

London

A Poem in Imitation of the Third Satire of Juvenal
By Samuel Johnson (1738)

Though grief and fondness in my breast rebel,
When injured THALES bids the town farewell,
Yet still my calmer thoughts his choice commend,
I praise the hermit, but regret the friend,
Resolved at length, from vice and LONDON far,
To breathe in distant fields a purer Air,
And, fixed on CAMBRIA's solitary shore,
Give to St. DAVID one *true Briton* more.

For who would leave, unbribed, *Hibernia's* Land,
Or change the rocks of *Scotland* for the *Strand*?
There none are swept by sudden fate away,
But all whom hunger spares, with age decay:
Here malice, rapine, accident, conspire,
And now a rabble rages, now a fire;
Their ambush here relentless ruffians lay,
And here the fell attorney prowls for prey;
Here falling houses thunder on your head,
And here a female atheist talks you dead.

While THALES waits the wherry that contains
Of dissipated wealth the small remains,
On *Thames's* banks, in silent thought we stood,
Where GREENWICH smiles upon the silver flood:
Struck with the seat that gave ELIZA birth,
We kneel, and kiss the consecrated earth;
In pleasing dreams the blissful age renew,
And call BRITANNIA's glories back to view;
Behold her cross triumphant on the main,
The guard of commerce, and the dread of *Spain*,
Ere Masquerades debauched, excise oppressed,
Or *English* honour grew a standing jest.

A transient calm the happy scenes bestow,
And for a moment lull the sense of woe.
At length awaking, with contemptuous frown,
Indignant THALES eyes the neighb'ring town.

“Since worth,” he cries, “in these degen'rate days,
Wants ev'n the cheap reward of empty praise;

7 Cambria: Wales.

8 St. david: patron saint of Wales.

9 Hibernia: Ireland.

10 the Stand: a busy section of London.

23 Queen Elizabeth born at Greenwich. (S. J.)

35 the rest of the poem is a speech by Thales.

In those curst walls, devote to vice and gain,
Since unrewarded science toils in vain;
Since hope but soothes to double my distress,
And ev'ry moment leaves my little less;
While yet my steady steps no staff sustains,
And life still vig'rous revels in my veins;
Grant me, kind heaven, to find some happier place,
Where honesty and sense are no disgrace;
Some pleasing bank where verdant osiers play,
Some peaceful vale with nature's paintings gay;
Where once the harassed BRITON found repose,
And safe in poverty defy'd his foes;
Some secret cell, ye pow'rs, indulgent give.
Let —— live here, for —— has learned to live.
Here let those reign, whom pensions can incite
To vote a patriot black, a courtier white;
Explain their country's dear-bought rights away,
And plead for pirates in the face of day;
With slavish tenets taint our poisoned youth,
And lend a lye the confidence of truth.

Let such raise palaces, and manors buy,
Collect a tax, or farm a lottery,
With warbling eunuchs fill a licens'd stage,
And lull to servitude a thoughtless age.

Heroes, proceed! What bounds your pride shall hold?
What check restrain your thirst of pow'r and gold?
Behold rebellious virtue quite o'erthrown,
Behold our fame, our wealth, our lives your own.

To such, a groaning nation's spoils are giv'n,
When public crimes inflame the wrath of heav'n:
But what, my friend, what hope remains for me,

45 osiers: willows.

47 during the Anglo-Saxon and Danish invasions.

50 the identity of the person referred to – if any specific person is meant – remains obscure.

54 Spain, with the legal right to regulate trade with her American possessions, searched British ships. Johnson's note observes, "The invasions of the Spaniards were defended in the house of Parliament."

59 warbling eunuchs: a reference to the craze for Italian opera;
licensed: censored.

Who start at theft, and blush at perjury?
Who scarce forbear, tho' BRITAIN's court he sing,
To pluck a titled poet's borrowed wing;
A statesman's logic, unconvinc'd can hear,
And dare to slumber o'er the *Gazetteer*;
Despise a fool in half his pension dressed,
And strive in vain to laugh at *H—y's* jest.

Others with softer smiles, and subtler art,
Can sap the principles, or taint the heart;
With more address a lover's note convey,
Or bribe a virgin's innocence away.
Well may they rise, while I, whose rustic tongue
Ne'er knew to puzzle right, or varnish wrong,
Spurn'd as a beggar, dreaded as a spy,
Live unregarded, unlamented die.

For what but social guilt the friend endears?
Who shares *Orgilio's* crimes, his fortune shares.
But thou, should tempting villainy present
All *Marlb'rough* hoarded, or all *Villiers* spent;
Turn from the glitt'ring bribe thy scornful eye,
Nor sell for gold, what gold could never buy,
The peaceful slumber, self-approving day,
Unsullied fame, and conscience ever gay.

The cheated nation's happy fav'rites, see!
Mark whom the great caress, who frown on me!
LONDON! the needy villain's gen'ral home,
The common shore of *Paris* and of *Rome*;
With eager thirst, by folly or by fate,
Sucks in the dregs of each corrupted state.
Forgive my transports on a theme like this,
I cannot bear a *French* metropolis.

72 *Gazetteer*: the paper which at that time contained apologies for the Court. (S.J.) The Daily *Gazetteer*, founded in 1735, was the official newspaper of Walpole's ministry.

74 *H—y's*: John Lord Hervey, who was also attacked by Pope in the Epistle to Arbuthnot.

86 Marloborough: John Churchill, First Duke of Marloborough, a famous general who, Johnson believed, extended wars in order to profiteer from them; Villiers: George Villiers, second Duke of Buckingham.

94 shore: sewer.

Illustrious EDWARD! from the realms of day,
The land of heroes and of saints survey;
Nor hope the *British* lineaments to trace,
The rustic grandeur, or the surly grace;
But lost in thoughtless ease, and empty show,
Behold the warrior dwindled to a beau;
Sense, freedom, piety, refin'd away,
Of FRANCE the mimic, and of SPAIN the prey.

All that at home no more can beg or steal,
Or like a gibbet better than a wheel;
Hiss'd from the stage, or hooted from the court,
Their air, their dress, their politics import;
Obsequious, artful, voluble and gay,
On *Britain's* fond credulity they prey.
No gainful trade their industry can 'scape,
They sing, they dance, clean shoes, or cure a clap;
All sciences a fasting Monsieur knows,
And bid him go to hell, to hell he goes.

Ah! what avails it, that, from slav'ry far,
I drew the breath of life in *English* air;
Was early taught a *Briton's* right to prize,
And lisp the tale of HENRY's victories;
If the gulled conqueror receives the chain,
And flattery subdues when arms are vain?

Studious to please, and ready to submit,
The supple *Gaul* was born a parasite:
Still to his int'rest true, where'er he goes,
Wit, brav'ry, worth, his lavish tongue bestows;
In ev'ry face a thousand graces shine,
From ev'ry tongue flows harmony divine.
These arts in vain our rugged natives try,
Strain out with fault'ring diffidence a lye,
And get a kick for awkward flattery.

Besides, with justice, this discerning age

99 Edward: Edward III, victor at Crecy.

108 the death penalty was implemented in England by a gibbet, in France by the wheel.

114 clap: gonorrhoea.

120 Henry: Henry V, whose greatest victory was at Agincourt.

125 interest: self-interest.

Admires their wond'rous talents for the stage:
Well may they venture on the mimic's art,
Who play from morn to night a borrow'd part;
Practiced their master's notions to embrace,
Repeat his maxims, and reflect his face;
With ev'ry wild absurdity comply,
And view each object with another's eye;
To shake with laughter ere the jest they hear,
To pour at will the counterfeited tear;
And as their patron hints the cold or heat,
To shake in dog-days, in *December* sweat.

How, when competitors like these contend,
Can surly virtue hope to fix a friend?
Slaves that with serious impudence beguile,
And lye without a blush, without a smile;
Exalt each trifle, ev'ry vice adore,
Your taste in snuff, your judgment in a whore;
Can *Balbo's* eloquence applaud, and swear
He gropes his breeches with a monarch's air.

For arts like these preferred, admired, caressed,
They first invade your table, then your breast;
Explore your secrets with insidious art,
Watch the weak hour, and ransack all the heart;
Then soon your ill-placed confidence repay,
Commence your lords, and govern or betray.

By numbers here from shame or censure free,
All crimes are safe, but hated poverty.
This, only this, the rigid law persues,
This, only this, provokes the snarling muse;
The sober trader at a tattered cloak,
Wakes from his dream, and labours for a joke;
With brisker air the silken courtiers gaze,
And turn the varied taunt a thousand ways.
Of all the griefs that harrass the distressed,
Sure the most bitter is a scornful jest;
Fate never wounds more deep the gen'rous heart,
Than when a Blockhead's Insult points the dart.

Has heaven reserved, in pity to the poor,

151 gropes: grasps, touches.

157 Commence: start being.

No pathless waste, or undiscover'd shore?
No secret island in the boundless main?
No peaceful desert yet unclaim'd by SPAIN?
Quick let us rise, the happy seats explore,
And bear oppression's insolence no more.
This mournful truth is ev'ry where confessed,
Slow rises worth, by poverty depressed:
But here more slow, where all are slaves to gold,
Where looks are merchandise, and smiles are sold,
Where won by bribes, by flatteries implor'd,
The groom retails the favours of his lord.

But hark! th' affrighted crowd's tumultuous cries
Roll thro' the streets, and thunder to the skies;
Rais'd from some pleasing dream of wealth and pow'r,
Some pompous palace, or some blissful bor'r,
Aghast you start, and scarce with aching sight,
Sustain th' approaching fire's tremendous light;
Swift from pursuing horrors take your way,
And leave your little ALL to flames a prey;
Then thro' the world a wretched vagrant roam,
For where can starving merit find a home?
In vain your mournful narrative disclose,
While all neglect, and most insult your woes.

Should heaven's just bolts *Orgilio's* wealth confound,
And spread his flaming palace on the ground,
Swift o'er the land the dismal rumor flies,
And public mournings pacify the skies;
The laureat tribe in servile verse relate,
How virtue wars with persecuting fate;
With well-feign'd gratitude the pension's band
Refund the plunder of the begger'd land.
See! while he builds, the gaudy vassals come,
And crowd with sudden wealth the rising dome;
The price of boroughs and of souls restore,
And raise his treasures higher than before.
Now bless'd with all the baubles of the great,
The polish'd marble, and the shining plate,
Orgilio sees the golden pile aspire,
And hopes from angry heav'n another fire.

173 the Spaniards at this time were said to make claim to some of our American provinces. (S.J.)

203 dome: building.

Couldst thou resign the park and play content,
For the fair banks of *Severn* or of *Trent*;
There might'st thou find some elegant retreat,
Some hireling senator's deserted seat;
And stretch thy prospects o'er the smiling land,
For less than rent the dungeons of the *Strand*;
There prune thy walks, support thy drooping flow'rs,
Direct thy rivulets, and twine thy bow'rs;
And, while thy grounds a cheap repast afford,
Despise the dainties of a venal lord:
There ev'ry bush with nature's music rings,
There ev'ry breeze bears health upon its wings;
On all thy hours security shall smile,
And bless thine evening walk and morning toil.

Prepare for death, if here at night you roam,
And sign your will before you sup from home.
Some fiery fop, with new commission vain,
Who sleeps on brambles till he kills his man;
Some frolic drunkard, reeling from a feast,
Provokes a broil, and stabs you for a jest.
Yet ev'n these heroes, mischievously gay,
Lords of the street, and terrors of the way;
Flushed as they are with folly, youth and wine,
Their prudent insults to the poor confine;
Afar they mark the flambeau's bright approach,
And shun the shining train, and golden coach.

In vain, these dangers past, your doors you close,
And hope the balmy blessings of Repose:
Cruel with guilt, and daring with despair,
The midnight murd'rer bursts the faithless bar;
Invades the sacred hour of silent rest,
And plants, unseen, a dagger in your breast.

Scarce can our fields, such crowds at *Tyburn* die,
With Hemp the gallows and the fleet supply.
Propose your schemes, ye senatorian band,
Whose *Ways and Means* support the sinking land;
Lest ropes be wanting in the tempting spring,
To rig another convoy for the K—g.

211 *Severn*: a river running from Wales to the Bristol Channel in England; *Trent*: a river in central England.

225 from: away from.

227 brambles: thorns.

242 *Tyburn*: the place of execution.

245 *Ways and Means*: a cant term in the House of Commons for methods of raising money. (S. J.)

247 there was considerable popular objection to the king's frequent visits to Hanover.

A single jail, in ALFRED's golden reign,
Could half the nation's criminals contain;
Fair justice then, without constraint adored,
Held high the steady scale, but deeped the sword;
No spies were paid, no *special juries* known,
Blessed age! But ah! How diff'rent from our own!

Much could I add, —— but see the boat at hand,
The tide retiring, calls me from the land:
Farewell! —— When youth, and health, and fortune spent,
Thou fly'st for refuge to the wilds of *Kent*;
And tired like me with follies and with crimes,
In angry numbers warn'st succeeding times;
Then shall thy friend, nor thou refuse his aid,
Still foe to vice forsake his *Cambrian* shade;
In virtue's cause once more exert his rage,
Thy satire point, and animate thy page.”

251 deeped the sword: Johnson intended the image of Justice in her traditional posture, her sword held with point on the ground or pointing downward, an image for the suspension of punishment in a golden age.

259 numbers: verses.