

John Bennet, "The Fortune-Teller"

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JOHN BENNET

"The Fortune-Teller"

One Whitsuntide, when merry glee
Proclaim'd each blooming rustic free;
When nymphs and swains, in circling bands,
At sound of tabor join'd their hands
In nimble dance, with sprightly mien, 5
Beneath the bower on the green:
Methought the golden age reviv'd,
So harmless were the sports contriv'd.

But ah! how soon the scene was chang'd,
When from these rural joys they rang'd. 10
For at the place th' Egyptian crew
Came for lucrative interview;
Among the tribe a buxom lass,
Who daily wonders brought to pass.
Yet pedling first was their pretence, 15
To learn if any had the sense
Their hocus pocus to elude,
If not to tell the multitude;
One of their tribe, both deaf and dumb,
Reveal'd past, present, and to come. 20

The scheme succeeds; such numbers flock,
Made Christian-Faith a laughing stock!
Made it appear that Satan hath
His eye fix'd on implicit faith.
Now to his oracle they press, 25
And hope in vain for happiness.

The Sybil seated in grimace,
Her vot'ries come with anxious-face;
They write the sum of their demand,
And wishing at her alter stand. 30

One for a husband gives her fee,
Who's soon to be the happy she;
Not so another can be blest,
Till two long years have broke her rest;
But still a second fee retains, 35
And years to months a change regains:
She threatens some and some collogues,
And proves too many w—s and r—s.

She to the matrimonial slate
In order reads their certain fate;
Bids the dull husband straight provide
For th' issue of his teeming bride:
Assures the barren of success,
That children shall their ages bless.

40

A brother seeks a brother lost, 45
In prison strong confin'd and crost;
But tho' he roams on foreign strand,
He soon shall see his native land.

Another offers at her shrine,
Who's promis'd treasures from the mine:
Could but his partner have such bliss,
Her pilfer'd goods she would not miss.

50

A mother ardently requires
An answer kind to her desires:
A long-lost daughter was the theme, 55
And she receives a golden dream.

Good God! that mortals e'er should strive
In hidden secrets thus to dive:
Would they regard thy sacred text,
Impostors could not have pretext 60
Unwary people to delude,
Or on thy attributes intrude.

They still kept on their impious trade,
And ev'ry day fresh vot'ries made;
Till vengeance bid Astrea rise: 65
Despair then seiz'd their baleful eyes.
Their utmost skill now at the stake,
The deaf and dumb could hear and speak,
And from her shrine in haste withdrew;
Shame and confusion with her flew. 70

Demetrius found his gains were gone;
Diana fled; her witchcrafts done.
He then betray'd one of the crew,
The darling pelf yet still his view.
Virtue rejoic'd to see the stroke, 75
That vice itself the charm had broke:
Astrea's orders were obey'd,
And th' hag to prison was convey'd.

Th' infernal tribe now sad distrest,
Detractor's council was a jest; 80
Who finding that fair virtue's cause
Was well defended by just laws;
To give such vile adherents play,
His canker'd heart no more could say;
Thus added to lost reason, loss of pay. 85

NOTES:

1 *Whitsuntide* "The church season of Pentecost," a festival occurring on the seventh Sunday after Easter in the Christian tradition (*OED*).

2 *rustic* "A person living in the countryside; a peasant" (*OED*).

3 *nymph* "A beautiful young woman" (*OED*); *swain* "A country gallant or lover" (*OED*).

4 *tabor* A drum (*OED*).

5 *mien* "The look ... manner, or conduct of a person, as showing character, mood, etc." (*OED*).

6 *bower* "A place closed in or overarched with branches of trees, shrubs, or other plants (*OED*).

11 *place* "Woodstock" [Author's Note].

27 *Sybil* "A prophetess; a fortune-teller, a witch" (*OED*).

28 *vot'ries* "A devout worshipper" (*OED*).

37 *collogues* "To prevail upon or influence ... to coax" (*OED*).

38 *w--s and r--s* Likely to be understood as "whores and rogues."

42 *teeming* "Child-bearing" (*OED*).

46 *crost* "Thwarted" (*OED*).

52 *pilfer'd* "Stolen" (*OED*).

65 *Astrea* *Astraea*, Greek goddess of justice (Dixon-Kennedy, *Encyclopedia of Greco-Roman Mythology*, 52).

66 *baleful* "Unhappy ... miserable" (*OED*).

71 *Demetrius* A biblical figure who falsely worshipped the Roman goddess Diana, causing him to incite a riot against the Apostle Paul (*OCB*).

72 *Diana* Roman goddess of hunting, wilderness, and animals (Dixon-Kennedy, *Encyclopedia of Greco-Roman Mythology*, 52).

74 *pelf* "Stolen good[s]" (*OED*).

84 *canker'd* "Infected with evil; corrupt, depraved" (*OED*).

Source: *Poems on Several Occasions* (London, 1774), pp. 17-22. [[Google Books](#)]

Edited by Alex Pittel