

MAY-DAY NIGHT.^{1*}

[THE following is a translation by Mr. Shelley of the May-day Night scene in the tragedy of Faust.² A few passages were not filled up in the manuscript; and one or two others, perhaps of a like nature, have been omitted,³ not out of an idle squeamishness, but that the true spirit of them might not be mistaken for want of being accompanied by the context of the whole work. The scene is the first specimen, we believe, of a poetical English translation⁴ of that extraordinary production, to which no man was better able to do justice than our lamented friend.⁵ The poetical reader will feel with what vivacity he has encountered the ghastly bustle of the revellers, —with what apprehensiveness of tact, yet strength of security, he has carried us into the thick of “the witch element.” These are strong terms of praise for a translation; but Mr. Shelley went to his work in a kindred spirit of genius, and Goëthe has so completely made his work a work of creation, it seems a thing so involuntarily growing out of the world he has got into, like the animated rocks and crags⁶ which he speaks of,—that a congenial translator in one’s own language seems to step into his place as the abstract observer, and to leave but two images present to one’s mind, the work and himself. In other words, he is the true representative of his author. This is the very highest triumph both of poetry and translation.

Webster⁷ and Middleton⁸ would have liked this scene. Every body will like it, who can feel at all what the poet feels most, the secret analogies that abound in all things,—the sympathies, of which difference and even antipathy cannot get rid. How we pity Faust in this play, who refines and hardens himself out of his faith in things good, and acquires the necessity of inordinate excitement! How we congratulate even the Devil, who, having got a pitch still further, discovers a kind of faith in faithlessness itself, and extracts a good, wretched as it is, out of his laughing at every thing! And how delightful, is it not, to see the blindest scepticism itself thus brought round to poetry and imagination by the very road which seemed to lead

* Author: Percy Bysshe Shelley / Transcribed and annotated by Alessia Testori.

farthest from it, and the misfortune of worldly-mindedness inculcated by the very charities which the poet finds out in its behalf!

We have sometimes thought of attempting a work, in which beasts and birds should speak, not as in *Æsop*,⁹ but as they might be supposed to talk, if they could give us the result of their own actual perceptions and difference of organisation. Goëthe would handle such a subject to perfection.]

MAY-DAY NIGHT.

SCENE—*The Hartz Mountain,*¹⁰ *a desolate Country.*

FAUST,¹¹ MEPHISTOPHELES.¹²

Meph. Would you not like a broomstick? As for me
I wish I had a good stout ram to ride;
For we are still far from the appointed place.

Faust. This knotted staff is help enough for me,
Whilst I feel fresh upon my legs. What good
Is there in making short a pleasant way?
To creep along the labyrinths of the vales,
And climb those rocks where ever-babbling springs
Precipitate themselves in waterfalls,
Is the true sport that seasons such a path.
Already Spring kindles the birchen spray,
And the hoar pines already feel her breath:
Shall she not work also within our limbs?

Meph. Nothing of such an influence do I feel.
My body is all wintry, and I wish
The flowers upon our path were frost and snow.
But see how melancholy rises now,
Dimly uplifting her belated beam,
The blank unwelcome round of the red moon,
And gives so bad a light, that every step
One stumbles 'gainst some crag. With your permission,
I'll call an Ignis-fatuus¹³ to our aid:
I see one yonder burning jollily.
Halloo, my friend! may I request that you

Would favour us with your bright company?
 Why should you blaze away there to no purpose?
 Pray be so good as light us up this way.

Ignis-f. With reverence be it spoken, I will try
 To overcome the lightness of my nature;
 Our course you know is generally zig-zag.

Meph. Ha, ha! your worship thinks you have to deal
 With men. Go strait on, in the Devil's name,
 Or I will blow your flickering life out.

Ignis-f. Well,
 I see you are the master of the house;
 I will accommodate myself to you.
 Only consider, that to-night this mountain
 Is all enchanted, and if Jack-a-lantern
 Shews you his way, though you should miss your own,
 You ought not to be too exact with him

(Faust, Mephistopheles, and Ignis-fatuus, in alternate chorus.)

The limits of the sphere of dream,
 The bounds of true and false, are past.
 Lead us on, thou wandering Gleam,
 Lead us onward, far and fast,
 To the wide, the desert¹⁴ waste.

But see how swift advance, and shift,
 Trees behind trees, row by row,—
 How, clift by clift, rocks bend and lift
 Their fawning foreheads as we go.
 The giant-snouted crags, ho! ho!
 How they snort and how they blow!

Through the mossy sods and stones
 Stream and streamlet hurry down —

A rushing throng! A sound of song
Beneath the vault of Heaven is blown!
Sweet notes of love, the speaking tones
Of this bright day, sent down to say
That Paradise on Earth is known,
Resound around, beneath, above.
All we hope and all we love
Finds a voice in this blithe strain,
Which wakens hill, and wood, and rill,
And vibrates far o'er field and vale,
And which echo, like the tale
Of old times, repeats again.

To whoo! to whoo! Near, nearer now
The sound of song, the rushing throng!
Are the screech, the lapwing, and the jay,
All awake as if 'twere day?
See, with long legs and belly wide,
A salamander in the lake!
Every root is like a snake,
And along the loose hill side,
With strange contortions through the night,
Curls, to seize or to affright;¹⁵
And, animated, strong, and many,
They dart forth polypus-antennæ,
To blister with their poison spume
The wanderer. Through the dazzling gloom
The many-coloured mice, that thread
The dewy turf beneath our tread,
In troops each others motions cross,
Through the heath and through the moss;
And, in legions intertangled,

The fire-flies flit, and swarm, and throng,
Till all the mountain depths are spangled.

Tell me, shall we go or stay?
Shall we onward? Come along!
Every thing around is swept
Forward, onward, far away!
Trees and masses intercept
The sight, and wisps on every side
Are puffed up and multiplied.

Meph. Now vigorously seize my skirt, and gain
This pinnacle of isolated crag.
One may observe with wonder from this point,
How Mammon¹⁶ glows among the mountains.

Faust. Aye—
And strangely through the solid depth below
A melancholy light, like the red dawn,
Shoots from the lowest gorge of the abyss
Of mountains, lightning hitherward: there rise
Pillars of smoke, here clouds float gently by;
Here the light burns soft as the enkindled air,
Or the illumined dust of golden flowers;
And now it glides like tender colours spreading,
And now bursts forth in fountains from the earth;
And now it winds, one torrent of broad light,
Through the far valley with a hundred veins;
And now once more within that narrow corner
Masses itself into intensest splendour.
And near us, see! sparks spring out of the ground,
Like golden sand scattered upon the darkness;
The pinnacles of that black wall of mountains
That hems us in, are kindled.

Meph. Rare, in faith!
Does not Sir Mammon gloriously illuminate
His palace for this festival . . . it is
A pleasure which you had not known before.
I spy the boisterous guests already.

Faust. Now
The children of the wind rage in the air!
With what fierce strokes they fall upon my neck!

Meph. Cling tightly to the old ribs of the crag.
Beware! for if with them thou warrest
In their fierce flight towards the wilderness,
Their breath will sweep thee into dust, and drag
Thy body to a grave in the abyss.

A cloud thickens the night.
Hark! how the tempest crashes through the forest!
The owls fly out in strange affright;
The columns of the evergreen palaces
Are split and shattered;
The roots creak, and stretch, and groan;
And ruinously overthrown,
The trunks are crushed and shattered
By the fierce blast's unconquerable stress.
Over each other crack and crash they all
In terrible and intertangled fall;
And through the ruins of the shaken mountain
The airs hiss and howl.
It is not the voice of the fountain,
Nor the wolf in his midnight prowling.
Dost thou not hear?
Strange accents are ringing
Aloft, afar, anear;¹⁷
The witches are singing!

The torrent of a raging wizard song
Streams the whole mountain along.

Chorus of Witches.

The stubble is yellow, the corn is green,
Now to the Brocken¹⁸ the witches go;
The mighty multitude here may be seen
Gathering, wizard and witch, below.
Sir Urean¹⁹ is sitting aloft in the air;
Hey over stock! and hey over stone!
'Twixt²⁰ witches and incubi,²¹ what shall be done?
Tell it who dare! tell it who dare!

A Voice.

Upon a sow swine, whose farrows were nine,
Old Baubo²² rideth alone.

Chorus.

Honour her to whom honour is due,
Old mother Baubo, honor to you!
An able sow, with old Baubo upon her,
Is worthy of glory, and worthy of honour!
The legion of witches is coming behind,
Darkening the night, and outspeeding the wind.

A Voice.

Which way comest thou?

A Voice.

Over Ilsenstein;²³

The owl was awake in the white moon-shine;
I saw her at rest in her downy nest,
And she stared at me with her broad, bright eye.

Voices.

And you may now as well take your course on to Hell,
Since you ride by so fast on the headlong blast.

A Voice.

She dropt poison upon me as I past.
Here are the wounds——

Chorus of Witches.

Come away! come along!
 The way is wide, the way is long,
 But what is that for a bedlam throng?
 Stick with the prong, and scratch with the broom.
 The child in the cradle lies strangled at home,
 And the mother is clapping her hands.

Semi-Chorus of Wizards I.

We glide in
 Like snails, when the women are all away;
 And from a house once given over to sin
 Woman has a thousand steps to stray.

Semi-Chorus II.

A thousand steps must a woman take,
 Where a man but a single spring will make.

Voices above.

Come with us, come with us, from Felumee.²⁴

Voices below.

With what joy would we fly through the upper sky!
 We are washed, we are 'nointed,²⁵ stark naked are we;
 But our toil and our pain is for ever in vain.

Both Chorusses.

The wind is still, the stars are fled,
 The melancholy moon is dead;
 The magic notes, like spark on spark,
 Drizzle, whistling through the dark.
 Come away!

Voices below.

Stay, oh, stay!

Voices above.

Out of the crannies of the rocks,
 Who calls?

Voices below.

Oh, let me join your flocks!
I three hundred years have striven
To catch your skirt and mount to Heaven,—
And still in vain. Oh, might I be
With company akin to me!

Both Chorusses.

Some on a ram, and some on a prong,
On poles and on broomsticks we flutter along;
Forlorn is the wight who can rise not to-night.

A Half-witch below.

I have been tripping this many an hour:
Are the others already so far before?
No quiet at home, and no peace abroad!
And less methinks is found by the road.

Chorus of Witches.

Come onward, away! aroint thee, aroint!
A witch to be strong must anoint—anoint—
Then every trough will be boat enough;
With a rag for a sail we can sweep through the sky,
Who flies not to-night, when means he to fly?

Both Chorusses.

We cling to the skirt, and we strike on the ground;
Witch legions thicken around and around;
Wizard swarms cover the heath all over.

(They descend.)

Mephistopheles.

What thronging, dashing, raging, rustling;
What whispering, babbling, hissing, bustling;
What glimmering, spurting, stinking, burning,
As Heaven and Earth were overturning.
There is a true witch element about us.
Take hold on me, or we shall be divided.
Where are you?

Faust. (*From a distance.*)—Here!

Meph. I must exert my authority in the house.
Place for young Voland!²⁶ pray make way, good people.
Take hold on me, doctor, and with one step
Let us escape from this unpleasant crowd:
They are too mad for people of my sort.
Just there shines a peculiar kind of light—
Something attracts me in those bushes. Come
This way; we shall slip down there in a minute.

Faust. Spirit of Contradiction! Well, lead on—
'Twere a wise feat indeed to wander out
Into the Brocken upon May-day night,
And then to isolate oneself in scorn,
Disgusted with the humours of the time.

Meph. See yonder, round a many coloured flame
A merry club is huddled all together:
Even with such little people as sit there
One would not be alone.

Faust. Would that I were
Up yonder in the glow and whirling smoke,
Where the blind million rush impetuously
To meet the evil ones; there might I solve
Many a riddle that torments me!

Meph. Yet
Many a riddle there is tied anew
Inextricably. Let the great world rage!
We will stay here safe in the quiet dwellings.
'Tis our old custom. Men have ever built
Their own small world in the great world of all.
I see young witches naked there, and old ones
Wisely attired with greater decency.
Be guided now by me, and you shall buy
A pound of pleasure with a dram of trouble.

I hear them tune their instruments—one must
 Get used to this damned scraping. Come, I'll lead you
 Among them; and what you there do and see,
 As a fresh compact 'twixt us two shall be.
 How say you now? this space is wide enough—
 Look forth, you cannot see the end of it—
 An hundred bonfires burn in rows, and they
 Who throng around them seem innumerable:
 Dancing and drinking, jabbering, making love,
 And cooking, are at work. Now tell me, friend,
 What is there better in the world than this?

Faust. In introducing us, do you assume
 The character of wizard or of devil?

Meph. In truth, I generally go about
 In strict incognito; and yet one likes
 To wear one's orders upon gala days.
 I have no ribbon at knee; but here
 At home the cloven foot is honourable.
 See you that snail there?—she comes creeping up,
 And with her feeling eyes has smelt out something.
 I could not, if I would, mask myself here.
 Come now, we'll go about from fire to fire:
 I'll be the pimp, and you shall be the lover.

*(To some old women, who are sitting round a heap of
 glimmering coals.)*

Old gentlewomen, what do you do out here?
 You ought to be with the young rioters
 Right in the thickest of the revelry—
 But every one is best content at home.

General.

Who dare confide in night or a just claim?
 So much as I had done for them! and now—
 With women and the people 'tis the same,

Youth will stand foremost ever,—age may go
To the dark grave unhonoured.

Minister.

Now-a-days
People assert their rights: they go too far;
But as for me, the good old times I praise;
Then we were all in all, 'twas something worth
One's while to be in place and wear a star;
That was indeed the golden age on earth.

*Parvenu.**

We too are active, and we did and do
What we ought not, perhaps; and yet we now
Will seize, whilst all things are whirled round and round,
A spoke of Fortune's wheel, and keep our ground.

Author.

Who now can taste a treatise of deep sense
And wondrous volume? 'tis impertinence
To write what none will read, therefore will I
To please the young and thoughtless people try.

Meph. (Who at once appears to have grown very old.)

I find the people ripe for the last day,
Since I last came up to the wizard mountain;
And as my little cask runs turbid now,
So is the world drained to the dregs.

Pedlar-Witch. Look here,
Gentlemen; do not hurry on so fast
And lose the chance of a good pennyworth.
I have a pack full of the choicest wares
Of every sort, and yet in all my bundle
Is nothing like what may be found on earth;
Nothing that in a moment will make rich

* A sort of fundholder.

Men and the world with fine malicious mischief—
 There is no dagger drunk with blood; no bowl
 From which consuming poison may be drained
 By innocent and healthy lips; no jewel
 The price of an abandoned maiden's shame;
 No sword which cuts the bond it cannot loose,
 Or stabs the wearer's enemy in the back;
 No——

Meph. Gossip, you know little of these times.
 What has been, has been; what is done, is past.
 They shape themselves into the innovations,
 They breed, and innovation drags us with it.
 The torrent of the crowd sweeps over us:
 You think to impel, and are yourself impelled.

Faust. Who is that yonder?

Meph. Mark her well. It is
 Lilith.²⁷

Faust. Who?

Meph. Lilith, the first wife of Adam.
 Beware of her fair hair, for she excels
 All women in the magic of her locks;
 And when she winds them round a young man's neck,
 She will not ever set him free again.

Faust. There sit a girl and an old woman—they
 Seem to be tired with pleasure and with play.

Meph. There is rest to night for any one:
 When one dance ends another is begun;
 Come, let us to it! We shall have rare fun.

*(Faust dances and sings with a girl, and Mephistopheles
 with an old woman.)*²⁸

*Brocto-phantasmist.*²⁹ What is this cursed multitude about?

Have we not long since proved to demonstration
That ghosts move not on ordinary feet?
But these are dancing just like men and women.

The Girl. What does he want then at our ball?

Faust. Oh! he

Is far above us all in his conceit:
Whilst we enjoy, he reasons of enjoyment;
And any step which in our dance we tread,
If it be left out of his reckoning,
Is not to be considered as a step.
There are few things that scandalize him not:
And when you whirl round in the circle now,
As he went round the wheel in his old mill,
He says that you go wrong in all respects,
Especially if you congratulate him
Upon the strength of the resemblance.

Broct. Fly!

Vanish! Unheard of impudence! What, still there!
In this enlightened age too, since you have been
Proved not to exist!—But this infernal brood
Will hear no reason and endure no rule.
Are we so wise, and is the *pond* still haunted?
How long have I been sweeping out this rubbish
Of superstition, and the world will not
Come clean with all my pains!—it is a case
Unheard of!

The Girl. Then leave off teasing us so.

Broct. I tell you spirits, to your faces now,
That I should not regret this despotism
Of spirits, but that mine can wield it not.
To night I shall make poor work of it,
Yet I will take a round with you, and hope

Before my last step in the living dance
To beat the poet and the devil together.

Meph. At last he will sit down in some foul puddle;
That is his way of solacing himself;
Until some leech, diverted with his gravity,
Cures him of spirits and the spirit together.

(To Faust, who has seceded from the dance.)

Why do you let that fair girl pass from you,
Who sung so sweetly to you in the dance?

Faust. A red mouse in the middle of her singing
Sprung from her mouth.

Meph. That was all right, my friend.
Be it enough that the mouse was not grey.
Do not disturb your hour of happiness
With close consideration of such trifles.

Faust. Then saw I——

Meph. What?

Faust. Seest thou not a pale
Fair girl, standing alone, far, far away?
She drags herself now forward with slow steps,
And seems as if she moved with shackled feet:
I cannot overcome the thought that she
Is like poor Margaret.³⁰

Meph. Let it be—pass on—
No good can come of it—it is not well
To meet it—it is an enchanted phantom,
A lifeless idol; with a numbing look,
It freezes up the blood of man; and they
Who meet its ghastly stare are turned to stone,
Like those who saw Medusa.³¹

Faust. Oh, too true!
Her eyes are like the eyes of a fresh corpse

Which no beloved hand has closed, alas!
That is the heart which Margaret yielded to me—
Those are the lovely limbs which I enjoyed!

Meph. It is all magic, poor deluded fool!
She looks to every one like his first love.

Faust. Oh, what delight! what woe! I cannot turn
My looks from her sweet piteous countenance.
How strangely does a single blood-red line,
Not broader than the sharp edge of a knife,
Adorn her lovely neck!

Meph. Aye, she can carry
Her head under her arm upon occasion;
Perseus³² has cut it off for her. These pleasures
End in delusion.—Gain this rising ground,
It is as airy here as in a []
And if I am not mightily deceived,
I see a theatre—What may this mean?

Attendant. Quite a new piece, the last of seven, for 'tis
The custom now to represent that number.
'Tis written by a Dilettante,³³ and
The actors who perform are Dilettanti;
Excuse me, gentlemen; but I must vanish.
I am a Dilettante curtain-lifter.

[BLANK PAGE]

EDITORIAL NOTES

¹ Reference to the night between 30th April and 1st May. Also known as “Walpurgis Night”, it is the eve of the Christian feast day of Saint Walpurga and commemorates her canonization on 1st May 870 CE. In Germany, Saint Walpurga was worshipped as a protector against pest, rabies, whooping cough and witchcraft. “May Day” is, instead, a Europe-wide festival, also held on 1st May, which, in contrast to the night of Walpurga, celebrates the arrival of summer.

² Percy Bysshe Shelley’s translation of the *Walpurgisnacht auf dem Brocken* scene from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Faust* (Part I, Scene XXI) (1808).

³ This translation was published after Shelley’s death. It is highly likely that some corrections were made by other editors of *The Liberal* before its first issue was printed. Mary Shelley, in particular, heavily edited the majority of her husband’s lyrical pieces, changing, omitting, and removing several lines. Mary was also the editor of two posthumous collections of Shelley’s works: *Posthumous Poems* (1824) and *Poetical Works* (1839).

⁴ The definition of “poetical English translation” indicates that Shelley’s is not a word-for-word rendition of the original.

⁵ Percy Bysshe Shelley.

⁶ Sharp, detached fragments of rocks.

⁷ John Webster (c. 1578-c. 1632), dramatist.

⁸ Thomas Middleton (1580-1627), dramatist.

⁹ Æsop (620-564 BCE), alleged author of a collection of Greek fables (known in English as *Æsop’s Fables*), almost certainly a legendary figure.

¹⁰ The Harz Mountains are a highland area in northern Germany.

¹¹ Johann Georg Faust (c. 1480-c. 1541), itinerant alchemist, astrologer, and magician of the German Renaissance. He became the subject of folk legends in the years after his death, as well as of several literary works, most famously Christopher Marlowe’s *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus* (c. 1592) and Goethe’s *Faust* (1808).

¹² Mephistopheles, also known as Mephisto, a demon in German folklore. In *Faust* legends, the protagonist makes a deal with the devil at the price of his own soul. Mephistopheles acts as the devil’s agent.

¹³ (Latin) A flitting phosphorescent light seen at night, chiefly over marshy ground.

¹⁴ Obsolete spelling of “desert”.

¹⁵ (Archaic) To frighten, to alarm.

¹⁶ In the New Testament, Mammon is negatively associated with any entity that promises wealth; medieval writers commonly interpreted it as an evil demon or a God.

¹⁷ (Archaic) Near, close.

¹⁸ Highest of the Harz Mountains (1142 metres).

¹⁹ In early modern Germany the expression *Herr Urian* or *Meister Urian* denoted a proverbial unwanted guest. Here used to indicate the devil.

²⁰ (Middle English) Between (short for *betwixt*).

²¹ In folklore, a demon believed to lie upon sleeping persons. From Latin *incubāre*: to lie upon.

²² Ancient Greek Goddess, also known as the goddess of Obscenity.

²³ A formation of granite rocks in the Harz Mountains.

²⁴ In the original manuscript, Goethe here uses the term “Felsensee” (“Rock Lake”), a lake in the Palatinate Forest (Pfälzerwald), now in the German state of Rhineland-Palatinate. In *Posthumous Poems* (1824) and *Poetical Works* (1839), “Felunsee”. In *Relics of Shelley* (1862), Percy’s use of “Felunsee” is considered erroneous and it is corrected with “Felsensee”.

²⁵ (Archaic) To anoint: to smear or rub with oil or an oily substance.

²⁶ (German) Old term for “Devil”.

²⁷ Feminine figure in Christian mythology, the first wife of Adam and a primordial she-demon. She was banished from the Garden of Eden for disobeying Adam. In some religious texts, Lilith is believed to be the serpent in the Garden of Eden. In Jewish folklore, Lilith is considered to be a raven-haired demon who preys on helpless newborn infants and seduces unsuspecting men, using their seed to produce hordes of demon babies.

EDITORIAL NOTES

²⁸ A few stanzas from the original *Faust* are omitted here (lines 300-316).

²⁹ Shelley here keeps the name given by Goethe in the original manuscript and in the first edition of *Faust*. Goethe used this term in reference to Christoph Friedrich Nicolai (1733-1811), a Berlin author who had harshly criticized him. Nicolai's most famous attack on Goethe was a parody of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), which Nicolai entitled *The Joys of Werther* (1775). In 1791, Nicolai was visited with a terrible malady and was finally relieved by the application of leeches about the end of the spine. Hence Goethe's use of the term *Proktophantamist*, which Bayard Taylor aptly rendered as "Rump-visionary". See *Faust: A Tragedy* (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1870), p. 314.

³⁰ Also known as "Gretchen", Margaret is the young woman with whom Faust falls in love (and whom he eventually destroys).

³¹ In Greek Mythology, a winged female creature with a head of hair consisting of snakes. Medusa had the power of turning into stone whoever looked at her.

³² In Greek Mythology, the son of Zeus and Danaë. He killed Medusa by cutting off her head.

³³ Someone with a superficial interest in a branch of the arts or knowledge generally.