



## Inaudible Symphony: Harmony in *Queen Mab*

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### Abstract

Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Queen Mab* is commonly acknowledged as a philosophical poem, which indicates some of Shelley's philosophical thoughts. Shelley's versification in this poem reflects his concern towards the theory of harmony. Harmony originated from music, referring to the proper ratios and order of numbers. And harmony here in this poem, bares some similarities with the mean or intermediate state in China's culture, which encourages people to try to find a proper place between the two extremes instead of going either of them. By using many techniques such as symbolizing, allegory, etc., he shows his desire for harmony in three folds, harmony between man and god, between man and Nature, and between man and man. Shelley thinks that poets are the one who should shoulder the duty of awaking common people. With virtues the ideal of a harmonious world would be achieved.

**Key words:** Shelley; *Queen Mab*; Harmony; Virtues

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### INTRODUCTION

*Queen Mab* is the first long poem written by Percy Bysshe Shelley when he was 18 years old. As this is a poem

written in his early age, among Shelley's innumerable works, it is of no much importance. It is commonly acknowledged as a philosophical poem, besides that, there is little criticism on it. Though in *Queen Mab* we cannot see the same exquisite writing skills shown in works as *To the West Wind* and his mature language using skills, we see what a young Shelley is. At the age of 18, an age of passion, doubt, confusion, as well as hope, Shelley is of no exception. Shelley is

conscious of surpassing powers of reason and imagination, it is not strange that he should, even while so young, have believed that his written thoughts would tend to disseminate opinions which he believed conducive to the happiness of the human race. (Bysshe, 1901, p.931)

As we know, Shelley does not believe in religion, which he considers as a tool used by some people for their own interest. At the same time, he is a man of great responsibility. He always worries about human beings' current situation and their future, and he did not stop making contemplation about humankind's existence. As Mary Shelley said in her *Note on Queen Mab*, "the world's brightest gauds and its most solid advantages were of no worth in his eyes, when compared to the cause of what he considered truth, and the good of his fellow-creatures."

The word "harmony" comes from music, referring to the proper ratios and order of numbers<sup>1</sup>. And the theory of harmony was first appeared in Pythagorean cosmology. It is believed in the Pythagorean doctrine that the universe comprises of two worlds: the intelligible world and the physical world. In Plato's *Timaeus*, which is considered as the most important footnote to Pythagorean cosmology, the two worlds above are seemed as the world of being and the world of change. A famous distinction between

<sup>1</sup> The understanding of harmony is based on Prof. Liu Lihui's understanding in his book *Harmony of Life: A Study of the Underlying Argument in Spencer's The Faerie Queen*.

the two worlds was stated in Timaeus' speech (Timaeus & Critias, pp.40-42, qtd. Liu, 2004, p.1): The intelligible world is "apprehensible by intelligence with the aid of reasoning" and remains "eternally the same," while, the physical world is "never fully real" and is "visible, tangible, and corporeal and therefore perceptible by the senses." It can be concluded that the nature of the intelligible world is harmony, and that of the physical world is change, but the physical world should reflect the harmony of the intelligible world. Plato's *Timaeus* gives its explanation of the cosmos on the mathematical relationships. As "the physical world comes out of the intelligible world, the incarnation of divine harmony finds full expressions in the concrete numbers in the physical world" (Liu, 2004, p.2). It is held that the proper and pleasing relationships between or among numbers produce harmony. This is also true in music. Why is music beautiful? It is because that it is a creation out of harmonious relationships among the notes, which are placed in order, hierarchy and unity. The Pythagorean tradition treats the universe as a piece of harmonious music. "The best reification of the pleasing relationships in numbers is music." (Ibid., p.3) And the best music in the universe is the music of the spheres, also the celestial music. The Pythagorean doctrine holds that each sphere produces a note during its process of moving around the earth, and the different notes made by all the celestial bodies together produce the most harmonious music, that is the celestial music.

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## 1. UNITY OF BODY AND SOUL

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As is known to all, Percy Bysshe Shelley does not believe in religion. He was driven away from Oxford University for spreading his *Necessity of Atheism*, and his hatred toward religion can easily be seen in his works. "There is no God!" he always cried out. In his eyes, religion has become the most powerful tool some people use to rule and suppress other people, so as to achieve their own interest. In this poem, Shelley expressed his opinion toward Christianity thoroughly through God's own confession:

From an eternity of idleness  
I, God, awoke; in seven days' toil made earth  
From nothing; rested, and created man:  
I placed him in a Paradise and there  
Planted the tree of evil, so that he  
Might eat and perish, and my soul procure  
Wherewith to sate its malice, and to turn,  
Even like a heartless conqueror of the earth,  
All misery to my fame. (Shelley, VII 106-114)

But Shelley thinks that all sorts of spirits do exist, such as the spirit of Ianthe, the spirit of Nature and Queen Mab. The adventure Ianthe's soul and Queen Mab have embodies the harmonious relationships between man and god. At the beginning, the whole world is in peace. Ianthe, a beautiful girl is in sound sleep. Queen Mab (Fairy)

drives her incomparable chariot and comes to invite Ianthe's soul (Spirit) to join her. Her chariot can carry her through spatial and temporal dimensions. Fairy wakes up Ianthe's soul. Lines 130-138 in part I give a careful description about Ianthe's soul.

Sudden arose  
Ianthe's Soul; it stood  
All beautiful in naked purity,  
The perfect semblance of its bodily frame.  
Instinct with inexpressible beauty and grace,  
Each stain of earthliness  
Had passed away, it reasoned  
Its native dignity, and stood  
Immortal amid ruin.

Here human body symbolizes the unity of man and god, earthliness and holiness, harmony between man and god. But with the ascending of her soul, her spirit gets rid of the chains of earthliness. It seems that the harmony is broken. But after finishing the journey, Ianthe's soul comes back, that is another beginning of harmony, a world of more harmonious relationships between man and the universe. Lines 166-187 state the tasks Queen Mab. To some degree, Shelley identifies himself with Queen Mab, so her tasks are considered by Shelley to be poets' tasks. Ianthe's soul gets on the chariot, and the journey sets out. The chariot keeps ascending and eventually gets out of the earth and runs in the space. Fairy and Spirit watch over the earth in the distance. The whole human history is displayed in front of them, the past, the present and the future. Those shining palaces in the past are now in ruins; where thick forest extended are now desert. But under the light of virtue, they see hope in the future. They move around the earth, seeing things happening everywhere, in some places, they see beautiful scenery as if they were in heaven; in other places, they cannot see anything but smoke, fire and hear people's cry, shout and howl as though they were in hell. At the end of the journey, Ianthe's soul comes back to her body, and then she wakes up.

During their adventure, a kind of special music is always heard. This is not the usual music played with musical instruments, but music of spheres. As said before, Pythagorean doctrine believes that every celestial body makes a note while moving around the earth, and all the notes made by all the spheres compose the most harmonious music ever through the proper ratios and order of numbers. Celestial music is the ultimate embodiment of the idea of harmony. And the back tone of harmony is played from the very beginning to the very end.

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## 2. HARMONY BETWEEN MAN AND NATURE

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The harmonious relationship between man and Nature is a topic with quite a long history. The Garden of

Eden is possibly one of the most well-known examples demonstrating harmony in the western world. Before creating the world, everything in harmony is in God's concept, which is the intelligible world. Then He (God) uses six days to create the Paradise. (Genesis 1) God actualizes the harmony in the intelligible world through creating all the things with accordance to order (different things in different days), hierarchy (Adam in charge of all the things in the Garden of Eden) and unity. Ovid holds the view that harmony is the main tone in the Golden Age, the first millennium of the imagined human history. Ovid described what the harmonious scene is like in *Metamorphoses* (33), it is a world where "there is no vice, no law and war but peace, for all living creatures have bounteous virtues, trusting one another." (qtd. Liu, 2004, p.6)

From the first day the universe was born, humankind and Nature have interdependent relationship. But in the long river of human history, our human beings have been neglecting the importance of Nature as a result of overemphasizing the existence of humankind for quite a long time. The development of humankind itself has always been the center of people's attention. But since the industrial civilization, people have been pursuing economical development at the cost of polluting the natural environment. Finally Nature cannot bear it any longer, so it begins to take revenge. In the front of natural disasters, people commence to reflect over what they have done to the natural environment. And the relationship between man and Nature becomes the choice of numerous writers' writing materials. Henry David Thoreau discovered as early as in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the damages industrial civilization has brought to the natural ecology. He compares that condition to pick the brightest star in the fancy dark sky, deleting the most touching phrases from a graceful poetical work, and taking out the most sounding chapter from a solemn symphony. (Ibid.).

As said in the article "Henry Thoreau, the Poet-Naturalist", Thoreau's great aim is to recommend Nature to Man—to prove her worthy of the recommendation, and so induce and enhance the idea of individuality, which, in mist of all her masses and mighty generalities, she everywhere faithfully celebrates. And to Emerson, nature is the law, the final word and the supreme court. Emerson's basic teaching is that the fundamental context of our lives is nature (Richardson, 1999). In this poem, the poet spares no effort in praising Nature. When referring to the natural world, he uses beautiful and sounding words and phrases, making the readers feel peaceful and calm as if they were placed in a harmonious world.

Look on yonder earth:  
The golden harvests spring; the unfailing sun  
Sheds light and life; the fruits, the flowers, the  
trees,  
Arise in due succession; all things speak  
Peace, harmony, and love. The universe,

In Nature's silent eloquence, declares  
That all fulfill the works of love and joy, –  
All but the outcast, Man. (IV 192-199)

Between these lines, we can read the poet's great appreciation of Nature. The crops in the field, the bright sun, the fruits, the flowers, the trees, all things speak the same language, which is the language of peace, harmony and love. Shelley suggests that Nature is the mother of the world (VI 197-203), who breeds the whole world and has the "unvarying harmony" (VI 203). Truly, Nature is humankind's mother, and we human beings get everything we need from her such as food, clothes, water and air. Nature can assure our existence. She has the incomparable "re-creating hand" (V 56). She is endowed with great power while at the same time Man is so weak, fragile and passive compared to Nature. "Thy (Nature's) throne of power unappealable" (III 218), "Thou (Nature) art the judge beneath whose nod / Man's brief and frail authority / Is powerless as the wind / That passed idly by." (III 220-222) But it's human's responsibility that the peace between Man and Nature is broken. As the poet says "He (Man) fabricates the sword which stabs his peace" (III 200), humankind eats the poisonous fruit he himself planted. In his note on Lines 211, 212 in Part VIII, Shelley holds that "the depravity of the physical and moral nature of man originated in his unnatural habits of life." In lines 4-10 in part III, Nature gives her warning to humankind. Human beings have to learn from the lessons they have had, and take action immediately to mend the broken harmony. Since Man is closely connected to Nature, "in one human brain causes the faintest thought, becomes a link in the great chain of Nature." (II 106-108) Only when Nature and Man work together in harmony can humankind realize the great work (creating an ideal society): "When man, with changeless Nature coalescing, will undertake regeneration's work" (V 42-43). In this poem, Queen Mab and Ianthe's soul see two scenes which best interpret "harmony between Man and Nature" with action rather than words. They see "a babe before his mother's door, sharing his morning's meal with the green and golden basilisk that comes to lick his feet". The little babe shares his breakfast with the bird, which shows interdependent relationships between Man and Nature. They also see the "winged habitants" flee from the form of man, but "gather round, and prune their sunny feathers on the hands which little children stretch in friendly sport". They read harmony between children and Nature, not Man and Nature. What is the reason? This will be talked about in part 4.

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### 3. HARMONY AMONG MEN

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What should be the relationships between man and man be like? For thousands of years, people have been discussing about the question. In the Bible, it is stated that "And hath

made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation” (*Holy Bible*, Acts 17, p.26). And in the *Declaration of Independence*, “all men are created equal”. It seems that man and man should live in harmony. But the fact is on the contrary. From the first day men are driven out of the Garden of Eden, the word “war” has been in the dictionary of the whole human history, and it appears for innumerable times. People have always wanted to gain equal position. But the equality in its true sense has never been achieved. Even in Plato’s *The Republic*, Plato divides all the people in the ideal state into three classes: rulers, auxiliaries, commoners. He thinks that if every person works in his position in accordance to his ability, then a harmonious community. But that is only an imagination, a wonderful wish. The Civil War cannot be said to have ended up the basic problem of inharmonious relationship between man and man, but it has actually improved the condition of two poles pointing to each other. In *The Gettysburg Address*, President Lincoln addressed to the whole world that “this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom – and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.” From his statement, it is easily concluded that the government as well as the ruler should serve the people instead of oppressing them.

In this poem, although the poet doesn’t clearly show his opinion that man and man should exist in the same world in harmony, through his description of the cruel reign of the rulers and the cruelty of wars, we see his despising of these factors which break the balance among human beings. “These are the hired bravos who defend the tyrant’s throne.” (IV 178-179) Shelley gives his opinion in his notes on *Queen Mab*, “to employ murder as a means of justice is an idea which a man of an enlightened mind will not dwell upon with pleasure.” Several scenes depicting the palaces appear on the journey of *Queen Mab* and *Ianthe’s* soul. But they are not glamorous ones shining with golden light, but ashes or ruins. This clearly shows the poet’s wish to overthrow the dictatorship and cruel ruling. The ruler, the King, has ugly appearance: big and fat head, big belly, wearing a gilded chain... Lines 30-44 in Part III gives a careful description about the unbearable dictator’s appearance. Also, the reason why Shelley doesn’t believe in religion is that religion has become the tool for some people to oppress others and maintain their own interest at the cost of others’ benefit: “The name of God has fenced about all crime with holiness, himself the creature of His worshippers” (VII 26-28).

About the wars, Shelley writes very well, especially in Part IV. It is a trilogy consisting of three parts. The tones of the three parts are peace, noise, another kind of peace. Before the war breaks out (from Line 1 to Line 33), the whole world is in peace, “Where Silence disturbed might watch alone, so cold, so bright, so still.” (18-19) The sun,

the waters and cloud in peace, but a peace with a color of darkness. Suddenly the peace is broken. The world is filled with red smoke, the beams of falling bombs, roars, the sounds of bursting bombs, people’s shrieks, groans and shouts. The whole world in the war is like a hell on the earth.

Ah! whence you glare  
That fires the arch of Heaven? – that dark red  
smoke  
Blotting the silver moon? The stars are quenched  
In darkness, and the pure and spangling snow  
Gleams faintly through the gloom that gathers  
round!

... ..  
Frequent and frightful of the bursting bomb;  
The falling beams, the shriek, the groan, the shout,  
The ceaseless clangour, and the rush of men  
Inebriate with rage: —loud, and more loud (pp.33-45)

Here some men are hunters, others are preys. The cruelty of wars cut down the connection of man and man. After the war, the world comes back to peace again. But this is a kind of peace which can suffocate all the living things, lifeless. Dead bodies lie here and there, blood merges into earth, turning the earth into the red sea. The battlefield is filled with the terrifying smell of Death. This is not supposed to be what it should be. Man and man should live happily together in this world.

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#### 4. TOWARD AN IDEAL STATE

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In Shelley’s heart, he has the same imagination of an ideal state as Plato has had before. But the question is how to realize that ideal? Plato and Aristotle “credited harmony to virtues” (Liu, 2004, p.5) In *The Republic*, in order to achieve the ideal state, people have to have the four virtues of the human soul possess. The four virtues described by Plato are prudence, courage, temperance, and justice. Prudence, also known as wisdom, is found in the rulers. The second virtue is courage, which is found in the military section of the community. Courage is not the virtue of standing in front of a tank and saying it will not hurt me, that is stupidity. Courage is the ability to apply what you have been taught: What is to be feared and what is not to be feared. Ability to retain under all circumstances a true and lawful notion about what is feared and what is not to be feared is what I’m calling courage (430b). The next virtue temperance, also known as self-discipline, is found in the workers of Plato’s community. It is seen that each position has its own importance in the community, and for the community to function correctly each one must agree on their position in life. Plato relates, ... in this community... the rulers and their subjects agree on who the rulers should be (431e).

Temperance is also used to control the desire to go against one's free-will. Plato says, to be self-disciplined is somehow to order and control the pleasures and desires (430e). The last virtue to be discussed is Justice otherwise known as morality. Justice is found when all of the three work together, and no crimes are committed. If one breaks pattern then the community becomes immoral, or if one becomes out of place then it is immoral. ...when each of the three classes... perform its own function and does its own job in the community, then this is morality... (434c).

As a matter of fact, Shelley also thinks that virtues people can finally achieve the ideal state of harmony.

O human Spirit! Spur thee to the goal  
Where virtue fixes universal peace,  
And midst the ebb and flow of human things,  
Show somewhat stable, somewhat certain still,  
A lighthouse o'er the wild of dreary waves.

At the time of the publication of *Queen Mab*, the whole world is like a sailor cast away from the crew of the ship, floating on the surface of the sea, lost in direction. Virtues are like a lighthouse bringing brightness to the sailor. "sacred sympathies of soul and sense" are the way leading to the final truth. As the four virtues in *The Republic*, in *Queen Mab*, Shelley suggests that with "courage of soul, that dreaded not a name, elevated will, that journeyed on through life's phantasmal scene in fearlessness, with virtue, love and pleasure" people work hand in hand, then humankind will finally reach that goal. And the answer to the question at the end of Part 2 of this paper is that children have the virtues needed, which the grown ups have not, "the spontaneous song of the child is an expression of delight in the harmony (produced by harmony)" (Richter, 1998, p.337). It is worth being noticed that this poem consists of nine parts. Number nine symbolizes virtue in the western culture (Hu, 2001, p.186), the full form of full three. Nine is also the number of the souls of people with virtues. So we can conclude that Shelley treats virtues as the only way to harmony.

And who should be the one chosen to shoulder the task of telling the importance of virtues in realizing an ideal state? Shelley's answer is the poet. Compared to Plato's looking down upon poets who are driven out of his republic state, Shelley in his poem refute Plato's opinion by emphasizing poets' effect on waking people's awareness of building harmonious relationships with the whole universe. Whitehead states that "Shelley and Wordsworth proved with a lot of emphasis that Nature cannot be separated from its aesthetics value." (p.85) He also thinks that the unity of man and Nature is reserved for the true poets and poems in larger sense. That is to say that the artistic spirit included in poetical works is a symbol of the harmonious coexistence of man and Nature.

As a matter of fact, Shelley identifies himself with Queen Mab who can rationally see people's past, the present and foresee the future, as well as analyzing the reason for the dangers concerning people's existence, giving her warning and opinions about making some changes. So the work *Queen Mab* is devoted to be also what poets have to do. In Shelley's eye, "poetry, in any age removed from the primitive source of language, recaptures for humanity, by metaphor and harmony" (Richter, 1998, p.338). Poetry is the best form bearing harmony. Therefore, it is certainly the poets who can best transmit the message of harmony to common people.

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## CONCLUSION

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Percy Bysshe Shelley is a remarkable poet in the history of world poetry. He is remembered as a romantic poet at the same height of Wordsworth, Keats and Byron. But as a poem wrote in his early life, *Queen Mab* has not attracted much attention of the world. Maybe under the influence of some former scholars, and holding the society in his mind, Shelley expresses his opinion about the social situation at that time, and his desire for an ideal state. He shows his definition of harmony in three folds, harmony between man and god, between man and Nature, and between man and man. The dialogue between Queen Mab and Ianthe's soul and their journeying together as well as the celestial music filling the space shows the harmony between man and god. Secondly, the poet's generous praising toward Nature suggests that he longs to get close to the natural world. And horrible changes human beings have brought to Nature warn us that if we keep ignoring the damages we have done to the natural world, what is coming around is a horrible future. The cruelty of war reminds people of the importance of peace and the harmony between man and man. Harmony the poet pursues is has some resemblance with China's mean or intermediate state. The best way is never go extreme but finds a proper position between the two extremes. Shelley thinks that poets are the one who should shoulder the duty of awaking common people. With virtues the ideal of a harmonious world would be reached.

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