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Poems

Poems and fables

Gay, John

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Fable V

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When thus, with panic shame possess'd,
An auditor his friends address'd.

What are we? ministerial tools.
We little knaves are greater fools.
At last this secret is explor'd;
'Tis our corruption thins the hoard.
For ev'ry grain we touch'd, at least
A thousand his own heaps increas'd.
Then, for his kin, and fav'rite spies,
A hundred hardly could suffice.
Thus, for a paltry sneaking bribe,
We cheat ourselves, and all the tribe;
For all the magazine contains,
Grows from our annual toil and pains.

They vote th' account shall be inspected;
The cunning plund'rer is detected:
The fraud is sentenc'd; and his hoard,
As due, to public use restor'd.

F A B L E V.

The BEAR in a Boat.

To a COXCOMB.

THAT man must daily wiser grow,
Whose search is bent himself to know:
Impartially he weighs his scope,
And on firm reason founds his hope;

He tries his strength before the race,
 And never seeks his own disgrace :
 He knows the compass, sail, and oar,
 Or never launches from the shore ;
 Before he builds, computes the cost,
 And in no proud pursuit is lost :
 He learns the bounds of human sense,
 And safely walks within the fence.
 Thus conscious of his own defect,
 Are pride and self-importance check'd.

If then, self-knowledge to pursue,
 Direct our life in ev'ry view,
 Of all the fools that pride can boast,
 A Coxcomb claims distinction most.

Coxcombs are of all ranks and kind ;
 They're not to sex or age confin'd,
 Or rich, or poor, or great, or small ;
 And vanity besets 'em all.
 By ignorance is pride increas'd :
 Those most assume who know the least ;
 Their own false balance gives 'em weight,
 But ev'ry other finds 'em light.

Not that all coxcombs follies strike
 And draw our ridicule alike.
 To diff'rent merits each pretends,
 This in love-vanity transcends ;
 That smitten with his face and shape,
 By dress distinguishes the ape :
 T'other with learning crams his shelf,
 Knows books, and all things but himself.

All these are fools of low condition,
 Compar'd with coxcombs of ambition.

For those, puff'd up with flatt'ry, dare
Assume a nation's various care :
They ne'er the grossest praise mistrust,
Their sycophaants seem hardly just ;
For these, in part alone, attest
The flatt'ry their own thoughts suggest.
In this wide sphere a coxcomb's shown
In other realms besides his own :
The self-deem'd Machiavel at large
By turns controuls in ev'ry charge.
Does commerce suffer in her rights ?
'Tis he directs the naval fights.
What sailor dares dispute his skill ?
He'll be an adm'ral when he will.
Now, meddling in the foldier's trade,
Troops must be hir'd, and levies made.
He gives ambassadors their cue,
His cobbled treaties to renew ;
And annual taxes must suffice
The current blunders to disguise.
When his crude schemes in air are lost,
And millions scarce defray the cost,
His arrogance (nought undismay'd)
Trusting in self-sufficient aid,
On other rocks misguides the realm,
And thinks a pilot at the helm.
He ne'er suspects his want of skill,
But blunders on from ill to ill ;
And, when he fails of all intent,
Blames only unforeseen event.
Left you mistake the application,
The fable calls me to relation.

A Bear of shagg and manners rough,
At climbing trees expert enough ;
For dextrously, and safe from harm,
Year after year he robb'd the swarm.
Thus, thriving on industrious toil,
He glory'd in his pilfer'd spoil,

This trick so swell'd him with conceit,
He thought no enterprize too great.
Alike in sciences and arts,
He boasted univerfal parts ;
Pragmatic, busy, bustling, bold,
His arrogance was uncontroul'd :
And thus he made his party good,
And grew dictator of the wood.

The beasts, with admiration, stare,
And think him a prodigious Bear.
Were any common booty got,
'Twas his each portion to allot:
For why, he found there might be picking,
Ev'n in the carving of a chicken.
Intruding thus, he by degrees
Claim'd too the butcher's larger fees.
And now his over-weening pride
In ev'ry province will preside.
No task too difficult was found.
His blund'ring nose misleads the hound :
In stratagem and subtle arts,
He over-rules the fox's parts.

It chanc'd, as, on a certain day,
Along the bank he took his way,
A boat, with rudder, sail, and oar,
At anchor floated near the shore.

He stopt, and turning to his train,
Thus pertly vents his vaunting strain.

What blund'ring puppies are mankind,
In ev'ry science always blind!

I mock the pedantry of schools.

What are their compasses and rules?

From me that helm shall conduct learn,

And man his ignorance discern.

So saying, with audacious pride,

He gains the boat, and climbs the side.

The beasts astonish'd line the strand.

The anchor weigh'd, he drives from land::

The slack sail shifts from side to side;

The boat untrimm'd admits the tide.

Borne down, adrift, at random tost,

His oar breaks short, the rudder's lost.

The Bear, presuming in his skill,

Is here and there officious still;

Till, striking on the dang'rous sands,

A-ground the shatter'd vessel stands.

To see the bungler thus distress'd,

The very fishes sneer and jest.

Ev'n gudgeons join in ridicule,

To mortify the meddling fool.

The clam'rous watermen appear;

Threats, curses, oaths, insult his ear:

Seiz'd, thresh'd, and chain'd, he's dragg'd to land;

Derision shouts along the strand.