

# **Rosalind and Helen**

**A Modern Eclogue**

Percy Bysshe Shelley

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## ***Advertisement***

The story of *Rosalind and Helen* is, undoubtedly, not an attempt in the highest style of poetry. It is in no degree calculated to excite profound meditation; and if, by interesting the affections and amusing the imagination, it awaken a certain ideal melancholy favourable to the reception of more important impressions, it will produce in the reader all that the writer experienced in the composition. I resigned myself, as I wrote, to the impulse of the feelings which moulded the conception of the story; and this impulse determined the pauses of a measure, which only pretends to be regular inasmuch as its corresponds with, and expresses, the irregularity of the imaginations which inspired it.

I do not know which of the few scattered poems I left in England will be selected by my bookseller to add to this collection. One [”Lines written among the Euganean Hills”–ed.], which I sent from Italy, was written after a day’s excursion among those lovely mountains which surround what was once the retreat, and where is now the sepulchre, of Petrarch. If any one is inclined to condemn the insertion of the introductory lines, which image forth the sudden relief from a state of deep despondency by the radiant visions disclosed by the sudden burst of an Italian sunrise in autumn on the highest peak of those delightful mountains, I can only offer as my excuse, that they were not erased at the request of a dear friend, with whom added years of intercourse only add to my apprehension of its value, and who would have had more right than any one to complain, that she has not been able to extinguish in me the very power of delineating sadness.

NAPLES, Dec. 20, 1818.

## **Rosalind, Helen and her Child Scene, the Shore of the Lake of Como**

### **Helen.**

Come hither, my sweet Rosalind.  
’Tis long since thou and I have met;  
And yet methinks it were unkind  
Those moments to forget.  
Come sit by me. I see thee stand  
By this lone lake, in this far land,  
Thy loose hair in the light wind flying,  
Thy sweet voice to each tone of even  
United, and thine eyes replying  
To the hues of yon fair heaven.  
Come, gentle friend: wilt sit by me?  
And be as thou wert wont to be  
Ere we were disunited?  
None doth behold us now: the power  
That led us forth at this lone hour  
Will be but ill requited  
If thou depart in scorn: oh! come,

And talk of our abandoned home.  
 Remember, this is Italy,  
 And we are exiles. Talk with me  
 Of that our land, whose wilds and floods,  
 Barren and dark although they be,  
 Were dearer than these chestnut woods:  
 Those heathy paths, that inland stream,  
 And the blue mountains, shapes which seem  
 Like wrecks of childhood's sunny dream:  
 Which that we have abandoned now,  
 Weighs on the heart like that remorse  
 Which altered friendship leaves. I seek  
 No more our youthful intercourse.  
 That cannot be! Rosalind, speak.  
 Speak to me. Leave me not. – When morn did come,  
 When evening fell upon our common home,  
 When for one hour we parted, – do not frown:  
 I would not chide thee, though thy faith is broken:  
 But turn to me. Oh! by this cherished token,  
 Of woven hair, which thou wilt not disown,  
 Turn, as 'twere but the memory of me,  
 And not my scornèd self who prayed to thee.

### **Rosalind.**

Is it a dream, or do I see  
 And hear frail Helen? I would flee  
 Thy tainting touch; but former years  
 Arise, and bring forbidden tears;  
 And my o'erburthened memory  
 Seeks yet its lost repose in thee.  
 I share thy crime. I cannot choose  
 But weep for thee: mine own strange grief  
 But seldom stoops to such relief:  
 Nor ever did I love thee less,  
 Though mourning o'er thy wickedness  
 Even with a sister's woe. I knew  
 What to the evil world is due,  
 And therefore sternly did refuse  
 To link me with the infamy  
 Of one so lost as Helen. Now  
 Bewildered by my dire despair,  
 Wondering I blush, and weep that thou  
 Should'st love me still, – thou only! – There,  
 Let us sit on that gray stone,

Till our mournful talk be done.

**Helen.**

Alas! not there; I cannot bear  
The murmur of this lake to hear.  
A sound from there, Rosalind dear,  
Which never yet I heard elsewhere  
But in our native land, recurs,  
Even here where now we meet. It stirs  
Too much of suffocating sorrow!  
In the dell of yon dark chestnut wood  
Is a stone seat, a solitude  
Less like our own. The ghost of Peace  
Will not desert this spot. To-morrow,  
If thy kind feelings should not cease,  
We may sit here.

**Rosalind.**

Thou lead, my sweet,  
And I will follow.

**Henry.**

'Tis Fenici's seat  
Where you are going? This is not the way,  
Mamma; it leads behind those trees that grow  
Close to the little river.

**Helen.**

Yes: I know:  
I was bewildered. Kiss me, and be gay,  
Dear boy: why do you sob?

**Henry.**

I do not know:  
But it might break any one's heart to see  
You and the lady cry so bitterly.

## **Helen.**

It is a gentle child, my friend. Go home,  
Henry, and play with Lilla till I come.  
We only cried with joy to see each other;  
We are quite merry now: Good-night.

The boy  
Lifted a sudden look upon his mother,  
And in the gleam of forced and hollow joy  
Which lightened o'er her face, laughed with the glee  
Of light and unsuspecting infancy,  
And whispered in her ear, "Bring home with you  
That sweet strange lady-friend." Then off he flew,  
But stopped, and beckoned with a meaning smile,  
Where the road turned. Pale Rosalind the while,  
Hiding her face, stood weeping silently.

In silence then they took the way  
Beneath the forest's solitude.  
It was a vast and antique wood,  
Thro' which they took their way;  
And the gray shades of evening  
O'er that green wilderness did fling  
Still deeper solitude.  
Pursuing still the path that wound  
The vast and knotted trees around  
Through which slow shades were wandering,  
To a deep lawny dell they came,  
To a stone seat beside a spring,  
O'er which the columned wood did frame  
A roofless temple, like the fane  
Where, ere new creeds could faith obtain,  
Man's early race once knelt beneath  
The overhanging deity.  
O'er this fair fountain hung the sky,  
Now spangled with rare stars. The snake,  
The pale snake, that with eager breath  
Creeps here his noontide thirst to slake,  
Is beaming with many a mingled hue,  
Shed from yon dome's eternal blue,  
When he floats on that dark and lucid flood  
In the light of his own loveliness;  
And the birds that in the fountain dip  
Their plumes, with fearless fellowship

Above and round him wheel and hover.  
The fitful wind is heard to stir  
One solitary leaf on high;  
The chirping of the grasshopper  
Fills every pause. There is emotion  
In all that dwells at noontide here:  
Then, through the intricate wild wood,  
A maze of life and light and motion  
Is woven. But there is stillness now:  
Gloom, and the trance of Nature now:  
The snake is in his cave asleep;  
The birds are on the branches dreaming:  
Only the shadows creep:  
Only the glow-worm is gleaming:  
Only the owls and the nightingales  
Wake in this dell when daylight fails,  
And gray shades gather in the woods:  
And the owls have all fled far away  
In a merrier glen to hoot and play,  
For the moon is veiled and sleeping now.  
The accustomed nightingale still broods  
On her accustomed bough,  
But she is mute; for her false mate  
Has fled and left her desolate.

This silent spot tradition old  
Had peopled with the spectral dead.  
For the roots of the speaker's hair felt cold  
And stiff, as with tremulous lips he told  
That a hellish shape at midnight led  
The ghost of a youth with hoary hair,  
And sate on the seat beside him there,  
Till a naked child came wandering by,  
When the fiend would change to a lady fair!  
A fearful tale! The truth was worse:  
For here a sister and a brother  
Had solemnized a monstrous curse,  
Meeting in this fair solitude:  
For beneath yon very sky,  
Had they resigned to one another  
Body and soul. The multitude,  
Tracking them to the secret wood,  
Tore limb from limb their innocent child,  
And stabbed and trampled on its mother;  
But the youth, for God's most holy grace,

A priest saved to burn in the market-place.

Duly at evening Helen came  
To this lone silent spot,  
From the wrecks of a tale of wilder sorrow  
So much of sympathy to borrow  
As soothed her own dark lot.  
Duly each evening from her home,  
With her fair child would Helen come  
To sit upon that antique seat,  
While the hues of day were pale;  
And the bright boy beside her feet  
Now lay, lifting at intervals  
His broad blue eyes on her;  
Now, where some sudden impulse calls  
Following. He was a gentle boy  
And in all gentle sports took joy;  
Oft in a dry leaf for a boat,  
With a small feather for a sail,  
His fancy on that spring would float,  
If some invisible breeze might stir  
Its marble calm: and Helen smiled  
Through tears of awe on the gay child,  
To think that a boy as fair as he,  
In years which never more may be,  
By that same fount, in that same wood,  
The like sweet fancies had pursued;  
And that a mother, lost like her,  
Had mournfully sate watching him.  
Then all the scene was wont to swim  
Through the mist of a burning tear.

For many months had Helen known  
This scene; and now she thither turned  
Her footsteps, not alone.  
The friend whose falsehood she had mourned,  
Sate with her on that seat of stone.  
Silent they sate; for evening,  
And the power its glimpses bring  
Had, with one awful shadow, quelled  
The passion of their grief. They sate  
With linkèd hands, for unrepelled  
Had Helen taken Rosalind's.  
Like the autumn wind, when it unbinds  
The tangled locks of the nightshade's hair,



Which is twined in the sultry summer air  
Round the walls of an outworn sepulchre,  
Did the voice of Helen, sad and sweet,  
And the sound of her heart that ever beat,  
As with sighs and words she breathed on her,  
Unbind the knots of her friend's despair,  
Till her thoughts were free to float and flow;  
And from her labouring bosom now,  
Like the bursting of a prisoned flame,  
The voice of a long pent sorrow came.

### **Rosalind.**

I saw the dark earth fall upon  
The coffin; and I saw the stone  
Laid over him whom this cold breast  
Had pillowed to his nightly rest!  
Thou knowest not, thou canst not know  
My agony. Oh! I could not weep:  
The sources whence such blessings flow  
Were not to be approached by me!  
But I could smile, and I could sleep,  
Though with a self-accusing heart.  
In morning's light, in evening's gloom,  
I watched, – and would not thence depart –  
My husband's unlamented tomb.  
My children knew their sire was gone,  
But when I told them, – "he is dead," –  
They laughed aloud in frantic glee,  
They clapped their hands and leaped about,  
Answering each other's ecstasy  
With many a prank and merry shout.  
But I sate silent and alone,  
Wrapped in the mock of mourning weed.

They laughed, for he was dead: but I  
Sate with a hard and tearless eye,  
And with a heart which would deny  
The secret joy it could not quell,  
Low muttering o'er his loathed name;  
Till from that self-contention came  
Remorse where sin was none; a hell  
Which in pure spirits should not dwell.

I'll tell thee truth. He was a man

Hard, selfish, loving only gold,  
Yet full of guile: his pale eyes ran  
With tears, which each some falsehood told,  
And oft his smooth and bridled tongue  
Would give the lie to his flushing cheek:  
He was a coward to the strong:  
He was a tyrant to the weak,  
On whom his vengeance he would wreak:  
For scorn, whose arrows search the heart,  
From many a stranger's eye would dart,  
And on his memory cling, and follow  
His soul to its home so cold and hollow.  
He was a tyrant to the weak,  
And we were such, alas the day!  
Oft, when my little ones at play,  
Were in youth's natural lightness gay,  
Or if they listened to some tale  
Of travellers, or of fairy land, –  
When the light from the wood-fire's dying brand  
Flashed on their faces, – if they heard  
Or thought they heard upon the stair  
His footstep, the suspended word  
Died on my lips: we all grew pale:  
The babe at my bosom was hushed with fear  
If it thought it heard its father near;  
And my two wild boys would near my knee  
Cling, cowed and cowering fearfully.

I'll tell thee truth: I loved another.  
His name in my ear was ever ringing,  
His form to my brain was ever clinging:  
Yet if some stranger breathed that name,  
My lips turned white, and my heart beat fast:  
My nights were once haunted by dreams of flame,  
My days were dim in the shadow cast  
By the memory of the same!  
Day and night, day and night,  
He was my breath and life and light,  
For three short years, which soon were passed.  
On the fourth, my gentle mother  
Led me to the shrine, to be  
His sworn bride eternally.  
And now we stood on the altar stair,  
When my father came from a distant land,  
And with a loud and fearful cry

Rushed between us suddenly.  
I saw the stream of his thin gray hair,  
I saw his lean and lifted hand,  
And heard his words, – and live! Oh God!  
Wherefore do I live? – "Hold, hold!"  
He cried, – "I tell thee 'tis her brother!  
Thy mother, boy, beneath the sod  
Of yon churchyard rests in her shroud so cold:  
I am now weak, and pale, and old:  
We were once dear to one another,  
I and that corpse! Thou art our child!"  
Then with a laugh both long and wild  
The youth upon the pavement fell:  
They found him dead! All looked on me,  
The spasms of my despair to see:  
But I was calm. I went away:  
I was clammy-cold like clay!  
I did not weep: I did not speak:  
But day by day, week after week,  
I walked about like a corpse alive!  
Alas! sweet friend, you must believe  
This heart is stone: it did not break.  
My father lived a little while,  
But all might see that he was dying,  
He smiled with such a woeful smile!  
When he was in the churchyard lying  
Among the worms, we grew quite poor,  
So that no one would give us bread:  
My mother looked at me, and said  
Faint words of cheer, which only meant  
That she could die and be content;  
So I went forth from the same church door  
To another husband's bed.  
And this was he who died at last,  
When weeks and months and years had passed,  
Through which I firmly did fulfil  
My duties, a devoted wife,  
With the stern step of vanquished will,  
Walking beneath the night of life,  
Whose hours extinguished, like slow rain  
Falling for ever, pain by pain,  
The very hope of death's dear rest;  
Which, since the heart within my breast  
Of natural life was dispossessed,  
Its strange sustainer there had been.

When flowers were dead, and grass was green  
Upon my mother's grave, – that mother  
Whom to outlive, and cheer, and make  
My wan eyes glitter for her sake,  
Was my vowed task, the single care  
Which once gave life to my despair, –  
When she was a thing that did not stir  
And the crawling worms were cradling her  
To a sleep more deep and so more sweet  
Than a baby's rocked on its nurse's knee,  
I lived: a living pulse then beat  
Beneath my heart that awakened me.  
What was this pulse so warm and free?  
Alas! I knew it could not be  
My own dull blood: 'twas like a thought  
Of liquid love, that spread and wrought  
Under my bosom and in my brain,  
And crept with the blood through every vein;  
And hour by hour, day after day,  
The wonder could not charm away,  
But laid in sleep, my wakeful pain,  
Until I knew it was a child,  
And then I wept. For long, long years  
These frozen eyes had shed no tears:  
But now – 'twas the season fair and mild  
When April has wept itself to May:  
I sate through the sweet sunny day  
By my window bowered round with leaves,  
And down my cheeks the quick tears fell  
Like twinkling rain-drops from the eaves,  
When warm spring showers are passing o'er:  
O Helen, none can ever tell  
The joy it was to weep once more!

I wept to think how hard it were  
To kill my babe, and take from it  
The sense of light, and the warm air,  
And my own fond and tender care,  
And love and smiles; ere I knew yet  
That these for it might, as for me,  
Be the masks of a grinning mockery.  
And haply, I would dream, 'twere sweet  
To feed it from my faded breast,  
Or mark my own heart's restless beat  
Rock it to its untroubled rest,

And watch the growing soul beneath  
Dawn in faint smiles; and hear its breath,  
Half interrupted by calm sighs,  
And search the depth of its fair eyes  
For long departed memories!  
And so I lived till that sweet load  
Was lightened. Darkly forward flowed  
The stream of years, and on it bore  
Two shapes of gladness to my sight;  
Two other babes, delightful more  
In my lost soul's abandoned night,  
Than their own country ships may be  
Sailing towards wrecked mariners,  
Who cling to the rock of a wintry sea.  
For each, as it came, brought soothing tears,  
And a loosening warmth, as each one lay  
Sucking the sullen milk away  
About my frozen heart, did play,  
And weaned it, oh how painfully! –  
As they themselves were weaned each one  
From that sweet food, – even from the thirst  
Of death, and nothingness, and rest,  
Strange inmate of a living breast!  
Which all that I had undergone  
Of grief and shame, since she, who first  
The gates of that dark refuge closed,  
Came to my sight, and almost burst  
The seal of that Lethean spring;  
But these fair shadows interposed:  
For all delights are shadows now!  
And from my brain to my dull brow  
The heavy tears gather and flow:  
I cannot speak: Oh let me weep!

The tears which fell from her wan eyes  
Glimmered among the moonlight dew:  
Her deep hard sobs and heavy sighs  
Their echoes in the darkness threw.  
When she grew calm, she thus did keep  
The tenor of her tale:

He died:  
I know not how: he was not old,  
If age be numbered by its years:  
But he was bowed and bent with fears,

Pale with the quenchless thirst of gold,  
Which, like fierce fever, left him weak;  
And his strait lip and bloated cheek  
Were warped in spasms by hollow sneers;  
And selfish cares with barren plough,  
Not age, had lined his narrow brow,  
And foul and cruel thoughts, which feed  
Upon the withering life within,  
Like vipers on some poisonous weed.  
Whether his ill were death or sin  
None knew, until he died indeed,  
And then men owned they were the same.

Seven days within my chamber lay  
That corse, and my babes made holiday:  
At last, I told them what is death:  
The eldest, with a kind of shame,  
Came to my knees with silent breath,  
And sate awe-stricken at my feet;  
And soon the others left their play,  
And sate there too. It is unmeet  
To shed on the brief flower of youth  
The withering knowledge of the grave;  
From me remorse then wrung that truth.  
I could not bear the joy which gave  
Too just a response to mine own.  
In vain. I dared not feign a groan;  
And in their artless looks I saw,  
Between the mists of fear and awe,  
That my own thought was theirs; and they  
Expressed it not in words, but said,  
Each in its heart, how every day  
Will pass in happy work and play,  
Now he is dead and gone away.

After the funeral all our kin  
Assembled, and the will was read.  
My friend, I tell thee, even the dead  
Have strength, their putrid shrouds within,  
To blast and torture. Those who live  
Still fear the living, but a corse  
Is merciless, and power doth give  
To such pale tyrants half the spoil  
He rends from those who groan and toil,  
Because they blush not with remorse

Among their crawling worms. Behold,  
I have no child! my tale grows old  
With grief, and staggers: let it reach  
The limits of my feeble speech,  
And languidly at length recline  
On the brink of its own grave and mine.

Thou knowest what a thing is Poverty  
Among the fallen on evil days:  
'Tis Crime, and Fear, and Infamy,  
And houseless Want in frozen ways  
Wandering ungarmented, and Pain,  
And, worse than all, that inward stain  
Foul Self-contempt, which drowns in sneers  
Youth's starlight smile, and makes its tears  
First like hot gall, then dry for ever!  
And well thou knowest a mother never  
Could doom her children to this ill,  
And well he knew the same. The will  
Imported, that if e'er again  
I sought my children to behold,  
Or in my birthplace did remain  
Beyond three days, whose hours were told,  
They should inherit nought: and he,  
To whom next came their patrimony,  
A sallow lawyer, cruel and cold,  
Aye watched me, as the will was read,  
With eyes askance, which sought to see  
The secrets of my agony;  
And with close lips and anxious brow  
Stood canvassing still to and fro  
The chance of my resolve, and all  
The dead man's caution just did call;  
For in that killing lie 'twas said –  
"She is adulterous, and doth hold  
In secret that the Christian creed  
Is false, and therefore is much need  
That I should have a care to save  
My children from eternal fire."  
Friend, he was sheltered by the grave,  
And therefore dared to be a liar!  
In truth, the Indian on the pyre  
Of her dead husband, half consumed,  
As well might there be false, as I  
To those abhorred embraces doomed,

Far worse than fire's brief agony.  
As to the Christian creed, if true  
Or false, I never questioned it:  
I took it as the vulgar do:  
Nor my vexed soul had leisure yet  
To doubt the things men say, or deem  
That they are other than they seem.

All present who those crimes did hear,  
In feigned or actual scorn and fear,  
Men, women, children, slunk away,  
Whispering with self-contented pride,  
Which half suspects its own base lie.  
I spoke to none, nor did abide,  
But silently I went my way,  
Nor noticed I where joyously  
Sate my two younger babes at play,  
In the court-yard through which I passed;  
But went with footsteps firm and fast  
Till I came to the brink of the ocean green,  
And there, a woman with gray hairs,  
Who had my mother's servant been,  
Kneeling, with many tears and prayers,  
Made me accept a purse of gold,  
Half of the earnings she had kept  
To refuge her when weak and old.

With woe, which never sleeps or slept,  
I wander now. 'Tis a vain thought –  
But on yon alp, whose snowy head  
'Mid the azure air is islanded,  
(We see it o'er the flood of cloud,  
Which sunrise from its eastern caves  
Drives, wrinkling into golden waves,  
Hung with its precipices proud,  
From that gray stone where first we met)  
There – now who knows the dead feel nought? –  
Should be my grave; for he who yet  
Is my soul's soul, once said: "Twere sweet  
'Mid stars and lightnings to abide,  
And winds and lulling snows, that beat  
With their soft flakes the mountain wide,  
Where weary meteor lamps repose,  
And languid storms their pinions close:  
And all things strong and bright and pure,



And ever during, aye endure:  
Who knows, if one were buried there,  
But these things might our spirits make,  
Amid the all-surrounding air,  
Their own eternity partake?"  
Then 'twas a wild and playful saying  
At which I laughed, or seemed to laugh:  
They were his words: now heed my praying,  
And let them be my epitaph.  
Thy memory for a term may be  
My monument. Wilt remember me?  
I know thou wilt, and canst forgive  
Whilst in this erring world to live  
My soul disdained not, that I thought  
Its lying forms were worthy aught  
And much less thee.

**Helen.**

O speak not so,  
But come to me and pour thy woe  
Into this heart, full though it be,  
Ay, overflowing with its own:  
I thought that grief had severed me  
From all beside who weep and groan;  
Its likeness upon earth to be,  
Its express image; but thou art  
More wretched. Sweet! we will not part  
Henceforth, if death be not division;  
If so, the dead feel no contrition.  
But wilt thou hear since last we parted  
All that has left me broken hearted?

**Rosalind.**

Yes, speak. The faintest stars are scarcely shorn  
Of their thin beams by that delusive morn  
Which sinks again in darkness, like the light  
Of early love, soon lost in total night.

**Helen.**

Alas! Italian winds are mild,  
But my bosom is cold – wintry cold –  
When the warm air weaves, among the fresh leaves,  
Soft music, my poor brain is wild,

And I am weak like a nursling child,  
Though my soul with grief is gray and old.

**Rosalind.**

Weep not at thine own words, though they must make  
Me weep. What is thy tale?

**Helen.**

I fear 'twill shake  
Thy gentle heart with tears. Thou well  
Rememberest when we met no more,  
And, though I dwelt with Lionel,  
That friendless caution pierced me sore  
With grief; a wound my spirit bore  
Indignantly, but when he died  
With him lay dead both hope and pride.  
Alas! all hope is buried now.  
But then men dreamed the aged earth  
Was labouring in that mighty birth,  
Which many a poet and a sage  
Has aye foreseen – the happy age  
When truth and love shall dwell below  
Among the works and ways of men;  
Which on this world not power but will  
Even now is wanting to fulfil.

Among mankind what thence befell  
Of strife, how vain, is known too well;  
When Liberty's dear paeon fell  
'Mid murderous howls. To Lionel,  
Though of great wealth and lineage high,  
Yet through those dungeon walls there came  
Thy thrilling light, O Liberty!  
And as the meteor's midnight flame  
Startles the dreamer, sun-like truth  
Flashed on his visionary youth,  
And filled him, not with love, but faith,  
And hope, and courage mute in death;  
For love and life in him were twins,  
Born at one birth: in every other  
First life then love its course begins,  
Though they be children of one mother;  
And so through this dark world they fleet

Divided, till in death they meet:  
But he loved all things ever. Then  
He passed amid the strife of men,  
And stood at the throne of armed power  
Pleading for a world of woe:  
Secure as one on a rock-built tower  
O'er the wrecks which the surge trails to and fro,  
'Mid the passions wild of human kind  
He stood, like a spirit calming them;  
For, it was said, his words could bind  
Like music the lulled crowd, and stem  
That torrent of unquiet dream,  
Which mortals truth and reason deem,  
But is revenge and fear and pride.  
Joyous he was; and hope and peace  
On all who heard him did abide,  
Raining like dew from his sweet talk,  
As where the evening star may walk  
Along the brink of the gloomy seas,  
Liquid mists of splendour quiver.  
His very gestures touched to tears  
The unpersuaded tyrant, never  
So moved before: his presence stung  
The torturers with their victim's pain,  
And none knew how; and through their ears,  
The subtle witchcraft of his tongue  
Unlocked the hearts of those who keep  
Gold, the world's bond of slavery.  
Men wondered, and some sneered to see  
One sow what he could never reap:  
For he is rich, they said, and young,  
And might drink from the depths of luxury.  
If he seeks Fame, Fame never crowned  
The champion of a trampled creed:  
If he seeks Power, Power is enthroned  
'Mid ancient rights and wrongs, to feed  
Which hungry wolves with praise and spoil,  
Those who would sit near Power must toil;  
And such, there sitting, all may see.  
What seeks he? All that others seek  
He casts away, like a vile weed  
Which the sea casts unreturningly.  
That poor and hungry men should break  
The laws which wreak them toil and scorn,  
We understand; but Lionel

We know is rich and nobly born.  
So wondered they: yet all men loved  
Young Lionel, though few approved;  
All but the priests, whose hatred fell  
Like the unseen blight of a smiling day,  
The withering honey dew, which clings  
Under the bright green buds of May,  
Whilst they unfold their emerald wings:  
For he made verses wild and queer  
On the strange creeds priests hold so dear,  
Because they bring them land and gold.  
Of devils and saints and all such gear,  
He made tales which whoso heard or read  
Would laugh till he were almost dead.  
So this grew a proverb: "Don't get old  
Till Lionel's 'Banquet in Hell' you hear,  
And then you will laugh yourself young again."  
So the priests hated him, and he  
Repaid their hate with cheerful glee.

Ah, smiles and joyance quickly died,  
For public hope grew pale and dim  
In an altered time and tide,  
And in its wasting withered him,  
As a summer flower that blows too soon  
Droops in the smile of the waning moon,  
When it scatters through an April night  
The frozen dews of wrinkling blight.  
None now hoped more. Gray Power was seated  
Safely on her ancestral throne;  
And Faith, the Python, undefeated,  
Even to its blood-stained steps dragged on  
Her foul and wounded train, and men  
Were trampled and deceived again,  
And words and shows again could bind  
The wailing tribes of human kind  
In scorn and famine. Fire and blood  
Raged round the raging multitude,  
To fields remote by tyrants sent  
To be the scornèd instrument  
With which they drag from mines of gore  
The chains their slaves yet ever wore:  
And in the streets men met each other,  
And by old altars and in halls,  
And smiled again at festivals.

But each man found in his heart's brother  
Cold cheer; for all, though half deceived,  
The outworn creeds again believed,  
And the same round anew began,  
Which the weary world yet ever ran.

Many then wept, not tears, but gall  
Within their hearts, like drops which fall  
Wasting the fountain-stone away.  
And in that dark and evil day  
Did all desires and thoughts, that claim  
Men's care – ambition, friendship, fame,  
Love, hope, though hope was now despair –  
Indue the colours of this change,  
As from the all-surrounding air  
The earth takes hues obscure and strange,  
When storm and earthquake linger there.

And so, my friend, it then befell  
To many, most to Lionel,  
Whose hope was like the life of youth  
Within him, and when dead, became  
A spirit of unresting flame,  
Which goaded him in his distress  
Over the world's vast wilderness.  
Three years he left his native land,  
And on the fourth, when he returned,  
None knew him: he was stricken deep  
With some disease of mind, and turned  
Into aught unlike Lionel.  
On him, on whom, did he pause in sleep,  
Serenest smiles were wont to keep,  
And, did he wake, a wingèd band  
Of bright persuasions, which had fed  
On his sweet lips and liquid eyes,  
Kept their swift pinions half outspread,  
To do on men his least command;  
On him, whom once 'twas paradise  
Even to behold, now misery lay:  
In his own heart 'twas merciless,  
To all things else none may express  
Its innocence and tenderness.

'Twas said that he had refuge sought  
In love from his unquiet thought

In distant lands, and been deceived  
By some strange show; for there were found,  
Blotted with tears as those relieved  
By their own words are wont to do,  
These mournful verses on the ground,  
By all who read them blotted too.

”How am I changed! my hopes were once like fire:  
I loved, and I believed that life was love.  
How am I lost! on wings of swift desire  
Among Heaven’s winds my spirit once did move.  
I slept, and silver dreams did aye inspire  
My liquid sleep: I woke, and did approve  
All nature to my heart, and thought to make  
A paradise of earth for one sweet sake.  
”I love, but I believe in love no more.  
I feel desire, but hope not. O, from sleep  
Most vainly must my weary brain implore  
Its long lost flattery now: I wake to weep,  
And sit through the long day gnawing the core  
Of my bitter heart, and, like a miser, keep,  
Since none in what I feel take pain or pleasure,  
To my own soul its self-consuming treasure.”

He dwelt beside me near the sea:  
And oft in evening did we meet,  
When the waves, beneath the starlight, flee  
O’er the yellow sands with silver feet,  
And talked: our talk was sad and sweet,  
Till slowly from his mien there passed  
The desolation which it spoke;  
And smiles, – as when the lightning’s blast  
Has parched some heaven-delighting oak,  
The next spring shows leaves pale and rare,  
But like flowers delicate and fair,  
On its rent boughs, – again arrayed  
His countenance in tender light:  
His words grew subtle fire, which made  
The air his hearers breathed delight:  
His motions, like the winds, were free,  
Which bend the bright grass gracefully,  
Then fade away in circlets faint:  
And wingèd Hope, on which upborne  
His soul seemed hovering in his eyes,  
Like some bright spirit newly born

Floating amid the sunny skies,  
Sprang forth from his rent heart anew.  
Yet o'er his talk, and looks, and mien,  
Tempering their loveliness too keen,  
Past woe its shadow backward threw,  
Till like an exhalation, spread  
From flowers half drunk with evening dew,  
They did become infectious: sweet  
And subtile mists of sense and thought:  
Which wrapped us soon, when we might meet,  
Almost from our own looks and aught  
The wide world holds. And so, his mind  
Was healed, while mine grew sick with fear:  
For ever now his health declined,  
Like some frail bark which cannot bear  
The impulse of an altered wind,  
Though prosperous: and my heart grew full  
'Mid its new joy of a new care:  
For his cheek became, not pale, but fair,  
As rose-o'ershadowed lilies are;  
And soon his deep and sunny hair,  
In this alone less beautiful,  
Like grass in tombs grew wild and rare.  
The blood in his translucent veins  
Beat, not like animal life, but love  
Seemed now its sullen springs to move,  
When life had failed, and all its pains:  
And sudden sleep would seize him oft  
Like death, so calm, but that a tear,  
His pointed eyelashes between,  
Would gather in the light serene  
Of smiles, whose lustre bright and soft  
Beneath lay undulating there.  
His breath was like inconstant flame,  
As eagerly it went and came;  
And I hung o'er him in his sleep,  
Till, like an image in the lake  
Which rains disturb, my tears would break  
The shadow of that slumber deep:  
Then he would bid me not to weep,  
And say with flattery false, yet sweet,  
That death and he could never meet,  
If I would never part with him.  
And so we loved, and did unite  
All that in us was yet divided:

For when he said, that many a rite,  
By men to bind but once provided,  
Could not be shared by him and me,  
Or they would kill him in their glee,  
I shuddered, and then laughing said –  
"We will have rites our faith to bind,  
But our church shall be the starry night,  
Our altar the grassy earth outspread,  
And our priest the muttering wind."

'Twas sunset as I spoke: one star  
Had scarce burst forth, when from afar  
The ministers of misrule sent,  
Seized upon Lionel, and bore  
His chained limbs to a dreary tower,  
In the midst of a city vast and wide.  
For he, they said, from his mind had bent  
Against their gods keen blasphemy,  
For which, though his soul must roasted be  
In hell's red lakes immortally,  
Yet even on earth must he abide  
The vengeance of their slaves: a trial,  
I think, men call it. What avail  
Are prayers and tears, which chase denial  
From the fierce savage, nursed in hate?  
What the knit soul that pleading and pale  
Makes wan the quivering cheek, which late  
It painted with its own delight?  
We were divided. As I could,  
I stilled the tingling of my blood,  
And followed him in their despite,  
As a widow follows, pale and wild,  
The murderers and corse of her only child;  
And when we came to the prison door  
And I prayed to share his dungeon floor  
With prayers which rarely have been spurned,  
And when men drove me forth and I  
Stared with blank frenzy on the sky,  
A farewell look of love he turned,  
Half calming me; then gazed awhile,  
As if thro' that black and massy pile,  
And thro' the crowd around him there,  
And thro' the dense and murky air,  
And the thronged streets, he did espy  
What poets know and prophesy;



And said, with voice that made them shiver  
And clung like music in my brain,  
And which the mute walls spoke again  
Prolonging it with deepened strain:  
"Fear not the tyrants shall rule for ever,  
Or the priests of the bloody faith;  
They stand on the brink of that mighty river,  
Whose waves they have tainted with death:  
It is fed from the depths of a thousand dells,  
Around them it foams, and rages, and swells,  
And their swords and their sceptres I floating see,  
Like wrecks in the surge of eternity."

I dwelt beside the prison gate,  
And the strange crowd that out and in  
Passed, some, no doubt, with mine own fate,  
Might have fretted me with its ceaseless din,  
But the fever of care was louder within.  
Soon, but too late, in penitence  
Or fear, his foes released him thence:  
I saw his thin and languid form,  
As leaning on the jailor's arm,  
Whose hardened eyes grew moist the while,  
To meet his mute and faded smile,  
And hear his words of kind farewell,  
He tottered forth from his damp cell.  
Many had never wept before,  
From whom fast tears then gushed and fell:  
Many will relent no more,  
Who sobbed like infants then: aye, all  
Who thronged the prison's stony hall,  
The rulers or the slaves of law,  
Felt with a new surprise and awe  
That they were human, till strong shame  
Made them again become the same.  
The prison blood-hounds, huge and grim,  
From human looks the infection caught,  
And fondly crouched and fawned on him;  
And men have heard the prisoners say,  
Who in their rotting dungeons lay,  
That from that hour, throughout one day,  
The fierce despair and hate which kept  
Their trampled bosoms almost slept:  
Where, like twin vultures, they hung feeding  
On each heart's wound, wide torn and bleeding, –

Because their jailors' rule, they thought,  
Grew merciful, like a parent's sway.

I know not how, but we were free:  
And Lionel sate alone with me,  
As the carriage drove thro' the streets apace;  
And we looked upon each other's face;  
And the blood in our fingers intertwined  
Ran like the thoughts of a single mind,  
As the swift emotions went and came  
Thro' the veins of each united frame.  
So thro' the long long streets we passed  
Of the million-peopled City vast;  
Which is that desert, where each one  
Seeks his mate yet is alone,  
Beloved and sought and mourned of none;  
Until the clear blue sky was seen,  
And the grassy meadows bright and green,  
And then I sunk in his embrace,  
Enclosing there a mighty space  
Of love: and so we travelled on  
By woods, and fields of yellow flowers,  
And towns, and villages, and towers,  
Day after day of happy hours.  
It was the azure time of June,  
When the skies are deep in the stainless noon,  
And the warm and fitful breezes shake  
The fresh green leaves of the hedge-row briar,  
And there were odours then to make  
The very breath we did respire  
A liquid element, whereon  
Our spirits, like delighted things  
That walk the air on subtle wings,  
Floated and mingled far away,  
'Mid the warm winds of the sunny day.  
And when the evening star came forth  
Above the curve of the new bent moon,  
And light and sound ebbed from the earth,  
Like the tide of the full and weary sea  
To the depths of its tranquillity,  
Our natures to its own repose  
Did the earth's breathless sleep attune:  
Like flowers, which on each other close  
Their languid leaves when daylight's gone,  
We lay, till new emotions came,

Which seemed to make each mortal frame  
One soul of interwoven flame,  
A life in life, a second birth  
In worlds diviner far than earth,  
Which, like two strains of harmony  
That mingle in the silent sky  
Then slowly disunite, passed by  
And left the tenderness of tears,  
A soft oblivion of all fears,  
A sweet sleep: so we travelled on  
Till we came to the home of Lionel,  
Among the mountains wild and lone,  
Beside the hoary western sea,  
Which near the verge of the echoing shore  
The massy forest shadowed o'er.

The ancient steward, with hair all hoar,  
As we alighted, wept to see  
His master changed so fearfully;  
And the old man's sobs did waken me  
From my dream of unremaining gladness;  
The truth flashed o'er me like quick madness  
When I looked, and saw that there was death  
On Lionel: yet day by day  
He lived, till fear grew hope and faith,  
And in my soul I dared to say,  
Nothing so bright can pass away:  
Death is dark, and foul, and dull,  
But he is – O how beautiful!  
Yet day by day he grew more weak,  
And his sweet voice, when he might speak,  
Which ne'er was loud, became more low;  
And the light which flashed through his waxen cheek  
Grew faint, as the rose-like hues which flow  
From sunset o'er the Alpine snow:  
And death seemed not like death in him,  
For the spirit of life o'er every limb  
Lingered, a mist of sense and thought.  
When the summer wind faint odours brought  
From mountain flowers, even as it passed  
His cheek would change, as the noonday sea  
Which the dying breeze sweeps fitfully.  
If but a cloud the sky o'er cast,  
You might see his colour come and go,  
And the softest strain of music made

Sweet smiles, yet sad, arise and fade  
Amid the dew of his tender eyes;  
And the breath, with intermitting flow,  
Made his pale lips quiver and part.  
You might hear the beatings of his heart,  
Quick, but not strong; and with my tresses  
When oft he playfully would bind  
In the bowers of mossy lonelineses  
His neck, and win me so to mingle  
In the sweet depth of woven caresses,  
And our faint limbs were intertwined,  
Alas! the unquiet life did tingle  
From mine own heart through every vein,  
Like a captive in dreams of liberty,  
Who beats the walls of his stony cell.  
But his, it seemed already free,  
Like the shadow of fire surrounding me!  
On my faint eyes and limbs did dwell  
That spirit as it passed, till soon,  
As a frail cloud wandering o'er the moon,  
Beneath its light invisible,  
Is seen when it folds its gray wings again  
To alight on midnight's dusky plain,  
I lived and saw, and the gathering soul  
Passed from beneath that strong control,  
And I fell on a life which was sick with fear  
Of all the woe that now I bear.

Amid a bloomless myrtle wood,  
On a green and sea-girt promontory,  
Not far from where we dwelt, there stood  
In record of a sweet sad story,  
An altar and a temple bright  
Circled by steps, and o'er the gate  
Was sculptured, "To Fidelity";  
And in the shrine an image sate,  
All veiled: but there was seen the light  
Of smiles, which faintly could express  
A mingled pain and tenderness  
Through that ethereal drapery.  
The left hand held the head, the right –  
Beyond the veil, beneath the skin,  
You might see the nerves quivering within –  
Was forcing the point of a barbèd dart  
Into its side-convulsing heart.

An unskilled hand, yet one informed  
With genius, had the marble warmed  
With that pathetic life. This tale  
It told: A dog had from the sea,  
When the tide was raging fearfully,  
Dragged Lionel's mother, weak and pale,  
Then died beside her on the sand,  
And she that temple thence had planned;  
But it was Lionel's own hand  
Had wrought the image. Each new moon  
That lady did, in this lone fane,  
The rites of a religion sweet,  
Whose god was in her heart and brain:  
The seasons' loveliest flowers were strewn  
On the marble floor beneath her feet,  
And she brought crowns of sea-buds white,  
Whose odour is so sweet and faint,  
And weeds, like branching chrysolite,  
Woven in devices fine and quaint,  
And tears from her brown eyes did stain  
The altar: need but look upon  
That dying statue fair and wan,  
If tears should cease, to weep again:  
And rare Arabian odours came,  
Through the myrtle corses steaming thence  
From the hissing frankincense,  
Whose smoke, wool-white as ocean foam.  
Hung in dense flocks beneath the dome –  
That ivory dome, whose azure night  
With golden stars, like heaven, was bright –  
O'er the split cedar's pointed flame;  
And the lady's harp would kindle there  
The melody of an old air,  
Softer than sleep; the villagers  
Mixed their religion up with hers,  
And as they listened round, shed tears.

One eve he led me to this fane:  
Daylight on its last purple cloud  
Was lingering gray, and soon her strain  
The nightingale began; now loud,  
Climbing in circles the windless sky,  
Now dying music; suddenly  
'Tis scattered in a thousand notes,  
And now to the hushed ear it floats

Like field smells known in infancy,  
 Then failing, soothes the air again.  
 We sate within that temple lone,  
 Pavilioned round with Parian stone:  
 His mother's harp stood near, and oft  
 I had awakened music soft  
 Amid its wires: the nightingale  
 Was pausing in her heaven-taught tale:  
 "Now drain the cup," said Lionel,  
 "Which the poet-bird has crowned so well  
 With the wine of her bright and liquid song!  
 Heardst thou not sweet words among  
 That heaven-resounding minstrelsy?  
 Heardst thou not, that those who die  
 Awake in a world of ecstasy?  
 That love, when limbs are interwoven,  
 And sleep, when the night of life is cloven,  
 And thought, to the world's dim boundaries clinging,  
 And music, when one beloved is singing,  
 Is death? Let us drain right joyously  
 The cup which the sweet bird fills for me."  
 He paused, and to my lips he bent  
 His own: like spirit his words went  
 Through all my limbs with the speed of fire;  
 And his keen eyes, glittering through mine,  
 Filled me with the flame divine,  
 Which in their orbs was burning far,  
 Like the light of an unmeasured star,  
 In the sky of midnight dark and deep:  
 Yes, 'twas his soul that did inspire  
 Sounds, which my skill could ne'er awaken;  
 And first, I felt my fingers sweep  
 The harp, and a long quivering cry  
 Burst from my lips in symphony:  
 The dusk and solid air was shaken,  
 As swift and swifter the notes came  
 From my touch, that wandered like quick flame,  
 And from my bosom, labouring  
 With some unutterable thing:  
 The awful sound of my own voice made  
 My faint lips tremble; in some mood  
 Of wordless thought Lionel stood  
 So pale, that even beside his cheek  
 The snowy column from its shade  
 Caught whiteness: yet his countenance

Raised upward, burned with radiance  
Of spirit-piercing joy, whose light,  
Like the moon struggling through the night  
Of whirlwind-rifted clouds, did break  
With beams that might not be confined.  
I paused, but soon his gestures kindled  
New power, as by the moving wind  
The waves are lifted, and my song  
To low soft notes now changed and dwindled,  
And from the twinkling wires among,  
My languid fingers drew and flung  
Circles of life-dissolving sound,  
Yet faint; in aëry rings they bound  
My Lionel, who, as every strain  
Grew fainter but more sweet, his mien  
Sunk with the sound relaxedly;  
And slowly now he turned to me,  
As slowly faded from his face  
That awful joy: with looks serene  
He was soon drawn to my embrace,  
And my wild song then died away  
In murmurs: words I dare not say  
We mixed, and on his lips mine fed  
Till they methought felt still and cold:  
"What is it with thee, love?" I said:  
No word, no look, no motion! yes,  
There was a change, but spare to guess,  
Nor let that moment's hope be told.  
I looked, and knew that he was dead,  
And fell, as the eagle on the plain  
Falls when life deserts her brain,  
And the mortal lightning is veiled again.

O that I were now dead! but such  
(Did they not, love, demand too much,  
Those dying murmurs?) he forbade.  
O that I once again were mad!  
And yet, dear Rosalind, not so,  
For I would live to share thy woe.  
Sweet boy, did I forget thee too?  
Alas, we know not what we do  
When we speak words.

No memory more

Is in my mind of that sea shore.  
Madness came on me, and a troop  
Of misty shapes did seem to sit  
Beside me, on a vessel's poop,  
And the clear north wind was driving it.  
Then I heard strange tongues, and saw strange flowers,  
And the stars methought grew unlike ours,  
And the azure sky and the stormless sea  
Made me believe that I had died,  
And waked in a world, which was to me  
Drear hell, though heaven to all beside:  
Then a dead sleep fell on my mind,  
Whilst animal life many long years  
Had rescue from a chasm of tears;  
And when I woke, I wept to find  
That the same lady, bright and wise,  
With silver locks and quick brown eyes,  
The mother of my Lionel,  
Had tended me in my distress,  
And died some months before. Nor less  
Wonder, but far more peace and joy  
Brought in that hour my lovely boy;  
For through that trance my soul had well  
The impress of thy being kept;  
And if I waked, or if I slept,  
No doubt, though memory faithless be,  
Thy image ever dwelt on me;  
And thus, O Lionel, like thee  
Is our sweet child. 'Tis sure most strange  
I knew not of so great a change,  
As that which gave him birth, who now  
Is all the solace of my woe.

That Lionel great wealth had left  
By will to me, and that of all  
The ready lies of law bereft  
My child and me, might well befall.  
But let me think not of the scorn,  
Which from the meanest I have borne,  
When, for my child's beloved sake,  
I mixed with slaves, to vindicate  
The very laws themselves do make:  
Let me not say scorn is my fate,  
Lest I be proud, suffering the same  
With those who live in deathless fame.



She ceased. – "Lo, where red morning thro' the woods  
 Is burning o'er the dew"; said Rosalind.  
 And with these words they rose, and towards the flood  
 Of the blue lake, beneath the leaves now wind  
 With equal steps and fingers intertwined:  
 Thence to a lonely dwelling, where the shore  
 Is shadowed with deep rocks, and cypresses  
 Cleave with their dark green cones the silent skies,  
 And with their shadows the clear depths below,  
 And where a little terrace from its bowers,  
 Of blooming myrtle and faint lemon-flowers,  
 Scatters its sense-dissolving fragrance o'er  
 The liquid marble of the windless lake;  
 And where the agèd forest's limbs look hoar,  
 Under the leaves which their green garments make,  
 They come: 'tis Helen's home, and clean and white,  
 Like one which tyrants spare on our own land  
 In some such solitude, its casements bright  
 Shone through their vine-leaves in the morning sun,  
 And even within 'twas scarce like Italy.  
 And when she saw how all things there were planned,  
 As in an English home, dim memory  
 Disturbed poor Rosalind: she stood as one  
 Whose mind is where his body cannot be,  
 Till Helen led her where her child yet slept,  
 And said, "Observe, that brow was Lionel's,  
 Those lips were his, and so he ever kept  
 One arm in sleep, pillowing his head with it.  
 You cannot see his eyes, they are two wells  
 Of liquid love: let us not wake him yet."  
 But Rosalind could bear no more, and wept  
 A shower of burning tears, which fell upon  
 His face, and so his opening lashes shone  
 With tears unlike his own, as he did leap  
 In sudden wonder from his innocent sleep.

So Rosalind and Helen lived together  
 Thenceforth, changed in all else, yet friends again,  
 Such as they were, when o'er the mountain heather  
 They wandered in their youth, through sun and rain.  
 And after many years, for human things  
 Change even like the ocean and the wind,  
 Her daughter was restored to Rosalind,  
 And in their circle thence some visitings  
 Of joy 'mid their new calm would intervene:

A lovely child she was, of looks serene,  
And motions which o'er things indifferent shed  
The grace and gentleness from whence they came.  
And Helen's boy grew with her, and they fed  
From the same flowers of thought, until each mind  
Like springs which mingle in one flood became,  
And in their union soon their parents saw  
The shadow of the peace denied to them.  
And Rosalind, for when the living stem  
Is cankered in its heart, the tree must fall,  
Died ere her time; and with deep grief and awe  
The pale survivors followed her remains  
Beyond the region of dissolving rains,  
Up the cold mountain she was wont to call  
Her tomb; and on Chiavenna's precipice  
They raised a pyramid of lasting ice,  
Whose polished sides, ere day had yet begun,  
Caught the first glow of the unrisen sun,  
The last, when it had sunk; and thro' the night  
The charioteers of Arctos wheelèd round  
Its glittering point, as seen from Helen's home,  
Whose sad inhabitants each year would come,  
With willing steps climbing that rugged height,  
And hang long locks of hair, and garlands bound  
With amaranth flowers, which, in the clime's despite,  
Filled the frore air with unaccustomed light:  
Such flowers, as in the wintry memory bloom  
Of one friend left, adorned that frozen tomb.

Helen, whose spirit was of softer mould,  
Whose sufferings too were less, Death slower led  
Into the peace of his dominion cold:  
She died among her kindred, being old.  
And know, that if love die not in the dead  
As in the living, none of mortal kind  
Are blest, as now Helen and Rosalind.

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Percy Bysshe Shelley  
Rosalind and Helen  
A Modern Eclogue  
1818

<http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/PShelley/rosalind.html>

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