Poets of Devon & Cornwall

Shearsman Classics Vol. 1
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# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexander Barclay (1476-1522)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humfrey Gifford (?1550-1589)</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard Carew (1555-1620)</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sir Walter Ralegh (1555-1618)</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sir Arthur Gorges (?1557-1625)</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George Peele (1558-1598?)</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne Dowriche (1560-1613)</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph Hall (1574-1656)</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Ford (1586-1640)</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William Browne (?1590-1645)</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Herrick (1591-1674)</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William Strode (1602?-1645)</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sidney Godolphin (1610-1643)</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary, Lady Chudleigh (1656-1710)</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Gay (1685-1732)</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834)</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

What room is there in the early 21st century for an anthology of the poets of Devon and Cornwall, where the youngest representative is Coleridge, who died almost 175 years ago? Well, this seemingly arbitrary selection – determined by place, and in which all but four of the authors were born in a sixty-year span – throws up a number of interesting figures who might not otherwise be quite so visible. It also reminds us of the major literary figures who have worked or been born in the two westernmost counties.

The selection begins and ends as it does for two simple reasons: I can find no significant poet prior to Alexander Barclay — although there have been interesting claims for the medieval Gawain poet having lived in Devon — and I wished to avoid the turgid work of the minor Victorian versifiers who seem to have been all too active in the latter part of the 19th century. When I began the selection, I was aware of the west-country origins, or connections, of the major names, but subsequently discovered the work of William Strode, Sir Arthur Gorges and Lady Chudleigh — all fine poets — not to mention John Ford and George Peele, whose Devon origins, and indeed whose non-dramatic verse had previously escaped me. Of the other poets offered here, some are of the very first rank, but all those included have something to offer the lover of poetry — these are not provincial makeweights, even if in some cases their works do not now fall quite as easily on the ear as they might have done in former times.

In the cases of Barclay and Richard Carew, the selections are actually translations, which may seem strange to the modern reader. In Barclay’s case, the translations are decidedly free however, and The Ship of Fools features a number of verses interpolated by the translator, mentioning figures in the Ottery area. Carew’s translation of Tasso, though incomplete, deserves to be better known than as a footnote to Fairfax’s later version, and represents Carew’s talents better than the occasional verses contained in his fascinating Survey of Cornwall.
The most famous figure included in the book is of course Sir Walter Ralegh, a figure almost of fable, given the extent of his exploits. His poetry was much esteemed in his day, at a time when all gentlemen courtiers seem to have been able to turn their hand to the composition of verse, but little of it was published and almost none of it with an incontrovertible attribution. Courtiers of the period usually shunned publication, alas — although we are indebted to Sir Arthur Gorges, Ralegh’s cousin, for compiling a collection of his own poems and translations in manuscript. This leaves the modern editor with a puzzle over which of Ralegh’s poems one might safely include: a recent compilation1 of his poetry was organised on the basis of declining likelihood of authorship. The results are chastening, with only some 35 poems surviving the cull and not all of those being certainties. The quality of these poems is however very high indeed and gives the modern reader some idea of why Ralegh was held in such esteem by major writers such as Spenser and Sidney.

At the other end of the time-scale we have Coleridge, another giant: the selection here concentrates on early works composed in Devon or across the border in Somerset, or on poems with local themes. One great poem thus qualifies: ‘Kubla Khan’, composed while the poet lived on Exmoor.

Robert Herrick should need no introduction. He wrote the majority of his work in Devon, while Vicar of Dean Prior, and he is without doubt one of the great poets of the Caroline era. His contemporary, Sidney Godolphin, who was killed in a Civil War skirmish at Chagford on Dartmoor, is a poet who should be better known, although it is true that not all of his work is of the first rank. There is enough there, however, to make him worthy of our time and attention today.

I would have liked to have been able to include more women poets, but social conventions for most of the period covered here tended to prevent women from publishing their work — which leaves us with only two women, the sternly Protestant Anne Dowriche, and the robust proto-feminist Lady Chudleigh, whose work should be considered amongst
the most significant of her era. Both women deserve inclusion on their own merits.

Of the remaining poets, William Strode is woefully under-rated. Whilst researching this selection I acquired the only collected edition of his poetry, published in 1907, and was surprised to find that the volume still had uncut pages — a sad fate for a poet whose best work is still worth reading today, and whose consignment to oblivion owes more perhaps to the stature of his contemporaries than to any deficiencies in his own work. Then there is William Browne, a significant figure in his day but one whose work is now unfashionable, given its Arcadian pastoral themes. Humfrey Gifford, about whom little is known, and Joseph Hall, Bishop of Exeter while Herrick was at Dean Prior, both offer additional evidence that Devon was hardly lacking in talent in the 16th and 17th centuries.

John Gay was probably the most successful of the poets here in his own time, in terms of sales and broader reputation. A populist, as befits the author of *The Beggar’s Opera*, much of his other work does not survive the passage of time well, but a small selection such as that offered here gives a fascinating glimpse into the world of 18th century London.

The poems selected for this anthology have been lightly updated, modern spelling being applied except in cases where the scansion would be adversely affected, but period punctuation has been retained where I have been able to verify its accuracy.

The Shearsman Classics series — which is not devoted solely to regional writers — will include individual volumes dedicated to some of these poets, beginning with Herrick in 2007; books devoted to Chudleigh and Strode will follow in 2008.

Tony Frazer, Exeter, 2007

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Alexander Barclay

Alexander Barclay was born around 1476. His place of birth is disputed, but one source who seems to have known him said that was born “beyonde the cold river of Twede”, i.e. in Scotland. His early years were spent in Croydon, and at some point he took a degree. He was ordained in 1508.

Barclay was appointed chaplain of the college of Ottery St Mary in the first decade of the 1500s. There, in 1509, he wrote his satirical poem, *The Ship of Fools*, a free translation from Sebastian Brant’s German poem *Das Narrenschiff* (1494), which was popular throughout Europe at that time, although Barclay seems to have based his version more on the Latin translation than on the German original. *The Ship of Fools* was as popular in Barclay’s version as it had been in Germany, and it marked the beginning of a new satirical literature in English.

In 1513, Barclay seems to have become a monk in the Benedictine monastery of Ely. It was probably here that he wrote his *Eclogues* (translations from Italian), but in 1520 “Maistre Barkleye, the Blacke Monke and Poete” was requested to devise “histoires and convenient raisons to florisshe the buildings and banquet house withal” at the meeting between Henry VIII and François I at the Field of the Cloth of Gold.

It is presumed that he went along with the religious changes as, under Edward VI, he retained the livings of Great Baddow and of Wookey, and acquired the rectory of All Hallows, in London’s Lombard Street, in 1552. Shortly after this last preferment, he died at Croydon, where he was buried.

The text offered here retains some old spellings where the scansion demands it, or where no modern version exists. Sometimes, every syllable in a word should be pronounced, as if the word were French: thus *occasion* is not o-KAY-zhun, but o-KA(Y)-zee-on, and *devotion* is dee-VO-see-on.

**Further Reading:**


from *The Ship of Fools*

*Here begynneth the foles and first inprofytable bokes*

I am like other clerks which so frowardly them guide.  
That after they are honest come unto promotion  
They give them to pleasure their study set aside.  
Their avarice covering with feigned devotion.  
Yet daily they preach: and have great derision  
Against the rude laymen: and all for covetyse.  
Though their own conscience be blinded with that vice.

But if I durst trouth plainly utter and express.  
This is the special cause of this inconvenience.  
That greatest fools, and fullest of lewdness  
Havinge least wit: and simplest science  
Are first promoted: and have greatest reverence  
For if one can flatter, and bear a hawk on his fist  
He shall be made Parson of Honiton or of Clyst.

But he that is in study ay firm and diligent.  
And without all favour preacheth Christus lore  
Of all the comontye nowadays is sore shent.  
And by estates threatened to prison oft therefore.  
Thus what avail is it, to us to study more:  
To know other scripture, truth, wisdom, or virtue  
Since few, or none without favour dare them shew.

But O noble Doctors, that worthy are of name:  
Consider our old fathers: note well their diligence:  
Ensue ye their steps: obtain ye such fame,  
As they did living: and that by true prudence.  
Within their hearts they planted their science  
And not in pleasant books. But now too few such be.  
Therefore in this ship let them come row with me.

*[frowardly: perversely; covetyse: covet; comontye: community;  
shent: put to shame/disgraced; ensue: follow]*
Of leapings and dances and fools that pass
their time in such vanity.

Those folys a place may challenge in my ship
Which void of wisdom as men out of their mind
Them self delight to dance to leap and skip
In compass running like to the world wide
In unkind labour, such folys pleasure find
Running about in this their furious vice
Like as it were in Bacchus’ sacrifice

Or as the druydans runneth in vain about
In their mad feasts upon the hill of yde
Making their sacrifice with furore noise and shout
Whan their madness setteth their wit aside
Or when the priests of mars all night abide
Within their temple by use abominable
To their idolys doing their service detestable

Like as these paynyms hath to their idols done
Their sacrifice wand’ring in their madness
Their bodies wearying, in vain wasting their shone
So do these folys them self to dancing dress
Seeking occasion of great unhappiness
They take such labour without all hope of gain
Without reward sure, of wearyness and pain

Say folys that use this fury and outrage
What causeth you to have delight therein
For your great labour say what is your wage
Forsooth ye can thereby no profit win
But seek occasion (as I have said) of sin
And for thy wearing thy feet thus in the dust
Thou gettest no gain but cause of carnal lust
But when I consider of this foolish game
The first beginning and cause original
I say the cause thereof is worthy blame
For when the devil to deceive man mortal
And do contempt to the high god eternal
Upon a stage had set a calf of gold.
That every man the same might clear behold

So than the fend ground of misgovernment
Caused the people this figure to honour
As for their god and before the same to dance.
When they were drunken, thus fell they in error
Of idolatry, and forgot their creator.
Before this idol dancing both wife and man
Despising God: Thus dancing first began

Such blind folyes and inconvenience
Engendreth great hurt and incommodity
And seweth seed whereof growtheth great offence
The ground of vice and of all enormity
In it is pride, foul lust and lechery
And while lewd leaps are usèd in the dance
Oft froward bargains are made by countenance

What else is dancing but even a nursery
Or else a bait to purchase and maintain
In young hearts the vile sin of ribaldry
Them fest’ring therein, as in a deadly chain
And to say truth in words clear and plain
Venereous people have all their whole pleasance
Their vice to nourish by this unthrifty dance

And wanton people disposèd unto sin
To satisfy their mad concupiscence
With hasty course unto this dancing ryn
To seek occasion of vile sin and offence
And to express my mind in short sentence
This vicious game oft times doth attyse
By his lewd signs, chaste heartis unto vice

Than it in earth no game is more damnable
It seemeth no peace, but battle openly
They that it use of minds seem unstable
As mad folk runnng with clamour shout and cry
What place is void of this furious folly
None: so that I doubt within a while
These folys the holy church shall defile

Of people what sort or order may we find
Rich or poor high or low of name
But by their foolishness, and wanton mind
Of each sort some are given unto the same
The priestis and clerks to dance have no shame
The frere or monk in his frock and cowl
Must dance in his dortor leaping to play the fool

To it cometh children, maids and wives.
And flattering young men to see to have their prey
The hand in hand great falsehood oft contrives
The old queen also this madness will assay
And the old dotard though he skantly may
For age and lameness steer other foot or hand
Yet playeth he the fool with other in the band

Than leap they about as folk past their mind
With madness amazèd running in compace
He most is commended that can most lewdness find
Or can most quickly run about the place
There are all manners usèd that lack grace
Moving their bodies in signs full of shame
Which doth their hearts to sin right sore inflame
So oft this vice doth many one abuse
That when they are departed from the dance
On lust and sin continually they muse
Having therein their will and their pleasance
Than fall they oft to great misgovernance
As folys given to work unprofitable
So in my ship they well deserve a babel.

***

[druydans: druids; yde: probably ‘Ides,’ as in Ides, a druidic festival day; idolys: idols; paynys: pagans, heathens; fend: either fiend/fiendish, or defended; froward: perverse; ryn: run; attys: entice; heartis: hearts; folys: fools; priestis: priests; frier: friar; dortor: dormitory; compace: compass; ]

The Envoy of Barclay to The Fools

Ye obstinate folys that often fall in vice
How long shall ye keep this froward ignorance
Submit your minds, and so from sin arise
Let meekness slake your mad misgovernance
Remember that worldly pain it grievance
To be compared to hell which hath no peer
There is still pain, this is a short penance
Wherefore correct thy self while thou art here.
Sir Arthur Gorges

Sir Arthur Gorges was born in 1557, most probably at the family manor house in Butshead, outside Plymouth, although claims have been made for his birth in Dorset. He was cousin to Sir Walter Ralegh and, like Ralegh, was one of the gentleman-volunteers to battle against the Spanish Armada. In 1597 he commanded the War-Spite, the ship in which Raleigh sailed as Vice Admiral under Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, on the Islands voyage. Gorges was knighted in 1597. His first wife Douglas Howard, whom he married in 1584, was a great beauty, and was the subject of a famous poem by Edmund Spenser upon her early death. Gorges remarried in 1597.

In 1611, with Sir Walter Cope, he was one of the founders of a central office for the transaction and registration of the sale of land, tenements, and goods, and also mercantile and other businesses, called ‘The Publicke Register for Generall Commerce’. He was MP for five different constituencies between 1584 and 1601.

His own poems have sometimes been confused with those of Ralegh, and his poem ‘The gentle season of the year...’ – in fact partly a translation from the French – had at times been ascribed to Sir Philip Sidney, but matters became much clearer in 1940 when his collected poems, Vannetyes and Toyes of Yowth, were discovered in manuscript. Two of the poems were in the author’s own hand, and many of the others bore his autograph emendations. Gorges was also a translator, producing a version of Lucan’s Pharsalia, and several versions of French poems, which are scattered throughout his Vannetyes. He died in 1625.

Further reading:
Raymond Gorges: The Story of a Family Through Eleven Centuries (privately printed, Boston, 1944)
The gentle season of the year
The gentle season of the year
hath made the blooming branch appear
and beautified the lands with flowers
The air doth savour with delight
the heavens do smile to see the sight
and yet mine eyes augment their showers

The meadows mantled all with green
the trembling leaves have clothed the treen
the birds with feathers new do sing
But I poor soul whom wrong doth wrack
attire myself in mourning black
whose leaf doth fall amidst his spring

And as we see the scarlet rose
in this sweet prime his bud disclose
whose hue is with the sun revived
So in this April of mine age
my lively colour doth assuage
because my sunshine is deprived

My heart that wanted was of yore
light as the wind to range and sore
in every place where beauty springs
Now only hovers over you
even as a bird that’s taken new
and flutters but with clippèd wings

When all men else are bent to sport
then pensive I alone resort
into some solitary walk
As doth the doleful turtledove
who having lost her faithful love
sits mourning on some withered stalk
There to myself do I recount
how far my woes my joys surmount
how love requiteth me with hate
how all my pleasures end in pain
how happ doth show my hope but vain
how fortune frowns upon my state

And in this mood charged with despair
with vapoured sighs I dim the air
and to the gods make this request
That by the ending of my life
I may have truce with this strange strife
and bring my soul to better rest.

[treem: trees]

She that holds me under the laws of love
on whom my mournful verse so oft complains
For those strange griefs that I through wrong do prove
she is the court wherein my life remains
She is my prince of whom I would deserve
and she alone to me can favour lend
She hath for courtiers thousands that do serve
and only on her eyes for looks attend
Unto her love we would as fain aspire
as others would in Court to honours rise
And as disgrace makes courtiers to retire
so do her frowns cause malcontents likewise
Like to the court she is unconstant and unkind
But from the court differs in this alone
That in the court men hope reward to find
But following her such hope remaineth none
From your fair eyes the kindling sparks were sent
From your fair eyes the kindling sparks were sent
that first did set my fancy on a fire
before which time I knew not what it meant
to burn in love and languish in desire
But daily now as in your face I see
those graces grow, that makes you more to shine
so daily doth new flames arise in me
and more and more, consume this breast of mine
Now are they grown so far into extremes
that greater rage, with life I may not taste
then do you not increase, in beauty’s beams
Except you would my limbs to cinders waste
Yet better ’twere, that I should perish so
than you to lose such praise and glory due
although a mean to help all this I know
if love with beauty might increase in you
Which if it fail, then love thou wantst device
that canst not make her subject to thy bow
whose gentle heart was never framed of ice
although her breast resemble driven snow.

Since course of kind ordains it to be so
Since course of kind ordains it to be so
that strongest steel should yield unto the flame
and every metal that in mine doth grow
doth want the power for to resist the same
Then do not blame this human heart of mine
To yield unto the force of flames divine.
And since likewise by proof and daily view
we find the fire to have such secret power
to try the gold were it be false or true
and basest dross from finest silver scour
Then be assured true is this heart of mine
That so is tried in flames that are divine.

But therewithall sweet friend you must presume
that as the fire can metals melt and try
So will the force thereof each thing consume
that therein doth too long a season lie
Then save with speed the heart more yours than mine
Which else consumes amidst these flames divine.

_My heart I have oftimes bid thee beware_

My heart I have oftimes bid thee beware
how thou becamst subject to cruel love
But of my words thou never tookest care
alluring hope, thy fancy so did move
Wherefore my heart, the harm remains to me
but thine the blame, if I a captive be.

Why say you so what fault was it of mine
to yield when I did find my self betrayed
Nay rather blame those spiaalls false of thine
that led me on where beauty ambush laid
Those eyes I mean that bribèd were so oft
with smiling looks sent from a murdering thought

And call to count the trumpet of thy mind
who did so friendly sound unto thy foes
That tongue of thine who trait'rously inclined
in parley did thy secrets all disclose
And thy right hand (who if the truth were known)
did oft subscribe, more yours than mine own

Why then my heart this last farewell receive
and ye false limbs that be betrayèd so
Alas sweet life as yet do not us leave
for though perchance may’st find a friendly foe
Who of her grace to thee may freedom give
in hope thereof I am content to live.

Retire from me you pensive thoughts awhile
Retire from me you pensive thoughts awhile
decayers of my youth my strength and lively blood
And let sweet sleep my troubled head beguile
whilst you go bathe yourselves in Lethe’s flood
Or if not so, till I have taken rest
my thoughts go lodge within my mistress’ breast

Make known to her my wounds as yet but green
disclose the sparks not grown to be a flame
Which time itself will make too plainly seen
except I cloak these griefs of mine with game
A ready way to fly not find relief
for who will rue on him that hides his grief

Therefore my thoughts perform this last request
of my true heart a thrall become to love
that she may know from whence comes my unrest
as well as I her beauty’s force do prove
Then will I hope this happy end to see
pity in her, and joy to reign in me

Until which time I vow to roam about
in deserted woods till life with love be spent
Where none but love shall know to find me out
nor love himself, but from my mistress sent
For whose sweet sake to show on me her power
my weal for woe, my sweet I change for sour

And more then that for though through her disdain
She chance to clip the wings off my desire
And of my hope throw out the latter main
and force with shame my fancies to retire
Yet shall my love not end with loss of breath
for thou my soul shalt serve her after death

The unripe fruits of wanton youth’s desire

The unripe fruits of wanton youth’s desire
so diff’rent are to use from that they seem
As when we do unto their height aspire
then most we loathe that we most dear did deem
To find ourselves so blinded in conceit
instead of food to fawn on flatt’ring bait

To hunters’ sports these joys compared may be
who with delight, so long in chase do run
As that their game before their face do fly
but lose their sport when they their prey have won
Then reason would that we should toys neglect
as are but shows and nothing in effect
Whose small abode doth yield no more content
  then lickerish meats, that do the palate please
Whose pleasure fades, when as their taste is spent
  and only serve to nourish one disease
Whose count well made, low grief is all the gain
  where fading joys are bought with lasting pain

Yet well I wote that when these lines of mine
  shall come before my mistress' carping eyes
She will me taunt and say the fox is fine
  that loves no grapes because they hang too high
And seem to make that dainty to be found
  which all men see grow rife, upon the ground

[lickerish: tasty]

Sonnet

When at your hands of love the sugared fruit
  I did request in guerdon of my truth
You did allege to hinder such my suit
  good fame which did surpass delights of youth
But as a man I pleasure did prefer
  with those sweet joys which I in love do find
Before those dreams that make us think we err
  and live in awe of words that are but wind
For frankly speak and then sweet friend tell me
  in these great terms of fame what proof is found
That doth delight or with our sense agree
  on old wives' tales, a fancy vain you ground
For in conceit alone doth fame consist
  But pleasure you may taste of if you list.

[guerdon: reward, recompense; list: wish/desire]