

John Leyden (1775-1811)

5 *The Mermaid*

On Jura's heath how sweetly swell
The murmurs of the mountain bee!
How softly mourns the writhed shell
Of Jura's shore, its parent sea!

But softer, floating o'er the deep, 5
The Mermaid's sweet sea-soothing lay,
That charm'd the dancing waves to sleep,
Before the bark of Colonsay.

Aloft the purple pennons wave,
As, parting gay from Crinan's shore, 10
From Morven's wars the seamen brave
Their gallant chieftain homeward bore.

In youth's gay bloom, the brave Macphail
Still blamed the lingering bark's delay;
For her he chid the flagging sail, 15
The lovely maid of Colonsay.

And "Raise," he cried, "the song of love,
The maiden sung with tearful smile,
When first o'er Jura's hills to rove,
We left afar the lonely isle! 20

"I saw the tear-drops on her cheek
Her eyes in dewy lustre shine,
And as she spoke, with pressure weak
Her hand she fondly clasped in mine.

"When on this ring of ruby red 25

Shall die,' she said, 'the crimson hew,
Know that thy favourite fair is dead,
Or proves to thee and love untrue.'”

Now, lightly poised, the rising oar
Disperses wide the foamy spray, 30
And, echoing far o'er Crinan's shore,
Resounds the song of Colonsay.

“Softly blow, thou western breeze,
Softly rustle through the sail,
Soothe to rest the furrowy seas, 35
Before my love, sweet western gale!

“Where the wave is tinged with red,
And the russet sea-leaves grow,
Mariners, with prudent dread,
Shun the shelving reefs below. 40

“As you pass through Jura's sound,
Bend your course by Scarba's shore,
Shun, O shun, the gulf profound,
Where Corrivrekin's surges roar!

“If, from that unbottom'd deep, 45
With wrinkled form and wreathed train,
O'er the verge of Scarba's steep,
The sea-snake heave his snowy mane,

“Unwarp, unwind his oozy coils,
Sea-green sisters of the main, 50
And, in the gulf, where ocean boils,
The unwieldy wallowing monster chain!

“Softly blow, thou western breeze,
Softly rustle through the sail,
Soothe to rest the furrowed seas, 55

Before my love, sweet western gale!"

Thus, all to soothe the Chieftain's woe,
Far from the maid he loved so dear,
The song arose, so soft and slow,
He seem'd her parting sigh to hear. 60

The lonely deck he paces o'er.
Impatient for the rising day,
And still, from Crinan's moonlight shore,
He turns his eyes to Colonsay.

The moonbeams crisp the curling surge, 65
That streaks with foam the ocean green;
While forward still the rowers urge
Their course, a female form was seen.

That sea-maid's form, of pearly light, 70
Was whiter than the downy spray,
And round her bosom, heaving bright,
Her glossy, yellow ringlets play.

Borne on a foamy-crested wave,
She reach'd amain the bounding prow,
Then, clasping fast the Chieftain brave, 75
She, plunging, sought the deep below.

Ah! long beside thy feigned bier,
The monks the prayers of death shall say,
And long, for thee, the fruitless tear
Shall weep the Maid of Colonsay! 80

But downwards, like a powerless corse,
The eddying waves the Chieftain bear;
He only heard the moaning hoarse
Of waters, murmuring in his ear.

The murmurs sink by slow degrees; 85
No more the surges round him rave;
Lull'd by the music of the seas,
He lies within a coral cave.

In dreamy mood reclines he long,
Nor dares his tranced eyes unclose, 90
Till, warbling wild, the sea-maid's song,
Far in the crystal cavern, rose;

Soft as that harp's unseen control,
In morning dreams which lovers hear,
Whose strains steal sweetly o'er the soul, 95
But never reach the waking ear.

As sunbeams through the tepid air,
When clouds dissolve the dews unseen,
Smile on the flowers, that bloom more fair,
And fields, that glow with livelier green — 100

So melting soft the music fell;
It seem'd to soothe the fluttering spray —
"Say, heard'st thou not these wild notes swell?" —
"Ah! 'tis the song of Colonsay."

Like one that from a fearful dream 105
Awakes, the morning light to view,
And joys to see the purple beam,
Yet fears to find the vision true, —

He heard that strain, so wildly sweet,
Which bade his torbid langour fly; 110
He fear'd some spell had bound his feet,
And hardly dared his limbs to try.

"This yellow sand, this sparry cave,
Shall bend thy soul to beauty's sway;

Canst thou the maiden of the wave
Compare to her of Colonsay?" 115

Roused by that voice, of silver sound,
From the paved floor he lightly sprung,
And, glancing wild his eyes around,
Where the fair nymph her tresses wrung, 120

No form he saw of mortal mould;
It shone like ocean's snowy foam;
Her ringlets waved in living gold,
Her mirror crystal, pearl her comb.

Her pearly comb the siren took, 125
And careless bound her tresses wild;
Still o'er the mirror stole her look,
As on the wondering youth she smiled.

Like music from the greenwood tree,
Again she raised the melting lay; 130
— "Fair warrior, wilt thou dwell with me,
And leave the Maid of Colonsay?"

"Fair is the crystal hall for me,
With rubies and with emeralds set,
And sweet the music of the sea 135
Shall sing, when we for love are met.

"How sweet to dance, with gliding feet,
Along the level tide so green,
Responsive to the cadence sweet,
That breathes along the moonlight scene! 140

"And soft the music of the main
Rings from the motley tortoise-shell,
While moonbeams, o'er the watery plain,
Seem trembling in its fitful swell.

“How sweet, when billows heave their head, 145
And shake their snowy crests on high,
Serene in Ocean’s sapphire-bed,
Beneath the tumbling surge, to lie;

“To trace, with tranquil step, the deep,
Where pearly drops of frozen dew 150
In concave shells, unconscious, sleep,
Or shine with lustre, silvery blue!

“Then shall the summer sun, from far,
Pour through the wave a softer ray,
While diamonds, in a bower of spar, 155
At eve shall shed a brighter day.

“Nor stormy wind, nor wintry gale,
That o’er the angry ocean sweep,
Shall e’er our coral groves assail,
Calm in the bosom of the deep. 160

“Through the green meads beneath the sea,
Enamour’d, we shall fondly stray —
Then, gentle warrior, dwell with me,
And leave the Maid of Colonsay!” —

“Though bright thy locks of glistening gold, 165
Fair maiden of the foamy main!
Thy life-blood is the water cold,
While mine beats high in every vein.

“If I, beneath thy sparry cave,
Should in thy snowy arms recline, 170
Inconstant as the restless wave,
My heart would grow as cold as thine.”

As cygnet down, proud swell’d her breast;

Her eye confest the pearly tear;
His hand she to her bosom press'd — 175
“Is there no heart for rapture here?”

“These limbs, sprung from the lucid sea,
Does no warm blood their currents fill,
No heart-pulse riot, wild and free,
To joy, to love’s delirious thrill?” — 180

“Though all the splendour of the sea
Around thy faultless beauty shine,
That heart, that riots wild and free,
Can hold no sympathy with mine.

“These sparkling eyes, so wild and gay, 185
They swim not in the light of love:
The beauteous Maid of Colonsay,
Her eyes are milder than the dove!

“Even now, within the lonely isle,
Her eyes are dim with tears for me; 190
And canst thou think that siren smile
Can lure my soul to dwell with thee?”

An oozy film her limbs o’erspread;
Unfolds in length her scaly train:
She toss’d, in proud disdain, her head, 195
And lash’d, with webbed fin, the main.

“Dwell here, alone!” the mermaid cried,
“And view far off the sea-nymphs play;
Thy prison-wall, the azure tide,
Shall bar thy steps from Colonsay. 200

“Whene’er, like Ocean’s scaly brood,
I cleave, with rapid fin, the wave,
Far from the daughter of the flood,

Conceal thee in this coral cave.

“I feel my former soul return; 205
It kindles at thy cold disdain:
And has a mortal dared to spurn
A daughter of the foamy main!” —

She fled, — around the crystal cave
The rolling waves resume their road, 210
On the broad portal idly rave,
But enter not the nymph’s abode.

And many a weary night went by,
As in the lonely cave he lay;
And many a sun roll’d through the sky, 215
And pour’d its beams on Colonsay;

And oft, beneath the silver moon,
He heard afar the mermaid sing,
And oft, to many a melting tune,
The shell-formed lyres of ocean ring: 220

And when the moon went down the sky,
Still rose, in dreams, his native plain,
And oft he thought his love was by,
And charm’d him with some tender strain;

And heart-sick, oft he waked to weep, 225
When ceased that voice of silver sound,
And thought to plunge him in the deep,
That wall’d his crystal cavern round.

But still the ring, of ruby red,
Retain’d it vivid crimson hue, 230
And each despairing accent fled,
To find his gentle love so true.

When seven long lonely months were gone,
The Mermaid to his cavern came,
No more misshapen from the zone, 235
But like a maid of mortal frame.

“O give to me that ruby ring,
That on thy finger glances gay,
And thou shalt hear the mermaid sing
The song, thou lovest, of Colonsay.” — 240

“This ruby ring, of crimson grain,
Shall on thy finger glitter gay,
If thou wilt bear me through the main,
Again to visit Colonsay.” —

“Except thou quit thy former love, 245
Content to dwell for aye with me,
Thy scorn my finny frame might move,
To tear thy limbs amid the sea.” —

“Then bear me swift along the main,
The lonely isle again to see, 250
And, when I here return again,
I plight my faith to dwell with thee.” —

An oozy film her limbs o’erspread,
While slow unfolds her scaly train,
With gluey fangs her hands were clad, 255
She lash’d, with webbed fin, the main.

He grasps the mermaid’s scaly sides,
As, with broad fin, she oars her way;
Beneath the silent moon she glides,
That sweetly sleeps on Colonsay. 260

Proud swells her heart! she deems, at last,
To lure him with her silver tongue,

And, as the shelving rocks she past,
She raised her voice, and sweetly sung.

In softer, sweeter strains she sung, 265
Slow gliding o'er the moonlight bay,
When light to land the Chieftain sprung,
To hail the Maid of Colonsay.

O sad the mermaid's gay notes fell, 270
And sadly sink remote at sea!
So sadly mourns the writhed shell
Of Jura's shore, its parent sea.

And ever as the year returns, 275
The charm-bound sailors know the day;
For sadly still the mermaid mourns
The lovely Chief of Colonsay.

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