

Amy Levy, 'Magdalen'

All things I can endure, save one.
The bare, blank room where is no sun;
The parcelled hours; the pallet hard;
The dreary faces here within;
The outer women's cold regard;
The Pastor's iterated "sin";--
These things could I endure, and count
No overstrain'd, unjust amount;
No undue payment for such bliss--
Yea, all things bear, save only this:
That you, who knew what thing would be,
Have wrought this evil unto me.
It is so strange to think on still--
That you, that you should do me ill!
Not as one ignorant or blind,
But seeing clearly in your mind
How this must be which now has been,
Nothing aghast at what was seen.
Now that the tale is told and done,
It is so strange to think upon.
You were so tender with me, too!
One summer's night a cold blast blew,
Closer about my throat you drew
That half-slipt shawl of dusky blue.
And once my hand, on summer's morn,
I stretched to pluck a rose; a thorn
Struck through the flesh and made it bleed
(A little drop of blood indeed!)
Pale grew your cheek you stooped and bound
Your handkerchief about the wound;
Your voice came with a broken sound;
With the deep breath your breast was riven;
I wonder, did God laugh in Heaven?

How strange, that you should work my woe!
How strange! I wonder, do you know
How gladly, gladly I had died
(And life was very sweet that tide)
To save you from the least, light ill?
How gladly I had borne your pain.
With one great pulse we seem'd to thrill,--

Nay, but we thrill'd with pulses twain.

Even if one had told me this,
"A poison lurks within your kiss,
Gall that shall turn to night his day:"
Thereon I straight had turned away--
Ay, tho' my heart had crack'd with pain--
And never kiss'd your lips again.

At night, or when the daylight nears,
I hear the other women weep;
My own heart's anguish lies too deep
For the soft rain and pain of tears.
I think my heart has turn'd to stone,
A dull, dead weight that hurts my breast;
Here, on my pallet-bed alone,
I keep apart from all the rest.
Wide-eyed I lie upon my bed,
I often cannot sleep all night;
The future and the past are dead,
There is no thought can bring delight.
All night I lie and think and think;
If my heart were not made of stone,
But flesh and blood, it needs must shrink
Before such thoughts. Was ever known
A woman with a heart of stone?

The doctor says that I shall die.
It may be so, yet what care I?
Endless reposing from the strife?
Death do I trust no more than life.
For one thing is like one arrayed,
And there is neither false nor true;
But in a hideous masquerade
All things dance on, the ages through.
And good is evil, evil good;
Nothing is known or understood
Save only Pain. I have no faith
In God, or Devil, Life or Death.

The doctor says that I shall die.
You, that I knew in days gone by,
I fain would see your face once more,
Con well its features o'er and o'er;

And touch your hand and feel your kiss,
Look in your eyes and tell you this:
That all is done, that I am free;
That you, through all eternity,
Have neither part nor lot in me.

‘In the Mile End Road’

How like her! But 'tis she herself,
Comes up the crowded street,
How little did I think, the morn,
My only love to meet!

Whose else that motion and that mien?
Whose else that airy tread?
For one strange moment I forgot
My only love was dead.

‘Contradictions’

Now, even, I cannot think it true,
My friend, that there is no more you.
Almost as soon were no more I,
Which were, of course, absurdity!
Your place is bare, you are not seen,
Your grave, I'm told, is growing green;
And both for you and me, you know,
There's no Above and no Below.
That you are dead must be inferred,
And yet my thought rejects the word.

Amy Levy

The Sequel to a Reminiscence

Not in the street and not in the square,
The street and square where you went and came;
With shuttered casement your house stands bare,
Men hush their voice when they speak your name.

I, too, can play at the vain pretence,
Can feign you dead; while a voice sounds clear
In the inmost depths of my heart: Go hence,
Go, find your friend who is far from here.

Not here, but somewhere where I can reach!
Can a man with motion, hearing and sight,
And a thought that answered my thought and speech,
Be utterly lost and vanished quite?

Whose hand was warm in my hand last week? . .
My heart beat fast as I neared the gate—
Was it this I had come to seek,
“A stone that stared with your name and date;”

A hideous, turfless, fresh-made mound;
A silence more cold than the wind that blew?
What had I lost, and what had I found?
My flowers that mocked me fell to the ground—
Then, and then only, my spirit knew.

A Ballad of Religion and Marriage

Swept into limbo is the host
Of heavenly angels, row on row;
The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
Pale and defeated, rise and go.
The great Jehovah is laid low,
Vanished his burning bush and rod—
Say, are we doomed to deeper woe?
Shall marriage go the way of God?

Monogamous, still at our post,
Reluctantly we undergo
Domestic round of boiled and roast,
Yet deem the whole proceeding slow.
Daily the secret murmurs grow;
We are no more content to plod
Along the beaten paths—and so

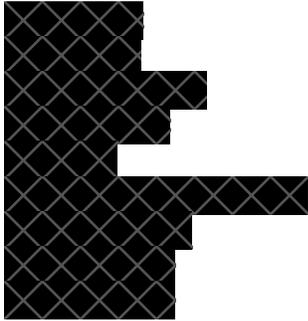
Marriage must go the way of God.

Soon, before all men, each shall toast
The seven strings unto his bow,
Like beacon fires along the coast,
The flame of love shall glance and glow.
Nor let nor hindrance man shall know,
From natal bath to funeral sod;
Perennial shall his pleasures flow
When marriage goes the way of God.

Grant, in a million years at most,
Folk shall be neither pairs nor odd—
Alas! we sha'n't be there to boast
"Marriage has gone the way of God!"

Xantippe and Other Verse

Amy Levy



Xantippe.

(A FRAGMENT.)

WHAT, have I waked again ? I never thought
To see the rosy dawn, or ev'n this grey,
Dull, solemn stillness, ere the dawn has come.
The lamp burns low ; low burns the lamp of life :
The still morn stays expectant, and my soul,
All weighted with a passive wonderment,
Waiteth and watcheth, waiteth for the dawn.
Come hither, maids ; too soundly have ye slept
That should have watched me ; nay, I would not chide
Oft have I chidden, yet I would not chide
In this last hour ; now all should be at peace.
I have been dreaming in a troubled sleep
Of weary days I thought not to recall ;
Of stormy days, whose storms are hushed long since ;
Of gladsome days, of sunny days ; alas !
In dreaming, all their sunshine seem'd so sad,
As though the current of the dark To-Be
Had flow'd, prophetic, through the happy hours.
And yet, full well, I know it was not thus ;
I mind me sweetly of the summer days,
When, leaning from the lattice, I have caught
The fair, far glimpses of a shining sea ;
And, nearer, of tall ships which thronged the bay,

Xantippe and Other Verse

And stood out blackly from a tender sky
All flecked with sulphur, azure, and bright gold ;
And in the still, clear air have heard the hum
Of distant voices ; and methinks there rose
No darker fount to mar or stain the joy
Which sprang ecstatic in my maiden breast
Than just those vague desires, those hopes and fears,
Those eager longings, strong, though undefined,
Whose very sadness makes them seem so sweet.
What cared I for the merry mockeries
Of other maidens sitting at the loom ?
Or for sharp voices, bidding me return
To maiden labour ? Were we not apart,
I and my high thoughts, and my golden dreams,
My soul which yearned for knowledge, for a tongue
That should proclaim the stately mysteries
Of this fair world, and of the holy gods ?
Then followed days of sadness, as I grew
To learn my woman-mind had gone astray,
And I was sinning in those very thoughts
For maidens, mark, such are not woman's thoughts
(And yet, 'tis strange, the gods who fashion us
Have given us such promptings). . . .

Fled the years,
Till seventeen had found me tall and strong,
And fairer, runs it, than Athenian maids
Are wont to seem ; I had not learnt it well
My lesson of dumb patience and I stood
At Life's great threshold with a beating heart,
And soul resolved to conquer and attain. . . .
Once, walking 'thwart the crowded market place,
With other maidens, bearing in the twigs
White doves for Aphrodite's sacrifice,
I saw him, all ungainly and uncouth,
Yet many gathered round to hear his words,
Tall youths and stranger-maidens Sokrates
I saw his face and marked it, half with awe,
Half with a quick repulsion at the shape. . . .
The richest gem lies hidden furthest down,
And is the dearer for the weary search ;
We grasp the shining shells which strew the shore,
Yet swift we fling them from us ; but the gem
We keep for aye and cherish. So a soul,
Found after weary searching in the flesh
Which half repelled our senses, is more dear,
For that same seeking, than the sunny mind
Which lavish Nature marks with thousand hints
Upon a brow of beauty. We are prone
To overweigh such subtle hints, then deem,
In after disappointment, we are fooled. . . .
And when, at length, my father told me all,

Xantippe and Other Verse

That I should wed me with great Sokrates,
I, foolish, wept to see at once cast down
The maiden image of a future love,
Where perfect body matched the perfect soul.
But slowly, softly did I cease to weep ;
Slowly I 'gan to mark the magic flash
Leap to the eyes, to watch the sudden smile
Break round the mouth, and linger in the eyes ;
To listen for the voice's lightest tone
Great voice, whose cunning modulations seemed
Like to the notes of some sweet instrument.
So did I reach and strain, until at last
I caught the soul athwart the grosser flesh.
Again of thee, sweet Hope, my spirit dreamed !
I, guided by his wisdom and his love,
Led by his words, and counselled by his care,
Should lift the shrouding veil from things which be,
And at the flowing fountain of his soul
Refresh my thirsting spirit. . . .

And indeed,

In those long days which followed that strange day
When rites and song, and sacrifice and flow'rs,
Proclaimed that we were wedded, did I learn,
In sooth, a-many lessons ; bitter ones
Which sorrow taught me, and not love inspired,
Which deeper knowledge of my kind impressed
With dark insistence on reluctant brain ;
But that great wisdom, deeper, which dispels
Narrowed conclusions of a half-grown mind,
And sees athwart the littleness of life
Nature's divineness and her harmony,
Was never poor Xantippe's. . . .

I would pause

And would recall no more, no more of life,
Than just the incomplete, imperfect dream
Of early summers, with their light and shade,
Their blossom-hopes, whose fruit was never ripe ;
But something strong within me, some sad chord
Which loudly echoes to the later life,
Me to unfold the after-misery
Urges with plaintive wailing in my heart.
Yet, maidens, mark ; I would not that ye thought
I blame my lord departed, for he meant
No evil, so I take it, to his wife.
'Twas only that the high philosopher,
Pregnant with noble theories and great thoughts,
Deigned not to stoop to touch so slight a thing
As the fine fabric of a woman's brain
So subtle as a passionate woman's soul.
I think, if he had stooped a little, and cared,
I might have risen nearer to his height,

Xantippe and Other Verse

And not lain shattered, neither fit for use
As goodly household vessel, nor for that
Far finer thing which I had hoped to be. . . .
Death, holding high his retrospective lamp,
Shows me those first, far years of wedded life,
Ere I had learnt to grasp the barren shape
Of what the Fates had destined for my life.
Then, as all youthful spirits are, was I
Wholly incredulous that Nature meant
So little, who had promised me so much.
At first I fought my fate with gentle words,
With high endeavours after greater things ;
Striving to win the soul of Sokrates,
Like some slight bird, who sings her burning love
To human master, till at length she finds
Her tender language wholly misconceived,
And that same hand whose kind caress she sought,
With fingers flippant flings the careless corn. . . .
I do remember how, one summer's eve,
He, seated in an arbour's leafy shade,
Had bade me bring fresh wine—skins. . . .

As I stood

Ling'ring upon the threshold, half concealed
By tender foliage, and my spirit light
With draughts of sunny weather, did I mark
An instant, the gay group before mine eyes.
Deepest in shade, and facing where I stood,
Sat Plato, with his calm face and low brows
Which met above the narrow Grecian eyes,
The pale, thin lips just parted to the smile,
Which dimpled that smooth olive of his cheek.
His head a little bent, sat Sokrates,
With one swart finger raised admonishing,
And on the air were borne his changing tones.
Low lounging at his feet, one fair arm thrown
Around his knee (the other, high in air
Brandish'd a brazen ampor, which yet rained
Bright drops of ruby on the golden locks
And temples with their fillets of the vine),
Lay Alkibiades the beautiful.
And thus, with solemn tone, spake Sokrates:
' This fair Aspasia, which our Perikles
Hath brought from realms afar, and set on high
In our Athenian city, hath a mind,
I doubt not, of a strength beyond her race ;
And makes employ of it, beyond the way
Of women nobly gifted : woman's frail
Her body rarely stands the test of soul ;
She grows intoxicate with knowledge ; throws
The laws of custom, order, 'neath her feet,
Feasting at life's great banquet with wide throat.'

Xantippe and Other Verse

Then sudden, stepping from my leafy screen,
Holding the swelling wine-skin o'er my head,
With breast that heaved, and eyes and cheeks aflame,
Lit by a fury and a thought, I spake:
' By all great powers around us ! can it be
That we poor women are empirical ?
That gods who fashioned us did strive to make
Beings too fine, too subtly delicate,
With sense that thrilled response to ev'ry touch
Of nature's and their task is not complete ?
That they have sent their half-completed work
To bleed and quiver here upon the earth ?
To bleed and quiver, and to weep and weep,
To beat its soul against the marble walls
Of men's cold hearts, and then at last to sin !'
I ceased, the first hot passion stayed and stemmed
And frightened by the silence : I could see,
Framed by the arbour foliage, which the sun
In setting softly gilded with rich gold,
Those upturned faces, and those placid limbs ;
Saw Plato's narrow eyes and niggard mouth,
Which half did smile and half did criticise,
One hand held up, the shapely fingers framed
To gesture of entreaty ' Hush, I pray,
Do not disturb her ; let us hear the rest ;
Follow her mood, for here's another phase
Of your black-browed Xantippe. . . .'

Then I saw

Young Alkibiades, with laughing lips
And half-shut eyes, contemptuous shrugging up
Soft, snowy shoulders, till he brought the gold
Of flowing ringlets round about his breasts.
But Sokrates, all slow and solemnly,
Raised, calm, his face to mine, and sudden spake :
' I thank thee for the wisdom which thy lips
Have thus let fall among us : prythee tell
From what high source, from what philosophies
Didst cull the sapient notion of thy words ?'
Then stood I straight and silent for a breath,
Dumb, crushed with all that weight of cold contempt ;
But swiftly in my bosom there uprose
A sudden flame, a merciful fury sent
To save me ; with both angry hands I flung
The skin upon the marble, where it lay
Spouting red rills and fountains on the white ;
Then, all unheeding faces, voices, eyes,
I fled across the threshold, hair unbound
White garment stained to redness beating heart
Flooded with all the flowing tide of hopes
Which once had gushed out golden, now sent back
Swift to their sources, never more to rise. . . .

Xantippe and Other Verse

I think I could have borne the weary life,
The narrow life within the narrow walls,
If he had loved me ; but he kept his love
For this Athenian city and her sons ;
And, haply, for some stranger–woman, bold
With freedom, thought, and glib philosophy. . . .
Ah me ! the long, long weeping through the nights,
The weary watching for the pale–eyed dawn
Which only brought fresh grieving : then I grew
Fiercer, and cursed from out my inmost heart
The Fates which marked me an Athenian maid.
Then faded that vain fury ; hope died out ;
A huge despair was stealing on my soul,
A sort of fierce acceptance of my fate,
He wished a household vessel well ! 'twas good,
For he should have it ! He should have no more
The yearning treasure of a woman's love,
But just the baser treasure which he sought.
I called my maidens, ordered out the loom,
And spun unceasing from the morn till eve ;
Watching all keenly over warp and woof,
Weighing the white wool with a jealous hand.
I spun until, methinks, I spun away
The soul from out my body, the high thoughts
From out my spirit ; till at last I grew
As ye have known me, eye exact to mark
The texture of the spinning ; ear all keen
For aimless talking when the moon is up,
And ye should be a–sleeping ; tongue to cut
With quick incision, 'thwart the merry words
Of idle maidens. . . .

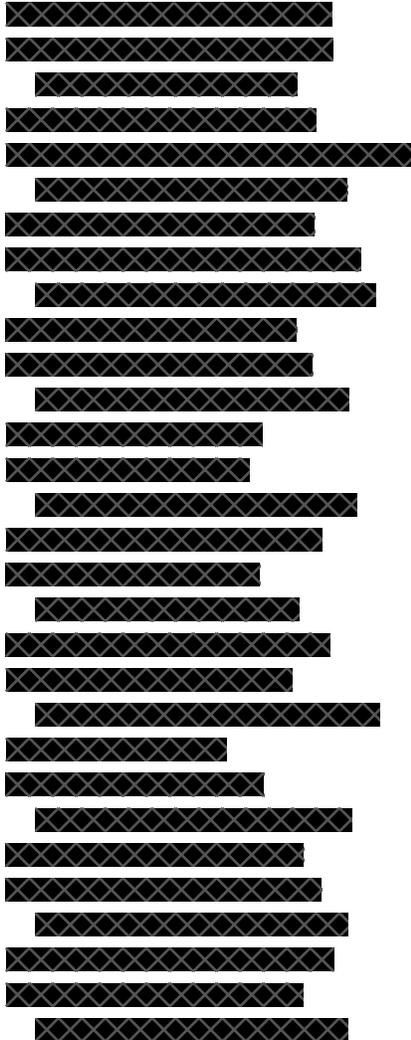
Only yesterday

My hands did cease from spinning ; I have wrought
My dreary duties, patient till the last.
The gods reward me ! Nay, I will not tell
The after years of sorrow ; wretched strife
With grimmest foes sad Want and Poverty ;
Nor yet the time of horror, when they bore
My husband from the threshold ; nay, nor when
The subtle weed had wrought its deadly work.
Alas ! alas ! I was not there to soothe
The last great moment ; never any thought
Of her that loved him save at least the charge,
All earthly, that her body should not starve. . . .
You weep, you weep ; I would not that ye wept ;
Such tears are idle ; with the young, such grief
Soon grows to gratulation, as, 'her love
Was withered by misfortune ; mine shall grow
All nurtured by the loving,' or, 'her life
Was wrecked and shattered mine shall smoothly sail.'
Enough, enough. In vain, in vain, in vain !

Xantippe and Other Verse

The gods forgive me ! Soerly have I sinned
In all my life. A fairer fate befall
You all that stand there. . . .

Ha ! the dawn has come ;
I see a rosy glimmer nay ! it grows dark ;
Why stand ye so in silence ? throw it wide,
The casement, quick ; why tarry ? give me air
O fling it wide, I say, and give me light !





Giorgione, *Sleeping Venus* (c. 1510)

Michael Field

'The Sleeping Venus'

Here is Venus by our homes
And resting on the verdant swell
Of a soft country flanked with mountain domes :
She has left her arched shell,
Has left the barren wave that foams,
Amid earth's fruitful tilths to dwell.
Nobly lighted while she sleeps
As sward-lands or the corn-field sweeps,
Pure as are the things that man
Needs for life and using can
Never violate nor spot—
Thus she slumbers in no grot,
But on open ground.
With the great hill-sides around.
And her body has the curves,
The same extensive smoothness seen
In yonder breadths of pasture, in the swerves
Of the grassy mountain-green
That for her propping pillow serves :
There is a sympathy between
Her and Earth of largest reach,
For the sex that forms them each
Is a bond, a holiness,
That unconsciously must bless
And unite them, as they lie
Shameless underneath the sky
A long, opal cloud
Doth in noontide haze enshroud.
O'er her head her right arm bends ;
And from the elbow raised aloft

Down to the crossing knees a line descends
Unimpeachable and soft
As the adjacent slope that ends
In chequered plain of hedge and croft.
Circular as lovely knolls,
Up to which a landscape rolls
With desirous sway, each breast
Rises from the level chest,
One in contour, one in round—
Either exquisite, low mound
Firm in shape and given
To the August warmth of heaven.
With bold freedom of incline,
With an uttermost repose,
From hip to herbage-cushioned foot the line
Of her left leg stretching shows
Against the turf direct and fine,
Dissimilar in grace to those
Little bays that in and out
By the ankle wind about ;
Or that shallow bend, the right
Curled-up knee has brought to sight
Underneath its bossy rise,
Where the loveliest shadow lies !
Charmed umbrage rests
On her neck and by her breasts.
Her left arm remains beside
The plastic body's lower heaves,
Controlled by them, as when a river-side
With its sandy margin weaves
Deflections in a lenient tide ;
Her hand the thigh's tense surface leaves,
Falling inward. Not even sleep
Dare invalidate the deep,
Universal pleasure sex
Must unto itself annex—
Even the stillest sleep ; at peace,
More profound with rest's increase,
She enjoys the good
Of delicious womanhood.
Cheek and eyebrow touch the fold
Of the raised arm that frames her hair,
Her braided hair in colour like to old
Copper glinting here and there :
While through her skin of olive-gold
The scarce carnations mount and share
Faultlessly the oval space
Of her temperate, grave face.
Eyelids underneath the day
Wrinkle as full buds that stay,

Through the tranquil, summer hours,
Closed although they might be flowers ;
The red lips shut in
Gracious secrets that begin.
On white drapery she sleeps,
That fold by fold is stained with shade ;
Her mantle's ruddy pomegranate in heaps
For a cushion she has laid
Beneath her; and the glow that steeps
Its grain of richer depth is made
By an overswelling bank,
Tufted with dun grasses rank.
From this hillock's outer heaves
One small bush defines its leaves
Broadly on the sober blue
The pale cloud-bank rises to,
Whilst it sinks in bland
Sunshine on the distant land.

Near her resting-place are spread,
In deep or greener-lighted brown,
Wolds, that half-withered by the heat o'erhead,
Press up to a little town
Of castle, archway, roof and shed,
Then slope in grave continuance down :
On their border, in a group.
Trees of brooding foliage droop
Sidelong ; and a single tree
Springs with bright simplicity,
Central from the sunlit plain.
Of a blue no flowers attain,
On the fair, vague sky
Adamantine summits lie.

And her resting is so strong
That while we gaze it seems as though
She had lain thus the solemn glebes among
In the ages far ago
And would continue, till the long,
Last evening of Earth's summer glow
In communion with the sweet
Life that ripens at her feet :
We can never fear that she
From Italian fields will flee,
For she does not come from far,
She is of the things that are ;
And she will not pass
While the sun strikes on the grass.