

Satyr

This is Rochester's best-known poem, and also perhaps his most intellectually ambitious. More than anything else, this represents the libertine desire to free oneself from received opinion and orthodoxies of every kind, religious and ethical as well as sexual.

Sometimes identified as "A Satire [or Satyr] against Reason and Mankind," this poem was probably written in 1674, though it was not printed until after Rochester's death in 1680. We know that it existed no later than February 1675, because Edward Stillingfleet, a prominent preacher in London, referred to the first part, lines 1-173, in a sermon that month. The rest of the poem, lines 174-225, seems to have been written (probably, but not certainly, by Rochester himself) in response to that sermon. (Some manuscript versions of the poem subtitle those lines "Addition" or "The Apology.")

Were I (who to my cost already am
One of those strange, prodigious creatures, man)
A spirit free to choose, for my own share,
What case of flesh and blood I pleased to wear,
I'd be a dog, a monkey or a bear, 5
Or anything but that vain animal
Who is so proud of being rational.
The senses are too gross, and he'll contrive
A sixth, to contradict the other five,
And before certain instinct, will prefer 10
Reason, which fifty times for one does err;
Reason, an *ignis fatuus* in the mind,
Which, leaving light of nature, sense, behind,
Pathless and dangerous wandering ways it takes
Through error's fenny bogs and thorny brakes; 15
Whilst the misguided follower climbs with pain

Mountains of whimses, heaped in his own brain;
Stumbling from thought to thought, falls headlong down
Into doubt's boundless sea, where, like to drown,
Books bear him up a while, and make him try 20
To swim with bladders of philosophy;
In hopes still to o'ertake th' escaping light,
The vapor dances in his dazzling sight
Till, spent, it leaves him to eternal night.
Then old age and experience, hand in hand, 25
Lead him to death, and make him understand,
After a search so painful and so long,
That all his life he has been in the wrong.
Huddled in dirt the reasoning engine lies,
Who was proud, so witty, and so wise. 30

Pride drew him in, as cheats their bubbles catch,
And made him venture to be made a wretch.
His wisdom did his happiness destroy,
Aiming to know that world he should enjoy.
And wit was his vain, frivolous pretense 35
Of pleasing others at his own expense,
For wits are treated just like common whores:
First they're enjoyed, and then kicked out of doors.
The pleasure past, a threatening doubt remains
That frights th' enjoyer with succeeding pains. 40
Women and men of wit are dangerous tools,
And ever fatal to admiring fools:
Pleasure allures, and when the fops escape,
'Tis not that they're belov'd, but fortunate,
And therefore, what they fear at heart, they hate. 45

But now, methinks, some formal band and beard
Takes me to task. Come on, sir; I'm prepared.
"Then, by your favor, anything that's writ
Against this gibing, jingling knack called wit
Likes me abundantly; but you take care 50
Upon this point, not to be too severe.

Perhaps my muse were fitter for this part,
For I profess I can be very smart
On wit, which I abhor with all my heart.
I long to lash it in some sharp essay, 55
But your grand indiscretion bids me stay
And turns my tide of ink another way.
"What rage ferments in your degenerate mind
To make you rail at reason and mankind?
Blest, glorious man! to whom alone kind heaven 60
An everlasting soul has freely given,
Whom his great Maker took such care to make
That from himself he did the image take
And this fair frame in shining reason dressed
To dignify his nature above beast; 65
Reason, by whose aspiring influence
We take a flight beyond material sense
Dive into mysteries, then soaring pierce
The flaming limits of the universe,
Search heaven and hell, find out what's acted there, 70
And give the world true grounds of hope and fear."

Hold, mighty man, I cry, all this we know
From the pathetic pen of Ingelo,
From Patrick's Pilgrim, Sibbes' soliloquies,
And 'tis this very reason I despise: 75
This supernatural gift, that makes a mite
Think he's the image of the infinite,
Comparing his short life, void of all rest,
To the eternal and the ever blest;
This busy, puzzling stirrer-up of doubt 80
That frames deep mysteries, then finds 'em out,
Filling with frantic crowds of thinking fools
Those reverend bedlams, colleges and schools;
Borne on whose wings, each heavy sot can pierce
The limits of the boundless universe; 85
So charming ointments make an old witch fly
And bear a crippled carcass through the sky.

'Tis this exalted power, whose business lies
In nonsense and impossibilities,
This made a whimsical philosopher 90
Before the spacious world, his tub prefer,
And we have modern cloister'd coxcombs who
Retire to think, 'cause they have nought to do.

But thoughts are given for action's government;
Where action ceases, thought's impertinent. 95
Our sphere of action is life's happiness,
And he who thinks beyond, thinks like an ass.
Thus, whilst against false reasoning I inveigh,
I own right reason, which I would obey:
That reason which distinguishes by sense 100
And gives us rules of good and ill from thence,
That bounds desires with a reforming will
To keep 'em more in vigor, not to kill.
Your reason hinders, mine helps to enjoy,
Renewing appetites yours would destroy. 105
My reason is my friend, yours is a cheat;
Hunger calls out, my reason bids me eat;
Perversely, yours your appetite does mock:
This asks for food, that answers, "What's o'clock?"
This plain distinction, sir, your doubt secures: 110
'Tis not true reason I despise, but yours.

Thus I think reason righted, but for man,
I'll ne'er recant; defend him if you can.
For all his pride and his philosophy,
'Tis evident beasts are, in their degree, 115
As wise at least, and better far than he.
Those creatures are the wisest who attain,
By surest means, the ends at which they aim.
If therefore Jowler finds and kills his hares
Better than Meres supplies committee chairs, 120
Though one's a statesman, th' other but a hound,
Jowler, in justice, would be wiser found.

You see how far man's wisdom here extends;
Look next if human nature makes amends:
Whose principles most generous are, and just, 125
And to whose morals you would sooner trust.
Be judge yourself, I'll bring it to the test:
Which is the basest creature, man or beast?
Birds feed on birds, beasts on each other prey,
But savage man alone does man betray. 130
Pressed by necessity, they kill for food;
Man undoes man to do himself no good.
With teeth and claws by nature armed, they hunt
Nature's allowance, to supply their want.
But man, with smiles, embraces, friendship, praise, 135
Inhumanly his fellow's life betrays;
With voluntary pains works his distress,
Not through necessity, but wantonness.
For hunger or for love they fight or tear,
Whilst wretched man is still in arms for fear. 140
For fear he arms, and is of arms afraid,
By fear to fear successively betrayed;
Base fear, the source whence his best passions came:
His boasted honor, and his dear-bought fame;
That lust of power, to which he's a slave, 145
And for the which alone he dares be brave;
To which his various projects are designed;
Which makes him generous, affable, and kind;
For which he takes such pains to be thought wise,
And screws his actions in a forced disguise, 150
Leading a tedious life in misery
Under laborious, mean hypocrisy.
Look to the bottom of his vast design,
Wherein man's wisdom, power, and glory join:
The good he acts, the ill he does endure, 155
'Tis all from fear, to make himself secure.
Merely for safety, after fame we thirst,
For all we would be cowards if they durst.
And honesty's against all common sense:

Men must be knaves, 'tis in their own defence. 160
Mankind's dishonest, if you think it fair
Amongst known cheats to play upon the square,
You'll be undone.

Nor can weak truth your reputation save:
The knaves will all agree to call you knave. 165
Wronged shall he live, insulted o'er, oppressed,
Who dares be less a villain than the rest.

Thus, sir, you see what human nature craves:
Most men are cowards, all men should be knaves.
The difference lies, as far as I can see, 170
Not in the thing itself, but the degree,
And all the subject matter of debate is only:
Who's a knave of the first rate?

All this with indignation have I hurled
At the pretending part of the proud world, 175
Who, swollen with selfish vanity, devise
False freedoms, holy cheats, and formal lies
Over their fellow slaves to tyrannize.
But if in Court so just a man there be
(In Court a just man, yet unknown to me) 180
Who does his needful flattery direct,
Not to oppress and ruin, but protect
(Since flattery, which way soever laid,
Is still a tax on that unhappy trade);
If so upright a statesman you can find, 185
Whose passions bend to his unbiased mind,
Who does his arts and policies apply
To raise his country, not his family,
Nor, whilst his pride owned avarice withstands,
Receives close bribes through friends' corrupted hands – 190
Is there a churchman who on God relies;
Whose life, his faith and doctrine justifies?
Not one blown up with vain prelatic pride,
Who, for reproof of sins, does man deride;

Whose envious heart makes preaching a pretense, 195
With his obstreperous, saucy eloquence,
To chide at kings, and rail at men of sense;
None of that sensual tribe whose talents lie
In avarice, pride, sloth, and gluttony;
Who hunt good livings, but abhor good lives; 200
Whose lust exalted to that height arrives
They act adultery with their own wives,
And ere a score of years completed be,
Can from the lofty pulpit proudly see
Half a large parish their own progeny; 205
Nor doting bishop who would be adored
For domineering at the council board,
A greater fop in business at fourscore,
Fonder of serious toys, affected more,
Than the gay, glittering fool at twenty proves 210
With all his noise, his tawdry clothes, and loves;
But a meek, humble man of honest sense,
Who, preaching peace, does practice continence;
Whose pious life's a proof he does believe
Mysterious truths, which no man can conceive. 215
If upon the earth there dwell such God-like men,
I'll here recant my paradox to them,
Adore those shrines of virtue, homage pay,
And, with the rabble world, their laws obey.
If such there be, yet grant me this at least: 220
Man differs more from man, than man from beast.