Classic Poetry Series

Samuel Butler

- poems -

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Hudibras, Part I (excerpts)

THE ARGUMENT OF THE FIRST CANTOSir Hudibras his passing worth,
The manner how he sallied forth;
His arms and equipage are shown;
His horse's virtues, and his own.
Th' adventure of the bear and fiddle
Is sung, but breaks off in the middle.
When civil fury first grew high,
And men fell out, they knew not why;
When hard words, jealousies, and fears,
Set folks together by the ears,
And made them fight, like mad or drunk,
For Dame Religion, as for punk;
Whose honesty they all durst swear for,
Though not a man of them knew wherefore:
When Gospel-Trumpeter, surrounded
With long-ear'd rout, to battle sounded,
And pulpit, drum ecclesiastic,
Was beat with fist, instead of a stick;
Then did Sir Knight abandon dwelling,
And out he rode a colonelling.

A wight he was, whose very sight would
Entitle him Mirror of Knighthood;
That never bent his stubborn knee
To any thing but Chivalry;
Nor put up blow, but that which laid
Right worshipful on shoulder-blade;
Chief of domestic knights and errant,
Either for cartel or for warrant;
Great on the bench, great in the saddle,
That could as well bind o'er, as swaddle;
Mighty he was at both of these,
And styl'd of war, as well as peace.
(So some rats, of amphibious nature,
Are either for the land or water).
But here our authors make a doubt
Whether he were more wise, or stout:
Some hold the one, and some the other;
But howsoe'er they make a pother,
The diff'rence was so small, his brain
Outweigh'd his rage but half a grain;
Which made some take him for a tool
That knaves do work with, call'd a fool,
And offer to lay wagers that
As Montaigne, playing with his cat,
Complains she thought him but an ass,
Much more she would Sir Hudibras;
(For that's the name our valiant knight
To all his challenges did write).
But they're mistaken very much,
'Tis plain enough he was no such;
We grant, although he had much wit,

H' was very shy of using it;
As being loth to wear it out,
And therefore bore it not about,
Unless on holy-days, or so,
As men their best apparel do.
Beside, 'tis known he could speak Greek
As naturally as pigs squeak;
That Latin was no more difficile,
Than to a blackbird 'tis to whistle:
Being rich in both, he never scanted
His bounty unto such as wanted;
But much of either would afford
To many, that had not one word.
For Hebrew roots, although th'are found
To flourish most in barren ground,
He had such plenty, as suffic'd
To make some think him circumcis'd;
And truly so, perhaps, he was,
'Tis many a pious Christian's case.

He was in logic a great critic,
Profoundly skill'd in analytic;
He could distinguish, and divide
A hair 'twixt south, and south-west side:
On either which he would dispute,
Confute, change hands, and still confute,
He'd undertake to prove, by force
Of argument, a man's no horse;
He'd prove a buzzard is no fowl,
And that a lord may be an owl,
A calf an alderman, a goose a justice,
And rooks Committee-men and Trustees.
He'd run in debt by disputation,
And pay with ratiocination.
All this by syllogism, true
In mood and figure, he would do.

For rhetoric, he could not ope
His mouth, but out there flew a trope;
And when he happen'd to break off
I' th' middle of his speech, or cough,
H' had hard words, ready to show why,
And tell what rules he did it by;
Else, when with greatest art he spoke,
You'd think he talk'd like other folk,
For all a rhetorician's rules
Teach nothing but to name his tools.
His ordinary rate of speech
In loftiness of sound was rich;
A Babylonish dialect,
Which learned pedants much affect.
It was a parti-colour'd dress

Of patch'd and pie-bald languages;
'Twas English cut on Greek and Latin,
Like fustian heretofore on satin;
It had an odd promiscuous tone,
As if h' had talk'd three parts in one;
Which made some think, when he did gabble,
Th' had heard three labourers of Babel;
Or Cerberus himself pronounce
A leash of languages at once.
This he as volubly would vent
As if his stock would ne'er be spent:
And truly, to support that charge,
He had supplies as vast and large;
For he would coin, or counterfeit
New words, with little or no wit:
Words so debas'd and hard, no stone
Was hard enough to touch them on;
And when with hasty noise he spoke 'em,
The ignorant for current took 'em;
That had the orator, who once
Did fill his mouth with pebble stones
When he harangu'd, but known his phrase
He would have us'd no other ways.

In mathematics he was greater
Than Tycho Brahe, or Erra Pater:
For he, by geometric scale,
Could take the size of pots of ale;
Resolve, by sines and tangents straight,
If bread or butter wanted weight,
And wisely tell what hour o' th' day
The clock does strike by algebra.

Beside, he was a shrewd philosopher,
And had read ev'ry text and gloss over;
Whate'er the crabbed'st author hath,
He understood b' implicit faith:
Whatever sceptic could inquire for,
For ev'ry why he had a wherefore;
Knew more than forty of them do,
As far as words and terms could go.

All which he understood by rote,
And, as occasion serv'd, would quote;
No matter whether right or wrong,
They might be either said or sung.
His notions fitted things so well,
That which was which he could not tell;
But oftentimes mistook th' one
For th' other, as great clerks have done.
He could reduce all things to acts,
And knew their natures by abstracts;

Where entity and quiddity,
The ghosts of defunct bodies fly;
Where truth in person does appear,
Like words congeal'd in northern air.
He knew what's what, and that's as high
As metaphysic wit can fly;
In school-divinity as able
As he that hight Irrefragable;
Profound in all the Nominal
And Real ways, beyond them all:
And with as delicate a hand,
Could twist as tough a rope of sand;
And weave fine cobwebs, fit for skull
That's empty when the moon is full;
Such as take lodgings in a head
That's to be let unfurnished.
He could raise scruples dark and nice,
And after solve 'em in a trice;
As if Divinity had catch'd
The itch, on purpose to be scratch'd;
Or, like a mountebank, did wound
And stab herself with doubts profound,
Only to show with how small pain
The sores of Faith are cur'd again;
Although by woful proof we find,
They always leave a scar behind.
He knew the seat of Paradise,
Could tell in what degree it lies;
And, as he was dispos'd, could prove it,
Below the moon, or else above it.
What Adam dreamt of, when his bride
Came from her closet in his side:
Whether the devil tempted her
By an High Dutch interpreter;
If either of them had a navel:
Who first made music malleable:
Whether the serpent, at the fall,
Had cloven feet, or none at all.
All this, without a gloss, or comment,
He could unriddle in a moment,
In proper terms, such as men smatter
When they throw out, and miss the matter.

For his Religion, it was fit
To match his learning and his wit;
'Twas Presbyterian true blue;
For he was of that stubborn crew
Of errant saints, whom all men grant
To be the true Church Militant;
Such as do build their faith upon
The holy text of pike and gun;
Decide all controversies by

Infallible artillery;
And prove their doctrine orthodox
By apostolic blows and knocks;
Call fire and sword and desolation,
A godly-thorough-reformation,
Which always must be carried on,
And still be doing, never done;
As if religion were intended
For nothing else but to be mended.
A sect, whose chief devotion lies
In odd perverse antipathies;
In falling out with that or this,
And finding somewhat still amiss;
More peevish, cross, and splenetic,
Than dog distract, or monkey sick.
That with more care keep holy-day
The wrong, than others the right way;
Compound for sins they are inclin'd to,
By damning those they have no mind to:
Still so perverse and opposite,
As if they worshipp'd God for spite.
The self-same thing they will abhor
One way, and long another for.
Free-will they one way disavow,
Another, nothing else allow:
All piety consists therein
In them, in other men all sin:
Rather than fail, they will defy
That which they love most tenderly;
Quarrel with minc'd-pies, and disparage
Their best and dearest friend, plum-porridge;
Fat pig and goose itself oppose,
And blaspheme custard through the nose.
Th' apostles of this fierce religion,
Like Mahomet's, were ass and widgeon,
To whom our knight, by fast instinct
Of wit and temper, was so linkt,
As if hypocrisy and nonsense
Had got th' advowson of his conscience.

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Samuel Butler