

# **The Witch of Atlas**

Percy Bysshe Shelley

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# The Witch of Atlas

Percy Bysshe Shelley

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TO MARY  
(ON HER OBJECTING TO THE FOLLOWING POEM, UPON THE  
SCORE OF ITS CONTAINING NO HUMAN INTEREST).

1.

How, my dear Mary, are you critic-bitten  
(For vipers kill, though dead) by some review,  
That you condemn these verses I have written,  
Because they tell no story, false or true?  
What, though no mice are caught by a young kitten,  
May it not leap and play as grown cats do,  
Till its claws come? Prithee, for this one time,  
Content thee with a visionary rhyme.

2.

What hand would crush the silken-winged fly,  
The youngest of inconstant April's minions,  
Because it cannot climb the purest sky,  
Where the swan sings, amid the sun's dominions?  
Not thine. Thou knowest 'tis its doom to die,  
When Day shall hide within her twilight pinions  
The lucent eyes, and the eternal smile,  
Serene as thine, which lent it life awhile.

3.

To thy fair feet a winged Vision came,  
Whose date should have been longer than a day,  
And o'er thy head did beat its wings for fame,  
And in thy sight its fading plumes display;  
The watery bow burned in the evening flame.  
But the shower fell, the swift Sun went his way  
And that is dead. O, let me not believe  
That anything of mine is fit to live!

4.

Wordsworth informs us he was nineteen years

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Considering and retouching Peter Bell;  
Watering his laurels with the killing tears  
Of slow, dull care, so that their roots to Hell  
Might pierce, and their wide branches blot the spheres  
Of Heaven, with dewy leaves and flowers; this well  
May be, for Heaven and Earth conspire to foil  
The over-busy gardener's blundering toil.

5.

My Witch indeed is not so sweet a creature  
As Ruth or Lucy, whom his graceful praise  
Clothes for our grandsons but she matches Peter,  
Though he took nineteen years, and she three days  
In dressing. Light the vest of flowing metre  
She wears; he, proud as dandy with his stays,  
Has hung upon his wiry limbs a dress  
Like King Lear's 'looped and windowed raggedness.'

6.

If you strip Peter, you will see a fellow  
Scorched by Hell's hyperequatorial climate  
Into a kind of a sulphureous yellow:  
A lean mark, hardly fit to fling a rhyme at;  
In shape a Scaramouch, in hue Othello.  
If you unveil my Witch, no priest nor primate  
Can shrive you of that sin, if sin there be  
In love, when it becomes idolatry.

## THE WITCH OF ATLAS.

1.

Before those cruel Twins, whom at one birth  
Incestuous Change bore to her father Time,  
Error and Truth, had hunted from the Earth  
All those bright natures which adorned its prime,  
And left us nothing to believe in, worth  
The pains of putting into learned rhyme,  
A lady-witch there lived on Atlas' mountain  
Within a cavern, by a secret fountain.

2.

Her mother was one of the Atlantides:  
The all-beholding Sun had ne'er beholden  
In his wide voyage o'er continents and seas  
So fair a creature, as she lay enfolden  
In the warm shadow of her loveliness;

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He kissed her with his beams, and made all golden  
The chamber of gray rock in which she lay  
She, in that dream of joy, dissolved away.

3.

'Tis said, she first was changed into a vapour,  
And then into a cloud, such clouds as flit,  
Like splendour-winged moths about a taper,  
Round the red west when the sun dies in it:  
And then into a meteor, such as caper  
On hill-tops when the moon is in a fit:  
Then, into one of those mysterious stars  
Which hide themselves between the Earth and Mars.

4.

Ten times the Mother of the Months had bent  
Her bow beside the folding-star, and bidden  
With that bright sign the billows to indent  
The sea-deserted sand like children chidden,  
At her command they ever came and went  
Since in that cave a dewy splendour hidden  
Took shape and motion: with the living form  
Of this embodied Power, the cave grew warm.

5.

A lovely lady garmented in light  
From her own beauty deep her eyes, as are  
Two openings of unfathomable night  
Seen through a Temple's cloven roof her hair  
Dark the dim brain whirls dizzy with delight.  
Picturing her form; her soft smiles shone afar,  
And her low voice was heard like love, and drew  
All living things towards this wonder new.

6.

And first the spotted cameleopard came,  
And then the wise and fearless elephant;  
Then the sly serpent, in the golden flame  
Of his own volumes interwolved; all gaunt  
And sanguine beasts her gentle looks made tame.  
They drank before her at her sacred fount;  
And every beast of beating heart grew bold,  
Such gentleness and power even to behold.

7.

The brinded lioness led forth her young,  
That she might teach them how they should forego  
Their inborn thirst of death; the pard unstrung  
His sinews at her feet, and sought to know  
With looks whose motions spoke without a tongue  
How he might be as gentle as the doe.

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The magic circle of her voice and eyes  
All savage natures did imparadise.

8.

And old Silenus, shaking a green stick  
Of lilies, and the wood-gods in a crew  
Came, blithe, as in the olive copses thick  
Cicadae are, drunk with the noonday dew:  
And Dryope and Faunus followed quick,  
Teasing the God to sing them something new;  
Till in this cave they found the lady lone,  
Sitting upon a seat of emerald stone.

9.

And universal Pan, 'tis said, was there,  
And though none saw him, through the adamant  
Of the deep mountains, through the trackless air,  
And through those living spirits, like a want,  
He passed out of his everlasting lair  
Where the quick heart of the great world doth pant,  
And felt that wondrous lady all alone,  
And she felt him, upon her emerald throne.

10.

And every nymph of stream and spreading tree,  
And every shepherdess of Ocean's flocks,  
Who drives her white waves over the green sea,  
And Ocean with the brine on his gray locks,  
And quaint Priapus with his company,  
All came, much wondering how the enwombed rocks  
Could have brought forth so beautiful a birth;  
Her love subdued their wonder and their mirth.

11.

The herdsmen and the mountain maidens came,  
And the rude kings of pastoral Garamant  
Their spirits shook within them, as a flame  
Stirred by the air under a cavern gaunt:  
Pigmies, and Polyphemes, by many a name,  
Centaur, and Satyr, and such shapes as haunt  
Wet clefts, and lumps neither alive nor dead,  
Dog-headed, bosom-eyed, and bird-footed.

12.

For she was beautiful her beauty made  
The bright world dim, and everything beside  
Seemed like the fleeting image of a shade:  
No thought of living spirit could abide,  
Which to her looks had ever been betrayed,  
On any object in the world so wide,  
On any hope within the circling skies,

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But on her form, and in her inmost eyes.

13.

Which when the lady knew, she took her spindle  
And twined three threads of fleecy mist, and three  
Long lines of light, such as the dawn may kindle  
The clouds and waves and mountains with; and she  
As many star-beams, ere their lamps could dwindle  
In the belated moon, wound skilfully;  
And with these threads a subtle veil she wove  
A shadow for the splendour of her love.

14.

The deep recesses of her odorous dwelling  
Were stored with magic treasures sounds of air,  
Which had the power all spirits of compelling,  
Folded in cells of crystal silence there;  
Such as we hear in youth, and think the feeling  
Will never die yet ere we are aware,  
The feeling and the sound are fled and gone,  
And the regret they leave remains alone.

15.

And there lay Visions swift, and sweet, and quaint,  
Each in its thin sheath, like a chrysalis,  
Some eager to burst forth, some weak and faint  
With the soft burthen of intensest bliss.  
It was its work to bear to many a saint  
Whose heart adores the shrine which holiest is,  
Even Love's: and others white, green, gray, and black,  
And of all shapes and each was at her beck.

16.

And odours in a kind of aviary  
Of ever-blooming Eden-trees she kept,  
Clipped in a floating net, a love-sick Fairy  
Had woven from dew-beams while the moon yet slept;  
As bats at the wired window of a dairy,  
They beat their vans; and each was an adept,  
When loosed and missioned, making wings of winds,  
To stir sweet thoughts or sad, in destined minds.

17.

And liquors clear and sweet, whose healthful might  
Could medicine the sick soul to happy sleep,  
And change eternal death into a night  
Of glorious dreams or if eyes needs must weep,  
Could make their tears all wonder and delight,  
She in her crystal vials did closely keep:  
If men could drink of those clear vials, 'tis said  
The living were not envied of the dead.

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18.

Her cave was stored with scrolls of strange device,  
The works of some Saturnian Archimage,  
Which taught the expiations at whose price  
Men from the Gods might win that happy age  
Too lightly lost, redeeming native vice;  
And which might quench the Earth-consuming rage  
Of gold and blood till men should live and move  
Harmonious as the sacred stars above;

19.

And how all things that seem untameable,  
Not to be checked and not to be confined,  
Obey the spells of Wisdom's wizard skill;  
Time, earth, and fire the ocean and the wind,  
And all their shapes and man's imperial will;  
And other scrolls whose writings did unbind  
The inmost lore of Love let the profane  
Tremble to ask what secrets they contain.

20.

And wondrous works of substances unknown,  
To which the enchantment of her father's power  
Had changed those ragged blocks of savage stone,  
Were heaped in the recesses of her bower;  
Carved lamps and chalices, and vials which shone  
In their own golden beams each like a flower,  
Out of whose depth a fire-fly shakes his light  
Under a cypress in a starless night.

21.

At first she lived alone in this wild home,  
And her own thoughts were each a minister,  
Clothing themselves, or with the ocean foam,  
Or with the wind, or with the speed of fire,  
To work whatever purposes might come  
Into her mind; such power her mighty Sire  
Had girt them with, whether to fly or run,  
Through all the regions which he shines upon.

22.

The Ocean-nymphs and Hamadryades,  
Oreads and Naiads, with long weedy locks,  
Offered to do her bidding through the seas,  
Under the earth, and in the hollow rocks,  
And far beneath the matted roots of trees,  
And in the gnarled heart of stubborn oaks,  
So they might live for ever in the light  
Of her sweet presence each a satellite.



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23.

'This may not be,' the wizard maid replied;  
'The fountains where the Naiades bedew  
Their shining hair, at length are drained and dried;  
The solid oaks forget their strength, and strew  
Their latest leaf upon the mountains wide;  
The boundless ocean like a drop of dew  
Will be consumed the stubborn centre must  
Be scattered, like a cloud of summer dust.

24.

'And ye with them will perish, one by one;  
If I must sigh to think that this shall be,  
If I must weep when the surviving Sun  
Shall smile on your decay oh, ask not me  
To love you till your little race is run;  
I cannot die as ye must over me  
Your leaves shall glance the streams in which ye dwell  
Shall be my paths henceforth, and so farewell!'

25.

She spoke and wept: the dark and azure well  
Sparkled beneath the shower of her bright tears,  
And every little circlet where they fell  
Flung to the cavern-roof inconstant spheres  
And intertangled lines of light: a knell  
Of sobbing voices came upon her ears  
From those departing Forms, o'er the serene  
Of the white streams and of the forest green.

26.

All day the wizard lady sate aloof,  
Spelling out scrolls of dread antiquity,  
Under the cavern's fountain-lighted roof;  
Or brodering the pictured poesy  
Of some high tale upon her growing woof,  
Which the sweet splendour of her smiles could dye  
In hues outshining heaven and ever she  
Added some grace to the wrought poesy.

27.

While on her hearth lay blazing many a piece  
Of sandal wood, rare gums, and cinnamon;  
Men scarcely know how beautiful fire is  
Each flame of it is as a precious stone  
Dissolved in ever-moving light, and this  
Belongs to each and all who gaze upon.  
The Witch beheld it not, for in her hand  
She held a woof that dimmed the burning brand.

28.

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This lady never slept, but lay in trance  
All night within the fountain as in sleep.  
Its emerald crags glowed in her beauty's glance;  
Through the green splendour of the water deep  
She saw the constellations reel and dance  
Like fire-flies and withal did ever keep  
The tenour of her contemplations calm,  
With open eyes, closed feet, and folded palm.

29.

And when the whirlwinds and the clouds descended  
From the white pinnacles of that cold hill,  
She passed at dewfall to a space extended,  
Where in a lawn of flowering asphodel  
Amid a wood of pines and cedars blended,  
There yawned an inextinguishable well  
Of crimson fire full even to the brim,  
And overflowing all the margin trim.

30.

Within the which she lay when the fierce war  
Of wintry winds shook that innocuous liquor  
In many a mimic moon and bearded star  
O'er woods and lawns; the serpent heard it flicker  
In sleep, and dreaming still, he crept afar  
And when the windless snow descended thic it flicker  
In sleep, and dreaming still, he crept afar—  
And when the windless snow descended thicker  
Than autumn leaves, she watched it as it came  
Melt on the surface of the level flame.

31.

She had a boat, which some say Vulcan wrought  
For Venus, as the chariot of her star;  
But it was found too feeble to be fraught  
With all the ardours in that sphere which are,  
And so she sold it, and Apollo bought  
And gave it to this daughter: from a car  
Changed to the fairest and the lightest boat  
Which ever upon mortal stream did float.

32.

And others say, that, when but three hours old,  
The first-born Love out of his cradle leapt,  
And clove dun Chaos with his wings of gold,  
And like a horticultural adept,  
Stole a strange seed, and wrapped it up in mould,  
And sowed it in his mother's star, and kept  
Watering it all the summer with sweet dew,  
And with his wings fanning it as it grew.

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33.

The plant grew strong and green, the snowy flower  
Fell, and the long and gourd-like fruit began  
To turn the light and dew by inward power  
To its own substance; woven tracery ran  
Of light firm texture, ribbed and branching, o'er  
The solid rind, like a leaf's veined fan—  
Of which Love scooped this boat—and with soft motion  
Piloted it round the circumfluous ocean.

34.

This boat she moored upon her fount, and lit  
A living spirit within all its frame,  
Breathing the soul of swiftness into it.  
Couched on the fountain like a panther tame,  
One of the twain at Evan's feet that sit—  
Or as on Vesta's sceptre a swift flame—  
Or on blind Homer's heart a winged thought,—  
In joyous expectation lay the boat.

35.

Then by strange art she kneaded fire and snow  
Together, tempering the repugnant mass  
With liquid love—all things together grow  
Through which the harmony of love can pass;  
And a fair Shape out of her hands did flow—  
A living Image, which did far surpass  
In beauty that bright shape of vital stone  
Which drew the heart out of Pygmalion.

36.

A sexless thing it was, and in its growth  
It seemed to have developed no defect  
Of either sex, yet all the grace of both,—  
In gentleness and strength its limbs were decked;  
The bosom swelled lightly with its full youth,  
The countenance was such as might select  
Some artist that his skill should never die,  
Imaging forth such perfect purity.

37.

From its smooth shoulders hung two rapid wings,  
Fit to have borne it to the seventh sphere,  
Tipped with the speed of liquid lightnings,  
Dyed in the ardours of the atmosphere:  
She led her creature to the boiling springs  
Where the light boat was moored, and said: 'Sit here!'  
And pointed to the prow, and took her seat  
Beside the rudder, with opposing feet.

38.

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And down the streams which clove those mountains vast,  
Around their inland islets, and amid  
The panther-peopled forests whose shade cast  
Darkness and odours, and a pleasure hid  
In melancholy gloom, the pinnace passed;  
By many a star-surrounded pyramid  
Of icy crag cleaving the purple sky,  
And caverns yawning round unfathomably.

39.

The silver noon into that winding dell,  
With slanted gleam athwart the forest tops,  
Tempered like golden evening, feebly fell;  
A green and glowing light, like that which drops  
From folded lilies in which glow-worms dwell,  
When Earth over her face Night's mantle wraps;  
Between the severed mountains lay on high,  
Over the stream, a narrow rift of sky.

40.

And ever as she went, the Image lay  
With folded wings and unawakened eyes;  
And o'er its gentle countenance did play  
The busy dreams, as thick as summer flies,  
Chasing the rapid smiles that would not stay,  
And drinking the warm tears, and the sweet sighs  
Inhaling, which, with busy murmur vain,  
They had aroused from that full heart and brain.

41.

And ever down the prone vale, like a cloud  
Upon a stream of wind, the pinnace went:  
Now lingering on the pools, in which abode  
The calm and darkness of the deep content  
In which they paused; now o'er the shallow road  
Of white and dancing waters, all besprent  
With sand and polished pebbles:—mortal boat  
In such a shallow rapid could not float.

42.

And down the earthquaking cataracts which shiver  
Their snow-like waters into golden air,  
Or under chasms unfathomable ever  
Sepulchre them, till in their rage they tear  
A subterranean portal for the river,  
It fled—the circling sunbows did upbear  
Its fall down the hoar precipice of spray,  
Lighting it far upon its lampless way.

43.

And when the wizard lady would ascend

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The labyrinths of some many-winding vale,  
Which to the inmost mountain upward tend—  
She called 'Hermaphroditus!'—and the pale  
And heavy hue which slumber could extend  
Over its lips and eyes, as on the gale  
A rapid shadow from a slope of grass,  
Into the darkness of the stream did pass.

44.

And it unfurled its heaven-coloured pinions,  
With stars of fire spotting the stream below;  
And from above into the Sun's dominions  
Flinging a glory, like the golden glow  
In which Spring clothes her emerald-winged minions,  
All interwoven with fine feathery snow  
And moonlight splendour of intensest rime,  
With which frost paints the pines in winter time.

45.

And then it winnowed the Elysian air  
Which ever hung about that lady bright,  
With its aethereal vans—and speeding there,  
Like a star up the torrent of the night,  
Or a swift eagle in the morning glare  
Breasting the whirlwind with impetuous flight,  
The pinnacle, oared by those enchanted wings,  
Clove the fierce streams towards their upper springs.

46.

The water flashed, like sunlight by the prow  
Of a noon-wandering meteor flung to Heaven;  
The still air seemed as if its waves did flow  
In tempest down the mountains; loosely driven  
The lady's radiant hair streamed to and fro:  
Beneath, the billows having vainly striven  
Indignant and impetuous, roared to feel  
The swift and steady motion of the keel.

47.

Or, when the weary moon was in the wane,  
Or in the noon of interlunar night,  
The lady-witch in visions could not chain  
Her spirit; but sailed forth under the light  
Of shooting stars, and bade extend amain  
Its storm-outspeeding wings, the Hermaphrodite;  
She to the Austral waters took her way,  
Beyond the fabulous Thamondocana,—

48.

Where, like a meadow which no scythe has shaven,  
Which rain could never bend, or whirl-blast shake,

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With the Antarctic constellations paven,  
Canopus and his crew, lay the Austral lake—  
There she would build herself a windless haven  
Out of the clouds whose moving turrets make  
The bastions of the storm, when through the sky  
The spirits of the tempest thundered by:

49.

A haven beneath whose translucent floor  
The tremulous stars sparkled unfathomably,  
And around which the solid vapours hoar,  
Based on the level waters, to the sky  
Lifted their dreadful crags, and like a shore  
Of wintry mountains, inaccessibly  
Hemmed in with rifts and precipices gray,  
And hanging crags, many a cove and bay.

50.

And whilst the outer lake beneath the lash  
Of the wind's scourge, foamed like a wounded thing,  
And the incessant hail with stony clash  
Ploughed up the waters, and the flagging wing  
Of the roused cormorant in the lightning flash  
Looked like the wreck of some wind-wandering  
Fragment of inky thunder-smoke—this haven  
Was as a gem to copy Heaven engraven,—

51.

On which that lady played her many pranks,  
Circling the image of a shooting star,  
Even as a tiger on Hydaspes' banks  
Outspeeds the antelopes which speediest are,  
In her light boat; and many quips and cranks  
She played upon the water, till the car  
Of the late moon, like a sick matron wan,  
To journey from the misty east began.

52.

And then she called out of the hollow turrets  
Of those high clouds, white, golden and vermilion,  
The armies of her ministering spirits—  
In mighty legions, million after million,  
They came, each troop emblazoning its merits  
On meteor flags; and many a proud pavilion  
Of the intertexture of the atmosphere  
They pitched upon the plain of the calm mere.

53.

They framed the imperial tent of their great Queen  
Of woven exhalations, underlaid  
With lambent lightning-fire, as may be seen

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A dome of thin and open ivory inlaid  
With crimson silk—cressets from the serene  
Hung there, and on the water for her tread  
A tapestry of fleece—like mist was strewn,  
Dyed in the beams of the ascending moon.

54.

And on a throne o'erlaid with starlight, caught  
Upon those wandering isles of aery dew,  
Which highest shoals of mountain shipwreck not,  
She sate, and heard all that had happened new  
Between the earth and moon, since they had brought  
The last intelligence—and now she grew  
Pale as that moon, lost in the watery night—  
And now she wept, and now she laughed outright.

55.

These were tame pleasures; she would often climb  
The steepest ladder of the crudded rack  
Up to some beaked cape of cloud sublime,  
And like Arion on the dolphin's back  
Ride singing through the shoreless air;—oft—time  
Following the serpent lightning's winding track,  
She ran upon the platforms of the wind,  
And laughed to hear the fire—balls roar behind.

56.

And sometimes to those streams of upper air  
Which whirl the earth in its diurnal round,  
She would ascend, and win the spirits there  
To let her join their chorus. Mortals found  
That on those days the sky was calm and fair,  
And mystic snatches of harmonious sound  
Wandered upon the earth where'er she passed,  
And happy thoughts of hope, too sweet to last.

57.

But her choice sport was, in the hours of sleep,  
To glide adown old Nilus, where he threads  
Egypt and Aethiopia, from the steep  
Of utmost Axume, until he spreads,  
Like a calm flock of silver—fleeced sheep,  
His waters on the plain: and crested heads  
Of cities and proud temples gleam amid,  
And many a vapour—belted pyramid.

58.

By Moeris and the Mareotid lakes,  
Strewn with faint blooms like bridal chamber floors,  
Where naked boys bridling tame water—snakes,  
Or chariotteering ghastly alligators,

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Had left on the sweet waters mighty wakes  
Of those huge forms—within the brazen doors  
Of the great Labyrinth slept both boy and beast,  
Tired with the pomp of their Osirian feast.

59.

And where within the surface of the river  
The shadows of the massy temples lie,  
And never are erased—but tremble ever  
Like things which every cloud can doom to die,  
Through lotus-paven canals, and wheresoever  
The works of man pierced that serenest sky  
With tombs, and towers, and fanes, 'twas her delight  
To wander in the shadow of the night.

60.

With motion like the spirit of that wind  
Whose soft step deepens slumber, her light feet  
Passed through the peopled haunts of humankind.  
Scattering sweet visions from her presence sweet,  
Through fane, and palace-court, and labyrinth mined  
With many a dark and subterranean street  
Under the Nile, through chambers high and deep  
She passed, observing mortals in their sleep.

61.

A pleasure sweet doubtless it was to see  
Mortals subdued in all the shapes of sleep.  
Here lay two sister twins in infancy;  
There, a lone youth who in his dreams did weep;  
Within, two lovers linked innocently  
In their loose locks which over both did creep  
Like ivy from one stem;—and there lay calm  
Old age with snow-bright hair and folded palm.

62.

But other troubled forms of sleep she saw,  
Not to be mirrored in a holy song—  
Distortions foul of supernatural awe,  
And pale imaginings of visioned wrong;  
And all the code of Custom's lawless law  
Written upon the brows of old and young:  
'This,' said the wizard maiden, 'is the strife  
Which stirs the liquid surface of man's life.'

63.

And little did the sight disturb her soul.—  
We, the weak mariners of that wide lake  
Where'er its shores extend or billows roll,  
Our course unpiloted and starless make  
O'er its wild surface to an unknown goal:—



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But she in the calm depths her way could take,  
Where in bright bowers immortal forms abide  
Beneath the weltering of the restless tide.

64.

And she saw princes couched under the glow  
Of sunlike gems; and round each temple-court  
In dormitories ranged, row after row,  
She saw the priests asleep—all of one sort—  
For all were educated to be so.—  
The peasants in their huts, and in the port  
The sailors she saw cradled on the waves,  
And the dead lulled within their dreamless graves.

65.

And all the forms in which those spirits lay  
Were to her sight like the diaphanous  
Veils, in which those sweet ladies oft array  
Their delicate limbs, who would conceal from us  
Only their scorn of all concealment: they  
Move in the light of their own beauty thus.  
But these and all now lay with sleep upon them,  
And little thought a Witch was looking on them.

66.

She, all those human figures breathing there,  
Beheld as living spirits—to her eyes  
The naked beauty of the soul lay bare,  
And often through a rude and worn disguise  
She saw the inner form most bright and fair—  
And then she had a charm of strange device,  
Which, murmured on mute lips with tender tone,  
Could make that spirit mingle with her own.

67.

Alas! Aurora, what wouldst thou have given  
For such a charm when Tithon became gray?  
Or how much, Venus, of thy silver heaven  
Wouldst thou have yielded, ere Proserpina  
Had half (oh! why not all?) the debt forgiven  
Which dear Adonis had been doomed to pay,  
To any witch who would have taught you it?  
The Heliad doth not know its value yet.

68.

'Tis said in after times her spirit free  
Knew what love was, and felt itself alone—  
But holy Dian could not chaster be  
Before she stooped to kiss Endymion,  
Than now this lady—like a sexless bee  
Tasting all blossoms, and confined to none,

## The Witch of Atlas

Among those mortal forms, the wizard–maiden  
Passed with an eye serene and heart unladen.

69.

To those she saw most beautiful, she gave  
Strange panacea in a crystal bowl:—  
They drank in their deep sleep of that sweet wave,  
And lived thenceforward as if some control,  
Mightier than life, were in them; and the grave  
Of such, when death oppressed the weary soul,  
Was as a green and overarching bower  
Lit by the gems of many a starry flower.

70.

For on the night when they were buried, she  
Restored the embalmers' ruining, and shook  
The light out of the funeral lamps, to be  
A mimic day within that deathly nook;  
And she unwound the woven imagery  
Of second childhood's swaddling bands, and took  
The coffin, its last cradle, from its niche,  
And threw it with contempt into a ditch.

71.

And there the body lay, age after age.  
Mute, breathing, beating, warm, and undecaying,  
Like one asleep in a green hermitage,  
With gentle smiles about its eyelids playing,  
And living in its dreams beyond the rage  
Of death or life; while they were still arraying  
In liveries ever new, the rapid, blind  
And fleeting generations of mankind.

72.

And she would write strange dreams upon the brain  
Of those who were less beautiful, and make  
All harsh and crooked purposes more vain  
Than in the desert is the serpent's wake  
Which the sand covers—all his evil gain  
The miser in such dreams would rise and shake  
Into a beggar's lap;—the lying scribe  
Would his own lies betray without a bribe.

73.

The priests would write an explanation full,  
Translating hieroglyphics into Greek,  
How the God Apis really was a bull,  
And nothing more; and bid the herald stick  
The same against the temple doors, and pull  
The old cant down; they licensed all to speak  
Whate'er they thought of hawks, and cats, and geese,

## The Witch of Atlas

By pastoral letters to each diocese.

74.

The king would dress an ape up in his crown  
And robes, and seat him on his glorious seat,  
And on the right hand of the sunlike throne  
Would place a gaudy mock-bird to repeat  
The chatterings of the monkey.—Every one  
Of the prone courtiers crawled to kiss the feet  
Of their great Emperor, when the morning came,  
And kissed—alas, how many kiss the same!

75.

The soldiers dreamed that they were blacksmiths, and  
Walked out of quarters in somnambulism;  
Round the red anvils you might see them stand  
Like Cyclopes in Vulcan's sooty abysm,  
Beating their swords to ploughshares;—in a band  
The gaolers sent those of the liberal schism  
Free through the streets of Memphis, much, I wis,  
To the annoyance of king Amasis.

76.

And timid lovers who had been so coy,  
They hardly knew whether they loved or not,  
Would rise out of their rest, and take sweet joy,  
To the fulfilment of their inmost thought;  
And when next day the maiden and the boy  
Met one another, both, like sinners caught,  
Blushed at the thing which each believed was done  
Only in fancy—till the tenth moon shone;

77.

And then the Witch would let them take no ill:  
Of many thousand schemes which lovers find,  
The Witch found one,—and so they took their fill  
Of happiness in marriage warm and kind.  
Friends who, by practice of some envious skill,  
Were torn apart—a wide wound, mind from mind!—  
She did unite again with visions clear  
Of deep affection and of truth sincere.

80.

These were the pranks she played among the cities  
Of mortal men, and what she did to Sprites  
And Gods, entangling them in her sweet ditties  
To do her will, and show their subtle sleights,  
I will declare another time; for it is  
A tale more fit for the weird winter nights  
Than for these garish summer days, when we  
Scarcely believe much more than we can see.