Robert Graves (1895-1985)

1 Alexander and Queen Janet

On Janet come so late	
To their banquet of state	
The angels nobly smile;	
But Alexander thrusts away his plate.	
'Janet, where have you been?	5
Janet, what have you seen?	
Your lover is abashed:	
For want of you we have sat down thirteen.'	
'I have nowhere been,	
And nothing have I seen.	10
Were it not for Alexander	
You had no reason to sit down thirteen.'	
Sweet wine for Janet now,	
Fresh costards from the bough	
Of Paradise, white bread	15
Which they must force between her lips somehow.	
'I could not wish,' says she,	
'For prettier company,	
Angels of light, than yours,	
Yet crystal cups and dishes are not for me.	20
'Though Alexander dine	
On Heaven's own bread and wine,	
And Paradisal fruit,	
Such delicacies are not for me or mine.	
'Do you approve the grace	25
Of my form or my face?	
It springs from earth,' says Janet,	
'And must be welcomed in a greener place.'	

At this the angels hide	
Their proud heads, mortified;	30
Being deep in love with Janet	
And jealous, too, for Alexander's pride.	
Queen Janet softly goes	
Treading on her tip toes	
To the bright table head;	35
She lays before her man a damask rose.	
'Is it still your desire	
To shiver at my fire?	
Then come now, Alexander,	
Or stay and be a monk, or else a friar.'	40
'My lambkin, my sweet,	
I have dined on angels' meat,	
And in you I had trusted	
To attend their call and make my joy complete.'	
'Do you come? Do you stay?	45
Alexander, say!	
For if you will not come	
This gift rose I must surely snatch away.'	
'Janet, how can I come?	
Eat only a crumb	50
Of bread, essay this wine!	
In God's name sit beside me; or be dumb.'	
Her back Janet turns,	
Dumbly she spurns	
The red rose with her shoe;	55
But in each cheek another red rose burns.	
The twelve angels, alas,	
Are brought to a sad pass:	
Their lucent plumage pales,	
Their glittering sapphire eyes go dull as glass.	60
Now Alexander's soul	

Flies up from the brain hole,
To circle like a bat
Above his body threshing past control.

It was Queen Janet's power
Turned the sweet wine sour,
Shrivelled the apples' bloom,
And the bread crumbled into dusty flour.

1958

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