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Percy Bysshe Shelley
Epipsychidion
1821

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Epipsychidion

Percy Bysshe Shelley

1821

VERSES ADDRESSED TO THE NOBLE AND UNFORTUNATE LADY, EMILIA V____, NOW IMPRISONED IN THE CONVENT OF _____

L'anima amante si slancia fuori del creato, e si crea nel infinito un Mondo tutto per essa, diverso assai da questo oscuro e pauroso baratro. HER OWN WORDS

[The loving soul launches beyond creation, and creates for itself in the infinite a world all its own, far different from this dark and terrifying gulf". Teresa Viviani]

[I] Sweet Spirit! Sister of that orphan one,
Whose empire is the name thou weepst on,
In my heart's temple I suspend to thee
These votive wreaths of withered memory.

[II] Poor captive bird! Who, from thy narrow cage,
Pourest such music, that it might assuage
The rugged hearts of those who prisoned thee,
Were they not deaf to all sweet melody;
This song shall be thy rose: its petals pale
Are dead, indeed, my adored Nightingale!
But soft and fragrant is the faded blossom,
And it has no thorn left to wound thy bosom.

[III] High, spirit-winged Heart! Who dost for over
Beat thine unfeeling bars with vain endeavour,
'Till those bright plumes of thought, in which arrayed
It over-soared this low and worldly shade,
Lie shattered; and thy panting wounded breast
Stains with dear blood its unmaternal nest!
I weep vain tears: blood would less bitter be,
Yet poured forth gladlier, could it profit thee
[IV] Seraph of Heaven! Too gentle to be human,
Veiling beneath that radiant form of Woman
All that is insupportable in thee
Of light, and love, and immortality!
Sweet Benediction in the eternal Curse!
Veiled Glory of this lampless Universe!
Thou Moon beyond the clouds! Thou living Form
Among the Dead! Thou Star above the Storm!
Thou Wonder, and thou Beauty, and thou Terror!
Thou Harmony of Nature's art! Thou Mirror
In whom, as in the splendour of the Sun
All shapes look glorious which thou gazest on!
Aye, even the dim words which obscure thee now
Flash, lightning-like, with unaccustomed glow;
I pray thee that thou blot from this sad song
All of its much mortality and wrong,
With those clear drops, which start like sacred dew
From the twin lights thy sweet soul darkens through,
Weeping, till sorrow becomes ecstasy:
Then smile on it, so that it may not die.

[XXIII] Weak verses, go kneel at your Sovereign's feet,
And say-"We are the masters of thy slave;
What wouldst thou with us and ours and thine?"
Then call your sisters from Oblivion's cave,
And singing loud: "Love's very pain is sweet,
But its reward is in the world divine
Which, if not here, it builds beyond the grave."
So shall ye live when I am there. Then haste
Over the hearts of men, until ye meet
Marina, Vanna, Primus, and the rest,
And bid them love each other and be blest:
And leave the troop which errs, and which reproves,
And come and be my guest, -for I am Love's.

[V] I never thought before my death to see
Youth's vision thus made perfect. Emily,
I love thee; though the world by no thin name
Will hide that love from its unvalued shame.
Would we two had been twins of the same mother!
Or that the name my heart lent to another
Could be a sister's bond for her and thee,
Blending two beams of one eternity!
Yet were one lawful and the other true,
These names, though dear, could paint not, as is due,
How beyond refuge I am thine. Ah me!
I am not thine: I am a part of *thee*.
[VI] Sweet Lamp! My moth-like Muse has burnt its wings;
Or, like a dying swan who soars and sings,
Young Love should teach Time, in his own grey style,
All that thou art. Art thou not void of guile,
A lovely soul formed to be blest and bless?
A well of sealed and secret happiness,
Whose waters like blithe light and music are,
Vanquishing dissonance and gloom? A Star
Which moves not in the moving Heavens, alone?
A smile amid dark frowns? a gentle tone
Amid rude voices? a beloved light?
A Solitude, a Refuge, a Delight?
A lute, which those whom love has taught to play
Make music on, to soothe the roughest day
And lull fond grief asleep? A buried treasure?
A cradle of young thoughts of wingless pleasure?
A violet-shrouded grave of Woe?-I measure
The world of fancies, seeking one like thee,
And find-alas! Mine own infirmity.

[VII] She met me Stranger, upon life's rough way,
 And lured me towards sweet Death; as Night by Day,
 Winter by Spring, or Sorrow by swift Hope,
 Led into light, life, peace. An antelope,
 In the suspended impulse of its lightness,
 Were less ethereally light: the brightness
 Of her divinest presence trembles through
 Her limbs, as underneath a cloud of dew
 Embodied in the windless Heaven of June
 Amid the splendour-winged stars, the Moon
 Burns, inextinguishably beautiful:
 And from her lips, as from a hyacinth full
 Of honey-dew, a liquid murmur drops,
 Killing the sense with passion; sweet as stops
 Of planetary music heard in trance.
 In her mild lights the starry spirits dance,
 The sun-beams of those wells which ever leap
 Under the lightnings of the soul-too deep
 For the brief fathom-line of thought or sense
 The glory of her being, issuing thence,
 Stains the dead, blank, cold air with a warm shade
 Of unentangled intermixture, made
 By Love, of light and motion: one intense Diffusion, one serene

[XXII] This isle and house are mine, and I have vow'd
 Thee to be lady of the solitude.
 And I have fitted up some chambers there
 Looking towards the golden Eastern air,
 And level with the living winds, which flow
 Like waves above the living waves below.
 I have sent books and music there, and all
 Those instruments with which high Spirits call
 The future from its cradle, and the past
 Out of its grave, and make the present last
 In thoughts and joys which sleep, but cannot die,
 Folded within their own eternity.
 Our simple life wants little, and true taste
 Hires not the pale drudge Luxury to waste
 The scene it would adorn, and therefore still,
 Nature with all her children haunts the hill.
 The ring-dove, in the embowering ivy, yet
 Keeps up her love-lament, and the owls flit
 Round the evening tower, and the young stars glance
 Between the quick bats in their twilight dance;
 The spotted deer bask in the fresh moonlight
 Before our gate, and the slow, silent night
 Is measur'd by the pants of their calm sleep.
 Be this our home in life, and when years heap
 Their wither'd hours, like leaves, on our decay,
 Let us become the overhanging day,
 The living soul of this Elysian isle,
 Conscious, inseparable, one. Meanwhile
 We two will rise, and sit, and walk together,
 Under the roof of blue Ionian weather,
 And wander in the meadows, or ascend
 The mossy mountains, where the blue heavens bend
 With lightest winds, to touch their paramour;
 Or linger, where the pebble-paven shore,
 Under the quick, faint kisses of the sea,
 Trembles and sparkles as with ecstasy--
 Possessing and possess'd by all that is
 Within that calm circumference of bliss,
 And by each other, till to love and live
 Be one: or, at the noontide hour, arrive
 Where some old cavern hoar seems yet to keep

[XXI] Emily,

A ship is floating in the harbour now,
A wind is hovering o'er the mountain's brow;
There is a path on the sea's azure floor,
No keel has ever plough'd that path before;
The halcyons brood around the foamless isles;
The treacherous Ocean has forsworn its wiles;
The merry mariners are bold and free:
Say, my heart's sister, wilt thou sail with me?
Our bark is as an albatross, whose nest
Is a far Eden of the purple East;
And we between her wings will sit, while Night,
And Day, and Storm, and Calm, pursue their flight,
Our ministers, along the boundless Sea,
Treading each other's heels, unheededly.
It is an isle under Ionian skies,
Beautiful as a wreck of Paradise,
And, for the harbours are not safe and good,
This land would have remain'd a solitude
But for some pastoral people native there,
Who from the Elysian, clear, and golden air
Draw the last spirit of the age of gold,
Simple and spirited; innocent and bold.
The blue Aegean girds this chosen home,
With ever-changing sound and light and foam,
Kissing the sifted sands, and caverns hoar;
And all the winds wandering along the shore
Undulate with the undulating tide:
There are thick woods where sylvan forms abide;
And many a fountain, rivulet and pond,
As clear as elemental diamond,
Or serene morning air; and far beyond,
The mossy tracks made by the goats and deer
(Which the rough shepherd treads but once a year)
Pierce into glades, caverns and bowers, and halls
Built round with ivy, which the waterfalls
Luminescing, with sound that never fails
Accompany the noonday nightingales;
And all the place is peopled with sweet airs;
The light clear element which the isle wears
Is heavy with the scent of lemon-flowers,
Which float like incense with the wind

Omnipresence

Whose flowing outlines mingle in their flowing
Around her cheeks and utmost fingers glowing
With the unintermitted blood, which there
Quivers, (as in a fleece of snow-like air
The crimson pulse of living morning quiver.)
Continuously prolonged, and ending never
Till they are lost, and in that Beauty furled
Which penetrates and clasps and fills the world;
Scarce visible from extreme loveliness.
Warm fragrance seems to fall from her light dress,
And her loose hair; and where some heavy tress
The air of her own speed has disentwined,
The sweetness seems to satiate the faint wind;
And in the soul a wild odour is felt,
Beyond the sense, like fiery dews that melt
Into the bosom of a frozen bud.--
See where she stands! A mortal shape indued
With love and life and light and deity,
And motion which may change but cannot die;
An image of some bright Eternity;
A shadow of some golden dream; a Splendour
Leaving the third sphere pilotless; a tender
Reflection of the eternal Moon of Love
Under whose motions life's dull billows move;
A Metaphor of Spring and Youth and Morning;
A vision like incarnate April, warning,
With smiles and tears, Frost the Anatomy
Into his summer grave.

[VIII] Ah, woe is me!
What have I dared? Where am I lifted? How
Shall I descend, and perish not? I know
That Love makes all things equal: I have heard
By mine own heart this joyous truth averred:
The spirit of the worm beneath the sod
In love and worship, blends itself with God.
[IX] Spouse! Sister! Angel! Pilot of the Fate
Whose course has been so starless! O too late
Beloved! O too soon adored, by me!
For in the fields of immortality
My spirit should at first have worshipped thine,
A divine presence in a place divine;
Or should have moved beside it on this earth,
A shadow of that substance, from its birth;
But not as now: -I love thee; yes, I feel
That on the fountain of my heart a seal
Is set, to keep its waters pure and bright
For thee, since in those *tears* thou hast delight.
We-are we not formed, as notes of music are,
For one another, though dissimilar;
such difference without discord, as can make
Those sweetest sounds, in which all spirits shake
As trembling leaves in a continuous air?

[XX] The day is come, and thou wilt fly with me.
To whatsoever of dull mortality
Is mine, remain a vestal sister still;
To the intense, the deep, the imperishable,
Not mine but me, henceforth be thou united
Even as a bride, delighting and delighted.
The hour is come:-the destined Star has risen
Which shall descend upon a vacant prison.
The walls are high, the gates are strong, thick set
The sentinels-but true love never yet
Was thus constrained: it overleaps all fence:
Like lightning, with invisible violence
Piercing its continents; like Heaven's free breath,
Which he who grasps can hold not; liker Death,
Who rides upon a thought, and makes his way
Through temple, tower, and palace, and the array
Of arms: more strength has Love than he or they;
For it can burst his charnel, and make free
The limbs in chains, the heart in agony,
The soul in dust and chaos.

[XVIII] Twin spheres of light who rule this passive Earth,
 This world of love, this *me*; and into this birth
 Awaken all its fruits and flowers, and dart
 Magnetic might into its central heart;
 And lift its billows and its mists, and guide
 By everlasting laws, each wind and tide
 To its fit cloud, and its appointed cave;
 And lull its storms, each in the craggy grave
 Which was its cradle, luring to faint bowers
 The armies of the rainbow-winged showers;
 And, as those married lights, which from the towers
 Of Heaven look forth and fold the wandering globe
 In liquid sleep and splendour, as a robe;
 And all their many-mingled influence blend,
 If equal, yet unlike, to one sweet end;--
 So ye, bright regents, with alternate sway
 Govern my sphere of being, night and day!
 Thou, not disdainng even a borrowed might;
 Thou, not eclipsing a remoter light;
 And though the shadow of the seasons three,
 From Spring to Autumn's sere maturity,
 Light it into the Winter of the tomb,
 Where it may ripen to a brighter bloom
 Thou too, O Comet beautiful and fierce,
 Who drew the heart of this frail Universe
 Towards thine own, till, wreckt in that convulsion,
 Alternating attraction and repulsion,
 Thine went astray and taht wast rent in twain;
 Oh, float into our azure heaven again!
 Be there love's folding-star at thy return;
 The living Sun will feed thee from its urn
 Of golden fire; the Moon will veil her horn
 In thy last smiles; adoring Even and Morn
 Will worship thee with incense of calm breath
 And lights and shadows; as the star of Death
 And Birth, is worshipped by those sisters wild
 Called Hope and Fear-upon the heart are piled
 Their offerings,-of this sacrifice divine
 A World shall be the altar.

[XIX] Lady mine,
 Scorn not these flowers of thought, the fading birth

[X] Thy wisdom speaks in me, and bids me dare
 Beacon the rocks on which high hearts are wreckt.
 I never was attached to that great sect,
 Whose doctrine is, that each one should select
 Out of the crowd a mistress or a friend,
 And all the rest, though fair and wise, commend
 To cold oblivion, though it is in the code
 Of modern morals, and the beaten road
 Which those poor slaves with weary footsteps tread,
 Who travel to their home among the dead
 By the broad highway of the world, and so
 With one chained friend, perhaps a jealous foe,
 The dreariest and the longest journey go.
 [XI] True Love in this differs from gold and clay,
 That to divide is not to take away.
 Love is like understanding, that grows bright,
 Gazing on many truths; 'tis like thy light,
 Imagination! which from earth and sky,
 And from the depths of human phantasy,
 As from a thousand prisms and mirrors, fills
 The Universe with glorious beams, and kills
 Error, the worm, with many a sun-like arrow
 Of its reverberated lightning. Narrow
 The heart that loves, the brain that contemplates,
 The life that wears,
 the spirit that creates
 One object, and one form, and builds thereby
 A sepulchre for its eternity.

[XII] Mind from its object differs most in this:
Evil from good; misery from happiness;
The baser from the nobler; the impure
And frail, from what is clear and must endure.
If you divide suffering and dross, you may
Diminish till it is consumed away;
If you divide pleasure and love and thought,
Each part exceeds the whole; and we know not
How much, while any yet remains unshared,
Of pleasure may be gained, of sorrow spared:
This truth is that deep well, whence sages draw
The unenvied light of hope; the eternal law
By which those live, to whom this world of life
Is as a garden ravaged, and whose strife
Tills for the promise of a later birth
The wilderness of this Elysian earth.

[XVII] At length, into the obscure Forest came
The Vision I had sought through grief and shame.
Athwart that wintry wilderness of thorns
Flashed from her motion splendour like the Morn's
And from her presence life was radiated
Through the grey earth and branches bare and dead;
Through the grey earth and branches bare and dead;
So that her way was paved, and roofed above
With flowers as soft as thoughts of budding love;
And music from her respiration spread
Like light, -all other sounds were penetrated
By the small, still, sweet spirit of that sound,
So that the savage winds hung mute around;
And odours warm and fresh fell from her hair
Dissolving the dull cold in the froze air:
Soft as an Incarnation of the Su,
When light is changed to love, this glorious One
Floated into the cavern where I lay,
And called my Spirit, and the dreaming clay
Was lifted by the thing that dreamed below
As smoke by fire, and in her beauty's glow
I stood, and felt the dawn of my long night
Was penetrating me with living light:
I knew it was the Vision veiled from me
So many years-that it was Emily.

[XVI] What storms then shook the ocean of my sleep,
Blotting that Moon, whose pale and waning lips
Then shrank as in the sickness of eclipse;--
And how my soul was as a lampless sea,
And who was then its Tempest; and when She,
The Planet of that hour, was quenched, what frost
Crept o'er those waters, 'till from coast to coast
The moving billows of my being fell
Into a death of ice, immoveable;--
And then-what earthquakes made it gape and split,
The white Moon smiling all the while on it,
These words conceal:-If not, each word would be
The key of staunchless tears. Weep not for me!

[XIII] There was a Being whom my spirit oft
Met on its visioned wanderings, far aloft,
In the clear golden prime of my youth's dawn,
Upon the fairy isles of sunny lawn,
Amid the enchanted mountains, and the caves
Of divine sleep, and on the air-like waves
Of wonder-level dream, whose tremulous floor
Paved her light steps; - on an imagined shore,
Under the grey break of some promontory
She met me, robed in such exceeding glory
That I beheld her not. In solitudes
Her voice came to me through the whispering woods,
And from the fountains, and the odours deep
Of flowers, which, like lips murmuring in their sleep
Of the sweet kisses which had lulled them there,
Breathed but of *her* to the enamoured air;
And from the breezes whether low or loud,
And from the rain of every passing cloud,
And from the singing of the summer-birds,
And from all sounds, all silence. In the words
Of antique verse and high romance,-in form,
Sound, colour-in whatever checks that Storm
Which with the shattered present chokes the past;
And in that best philosophy, whose taste
Makes this cold common hell, our life, a doom
As glorious as a fiery martyrdom;
Her Spirit was the harmony of truth.--

[XIV] Then, from the caverns of my dreamy youth
 I sprang, as one sandalled with plumes of fire,
 And towards the loadstar of my one desire,
 I flitted, like a dizzy moth, whose flight
 Is as a dead leaf's in the owlet light,
 When it would seek in Hesper's setting sphere
 A radiant death, a fiery sepulchre,
 As if it were a lamp of earthly flame.--
 But She, whom prayers or tears then could not tame,
 Past, like a God throned on a winged plant
 Whose burning plumes to tenfold swiftness fan it
 Into the dreary cone of our life's shade;
 And as a man with mighty loss dismayed,
 I would have followed, though the grave between
 Yawned like a gulph whose spectres are unseen:
 When a voice said:-"O thou of hearts the weakest,
 The phantom is beside thee whom thou seekest."
 Then I-"where?"-the world's echo answered "where!"
 And in that silence, and in my despair,
 I questioned every tongueless wind that flew
 Over my tower of mourning, if it knew
 Whither 'twas fled, this soul out of my soul;
 And murmured names and spells which have control
 Over the sightless tyrants of our fate;
 But neither prayer nor verse could dissipate
 The night which closed on her; nor uncreate
 That world within this Chaos, mine and me,
 Of which she was the veiled Divinity
 The world I say of thoughts that worshipped her:
 And therefore I went forth, with hope and fear
 And every gentle passion sick to death
 Feeding y course with expectation's breath,
 Into the wintry forest of our life;
 And struggling through its error with vain strife,
 And stumbling in my weakness and my haste,
 And half bewildered by new forms, I past
 Seeking among those untaught foresters
 If I could fine one form resembling hers
 In which she might has masked herself from me.
 There-One, whose voice was venomed melody
 Sate by a well, under blue night-shade bowers
 The length of his shadow on the wall of night

[XV] In many mortal forms I rashly sought
 The shadow of that idol of my thought.
 And some were fair-but beauty dies away:
 Others were wise-but honeyed words betray:
 And One was true-oh! Why not true to me?
 Then, as a hunted deer that could not flee,
 I turned upon my thoughts, and stood at bay,
 Wounded and weak and panting; the cold day
 Trembled, for pity of my strife and pain.
 When, like a noon-day dawn, there shone again
 Deliverance. One stood on my path who seemed
 As like the glorious shape which I had dreamed,
 As is the Moon, whose changes ever run
 Into themselves, to the eternal Sun;
 The cold chaste Moon, the Queen of Heaven's bright isles,
 Who makes all beautiful on which she smiles,
 That wandering shrine of soft yet icy flame
 Which ever is transformed, yet still the same,
 And warms not but illumines. Young and fair
 As the descended Spirit of that sphere,
 She hid me, as the Moon may hide the night
 From its own darkness, until all was bright
 Between the Heaven and Earth of my calm mind,
 And, as a cloud charioted by the wind,
 She led me to a cave in that wild place,
 And sate beside me, with her downward face
 Illumining my slumbers, like the Moon
 Waxing and waning o'er Endymion.
 And I was laid asleep, spirit and limb
 And all my being became bright or dim
 As the Moon's image in a summer sea,
 According as she smiled or frowned on me;
 And there I lay, within a chaste cold bed:
 Alas, I then was nor alive nor dead:--
 For at her silver voice came Death and Life,
 Unmindful each of their accustomed strife,
 Masked like twin babes, a sister and a brother,
 The wandering hopes of one abandoned mother,
 And through the cavern without wings they flew,
 And cried "Away, he is not of our crew."
 I wept, and though it be a dream, I weep.