ROBERT HERRICK

An Ode for Him

Ah, Ben!
Say how or when
Shall we, thy guests,
Meet at those lyric feasts
Made at the Sun,
The Dog, the Triple Tun,
Where we such clusters had
As made us nobly wild, not mad;
And yet each verse of thine
Outdid the meat, outdid the frolic wine.

My Ben!
Or come again,
Or send to us
Thy wit’s great overplus;
But teach us yet
Wisely to husband it,
Lest we that talent spend,
And having once brought to an end
That precious stock, the store
Of such a wit the world should have no more.

Discontents in Devon

More discontents I never had
Since I was born, than here,
Where I have been, and still am sad,
In this dull Devonshire;
Yet justly too I must confess,
I ne’er invented such
Ennobled numbers for the press,
Than where I loathed so much.

1. “The Sun,” “The Dog,” and “The Triple Tun” were three taverns in London.
2. Two types of “clusters” are means of grapes (wine) and of people (parties).
3. Herrick here glances at Christ’s parable of the servants with different numbers of talents (Matthew 25.14).
4. As a Londoner, Herrick was for a long time miserable in his parsonage at Dean Prior, Devonshire.
Upon a Child That Died

Here she lies, a pretty bud,
Lately made of flesh and blood,
Who as soon fell fast asleep
As her little eyes did peep.

Give her strewings, but not stir
The earth that lightly covers her.

Oberon’s Feast

Shapcot! to thee the fairy state
I with discretion, dedicate,
Because thou prizest things that are
Curious and unfamiliar.

Take first the feast; these dishes gone,
We’ll see the fairy court anon.

A little mushroom table spread,
After short prayers, they set on bread;
A moon-parched grain of purest wheat,
With some small glittering grit to eat
His choice bits with; then in a trice
They make a feast less great than nice.

But all this while his eye is served,
We must not think his ear was sterved;
But that there was in place to stir
His spleen, the chirring grasshopper,
The merry cricket, puling fly,
The piping gnat for minstrelsy.

And now we must imagine first,
The elves present to quench his thirst
A pure seed-pearl of infant dew,
Brought and besweetened in a blue
And pregnant violet; which done,
His kitling eyes begin to run
Quite through the table, where he spies
The horns of papery butterflies,
Of which he eats, and tastes a little
Of that we call the cuckoo’s spittle.

A little fuzz-ball pudding stands
By, yet not blessed by his hands,

1. Oberon, the king of the fairies, was a popular figure in rural mythology as well as in literature (see A Midsummer Night’s Dream).
2. Probably Herrick’s friend Thomas Shapcot(t), a Devonshire lawyer.
3. Chaff, flour dust.
4. Delicate.
5. Neglected.
6. The seat of all emotions, more usually anger, but also, as here, laughter.
7. Little, tiny.
8. A frothy secretion, given off by various insects on grass and branches.
That was too coarse; but then forthwith
He ventures boldly on the pith
Of sugared rush, and eats the sag
And well-bestrutted nine bee’s sweet bag,
Gladding his palate with some store
Of emmets’ eggs; what would he more?
But beards of mice, a newt’s stewed thigh,
A bloated earwig, and a fly;
With the red-capped worm that’s shut
Within the concave of a nut,
Brown as his tooth. A little moth,
Late fattened in a piece of cloth;
With withered cherries, mandrake’s ears,
Mole’s eyes; to these the slain stag’s tears;
The unctuous dewlaps of a snail;
The broke-heart of a nightingale
O’ercome in music; with a wine
Ne’er ravished from the flattering vine,
But gently pressed from the soft side
Of the most sweet and dainty bride,
Brought in a dainty daisy, which
He fully quaffs up to bewitch
His blood to height; this done, commended
Grace by his priest; the feast is ended.

The Pillar of Fame

Fame’s pillar here at last we set,
Out-during marble, brass, or jet;
Charmed and enchanted so
As to withstand the blow
Of overthrow;
Nor shall the seas,
Or outrages
Of storms, o’erbear
What we uprear;
Tho’ kingdoms fall,
This pillar never shall
Decline or waste at all;
But stand for ever by his own
Firm and well-fixed foundation.

9. “Sag / And well-bestrutted”: filled to the point of bulging.
1. Ant eggs.
2. Mandrakes (mandragoras), being half-animal, half-vegetable, have very small ears indeed; moles (in the next line) have tiny, weak eyes. The point is that Oberon’s food must be not only curious but very dainty.
3. The word “add” is understood.
4. Herrick is thinking of an ancient story about a nightingale which tried to outsing a musician with a lyre, and died in the attempt. Such a broken heart would be the epitome of sweetness.
5. Bridewort (sometimes called meadow-sweet) is the source of the fairy vintage.
To his book’s end this last line he’d have placed:
Jocund his Muse was, but his life was chaste.7

His Grange, or Private Wealth

Though clock
To tell how night draws hence I’ve none,
A cock
I have to sing how day draws on.

A maid (my Prue) by good luck sent
To save
That little fates me gave or lent.
A hen

I keep, which creaking day by day,
Tells when
She goes her long white egg to lay.
A goose

I have, which with a jealous care,
Lets loose
Her tongue, to tell what danger’s near.
A lamb

I keep (tame), with my morsels fed,
Whose dam

An orphan left him (lately dead).
A cat

I keep, that plays about my house,
Grown fat

With eating many a miching1 mouse.

To these
A Tracy I do keep, whereby
I please
The more my rural privacy;
Which are

But toys, to give my heart some ease.
Where care
None is, slight things do lightly please.
Upon His Spaniel Tracy

Now thou art dead, no eye shall ever see,
For shape and service, spaniel like to thee.
This shall my love do, give thy sad death one.
Tear, that deserves of me a millón.

To Lar¹

No more shall I, since I am driven hence,
Devote to thee my grains of frankincense.
No more shall I from mantle-trees² hang down,
To honor thee, my little parsley crown:
No more shall I (I fear me) to thee bring
My chives of garlic for an offering.
No more shall I, from henceforth, hear a choir
Of merry crickets by my country fire.
Go where I will, thou lucky Lar stay here,
Warm by a glittering chimney all the year.

The Lily in a Crystal

You have beheld a smiling rose
   When virgins’ hands have drawn
   O’er it a cobweb-lawn;¹
And here, you see, this lily shows,
   Tombed in a crystal stone,
More fair in this transparent case
   Than when it grew alone
   And had but single grace.

You see how cream but naked is,
   Nor dances in the eye
   Without a strawberry;
Or some fine tincture,² like to this,
   Which draws the sight thereto,
More by that wantoning³ with it
   Than when the paler hue
   No mixture did admit.

¹. The Roman Lar was a household god associated with the hearth and the family-center; he would normally be paid just such familiar, homely honors as Herrick describes—a bit of incense, an occasional bit of herb or savory seasoning. The poem was evidently written when Herrick was ejected from his living by the Puritans.
². Mantlepiece.
³. Toying, sporting.
You see how amber through the streams
More gently strokes the sight
With some concealed delight

Than when he darts his radiant beams
Into the boundless air,
Where either too much life his worth
Doth all at once impair
Or set it little forth.

Put purple grapes or cherries in-
To glass, and they will send
More beauty to commend
Them from that clean and subtle skin
Than if they naked stood,

And had no other pride at all
But their own flesh and blood
And tinctures natural.

Thus lily, rose, grape, cherry, cream,
And strawberry do stir
More love when they transfer
A weak, a soft, a broken beam,
Than if they should discover
At full their proper excellence
Without some scene\(^4\) cast over
To juggle with the sense.

Thus let this crystaled lily be
A rule how far to teach
Your nakedness must reach;
And that no further than we see
Those glaring colors laid
By art’s wise hand, but to this end
They should obey a shade,
Lest they too far extend.

So, though you’re white as swan or snow
And have the power to move
A world of men to love,
Yet when your lawns and silks shall flow
And that white cloud divide
Into a doubtful twilight, then,

Then will your hidden pride
Raise greater fires in men.

\(^4\) Some varieties of cloudy amber do in fact look more attractive under water.
\(^5\) Veil.
To Blossoms

Fair pledges of a fruitful tree,
Why do ye fall so fast?
Your date is not so past
But you may stay yet here a while,
To blush and gently smile,
And go at last.

What, were ye born to be
An hour or half’s delight,
And so to bid good night?
'Twas pity Nature brought you forth
Merely to show your worth,
And lose you quite.

But you are lovely leaves, where we
May read how soon things have
Their end, though ne’er so brave;\(^1\)
And after they have shown their pride
Like you a while, they glide
Into the grave.

To the Water Nymphs Drinking at the Fountain\(^1\)

Reach with your whiter hands to me
Some crystal of the spring;
And I about the cup shall see
Fresh lilies flourishing.

Or else, sweet nymphs, do you but this—
To the glass your lips incline;
And I shall see by that one kiss
The water turned to wine.

1. Splendid, beautiful.