

Thomas Chatterton (1752-70)

2 *An Excelente Balade of Charitie*

(As wroten bie the gode priest, Thomas Rowley, 1464)

In Virginè the sweltry sun 'gan sheene,  
And hot upon the mees did cast his ray;  
The apple ripened from its paly green,  
And the soft pear did bend the leafy spray;  
The pied chelàndre sung the livelong day; 5  
'Twas now the pride, the manhood of the year,  
And eke the ground was dressed in its most neat aumere.

The sun was gleaming in the midst of day,  
Dead-still the air, and eke the welkin blue,  
When from the sea arose in drear array 10  
A heap of clouds of sable sullen hue,  
The which full fast unto the woodland drew,  
Hiding at once the sunnìs beauteous face,  
And the black tempest swelled, and gathered up apace.

Beneath a holm, fast by a pathway-side, 15  
Which did unto Saint Godwin's convent led,  
A hapless pilgrim moaning did abide,  
Poor in his view, ungentle in his weed,  
Long fillèd with the miseries of need.  
Where from the hailstone could the beggar fly? 20  
He had no houses there, nor any convent nigh.

Look in his clouded face, his sprite there scan;  
How woe-begone, how withered, sapless, dead!  
Haste to thy church-glebe-house, accursèd man!  
Haste to thy kiste, thy only sleeping bed. 25  
Cold as the clay which will grow on thy head  
Is charity and love among high elves;  
Knightìs and barons live for pleasure and themselves.

The gathered storm is ripe; the big drops fall,  
The sun-burnt meadows smoke, and drink the rain; 30

The coming ghastness do the cattle 'pall,  
And the full flocks are driving o'er the plain;  
Dashed from the clouds, the waters fly again;  
The welkin opes; the yellow lightning flies,  
And the hot fiery steam in the wide lowings dies. 35

List! now the thunder's rattling noisy sound  
Moves slowly on, and then embollen clangs,  
Shakes the high spire, and lost, expended, drowned,  
Still on the frightened ear of terror hangs;  
The winds are up; the lofty elmen swangs; 40  
Again the lightning and the thunder pours,  
And the full clouds are burst at once in stony showers.

Spurring his palfrey o'er the watery plain,  
The Abbot of Saint Godwin's convent came;  
His chapournette was drentèd with the rain, 45  
And his pencte girdle met with mickle shame;  
He backwards told his bede-roll at the same  
The storm increases, and he drew aside,  
With the poor aims-crauer near to the holm to bide.

His cloak was all of Lincoln cloth so fine, 50  
With a gold button fastened near his chin,  
His autremete was edged with golden twine,  
And his shoe's peak a loverde's might have been;  
Full well it shewn he thoughten cost no sin.  
The trammels of his palfrey pleased his sight, 55  
For the horse-milliner his head with roses dight.

'An alms, sir priest!' the drooping pilgrim said,  
'Oh! let me wait within your convent-door,  
Till the sun shineth high above our head,  
And the loud tempest of the air is o'er. 60  
Helpless and old am I, alas! and poor.  
No house, no friend, no money in my pouch,  
All that I call my own is this my silver crouche'.

'Varlet!' replied the Abbot, 'cease your din;  
This is no season alms and prayers to give, 65  
My porter never lets a beggar in;

None touch my ring who not in honour live'.  
And now the sun with the black clouds did strive,  
And shedding on the ground his glaring ray;  
The abbot spurred his steed, and eftsoon rode away. 70

Once more the sky was black, the thunder rolled,  
Fast running o'er the plain a priest was seen;  
Not dight full proud, not buttoned up in gold,  
His cope and jape were grey, and eke were clean;  
A limitour he was of order seen; 75  
And from the pathway-side then turnèd he,  
Where the poor beggar lay beneath the elmen tree.

'An alms, sir priest!' the drooping pilgrim said,  
'For sweet Saint Mary and your order sake'.  
The limitour then loosened his pouch-thread, 80  
And did thereout a groat of silver take:  
The needly pilgrim did for halline shake,  
'Here, take this silver, it may ease thy care,  
We are God's stewards all, naught of our own we bear.

But ah! unhappy pilgrim, learn of me. 85  
Scathe any give a rent-roll to their Lord;  
Here, take my semi-cope, thou'rt bare, I see,  
'Tis thine; the saints will give me my reward'.  
He left the pilgrim, and his way aborde.  
Virgin and holy saint, who sit in gloure, 90  
Or give the mighty will, or give the good man power.

1770

(From *The Complete Poetical Works of Thomas Chatterton*. Ed. With a Biographical Introduction, Notes, Glossary and Bibliography by Henry D. Roberts. Vol. II. London: George Routledge & Sons, 1906)