William Hamilton Reid, â??The Panic; or a Meditation supposed to be written upon the Discovery of the Plagueâ?•

Description

WILLIAM HAMILTON REID

â??The Panic; or a Meditation supposed to be written upon the Discovery of the Plagueâ?•

When the dire disease
Had on the first pale victim set its seal,
â??Twas horrid! Mute, aghast, his neighbours stood.â??
The symptoms sure, the death-struck wretch they shun:
Precaution vain! like lightning flew his fate,
And guilt attractive scourâ??d each dark recess
Where vice couchâ??d low, meanly submissive grown
To sad suspension now on all imposâ??d.
Not evâ??n the court the harsh alarm evades:
Spurning the guards, the messenger abrupt
Bursts on the throne: Nor Majesty itself,
Nor sycophants in courtly arts refinâ??d,
Such as who erst the Danish monarch urgâ??d
To curb the waves, could sooth the grating sound,
Or into silence bribe the dauntless truthâ??
Quite the reverse! their flight announcâ??d their fears:
Whilst on the crowd by despâ??rate power restrainâ??d
â??Grim Death grinnâ??d horrible:â?• flushâ??d with the hope
Of mortal festival.â?? â??Tis now Despair
And Desolation stalk the once-throneâ??d streets.
Hence Poverty, and all its squalid brood,
Work general ruin, till hecatombs
Of victims gasp, and scarce a parting sigh
Surviving wretches trust the treacherous air.
Meanwhile habitual Misery verges on
To damn soft Pityâ??s source: nor juvenile Love,
Nor thâ?? Amor Patriae, save Friendship none
(That gem celestial) braves the sullen power,
Or looks beyond the present gloomy bound;
For others, midst these chilling scenes of woe
Callous, distress the dying and the dead,
And, vainly hoping to outlive the storm,
Consign their treasures to the groaning earth.
Yet say, my Muse; can all the forms of Death,

That like fierce torrents sweep this mortal stage,â??
Can famine, war, or pestilence, compare
With keen reflection, edgâ??d with conscious guilt,
And time misspent, and suffering goodness scornâ??d,
And dark futurity? No! This alone
Close viewâ??d, can freeze the boiling blood of lust,
And in a moment damp an ageâ??s joy.â??
Then let us hence contingences improve
By foresight prudent, and self-love refine:â??
So shall true dignity adorn each brow,
Firm-footed peace with calm unruffled hours,
And mental freedom with immortal youth,
Renew the soul.â??Then, saturated high
With beauty inexpressive, each great mind,
In faint resemblance of all-bounteous heaven,
Shall seize officious each occurring hour
To spread the joy, and raise a â??groveling world.â?•

NOTES:

Title *Plague* The bubonic plague destroyed much of Europe in the Middle Ages.

13 *the Danish monarch* An allusion to Valdemar IV Atterdag. The title Atterdag roughly translates to â??New Day,â?• a title bestowed because of his restoration of wealth to Denmark during his reign.

18 *â??Grim Death grinnâ??d horrible:â?•* Reid is drawing from Book II of Miltonâ??s *Paradise Lost.* He is synthesizing two passages, â??Grim Death, my son and foeâ?• (l. 804) and â??Death/Grinnâ??d horrible a ghastly smileâ?• (ll. 845-46), perhaps for alliterative effect.

22 *hetacombs* In ancient times, a reference to public sacrifice of 100 oxen for a religious ceremony. By the eighteenth-century, however, it meant a great number of people dying (*OED*).

27 *Amors Patriae* Latin for love of oneâ??s country (*OED*).

34 *Muse* In poetry, the image of the Muse was often invoked as someone who aids the poet in writing.

42 *contingences* Variant spelling of the word contingencies.

51 *â??groveling worldâ?•* Quotation not traced.

Source: *The Gentlemanâ??s Magazine*, vol. 59 Pt. 2 (July 1789), pp. 650-651.

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