

A. C. Swinburne (1837-1909)

*1 After Death*

The four boards of the coffin lid  
Heard all the dead man did.

The first curse was in his mouth,  
Made of grave's mould and deadly drouth.

The next curse was in his head, 5  
Made of God's work discomfited.

The next curse was in his hands,  
Made out of two grave-bands.

The next curse was in his feet, 10  
Made out of a grave-sheet.

'I had fair coins red and white,  
And my name was as great light;

I had fair clothes green and red,  
And strong gold bound round my head.

But no meat comes in my mouth, 15  
Now I fare as the worm doth;

And no gold binds in my hair,  
Now I fare as the blind fare.

My live thews were of great strength, 20  
Now am I waxen a span's length;

My live sides were full of lust,  
Now are they dried with dust.'

The first board spake and said:  
'Is it best eating flesh or bread?'

The second answered it: 25  
'Is wine or honey the more sweet?'

The third board spake and said:  
'Is red gold worth a girl's gold head?'

The fourth made answer thus: 30  
'All these things are as one with us.'

The dead man asked of them:  
'Is the green land stained brown with flame?'

Have they hewn my son for beasts to eat,  
And my wife's body for beasts' meat?

Have they boiled my maid in a brass pan, 35  
And built a gallows to hang my man?'

The boards said to him:  
'This is a lewd thing that ye deem.'

Your wife has gotten a golden bed,  
All the sheets are sewn with red. 40

Your son has gotten a coat of silk,  
The sleeves are soft as curded milk.

Your maid has gotten a kirtle new,  
All the skirt has braids of blue.

Your man has gotten both ring and glove, 45  
Wrought well for eyes to love.'

The dead man answered thus:

‘What good gift shall God give us?’

The boards answered him anon:

‘Flesh to feed hell’s worm upon.’

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*1866*

(From *Poetical Works. The Complete Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne*. Ed. Sir Edmund Gosse and Thomas James Wise. Vol. 2. London: William Heinemann, 1925)