

Classic Poetry Series

John Taylor
- poems -

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John Taylor(24 August 1578 – 1653)

John Taylor was an English poet who dubbed himself "The Water Poet".

Biography

He was born in Gloucester, 24 August 1578.

After his waterman apprenticeship he served (1596) in Essex's fleet, and was present at Flores in 1597 and at the siege of Cadiz.

He spent much of his life as a Thames waterman, a member of the guild of boatmen that ferried passengers across the River Thames in London, in the days when the London Bridge was the only passage between the banks. He became a member of the ruling oligarchy of the guild, serving as its clerk; it is mainly through his writings that history is familiar with the watermen's disputes of 1641–42, in which an attempt was made to democratize the leadership of the Company. He details the uprisings in the pamphlets *John Taylors Manifestation ...* and *To the Right Honorable Assembly ...* (Commons Petition), and in *John Taylors Last Voyage and Adventure of 1641*.

Taylor discusses the watermen's disputes with the theater companies (who moved the theaters from the south bank to the north in 1612, depriving the ferries of traffic) in *The True Cause of the Watermen's Suit Concerning Players* (written in 1613 or 1614). He also addresses the coachmen, in his tracts *An Errant Thief* (1622) and *The World Runnes on Wheelles* (1623).

Taylor was also the first poet to mention the deaths of William Shakespeare and Francis Beaumont in print, in his 1620 poem, "The Praise of Hemp-seed". Both had died four years earlier.

In paper, many a poet now survives
Or else their lines had perish'd with their lives.
Old Chaucer, Gower, and Sir Thomas More,
Sir Philip Sidney, who the laurel wore,
Spenser, and Shakespeare did in art excell,
Sir Edward Dyer, Greene, Nash, Daniel.
Sylvester, Beaumont, Sir John Harrington,
Forgetfulness their works would over run
But that in paper they immortally
Do live in spite of death, and cannot die.

He was a prolific, if rough-hewn (wit rather than poet), writer with over one hundred and fifty publications in his lifetime. Many were gathered into the compilation *All the Workes of John Taylor the Water Poet* (London, 1630; facsimile reprint Scholar Press, Menston, Yorkshire, 1973); and The Spencer Society brought out their *Works of John Taylor ...* not included in the Folio edition of 1630 (5 volumes, 1870–78). Although his work was not sophisticated, he was a keen observer of people and styles in the seventeenth century, and as such his work is often studied by social historians. One example is his 1621 work *Taylor's Motto*, which included a list of then-current card games and diversions.

He achieved notoriety by a series of eccentric journeys e.g. he travelled from London to Queenborough in a paper boat with two stockfish tied to canes for oars, described in "The Praise of Hemp-Seed", which was re-enacted in 2006.

Taylor is one of the few early authors of a palindrome that can be credited as such: in 1614, he wrote "Lewd did I live, & evil I did dwel." He also wrote a poem about Thomas Parr, a man who supposedly lived to the age of 152. He was also the author of a constructed language called Barmoodan.

Many of Taylor's works were published by subscription; i.e., he would propose a book, ask for contributors, and write it when he had enough subscribers to undertake the printing costs. He had more than sixteen hundred subscribers to *The Pennylesse Pilgrimage; or, the Moneylesse Perambulation of John Taylor, alias the Kings Magesties Water-Poet; How He TRAVAILED on Foot from London to Edenborough in Scotland, Not Carrying any Money To or Fro, Neither Begging, Borrowing, or Asking Meate, Drinke, or Lodging.,* published in 1618. Those who defaulted on the subscription were chided the following year in a scathing brochure entitled *A Kicksey Winsey, or, A Lerry Come-Twang*, which he issued in the following year.

By wondrous accident perchance one may
Grope out a needle in a load of hay;
And though a white crow be exceedingly rare,
A blind man may, by fortune, catch a hare.
- *A Kicksey Winsey* (pt. VII)

From 'The Severall Seiges, Assaults, Sackings, And Finall Destruction Of The Famous, Ancient, And Memorable City Of Jerusalem.'

The Justice, Mercy, and the Might, I sing,
Of heav'ns iust, merciful, Almighty King;
By whose fore-knowledge all things were elected,
Whose power hath all things made & al protected,
Whose mercies' flood hath quencht his iustice flame,
Who was, is, shall be one, and still the same
Who in the prime, when all things first began,
Made all for man, and for himselfe made man,
Made, not begotten, or of humane birth,
No sire but God, no mother but the earth ;
Who ne'r knew childhood, or the sucking teate,
But at the first was made man compleat;
Whose inward soule in God-like forme did shine,
As image of the Maiestie Divine ;
Whose supernaturall wisdom (beyond nature)
Did name each sensible and senceless creature,
And from whose star-like, sand-like generation
Sprung every kindred, kingdome, tribe, and nation.
All people then one language spake alone,
Interpreters the world then needed none ;
There lived then no learned deepe grammarians,
There were no Turkes, no Scythians, no Tartarians
Then all was one, and one was only all
The language of the universall ball.
Then if a traveller had gone as farre
As from the Artick to th' Antartick starre,
If he from Boreas unto Auster went,
Or from the Orient to th' Occident,
Which way soever he did turne or winde,
He had been sure his country-man to find.
One hundred thirty winters since the flood
The earth one onely language understood ;
Vntill the sonne of Cush, the sonne of Cham,
A proud, cloud-scaling towre began to frame,
Trusting that if the world again were drown'd,
He in his lofty building might rest sound;

All future floods he purpos'd to prevent,
Aspiring to heav'n's glorious battlement.
But high Jehovah with a puff was able
To make ambitious Babel but a bable,
(For what is man, that he should dare resist
The great Almighty's pow'r, who in his fist
Doth gripe eternity, and, when he please,
Can make and unmake heav'n and earth & seas ?)
For in their expectation of conclusion
He plag'd them all with sundry tongues' confusion.
Such gibbrish, gibble-gabble, all did fangle,
Some laugh, some fret, all prate, all different wrangle ;
One calls in Hebrew to his working mate,
And he in Welch, Glough whee comrage doth prate ;
Another gapes in English or in Scotch,
And they are answered in the French or Dutch,
Caldiac, Syriacke, and Arabian,
Greeke, Latine, Tuscan, and Armenian,
The Transilvanian, and Hungarian,
The Persian, and the rude Barbarian :
All these, and divers more than I can number,
Misunderstanding tongues did there incumber.

John Taylor

In Praise Of The Hemp-Seed

Tis paper (being printed) doth reveale
Th' Eternall testament of all our weale:
In paper is recorded the records
Of the Great all-Creating Lord of Lords.
Upon this weake ground, strongly is engran'd
The meanes how man was made, and lost, and sav'd,
Bookes Patriarchall, and Prophetical,
Historicall, or heav'nly Mystical,
Evangelicke, and Apostolical,
Writ in the sacred Text, in general.
Much hath the Church (our mother) propagated
By venerable Fathers workes translated
Saint Jerome, Gregory, Ambrose, Augustine,
Saint Basill, Bernard, Cyprian, Constantine:
Eusebius, Epiphanius, Origen,
Ignatius, and Lactantius (reverend men)
Good Luther, Calvine, learned Zwinglius,
Melancton, Beza, Oecolampadius,
These, and a world more then I can recite
Their labours would have slept in endlesse night,
But that in paper they preserv'd have bin
T' instruct us how to shun death, hell, and sin.
How should we know the change of monarchies,
Th' Assyrian, and the Persian Emperies,
Great Alexanders, large, smal lasting glory
Or Romes high Caesars often changing story?
How should Chronologies of Kings be knowne
Of either other countryes, or our owne?
But that Josephus, and Suetanius
Pollidore, Virgil, and Oretlius,
Seneca, and Cornelius Tacitus
With Scaliger, and Quintus Curtius;
Plutarch, Guichiardine, Gallobelgicus
Thomasio, and Hector Boetius;
Fox, Copper, Froysard, Grafton, Fabian,
Hall, Hove'den, Lanquet, Sleiden, Buchanan,
The Reverend learned Cambden, Selden, Stowe,
With Polychronicon, and Speed, and Howe,
With Parris, Malmsbury, and many more

Whose workes in paper are yet extant store.

Philemon Holland (famous for translation)
Hath (with our owne tongue) well inricht our nation.
Esop, and Aristotle, Pliny, Plato,
Pithagoras, and Cicero, and Cato,
Du Bartas, Ariosto, Martial, Tasso,
Plantus, and Homer, Terence, Virgill, Naso,
Fraunciscus Petrark, Horace, Juvenal,
Philosophers, and ex'lent Poets all.

Or Orators, historians, every one
In paper made their worthy studies knowne.

Who ever went beyond our learned King,
Whose Art throughout the spacious world doth ring:
Such a Divine, and Poet, that each State
Admires him, whom they cannot imitate,

In Paper, many a Poet now survives
Or else their lines had perish'd with their lives.
Old Chaucer, Gower, and Sir Thomas More,
Sir Philip Sidney who the Lawrell wore,
Spencer, and Shakespeare did in Art excell,
Sir Edward Dyer, Greene, Nash, Daniell.
Silvester, Beaumont, Sir John Harrington,
Forgetfulnesse their workes would overrun
But that in paper they immortally
Do live in spite of death, and cannot die.

And many there are living at this day
Which do in paper their true worth display:
As Davis, Drayton, and the learned Dun,
Jonson, and Chapman, Marston, Middleton,
With Rowyle, Fletcher, Withers, Messenger,
Heywood, and all the rest where e're they are,
Must say their lines, but for the paper she ete
Had scarcely ground whereon to set their feete.

Acts, Statues, Lawes, would be consum'd and lost
All right and order, topsy-turvy tost:
Oppression, wrong, destruction and confusion,

We'rt not for paper, were the worlds conclusion.
Negotiations, and Embassages
Maps, Cartes, discoveries of strange passages:
Leagues, truces, combinations, and contracts,
Lawes, Nat'rall, Morall, Civill and Divine,
T' instruct, reprove, correct, inlarge, confine.

All Memorandums of forepassed ages,
Sayings and sentences of auncient Sages,
Astronomy, and Phisick much renownd,
The Liberall Arts rules, maxiomes, or ground,
The glory of Apolloes Radiant shine,
Supporter of the Sacred sisters Nine,
The Atlas, that all histories doth beare
Throughout the world, here, there, and every where.

All this and more is paper, and all this,
From fruitfull Hempseed still produced is. . . .

John Taylor

The Description Of Tyburn

I Have heard sundry men oft times dispute
Of trees, that in one year will twice bear fruit.
But if a man note Tyburn, 'will appear,
That that's a tree that bears twelve times a year.
I muse it should so fruitful be, for why
I understand the root of it is dry,
It bears no leaf, no bloom, or no bud,
The rain that makes it fructify is blood.
I further note, the fruit which it produces,
Doth seldom serve for profitable uses:
Except the skillful Surgeons industry
Do make Dissection of Anatomy.
It blooms, buds, and bears, all three together,
And in one hour, doth live, and die, and wither.
Like Sodom Apples, they are in conceit,
For touched, they turn to dust and ashes straight.
Besides I find this tree hath never been
Like other fruit trees, walled or hedged in,
But in the highway standing many a year,
It never yet was robbed, as I could hear.
The reason is apparent to our eyes,
That what it bears, are dead commodities:
And yet sometimes (such grace to it is given)
The dying fruit is well prepared for heaven,
And many times a man may gather thence
Remorse, devotion, and true penitence.
And from that tree, I think more fools ascend
To that Celestial joy, which shall never end:
I say, more fools from thence to heaven do come,
Than from all Churchyards throughout Christendom.
The reason is, the bodies are all dead,
And all the fools to joy or woe are fled.
Perhaps a week, a day, or two, or three,
Before they in the Churchyards buried be.
But at this Tree, in twinkling of an eye,
The soul and body part immediately,
There death the fatal parting blow doth strike,
And in Churchyards is seldom seen the like.
Besides, they are assistant with the alms

Of peoples charitable prayers, and Psalms,
Which are the wings that lift the hov'ring spirit,
By faith, through grace, true glory to inherit.
Concerning this dead fruit, I noted it,
Instead of paste it's put into a pit,
And laid up carefully in any place,
Yet worm-eaten it grows in little space.
My understanding can by no means frame,
To give this Tyburn fruit a fitter name,
Than Medlers, for I find that great and small,
(To my capacity) are Medlers all.
Some say they are Choked pears, and some again
Do call them Hearty Chokes, but 'tis most plain,
It is a kind of Medler it doth bear,
Or else I think it never would come there.
Moreover where it grows, I find it true,
It often turns the Herb of grace to Rue.
Amongst all Pot-herbs growing on the ground,
Time is the least respected, I have found,
And most abused, and therefore one shall see
No branch or bud of it grow near this Tree:
For 'tis occasion of man's greatest crime,
To turn the use, into abuse, of Time.
When passions are let loose without a bridle,
Then precious Time is turned to Love and Idle:
And that's the chiefest reason I can show,
Why fruit so often doth on Tyburn grow.
There are inferior Gallows which bear
(According to the season) twice a year:
And there's a kind of watrish Tree at Wapping,
Whereas Sea-thieves or Pirates are caught napping:
But Tyburn doth deserve before them all
The title and addition capital,
Of Arch or great Grand Gallows of our Land,
Whilst all the rest like ragged Lackeys stand;
It hath (like Luna) full, and change, and quarters,
It (like a Merchant) monthly trucks and barthers;
But all the other Gallows are fit,
Like Chapman, or poor Peddlers onto it.
Thus Jails and Jailers being here explained,
How both are good, and for good use ordained:
All sorts of Hanging which I could surmise,

I likewise have described before your eyes;
And further having showed what Tyburn is,
With many more inferior Gallows,
My pen from paper with this Prayer doth part,
God bless all people from their sins depart.

John Taylor

The Olde, Olde, Very Olde Man; Or The Age And Long Life Of Thomas Parr

Good wholesome labour was his exercise,
Down with the lamb, and with the lark would rise:
In mire and toiling sweat he spent the day,
And to his team he whistled time away:
The cock his night-clock, and till day was done,
His watch and chief sun-dial was the sun.
He was of old Pythagoras' opinion,
That green cheese was most wholesome with an onion;
Coarse meslin bread, and for his daily swig,
Milk, butter-milk, and water, whey and whig:
Sometimes metheglin, and by fortune happy,
He sometimes sipped a cup of ale most nappy,
Cyler or perry, when he did repair
T' Whitson ale, wake, wedding, or a fair;
Or when in Christmas-time he was a guest
At his good landlord's house amongst the rest:
Else he had little leisure-time to waste,
Or at the ale-house huff-cap ale to taste;
His physic was good butter, which the soil
Of Salop yields, more sweet than candy oil;
And garlick he esteemed above the rate
Of Venice treacle, or best mithridate.
He entertained no gout, no ache he felt,
The air was good and temperate where he dwelt;
While mavisses and sweet-tongued nightingales
Did chant him roundelays and madrigals.
Thus living within bounds of nature's laws,
Of his long-lasting life may be some cause.

John Taylor

The Prayse Of The Needle

To all dispersed sorts of arts and trades
I write the needles prayse (that never fades).
So long as children shall be got or borne,
So long as garments shall be made or worne,
So long as hemp or flax, or sheep shall bear
Their linen woolen fleeces yeare by yeare,
So long as silk-wormes, with exhausted spoile,
Of their own entrails for man's gaine shall toyle,
Yea till the world be quite dissolv'd and past,
So long at least, the needles' use shall last.

John Taylor