

The Tale of Hercules and Cacus

This yearly feast, these solemn rites,
This altar, sign of godly might,
Blind ritual does not impose,
Forsaking tales and gods of old.
As only proper, Trojan friends,
As ransomed men from savage ends,
We celebrate this day each year,
Renewing honor, laud, and fear.

Now first espy this distant cliff,
What ponderous, leaning rocks there sit.
The neighb'ring field lies strewn with stones,
Rocks wrested from their mountain home.
A mighty cascade dragged them down
And left a desolate jutting crown.
This site once held a yawning cave,
So vast, secluded, deep, and great
That never did the sun's bright rays
Illuminate its master's face.

Inhuman, hardly half a man,
Tall Cacus here laid ghastly plans
That left the cave's floor warm to touch,
Repainted oft with fresh red blood.
Decaying portraits lined the hall,
Affixed with pride upon the wall.
Great Vulcan bred this wicked brute
And blessed his lips with flame and soot.

Releasing black night from his mouth,
He dragged his pond'rous form about.

One day at last our prayers were heard.
A great god wends his way homeward,
Regaled proud in Geryon hide
And shepherding his ransomed prize.
The conqu'ring hero Hercules
Earned from the triple-bodied beast
So great a herd of cows and bulls
To make the river's valley full.

But Cacus raging in his mind
Could leave no trick or crime untried.
Out of the shelter of their stalls,
Four bulls pristine and prized by all
He guided toward the stony shade
By tail, lest any tracks be made
To lead a searcher toward the spot
Or evidence his furtive plot.

When finally the deed was done,
For Hercules, the time had come
To take his journey up again,
To move the sated herd, but when
He urged them on, they wouldn't move.
He goaded them. They only mooed.
But one cow held down deep inside
The mountain heard the noise and cried.
Though faint, it foiled Cacus' goal
And caused his hoping face to fall.

But anger conquered Hercule's gaze.
It set his bitter mind ablaze.
In rage he grabbed his knotted staff
And sprinted up the mountain's path.
The monster's eyes betrayed his fear.
They never had been so sincere.
He stumbled turning in retreat,
But panic gave wings to his feet.
More swiftly than the wind he raced
Back to his home and closed the gate.
His father wrought an iron chain
That bore the great door's weighty frame.
When Cacus struck its stress, it snapped
And loosed a stony avalanche.
Our hero faced a wall of rock.
The only entrance now was blocked.

Oh, can't you see his burning rage,
A fire that cannot be assuaged!
Three times he tried the rock-pile door.
Three times he looked the whole mount o'er.
Three times his furious efforts failed.
He sat to rest down in the vale,
When his eye caught a jutting crag,
Eroded smooth and rising high.
It threw a shadow o'er the cave
And harbored nests for birds of prey.
It slanted from the mountain ridge
Leftward toward the river's edge.

So from the right side, Hercules
With all the strength his limbs would cede,

Impelled himself against the peak
And shook its deep foundations free.
How vast the impact of the rock
That heaven felt the thunderous shock,
That water left the Tiber's bed
And turned to flow upstream instead.

The cave and palace of the beast
Lie now exposed, now fully breached.
If earth itself by force were cleft,
Revealing seats of souls bereft,
Hell's sallow sector scorned on high,
Where shades recoil from sudden light,
No less did Cacus now withdraw
And bellow, trapped within the maw.

The hero pressing from on high
Let boughs and arms and boulders fly
To pelt the fiend, now pale with fear,
Too spent to run, content to sear.
And from his throat (so strange to say)
He scalds his home with choking flames,
Which, stinging, robbed his eyes of sight
And cast the cavern into night.

But not content to spare the beast,
Alcides' rage compelled him leap.
In headlong flight past burning tongues,
He through a cloud of blackness sprung.
And grasping in his tangled arms
The one whose heat no longer harms,
He crushed his bloody thirsty throat

And gouged his yellow eyes to gloat.

The unclothed murky pit exposed
With doors removed, we saw enclosed
The plundered cows who lie in wait
To be led out the splint'ry gate.
The malformed corpse he broke and beat
He dragged out by its lifeless feet.
But proof our doubting hearts required
That such affairs had so transpired.
Unable to avert our eyes,
We marveled at our hero's prize,
The blinded eyes yet rousing fear,
The shaggy breast imposing here,
And jaws, which in the battle's strife
Lost smoking, doused, the spark of life.

We henceforth celebrate these rites
And teach our sons upon this site
To proudly guard the sacred day
On which Potitius first did pray.
Pinarian guard of Hercule's sect,
In hallowed shade he did erect
The glorious altar which you see.
Forever greatest may it be.

O come in laud of deeds performed,
Young men, and with a wreath adorn
Your hair and head. Now stretch your hand.
Receive the cup, its potion glad.
Drink deep my sons and call upon,
With cups aloft, our common gods.