

O For A Muse Of Fire...

by Louis Morris

Apollo soared. Like a burning comet he flew, unchecked by the bonds that kept mere mortals constricted to the ground, crawling like ignorant ants. To watch a god at play is a wondrous sight, and there is no god more playful than Apollo. For a while he danced in the Sun's rays, outshining them all, before ascending higher and higher towards their source. No Icarus was he, and he plunged unscathed into the heart of the solar fire, for a while glorying in its undimmed warmth. When he tired of this, he dived forth from Helios' chariot and sought pleasures in the world below. He sent the four winds fleeing before his radiant arrows, spiced his prophet's dreams at Delphi with heady visions, spied on nymphs bathing in a mountain stream, but nothing seemed to hold his attention for long. Sometimes even the powers of a god cannot make an impression on the chasm of time to fill that is eternal life.

With a theatrical sigh, Apollo made up his mind and summoned his nine companions, the keepers of culture, the Muses. They came with the speed of thought, which is their domain, and bowed before their divine master. "Greetings, daughters of Mnemosyne" he said, his voice rich with the warmth of a thousand sunrises "I find myself in need of a diversion... a contest perhaps?"

"But lord" said Erato, Muse of poetry, "how can we have a fair contest? Each of us is unparalleled in our own field, so whichever you choose there can only be one winner."

"That is so" the god replied "so each of you must persuade me, persuade me whose art is the finest, the most important, the most worthy of a contest. Then perhaps I will choose."

There was a moment of silence as the Muses considered the task ahead, then Calliope, eldest and most authoritative of the nine sisters, stepped

forward. "I shall begin, my lord, and there shall be no need for any others to speak after. For it is clear that the heroic epic is the noblest art, beyond compare. Why else do brave men strive to outdo each other, performing great feats of valour? It is because they know that their deeds will be made famous by song and story and that their name will never be forgotten. Did not great Achilles choose death and undying fame, delivered by Homers verse, instead of a safe passage to oblivion? Only through the epic can a man live forever; it is nothing less than the secret of eternal life."

Having said her piece, Calliope stepped back and yielded the floor to the next Muse, Clio, "Though it pains me to contradict my sister" she began "I feel I must in the interest of fact. And that is the issue; facts. For the truth is, you will find in all of her endless epics barely enough fact to fill one little scroll like I carry here with me. Only history holds the key to understanding the past, to unlocking the secrets of lost generations. And lest you doubt its status as an art, behold the sweeping narratives of nations, the battles and betrayals played out with a cast of millions against the backdrop of the rise and fall of empires. How can the fictitious exploits of vain heroes compare with what has really happened; truth is indeed more fantastic than invention."

Next came Urania, her eyes ever upturned to the heavens even as she spoke. "Listening here, I cannot help but feel that my sisters before have missed something, namely that their arts are concerned only with the past, the dry deeds of the dead whose bones have long since crumbled to dust. Why spend your time poring over what has passed and is no more, when the whole wide future lies ahead of you, untouched? That future lies written on the greatest canvas of them all, the great dome of the sky above, the fates of all to be found amongst constellations and galaxies. Who can argue against the glory of the stars, those celestial lights who have been man's constant inspiration and guide, and will remain so for all eternity? We are all moved by the cycle of the stars as they wheel slowly across the night sky and the sedate dance of the planets. My art offers the only way of leaving behind this mundane world and discovering the limitless possibility of a whole universe."

The next voice to speak was a mournful whisper, its soft sibilance seeming to bypass the ears and go straight to the heartstrings. "My sister speaks of fate" intoned Melpomene "but who can relate to the destiny spelt out in the patterns of cold and distant stars? Rather look to tragedy, where the iron hand of fate is seen holding the lives of men in its grip. There is no-one who can behold the stories of great men brought low by pride, of cunning designs thwarted by cruel chance, of mortals struggling under the burden of the gods' will, and not feel their deepest emotions stirred, for tragedy is the window which illuminates the noble yet doomed nature of the human condition. By heeding the tales of those whom fortune crushed, we can learn to avoid the perils of hubris and become thankful for what we have. Truly, sometimes sadness is the route to happiness."

A sombre silence followed her pronouncement, suddenly broken by Thalia's trilling laugh, like a waterfall of sunlight. "Come, come, sisters" she cried 'are we not guilty of falling into melancholy? Our lord Apollo asked us for entertainment, not a funeral. Laugh and be merry! And that is the essence of my art, laughter and good cheer. To my mind, comedy is the one thing which sets men and gods aside from beasts. A peacock might do a strutting dance, and a nightingale might sing a melody, but only we can see the funny side of things. Try and explain the essence of humour and you fail; who can explain why the way a word falls or the hidden meaning behind a gesture provokes hilarity, or even what hilarity is? But nevertheless we laugh, and comedy wends its way through the lives of all, turning sighs into smiles and sorrow into mirth. It is my gift to everyone, and if you do not accept it, well then perhaps the joke is on you."

Apollo's amused gaze left her smiling face and moved to that of Polyhymnia, hidden behind a gossamer veil. "My lord" she said humbly "I do not seek to criticise the words of my sisters, nor their arts, for they all have a place in mine. Yes: song, verse, study, drama and indeed every act are dear to me, when done in veneration of the divine. Then they can ascend frivolity and assume a deeper meaning, putting hearts in tune with the sacred and giving purpose to our existence. I contend that that is the reason that should drive all

art, the need to praise the gods and that which is god in ourselves. The fruits of spirituality speak for themselves: peace, wisdom, fulfilment and joy await those who are willing to follow me on the path to becoming truly holy.”

Polyhymnia bowed and retreated, leaving the floor open to Erato, who spoke for the second time. “Great Apollo, I asked you earlier how we could have a fair contest, and I ask you again now. Surely it is obvious that poetry is the supreme art? It is language, the medium through which all thoughts and feelings are conveyed, distilled into its purest form. All the emotions from a whole book of plodding prose can be conveyed by a few short lines of verse, with infinitely more elegance. A true poet’s spirit will transcend the rhymes and meter of which his creation is made and shine through, visible to all. It is dangerous as well as marvellous to become a poet, because it means putting your very soul on display.”

The focus of the group attention now moved inexorably to one of the last two remaining Muses, Terpsichore the dancer. “I will be frank” she said “it seems to me that my sisters have been concerned too much with words. Words do not facilitate expression, they stifle it, channelling into paths that have been already trod. Thus I will give you my argument in my own art, using my body as a tool to tell you what mere language cannot.” Then she said no more, instead giving herself over to the flow of the dance. The others watched appreciatively as it sent her weaving between them, and drew her limbs into one form after another, each more perfect than the last.

After a while, Apollo noticed that there was one Muse who was not watching the dance, but was standing aside with an expression of faint concentration. As Terpsichore came to a halt with a flourish, the god spoke out, saying “Euterpe? You are the last yet to speak. Why do you not make your case?”

“I apologise, lord; I was listening to the music.”

“What music? I hear none.”

“The music that is present everywhere. The symphony of life.”

This provoked several rolled eyes from the other Muses, and not a few disdainful sighs. “Very well” she continued “as I see my sisters do not hear the music, I will persuade them to open their ears, and persuade you of the worth of my art.”

“That is good” Apollo replied “begin.”

“If you go to the heart of which art is the most important, you must look at which is the most relevant to life. And music is not just relevant to life, music is alive. Anyone who has truly listened understands this, understands that there is just as much sentience in rhythms and harmonies as in mundane cells and organs. You can even trace the life cycle of a piece of music, from its birth deep in the dusty recesses of a composer’s mind, it’s flowering when sent soaring aloft by voice or instrument, it’s breeding as it worms its way into the minds of fresh converts and inspires new melodies and finally death when the notes of its tune fade away for the last time and pass from memory to oblivion. Music changes and evolves just as living creatures do, spawning genres and subgenres just like kingdoms, phyla and species.

It adapts itself to fill every available niche, affecting anger and rebellion for angst-ridden teenage minds or smoothing its rough edges to fit in with older ears. Such is the vitality and power of this primal force that we might be moved to ask whether it is really music imitating life or whether the opposite is true.”

Nonsense!” interrupted Calliope ‘it couldn’t be plainer that epic verse is the king of the arts,” A storm of cries followed:

“No! History!”

“Poetry!”

“Astrology!”

“Comedy!”

“Tragedy!”

“Prayer!”

“Dance!”

“Silence!” Apollo’s command flew through the hubbub like one of his blazing arrows, and cut it down dead. A nod of his head indicated that Euterpe should continue.

“Thank you” she said, unmoved by the tumult “sisters, if you doubt the pre-eminence of my art, then think on this; to which of our nine passions did we give our name, our name and all that signifies? Oh Muses, we who inspire mortals to ascend that brightest heaven of invention, which art claimed our name? Music. *Muse-ic*. Hear the sound of the word, as you should hear the symphony of life which surrounds everything, and know.” There was a pause as each of the nine silently digested her words, then she turned once more to Apollo. “My lord, if it’s entertainment you seek, you have no need of contests and speeches. All the happiness you could ever need is locked in that famous lyre in your hand.’

Apollo smiled, and with that first sweet chord he acknowledged the victor he had known all along.
