JOHN GAY  
1685–1732

The Birth of the Squire. An Eclogue

_In Imitation of the Pollio of Virgil_¹

Ye sylvan Muses, loftier strains recite,
Not all in shades and humble cots² delight.
Hark! the bells ring; along the distant grounds
The driving gales convey the swelling sounds;

Th’ attentive swain, forgetful of his work,
With gaping wonder leans upon his fork.
What sudden news alarms the waking morn?
To the glad squire a hopeful heir is born.

Mourn, mourn, ye stags, and all ye beasts of chase,
This hour destruction brings on all your race.

See the pleased tenants duteous offerings bear,
Turkeys, and geese, and grocer’s sweetest ware;
With the new health³ the ponderous tankard flows,
And old October⁴ reddens every nose.

Beagles and spaniels round his cradle stand,
Kiss his moist lip and gently lick his hand.
He joys to hear the shrill horn’s echoing sounds,
And learns to lisp the names of all the hounds.

With frothy ale to make his cup o’erflow,
Barley shall in paternal acres grow;
The bee shall sip the fragrant dew from flowers,
To give metheglin⁵ for his morning hours;
For him the clustering hop shall climb the poles,
And his own orchard sparkle in his bowls.

His sire’s exploits he now with wonder hears,
The monstrous tales indulge his greedy ears:
How when youth strung his nerves and warmed his veins,
He rode, the mighty Nimrod⁶ of the plains.
He leads the staring infant through the hall,
Points out the horny spoils that grace the wall;
Tells how this stag through three whole counties fled,
What rivers swam, where bayed, and where he bled.
Now he the wonders of the fox repeats,
Describes the desperate chase, and all his cheats;

How in one day, beneath his furious speed,
He tired seven coursers of the fleetest breed;

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1. Virgil’s famous Fourth Eclogue (dedicated to Consul Pollio) foretells the birth of a marvelous child, the hope of Rome. In the Middle Ages it was assumed that the poet had foreseen the birth of Christ, and he became known as a great magician.
2. Cottages.
3. Toast.
4. Ale.
5. Mead (made from honey).
6. A great hunter (Genesis 10.9).
How high the pale he leapt, how wide the ditch,
When the hound tore the haunches of the witch! 7
These stories, which descend from son to son,
The forward boy shall one day make his own.

Ah, too fond mother, think the time draws nigh
That calls the darling from thy tender eye;
How shall his spirit brook the rigid rules,
And the long tyranny of grammar schools?
Let younger brother o'er dull authors plod,
Lashed into Latin by the tingling rod;
No, let him never feel that smart disgrace:
Why should he wiser prove than all his race?

When ripening youth with down o'ershades his chin,
And every female eye incites to sin,
The milkmaid (thoughtless of her future shame)
With smacking lip shall raise his guilty flame;
The dairy, barn, the hayloft, and the grove
Shall oft be conscious of their stolen love.
But think, Priscilla, on that dreadful time
When pangs and watery qualms shall own8 thy crime;
How wilt thou tremble when thy nipple's pressed
To see the white drops bathe thy swelling breast!
Nine moons shall publicly divulge her shame,
And the young squire forestall a father's name.

When twice twelve times the reaper's sweeping hand
With leveled harvests has bestrewn the land,
On famed St. Hubert's feast9 his winding horn
Shall cheer the joyful hound and wake the morn.
This memorable day his eager speed
Shall urge with bloody heel the rising steed.
O check the foamy bit, nor tempt thy fate;
Think on the murders of a five-bar gate!
Yet prodigal of life, the leap he tries,
Low in the dust his groveling honor lies,
Headlong he falls, and on the rugged stone
Distorts1 his neck, and cracks the collarbone.
O venturous youth, thy thirst of game allay;
May'st thou survive the perils of this day!
He shall survive; and in late years be sent
To snore away debates in Parliament.

The time shall come, when his more solid sense
With nod important shall the laws dispense;
A justice, with grave justices shall sit,
He praise their wisdom, they admire his wit.
No greyhound shall attend the tenant’s pace,
No rusty gun the farmer’s chimney grace;
Salmons shall leave their covers void of fear,
Nor dread the thievish net or triple spear;
Poachers shall tremble at his awful name,
Whom vengeance now o’ertakes for murdered game.

Assist me, Bacchus, and ye drunken powers,
To sing his friendships and his midnight hours!

Why dost thou glory in thy strength of beer,
Firm-corked and mellowed till the twentieth year;
Brewed or when Phoebus warms the fleecy sign
Or when his languid rays in Scorpio shine?  
Think on the mischiefs which from hence have sprung!
It arms with curses dire the wrathful tongue;
Foul scandal to the lying lip affords,
And prompts the memory with injurious words.

O where is wisdom, when by this o’erpowered?
The state is censured, and the maid deflowered!

And wilt thou still, O squire, brew ale so strong?

Methinks I see him in his hall appear,
Where the long table floats in clammy beer,
Midst mugs and glasses shattered o’er the floor,
Dead-drunk, his servile crew supinely snore;
Triumphant, o’er the prostrate brutes he stands,
The mighty bumper trembles in his hands;
Boldly he drinks, and like his glorious sires,
In copious gulps of potent ale expires.

Recitativo and Air from Acis and Galatea

POLYPHEMUS. I rage, I melt, I burn,
The feeble god has stabbed me to the heart.
Thou trusty pine, prop of my godlike steps,
I lay thee by.

Bring me a hundred reeds of decent growth,
To make a pipe for my capacious mouth;
In soft enchanting accents let me breathe
Sweet Galatea’s beauty, and my love.

2. Either in spring (Aries) or fall (Scorpio).
1. In this scene from Gay’s pastoral opera, with music by Handel, the monstrous giant Polyphemus expresses his yearning for the shepherdess Galatea.
2. Cupid.
3. Panpipe or set of flutes.
Air.

O ruddier than the cherry!
O sweeter than the berry!
   O nymph, more bright
   Than moonshine night!
Like kidlings blithe and merry.

Ripe as the melting cluster, 4
No lily has such luster;
   Yet hard to tame
   As raging flame,
And fierce as storms that bluster.

O ruddier, &c.

4. Grapes ready to “melt in the mouth.”