The Phoenix

GEORGE DARLEY

1795–1846

George Darley, an Irish mathematician, was one of the poets who figured in the “Elizabethan revival” of the later Romantic period. He wrote prose tales and dramatic criticism, as well as various dramas in the style of Shakespeare’s contemporaries. His long work *Nepenthe* (1835) includes most of his best lyrics, from which the first of the following poems has been selected; the last poem is from *Syren Songs* (1837). Part of the distinctive charm of Darley’s lyrics is that they recall, without merely mimicking, their Elizabethan and seventeenth-century originals. The stately lyric *It is not beauty I demand* was for years mistakenly printed in Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury* as a poem of the Caroline period in the seventeenth century.

The Phoenix¹

O blest unfabled Incense Tree,
That burns in glorious Araby,
With red scent chalicing the air,
Till earth-life grow Elysian there!

Half-buried to her flaming breast
In this bright tree, she makes her nest,
Hundred-sunned Phoenix! when she must
Crumble at length to hoary dust!

Her gorgeous deathbed! her rich pyre
Burnt up with aromatic fire!
Her urn, sight high from spoiler men!
Her birthplace when self-born again!

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¹ A legendary bird: only one exists at a time; it dies periodically, singing, in aromatic flames, and is reborn from the ashes.
The mountainless green wilds among,
Here ends she her unechoing song!
With amber tears and odorous sighs
Mourned by the desert where she dies!

It is not Beauty I demand

It is not Beauty I demand,
A crystal brow, the moon’s despair,
Nor the snow’s daughter, a white hand,
Nor mermaid’s yellow pride of hair.

Tell me not of your starry eyes,
Your lips that seem on roses fed,
Your breasts where Cupid trembling lies,
Nor sleeps for kissing of his bed.

A bloomy pair of vermeil cheeks,
Like Hebe’s in her ruddiest hours,
A breath that softer music speaks
Than summer winds a-wooing flowers.

These are but gauds; nay, what are lips?
Coral beneath the ocean-stream,
Whose brink when your adventurer sips
Full oft he perisheth on them.

And what are cheeks but ensigns oft
That wave hot youth to fields of blood?
Did Helen’s breast though ne’er so soft,
Do Greece or Ilium any good?

Eyes can with baleful ardor burn,
Poison can breathe that erst perfumed,
There’s many a white hand holds an urn
With lovers’ hearts to dust consumed.
The Mermaidens’ Vesper Hymn

For crystal brows—there’s naught within,
They are but empty cells for pride;
He who the Syren’s hair would win
Is mostly strangled in the tide.

Give me, instead of beauty’s bust,
A tender heart, a loyal mind,
Which with temptation I could trust,
Yet never linked with error find.

One in whose gentle bosom I
Could pour my secret heart of woes,
Like the care-burdened honey-fly
That hides his murmurs in the rose.

My earthly comforter! whose love
So indefeasible might be,
That when my spirit won above
Hers could not stay for sympathy.

The Mermaidens’ Vesper Hymn

Troop home to silent grots and caves!
Troop home! and mimic as you go
The mournful winding of the waves
Which to their dark abysses flow.

At this sweet hour, all things beside
In amorous pairs to covert creep;
The swans that brush the evening tide
Homeward in snowy couples keep.

In his green den the murmuring seal
Close by his sleek companion lies;
While singly we to bedward steal,
And close in fruitless sleep our eyes.
GEORGE DARLEY

In bowers of love men take their rest,
   In loveless bowers we sigh alone,
With bosom friends are others blest—
   But we have none! but we have none!

1837