A Feast in Time of Plague

Translated by James E. Falen

An excerpt from Wilson’s tragedy
The City of the Plague.

A street. A table laid for a feast.
Several men and women celebrants.

A YOUNG MAN:

Most honored Chairman! I would speak
Of one whose memory we revere,
A man whose jests and comic tales,
Whose pointed wit and observations,
So caustic with their mocking air,
Enlivened many past occasions
And drove away the gloom with which
Our guest, the Plague, has now infected
So many of our brightest minds.

But two days since we hailed with mirth
Those tales of his, and so tonight,
Amid our feast, let’s not forget
Our Jackson now. Here stands his chair,
The empty seat as if awaiting
That merry man—but now he’s gone
To lie beneath the chilly earth...
Although his vivid voice remains,
Unsilenced yet within the grave;
But we are many still alive
And have tonight no cause to grieve.
So I propose for Jackson’s sake
A ringing toast and shouts of cheer,
As if he lived.
MASTER OF REVELS:

He was the first
To leave our band. And so let’s drink
A silent toast.

YOUNG MAN:

So be it then.

(All drink in silence.)

MASTER OF REVELS:

Your voice, dear Mary, can evoke
The dark rich sounds of native song;
So sing us, Mary, something sad,
That we may then more madly still
To mirth return, like one who wakes
From some dark dream to earth again.

MARY (sings):

Long ago our land was blessed:
Peaceful, rich, and gay;
People then on days of rest
Filled the church to pray;
Children’s voices full of cheer
Through the schoolyard rang,
In the fields both far and near
Scythe and sickle sang.

Now the church deserted stands;
School is locked and dark;
Overgrown are all our lands;
Empty groves are stark;
Now the village, bare as bone,
Seems an empty shell—
All is still—the graves alone
Thrive and toll the bell.

Endless carts of dead appear;
Now the living cry,
Calling down in mortal fear
Mercy from on high.
Endless corpses all demand
Plots of hallowed ground,
Graves like frightened cattle stand
Crowded close all round.

If my youth is doomed to go
Early into night,—
Edmund, whom I treasure so,
Edmund, my delight,
Don’t approach your Jenny’s bier,
Please, I beg, be kind,
Do not kiss these lips once dear,
Follow far behind.

Leave the village then, I pray,
Find some place of peace,
Dull your pain and go away,
Bring your soul release.
When the plague has passed, my love,
Pay my dust its due;
Even, Edmund, up above,
Jenny will be true.

MASTER OF REVELS:

We thank you, Mary, pensive lass,
We thank you for your mournful air.
In former days some plague like ours
Attacked your lovely hills and vales,
And woeful moans back then arose
Above your streams and purling brooks,
Which now once more in joy and peace
Meander through your native realm;
And now that dreadful year that took
So many brave and noble souls
Has only left the barest trace
In this your simple, rustic song,
So touching and so sad... There’s nought
Could move us more at this our feast
Than sounds remembered by the heart.
MARY:

If only I had never learned
To sing such songs so far from home!
My parents loved their Mary's voice,
And even now I seem to hear
Myself in song outside our door.
My voice was sweeter then and sang
In tones more pure and true.

LOUIZA:

Such songs
Are out of fashion now. And yet,
There still are simple souls who pine
At women's tears... and deem them real.
Our Mary thinks a tearful eye
Invincible,—but if she thought
Her laughter so, then be assured,
She'd laugh and laugh. But Walsingham
Has praised these shrieking northern belles,
And so she moans. Oh how I loathe
These Scottish heads of flaxen hair!

MASTER OF REVELS:

Be still. I hear the wagon wheels.

(A cart goes by, laden with corpses
and driven by a black man.)

MASTER OF REVELS:

Louisa swoons! To hear her talk,
You'd think her heart was like a man's.
The cruel prove weaker than the soft,
And dread can strike the fiercest soul.
Some water, Mary... she'll come round.

MARY:

Come, sister of my shame and woe,
Lean back on me.

© 2013. All rights reserved. This document may not be reproduced or distributed without consent of its author.
LOUISA (regaining consciousness):

    I thought I saw
    Some dreadful thing—all black... white-eyed...
    That called me to its cart... and there
    The dead lay deep... and babbled words...
    Some strange and unfamiliar tongue...
    But tell me, did I only dream?
    Or did that cart go by?

YOUNG MAN:

    Louisa!
    Lift up your heart. Although our street
    Is refuge safe enough from death,
    A place for feasts, where grief is banned,
    That somber cart, as you well know,
    Has right to travel where it will,
    And let it pass we must. But now,
    Good Walsingham, let's cancel strife
    And all these women's fainting spells.
    Come, sing a rash and lively song,
    No tune composed of Scottish grief—
    But reckless, bacchanalian song,
    One fit for friends and flaming cups!

MASTER OF REVELS:

    I know no songs like this. I'll sing
    A hymn to plagues. I wrote the thing
    Last night when we had quit the feast.
    A strange, compulsive need for rhyme,
    Quite new to me, then gripped my soul.
    My throaty voice well suits the song...

VOICES FROM THE CROWD:

    A hymn to plagues! Let's hear it then!
    A hymn to plagues! Bravo! Well done!

MASTER OF REVELS (sings):

    When mighty Winter from the north,
    Like warrior chieftain, marches forth
To lead herself her ragged host
Of frosts and snows against the land,
Our glasses ring in hearty toast
And crackling chimneys warm our band.

The Plague herself, that fearsome Queen,
Has now arrived upon the scene
To reap corruption’s rich reward;
All day and night with dreadful spade
She taps the battened windowboard.
But where to turn? Where summon aid?

As we from prankster Winter hide,
We'll greet the Plague locked up inside;
We'll light the flame and pour the wine,
We'll drown our thoughts and gaily jest,
And as we dance and as we dine,
We'll praise the reign of Empress Pest.

There’s rapture on the battleground,
And where the black abyss is found,
And on the raging ocean main,
Amid the stormy waves of death,
And in the desert hurricane,
And in the Plague’s pernicious breath.

For all that threatens to destroy
Conceals a strange and savage joy—
Perhaps for mortal man a glow
That promises eternal life;
And happy he who comes to know
This rapture found in storm and strife.

So hail to you, repellent Pest!
You strike no fear within our breast;
We are not crushed by your design;
So fill the foaming glasses high,
We’ll sip the rosy maiden wine
And kiss the lips where plague may lie!

(An aged priest appears.)
PRIEST:

This godless feast! You godless men!
With revels and with wanton songs
You mock the dark and gruesome hush
Sent forth by death across the land!
At dreadful funeral rites I pray
Before the pale and weeping crowd,
While your repulsive sinful play
Disturbs the graveyard’s silent peace
And shakes the earth where dead men sleep.
Had not old men’s and women’s prayers
Redeemed our common pit of death,
I might have thought that fiends had come
To torture sinners’ godless souls
And drag them, cackling, off to hell.

SEVERAL VOICES:

He speaks of hell as one who knows.
Be gone, old man, you’ve lost your way.

PRIEST:

I charge you by the sacred blood
Of Him who suffered for our sins
To halt this monstrous feast, if still
You hope to meet by Heaven’s grace
The souls of those you loved and lost.
Disperse, I say, and get you home!

MASTER OF REVELS:

Our homes are sad—youth treasures mirth.

PRIEST:

Can that be you, good Walsingham?
Who on your knees but three weeks since
Embraced your mother’s corpse and sobbed?
Who howled and beat upon her grave?
Or think you that she doesn’t weep
Great bitter tears in heaven now,
To see her son at such a feast,
This feast of vice—to hear your voice
In shameless song—all this amid
Our holy prayers and anguished sighs?
Come with me now!

MASTER OF REVELS:

Why come you here
To cause me pain? I cannot leave
To take your path: what holds me here
Is foul despair and memories dread,
Awareness of my lawless ways,
The horror of the deathly hush
That now prevails within my house,—
And yes, these fresh and frenzied revels,
The blessed poison of this cup,
And kisses sweet (forgive me, Lord)
From this depraved, but lovely wretch…
My mother’s shade will call me back
No more… too late… I hear your plea
And know you struggle for my soul…
Too late… Depart, old man, in peace;
But cursed be all who follow thee.

MANY VOICES:

Bravo! Well said! Our worthy chief!
You’ve heard the sermon. Leave us, priest!

PRIEST:

Mathilda’s blessed spirit calls!

MASTER OF REVELS (rising):

Oh, raise your pale, decrepit hand
And swear to God to leave unspoke
That name entombed forevermore!
Oh, could I from those deathless eyes
Conceal this scene! She thought me once
A proud and pure… a noble man,
And in my arms she savored joy...
Where am I now? My blessed light!
I see you… but my sinful soul
Can reach you there no more…
A WOMAN’S VOICE:

He’s mad—
He babbles of his buried wife.

PRIEST:

Come with me now. .

MASTER OF REVELS:

In Heaven’s name,
Good father, leave.

PRIEST:

God save your soul.
Farewell, my son.

(He leaves. The feast goes on.
The Master of Revels stays lost in thought.)

University of Tennessee