

THE MASQUE OF DIANA

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...And thrice-twinned Hékate, the three faces of virgin Diana — Æneid 4.511

In a garden enclosure concealed in the dark that discomfits my sight,
A garden still and fit for sleep
Enwrap within the moonless night,
I awake. This black sky and dense air that surround me, enthralled by some charm,
Swift imbue my dull spirit with dreams not my own, but light borrowed, unbound,
When my Self is asleep. What mysterious harmonies, mute and unstrung!

I lie watching in silence, attentive to visible words a voice breathes
On my mind as night's breeze lifts the leaves: "Stranger, marvels await you unveiled
Once the moonless night above
Transforms itself to sunless day.
Be all ears and eyes, too, whilst we play for but you the diverse avatars
Of the goddess DIANA in masque. O bright Moon, pray discover your faces!

"Ever virgin, the huntress DIANA a vigilant shepherd held dear
And kept close in a grotto obscure that their ever-chaste longing concealed.
Her immaculate lover, embraced yet untouched, rapt her visit awaits:
‘Come, Ephesian Queen, who once
Were darkness, but are now my light!’
Mind his prayer for grace, sublime light from the shadows, his eyes lit with hope.

"In nocturnal expanses swift LUNA prevails. Her full circuit from light
Into darkness and back by far bests all the night-shifting spheres. On the heels
Of her brother the Sun, through the ether eternal she races on high.
From her silvery chariot LUNA beholds our wan shadows below
Flitting to and fro and, soon,
Forever gone as if a dream.

"From underground, the Lower World,
By the third of her names is dread HÉKATE summoned through witchery's spells
And enchantment of fairies who change under cover of darkness wee babes
In their cradles. Beware, Sleeping Stranger, of demons from secret domains
That may slip in, unseen and unheard, on some crystal-clear rays of the Moon
To rob your peace, to change your dreams.

“Black sabbath, revel, dance of witches,
O night of magic, night of changes,
I conjure you, ye shadowy spirits and underworld light, do conjoin
In the circles of Water and Fire, Earth and Air, in dark HEKATE’s name
Bind a spell: convert day into darkness, and dissipate modest reserve;
Drain off prudence through lasses’ quick ears and the mind through a lunatic’s eyes.

“Most misproud among HEKATE’s children, the imps, now appears sprightly Puck,
A pimping elf, a clever thief.
With mischief laugh his song and steps:
‘Here a pin! there an arm! there a dwarf! here a crib! here a flame! there a barn!
In the matter of devilment, hail to Puck! master of amorous sport,
Surreptitious seducer of maids who lie dreaming and curious lads.’

“We revisit the goddess in noon’s light. DIANA, swift mistress of hounds
And the chase, at the edge of a mountain spring daydreams at ease, undisturbed.
A naked maid, alone she bathes.
A band of silver crowns her brow.
A stray hunter, Actæon, lies low in the reeds, by the huntress unseen,
And descries, he unbidden, a scene in her fancy that warrants his death.

“As cool Water she splashes on ankles and thighs, a quick shiver of cold
Fingers, silver or gold, the same coin that the virginal Dánaë felt
When proud Zeus, to a shower of glittering metal transformed, heavy fell
Upon her breasts, upon her waist,
Upon her couch she starts from sleep.
The chaste daughter of Zeus in her reverie suspires — and Actæon, too.

“While she bends her long back in the sunlight and stretches her hands to the Earth,
She envisions the Sun’s child Pasíphaë, bowed, in the guise of a cow,
Now submitting her buttocks, exposed through the hide, to the violent probe
Of the bull that belabors her flanks. As with thunderer Jupiter’s bolts
And jolting blast and ardent dart,
The beast besets our heifer’s ’hind.

“A sphere of Air, a sphere of Fire,
The high cry of an eagle informs in her hearing an image of flight:
The boy Gánymede, comeliest youth in old Troy, aviates from his home
In the talons of Jove, here a bird, to Olympus on high; seized by a
Swoon, the boy spreads his arms with those wings that are stirring the air ’bout his ears,
The Air, where Fiery spirits sing.

“Oh what! A sound she hears, she turns
 And there concealed the hunter spies.
 Bright DIANA, in view of the outrage, displays her arms wide to his sight.
 Splendid breasts fix his gaze as she darts through her pupils a murderous beam
 That in striking his eye finds its way to the heart and transforms him in flesh
 To a stag. She halloos his own hounds, which now spring forth and tear him apart.

 “Turn your eyes, Sleeping Stranger, aloft and behold where majestic She stands,
 Light-bearing Virgin, Heaven’s Queen
 Lightly borne on swan’s-down clouds.
 All emblazoned in argent and azure, She looks to the uppermost spheres.
 Sense Her aura of sanctity, boundlessly graceful, while cherubs float round.
 And this too, this fair sliver of Moon underfoot: here is LUNA’s support.”

 And no more as dream fades before day. On his radiant car PHŒBUS, god
 Of all light, of all song, joins in flight his twin sister DIANA and bride.
 Amazed and dumb I watch the Moon
 Umbriferous eclipse the Sun.
 ’Bove the Némian grove the crowned Groom and Moon veiled in conjunction concur.
 There the emblem, the goddess’ last phase, for the wedding of Magic and Verse.

masque: a play incorporating poetry, song, & dance performed by masked actors; a courtly entertainment in early modern England.

Diana: goddess of the hunt, the moon (LUNA in Latin), & nature; a triple goddess along with Luna & Hekate; twin sister of Phœbus Apollo, her male counterpart, god of light, the sun, poetry, music, prophecy, etc.

Ephesian Queen: Diana’s temple at Ephesus was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. St. Paul went there to preach the gospel, but the Ephesians, crying ‘Diana of the Ephesians is great!’ drove him & his disciples from the city. The poet imagines here that the pastor-saint, bewitched, now a convert to her worship, moons over his chimeric lover.

Hekate: underworld goddess of magic & witchcraft. *Hekatos* in Greek (‘far-shooting’), a Homeric epithet of Apollo, serves as the masculine counterpart of Hekate’s name.

Puck: Shakespeare’s mischievous sprite.

Actæon: young Theban hunter & peeping Tom in Ovid’s book of changes.

Danaë: mythological Greek virgin whose father locked her in a bronze tower; Jupiter raped her; mother of Perseus.

Pasiphaë: daughter of the Sun; wife of King Minos of Crete; enamored of a bull; mother of the Minotaur.

Ganymede: Trojan youth of great beauty; in the form of an eagle Jupiter abducted him; cupbearer to the Olympian gods & Jupiter’s favorite.

Heaven’s Queen: the Virgin Mary as represented in Christian art; mystical bride of Christ.

Nemian grove: woodland site near Rome of Diana’s sanctuary on the shore of the volcanic Lake Nemi, called ‘the Mirror of Diana.’