then  
Across his back the steel that saves all men  
From doom he fastened and behind him slung  
His quiver so that round his frame it hung  
With many chilling arrows which deal death  
And make a man incapable of breath. 140

Their points were lethal, and tears from them ran;  
Their shafts were smooth and of a lengthy span,  
Their butts with feathers covered, which once shook  
Upon a red-brown eagle. Then he took  
His sturdy spear, and on his head he placed  
A helmet made of adamant, finely chased  
And closely shaped. His bronze shield, all aglow,  
He seized, which no-one ever with a blow  
Had smashed or crushed, a wonder to behold,  
The whole orb glistening with shining gold, 150

Gypsum, electron and white ivory,  
While forged upon the layers one could see  
Dark-blue enamel. At its core was Dread  
In adamant, unspeakable, his head  
Turned back, his eyes afire; his teeth shone white,  
All in a row, daunting, provoking fright;  
Feared Strife hovered about his shaggy face,  
She who assembled all the warrior race:  
She snatched the minds and senses pitilessly  
Of those poor folk who brought hostility       160  
To Zeus's son, and they went down below  
Into the house of Hades; their bones, though,  
After the skin round them had rotted quite,  
Crumbled away beneath the parching light.  
And gathered all around the prince Caeneus  
And Dryas and Perithous and Hopleus,  
Exadius, Prolochus and Phalereus  
And Mopsus, son of Ares, and Theseus  
Were all the Lapith spearsmen, keen for strife.  
The prince's ranks looked like the gods whose life 170  
Is endless, all of silver, and upon  
Their frames was armoured gold, assembled on  
The other side the prophet Asbolus,  
The black-haired Mimas, Ureus, Arctus,  
Dryalus and Perimedes, progeny  
Of Peuceus, all of silver equally,  
Gold pine-trees in their hands. It was as though  
They lived that, hand-to-hand, they battled so  
With spears and pines; grim Ares' horses raced,  
In gold, while that fierce Ares could be traced   180

There, too, the creator of the spoils, and he  
Held in his hands a spear and urgently  
Was spurring on his men. As if he would  
Be slaying live men, he reeked blood. He stood  
Upon his chariot, while beside him Flight  
And Panic hovered, eager for the fight.  
There, too, was Tritogeneia, child of Zeus,  
Spoil-winner, who seemed anxious to let loose  
The battle, with her weapon in her hand,  
Gold helmet on her head, while round her spanned 190  
The aegis, as she headed for the strife.  
The gods, too, who enjoy eternal life  
Were there, and Zeus' and Leto's progeny  
Played on a golden lyre harmoniously  
Amongst them all. The gods abode was there,  
Holy Olympus, and, spread everywhere,  
Was boundless wealth; a limpid melody  
The Muses sang. A harbour, sanctuary  
From the fierce sea, was painted there as well,  
Which seemed to heave about the ocean's swell, 200  
Made of refined tin, finished as a sphere,  
With many hunting dolphins rushing here  
And there. Two silver dolphins in that team  
Were eating up the mute fish as a stream  
Of water left their mouths, and, furthermore,  
Some bronze fish trembled. Sat upon the shore,  
A fisherman watched them, and he seemed to be  
About to cast the fishing-net that he  
Held in his hands. There was the progeny  
Of rich-haired Danaë, a cavalry



Master named Perseus, whose feet did not touch  
The shield, though they were very near. O such  
A thing to speak of! For in not one place  
Was it sustained – the Lame One thus had chased  
The gold himself. Around his feet were shaped  
Black sandals and across his back was draped,  
Tied with a bronze cross-belt, a black-sheathed sword,  
And, quite as swift as thought, he roamed abroad  
In flight. Across the broad of his back the head  
Was seen of the monster Gorgon, causing dread 220  
To everyone. A marvel to behold,  
A silver pouch held it. Bright crests of gold  
Hung from it. On the hero's head there lay  
A thing which never sees the light of day,  
The dreadful cap of Hades. Shuddering  
With horror, he himself was hastening,  
Chased by the Gorgons, whom none would make bold  
To near or speak of, eager to take hold  
Of him. As they set foot on the pale steel,  
The shield rang with a sharp and piercing peal. 230  
Two serpents, with their heads curved forwards, hung  
From tassels: each one showed a flickering tongue  
And teeth that gnashed with fury, eyes alight,  
And on their heads there quaked prodigious Fright.  
Beyond them armed men fought, some to defend  
Their town and parents from a tragic end,  
Others to sack it. Many people lay  
Slaughtered, but more continued in the fray.  
Upon the well-built towers of bronze, with shrieks  
That rent the air, the women tore their cheeks. 240

By famed Hephaestus had all this been made.  
The elders, on whom old age had been laid,  
Amassed outside the city gates to pray  
To the gods in fear for their own sons. But they  
Engaged in battle. The dark Fates, fierce-eyed,  
Grim, bloody, unapproachable, all vied,  
With pearl-white fangs that gnashed and snapped, to seize  
Those who had fallen; thus, when one of these  
Had dropped or had received some injury  
They caught him and, in her avidity                    250  
To drink dark blood, one of them would append  
Her great claws on him, and he'd then descend  
To Hades and chill Tartarus, and when  
They were replete with human blood, they then  
Went back into the fray once they had flung  
The man behind them, while above them hung  
Lachesis, Clotho and Atropos (less tall  
Than her companions, indeed quite small  
And yet the eldest one and nonpareil),  
And over the poor wretch a frenzied fray            260  
They caused. They eyed each other fearsomely,  
Fighting with hands and talons equally.  
And there stood mournful, pale Unhappiness,  
Dry, shrunk with hunger, causing great distress,  
Knees swollen, long-nailed, dripping snot, cheeks red  
With blood that down upon the ground she shed,  
Ad hideously she leered, her shoulders wet  
With much dust mixed with tears. One's eyes then met  
A well-built city: seven gold gates were fit  
Upon its towers' joists, thus guarding it.            270

The men with dances and festivities  
Were holding celebrations, some of these  
Conveying a new bride up to the house  
Where she will live in harmony with her spouse,  
Their means a well-wheeled car, the bridal song  
Increasing, while in waves afar a throng  
Of handmaids waved their torches, pivoting  
About: they went ahead, all revelling  
In the hilarity; there followed then  
Frolicsome choirs; to the shrill pipes young men 280  
Sang softly while the echo shook around  
Them all. The maidens, to the lovely sound  
Of lyres, led the dance, while flutes were played  
Upon the other side where a parade  
Of youths in laughing mood were revelling  
And causing the whole area to ring  
With mirth, dance and frivolity. Again,  
Folk galloped on horseback, while husbandmen  
Broke up the rich soil, tunics in a band  
Swathed round their loins. There was a wide cornland 290  
Where some with sharp hooks reaped the stalks which bent  
Beneath their weight, while others were intent  
On binding sheaves with strips, the threshing-floor  
Then spreading out; and there were yet some more  
Who reaped the vintage with a reaping-hook,  
While from them others into baskets took  
Black and white clusters from the many vines  
Which were weighed down with leaves and hung in lines  
Of silvery strands. Others were gathering  
Them into baskets. Near them was a string 300

Of vines in gold: all this had been designed  
By talented Hephaestus; it was lined  
With shivering leaves and silver stakes, and they  
Surrounded grapes that turned black. An array  
Of men were treading grapes while others drew  
Them off. Men boxed, men wrestled; huntsmen, too,  
Chased hares, while sharp-toothed hounds ran in the lead,  
Eager to catch their quarry by their speed,  
The hares keen to escape. Horsemen, astride  
Their charges, strove in contest as they vied     310  
To win a prize, and charioteers stood on  
Their well-built chariots while urging on  
Their swift steeds with a slack rein: as they flew,  
The jointed chariots, as they clattered, drew  
A loud shriek from the naves. Thus endlessly  
Their toil continued, and no victory  
Was gained. A large gold tripod had been laid  
Out for them, which had brilliantly been made  
By clever Hephaestus. Round the rim there ran  
Full-flowing Ocean all around the span     320  
Of the shield. Above it swans called out and trailed  
The sky while on the water's face there sailed  
Many more. Beside them fish were tumbling.  
To see that great shield was a wondrous thing,  
Even for Thunderer Zeus who had decreed  
Hephaestus make it. Heracles indeed,  
The valiant progeny of Zeus, could wield  
Exquisitely this masterpiece, this shield.  
He leapt upon his chariot with a spring  
Resembling great Zeus's lightning.     330

Then Iolaus, that strong charioteer,  
Guided the curving chariot. Coming near,  
Grey-eyed Athena spoke encouraging  
And wingèd words: "Hail to you, o offspring  
Of far-framed Lynceus! On this very day  
Our lord, great Zeus gives you the power to slay  
Cycnus and then strip the arms that splendidly  
Glittered. And yet you shall hear more from me,  
Mightiest of the people of this land:  
When you have slaughtered Cycnus, I demand 340  
That you leave him behind, his armour too,  
And, as he joins the fight, I order you  
To watch Ares and, when he is revealed  
As powerless beneath his well-wrought shield,  
Then wound him with your spear and then retreat,  
For it is not ordained that you should cheat  
Him of his steeds and arms. Then the goddess  
Leapt on the chariot with illustriousness  
And victory in her hands. The charioteer  
Rebuked his steeds and, at his cry, in fear 350  
They sped the chariot along the ground,  
And from it dust was scattered all around.  
The bright-eyed goddess shook her aegis then,  
Thus putting dauntlessness into both men;  
The earth groaned all around them. Like a flame  
Or hurricane, horse-taming Cycnus came  
Against Ares. The steeds neighed piercingly,  
Facing each other, and reverberantly  
The noise vibrated. "Cycnus, my good friend,"  
Said mighty Heracles, "why do you send 360

Your steeds against me in our sore dismay?  
Guide your swift horses clean out of the way.  
I'm travelling to Trachis and the man  
Who rules there, Ceyx, him whom no-one can  
Outdo in power and honour in that land,  
A thing that you yourself can understand,  
For you wed dark-eyed Themistinoë.  
His daughter. You'll have no delivery  
From death, you fool, if we should meet in war.  
Indeed he has made trial of me before,                    370  
Standing against me, hankering to be  
My victor. Three times was he hit by me:  
Each time his shield was pierced, but then I struck  
His thigh with all my strength, and now it stuck  
Deep in his flesh. Headlong into the dust  
He fell beneath the force of my spear-thrust.  
He would then have encountered the disdain  
Of all the gods by leaving on the plain  
His bloody spoils." But Cycnus did not pay  
Him any mind, and he refused to stay                    380  
His steeds. The two then leapt to the ground  
From their well-structured chariots in one bound.  
The fine-maned steeds were driven near to those two:  
Their hoofs rang out as over the ground they flew.  
As rocks from some great mountain way up high  
Come leaping down and tumble, as they fly,  
Upon each other, while oak-trees, once tall,  
And pines and towering poplars break and fall  
Beneath that mighty avalanche before  
They reach the plain, so did they, with a roar,           390

Fall on each other. Famed Iolaus, Arne,  
Aegina, green Althea and Helice  
Echoed out loud. They closed with a great shout.  
Clear-sighted Zeus then rained down many a gout  
Of blood and thundered loudly. This was done  
To signal battle to his dauntless son.  
As in the mountain-glens a well-tusked boar  
Will feel afraid to see a man before  
His eyes, resolving then to make assay  
Against the huntsmen, turning his head away 400  
To whet his teeth while foam begins to flow  
About his mouth, his eyes with fire aglow,  
His shaggy mane now bristling around

His neck, so Heracles leapt to the ground.  
Just when the grasshopper with his dusky wings,  
Perched on a verdant shoot, of summer sings  
To men, the dainty dew his nourishment,  
And all day long from dawn he is content  
To pour his voice out at the very height  
Of summer's heat, when Sirius can blight 410  
The flesh with scorching, when the beards which grow  
Upon the millet men in summer sow,  
When the crude grapes which Phoebus gave to men –  
Both joy and sorrow – start to colour, then  
They battled and a mighty din arose.  
Just as two lions in their wrath oppose  
Each other for a deer that has been killed –  
They snarl and clash - , or else like crooked-billed  
Vultures who claw each other as they screech

Aloud on some high rock that they may reach 420

A mountain-goat or else a fat, wild buck  
Which with his bow a vigorous man has struck  
But, ignorant of the place, has roamed away,  
But readily they mark it and the fray  
Is keen between them, they thus, with a yell,  
Against each other make assault pell-mell.

The Cycnus, passionate to have a chance  
To kill his foe, struck with his brazen lance  
His shield but did not break it. It was so  
That Zeus's benefaction saved his foe. 430

But mighty Heracles, the progeny  
Of Amphitryon, struck Cycnus violently  
Upon the neck, where it was unprotected  
Beneath helmet and shield, and thus bisected  
The sinews. Like a rock, down Cycnus came,  
Or like a lofty pine zapped by the flame  
Of Zeus's thunderbolt, and all about  
His frame his armour clashed, and then the stout  
Heracles let him alone as he took care

To watch for Ares. With a glowering stare, 440  
Just like a lion who rips ferociously  
The hide of a corpse he's found and rapidly  
Tears it apart in anger, fiercely glaring  
And with his paws the earth he falls to tearing,  
Lashing his flanks and shoulders with his tail  
So that whoever sees him there will fail  
To draw near and give battle, even thus  
Amphitryon's son, for fight still gluttonous,  
Stood face-to-face with Ares eagerly,



Nursing within his heart his bravery. 450

Ares drew near and in his heart he wept,

Then with a cry they at each other leapt.

As when a rock shoots from a great rock-face

And rolls in lengthy whirls, bounding apace

And roaring, clashing with a high bluff, where

They grapple with each other, thus this pair

Engaged with a battle shout. Athena, though,

With her dak aegis, went to meet his foe:

She glowered and these wingèd words she spoke:

“Ares, hold back your matchless hands and choke 460

Your fearful anger. There are no decrees

That you should slay bold-hearted Heracles

Or strip his splendid armour. Come then, stay

Your fighting and do not stand in my way.”

So said she, but she couldn't make him hear:

He spoke out loudly, brandishing each spear

Like fire and rushed headlong, eager to slay

His foe, and with a spear he made assay

Upon his shield, galled that his son had died,

But from her chariot Athena, gleaming-eyed, 470

Deflected his spear's force. Then bitter woe

Seized Ares, who then leapt upon his foe,

His keen sword drawn. The son of Amphitryon,

Still keen for battle, as Ares came on,

Forcefully stabbed his thigh, which lay revealed

Beneath the base of his well-structured shield.

Deep down into his flesh he thrust his spear

And cast him flat upon the ground. Then Fear

And Panic caused the steeds to race ahead  
And pull the smooth-wheeled chariot, as they sped, 480  
Close to him. Lifting him from the wide ground  
Into the chariot he lashed them, bound  
For Olympus. Heracles and glorious  
Iolaus stripped the armour from Cycnus.  
Upon their chariot their swift steeds led  
Them straight tot Trachis. The goddess, though, instead  
Went to Olympus. As for Cycnus, he  
By Ceyx and the large community  
Ruled by that king was buried; in that place  
Were Anthe and Aegina and the race 490  
Of famed Iolcus, Helice and Arne.  
There gathered there a multiplicity  
Of folk to honour Ceyx, the good friend  
Of all the blessed gods, but in the end  
The Anaurus doomed the grave to oblivion  
When swelled by a rain-storm: this by Leto's son,  
Apollo, was decreed, for regularly  
Cycnus would watch for and then violently  
Despoil rich hecatombs which folk would bring  
To Pytho as a holy offering. 500