

A. C. Swinburne (1837-1909)

17 *Lady Isabel*

It was early on a May morning  
Lady Isabel combed her hair;  
But little kent she or the morn  
She wad never comb it mair.

It was early on a May morning  
Lady Isabel rang the keys;  
But little kent she or the morn  
A fey woman she was.

Ben it came her stepmother  
Fu fair in the bower floor;  
“It’s tauld me the day, Isabel  
Ye are your father’s whore.”

“O them that tauld you that, mither,  
I wish they may never drink wine;  
For if I be the same woman,  
My ain sell drees the pine.

“And them that tauld you that, mither,  
I wish they may never drink ale;  
For if I be the same woman  
My ain sell drees the dail.”

“It may be very well seen, Isabel,  
It may be very well seen,  
He buys to you the damask gowns,  
To me the dowie green.”

“Ye are of age and I am young,

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And young amo' my flowers;  
The fairer that my claithing be,  
The mair honour is yours.

"I have a love ayont the sea  
And far ayont the faem; 30  
For ilka gown my father buys me,  
My ain love sends me ten."

"Come here, come here now, Lady Isabel,  
And drink the wine wi' me;  
I hae twa jewels in ae coffer 35  
And ane o' them I'll gie thee."

"Stay still, stay still, my mither dear,  
Stay but a little while,  
Till I gang into Marykirk,  
It's but a little mile." 40

When she gaed on to Marykirk  
And into Mary's quire  
There she saw her ain mither  
Sit in a gowden chair.

"O will I leave the lands, mither, 45  
Or will I sail the sea,  
Or will I drink this dowie drink  
This woman's brewed for me?"

"Ye winna leave the lands, daughter,  
Nor will ye sail the sea, 50  
But ye will drink this dowie drink  
This woman's brewed for thee.

"Your bed is made in a better place  
Than ever hers will stand;  
For she shall sleep in hell's water 55

And ye in Heaven's land;  
Between the gold and the gilly flower  
That lie down at God's right hand.

"Your bed is made in a better place  
Than ever hers will be; 60  
And ere ye're cauld into your room  
Ye will be there wi' me.

"Come in, come in now, Lady Isabel,  
And drink the wine wi' me;  
I hae twa bonnie girdles in ae kist, 65  
And ane o' them I'll gie thee."

"Stay still, stay still, my mither dear,  
Stay still a little wee,  
Till I gang to yon garden green  
My Maries a' to see." 70

To some she gae the brooch, the brooch,  
To some she gae the ring;  
But wae betide her stepmother,  
To her she gae nae thing.

"Come in, come in now, Lady Isabel, 75  
And drink the wine wi' me;  
I hae twa bonny birds in ae cage  
And ane o' them I'll gie thee."

Slowly cam she by the bower  
And slowly cam she in; 80  
She could fu' weel of courtesie,  
Says — "Begin, mither, begin."

She put it till her cheek, her cheek,  
Sae did she till her chin;  
Sae did she till her fause fause lips, 85

But never a drap gaed in.

Lady Isabel put it till her cheek,  
Sae did she till her chin,  
Sae did she till her good sweet lips  
And the rank poison gaed in. 90

“O take this cup frae me, mother,  
O take this cup frae me;  
My bed is made in a better place  
Than ever yours will be.

“My bed is in the heavens high 95  
Between the sun and the flowers fine;  
But yours is in the lowest hell  
To dree torment and pine.

“My bed is made in the fair heaven  
Low down between God’s feet; 100  
My bed is gold and gilly-flower  
Among the angels sweet;  
But yours is made in the heavy hell  
Between the wind and the weet.

(From *Ballads of the English Border*. Ed. with  
Introduction, Glossary and Notes by William A.  
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