

All Curril's and Osborne's melted brass in one,
 (Blackguard, thought wrong by the young trade, but wronger
 By those whose consciences have eaten longer)
 Have I spared him, when, with a true rogue's awe
 Not of the truth or justice, but the law,
 He lay before my feet, and proffer'd me
 His rascal money for indemnity?
 In scorn I let him go, just taught, it seems,
 How to call people more ingenious names;
 For which, I own, I merit the reproofs
 Of all the world, but those who read his huffs.

Go, you poor wretch,—I mean the spider; go,
 And take care how you bite Sir Hudson Lowe.

SOUTHEOGONY,

OR THE BIRTH OF THE POET LAUREAT.^{*1}

Incipe, parve puer, risu cognoscere matrem.—VIRG.²

Laugh, if you can; but one way or another,
 Do pray, old boy, begin to know your mother.

WE'VE all of us read, in some poet or other,
 That Pallas³ was born without ever a mother;
 And 'tis equally certain, or more certain rather,
 That Mars was produc'd without ever a father:⁴
 For as to old Jupiter's pain in his brows,⁵
 The reason for that might still lie with his spouse;
 And as to his getting the thing in his head,
 It's what many men do, who are not brought to bed:
 Whereas that a son should be born of a lady,
 And none know the father, not even the Cadi,⁶
 Or rather, that there's been no father at all,
 (For it couldn't be Peter, and couldn't be Paul,

* Author: Leigh Hunt / Transcribed and annotated by Giacomo Ferrari.

And then, as the village says, “Who *could* it be?”)
Is a point on which doctors of all sorts agree.

Be this as it may, the immortals above us
Were talking of these things, and saying “Lord love us!”
When Jupiter, coming from council upon ’em,
(You’d have thought that the sound of his step had undone ’em,
But luckily he had escap’d their descriptions)
Said, “What do you say there about my conceptions?”
Conceive, if you can, a strange creature I’ve thought on,
For bard to the era about to be brought on,—
A jumble, a Janus,⁷ a Jack-of-all-trades,
A prostitute pen, yet the prince of old maids;
The ghost of a rhyming Inquisitor’s rack;
A crack on the crown, and a crown on the crack;⁸
A “Honi soit” zealot for Liberty’s charms,
Subsiding in softness beneath the King’s Arms;⁹
The vice contradiction; the virtue in if;
A weathercock image, so solemn and stiff,
Who first holds up one hand, and then holds up t’other,
As pompously fierce for one wind as another;
A mind, like his visage, by nature intended
For something, but left till too late to be mended,
That promises strength, but retreats in weak dudgeon,
The nose of a hawk, and the mouth of a gudgeon;¹⁰
In short, a grotesque, any thing but a true thing,
Part human, part brutal, part flowery, all nothing;
That begins like a man, but possessing no substance,
Runs flourishing off, like the figures on hob-stands,
And foams at a creature that guards t’other side,
To wit, it’s own self, and identical pride.
“I want such a being,” said Jove in conclusion,
“To put, with his praises, his friends in confusion,

And furnish crown'd heads with a shabby phenomenon,
Fit for some certain disasters then coming on."

"I cannot conceive such a being," said Juno:¹¹
"Don't mention," said Venus, "such *juncta in uno*:"¹²
"It's much beyond us," cried the whole of the goddesses,
Bridling, and settling their several boddices.¹³

"Well," cried a damsel, who kept Juno's peacock,
"It seems now as easy to me as *hic hæc hoc*."¹⁴
Good lord! sure my mistress is joking. Why I
Could conceive twenty such, or I'd like to know why.

Now the damsel who thus indiscreetly took on her,
By poets on earth is yclept Mrs. Honour:
But in heav'n, for her airs and her "pompous inanity,"¹⁵
Gods name her rightly, and call the jade Vanity.

"*Do*," said Jove laughing. He took from a shelf
The work of a bard who was big with himself,
And throwing it at her, the girl, as they say,
Seem'd struck of a heap, and look'd down, and said "Hey!"

A ludicrous gravity roll'd in her eyes,
She looks pregnantly vacant, and foolishly wise,
And picking her skirts up, sail'd off through the skies. }
You'd have thought all the Gods would have split 'em for
laughter,
To see her waist first, and herself coming after.

That very day nine weeks, if gossips be right,
My Southey, with green and grey head,¹⁶ came to light;
And 'tis said, that before he had found out his legs,
The rogue taught his grandmother how to suck eggs.¹⁷

EDITORIAL NOTES

¹ Internal evidence and style support Leigh Hunt's authorship of this piece (see William H. Marshall, *Byron, Shelley, Hunt, and The Liberal*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1960, 172). "The Laureat" is the poet laureate Robert Southey (1774-1843), and this verse satire tells of how he, inconceivable to any of the gods, was conceived by Vanity.

² Virgil, "Ecloga IV", 60.

³ In Greek mythology, Pallas is an epithet of the goddess Athena, born from the forehead of Zeus.

⁴ In Ovid's version of the birth of the god Mars, he was born of Juno alone.

⁵ In Greek mythology, the goddess Athena was born from the forehead of Zeus.

⁶ Although the specific reference could not be traced, the "Cadi" is a type of judge in Islamic countries; Cadis are responsible for numerous sentences in *One Thousand and One Nights*, which is probably Hunt's inspiration here.

⁷ In Roman mythology, Janus, the god of beginnings, time, and endings, is usually depicted as having two faces.

⁸ The exact meaning is unclear. However, "crack" was slang for "whore", and "The crack" would mean "the fashionable theme, the go". Therefore, the line probably alludes to Southey's "whorish" subservience to the crown and to his love for the spotlight.

⁹ In the royal coat of arms of the United Kingdom, the motto "Honi soit qui mal y pense" is written on the Garter surrounding the shield and is partly covered by the lion's and the unicorn's forelegs. The motto means "shame on anyone who thinks evil of it [the garter]". Therefore, Hunt's lines probably refer ironically to Southey's renunciation of his former liberal views in favour of conservatism and royalism: the once zealot of Liberty now submits weakly to royal power, just as the famous motto is covered by the beasts' forelegs ("the King's Arms").

¹⁰ A small freshwater fish.

¹¹ In Roman mythology, the wife of Jupiter and goddess of love and marriage.

¹² I.e., "Joined in one"; possibly a reference to the motto of the Order of the Bath (*Tria juncta in uno*, "three joined in one").

¹³ Pieces of clothing traditionally for women and girls, covering the torso from the neck to the waist.

¹⁴ In Latin, quite an easy lesson: the masculine, feminine, and neuter nominatives of the demonstrative pronoun "this".

¹⁵ Perhaps a reference to Samuel Johnson's sentence about James Boswell's *Account of Corsica* (1768): "a farrago of disgusting egotism and pompous inanity" (in Peter Pindar, *A poetical and congratulatory epistle to James Boswell, Esq.*, London: Kearsley, 1786, 21).

¹⁶ In the present context where Southey is described as duplicitous and inconceivable, Hunt describes him as both immature and old ("green and grey head") since birth.

¹⁷ "said to those who presume to offer advice to others who are more experienced", *OED*, "egg (n.)".