

Ode to Superstition

By Dr Nathan Drake

Quid iste fert tumultus? Aut quid omnium
Vultus in unum me truces?—Horatius

Saw ye that dreadful shape? heard ye the scream
That shook my trembling soul?
E'en now, e'en now, where you red lightnings gleam
Wan forms of terror scowl—
I know thee, Superstition, fiend whose breath
Poisons the passing hours,
Pales the young cheek, and o'er the bed of death
The gloom of horror pours;
Of ghastly Fear, and darkest Midnight born,
Far in a blasted dale,
Mid Laplands woods, and noisome wastes forlorn,
Where lurid hags the moon's pale orbit hail:
There, in some vast, some wild and cavern'd cell,
Where flits the dim blue flame,
They drink warm blood, and act the deed of hell,
The "deed without a name."
With hollow shriek and boding cry,
Round the wither'd witches hie,
On their uncouth features dire,
Gleams the pale and livid fire;
The charm begins, and now arise
Shadows foul, and piercing cries,
Storm and tempest loud assail,
Beating wind and rattling hail;
Thus, within th' infernal wood,
Dance they round the bubbling blood,
Till sudden from the wond'ring eye,
Upborne on harpy wing they fly,
Where, on the rude inhospitable wild,
Fir'd by the light'ning's arrowy stroke,
Oft at the balmy close of evening mild,
They're seen to hurry round the blasted oak:
Then rise strange spectres to the pilgrim's views,
With horrid lifeless stare,
And gliding float upon the noxious dew,
And howling rend the air.
Oft near yon leaf-clad solitary fanc,
Whilst morn yet clasps the night,

Some ghost is heard to sound his clanking chain,
Beheld mid moon-beam pale and dead to sight.
Nor less unfrequent the lone trav'ler hears
The sullen-sounding bell,
And the dim-lighted tow'r awakes to fear
Of haunted mansion, brake, or darkling dell.
Haste thee, Superstition fly!
Perish this thy sorcery!
Why in these gorgon terrors clad,
But to affright, afflict the bad,
'Tis thee, O Goddess! thee I hail,
Of Hesper born, and Cynthia pale,
That wont the same rude name to bear,
Yet gentle all and void of fear;
O come, in Fancy's garb array'd,
In all her lovely forms display'd,
And o'er the poet's melting soul,
Bid the warm tide of rapture roll,
To dying music, warbling gales,
Mid moon-light scenes, and woody vales,
Where Elves, and Fays, and Sprites disport,
And nightly keep their festive court;
There, mid the pearly flood of light,
In tincts cerulean richly dight,
Light-sporting o'er the trembling green,
Glance they quick thro' the magic scene,
And from the sparkling moss receive,
Shed by the fragrant hand of Eve,
The silver dew, of matchless pow'r,
To guard from harm, at midnight hour,
The lonely wight, who lost, from far,
Views not one friendly guiding star,
Or one kind lowly cottage door,
To point his track across the moor;
Whilst the storm howling, prompts his mind
Dark Demons ride the northern wind,
And, plaining, mourn their cruel doom,
On tempest hurl'd, and wint'ry gloom:
Oft too, along the vales at eve,
Shall Sprites the songs of gladness weave,
With many a sweet and varied flight,
Soft warbling hymn the setting light,
Heard far th' echoing hills among,
Whilst chaunting wild their heav'nly song,
Till lost in ether dies away,
The last, long, faint and murm'ring lay;

These on the lonely Bard attend,
With him the mountain's side ascend,
Or in the valley's lowly plain,
To Rapture breathe the melting strain;
These lift his soul beyond her clime,
To daring flights of thought sublime,
Where, warm'd by Fancy's brightest fire,
He boldly sweeps the sounding lyre:
Come then, with wild flow'rs, come array'd,
O Superstition, magic maid!
And welcome then, suggesting pow'r!
At evening close, or midnight hour.¹

¹ The two species of gothic superstition, the gloomy and the sportive, are, in this Ode, represented as the offspring of different parents; the former being produced by Fear and Midnight, the latter by Hesper and the Moon. The idea is founded on a commonly received opinion, among the ancient mythologists, that there were two Cupids, one amiable and tender, the son of Jupiter and Venus, the other debauched and revengeful, the son of Nox and Erebus. Eros and Anteros, notwithstanding the derivation of the latter name, ἀὐτέ ἀνὸ were both gods of mutual love.