

“The Romaunt of the Page” (1839)
Elizabeth Barrett Browning

“The truest, loving’st, and the gentlest boy, / That ever master had.— (Beaumont and Fletcher)
[epigraph present in 1839 & 1844 publications, & removed thereafter. Francis Beaumont (1584-1616) and John Fletcher (1579-1625) were dramatists and collaborators; the quotation comes from *Philaster* (produced 1611; printed 1620), Act 1, scene 2, ll. 159-60.]

I
A knight of gallant deeds
And a young page at his side,
From the holy war in Palestine
Did slow and thoughtful ride,
As each were a palmer and told for beads
The dews of the eventide. 5

II
“O young page,” said the knight,
“A noble page art thou!
Thou fearest not to steep in blood
The curls upon thy brow;
And once in the tent, and twice in the fight,
Didst ward me a mortal blow.” 10

III
“O brave knight,” said the page,
“O ere we hither came,
We talked in tent, we talked in field,
Of the bloody battle-game;
But here, below this greenwood bough,
I cannot speak the same. 15

IV
“Our troop is far behind,
The woodland calm is new;
Our steeds, with slow grass-muffled hoofs,
Tread deep the shadows through;
And in my mind, some blessing kind
Is dropping with the dew. 20

V
“The woodland calm is pure—
I cannot choose but have
A thought from these, o’ the beechen-trees
Which in our England wave,
And of the little finches fine
Which sang there, while in Palestine
The warrior-hilt we drave. 30



“Tableaux of the Affections” from *Findens’
Tableaux: A Series of Picturesque Scenes of National
Character, Beauty, and Costume* (1838)

drave = drive sword into enemy

VI

“Methinks, a moment gone,
 I heard my mother pray!
 I heard, sir knight, the prayer for *me*
 Wherein she passed away; 35
 And I know the Heavens are leaning down
 To hear what I shall say.”

VII

The page spake calm and high,
 As of no mean degree.
 Perhaps he felt in nature’s broad 40
 Full heart, his own was free.
 And the knight looked up to his lifted eye,
 Then answered smilingly:--

VIII

‘Sir page, I pray your grace!
 Certes, I meant not so 45 *certes = certainly*
 To cross your pastoral mood, sir page,
 With the crook of the battle-bow;
 But a knight may speak of a lady’s face,
 I ween, in any mood or place,
 If the grasses die or grow. 50

IX

“And this I meant to say,--
 My lady’s face shall shine
 As ladies’ faces use, to greet
 My page from Palestine;
 Or, speak she fair or *prank* she gay, 55 *prank = adorn oneself*
 She is no lady of mine.

X

“And this I meant to fear,--
 Her bower may suit thee ill!
 For, *sooth*, in that same field and tent, 60 *sooth = in truth*
 Thy *talk* was somewhat still;
 And fitter thy hand for my knightly spear,
 Than thy tongue for my lady’s will.”

XI

Slowly and thankfully
 The young page bowed his head:
 His large eyes seemed to muse a smile, 65
 Until he blushed instead,
 And no lady in her bower *pardiè*, *pardiè = by God (from French pardieu)*
 Could blush more sudden red.
 “Sir Knight,--thy lady’s bower to me
 Is suited well,” he said. 70

XII

Beati, beati, mortui!

From the convent on the sea,
One mile off, or scarce as nigh,
Swells the dirge as clear and high
As if that, over brake and lea, 75
Bodily the wind did carry
The great altar of St. Mary,
And the fifty tapers burning o'er it,
And the lady Abbess dead before it,
And the chanting nuns whom yesterweek 80
Her voice did charge and bless,--
Chanting steady, chanting meek,
Chanting with a solemn breath
Because that they are thinking less
Upon the Dead than upon death! 85

Beati, beati, mortui!

Now the vision in the sound
Wheelt on the wind around.
Now it sweepeth back, away—
The uplands will not let it stay 90
To dark the western sun.
Mortui!—away at last,--
Or ere the page's blush is past!
And the knight heard all, and the page heard none.

Beati, beati, mortui! = *Blessed be the dead!*

dark = *darken, cloud, dim, or obscure*

XIII

“A boon, thou noble knight, 95
If ever I servèd thee!
Though thou art a knight and I am a page,
Now grant a boon to me;
And tell me sooth, if dark or bright,
If little loved or loved aright 100
Be the face of thy ladye.”

XIV

Gloomily looked the knight;--
“As a son thou has servèd me,
And would to none I had granted boon
Except to only thee! 105
For haply then I should love aright,
For then I should know if dark or bright
Were the face of my ladye.

ladye = *archaic spelling of lady*

XV

“Yet ill it suits my knightly tongue
To grudge that granted boon! 110
That heavy price from heart and life
I paid in silence down.
The hand that claimed it, cleared in fine
My father's fame: I swear by mine,
That price was nobly won. 115

in fine = *conclusively, with connotations here of its original sense of fine, medieval Latin for the sum paid on concluding a lawsuit*

XVI

“Earl Walter was a brave old earl,--
 He was my father’s friend;
 And while I rode the lists at court
 And little guessed the end,
 My noble father in his shroud,
 Against a slanderer lying loud,
 He rose up to defend.

120

lists = an enclosed space for tournaments

XVII

“Oh, calm, below the marble grey
 My father’s dust was strown!
 Oh, meek, above the marble grey
 His image prayed alone!
 The slanderer lied—the wretch was brave,--
 For, looking up the minster-nave,
 He saw my father’s knightly glaive
 Was changed from steel to stone.

125

minster-nave = the central space of a cathedral leading up to the altar

130

XVIII

“Earl Walter’s glaive was steel,
 With a brave old hand to wear it,
 And dashed the lie back in the mouth
 Which lied against the godly truth
 And against the knightly merit!
 The slanderer, ‘neath the avenger’s heel,
 Struck up the dagger in appeal
 From stealthy lie to brutal force—
 And out upon the traitor’s corse
 Was yielded the true spirit.

135

glaive = a lance or spear; more loosely, a sword

140

corse = corpse

XIX

“And I would mine hand had fought that fight
 And justified my father!
 I would mine heart had caught that wound
 And slept beside him rather!
 I think it were a better thing
 Than murdered friend and marriage-ring
 Forced on my life together.

145

NOTE: in original, 1839 version, a shorter were account about a nameless Baron (rather than Earl Walter) championed the dead father; Stanzas XV-XIX were added later.

XX

“Wail shook Earl Walter’s house;
 His true wife shed no tear;
 She lay upon her bed as mute
 As the earl did on his bier:
 Till—‘Ride, ride fast,’ she said at last,
 ‘And bring the avengèd’s son anear!
 Ride fast—ride free, as a dart can flee,
 For white of blee with waiting for me
 Is the corse in the next chambère.’

150

155

blee = complexion

XXI

“I came—I knelt beside her bed—
 Her calm was worse than strife;
 ‘My husband, for thy father dear,
 Gave freely when thou wert not here 160
 His own and eke my life.
 A boon! Of that sweet child we make
 An orphan for thy father’s sake,
 Make thou, for ours, a wife.’

eke = also

XXII

“I said, ‘My steed neighs in the court, 165
 My bark rocks on the brine,
 And the warrior’s vow I am under now
 To free the pilgrim’s shrine;
 But fetch the ring and fetch the priest
 And call that daughter of thine, 170
 And rule she wide from my castle on Nyde
 While I am in Palestine.’

Nyde = the Nidd River in Yorkshire

XXIII

“In the dark chambère, if the bride was fair,
 Ye wis, I could not see,
 But the steed thrice neighed, and the priest fast prayed, 175
 And wedded fast were we.
 Her mother smiled upon her bed
 As at its side we knelt to wed,
 And the bride rose from her knee
 And kissed the smile of her mother dead, 180
 Or ever she kissed me.

ye wis = You know

XXIV

“My page, my page, what grieves thee so,
 That the tears run down thy face?”—
 “Alas, alas! mine own sistèr
 Was in thy lady’s case! 185
 But *she* laid down the silks she wore
 And followed him she wed before,
 Disguised as his true servitor,
 To the very battle-place.”

XXV

And wept the page, but laughed the knight,-- 190
 A careless laugh laughed he:
 “Well done it were for thy sistèr,
 But not for my ladye!
 My love, so please you, shall requite
 No woman, whether dark or bright, 195
 Unwomaned if she be.”

XXVI

The page stopped weeping and smiled cold—

“Your wisdom may declare
That womanhood is proved the best
By golden brooch and glossy vest 200
The mincing ladies wear;
Yet is it proved, and was of old,
Anear as well, I dare to hold,
By truth, or by despair.”

XXVII

He smiled no more, he wept no more, 205

But passionate he spake,—
“Oh, womanly she prayed in tent,
When none beside did wake!
Oh, womanly she paled in fight,
For one belovèd’s sake!— 210
And her little hand defiled with blood,
Her tender tears of womanhood
Most woman-pure did make!”

XXVIII

--“Well done it were for thy sistèr,
Thou tellest well her tale! 215

But for my lady, she shall pray
I’ the kirk of Nydesdale.
Not dread for me but love for me
Shall make my lady pale;
No casque shall hide her woman’s tear— 220
It shall have room to trickle clear
Behind her woman’s veil.”

XXIX

--“But what if she mistook thy mind
And followed thee to strife,
Then kneeling, did entreat thy love, 225
As Paynims ask for life?”

--“I would forgive, and evermore
Would love her as my servitor,
But little as my wife.

Paynims = pagans or heathens; in the medieval context here, especially Moslems or Arabs

XXX

“Look up—there is a small bright cloud 230
Alone amid the skies!

So high, so pure, and so apart,
A woman’s honor lies.”

The page looked up—the cloud was sheen—
A sadder cloud did rush, I ween, 235
Betwixt it and his eyes:

sheen = shining, bright, or resplendent

XXXI

Then dimly dropped his eyes away

From welkin unto hill—

welkin = sky or firmament

Ha! who rides there?—the page is ‘ware,

Though the cry at his heart is still!

240

And the page seeth all and the knight seeth none,

Though banner and spear do fleck the sun,

And the Saracens ride at will.

Saracens = Arabs or Moslems

XXXII

He speaketh calm, he speaketh low,--

“Ride fast, my master, ride,

245

Or ere within the broadening dark

The narrow shadows hide.”

“Yea, fast, my page, I will do so,

And keep thou at my side.”

XXXIII

“Now nay, now nay, ride on thy way,

250

Thy faithful page precede.

For I must loose on saddle-bow

My battle-casque that galls, I trow,

The shoulder of my steed;

And I must pray, as I did vow,

255

For one in bitter need.

XXXIV

“Ere night I shall be near to thee,--

Now ride, my master, ride!

Ere night, as parted spirits cleave

To mortals too beloved to leave,

260

I shall be at thy side.”

The knight smiled free at the fantasy,

And adown the dell did ride.

XXXV

Had the knight looked up to the page’s face,

No smile the word had won:

265

Had the knight looked up to the page’s face,

I ween he had never gone:

Had the knight looked back to the page’s geste,

geste = gesture

I ween he had turned anon!

anon = immediately

For dread was the woe in the face so young,

270

And wild was the silent geste that flung

Casque, sword to earth—as the boy down-sprung,

And stood—alone, alone.

XXXVI

He clenched his hands as if to hold
 His soul's great agony— 275
 "Have I renounced my womanhood,
 For wifhood unto *thee*,
 And is this the last, last look of thine
 That ever I shall see?

XXXVII

"Yet God thee save, and mayst thou have 280
 A lady to thy mind,
 More woman-proud and half as true
 AS one thou leav'st behind!
 And God me take with HIM to dwell—
 For HIM I cannot love too well, 285
 As I have loved my kind."

XXXVIII

SHE looketh up, in earth's despair,
 The hopeful Heavens to seek.
 That little cloud still floateth there,
 Whereof her Loved did speak. 290
 How bright the little cloud appears!
 Her eyelids fall upon the tears,
 And the tears down either cheek.

XXXIX

The tramp of hoof, the flash of steel—
 The Paynims round her coming! 295
 The sound and sight have made her calm,—
 False page, but truthful woman!
 She stands amid them all unmoved.
 A heart once broken by the loved
 Is strong to meet the foeman. 300

XL

"Ho, Christian page! art keeping sheep,
 From pouring wine-cups resting?"— *art = are you*
 "I keep my master's noble name,
 For warring, not for feasting;
 And if that here Sir Hubert were, 305
 My master brave, my master dear,
 Ye would not stay to question."

XLI

"Where is thy master, scornful page,
 That we may slay or bind him?"—
 "Now search the lea and search the wood, 310
 And see if ye can find him!
 Nathless, as hath been often tried, *nathless = nevertheless*
 Your Paynim heroes faster ride
 Before him than behind him."

XLII

“Give smoother answers, lying page,
Or perish in the lying.”— 315

“I trow that if the warrior brand
Beside my foot, were in my hand, *brand = here, the blade of a sword*
‘Twere better at replying.”

They cursed her deep, they smote her low, 320
They cleft her golden ringlets through;
The Loving is the Dying.

XLIII

She felt the scimitar gleam down,
And met it from beneath
With smile more bright in victory 325
Than any sword from sheath,—
Which flashed across her lip serene,
Most like the spirit-light between
The darks of life and death.

XLIV

Ingemisco, ingemisco! 330 *Ingemisco, ingemisco!* = I lament (i.e. my sins)
From the convent on the sea, Latin; from the Requiem for the Dead
Now it sweepeth solemnly!

As over wood and over lea
Bodily the wind did carry
The great altar of St. Mary, 335

And the fifty tapers paling o’er it,
And the Lady Abbess stark before it,
And the weary nuns with hearts that faintly
Beat along their voices saintly—

Ingemisco, ingemisco! 340

Dirge for abbess laid in shroud,
Sweepeth o’er the shroudless Dead,
Page or lady, as we said,
With the dew upon her head,
All as sad if not as loud. 345

Ingemisco, ingemisco!
Is ever a lament begun
By any mourner under sun,
Which, ere it endeth, suits but *one*?