

# The Altar of Artemis

By Aleister Crowley

Where, in the coppice, oak and pine  
And mystic yew and elm are found,  
Sweeping the skies, that grow divine  
With the dark wind's despairing sound,  
The wind that roars from the profound,  
And smites the mountain-tops, and calls  
Mute spirits to black festivals,  
And feasts in valleys iron-bound,  
Desolate crags, and barren ground;—  
There in the strong storm-shaken grove  
Swings the pale censer-fire for love.

The foursquare altar, rightly hewn,  
And overlaid with beaten gold,  
Stands in the gloom; the stealthy tune  
Of singing maidens overbold  
Desires mad mysteries untold,  
With strange eyes kindling, as the fleet  
Implacable untiring feet  
Weave mystic figures manifold  
That draw dawn angels to behold  
The moving music, and the fire  
Of their intolerable desire.

For, maddening to fiercer thought,  
The fiery limbs requicken, wheel  
In formless furies, subtly wrought  
Of swifter melodies than steel  
That flashes in the fight: the peal  
Of amorous laughters choking sense,  
And madness kissing violence,  
Ring like dead horsemen; bodies reel  
Drunken with motion; spirits feel  
The strange constraint of gods that clip  
From Heaven to mingle lip and lip.

The gods descend to dance; the noise  
Of hungry kissings, as a swoon,  
Faints for excess of its own joys,  
And mystic beams assail the moon,  
With flames of their infernal noon;

While the smooth incense, without breath,  
Spreads like same scented flower of death,  
    Over the grove; the lovers' boon  
    Of sleep shall steal upon them soon,  
And lovers' lips, from lips withdrawn,  
Seek dimmer bosoms till the dawn.

Yet on the central altar lies  
    The sacrament of kneaded bread,  
With blood made one, the sacrifice  
    To those, the living, who are dead—  
    Strange gods and goddesses, that shed  
Monstrous desires of secret things  
Upon their worshippers, from wings  
    One lucent web of light, from head  
    One labyrinthine passion-fed  
Palace of love, from breathing rife  
With secrets of forbidden life.

But not the sunlight, nor the stars,  
    Nor any light but theirs alone,  
Nor iron masteries of Mars,  
    Nor Saturn's misconceiving zone,  
    Nor any planet's may be shown,  
Within the circle of the grove,  
Where burn the sancities of love:  
    Nor may the foot of man be known,  
    Nor evil eyes of mothers thrown  
On maidens that desire the kiss  
Only of maiden Artemis.

But horned and huntress from the skies,  
    She bends her lips upon the breeze,  
And pure and perfect in her eyes,  
    Burn magical virginity's  
    Sweet intermittent sorceries.  
When the slow wind from her sweet word  
In all their conchéd ears is heard.  
    And like the slumber of the seas,  
    There murmur through the holy trees  
The kisses of the goddess keen,  
And sighs and laughters caught between.

For, swooning at the fervid lips  
    Of Artemis, the maiden kisses  
Sobs and the languid body slips

Down to enamelled wildernesses.  
Fallen and loose the shaken tresses;  
Fallen the sandal and girdling gold,  
Fallen the music manifold  
Of moving limbs and strange caresses,  
And deadly passion that possesses  
The magic ecstasy of these  
Mad maidens, tender as blue seas.

Night spreads her yearning pinions,  
The baffled day sinks blind to sleep;  
The evening breeze outswoons the sun's  
Dead kisses to the swooning deep.  
Upsoars the moon; the flashing steep  
Of Heaven is fragrant for her feet;  
The perfume of the grove is sweet  
As slumbering women furtive creep  
To bosoms where small kisses weep,  
And find in fervent dreams the kiss  
Most memoried of Artemis.

Impenetrable pleasure dies  
Beneath the madness of new dreams;  
The slow sweet breath is turned to sighs  
More musical than many streams  
Under the moving silver beams,  
Fretted with stars, thrice woven across.  
White limbs in amorous slumber toss,  
Like sleeping foam, whose silver gleams  
On motionless dark seas; it seems  
As if some gentle spirit stirred,  
Their lazy brows with some swift word.

So, in the secret of the shrine,  
Night keeps them nestled, so the gloom  
Laps them in waves as smooth as wine,  
As glowing as the fiery womb  
Of some young tigress, dark as doom,  
And swift as sunrise. Love's content  
Builds its own monument,  
And carves above its vaulted tomb  
The Phoenix on her fiery plume,  
To their own souls to testify  
Their kisses' immortality.