

**SHELLEY**  
**A Libretto**  
**by**  
**Martin Burke**

© 2014 *Martin Burke*  
*All rights reserved.*  
©2014 *Publication Scene4 Magazine*

Published as formatted by the author in the June 2014 issue of *SCENE4 Magazine*  
([www.scene4.com](http://www.scene4.com)) and provided as a free PDF download.  
Permission is granted to print one copy of this version for personal reading purposes.  
All Rights Reserved by the Author

©2014 Martin Burke. **Shelley** is fully protected under the copyright laws of the United States of America and international copyright laws. All rights, including the rights of translation into foreign languages, adaptations in motion pictures, television, video, radio, various other electronic media, recitation, public reading, and any other adaptations and are strictly reserved. Performances of any kind require the payment of a royalty. You may display this book for your personal, non-commercial use. But you may not otherwise reproduce or distribute copies of this book or any part thereof in any form (including by email or other electronic means), without the prior written consent of the owner. All inquiries should be directed to Martin Burke at [burkedelphicghent@mail.com](mailto:burkedelphicghent@mail.com)

## SHELLEY

1  
Leghorn 8 July 1822

### Shelley:

Fire, fire, fire  
I desire  
The wind behind my eyes and my soul set seawards  
What is my soul but my eye set seawards  
Fire, fire, fire  
I desire  
The wind in my hand and water upon me  
Oh chariot of longing what will we sing?  
You and I  
Behind the wind's power  
For this is the singing hour  
Fire, fire, fire  
I desire  
Flame in the mind and the mind freely singing  
Like swallows about me winging  
To the first of the many heavens  
Fire is the leaven  
I desire  
Fire, fire, fire

### Chorus of voices:

-You are the favoured child whose desires run wild  
-You breathe life and death in the same breath  
-You leave behind on holy ground the good you have found  
-You are the bright child, run wild, run wild  
-This is your hour, yours is the power  
-Choose! And win or loose  
-Run wild, run wild, you are divinity's child  
-Run with the wind, you will win  
-Or fail  
-Your boat is frail  
-Who is your captain but the uncertain sea?  
-What is your skill against the uncertain sea?  
-You set your mind against the uncertain sea

### (together)

Aim for a harbour  
Seek the good land  
Set the tiller homeward

Aim for a harbour  
Seek the good land  
The heart seeks the tiller of homeward

*Shelley:*

Homeward, homeward, homeward  
My heart is on the prow  
This is what the sea will allow  
Singing and rigging  
The buoy-bell is ringing  
Homeward, homeward, home  
Nothing I own but the wind  
Nothing desire except the fire  
My hand on the tiller  
Toward fire's burning pillar  
I desire the fire  
Into the fire I'll aim my desire  
Homewards, homewards I go

2  
*August 1811*

*Chorus:*

The news is out, the news is out  
Lucifer's child is on the loose  
His shadow falls upon the town  
Down is up and up is down  
Of his intent there can be no doubt

The news is out, the news is out  
The devil plans to cook your goose  
He's stoking up his deadly fire  
The consequences will be dire  
Listen: you can hear him shout

The news is out, the news is out  
He plays the cards with a deadly deuce  
He turns up trumps with the jack of hearts  
He plays the roles of many parts  
He knows what he's about

*Shelley:*

The chains of hell I'll break  
The cloths of heaven I'll make  
Nothing, nothing will be unknown

I'll whittle all down to the bone –  
The new Prometheus

Even the sky cannot refuse me  
The power of light comes to use me  
My thunder splits the brittle stone  
I am a power unknown  
The new Prometheus

Fire flows from me I am pure fire  
Who sees the flame must then expire  
Nothing of fire will be unknown  
The world lets out a shrivelled moan  
The new Prometheus

**Accusers:**

Mad and bad  
This Shelley is a dangerous spark  
Who could set this nation  
To an uncontrollable conflagration  
This Shelley is mad  
Mad as a dog with a dangerous bite  
Mad as the rain on a winter's night  
Mad as a pauper  
Mad as a fiend  
Mad as a storm-bringing wind

Mad and bad  
This Shelley is a dangerous spark  
Let loose in the dark  
We will undo him  
From his kit and kin  
We will douse the fire within  
There must be no fire  
There will be no fire  
The powers that be will all conspire  
To undo this dangerous spark

**Shelley:**

England treats me like a mad dog with a dangerous bite  
Because I tear the temples from their roots  
Then watch me tear the temple from its roots!

**Chorus:**

Dangerous times and dangerous men make a deadly combination-  
Who will pay the price?

Both sides are playing with false dice –what will be the outcome?

**Accusers:**

Beat him down!

Beat him down!

Chase the mad dog from the town!

**Shelley:**

Tear down!

Tear down!

Undo the placid town!

**Chorus:**

Dangerous times and dangerous men make a deadly combination-

Who is he who comes amongst us

Claiming to be the new Prometheus?

**Accusers:**

This Shelley

This braggart

This poor-man's fool!

**Shelley:**

Up by the roots!

Up by the roots!

I root the temple from its roots!

**Accusers:**

This mad dog with the dangerous bite

**Chorus:**

Who comes as if an errant knight

**Shelley:**

Watch the spark that I'll ignite!

**Chorus:**

Why does the wind hesitate?

Why is the sun late in arriving

Why is thunder thriving

And why does it celebrate?

Shock-waves run through the city

Bells are muffled

The sky is ruffled

Aldermen meet in closed committee

Even the river's uneasy  
Boats are waiting for the tide  
Widows are waiting on the quay-side  
Why does the wind hesitate?

*Shelley:*

See me oh mirror of nature see me  
The mountain's cold water runs in my mind  
I leave the broken world behind  
England is not my home

Let someone else drink the dregs  
Let someone else furrow  
Those bones with no marrow  
England is not my home

See me oh woman I've loved  
I leave you behind me  
And you will not find me  
England is not my home

*Harriet:*

You broke my bones on your will  
Your heart is ice and stone  
The wind from your mouth is chill

Ice and stone will build my grave  
A small cairn you will not visit  
You play the knight but are the knave

You only know the broken dream  
And words are disappearing birds  
You never heard my nightly scream

The ice and stone collide  
A heap of broken bones  
The love I had for you has died

A monument of broken bones  
And your unseemly will  
Have left me in an icy zone

No graceful word comes from your mouth  
No matter what protests you make  
Already you want to go south

My will is broken on your will  
I'm nothing but a heap of bones  
The tone of love turns shrill

**Shelley:**

Shrill words and binding chains  
How I break them  
And remake them in a poem!

**Harriet:**

Poetry's pledge means nothing to me  
The broken vows are everywhere  
There is nothing on which we agree

**Shelley:**

A pledge is only a moment's passion  
It fades and is gone  
It passes out of fashion

**Harriet:**

Good with words, you are good with words  
A cleaver man with a clever mind  
Magpie in a flock of lesser birds

**Shelley:**

How can I stay where there is no love  
But an empty cup and an empty plate-  
An intolerable weight

I cast aside -doing so with arrogant pride  
An empty cup and an empty plate  
England is not my home

**Chorus:**

The tide will not return you  
A passion's flame will burn you  
Already the water is waiting  
Already the ship it is sailing

Tides go to the shores of France  
In leaving you leave so much to chance  
What is it that you hope to see  
In your new found love for Italy?

Behind you a heap of broken bones  
The zodiac house is in a strange zone



What is it you hope to win from time  
As history ripples down your spine?

History ripples and water shudders  
Your boat has an unsteady rudder  
Passion's flame will not appease  
The widow when she grieves

The tide will not return you  
A passion's flame will burn you  
Already the water is waiting  
Already the ship is sailing

3  
Italy

Chorus:

Far away, far away  
The sun seems far away from the world  
But love has unfurled a banner  
In the shape of a bird  
In the shape of a word  
And heaven scans the world

Shelley:

This new world  
This beautiful Italy of my desire  
Even heaven bows before my fire

*Men scarcely know how beautiful fire is –  
Each flame of it a precious stone  
Dissolved in ever-moving light, and this  
Belongs to each and all who gaze upon*

Am I wind?  
Am I fire?  
Do I burn to renew  
Or burn to destroy  
Fire from my eye  
Oh empires I see you!  
I destroy to renew you  
Renew  
Renew  
To make the world new  
I hew a rough stone  
I am that stone  
Am ever myself in all that I do  
Only myself in all that I do

I am the burnishing fire

**The women:**

It could never be  
Love was too much for its own possibility  
He came as fire we could not douse  
He came as light that could not be put out  
It could never be  
It could never be

**Chorus:**

Beware proud man, beware  
You climb a stony stair  
It leads up  
But it also leads down  
Heaven can smile but heaven can frown  
And cast you into despair

**Shelley:**

I become one with the flame!  
I know love's secret name  
I will speak it again

*The breath whose might I have invoked in song  
Descends on me; my spirit's bark is driven  
Far from the shore, far from the trembling throng..*

Am I the wind which batters the town?  
Am I the wind tearing all down?  
Down to the green ground  
Depth-charge of sound  
Clouds overhead  
Thunder is spoken  
Everything broken  
The empires bereft of a shroud  
I batter the wind which batters my heart  
It was so from the start  
A wind-stirred heart  
Breaking the bonds of limits and chains  
The wind has come once, it will come again  
This is the wind which batters the world  
This is its healing word

**The women:**

Oh he is the wind and the fire and the flood  
He is the dark sun at noon

He is the one who covers up the clouds  
Which then cover up the moon  
But it could never be  
No it could never be  
All of our hopes were brittle as glass  
That broke in a storm  
And caused such alarm  
As sister have ever known

**Chorus:**

Your pride, your pride  
Can be cruel  
Though you use it as fire's fuel  
But beware proud man, beware  
Heaven can cast you into despair

**Shelley:**

What can it do that I cannot undo?  
Whatever heaven knows of damnation  
I counter with my soul's affirmation  
I am the living fire!

*A Power which comes and goes like a dream  
And which none can ever trace-  
Heaven's light on earth –Truth's brightest beam  
And when he ceased there lay upon the gleam  
Of those words upon his face*

Shall I speak  
Or let the lightning speak on my behalf?  
What do I seek  
What do I see  
What empires bow down before me?  
Streaks in the night sky brighten the earth  
All is shrouded as if for death  
I defy all with a living breath  
Living so as not to live  
Dying so as not to die  
Who am I but I?  
Lightning in a ruffled sky  
Ships at sea have nothing to guide by  
Hear the ring of the bell-buoy  
Lightning is my guide

*One mind, the type of all, the moveless wave  
Whose calm reflects all moving things that are  
Necessity and love, and life, the grave*

Am I the tide?  
Do I flow and ebb  
Water's web  
I abide, I abide  
Am surface tension and undertow  
Downriver I go  
Downriver, downriver  
My heart all a-quiver  
And history tingling in the flood  
Disturbing alluvium mud  
Downriver, downriver  
Am I the tide am I?  
What will abide when the flood subsides  
What will abide, oh what will abide  
The surging of the tide?

*The women:*

The tide was relentless and the fire was appealing  
Every word was a new word revealing  
The power of water and fire  
It could never be  
So much was expected and nothing accepted  
That did not conform to the tide  
So much was hoped for and so much debated  
And suddenly we each felt elated  
Merely to be by his side  
No one could sail us home  
Storm-tossed and battered  
But what did that matter  
To sisters on the tide?  
He was for sailing and we for remaining  
So that it could never be  
No it could never be  
News is brought from abroad

*Shelley:*

*Till all is bright, and clear, and still,  
Round that solitary hill*

Water, wind and tide  
I am your child  
Child of the wild wind  
Child of the tide  
Sweet water carry me home

*The women:*

Shelley as ever is deeply proud  
But deeply wounded by the worlds' denial  
Of the very power to which he aspires  
As if it could ever be  
That he might obtain a living fame  
And free the seed from the husk  
Free the kernel from the flame  
Loose everything so as to gain  
The essence of the flame  
But it could never be  
Now we are waiting alone  
Now we are waiting alone  
Time cannot measure  
The love that we treasure  
Oh no, that could never be

*Accusers:*

Nothing has changed  
The magpie struts from nest to nest  
And picks up glittering stones  
The magpie struts  
And winds his guts  
About a faction of dead bones

He will not outlive his own reputation  
He will not be counted of this nation  
The magpie struts but cannot walk  
Not sensibly talk  
But only say that he is fire  
Well, the fire will go out

*Chorus:*

We fear for you, we fear for you  
Some terrible fate is ringing a bell  
But what that is we cannot tell  
Nor the false note from the true

You walk a lonely road  
The end is nowhere in sight  
Daytime or night time  
What is the right time

To decipher the code  
Of love's deepest flame  
Of love's living name

Which nothing can shame

Shelley:

Enough!

I will away

Night time and daytime

Are both the right time

For the departure I'll make

4

Leghorn 8 July 1822

Shelley:

Good winds are blowing

I will away

Nothing will stay

I will away

Water is waiting

My boat will go sailing

Good winds are blowing away

I will away

Away

Why should I remain

The good shore is calling to me

I am free to answer or refuse

I do as I choose

And I choose away

The good shore will see me

The winds they will free me

I will away

Away

Across the lake

Across the void

What is the abyss?

This is the abyss I'll cross

Nothing is lost

All has been gained

I've broken all chains

My sails they are strained

There is no need for further explanation

All has been said

I leave all explanations to the dead

For I will be away

It is day

Oh mothering water I come

With all of my passions afire  
Where clouds pent up thunder  
My life force would plunder  
But I have nothing to fear

Oh mothering water I'm yours  
This is my final war  
And now what you choose  
I cannot refuse  
I'm reaching the second shore

I cannot refuse  
The life which you choose  
As my epitaph and pyre