

## L8 From such a face whose Excellence

*Notes.* This widely read, politically daring poem is an adaptation of the song “From a gypsy in the morning” performed towards the end of Ben Jonson’s masque *The Gypsies Metamorphosed* (Jonson 367-69). Jonson’s masque was first staged in the summer of 1621, and the libel was thus composed some time between then and, at the very latest, the early summer of 1623, when John Rous secured a copy having heard talk of the poem beforehand (BL Add. MS 28640). The authorship of this poem is uncertain. Various critics have attributed it to Alexander Gill, Ben Jonson himself, and William Drummond (to whom the verse is attributed in one source (Bodleian MS Eng. Poet. c.50)). Although there seems good cause to take Drummond’s candidacy very seriously, critical opinion is generally against it. The poem’s skilled and potent articulation of contemporary anxieties—about the possible homosexual relationship between James I and Buckingham; about the infiltration of the court by the dark forces of “popery” and Hispanophilia during a time of heightened concern about royal foreign policy towards Spain; and about the prevalence of fiscal and judicial corruption and general monarchical neglect—has attracted a significant body of critical and historical analysis. Important readings of the poem can be found in, P. Hammond (141-43); Bellany (Politics 258-260; and McRae (Literature 75-82).

### “The Five Senses”

#### 1. Seeinge

From such a face whose Excellence  
May Captivate my Soveraignes sence  
And make him Phœbus like his throne  
Resigne to him younge Phaëton<sup>1</sup>  
Whose skillesse and unsteaddie hand  
May prove the ruine of a land  
Unlesse great Jove downe from the skye  
Beholding Earthes Calamitie  
Strike with his hand that cannot err  
The proud Usurping Charioter  
And cure though Phœbus greive our woe<sup>2</sup>  
From such a face that cann worke soe

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Wheresoere thou hast a beeing  
Blesse my Sovereaigne, and his seeing.

## 2. Heareinge

From Jeasts prophane, from flattering tongues 15  
From bawdy tales from beastly songs  
From after supper suits that feare  
A Parliament or Councells eare  
From Spanish treaties<sup>3</sup> that may wound  
Our Countries peace the gospell sound<sup>4</sup> 20  
From Jobs false frends<sup>5</sup> that would entice  
My Sovereaigne from Heavens paradise  
From Prophetts such as Ahabs weere<sup>6</sup>  
Whose flatterings sooth my soveraignes eare  
His frownes more then his makers fearing 25  
Blesse my soveraigne, and his heareinge.

## 3. Tastinge

From all fruite that is forbidden  
Such for which old Eve<sup>7</sup> was chidden  
From bread of Laborers sweat, and toyle  
From the widdowes meale, and oyle 30  
From the Canded<sup>8</sup> poyson'd baites  
Of Jesuites<sup>9</sup> and their deceipts  
Italian Salletts,<sup>10</sup> Romish druggs  
The milke of Babells proud whore<sup>11</sup> duggs  
From wyne that can destroye the braine 35  
And from the daingerous figg of Spaine<sup>12</sup>  
Att all banquetts, and all feasting  
Blesse my Sovereaigne, and his tasting.

#### 4. Feelinge

From prick of Conscience such a sting  
As staines the Soule, heavens blesse my King 40  
From such a tribe<sup>13</sup> as may with drawe  
His thoughts from equitie, and lawe  
From such a smooth, and beardlesse Chinn  
As may provoke, or tempt to sinn  
From such a hand whose moyst palme may 45  
My soveraigne lead out of the way  
From things polluted, and uncleane  
From all thats beastly, and obsceane  
From what may sett his Soule a reeling  
Blesse my Soveraigne, and his feeling. 50

#### 5. Smellinge

Where Mirrhe, and frankinsence is throwne  
The altars built to Gods unknowne<sup>14</sup>  
Oh lett my Soveraigne never smell  
Such damn'd perfumes are fitt for hell  
Let noe such scent his nostrills staine 55  
From smells that poyson may the braine  
Heavens still preserve him, Next I crave  
Thou wilt be pleas'd great God to save  
My Soveraigne from a Ganimede<sup>15</sup>  
Whose whoreish breath hath power to lead 60  
His excellence which way it list  
O lett such lipps be never kist  
From a breath soe farr excelling  
Blesse my Soveraigne and his smelling.

On all the Sences

And just God I humblie pray 65  
That thou wilt take the Filme away  
That keeps my Soveraignes eyes from vieweing  
The things that wilbe our undoeing  
Then lett him Heare good God the sounds  
Aswell of Men, as of his hounds 70  
Give him a Taste and tymely too  
Of what his Subjects undergoe  
Give him a Feelinge of there woes  
And noe doubt his royall nose  
Will quickly Smell those rascalls forth 75  
Whose blacke deeds have ecclips't his worth.  
These found, and scourg'd for their offences  
Heavens blesse my Soveraigne, and his sences.

**Source.** Bodleian MS Malone 23, pp. 28-31

**Other known sources.** “Poems from a Seventeenth-Century Manuscript” 136; Bodleian MS Eng. Poet. c.50, fol. 25r; Bodleian MS Eng. Poet. e.37, p. 72; Bodleian MS Rawl. Poet. 26, fol. 72r; Bodleian MS Rawl. Poet. 117, fol. 23v; Bodleian MS Rawl. Poet. 160, fol. 14v; Bodleian MS Tanner 465, fol. 97r; BL Add. MS 22640, fol. 105r; BL Add. MS 23229, fol. 99r; BL Add. MS 25303, fol. 133r; BL MS Egerton 923, fol. 30r; BL MS Harley 367, fol. 153r; BL MS Stowe 962, fol. 144v; Brotherton MS Lt. q. 44, fol. 1r; NLS MS Advocates 19.3.8, fol. 47r; Nottingham MS Portland PW V 37, p. 197; St. John’s MS S.32, fol. 31r; Folger MS V.a.275, p. 175; Folger MS V.a.276, part 2, fol. 40v; Folger MS V.a.339, fol. 25v; Folger MS V.a.345, p. 59; Folger MS X.d.235; Houghton MS Eng. 686, fol. 59v; Huntington MS HM 198, 1.30; Morgan MS MA 1057, p. 80; Rosenbach MS 239/27, p. 58; Rosenbach MS 1083/16, p. 85

<sup>1</sup> *Phæbus like...younge Phaëton*: when Phoebus (Apollo), god of the sun, allowed his son Phaeton to drive the chariot of the sun for a day, the inexperienced Phaeton drove the chariot towards the earth before being struck dead by Jove. The myth was used commonly to articulate fears of the consequences

of King James placing power in the hands of youthful favourites.

<sup>2</sup> *And cure...our woe*: “And cure (though Phœbus greive) our woe” is a better reading.

<sup>3</sup> *Spanish treaties*: alluding, in particular, to the ongoing negotiations for a marriage alliance between England and Spain (see Section N).

<sup>4</sup> *the gospell sound*: the sound of preaching; i.e. Protestantism.

<sup>5</sup> *Jobs false frends*: Job’s three friends Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, who, in the biblical Book of Job, fail to comprehend the reasons for Job’s misfortunes.

<sup>6</sup> *Prophetts...Ahabs weere*: Ahab, the idolatrous King of Israel, took counsel from false prophets who promised him success in a campaign to take Ramoth-Gilead, while ignoring the warnings of the true prophet Micaiah (see 1 Kings 22; 2 Chronicles 18).

<sup>7</sup> *Eve*: who tasted of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden.

<sup>8</sup> *Canded*: candied.

<sup>9</sup> *Jesuites*: the militant Roman Catholic order of the Society of Jesus, widely feared in Protestant circles as the agents of Counter Reformation.

<sup>10</sup> *Italian Salletts*: Italian salads; here meaning popish “poisons”. Italy was widely associated with poisoning in this period.

<sup>11</sup> *Babells proud whore*: the whore of Babylon, widely identified in Protestant polemic with the papacy.

<sup>12</sup> *figg of Spaine*: literally, a fig grown in Spain; here implying both Catholic and Spanish poison, and Catholic and Spanish influence.

<sup>13</sup> *tribe*: “bribe” is a better reading.

<sup>14</sup> *altars...Gods unknowne*: altars built to false gods; here implying Catholicism.

<sup>15</sup> *Ganimede*: the Trojan boy loved by Jove, king of the gods, and a common term in this period for a sodomite.

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