

John Gay (1685-1732)

1 *The Country Ballad-singer*

(From *The Shepherd's Week*.)

Sublimer strains, O rustic muse! prepare;
Forget awhile the barn and dairy's care;
Thy homely voice to loftier numbers raise,
The drunkard's flights require sonorous lays;
With Bowzybeus' songs exalt thy verse, 5
While rocks and woods the various notes rehearse.

'Twas in the season when the reapers' toil
Of the ripe harvest 'gan to rid the soil;
Wide through the field was seen a goodly rout,
Clean damsels bound the gathered sheaves about; 10
The lads with sharpened hook and sweating brow
Cut down the labours of the winter plough.

When fast asleep they Bowzybeus spied,
His hat and oaken staff lay close beside;
That Bowzybeus who could sweetly sing, 15
Or with the rosined bow torment the string;
That Bowzybeus who, with fingers' speed,
Could call soft warblings from the breathing reed;
That Bowzybeus who, with jocund tongue,
Ballads, and roundelays, and catches sung; 20
They loudly laugh to see the damsel's fright,
And in disport surround the drunken wight.

Ah, Bowzybee, why didst thou stay so long?
The mugs were large, the drink was wondrous strong!
Thou shouldst have left the fair before 'twas night, 25
But thou sat'st toping till the morning light.

Cicely, brisk maid, steps forth before the rout,
And kissed with smacking lip the snoring lout
(For custom says: 'Whoe'er this venture proves,
For such a kiss demands a pair of gloves'). 30
By her example Dorcas bolder grows,
And plays a tickling straw within his nose.
He rubs his nostril, and in wonted joke
The sneering strains with stammering speech bespoke:

'To you, my lads, I'll sing my carols o'er; 35
As for the maids, I've something else in store.'
No sooner 'gan he raise his tuneful song,
But lads and lasses round about him throng.
Not ballad-singer placed above the crowd
Sings with a note so shrilling sweet and loud; 40
Nor parish-clerk, who calls the psalm so clear,
Like Bowzybeus soothes the attentive ear.
Of nature's laws his carols first begun,
Why the grave owl can never face the sun.
For owls, as swains observe, detest the light, 45
And only sing and seek their prey by night.
How turnips hide their swelling heads below,
And how the closing coleworts upwards grow;
How Will-a-wisp misleads night-faring clowns
O'er hills, and sinking bogs, and pathless downs. 50
Of stars he told that shoot with shining trail,
And of the glowworm's light that gilds his tail.
He sung where wood-cocks in the summer feed,
And in what climates they renew their breed —
Some think to northern coasts their flight they tend, 55
Or to the moon in midnight hours ascend —
Where swallows in the winter's season keep,
And how the drowsy bat and dormouse sleep;
How nature does the puppy's eyelid close,
Till the bright sun has nine times set and rose 60
(For huntsmen by their long experience find,
That puppies still nine rolling suns are blind).
Now he goes on, and sings of fairs and shows,
For still new fairs before his eyes arose.
How pedlers' stalls with glittering toys are laid, 65
The various fairings of the country maid.
Long silken laces hang upon the twine,
And rows of pins and amber bracelets shine;
How the tight lass knives, combs, and scissors spies,
And looks on thimbles with desiring eyes. 70
Of lotteries next with tuneful note he told,
Where silver spoons are won, and rings of gold.
The lads and lasses trudge the street along,
And all the fair is crowded in his song.
The mountebank now treads the stage, and sells 75

His pills, his balsams, and his ague-spells;
Now o'er and o'er the nimble tumbler springs,
And on the rope the venturous maiden swings;
Jack Pudding, in his party-coloured jacket,
Tosses the glove, and jokes at every packet. 80
Of raree-shows he sung, and Punch's feats,
Of pockets picked in crowds, and various cheats.

1714

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Chambers. Vol. 1. London, 1858)