



Epipsychidion

By Percy Bysshe Shelley

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EDITOR'S PREFACE

The noble and unfortunate Lady Emilia V , to

whom this poem was addressed, was the elder of two daughters, by his first wife, of a Count Viviani, head of one of the most ancient families in Pisa. Her father in his old age took unto himself a wife not much older than either of the daughters. This lady, whose beauty did not equal that of the Counts' children, was naturally jealous of their charms, and deemed them dangerous rivals in the eyes of her Cavaliere; she therefore exerted all her influence over her infatuated husband, and persuaded him, under pretence of completing their education, to place them each in a separate convent. Teresa Emilia, the eldest, had now been confined for two years in the Convent of St. Anna. Her father desired to see her married, but sought a husband for her who would take her off his hands without a dowry. Pacchiani, the friend and confessor to the family, and tutor to the children, made the Contessinas frequent subjects of his conversation

with the Shelleys, and spoke most enthusiastically of the beauty and accomplishments of Emilia. " Poverina," he said, " she pines like a bird in a cage—ardently longs to escape from her prison-house—pines with ennui, and wanders about the corridors like an unquiet spirit; she sees her young days glide on without an aim or purpose. She was made for love. ... A miserable place is that Convent of St. Anna/' /he added, " and if you had seen, as I have done, the poor pensionnaires shut up in that narrow, suffocating street in the summer (for it does not possess a garden), and in the winter, as now, shivering with cold, being allowed nothing to warm them but a few ashes, which they carry about in an earthen vase, you would pity them."

This little story deeply interested Shelley, and induced him to visit the captive some time in December, 1820.

The Convent of St. Anna, a ruinous building, was situated in an unfrequented street in the suburbs, not far from the walls.

"After passing through a gloomy portal that led to a quadrangle, the area of which was crowded with crosses, memorials of old monastic times," writes Medwin, "we were in the presence of Emilia. . . . Emilia was indeed lovely and interesting. Her profuse black hair, tied in the most simple knot, after the manner of a

Greek Muse in the Florence Gallery, displayed to its full height her brow, fair as that of the marble of which I speak. She was also of about the same height as the antique. Her features possessed a rare faultlessness, and almost Grecian contour, the nose and forehead making a straight line. . . . Her eyes had the sleepy voluptuousness, if not the colour, of Beatrice Cenci's. They had, indeed, no definite colour, changing with the changing feeling to dark or light, as the soul animated them. Her cheek was pale, too, as marble, owing to her confinement and want of air, and perhaps to 'thought.'" Mrs. Shelley gave a very similar description of Emilia, under the name of Clorinda, in her novel of Lodore.

It is hardly necessary to quote the further description of her as it is given at length in Dowden's *Life of Shelley* ; it only remains to state that the almost infatuated admiration of the idol declined almost as rapidly as it arose, to judge from Shelley's letter on the subject—that to Mr. Gisborne in June, 1822. Emilia married Biondi in 1822, and, according to the poet, led her husband and his mother "a devil of a life." She was seen by Medwin some years after her ill-starred wedding: as she lay on her couch and extended a thin hand, she was so changed that the visitor could hardly find a trace of her former beauty. Not long after this interview, poisoned by

the malaria of the Maremma, and broken in heart and hope, Emilia died.

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Users Review

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