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Poems

Poems on several occasions

Gay, John

Edinburgh, 1773

Trivia. Book III

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TRIVIA.

BOOK III.

Of Walking the Streets by Night.

O TRIVIA! goddeſs, leave thoſe low abodes,
And traverſe o'er the wide etherial roads,
Celeſtial queen, put on thy robes of light,
Now Cynthia nam'd fair regent of the night.
At ſight of thee the villain ſheathes his ſword,
Nor ſcales the wall, to ſteal the wealthy hoard.
O may thy ſilver lamp, from heav'n's high bow'r,
Direct my footſteps in the midnight hour!

When night firſt bids the twinkling ſtars appear,
Or with her cloudy veſt inwraps the air,
Then ſwarms the buſy ſtreet; with caution tread,
Where the ſhop windows falling threat thy head;
Now lab'rers home return, and join their ſtrength,
To bear the tott'ring plank, or ladder's length;
Still fix thy eyes intent upon the throng,
And as the paſſes open, wind along.

Where the fair columns of St Clement ſtand,
Whoſe ſtraiten'd bounds encroach upon the Strand;
Where the low penthouſe bows the walker's head,
And the rough pavement wounds the yielding tread;

Where not a poſt protects the narrow ſpace,
And, ſtrung in twines, combs dangle in thy face;
Summon at once thy courage, rouſe thy care,
Stand firm, look back, be reſolute, beware.
Forth iſſuing from ſteep lanes, the colliers ſteeds
Drag the black load; another cart ſucceeds;
Team follows team, crouds heap'd on crouds appear,
And wait impatient till the road grow clear.
Now all the pavement ſounds with trampling feet,
And the mixt hurry barricades the ſtreet.
Entangl'd here, the waggon's lengthen'd team
Cracks the tough harneſs; here a pond'rous beam
Lies overturn'd athwart; for ſlaughter fed
Here lowing bullocks raiſe their horned head.
Now oaths grow loud, with coaches coaches jar,
And the ſmart blow provokes the ſturdy war;
From the high box they whirl the thong around,
And with the twining laſh their ſhins reſound:
Their rage ferments, more dang'rous wounds they try,
And the blood guſhes down their painful eye.
And now on foot the frowning warriors light,
And with their pond'rous fiſts renew the fight;
Blow anſwers blow, their cheeks are ſmear'd with blood,
Till down they fall, and grappling roll in mud.
So when two boars, in wild Ytene * bred,
Or on Weſtphalia's fatt'ning cheſſnuts fed,
Gnaſh their ſharp tuſks, and rous'd with equal fire,
Diſpute the reign of ſome luxurious mire;

* New Foreſt in Hampſhire, anciently ſo called.

In the black flood they wallow o'er and o'er,
Till their arm'd jaws distil with foam and gore.
Where the mob gathers, swiftly shoot along,
Nor idly mingle with the noisy throng.
Lur'd by the silver hilt, amid the swarm,
The subtil artist will thy side disarm.
Nor is thy flaxen wig with safety worn;
High on the shoulder in a basket borne
Lurks the sly boy; whose hand to rapine bred,
Plucks off the curling honours of thy head.
Here dives the skulking thief, with practis'd slight,
And unfelt fingers make thy pockets light.
Where's now the watch, with all its trinkets, flown?
And thy late snuff-box is no more thy own.
But lo! his bolder thefts some tradesman spies,
Swift from his prey the scudding lurcher flies;
Dex'trous he 'scapes the coach with nimble bounds,
While ev'ry honest tongue *Stop thief* resounds.
So speeds the wily fox, alarm'd by fear,
Who lately filch'd the turkey's callow care;
Hounds following hounds, grow louder as he flies,
And injur'd tenants join the hunter's cries.
Breathless he stumbling falls: Ill-fated boy!
Why did not honest work thy youth employ?
Seiz'd by rough hands, he's dragg'd amid the rout,
And stretch'd beneath the pump's incessant spout:
Or plung'd in miry ponds, he gasping lies,
Mud choaks his mouth, and plaisters o'er his eyes.
Let not the ballad-singer's shrilling strain
Amid the swarm thy list'ning ear detain:
Guard well thy pocket; for these Syrens stand
To aid the labours of the diving hand;

Confed'rate in the cheat, they draw the throng,
And cambrick handkerchiefs reward the ſong;
But ſoon as coach or cart drives ratt'ling on,
The rabble part, in ſhoals they backward run.
So Jove's loud bolts the mingled war divide,
And Greece and Troy retreat on either ſide.

If the rude throng pour on with furious pace,
And hap to break thee from a friend's embrace,
Stop ſhort; nor ſtruggle through the croud in vain,
But watch with careful eye the paſſing train.
Yet I (perhaps too fond) if chance the tide
Tumultuous bear my partner from my ſide,
Impatient venture back; deſpiſing harm,
I force my paſſage where the thickeſt ſwarm.
Thus his loſt bride the Trojan ſought in vain,
Through night, and arms, and flames, and hills of ſlain.
Thus Niſus wander'd o'er the pathleſs grove,
To find the brave companion of his love.
The pathleſs grove in vain he wanders o'er:
Euryalus, alas! is now no more.

That walker, who regardleſs of his pace,
Turns oft to pore upon the damſel's face,
From ſide to ſide by thruſting elbows toſt,
Shall ſtrike his aking breaſt againſt the poſt;
Or water, daſh'd from fiſhy ſtalls, ſhall ſtain
His hapleſs coat with ſpirts of ſcaly rain.
But if unwarily he chance to ſtray,
Where twirling turnſtiles intercept the way,
The thwarting paſſenger ſhall force them round,
And beat the wretch half breathleſs to the ground.

Let conſtant vigilance thy footſteps guide,
And wary circumſpection guard thy ſide;
Then ſhalt thou walk unharm'd the dang'rous night,
Nor need th' officious link-boy's ſmoky light.
Thou never wilt attempt to croſs the road,
Where alehouſe-benches reſt the porter's load,
Grievous to heedleſs ſhins; no barrow's wheel,
That bruiſes oft the truant ſchool-boy's heel,
Behind thee rolling, with inſidious pace,
Shall mark thy ſtocking with a miry trace.
Let not thy vent'rous ſteps approach too nigh,
Where gaping wide, low ſteepy cellars lie,
Should thy ſhoe wrench aſide, down, down you fall,
And overturn the ſcolding huckſter's ſtall;
The ſcolding huckſter ſhall not o'er thee moan,
But pence exact for nuts and pears o'erthrown.

Though you through cleanlier alleys wind by day,
To ſhun the hurries of the public way,
Yet ne'er to thoſe dark paths by night retire;
Mind only ſafety, and contemn the mire.
Then no impervious courts thy haſte detain,
Nor ſneering alewives bid thee turn again.

Where Lincoln's-inn, wide ſpace, is rail'd around,
Croſs not with vent'rous ſtep; there oft is found
The lurking thief, who while the day-light ſhone,
Made the walls echo with his begging tone:
That crutch which late compaſſion mov'd, ſhall wound
Thy bleeding head, and fell thee to the ground.
Tho' thou are tempted by the linkman's call,
Yet truſt him not along the lonely wall;
In the midway he'll quench the flaming brand,
And ſhare the booty with the pilf'ring band.

Still keep the public ſtreets, where oily rays
Shot from the cryſtal lamp, o'erſpread the ways.
Happy Auguſta! law-defended town!
Here no dark lanthrons ſhade the villain's frown;
No Spaniſh jealouſies thy lanes infeſt,
Nor Roman vengeance ſtabs th' unwary breaſt;
Here tyranny ne'er lifts her purple hand,
But liberty and juſtice guard the land;
No bravoes here profeſs the bloody trade,
Nor is the church the murd'rer's refuge made.
Let not the chairman, with aſſuming ſtride,
Preſs near the wall, and rudely thruſt thy ſide;
The laws have ſet him bounds; his ſervile feet
Should ne'er encroach where poſts defend the ſtreet.
Yet who the footman's arrogance can quell,
Whoſe flambeau gilds the ſaſhes of Pell-mell,
When in long rank a train of torches flame,
To light the midnight viſits of the dame?
Others, perhaps, by happier guidance led,
May, where the chairman reſts, with ſafety tread;
Whene'er I paſs, their poles unſeen below,
Make my knee tremble with the jarring blow.
If wheels bar up the road where ſtreets are croſt,
With gentle words the coachman's ear accoſt:
He ne'er the threat, or harſh command obeys,
But with contempt the ſpatter'd ſhoe ſurveys.
Now man with utmoſt fortitude thy ſoul,
To croſs the way where carts and coaches roll;
Yet do not in thy hardy ſkill confide,
Nor raſhly riſk the kennel's ſpacious ſtride;
Stay till afar the diſtant wheel you hear,
Like dying thunder in the breaking air;

Thy foot will ſlide upon the miry ſtone,
And paſſing coaches cruſh thy tortur'd bone,
Or wheels incloſe the road ; on either hand
Pent round with perils, in the midſt you ſtand,
And call for aid in vain ; the coachman ſwears,
And carmen drive, unmindful of thy pray'rs.
Where wilt thou turn ? ah ! whither wilt thou fly !
On ev'ry ſide the preſſing ſpokes are nigh.
So ſailors, while Charybdis' gulph they ſhun,
Amaz'd, on Scylla's craggy dangers run.

Be ſure obſerve where brown Oſtrea ſtands,
Who boaſts her ſhelly ware from Wallfleet ſands,
There may'ſt thou paſs, with ſafe unmiry feet,
Where the rais'd pavement leads athwart the ſtreet.
If where Fleetditch with muddy current flows,
You chance to roam ; where oyſter-tubs in rows
Are rang'd beſide the poſts ; there ſtay thy haſte,
And with the ſav'ry fiſh indulge thy taſte :
The damſel's knife the gaping ſhell commands,
While the ſalt liquor ſtreams between her hands.

The man had ſure a palate cover'd o'er
With braſs or ſteel, that on the rocky ſhore
Firſt broke the oozy oyſter's pearly coat,
And riſk'd the living morſel down his throat.
What will not lux'ry taſte ? Earth, ſea, and air
Are daily ranſack'd for the bill of fare.
Blood ſtuff'd in ſkins is Britiſh Chriſtians' food,
And France robs marſhes of the croaking brood ;
Spungy morels in ſtrong ragouts are found,
And in the ſoup the ſlimy ſnail is drown'd.

When from high ſpouts the daſhing torrents fall,
Ever be watchful to maintain the wall ;

For ſhould'ſt thou quit thy ground, the ruſhing throng
Will with impetuous fury drive along;
All preſs to gain thoſe honours thou haſt loſt,
And rudely ſhove thee far without the poſt.
Then to retrieve the ſhade you ſtrive in vain,
Draggled all o'er, and ſoak'd in floods of rain,
Yet rather bear the ſhow'r, and toils of mud,
Than in the doubtful quarrel riſk thy blood.
O think on Oedipus' deteſted ſtate,
And by his woes be warn'd to ſhun thy fate.

Where three roads join'd he met his ſire unknown;
(Unhappy ſire, and more unhappy ſon!)
Each claim'd the way, their ſwords the ſtrife decide;
The hoary monarch fell, he groan'd, and dy'd!
Hence ſprung the fatal plague that thin'd thy reign,
Thy curſed inceſt, and thy children ſlain!
Hence wert thou doom'd in endleſs night to ſtray,
Through Theban ſtreets, and cheerleſs grope thy way.

Contemplate, mortal, on thy fleeting years;
See, with black train the funeral pomp appears!
Whether ſome heir attends in ſable ſtate,
And mourns with outward grief a parent's fate;
Or the fair virgin, nipt in beauty's bloom,
A croud of lover's follow to her tomb.
Why is the hearſe with 'ſcutcheons blazon'd round,
And with the nodding plume of oſtrich crown'd?
No: The dead know it not, nor profit gain;
It only ſerves to prove the living vain;
How ſhort is life! how frail is human truſt!
Is all this pomp for laying duſt to duſt?

Where the nail'd hoop defends the painted ſtall,
Bruſh not thy ſweeping ſkirt too near the wall;

Thy heedless sleeve will drink the colour'd oil,
And spot indelible thy pocket soil.
Has not wise nature strung the legs and feet
With firmest nerves, design'd to walk the street?
Has she not given us hands to grop aright,
Amidst the frequent dangers of the night?
And think'st thou not the double nostril meant
To warn from oily woes by previous scent?
† Who can the various city-frauds recite,
With all the petty rapines of the night?
Who now the guinea-dropper's bait regards,
Trick'd by the sharper's dice, or juggler's cards?
Why should I warn thee ne'er to join the fray,
Where the sham-quarrel interrupts the way?
Lives there in these our days so soft a clown,
Brav'd by the bully's oaths, or threat'ning frown?
I need not strict enjoin the pocket's care,
When from the crouded play thou lead'st the fair;
Who has not here, or watch, or snuff-box lost,
Or handkerchief that India's shuttle boast?
O! may thy virtue guard thee through the roads
Of Drury's mazy courts, and dark abodes.
The harlots' guileful paths, who nightly stand,
Where Katherine-street descends into the Strand.
Say, vagrant Muse, their wiles and subtile arts,
To lure the strangers unsuspecting hearts:
So shall our youth on healthful sinews tread,
And city-cheeks grow warm with rural red.
'Tis she who nightly strolls with saunt'ring pace,
No stubborn stays her yielding shape embrace;

† Various cheats formerly in practice.

Beneath the lamp her tawdry ribbons glare,
The new-ſcour'd mantua, and the flattern air;
High-draggled petticoats her travels ſhow,
And hollow cheeks with artful bluſhes glow;
With flatt'ring ſounds ſhe ſoothes the cred'lous ear,
My Noble Captain! Charmer! Love! My dear!
In riding-hood near tavern-doors ſhe plies,
Or muffled pinners hide her livid eyes.
With empty band-box ſhe delights to range,
And feigns a diſtant errand from the 'Change;
Nay, ſhe will oft the Quaker's hood profane,
And trudge demure the rounds of Drury-lane.
She darts from ſarſnet ambuſh wily leers,
Twitches thy ſleeve, or with familiar airs
Her fan will pat thy cheek; theſe ſnares diſdain,
Nor gaze behind thee, when ſhe turns again.

I knew a yeoman, who for thirſt of gain,
To the great city drove from Devon's plain
His num'rous lowing herd; his herds he ſold,
And his deep leathern pocket bagg'd with gold:
Drawn by a fraudful nymph, he gaz'd, he ſigh'd;
Unmindful of his home, and diſtant bride;
She leads the willing victim to his doom,
Through winding alleys to her cobweb-room,
Thence through the ſtreet he reels from poſt to poſt,
Valiant with wine, nor knows his treaſure loſt.
The vagrant wretch th' aſſembled watchmen ſpies,
He waves his hanger, and their poles defies;
Deep in the Roundhouſe pent, all night he ſnores,
And the next morn in vain his fate deplores.

Ah hapleſs ſwain, unus'd to pains and ills!
Canſt thou forego roaſt-beef for nauſcous pills?

How wilt thou lift to heav'n thy eyes and hands,
When the long ſcroll the ſurgeon's fees demands!
Or elſe (ye gods avert that worſt diſgrace!)
Thy ruin'd noſe falls level with thy face;
Then ſhall thy wife thy loathſome kiſs diſdain,
And wholeſome neighbours from thy mug refrain.

Yet there are watchmen, who with friendly light
Will teach thy reeling ſteps to tread aright;
For ſixpence will ſupport thy helpleſs arm,
And home conduct thee, ſafe from nightly harm:
But if they ſhake their lanthorns, from afar
To call their brethren to confed'rate war
When rakes reſiſt their pow'r; if hapleſs you
Should chance to wander with the ſcow'ring crew;
Though fortune yield thee captive, ne'er deſpair,
But ſeek the conſtable's confid'rate ear;
He will reverſe the watchman's harſh decree,
Mov'd by the rhet'ric of a ſilver fee.
Thus would you gain ſome fav'rite courtier's word,
Fee not the petty clerks, but bribe my Lord.

Now is the time that rakes their revels keep;
Kindlers of riot, enemies of ſleep.
His ſcatter'd pence the flying Nicker * ſlings,
And with the copper ſhow'r the caſement rings.
Who has not heard the Scowrer's midnight fame?
Who has not trembled at the Mohawks name?
Was there a watchman took his hourly rounds,
Safe from their blows, or new-invented wounds!

* Gentlemen who delighted to break windows with half-pence.

I paſs their deſp'rate deeds, and miſchiefs done,
Where from Snowhill black ſteepy torrents run;
How matrons, hoop'd within the hogſhead's womb,
Were tumbled furious thence, the rolling tomb
O'er the ſtones thunders, bounds from ſide to ſide:
So Regulus to ſave his country dy'd.

Where a dim gleam the paly lanthorn throws
O'er the mid pavement, heapy rubbiſh grows;
Or arched vaults their gaping jaws extend,
Or the dark cave to common ſhores deſcend.
Oft by the winds extinct the ſignal lies,
Or ſmothered in the glimmering ſocket dies,
E'er night has half roll'd round her ebon throne;
In the wide gulph the ſhatter'd coach o'erthrown
Sinks with the ſnorting ſteeds; the reins are broke,
And from the crackling axle flies the ſpoke.
So when ſam'd Eddyſtone's far-ſhooting ray,
That led the ſailor through the ſtormy way,
Was from its rocky roots by billows torn,
And the high turret in the whirlwind borne,
Fleets bulg'd their ſides againſt the craggy land,
And pitchy ruins blacken'd all the ſtrand.

Who then through night would hire the harneſs'd ſteeed,
And who would chuſe the ratt'ling wheel for ſpeed?
But hark! diſtreſs with ſcreaming voice draws nigh'r,
And wakes the ſlumb'ring ſtreet with cries of fire.
At firſt a glowing red enwraps the ſkies,
And borne by winds the ſcatt'ring ſparks ariſe;
From beam to beam the fierce contagion ſpreads;
The ſpiry flames now lift aloft their heads,

Through the burſt ſaſh a blazing deluge pours,
And ſplitting tiles deſcend in rattling ſhow'rs.
Now with thick crouds th' enlighten'd pavement
ſwarms,
The fireman ſweats beneath his crooked arms,
A leathern caſque his vent'rous head defends,
Boldly he climbs where thickeſt ſmoke aſcends;
Mov'd by the mother's ſtreaming eyes and pray'rs,
The helpleſs infant through the flame he bears,
With no leſs virtue, than through hoſtile fire
The Dardan hero bore his aged ſire.
See forceful engines ſpout their levell'd ſtreams,
To quench the blaze that runs along the beams;
The grapling hook plucks rafters from the walls,
And heaps on heaps the ſmoky ruin falls.
Blown by ſtrong winds the fiery tempeſt roars,
Bears down new walls, and pours along the floors;
The heav'ns are all a blaze, the face of night
Is cover'd with a ſanguine dreadful light;
'Twas ſuch a light involv'd thy tow'rs, O Rome,
The dire preſage of mighty Caeſar's doom,
When the ſun veil'd in ruſt his mourning head,
And frightful prodigies the ſkies o'erſpread.
Hark! the drum thunders! far, ye crouds, retire:
Behold! the ready match is tipt with fire,
The nitrous ſtore is laid, the ſmutty train
With running blaze awakes the barrel'd grain;
Flames ſudden wrap the walls; with ſullen ſound
The ſhatter'd pile ſinks on the ſmoaky ground.
So when the years ſhall have revolv'd the date,
Th' inevitable hour of Naples' fate,

Her ſapp'd foundations ſhall with thunders ſhake,
And heave and toſs upon the ſulph'rous lake;
Earth's womb at once the fiery flood ſhall rend,
And in th' abyſs her plunging tow'rs deſcend.
Conſider, reader, what fatigues I've known,
The toils, the perils of the wint'ry town;
What riots ſeen, what buſtling crouds I bor'd,
How oft I croſs'd where carts and coaches roar'd;
Yet ſhall I bleſs my labours, if mankind
Their future ſafety from my dangers find.
Thus the bold traveller, (inur'd to toil,
Whoſe ſteps have printed Aſia's deſert ſoil,
The barb'rous Arabs haunt; or ſhiv'ring croſt
Dark Greenland's mountains of eternal froſt:
Whom providence in length of years reſtores
To the wiſh'd harbour of his native ſhores;)
Sets forth his journals to the public view,
To caution, by his woes, the wand'ring crew.
And now compleat my gen'rous labours lie,
Finiſh'd, and ripe for immortality.
Death ſhall entomb in duſt this mould'ring frame,
But never reach th' eternal part, my fame.
When W* and G**, mighty names, are dead;
Or but at Chelſea under cuſtards read;
When critics crazy bandboxes repair,
And tragedies, turn'd rockets, bounce in air;
High rais'd on Fleetſtreet poſts, conſign'd to fame,
This work ſhall ſhine, and walkers bleſs my name.

EPISTLES

ON

SEVERAL OCCASIONS.

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