

Theognis, *Elegies* 2.1231-1389 (trans. Douglas E. Gerber) [Greek text; 6th century BCE]

Each set of lines (e.g. 1231–34, 1235–38, etc.) should be read as a fragment or excerpt of an original poem.

1231–34:

Cruel Eros, the spirits of Madness took you up and nursed you. Because of you Troy's acropolis was destroyed, and great Theseus, Aegeus' son, and noble Ajax, Oileus' son, through your acts of recklessness.¹

1235–38:

Listen, boy, you who have mastered my soul. I'll not say anything unpersuasive or displeasing to your heart. Come, have the patience of mind to understand my words. You are under no compulsion to do what is distasteful to you.

1238ab:

Never forsake the friend you have and seek another, persuaded by what base men say to you.

1239–40:

Often they'll say foolish things against you in my presence and against me in your presence. Pay no heed to them.

1241–42:

You will derive pleasure from the former love that is past, but you will no longer be in control of the love that is coming on.²

1243–44:

Let's be friends for a long time; thereafter associate with others, you whose deceitful ways are the very opposite of loyalty.

1245–46:

Water and fire will never mix, and we will never be true friends to each other.

1247–48:

Reflect on my hatred and your transgression, and know in your heart that I will make you pay for your offence to the best of my ability.

1249–52:

Boy, you're just like a horse; when you got your fill of barley, you came back to my stable, longing for your skilled charioteer, lovely meadow, cool spring water, and shady groves.

1253–54:

Happy is he who has dear boys, horses of uncloven hoof, hunting dogs, and friends in foreign parts.

1255–56:

Whoever does not love boys, horses of uncloven hoof, and dogs, never has good cheer in his heart.

1257–58:

Boy, you are like roving perils¹ in your disposition, loving now these, now those.

1259–62:

Boy, your form is handsome, but on your head there lies a stubborn and senseless crown. For you have in your heart the disposition of a close-wheeling kite, led on by what other men say.

1263–66:

Boy, you have repaid your benefactor badly and there is no gratitude from you for kindnesses rendered. Never yet have you bestowed any benefit on me, and I who have often done you a good turn have met with no respect.

1267–70:

A boy and a horse have a similar outlook. A horse does not weep for its charioteer lying in the dust, but carries the man who comes next, when it's had its fill of barley. In the same way also a boy loves the man who's at hand.

1271–74:

Boy, because of your lustful behaviour you have lost your good sense, and you have become a source of shame to my friends. For a short time you gave me cooling relief and after stormy weather I quietly put into harbour as night hastened on.²

1275–78:

Love too rises in season, when the burgeoning earth blooms with spring flowers. Then Love leaves the beautiful island of Cyprus and goes among men, bringing seed down upon the land.

1278ab:

Whoever gave you advice about me and told you to abandon my friendship and go . . .

1278cd:

Like a lion trusting in his might, I snatched a fawn from the doe with my claws, and did not drink its blood.

1279–82:

I have no wish to treat you badly, dear boy, not even if it will be better for me in the eyes of the immortal gods. For I do not sit in judgement on trifling offences. Of handsome boys...²³

1283–94:

Boy, don't wrong me. I still want to please you, and I make this observation with all good cheer. Rest assured, you will not get the better of me nor will you trick me. For though (if?) you have won and have the advantage hereafter, yet I shall wound you as you flee from me, as they say once the daughter of Iasius, the maiden Iasie, who was ripe for marriage, refused men and fled. Girding herself, blonde Atalanta left her father's home and tried to accomplish what was not to be accomplished. She went off to the lofty mountain peaks, fleeing from lovely marriage, the gift of golden Aphrodite. But in the end she came to know it, in spite of her refusal.⁴

1295–98:

Boy, don't stir up my soul in the midst of my cruel torments and don't let my love for you carry me off to the house of Persephone.⁵ Respect the wrath of the gods and the talk of men, and conceive kindly thoughts.

1299–1304:

Boy, how long will you flee from me? How I pursue and seek you out! May there come some end (to my eager desire for you?). But you, with lustful and arrogant heart and with the cruel ways of the kite, keep fleeing. Come, wait up and grant me your favour. Not for long will you possess the gift of the violet-crowned Cyprus-born [i.e. Aphrodite].⁶

1305–10:

Realizing in your heart that the bloom of lovely boyhood passes more swiftly than a footrace, reflect on this and release me from my bonds, lest one day you too, mighty boy, be overpowered and encounter the harsh workings of the Cyprus-born, just as I now do with you. Guard against this and do not let bad behaviour get the better of you . . . I was aware, boy, that you cheated on me—in fact I . . . you—in favour of those with whom you are now a close friend, throwing aside my friendship as of no value. You were not their friend before, whereas I thought that out of all I would make you a loyal comrade. Go

ahead, take another friend now; but I, your benefactor, am laid low. Let no one among all men, viewing you, desire to love a boy.

1318ab:

O wretch that I am! Because of my wretched suffering I have become a joy to my enemies and a burden to my friends.

1319–22:

Boy, since the Cyprian goddess gave you a beauty that arouses desire and all the young men are obsessed with your looks, listen to these words of mine and take them to heart as a favour to me, knowing that love is hard for a man to bear.

1323–26:

Cyprus-born, put an end to my pain, scatter the cares that gnaw at my heart, and restore me to happiness. Keep away cruel worries and with kindly heart grant me the workings of a sound mind, now that I have completed my span of youth.

1327–34:

Boy, as long as you have a chin that is smooth, I'll never stop praising you, not even if it is destined that I die. It's a fine thing still for you the giver and it's not shameful for me the lover to ask. I beseech you, on behalf of our (my?) parents, show me respect, boy, and grant me your favour. If one day you too shall crave the gift of the Cyprus-born crowned with violets and pursue another, then may the god grant that you meet with the same response.⁷

1335–36:

Happy the man who goes home and engages in amorous exercise, sleeping with a handsome boy all day long. I am no longer in love with a boy, I have kicked aside harsh pain, I have gladly escaped from grievous hardships, and the fair-crowned Cytherean [i.e. Aphrodite] has released me from longing. And as for your charms, boy, they don't exist in my eyes.

1341–50:

Alas, I am in love with a soft-skinned boy who shows me off to all my friends in spite of my unwillingness. I'll put up with the exposure—there are many things that one is forced to do against one's will—for it's by no unworthy boy that I was shown to be captivated. And there is some pleasure in loving a boy, since once in fact even the son of Cronus [i.e. Zeus], king of the immortals, fell in love with Ganymede, seized him, carried him off to Olympus, and made him divine, keeping the lovely bloom of boyhood. So, don't be astonished, Simonides, that I too have been revealed as captivated by love for a handsome boy.

1351–52:

Don't go carousing, boy, but take an old man's advice. It's not fitting for a young man to carouse.

1353–56:

For the young, Cyrnus, love is bitter and sweet, kind and harsh, until it is fulfilled. For if one fulfills it, it is sweet, but if one pursues it without fulfilment, it is the most painful of all things.

1357–60:

Those who love a boy always have a heavy yoke lying on their necks, a harsh reminder of amorous hospitality. For one who toils to win the love of a boy must, as it were, place his hand in a fire of vine twigs.⁸

1361–62:

You've lost my love, boy, you're like a ship that has struck a rock, and you've grasped a rotten rope.

1363–64:

I'll never cause you harm, even when I am absent, and no one will persuade me not to love you.

1365–66:

Most handsome and desirable of all boys, stay where you are and listen to a few words from me.

1367–68:

A boy shows gratitude, but a woman is a loyal companion of no one; she always loves the man who's at hand.

1369–72:

Love of a boy is fine to have and fine to set aside; it is much easier to find than to fulfil. Countless are the woes that hang suspended from it, countless the blessings. But in this way there is in fact some pleasure present.

1373–74:

You have never yet stayed for my sake, but you always leave in response to every earnest message.

1375–76:

Happy is he who loves a boy and does not know the sea, and is not concerned about the approach of night on the deep.

1377–80:

You are handsome, but under the bad influence of friends you associate with base men and because of this, boy, you incur shameful reproach. As for me, although I was reluctant to lose your love, I have benefited from it, acting as a free man should.

1381–85:

Men thought that you had come with a gift from the golden Cyprus-born . . . (But) the gift of the violet-crowned (Cyprus-born) becomes a most painful burden for men to bear, if she does not grant release from the pain.

1386–89:

Cyprus-born Cytherean, weaver of wiles, to honour you Zeus gave you this special gift. For you overwhelm the sound minds of men and there is no one strong or clever enough to escape you.

¹ Troy was destroyed because of Helen's elopement with Paris; Theseus probably because he accompanied Pirithous in an attempt to carry off Persephone (in some accounts he was imprisoned in Hades, in others he was set free by Heracles); and Ajax because of his rape of Cassandra.

² Perhaps the addressee has passed the age at which he was the one pursued and so could exercise control; now he is at an age when he will do the pursuing and control will change hands.

³ The poet may be saying that all handsome boys do wrong or that handsome boys can do wrong with impunity. In an erotic context 'doing wrong' involves failure to reciprocate the affection shown.

⁴ Just as Atalanta refused marriage but eventually succumbed to Milanion, so the boy has refused the poet's love but in the end will be won over.

⁵ A reference to suicide.

⁶ I.e., youth is short-lived and when the young have passed beyond adolescence Aphrodite no longer causes them to inspire passion in others.

⁷ I.e., when you become a lover, may the response you meet with be favourable or unfavourable, depending on how you respond to me.

⁸ Such a fire blazes quickly and with great heat.