

[John Duncan], “Small Beer”

Description

[JOHN DUNCAN]

“Small Beer”

If ever yet, *Aonian* maids,
You bless'd poor bard with timely aids;
Haste now — and help without suspension,
Bring spirit, numbers, rhyme, invention.
Here in sad plight your vot'ry view, 5
I'm left — e'en as I bake, to brew;
Spare, gentle critics, each default,
You'll find much water, little malt.
Bless me! an ague-fit I fear;
O theme to kill a Muse, *small Beer*. 10
 Thy name, base draff, a verse degrades,
Drink of penurious, musty maids,
Or drudging rogues, who sing like parrots,
Wedg'd in close stalls, or fulsome garrets.
Tasteless, weak, flatulent remains — 15
Squeez'd from impoverish'd husks and grains,
Fit swill for *Bedlam's* residentaries,
Or *Bridewell's* chastned penitentiaries,
Hard beverage of the starv'ling wit,
Thou very ratsbane to the cit. 20
Sad sob'rer in his midnight hours,
When wine th' insensate brain o'er pow'rs —
To what hard streights, thy poys'nous juice,
The good old dame does oft reduce,
When souerly belching from her pipes, 25
On *Gin* she calls to ease her gripes.
In vain — no *Gin* — (once cheap relief)
Is now — from guts to chase the grief.
Close pent, from bowels swoln and tore,
Thou'rt heard in many a fearful roar, 30
Imposer on the frugal purse,
In using bad, in keeping worse.
Stale, thou'rt mere verjuice; gall, when mild;
At best thou'rt but good water spoil'd.
 Stay — some who own for truth my satire, 35

May yet accuse her of ill nature.
 For once (if Sire *Apollo* will
 A proof of genius and of skill)
 I'll act the casuist in my lays,
 In one line lash, with t'other praise. 40
Small Beer, cool, elegant, regale,
 Thou royal child of good *king Ale*:
 In massy tankard bright and stable,
 Oft brought up to the princely table;
 To temp'rance, chastity and quiet, 45
 Thou friend — sworn foe to feuds and riot;
 Rescuer of captivated reason,
 From trait'rous wine's effected treason!
 Oft known the deadly fever's flame,
 (By the scorch'd Patient crav'd) to tame; 50
 To the sick wretch debar'd admission,
 Thro' envy of the sly Physician;
 Thee grateful Sailor's plenteous sip,
 Converted to ambrosial flipp.
 And thee, to heat, the good wife learns 55
 (Safe junket for unfuddling bearns)
 With sugar, mingled sweet, and spice,
 The saving huswife's rare device;
 Dear to the school-boy's liqu'rish chops,
 In posset boil'd, or sugar sops; 60
 Or by the alewife's cunning art,
 Work'd up in bottles fresh and smart,
 Thou'rt serv'd on holidays in glasses,
 Choice fare with 'prentice youths and lasses.
 Ah me! I'm at a sad extreme, 65
 Quite, quite exhausted, rhyme and theme;
 Tir'd fancy lags, dull numbers droop;
 My muse, like barrel, all a-stoop,
 Creeps on her lees, runs thick and slow,
 Help, *Phoebus*! I'm a cup too low. 70

NOTES:

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1 *Aonian maids* The Muses. Aonia is “a region of ancient Boeotia that contained the Helicon and Cithaeron mountains, sacred to the Muses” (*OED*).

5 *vot'ry* A devotee.

9 *ague-fit* “A state or bout of distress” (*OED*).

11 *draff* “Grains of malt after brewing” (*OED*).

12 *penurious* Poor.

15 *flatulent* “Generating or apt to generate gas in the alimentary canal” (*OED*).

17 *swill* “Liquid, or partly liquid, food” typically given to pigs (*OED*); *Bedlam* The Hospital of St. Mary of Bethlehem, notorious mental asylum in the eighteenth century.

18 *Bridewell* A London prison; *penitentiaries* Inmates.

20 *ratsbane* “Rat poison” (*OED*).

33 *verjuice* “The acid juice of green or unripe grapes, crabapples, or other sour fruit” (*OED*); *gall* Here a type of “intensely bitter substance” (*OED*).

39 *casuist* A person “who studies and resolves cases of conscience or doubtful questions regarding duty and conduct” (*OED*).

52 *sly* “Deceitful” (*OED*).

54 *ambrosial flipp* A delightful “mixture of beer and spirit sweetened with sugar and heated with a hot iron” (*OED*).

56 *bearns* Variation of “bairns,” children.

59 *liqu’rish chops* “Fond of delicious fare” (*OED*).

60 *posset* “A drink made from hot milk curdled with ale, wine, or other liquor, flavoured with sugar, herbs, spices, etc.” (*OED*).

60 *sugar sops* “A dish composed of steeped slices of bread, sweetened and sometimes spiced” (*OED*).

69 *lees* The sediment of alcoholic beverages in the barrel.

70 *Phoebus* “Apollo as the god of light or of the sun; the sun personified” (*OED*).

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Edited by Rafe Abd Al Illah Kassim