

Robert Southey (1774-1843)

10 *The Old Woman of Berkeley*

A Ballad,

Shewing how an old woman rode double, and who rode before her.

The Raven croak'd as she sate at her meal,
And the Old Woman knew what he said,
And she grew pale at the Raven's tale,
And sicken'd and went to her bed.

"Now fetch me my children, and fetch them with speed," 5
The Old Woman of Berkeley said,
"The Monk my son, and my daughter the Nun,
Bid them hasten or I shall be dead."

The Monk her son, and her daughter the Nun,
Their way to Berkeley went, 10
And they have brought with pious thought
The holy sacrament.

The Old Woman shriek'd as they enter'd her door,
And she cried with a voice of despair,
"Now take away the sacrament, 15
For its presence I cannot bear!"

Her lip it trembled with agony,
The sweat ran down her brow,
"I have tortures in store for evermore,
But spare me, my children, now!" 20

Away they sent the sacrament,
The fit it left her weak,
She look'd at her children with ghastly eyes,
And faintly struggled to speak.

"All kind of sin I have rioted in, 25
And the judgement now must be,
But I secured my children's souls,
Oh! pray, my children, for me!

“I have ’nointed myself with infant’s fat,
The fiends have been my slaves, 30
From sleeping babes I have suck’d the breath,
And breaking by charms the sleep of death,
I have call’d the dead from their graves.

“And the Devil will fetch me now in fire,
My witchcrafts to atone; 35
And I who have troubled the dead man’s grave
Shall never have rest in my own.

“Bless, I entreat, my winding sheet,
My children, I beg of you;
And with holy water sprinkle my shroud, 40
And sprinkle my coffin too.

“And let me be chain’d in my coffin of stone,
And fasten it strong, I implore,
With iron bars, and with three chains,
Chain it to the church floor. 45

“And bless the chains and sprinkle them,
And let fifty Priests stand round,
Who night and day the mass may say,
Where I lie on the ground.

“And see that fifty Choristers 50
Beside the bier attend me,
And day and night by the tapers’ light,
With holy hymns defend me.

“Let the church bells all both great and small,
Be toll’d by night and day, 55
To drive from thence the fiends who come
To bear my body away.

“And ever have the church door barr’d
After the even-song;
And I beseech you, children dear, 60
Let the bars and bolts be strong.

“And let this be three days and nights
My wretched corpse to save;
Till the fourth morning keep me safe,
And then I may rest in my grave.” 65

The Old Woman of Berkeley laid her down,
And her eyes grew deadly dim,
Short came her breath, and the struggle of death
Did loosen every limb.

They blest the old woman’s winding sheet 70
With rites and prayers due,
With holy water they sprinkled her shroud,
And they sprinkled her coffin too.

And they chain’d her in her coffin of stone,
And with iron barr’d it down, 75
And in the church with three strong chains
They chain’d it to the ground.

And they blest the chains and sprinkled them,
And fifty Priests stood round,
By night and day the mass to say 80
Where she lay on the ground.

And fifty sacred Choristers
Beside the bier attend her,
Who day and night by the tapers’ light
Should with holy hymns defend her. 85

To see the Priests and Choristers
It was a goodly sight,
Each holding, as it were a staff,
A taper burning bright.

And the church bells all both great and small, 90
Did toll so loud and long;
And they have barr’d the church door hard,
After the even-song.

And the first night the tapers’ light
Burnt steadily and clear, 95

But they without a hideous rout
 Of angry fiends could hear;

A hideous roar at the church door
 Like a long thunder peal;
 And the priests they pray'd, and the choristers sung 100
 Louder in fearful zeal.

Loud toll'd the bell, the priests pray'd well,
 The tapers they burnt bright,
 The Monk her son, and her daughter the Nun,
 They told their beads all night. 105

The cock he crew, the Fiends they flew
 From the voice of the morning away;
 Then undisturb'd the Choristers sing,
 And the fifty Priests they pray;
 As they had sung and pray'd all night 110
 They pray'd and sung all day.

The second night the tapers' light
 Burnt dismally and blue,
 And every one saw his neighbour's face
 Like a dead man's face to view. 115

And yells and cries without arise
 That the stoutest heart might shock,
 And a deafening roaring like a cataract pouring
 Over a mountain rock.

The Monk and Nun they told their beads 120
 As fast as they could tell,
 And aye as louder grew the noise
 The faster went the bell.

Louder and louder the Choristers sung
 As they trembled more and more, 125
 And the Priests as they pray'd to heaven for aid,
 They smote their breasts full sore.

The cock he crew, the Fiends they flew
 From the voice of the morning away;

Then undisturb'd the Choristers sing, 130
And the fifty Priests they pray;
As they had sung and pray'd all night
They pray'd and sung all day.

The third night came, and the tapers' flame
A frightful stench did make; 135
And they burnt as though they had been dipt
In the burning brimstone lake.

And the loud commotion, like the rushing of ocean,
Grew momentarily more and more;
And strokes as of a battering ram, 140
Did shake the strong church door.

The bellmen, they for very fear
Could toll the bell no longer;
And still as louder grew the strokes,
Their fear it grew the stronger. 145

The Monk and Nun forgot their beads,
They fell on the ground in dismay;
There was not a single Saint in heaven
To whom they did not pray.

And the Choristers' song, which late was so strong, 150
Falter'd with consternation,
For the church did rock as an earthquake shock
Uplifted its foundation.

And a sound was heard like the trumpet's blast,
That shall one day wake the dead; 155
The strong church door could bear no more,
And the bolts and the bars they fled;

And the tapers' light was extinguish'd quite,
And the choristers faintly sung,
And the Priests dismay'd, panted and pray'd, 160
And on all Saints in heaven for aid
They call'd with trembling tongue.

And in He came with eyes of flame,

The Devil to fetch the dead,
And all the church with his presence glow'd 165
Like a fiery furnace red.

He laid his hand on the iron chains,
And like flax they moulder'd asunder,
And the coffin lid, which was barr'd so firm,
He burst with his voice of thunder. 170

And he bade the Old Woman of Berkeley rise,
And come with her master away;
A cold sweat started on that cold corpse,
At the voice she was forced to obey.

She rose on her feet in her winding sheet, 175
Her dead flesh quiver'd with fear,
And a groan like that which the Old Woman gave
Never did mortal hear.

She follow'd her Master to the church door,
There stood a black horse there; 180
His breath was red like furnace smoke,
His eyes like a meteor's glare.

The Devil he flung her on the horse,
And he leapt up before,
And away like the lightning's speed they went, 185
And she was seen no more.

They saw her no more, but her cries
For four miles round they could hear,
And children at rest at their mothers' breast
Started, and scream'd with fear. 190

1798

(From *The Poetical Works of Robert Southey*. Vol. 6.
Collected by Himself. 10 vols. London, 1838)