

Niobe (Edited)
by Ovid
from *Metamorphosis*

All Lydia was in an uproar, and the rumor of the fact went through the town of Phrygia, and filled the wide world with talk about it. Before her own marriage, Niobe had known her, at the time when she was still single and living in Mæonia and Sipylus. And yet by the punishment of her countrywoman, Arachne, she was not warned to yield to the inhabitants of Heaven, and to use less boastful words. Many things worked together to increase her pride. However, neither the skill of her husband, nor their noble family heritage, nor the power of a mighty kingdom, pleased her so much (although all of them did please her) as her own children. Niobe might have been called the happiest of mothers if she had not thought so herself.

Manto, the daughter of Tiresias, foreknowing the future, urged by a divine impulse, had proclaimed through the middle of the streets, "You women of Ismenus, go all of you, and give to Latona, and the two children of Latona, the pious frankincense, together with prayers, and wreath your hair with laurel. By my mouth does Latona command this." The command was obeyed, and all the Theban women adorned their temples with leaves of laurel, as they were ordered, and offered frankincense on the sacred fires, and their prayers.

Then Niobe came, surrounded with a crowd of attendants. She stood out from the rest by the gold interwoven in her Phrygian garments. She tossed her hair, which hung down on both shoulders, and stood still. She proudly looked around and said, "What madness is this to prefer the gods of heaven, whom you have only heard of, to those who are seen? Why is Latona worshipped at the altars, and my godhead is still without its due frankincense? Tantalus was my father. He alone was allowed to approach the tables of the gods above. The sister of the Pleiades is my mother. The most mighty Atlas is my grandsire, who carries the skies on his neck. Jupiter is my other grandsire; He is my father-in-law. The Phrygian nations dread me; the palace of Cadmus is subject to me as its mistress; and the walls that were formed by the strings of my husband's lyre, together with their people, are governed by me and my husband. To whatever part of the house I turn my eyes, I see immense wealth. To this is added a face worthy of a goddess. Add to this my seven daughters, and as many sons, and, at a future day, sons-in-law and daughters-in-law. Knowing this, how can you presume to prefer Latona the Titaness? She was the daughter of some unknown Cæus, to whom, when in travail, the great earth once refused a little spot, to myself. Your goddess was not received by heaven, earth, or water. She was banished till Delos, pitying the wanderer, said, "You roam a stranger on the land, I in the waves," and gave her an unstable place of rest. She was made the mother of two children, that is but one seventh the number of my children. I am fortunate, and who can deny it? And I will remain fortunate. Who, too, can doubt of that?"

My wealth has made me secure. I am too great for Fortune possibly to hurt. And even if she could take away many things from me, even then she would leave me much more. My many blessings have now risen above any worry about my fortune. Suppose it *is* possible for some part of my many, many children to be taken away from me. Still, thus stripped, I will not be reduced to two—the number of Latona. How far, I ask, is she from being childless? Not far. Go from the sacrifice. So go away quickly from the sacrifice, and remove the laurel from your hair!"

They removed it, and left the sacrifice unperformed. They adored the goddess in gentle murmurs.

The goddess was then indignant. On the highest top of Mount Cynthus, she said to her two children, "Behold! Your mother proudly gave birth to you and shall yield to no one of the goddesses, except to Juno alone. I am called into question whether I am a Goddess, and, for all future ages, I am driven from the altars devoted to me, unless you help me. But this is not my only grief. The daughter of Tantalus has added abusive language to her shocking deeds, and has dared to put you down to her own children, and (what I wish may fall upon herself), she has called me childless; and the profane wretch has discovered a tongue like her father's."

Latona was going to add more to her complaint, but Phœbus said, "You can stop there; it merely prolongs the delay of her punishment." Phœbe said the same; and, by a speedy descent through the air, they arrived, covered with clouds, at the citadel of Cadmus.

There was a plain near the walls; it was level, extending far and wide, trampled continually by horses, where multitudes of wheels and hard hoofs had softened the clods placed beneath them. There, part of the seven sons of Amphion were mounting upon their spirited steeds. They pressed their backs, red with the Tyrian dye, and wielded the reins heavy with gold. Niobe's first son Ismenus was guiding the steps of the horses in a perfect circle, and curbing their foaming mouths, when he cried aloud, "Ah, wretched me!" and a dart pierced through the middle of his breast. The reins dropped from his dying hand, and eventually he fell on his side, over the horse's shoulder.

When he heard the sound of an arrow in the air, Sipylus, who was beside him, hurried his horse, as a pilot, sensible of the storm approaching, flies on seeing a cloud, and unfurls the hanging sails on every side, that the light breeze may by no means escape them. He gave rein and while he did so, the unerring dart overtook him. It stuck quivering in the top of his neck, the bare steel protruding from his throat. As he bent forward, he rolled over the horse's neck and the mane, and stained the ground with his warm blood.

At this time, the unhappy Phædimus, and Tantalus, the heir to the name of his grandsire, were just putting an end to their usual exercise of riding, and turning to the youthful exercises of the palestra, glowing with oil. They were struggling in a close grapple, breast to breast, when an arrow, sped onward from the stretched bow and pierced them both, just as they were united together. At the same instant they groaned aloud, and together they laid their limbs on the ground, writhing in pain. Together as they lay, for the last time, they rolled their eyeballs, and together they breathed out their life.

Alphenor saw this, and, beating his torn breast, flew to them, to lift up their cold limbs in his embrace, and fell in this affectionate duty. The Delian God had pierced the inner part of his midriff with the fatal steel. As soon as it was pulled out, a part of his lungs was dragged out on the barbs, and his blood poured out, with his life, into the air. But no single wound reached the unshaven Damasicthon. He was struck between the leg and where the sinewy ham makes the space between the joints soft. And while he tried with his hand to draw out the fatal weapon, another arrow was driven through his neck, up to the feathers. The blood drove this out, and itself starting forth, shot high up and pierced the air. The last of them, Ilioneus, had raised his unavailing arms in prayer, and had said, "O you gods (not knowing that all were not to be addressed), spare me!" The god, the bearer of the bow, was moved, but his arrow could not be recalled. He died with the smallest wound of all, his heart not being struck deep by the arrow.

The news of this calamity, and the grief of the people, and the tears of her family, came suddenly to the mother. She wondered that it could have happened. She was enraged that the gods above had dared this, and that they enjoyed so great a privilege. But Amphion, the father, thrust his sword through his breast, and died, ending his grief with his life.

Alas! how different was this Niobe from that Niobe who had lately driven the people from the altars of Latona, and, with her proud head, had directed her steps through the middle of the city, envied by her own people, but now to be pitied even by an enemy! She fell down on the cold bodies, and with no distinction, she distributed her last kisses among all her sons. She raised her livid arms from these towards heaven, she said, "Fill yourself, cruel Latona, with my sorrow. Fill your breast with my mourning. Fill, too, your relentless heart with seven deaths. I have received my death-blow. Rejoice and triumph, my victorious enemy. But why victorious? More remains to me in my misery than to you in your happiness. Even after so many deaths, I am the conqueror."

So she had spoken, when the string twanged from the bent bow, which affrighted all but Niobe alone. She had become bold by her misfortunes.

Her daughters were standing in black array, with their hair disheveled, before the biers of their brothers. One of these, drawing out the weapon sticking in her bowels, about to die, fainted, with her face placed upon her brother. Another, trying to comfort her wretched parent, became suddenly silent, and was doubled over with an invisible wound. She did not close her mouth until after the breath departed.

Another sister vainly trying to escape, fell down; another died upon her sister; another lay hidden; another trembled. And after six had been put to death from different wounds, only one remained. Her mother covered her with all her body and with all her garments. "Leave me just one, the youngest! I only ask that you spare one out of so many!"

While she was making her entreaty, the daughter for whom she was entreating was slain. Childless, she sat down among her dead sons and daughters and husband, and became hardened by her woes. No hair of hers was moved by the breeze. There was no blood in her face. Her eyes were still in her sad cheeks. There was no appearance of life in her body. Her tongue itself, too, congealed within, together with her hardened palate, and the veins ceased to be able to be moved. Her neck could not be bent, nor could her arms give any motion, nor her feet move. Within her it was all stone.

Still did she weep on; and, enveloped in a hurricane of mighty wind, she was borne away to her native land. There, fixed on the top of a mountain, she dissolved; and even yet does the marble distill tears.

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