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## TOM A BEDLAM

Many lunatics of the seventeenth century were classified, by the primitive social codes of the day, as “sturdy beggars” and on this score were whipped from one town to another till they either died or found miserable refuge in the workhouse of their parish. This song, vividly reminiscent of Edgar’s mad patter as “Poor Tom” in *King Lear*, survives in a single manuscript in the British Museum. A great deal of it makes use of “canting” terms, or thieves’ jargon; it also includes, as in stanza six, some buried learning of the “polite” variety. But its special quality is visionary. This anonymous, dateless, accidentally preserved poem is apocalyptic, free, fiercely ironic, and deeply human.

### Tom a Bedlam

From the hag and hungry goblin  
 That into rags would rend ye,  
 The spirit that stands by the naked man  
 In the book of moons<sup>1</sup> defend ye,  
 5 That of your five sound senses  
 You never be forsaken,  
 Nor wander from yourselves with Tom  
 Abroad to beg your bacon,  
       While I do sing, Any food, any feeding,  
 10       Feeding, drink, or clothing;  
       Come dame or maid, be not afraid,  
       Poor Tom will injure nothing.

Of thirty bare years have I  
 Twice twenty been enraged,  
 15 And of forty been three times fifteen  
 In durance soundly caged  
 On the lordly lofts of Bedlam  
 With stubble soft and dainty,  
 Brave bracelets<sup>2</sup> strong, sweet whips ding dong  
 20 With wholesome hunger plenty,  
       And now I sing, etc.

With a thought I took for Maudlin  
 And a cruse of cockle pottage,<sup>3</sup>  
 With a thing thus tall, sky bless you all,  
 25 I befell into this dotage.  
 I slept not since the Conquest,  
 Till then I never waked,  
 Till the roguish boy of love where I lay  
 Me found and strip’t me naked.  
 30       And now I sing, etc.

1. A book used by gypsy and astrological fortunetellers.

2. Handcuffs, ironically prettified as the straw pallet of the madman is “stubble soft and dainty.”

3. A mess of weeds. Sex and a meager diet have reduced Tom to his present state. The “Conquest” may be either the Norman conquest or an erotic defeat, perhaps both.

When I short have shorn my sow's face  
 And swigged my horny barrel,<sup>4</sup>  
 In an oaken inn I pound my skin<sup>5</sup>  
 As a suit of gilt apparel;  
 35 The moon's my constant mistress  
 And the lovely owl my marrow;<sup>6</sup>  
 The flaming drake and the night crow<sup>7</sup> make  
 Me music to my sorrow.  
           While I do sing, etc.

40 The palsy plagues my pulses  
 When I prig your pigs or pullen,<sup>8</sup>  
 Your culvers<sup>9</sup> take, or matchless make  
 Your chanticleer or sullen.<sup>1</sup>  
 When I want provant with Humphrey I sup,<sup>2</sup>  
 45 And when I am benighted,  
 I walk in Paul's with wandering souls,<sup>3</sup>  
 Yet never am affrighted.  
           But I do sing, etc.

I know more than Apollo,<sup>4</sup>  
 50 For oft when he lies sleeping  
 I see the stars at bloody wars  
 In the wounded welkin weeping;  
 The moon embrace her shepherd,<sup>5</sup>  
 And the queen of love her warrior,<sup>6</sup>  
 55 While the first doth horn the star of morn,  
 And the next the heavenly farrier.<sup>7</sup>  
           While I do sing, etc.

The gypsies, Snap and Pedro,  
 Are none of Tom's comradoes,  
 60 The punk I scorn and the cutpurse sworn,  
 And the roaring boy's bravadoes.<sup>8</sup>  
 The meek, the white, the gentle  
 Me handle, touch, and spare not;  
 But those that cross Tom Rynosseross<sup>9</sup>  
 65 Do what the panther dare not.  
           Although I sing, etc.

4. As a "gentleman of the road," the tramp parodies the amenities of polite travelers by scraping off a few bristles and gulping from a leather pottle.  
 5. The polite traveler pawns (impounds) his suit of clothing to settle his score only an inn, the tramp pawning his skin (all he owns) in a thicket.

6. Wife.

7. The "flaming drake" is a meteor or falling star, the "night crow" an owl, both evil portents.

8. Steal your pigs or poultry.

9. Pigeons.

1. I.e., by stealing hens, I render your rooster a widower, and so sullen.

2. To "dine with Duke Humphrey" is to go hungry.

3. St. Paul's churchyard, supposed to be haunted by ghosts, and perhaps for that reason a good place for a wandering man to get a night's open-air lodging.

4. God of the sun and of daylight; common sense.

5. Diana, goddess of the moon, and her shepherd lover Endymion.

6. Venus and Mars.

7. As the horns of the half-moon sometimes seem to embrace the morning star, so Mars, in the mythology, cuckolds ("horns") Vulcan, the husband of Venus and a heavenly farrier, i.e., blacksmith.

8. A punk is a prostitute, a cutpurse a pickpocket, and a roaring boy a drunken, loud-spoken roisterer.

9. Perhaps "rhinoceros," i.e., thick-skinned Tom, in ironic contrast to the two previous lines. The "panther," because his name in Greek means "all-animal," was often supposed to be the most fearsome of beasts.

With an host of furious fancies  
Whereof I am commander,  
With a burning spear and a horse of air,  
70 To the wilderness I wander.  
By a knight of ghosts and shadows  
I summoned am to a tourney  
Ten leagues beyond the wide world's end:  
Methinks it is no journey.  
75           Yet will I sing, etc.