



Anthus & Acanthis | Pipits & Redpolls

Autonous & his hungry horses

Autonous¹ had a propensity to desire well in excess of both his needs and his abilities. As a young and fanciful youth, he had married **Hippodamia**². Their union, perhaps, presaged that his wants would be so singularly channeled towards turning the stubborn mastic³ shrubs of his hill farm into a herd of horses.

On the night of their wedding, Melaneus⁴, Autonous's father, had gifted the newlyweds a small herd of horses to help beat back the onslaught of unruly plants that threatened to overrun the modest hut in which they would begin their family. In the golden dawn light, as they first walked their land, hands entwined, Hippodamia imagined groves of olives, fields of barley, rose hedges, a thriving vineyard, and an array of other plants that could sustain them through the many years ahead. But Autonous imagined only a throng of horses galloping gaily up and down the slopes well into the lazy summer afternoons ahead, their long shadows stretching down the pink Thessalonian slope into the dark sea below.

¹ Autonous translates to "self knowledge"

² Hippodamia translates to "horse tamer." Homer uses the same epithet to refer to Hector in The Iliad, calling him on multiple occasions, ἵπποδάμο, breaker of horses.

³ Mastic means resinous, particularly in reference to the mastic tree, *Pistacia lentiscus*. The resin was used in Ancient Greece as a chewing gum, and from the name we get words like masticate (to chew), masting (the edible nuts of beech, oak, etc) and masseter (the muscle that clenches the jaw and used for chewing).

⁴ Not to be confused with the more regarded Menelaus, King of Sparta, husband of Helen of Troy

Their herd of horses and children grew quickly in size and number, Hippodamia rearing four healthy boys - Anthus, Erodius, Schoeneus and Acanthus⁵ - and their sister, Acanthis, whose gentle and beautiful features had been subtly shaped by the wishes of the gods. The children grew up tall and strong, with Hippodamia's bountiful crops filling their bellies. As the children grew, their hands hardened to the work of life on a farm. And sure enough, the horses tamed the shrubs, and the children turned the newly open land into patches of pomegranates, spinach, wheat, and more. Erodius took a particular fondness to the horses and tended them well, grazing them in the meadows, moving fences to keep the horses clear of their gardens.

But all the drudgery of tending the fields and pasture was shirked by the lazy Autonomous, who left the toil solely to his family. When he expended any energy at all, he set it only to acquiring new horses. And soon his herd, like a plague of locusts, burdened the land with their callous hooves and restless jaws. The plants were chewed right to the ground and the land grew barren of color, save for the scant thistles and rushes the horses had passed over. The vacant yellow eyes of the sad horses looked longingly at the gardens. They pestered at the fences until the rotting wooden posts yielded their hold. Erodius did his best to mend the holes as quickly as they came, but the land grew tired of too many horses.

On one August morning, Helios seemed particularly reluctant to ascend into the sky, and an ashen pallor loomed over the late-summer farm. A frustrated Anthus made his way to the barren meadows where the horses were supposed to be grazing. The charge of the storm prickled his arms. He knew Erodius did his best, but Anthus's crops would never survive without his sparrow-sharp eyes to shore up the fences and keep the starved horses out. He reached the edge of the pasture just as Zeus's clamorous blows echoed across the land, unleashing a lasting rain that soaked the hillside. The pasture had been abused by too many horses over too many years and the soil washed away under the heavy onslaught of rain.⁶

Anthus wiped the thick rain from his brow and strained through the darkness to see if the horses were still in their pen. His efforts revealed nothing but another hole broken through the fence. He turned and headed back towards the struggling vineyard to grab tools to mend the gaping wound in the fence. At his second step, however, he looked up and saw a frightful line of yellowed eyes glowering with fear and hunger. His heart angered at the horses for eating the crops, at his father for neglecting the care of both his family and the horses, and for Erodius for his dilapidated

⁵ Names can be confusing in Greek mythology. Here the brother Acanthus has a very similar name to his sister, Acanthis.

⁶ There's the possibility that Erodius's name is linked etymologically to erosion

fences. He knelt slowly down, grabbed a crooked branch, and set out to drive the horses back into their barren pasture.

At first the horses turned to flee, but a fierce hunger beset them and they wheeled back around to face Anthus. The two forces stared intensely at one another in a tense, drawn out moment. With a great cry the horses broke into a full gallop, charging at the startled Anthus. Anthus had only a heartbeat of realization before he turned on his heels and made for safety. But the horses were quickly upon him. They tore into him, tearing flesh from bone⁷ as his screams for mercy were carried up to the heavens and down to his house.

Autonous heard the cries of anguish and strode reluctantly up the hill. He was quickly overtaken by his wife, Hippodamia. Both had grown weak from years of failing crops, but only the cowardly Autonous feared the stinging bite of the horses while his wife fought ferociously to save her son. And she would have kept on fighting until the horses took her own life as well had the gods not looked down upon the family with pity.

Zeus and Apollo heard the cries of Anthus, and swept down from the tumultuous skies. Together they drove the storm and horses back to protect the cursed family. As the gods of thunder and healing walked into the meadow, they placed their hands on the family, turning each into a bird, saving them from the maddening hunger of the horses.

Autonous, who in cowardice turned away from helping his son, became a **quail**, always timid, always scurrying away at the faintest scent of danger.

His wife, Hippodamia was swiftd away as a **lark**, her small head adorned by Apollo with a crest to honor her courage in attacking the horses.

Acanthis, Autonous's fair daughter would mourn her family's tragic undoing in those aggrieved fields of thistle and reed in the form of a thistle finch.

Erodius is said to have become a heron and Schoeneus another bird of the field⁸.

And lastly, the poor Anthus, who would forever be haunted by those horses, was set to the skies in the plumage of a pipit. And to this day, the bird strikes off at the sight of a horse, fleeing to safety while whistling an inculpatory neighing sound.

⁷ Horses, like other grazers, are opportunistic omnivores. The book *Deadly Equines* details historic stories of carnivory and aggressive behavior in horses.

⁸ It is unclear what type of bird Liberalis is referring to when describing Schoeneus's metamorphosis.

Notes: Acanthis & Anthus both lend their names to genera of birds, the redpolls & pipits, respectively. There are other figures in Greek mythology who bear the names Hippodamia and Erodius. It is possible that the egrets, *Ardea* spp., derive their generic name from this Erodius. But the translation of Liberalis's book is confusing and says too that there was a servant on the farm also named Erodius that became one type of heron while the brother Erodius became another.