

Christopher Smart

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Christopher Smart grew up sickly, having been born prematurely in 1722. His weak constitution turned him towards poetry and literature instead of sports. When Smart was eleven, his father died, forcing his mother to sell the main estate. Afterwards, Smart's main monetary benefactor became Henrietta, the Duchess of Cleveland, who funded his education. While attending university, Smart accrued quite a bit of debt. Eventually his debt, habit of praying in public, propensity towards illness, poor mental health, and dislike of clean underwear landed him in a private mental asylum.

While imprisoned, Smart kept a daily poetry log titled *Jubilate Agno* (or *Rejoice in the Lamb*.) The entries cover topics from Smart's daily life to his view of the Christian concept of the Divine. *Jubilate Agno* can be split into two opposing but complementary segments: the parts that begin with "Let," and the parts that begin with "For." The "Let" verses often correlate to the "For" verses; however, parts of the manuscript are missing. The most famous segment of *Jubilate Agno* — and of Christopher Smart's works in general — is an unpaired "For" piece about his cat, Jeffery.

"My Cat Jeffery," as the segment is frequently called, is exactly what it sounds like. The poem is about the heavenly virtues of his cat, entwining Smart's love of animals with his adoration of God. Each line showcases the poet's reverence for both his feline companion and the God in which he believed. While the fragment can feel context-less without the larger scope of the original journal, it endures as his most renowned poem.

Conversely, Smart's "Ode Against Ill-Nature" is perhaps one of the least known of his works. It pre-dates Smart's time in the asylum and is part of a pair, sharing this feature with the overall form of *Jubilate Agno*, demonstrating Smart's love of structure and organization. Originally published in 1752 in Smart's *Poems on Several Occasions*, "Ode Against Ill-Nature" is placed after its opposite, the "Ode on Good-Nature." Both works also sometimes lose the ode part of their title. While the latter poem is kept in simple verses of four lines with a standard rhyme scheme of AABB, the former is completely irregular, with a malleable rhyme scheme and alternating number of lines per verse. As the names suggest, the content within the two poems tackles the same theme from opposing sides; since

the Horatian “Ode on Good-Nature” focuses on what Smart found heavenly and virtuous, the Pindaric “Ode Against Ill-Nature” deals with the vices of humanity, especially in regard to sexuality. Both poems do delve into their opposing subjects, but their subjects are mostly separate.

Further Reading

Gigante, Denise. “Smart’s Powers: *Jubilate Agno*.” *Life: Organic Form and Romanticism*. Yale University Press, 2009, pp. 49-105.

Wild, Min and Noel Chevalier. *Reading Christopher Smart in the Twenty-First Century: “By Succession of Delight.”* Bucknell UP, 2013.

Ode Against Ill-Nature²³⁰

I.

OFFSPRING of Folly²³¹ and of Pride,²³²

To all that's odious, all that's base allied;

Nurs'd up²³³ by Vice, by Pravity²³⁴ misled,

By pedant²³⁵ Affectation²³⁶ taught and bred:

Away, thou hideous hell-born spright,²³⁷ 5

Go, with thy looks of dark design,

Sullen, sour, and saturnine;²³⁸

Fly to some gloomy shade, nor blot the goodly light.

Thy planet was remote²³⁹ when I was born;

'Twas Mercury that rul'd my natal morn, 10

What time the sun exerts his genial ray,

And ripens for enjoyment every growing day;

When to exist is but to love and sing,

And sprightly Aries²⁴⁰ smiles upon the spring.

II.

There in yon²⁴¹ lonesome heath,²⁴²

²³⁰ *Poems on Several Occasions*, 1752, pp. 4–6; *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*

²³¹ *Folly* foolishness

²³² *Pride* Folly, Pride, Vice, and other personified concepts are only capitalized in *A Collection of Poems by Several Hands*, ed. G. Pearch from 1775, and I have added those capitals here

²³³ *Nurs'd up* breastfed, raised

²³⁴ *Pravity* depravity

²³⁵ *Pedant* a person obsessively concerned with details

²³⁶ *Affectation* a constructed, artificial way of speech or manner

²³⁷ *Spright* sprite, a type of fairy or elf

²³⁸ *Saturnine* gloomy, dark

²³⁹ *Thy planet was remote* Saturn

²⁴⁰ *Aries* Western Zodiac sign for April, represented by the ram; sheep bear young in the spring

²⁴¹ *Yon* yonder, over there

²⁴² *Heath* flat land with acidic, infertile soil and low-growing plant life

Which Flora, or Sylvanus²⁴³ never knew, 15
 Where never vegetable drank the dew,
 Or beast, or fowl attempts to breathe;
 Where Nature's pencil has no colours laid;
 But all is blank, and universal shade;
 Contrast to figure, motion, life and light, 20
 There may'st thou vent thy spight,²⁴⁴
 For ever cursing, and for ever curs'd,
 Of all th' infernal crew the worst;
 The worst in genius, measure²⁴⁵ and degree;
 For envy, hatred, malice, are but parts of thee. 25

III.

Or would'st thou change the scene, and quit thy den,
 Behold the heaven-deserted fen,²⁴⁶
 Where spleen,²⁴⁷ by vapours dense begot and bred,
 Hardness of heart, and heaviness of head,
 Have rais'd their darksome walls, and plac'd their thorny bed; 30
 There may'st thou all thy bitterness unload,
 There may'st thou croak, in concert with the toad,
 With thee the hollow howling winds shall join,²⁴⁸
 Nor shall the bittern her base throat deny,
 The querulous frogs shall mix their dirge²⁴⁹ with thine, 35
 Th' ear piercing hern,²⁵⁰ and plover screaming high,

²⁴³ *Flora and Sylvanus* Roman deities of nature and the Spring

²⁴⁴ *Spight* spite

²⁴⁵ *Measure* amount or intensity

²⁴⁶ *Fen* bio-diverse, peat-laden wetlands

²⁴⁷ *Spleen* an organ associated with melancholy, one of the four humours

²⁴⁸ *Join* pronounced as "jine," rhyming with "thine"

²⁴⁹ *Dirge* a mournful lament, often sung

²⁵⁰ *Hern* heron

While million humming gnats fit oestrum²⁵¹ shall supply.

IV.

Away — away — behold an hideous band,

An herd of all thy minions are at hand:

Suspicion first with jealous caution stalks,

And ever looks around her as she walks, 40

With bibulous²⁵² ear imperfect sounds to catch,

And prompt to listen at her neighbour's latch.

Next Scandal's meagre shade,

Foe to the virgins, and the Poet's fame,

A wither'd, time-deflower'd²⁵³ old maid, 45

That ne'er enjoy'd Love's ever sacred flame.

Hypocrisy succeeds with saint-like look,

And elevates her hands, and plods upon her book.

Next comes illiberal scrambling²⁵⁴ Avarice,

Then Vanity and Affectation nice — 50

See, she salutes her shadow with a bow,

As in short Gallic²⁵⁵ trips she minces²⁵⁶ by,

Starting Antipathy²⁵⁷ is in her eye,

And squeamishly she knits her scornful brow.

To thee, Ill-nature, all the numerous group 55

With lowly reverence stoop —

They wait thy call, and mourn thy long delay,

²⁵¹ *Oestrum* a period of heat, or sexual readiness, in mammals

²⁵² *Bibulous* thirsty, drinking

²⁵³ *Deflower'd* having lost one's virginity

²⁵⁴ *Scrambling* to attempt to move upwards by accumulating goods

²⁵⁵ *Gallic* of Gaul, here, to dance or move in a French style

²⁵⁶ *Minces* to walk in small, short steps

²⁵⁷ *Antipathy* a strong feeling of dislike

Away — thou art infectious — haste away.

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