

Classic Poetry Series

George Wither

- poems -

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A Christmas Carol

So now is come our joyful'st feast,
Let every man be jolly.
Each room with ivy leaves is drest,
And every post with holly.
Though some churls at our mirth repine,
Round your foreheads garlands twine,
Drown sorrow in a cup of wine,
And let us all be merry.

Now all our neighbors' chimneys smoke,
And Christmas blocks are burning;
Their ovens they with bak'd-meats choke,
And all their spits are turning.
Without the door let sorrow lie,
And if for cold it hap to die,
We'll bury 't in a Christmas pie,
And evermore be merry.

Now every lad is wondrous trim,
And no man minds his labor;
Our lasses have provided them
A bag-pipe and a tabor.
Young men and maids and girls and boys
Give life to one another's joys,
And you anon shall by their noise
Perceive that they are merry.

Rank misers now do sparing shun,
Their hall of music soundeth,
And dogs thence with whole shoulders run,
So all things there aboundeth.
The country folk themselves advance,
For crowdy-mutton's come out of France.
And Jack shall pipe and Jill shall dance,
And all the town be merry.

Ned Swash hath fetch'd his bands from pawn,
And all his best apparel;
Brisk Nell hath bought a ruff of lawn
With droppings of the barrel;
And those that hardly all the year
Had bread to eat or rags to wear,
Will have both clothes and dainty fare,
And all the day be merry.

Now poor men to the justices
With capons make their arrants,
And if they hap to fail of these
They plague them with their warrants.
But now they feed them with good cheer,
And what they want they take in beer,
For Christmas comes but once a year,

And then they shall be merry.

Good farmers in the country nurse
The poor, that else were undone.
Some landlords spend their money worse,
On lust and pride at London.
There the roisters they do play,
Drab and dice their land away,
Which may be ours another day;
And therefore let's be merry.

The client now his suit forbears,
The prisoner's heart is eased,
The debtor drinks away his cares,
And for the time is pleased.
Though others' purses be more fat,
Why should we pine or grieve at that?
Hang sorrow, care will kill a cat,
And therefore let's be merry.

Hark how the wags abroad do call
Each other forth to rambling;
Anon you'll see them in the hall
For nuts and apples scrambling.
Hark how the roofs with laughters sound!
Anon they'll think the house goes round,
For they the cellar's depth have found,
And there they will be merry.

The wenches with their wassail bowls
About the streets are singing,
The boys are come to catch the owls,
The wild mare in is bringing.
Our kitchen boy hath broke his box,
And to the dealing of the ox
Our honest neighbors come by flocks,
And here they will be merry.

Now kings and queens poor sheepcotes have,
And mate with everybody;
The honest now may play the knave,
And wise men play at noddy.
Some youths will now a-mumming go,
Some others play at rowlandhoe,
And twenty other gameboys moe,
Because they will be merry.

Then wherefore in these merry days
Should we, I pray, be duller?
No, let us sing some roundelays
To make our mirth the fuller.
And, whilst thus inspir'd we sing,

Let all the streets with echoes ring,
Woods and hills and everything,
Bear witness we are merry.

George Wither

A Widow's Hymn

How near me came the hand of Death,
When at my side he struck my dear,
And took away the precious breath
Which quicken'd my beloved peer! 1
How helpless am I thereby made!
By day how grieved, by night how sad!
And now my life's delight is gone,
—Alas! how am I left alone!
The voice which I did more esteem
Than music in her sweetest key,
Those eyes which unto me did seem
More comfortable than the day;
Those now by me, as they have been,
Shall never more be heard or seen;
But what I once enjoy'd in them
Shall seem hereafter as a dream.
Lord! keep me faithful to the trust
Which my dear spouse reposed in me:
To him now dead preserve me just
In all that should perform'd be!
For though our being man and wife
Extendeth only to this life,
Yet neither life nor death should end
The being of a faithful friend.

George Wither

I Loved a Lass

I loved a lass, a fair one,
As fair as e'er was seen;
She was indeed a rare one,
Another Sheba Queen:
But, fool as then I was,
I thought she loved me too:
But now, alas! she's left me,
Falero, lero, loo!
Her hair like gold did glister,
Each eye was like a star,
She did surpass her sister,
Which pass'd all others far;
She would me 'honey' call,
She'd—O she'd kiss me too!
But now, alas! she's left me,
Falero, lero, loo!
In summer time to Medley
My love and I would go;
The boatmen there stood read'ly
My love and me to row.
For cream there would we call,
For cakes and for prunes too;
But now, alas! she's left me,
Falero, lero, loo!
Her cheeks were like the cherry,
Her skin was white as snow;
When she was blithe and merry
She angel-like did show;
Her waist exceeding small,
The fives did fit her shoe:
But now, alas! she's left me,
Falero, lero, loo!
In summer time or winter
She had her heart's desire;
I still did scorn to stint her
From sugar, sack, or fire;
The world went round about,
No cares we ever knew:
But now, alas! she's left me,
Falero, lero, loo!
To maidens' vows and swearing
Henceforth no credit give;
You may give them the hearing,
But never them believe;
They are as false as fair,
Unconstant, frail, untrue:
For mine, alas! hath left me,
Falero, lero, loo!

George Wither

Shall I Wasting in Despair

Shall I wasting in despair
Die because a woman's fair?
Or make pale my cheeks with care
'Cause another's rosy are?
Be she fairer than the day,
Or the flow'ry meads in May,
If she be not so to me,
What care I how fair she be?

Shall my heart be griev'd or pin'd
'Cause I see a woman kind?
Or a well-disposed nature
Joined with a lovely feature?
Be she meeker, kinder, than
Turtle dove or pelican,
If she be not so to me,
What care I how kind she be?

Shall a woman's virtues move
Me to perish for her love?
Or her well-deserving known
Make me quite forget mine own?
Be she with that goodness blest
Which may gain her name of best
If she be not such to me,
What care I, how good she be?

'Cause her fortune seems too high
Shall I play the fool and die?
Those that bear a noble mind,
Where they want of riches find,
Think what with them they would
That without them dare to woo;
And unless that mind I see,
What care I how great she be?

Great, or good, or kind, or fair,
I will ne'er the more despair;
If she love me, this believe,
I will die ere she shall grieve;
If she slight me when I woo,
I can scorn and let her go;
For if she be not for me,
What care I for whom she be?

George Wither

The Choice

Me so oft my fancy drew
Here and there, that I ne'er knew
Where to place desire before
So that range it might no more;
But as he that passeth by
Where, in all her jollity,
Flora's riches in a row
Do in seemly order grow,
And a thousand flowers stand
Bending as to kiss his hand;
Out of which delightful store
One he may take and no more;
Long he pausing doubteth whether
Of those fair ones he should gather.
First the Primrose courts his eyes,
Then the Cowslip he espies;
Next the Pansy seems to woo him,
Then Carnations bow unto him;
Which whilst that enamour'd swain
From the stalk intends to strain,
(As half-fearing to be seen)
Prettily her leaves between
Peeps the Violet, pale to see
That her virtues slighted be;
Which so much his liking wins
That to seize her he begins.
Yet before he stoop'd so low
He his wanton eye did throw
On a stem that grew more high,
And the Rose did there espy.
Who, beside her previous scent,
To procure his eyes content
Did display her goodly breast,
Where he found at full exprest
All the good that Nature showers
On a thousand other flowers;
Wherewith he affected takes it,
His belov'd flower he makes it,
And without desire of more
Walks through all he saw before.
So I wand'ring but erewhile
Through the garden of this Isle,
Saw rich beauties, I confess,
And in number numberless:
Yea, so differing lovely too,
That I had a world to do
Ere I could set up my rest,
Where to choose and choose the best.
Thus I fondly fear'd, till Fate
(Which I must confess in that
Did a greater favour to me
Than the world can malice do me)

Show'd to me that matchless flower,
Subject for this song of our;
Whose perfection having eyed,
Reason instantly espied
That Desire, which ranged abroad,
There would find a period:
And no marvel if it might,
For it there hath all delight,
And in her hath nature placed
What each several fair one graced.
Let who list, for me, advance
The admir'd flowers of France,
Let who will praise and behold
The reserv'd Marigold;
Let the sweet-breath'd Violet now
Unto whom she pleaseth bow;
And the fairest Lily spread
Where she will her golden head;
I have such a flower to wear
That for those I do not care.
Let the young and happy swains
Playing on the Britain plains
Court unblamed their shepherdesses,
And with their gold curl'd tresses
Toy uncensured, until I
Grudge at their prosperity.
Let all times, both present, past,
And the age that shall be last,
Vaunt the beauties they bring forth.
I have found in one such worth,
That content I neither care
What the best before me were;
Nor desire to live and see
Who shall fair hereafter be;
For I know the hand of Nature
Will not make a fairer creature.

George Wither

The Lover's Resolution

SHALL I, wasting in despair,
Die because a woman 's fair?
Or make pale my cheeks with care
'Cause another's rosy are?
Be she fairer than the day,
Or the flow'ry meads in May,
If she think not well of me,
What care I how fair she be?

Shall my silly heart be pined
'Cause I see a woman kind?
Or a well disposed nature
Joined with a lovely feature?
Be she meeker, kinder, than
Turtle-dove or pelican,
If she be not so to me,
What care I how kind she be?

Shall a woman's virtues move
Me to perish for her love?
Or her well-deservings known
Make me quite forget my own?
Be she with that goodness blest
Which may merit name of Best,
If she be not such to me,
What care I how good she be?

'Cause her fortune seems too high,
Shall I play the fool and die?
She that bears a noble mind,
If not outward helps she find,
Thinks what with them he would do
That without them dares her woo;
And unless that mind I see,
What care I how great she be?

Great, or good, or kind, or fair,
I will ne'er the more despair;
If she love me, this believe,
I will die ere she shall grieve;
If she slight me when I woo,
I can scorn and let her go;
For if she be not for me,
What care I for whom she be?

George Wither

The Manly Heart

Shall I, wasting in despair,
Die because a woman's fair?
Or my cheeks make pale with care
'Cause another's rosy are?
Be she fairer than the day
Or the flowery meads in May --
If she be not so to me,
What care I how fair she be?

Shall my foolish heart be pined
'Cause I see a woman kind;
Or a well dispos-ed nature
Join-ed with a lovely feature?
Be she meeker, kinder, than
Turtle-dove or pelican,
If she be not so to me,
What care I how kind she be?

Shall a woman's virtues move
Me to perish for her love?
Or her merit's value known
Make me quite forget mine own?
Be she with that goodness blest
Which may gain her name of Best;
If she seem not such to me,
What care I how good she be?

'Cause her fortune seems too high,
Shall I play the fool and die?
Those that bear a noble mind
Where they want of riches find,
Think what with them they would do
Who without them dare to woo;
And unless that mind I see,
What care I though great she be?

Great or good, or kind or fair,
I will ne'er the more despair;
If she love me, this believe,
I will die ere she shall grieve;
If she slight me when I woo,
I can scorn and let her go;
For if she be not for me,
What care I for whom she be?

George Wither

The Marigold

When with a serious musing I behold
The grateful and obsequious marigold,
How duly, ev'ry morning, she displays
Her open breast, when Titan spreads his rays;
How she observes him in his daily walk,
Still bending towards him her tender stalk;
How, when he down declines, she droops and mourns,
Bedew'd, as 'twere, with tears, till he returns;
And how she veils her flow'rs when he is gone,
As if she scorned to be looked on
By an inferior eye, or did contemn
To wait upon a meaner light than him;
When this I meditate, methinks the flowers
Have spirits far more generous than ours,
And give us fair examples to despise
The servile fawnings and idolatries
Wherewith we court these earthly things below,
Which merit not the service we bestow.

But, O my God! though groveling I appear
Upon the ground (and have a rooting here
Which hales me downward) yet in my desire
To that which is above me I aspire;
And all my best affections I profess
To Him that is the sun of righteousness.
Oh, keep the morning of His incarnation,
The burning noontide of His bitter passion,
The night of His descending, and the height
Of His ascension ever in my sight,
That imitating Him in what I may,
I never follow an inferior way.

George Wither

The Steadfast Shepherd

Hence away, thou siren, leave me,
Pish! unclasp those wanton arms,
Sugared words can ne'er deceive me
Though thou prove a thousand charms.
Fie, fie, forbear, no common snare
Can ever my affection chain.
They painted baits and poor deceits
Are all bestowed on me in vain.

I'm no slave to such as you be,
Neither shall that snowy breast,
Rolling eye and lip of ruby,
Ever rob me of my rest.
Go, go, display thy beauty's ray
To some more soon enamoured swain,
Those common wiles of sighs and smiles
Are all bestowed on me in vain.

I have elsewhere vowed a duty,
Turn away that tempting eye,
Show me not a painted beauty,
These impostures I defy.
My spirit loathes where gaudy clothes
And feigned oaths may love obtain.
I love her so, whose looks swear no,
That all your labours will be vain.

George Wither

Time is a Fading-flowre, that's found

Five Termes, there be, which five I doe apply
To all, that was, and is, and shall be done.
The first, and last, is that ETERNITIE,
Which, neither shall have End, nor, was begunne.
BEGINNING, is the next; which, is a space
(Or moment rather) scarce imaginarie,
Made, when the first Materiall, formed was;
And, then, forbidden, longer time time tarry.
TIME entred, when, BEGINNING had an Ending,
And, is a Progresse, all the workes of Nature,
Within the circuit of it, comprehending,
Ev'n till the period, of the Outward-creature.
END, is the fourth, of those five Termes I meane;
(As briefe, as was Beginning) and, ordayned,
To set the last of moments, to that Scaene,
Which, on this Worlds wide Stage, is entertayned.
The fifth, we EVERLASTING, fitly, call;
For, though, it once begunne, yet shall it never
Admit, of any future-end, at all;
But, be extended onward, still, for ever.
The knowledge of these Termes, and of what action,
To each of them belongs, would set an end,
To many Controversies, and Distractions,
Which doe so many trouble, and offend.
TIME'S nature, by the Fading-flowre, appeares;
Which, is a Type, of Transitory things:
The Circled-snake, ETERNITIE declares;
Within whose Round, each fading Creature, springs.
Some Riddles more, to utter, I intended,
But, lo; a sudden stop, my words have ended.

George Wither

Veil, lord, mine eyes till she be past

Veil, Lord, mine eyes till she be past,
When Folly tempts my sight;
Keep Thou my palate and my taste
From gluttonous delight.
Stop Thou mine ear from sirens' songs,
My tongue from lies restrain;
Withhold my hands from doing wrongs,
My feet from courses vain.

Teach, likewise, ev'ry other sense
To act an honest part,
But chiefly settle innocence
And pureness in my heart;
So naught without me or within,
Shall work an ill effect,
By tempting me to act a sin,
Or virtues to neglect.

George Wither