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Poems

Poems and fables

Gay, John

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Fable XVI

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And for reward shall share the feast,
 I mean shall pick my bones at least.
 Till now, th' astonish'd Cur replies,
 I look'd on all with envious eyes.
 How false we judge by what appears!
 All creatures feel their sev'ral cares.
 If thus you mighty beast complains,
 Perhaps man knows superior pains.
 Let envy then no more torment.
 Think on the Ox, and learn content.
 Thus said; close following at her heel,
 With chearful heart he mounts the wheel.

F A B L E XVI.

*The RAVENS, the SEXTON, and the EARTH-
 WORM.*

To LAURA.

LAURA, methinks your over-nice.
 True. Flatt'ry is a shocking vice;
 Yet sure, whene'er the praise is just,
 One may commend without disgust.
 Am I a privilege deny'd,
 Indulg'd by ev'ry tongue beside?
 How singular are all your ways!
 A woman, and averse to praise!
 If 'tis offence such truths to tell,
 Why do your merits thus excel?

Since then I dare not speak my mind,
 A truth conspicuous to mankind ;
 Though in full lustre ev'ry grace
 Distinguish your celestial face ;
 Though beauties of inferior ray
 (Like stars before the orb of day)
 Turn pale and fade : I check my lays,
 Admiring what I dare not praise.

If you the tribute due disdain,
 The muse's mortifying strain
 Shall, like a woman, in mere spite
 Set beauty in a moral light.

Though such revenge might shock the ear
 Of many a celebrated fair ;
 I mean that superficial race
 Whose thoughts ne'er reach beyond their face ;
 What's that to you ? I but displease
 Such ever-girlish ears as these.
 Virtue can brook the thoughts of age,
 That lasts the same through ev'ry stage.
 Though you by time must suffer more
 Than ever woman lost before ;
 To age is such indiff'rence shown,
 As if your face were not your own.

Were you by Antoninus taught ?
 Or is it native strength of thought,
 That thus, without concern or fright,
 You view yourself by reason's light ?

Those eyes of so divine a ray,
 What are they ? mould'ring, mortal clay.
 Those features, cast in heav'nly mold,
 Shall, like my coarser earth, grow old ;

Like common grass, the fairest flow'r
Must feel the hoary season's pow'r.

How weak, how vain is human pride!

Dares man upon himself confide?

The wretch who glories in his gain,

Amasses heaps on heaps in vain.

Why lose we life in anxious cares

To lay in hoards for future years?

Can those (when tortur'd by disease)

Clear our sick heart, or purchase ease?

Can those prolong one gasp of breath,

Or calm the troubled hour of death?

What's beauty? Call ye that your own,

A flow'r that fades as soon as blown?

What's man in all his boast of sway?

Perhaps the tyrant of a day.

Alike the laws of life take place

Through ev'ry branch of human race.

The monarch of long regal line

Was rais'd from dust as frail as mine.

Can he pour health into his veins,

Or cool the fever's restless pains?

Can he (worn down in nature's course)

New-brace his feeble nerves with force?

Can he (how vain is mortal pow'r!)

Stretch life beyond the destin'd hour?

Consider, man; weigh well thy frame;

The king, the beggar is the same.

Dust form'd us all. Each breathes his day,

Then sinks into his native clay.

Beneath a venerable yew,

That in the lonely church-yard grew,

Two Ravens fat. In solemn croak
 Thus one his hungry friend bespoke,
 Methinks I scent some rich repast;
 The favour strengthens with the blast;
 Snuff then, the promis'd feast inhale;
 I taste the carcase in the gale.
 Near yonder trees, the farmer's steed,
 From toil and daily drudg'ry freed,
 Hath groan'd his last. A dainty treat!
 To birds of taste delicious meat.

A Sexton, busy at his trade,
 To hear their chat, suspends his spade.
 Death struck him with no farther thought,
 Than merely as the fees he brought.
 Was ever two such blund'ring fowls,
 In brains and manners less than owls!
 Blockheads, says he, learn more respect:
 Know ye on whom ye thus reflect?
 In this same grave (who does me right,
 Must own the work is strong and tight)
 The 'Squire that yon fair hall possessit,
 To-night shall lay his bones at rest.
 Whence could the gross mistake proceed?
 The 'Squire was somewhat fat indeed.
 What then? The meanest bird of prey
 Such want of sense could ne'er betray:
 For sure some diff'rence must be found
 (Suppose the smelling organ found)
 In carcases (say what we can);
 Or where's the dignity of man?
 With due respect to human race,
 The Ravens undertook the case.

In such similitude of scent,
 Man ne'er could think reflexion meant,
 As epicures extol a treat,
 And seem their sav'ry words to eat,
 They prais'd dead horse, luxurious food,
 The ven'fon of the prescient broods.

The Sexton's indignation mov'd,
 The mean comparifon reprov'd;
 Their undiscerning palate blam'd,
 Which two-legg'd carion thus defam'd.

Reproachful speech from either side
 The want of argument supply'd,
 They rail, revile: As often ends
 The contest of disputing friends.

Hold, says the fowl; since human pride
 With confutation ne'er comply'd,
 Let's state the case, and then refer
 The knotty point: For taste may err.

As thus he spoke, from out the mold
 An Earth-worm, huge of size, unroll'd
 His monstrous length. They strait agree
 To chuse him as their referee;
 So to th' experience of the jaws
 Each states the merits of his cause.

He paus'd, and with a solemn tone
 Thus made his sage opinion known.

On carcafes of ev'ry kind
 This maw hath elegantly din'd;
 Provok'd by luxury or need,
 On beast, or fowl, or man, I feed;
 Such small distinction's in the favour,
 By turns I chuse the fancy'd flavour.

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Yet I must own (that human beast)
 A glutton is the rankest feast.
 Man, cease this boast ; for human pride
 Hath various tracts to range beside.
 The prince who kept the world in awe,
 The judge whose dictate fix'd the law,
 The rich, the poor, the great, the small,
 Are levell'd. Death confounds 'em all.
 Then think not that we reptiles share
 Such cates, such elegance of fare :
 The only true and real good
 Of man was never vermin's food.
 'Tis seated in th' immortal mind ;
 Virtue distinguishes mankind,
 And that (as yet ne'er harbour'd here)
 Mounts with the soul we know not where.
 So, goodman Sexton, since the case
 Appears with such a dubious face,
 To neither I the cause determine ;
 For diff'rent tastes please diff'rent vermin.

THE END OF VOLUME SECOND.



