Classics of the Alcohol Literature

A Sixteenth-Century English Alewife and Her Customers—Skelton’s *Tunnyng of Elynour Rummyng*

BRITANNICARUM literarum lumen ac decus—thus the great Erasmus referred to John Skelton (1460?–1529), the tutor of Henry Duke of York who was later to be King Henry VIII. Skelton was one of the ablest satirists of his age and received much recognition during his lifetime. His most famous poems were attacks on Cardinal Wolsey who once had been his friend.

Skelton’s light sketching of characters may have been influenced by French writers but his subjects and ideas show more of the influence of the German satirist Sebastian Brant.

One of Skelton’s most popular productions was his poem *The Tunnyng* of *Elynour Rummyng*, an alewife who apparently kept an alehouse a few miles from Henry VIII’s castle Nonsuch. This poem is presented here as descriptive of the kind of folk who gathered at low-class alehouses of the sixteenth century. It was “...a lewde sorte | To Elynour resorte,” and lewd, in Skelton’s times, did not mean so much lascivious but rather of lowly order.

It is interesting that nearly all who turn up at Elynour’s place were women. It was a place to go to for gossiping as well as for ale. No ceremony, no formality; women came in any kind of old rags, even “unbrased.” The good alewife was not much neater than her patrons. Her ale might have been a tasty brew but also certainly an unhygienic one.

Did the customers drink much? They “...drynke tyll they stare.” Some of them were chronic alcoholics, such as the woman who “...dranke so of the dregges | The cropy was in her legges.” The custom of women frequenting the alehouse was perhaps not universally accepted, for “Some, lothe to be espyde, | Start in at the backe syde.”

The text of the poem is reprinted here from Alexander Dyce’s edition of *The Poetical Works of John Skelton* (London; Thomas Rodd, 1843).

E. M. J.

*Brewing.*
Tell you I chyll,
If that ye wyll
A whyle be styll,
Of a comely gyll
That dwelt on a hyll:
But she is not gyll,
For she is somwhat sage
And well wore in age;
For her vysage
It would aswage
A mannes courage.

Her lothely lere
Is nothyngge clere,
But ugly of chere,
Droupy and drowsy,
Scurvy and lwysy;
Her face all bowsy,
Comely crynklyd,
Woundersly wrenkled,
Lyke a rost pygyes eare,
Brystled wyth here.

Her lewde lyppes twayne,
They slaver, men sayne,
Lyke a ropy rayne,
A gummy glayre:
She is ugly freyre;
Her nose somdele hoked,
And camously croked,
Never stoppyng,
But ever droppynge;
Her skynne lose and slacke,
Grained lyke a sacke;
With a croked backe.

Her eyen gowndy
Are full unsowndy,
For they are blered;
And she gray hered;
Jawed lyke a jetty;
A man would hawe pytty

To se how she is gumbe,
Fyngere and thumbe,
Gently ioynted,
Greesed and annoynted
Up to the knockels;
The bones [of] her huckels
Lyke as they were with buckels
Togyther made fast:
Her youth is farre past:
Foted lyke a plane,
Legged lyke a crane;
And yet she wyll iet,
Lyke a lolly fet,
In her furred flocket,
And gray russet rocket,
With symper the cocket.
Her huke of Lyncole grene,
It had ben hers, I wene,
More then forty yere;
And so doth it apere,
For the grene bare thredes
Loke lyke se re wedes,
Wyddered lyke hay,
The woll wore away;
And yet I dare saye
She thynketh herselfe gaye
Upon the holy daye,
Whan she doth her aray,
And gyrdeth in her gytes
Styched and pranked with pletes;
Her kyrtel Brystow red,
With clothes upon her hed
That wy a sowe of led,
Wrythen in wonder wyse,
After the Sarasyngs gyse,
With a whynm wham,
Knyt with a trym tram,
Upon her brayne pan,
Lyke an Egyptian,
Capped about:
When she goeth out
Herselfe for to shewe,
She dryveth downe the dewe
Wyth a payre of heles
As brode as two whelles;

She hobles as a gose
With her blanket hose
Over the falowe;
Her shone smered wyth talowe,
Gresed upon dyrt
That baudeth her skyrt.

**Primus Passus**

And this comely dame,
I understande, her name
is Elynour Rummynge,
At home in her wonnynge;
And as men say
She dwelt in Sothray
In a certayne stede
Bysyde Lederhede.
She is a tonnysh gyb;
The devyll and she be syb.

But to make up my tale,
She breweth noppie ale,
And maketh therof port sale
To travellars, to tynkers,
To sweters, to swynkers,
And all good ale drynkers,
That wyll nothe nying spare,
But drynke tyll they stare
And brynge themselfe bare,
With, Now away the mare,
And let us sley care,
As wyse as an hare!

Come who so wyll
To Elynour on the hyll,
Wyth, Fyll the cup, fyll,
And syt there by styll,
Erly and late:
Thyther cometh Kate,
Cysy, and Sare,
With thayr legges bare,
And also thayr fete
Hardely full unsweete;
Wyth thayr heles dagged,
Thayr kyrtelles all to-aggged,
Thayr smockes all to-ragged,

Wyth tytters and tatters,
Brynge dysshes and platters,
Wyth all thayr myght runnynge
To Elynour Rummynge,
To have of her tunnynge:
She leneth them on the same
And thus begynneth the game.

Some wenches come unlasd,
Some huswyves come unbrased,
Wyth thayr naked pappes,
That flyppes and flappes;
It wygges and it waggges,
Lyke tawny saffron bagges;
A sorte of foule drabbes
All scurvy with scabbes:
Some by flybytten,
Some skewed as a kyten;
Some wyth a sho clout
Bynde thayr heddes about;
Some have no herelace,
Thayr lockes about thayr face,
Thayr tresses untrust,
All full of unlust;
Some loke strawry,
Some cawry mawry;
Full untody tegges,
Lyke rotten eggges.
Suche a lewde sorte
To Elynour resorte
From tyde to tyde:
Abyde, abyde,
And to you shall be tolde
Howe hyr ale is solde
To Mawte and to Molde.
Secundus Passus

Some have no mony
That thyder commy,
For theyr ale to pay,
That is a shreud aray;
Elynour swered, Nay,
Ye shall not bære away
My ale for nought;
By hym that me bought!
   With, Hey, dogge, hay,
Have these hoggges away!
With, Get me a staffe,
The swyne eate my drafte!
Stryke the hoggges with a clube,
They have dronke up my swyllynge
tubbe!
For, be there never so much prese,
These swyne go to the hye dese,
The sowe with her pygges;
The børe his tayle wrygges,
His rumpe also he frygges
Agaynst the hye benche!
With, Fo, ther is a stenche!
Gather up, thou wenche;
Seest thou not what is fall?
Take up dyrt and all,
And bere out of the hall:
God gyve it yll preynge
Clenely as yvell chevynghe!
   But let us turne playne,
There we lefte agayne.
For, as yll a patch as that,
The hennes run in the mashfat;
For they go to roust
Streyght over the ale ioust,
And donge, whan it commes,
In the ale tunnes,
Than Elynour taketh
The mashe bolle, and shaketh
The hennes donge away,
And skommeth it into a tray
Whereas the yeest is,
With her mauney fystis:
And somtyme she blennes

The donge of her hennes
And the ale together;
And sayeth, Gossip, come hyther,
This ale shall be thynke,
And flooure the more quicker;
For I may tell you,
I lerned it of a Jewe,
When I began to brewe,
And I have founde it true;
Drinke now whyle it is new;
And ye may it broke,
It shall make you loke
Yonger than ye be
Yeres two or thre,
For ye may prove it by me;
Beholde, she sayde, and se
How bryght I am of ble!
Ich am not cast away,
That can my husband say,
When we kys and play
In lust and in lykyng;
He calleth me his whytyng
Hiss mulleng and his mytyng,
Hiss nobbes and his conny,
His swetyng and his honny,
With, Bas, my pretty bonny,
Thou art worth good and monny.
This make I my falyre fonny,
Til that he dreme and dronny;
For, after all our sport,
Than wyll he rout and snort;
Than swetely together we ly,
As two pygges in a sty.
To cease me semeth best,
And of this tale to rest,
And for to leve this letter,
Because it is no better,
And because it is no swetter;
We wyll no farther ryme
Of it at this tyme;
But we wyll turne playne
Where we left agayne.
Tertius Passus

Instede of coyne and monny,
Some brynge her a conny,
And some a pot with honny,
Some a salt, and some a spone,
Some theyr hose, some theyr shone;
Some ran a good trot
With a skellet or a pot;
Some fyll theyr pot full
Of good Lemster woll:
An huswyfe of trust,
Whan she is a thrust,
Suche a webbe can spyn,
Her thryft is full thyn.
    Some go streyght thyder,
Be it slaty or slyder;
They holde the hye waye,
They care not what men say,
Be that as be maye;
Some, lothe to be espyde,
Start in at the backe syde,
Over the hedge and pale,
And all for the good ale.
    Some renne tyll they swete,
Brynge wyth them malte or whete,
And dame Elynour entrete
To byrle them of the best.
    Than cometh an other gest;
She swered by the rode of rest,
Her lyppes are so drye,
Without drynke she must dye;
Therefore fyll it by and by,
And have here a pecke of ry.
    Anone cometh another,
As drye as the other,
And wyth her doth brynge
Mele, salte, or other thynge,
Her harvest gyrdle, her weddynge rynge,
To pay for her scot
As cometh to her lot.
Some bryngeth her husbandes hood,
Because the ale is good;
Another brought her his cap
To offer to the ale tap,
Wyth flaxe and wyth towe;
And some brought sowre dowe;
Wyth, Hey, and wyth, howe,
Syt we downe a rowe,
And drynke tyll we blowe,
And pype tyrly tyrlowe!
    Some layde to pledge
Theyr hatchet and theyr wedge,
Theyr hekell and theyr rele,
Theyr rocke, theyr spynnyng whele;
And some went so narrowe,
They layde to pledge theyr wharowe,
Theyr rybskyn and theyr spyndell,
Theyr nedell and theyr thymbell:
Here was scant thryft
Whan they made suche shyft.
    Theyr thrust was so great,
They asked never for mete,
But drynke, styl drynke,
And let the cat wynke,
Let us washe our gommes
From the drye crommes.

Quartus Passus

Some for very nede
Layde downe a skyne of threde,
And some a skyne of yarne;
Some brought from the barne
Both benes and pease;
Small chaffer doth ease
Sometyme, now and than:
Another there was that ran
With a good brasse pan;
Her colour was full wan;
She ran in all the hast
Unbrased and unlast;
Tawny, swart, and sallowe,
Lyke a cake of tallowe;
I swere by all hallow,
It was a stale to take
The devyll in a brake.
    And than came halting Jone,
And brought a gambone
Of bakon that was resty:
But, Lorde, as she was testy,
Angry as a waspy!
She began to yane and gaspy,
And bad Elynour go bet,
And fyll in good met;
It was dere that was farre fet.
    Another brought a spycke
Of a bacon flycke;
Her tonge was verye quycke,
But she spake somwhat thycke:
Her felow did stammer and stutter,
But she was a foule slut,
For her mouth fomyed.
And her bely groaned:
Jone sayne she had eaten a fyest;
By Christ, sayde she, thou lyest;
I have as swete a breth
As thou, wyth shamfull deth!
    Than Elynour sayde, Ye callettes,
I shall breake your palettes,
Wythout ye now cease!
And so was made the peace.
    Than thyder came dronken Ales;
And she was full of tales,

Of tydynes in Wales,
And of saint James in Gales,
And of the Portyngales;
Wyth, Lo, gossyp, I wys,
Thus and thus it is,
There hath ben great war
Betwene Temple Bar
And the Crosse in Chepe,
And there came an hepe
Of mylstones in a route:
She speketh thus in her snout,
Snevelyng in her nose;
As though she had the pose;
Lo, here is an olde typpet,
And ye wyll gyve me a syppet
Of your stale ale,
God sende you good sale!
And as she was dryngynge,
She fyll in a wynkyng
Wyth a barlyhood,
She pysst where she stood;
Than began she to wepe,
And forthwyth fell on slepe.
Elynour toke her up,
And blessed her wyth a cup
Of newe ale in cornes;
Ales founde therin no thornes,
But supped it up at ones,
She founde therin no bones.

Quintus Passus

Nowe in cometh another rabell;
Fyrst one wyth a ladell,
Another wyth a craddell,
And wyth a syde sadell:
And there began a fabell,
A clatterynge and a babell
Of folys fylly
That had a folle wyth wylyly,
With, Iast you, and, gup, gylly!
She coulde not lye stylyly.
    Then came in a genet,

And sware by saynt Benet,
I dranke not this sennet
A draught to my pay;
Elynour, I the pray,
Of thyne ale let us assay,
And have here a pylche of gray;
I were skynnes of connyn,
That causeth I loke so donny.
    Another than dyd hyche her,
And brought a pottel pycher,
A tonnel, and a bottell,
But she had lost the stoppell;
She cut of her sho sole,
And stopped therwyt the hole.

Amonge all the blommer,
Another brought a skommer,
A fryinge pan, and a slyce;
Elynour made the Pryce
For good ale eche whyt.

Than sterte in mad Kyt,
That had lyttle wyt;
She semed somdele seke,
And brought a penye cheke
To dame Elynour,
For a draught of lycour.

Than Margery Mylkeducke
Her kyrtell she did uptucke
An ynche above her kne,
Her legges that ye myght se;
But they were sturdy and stubbed,
Myghty pestels and clubbed,
As fayre and as whyte
As the fote of a kyte:
She was somwhat foule,
Crokeneked lyke an oule;
And yet she brought her fees,
A cantell of Essex chese
Was wel a fote thycke,
Full of maggottes quycke;
It was huge and greate,
And myghty stronge meate
For the devyll to eate;
It was tart and punyete.

Another sorte of slutttes,
Some brought walnuttet,
Some apples, some peres,
Some brought theyr cluppyng sheres,
Some brought this and that,
Some brought I wote nere what,
Some brought theyr husbandes hat,
Some podynges and lynkes,
Some trypes that stynkes.

But of all this thronge
One came them amonge,
She semed halfe a leche,
And began to preche
Of the tewsdaye in the weke
Whan the mare doth keke;
Of the vertue of an unas leke;
Of her husbandes breke;
Wyth the feders of a quale
She could to Burdeus sayle;
And wyth good ale barme
She could make a charme
To helpe wythall a stytch:
She semed to be a wytch.

Another brought two goslynges,
That were noughty froshlynges;
She brought them in a wallet,
She was a cumly callet:
The goslings were untyde;
Elynour began to chyde,
They be wretchockes thou hast
brought,
They are shyre shakynge nought!

Maude Ruggye thyther skypped:
She was ugly hypped,
And ugly thyecke lypped,
Lyke an onyon syded,
Lyke tan ledder hyded:
She had her so guyded
Betwene the cup and the wall,
That she was there wythall
Into a palsey fall;

Wyth that her hed shaked,
And her handes quaked:
Ones hed wold have aked
To see her naked:
She dranke so of the dregges,
The dropsy was in her legges;
Her face glystrynge lyke glas;
All foggy fat she was;
She had also the gout
In all her ioynete about;  
Her breth was soure and stale,  
And smelled all of ale:  
Such a bedfellow  
Wold make one cast his craw;  
But yet for all that  
She dranke on the mash fat.  
   There came an old rybybe;  
She halted of a kybe,  
She had broken her shyne  
At the threashold comyng in,  
And fell so wyde open  
That one myght se her token,  
The devyll thereon be wroken!  
What nede all this be spoken?  
She yelled lyke a calfe:  
Ryse up, on Gods halfe,  
Said Elynour Rummyng,  
I beshrew the for thy cummyng!  
And as she at her did pluck,  
Quake, quake, sayde the duck  
In that lampatrams lap;  
Wyth, Fy, cover thy shap  
Wyth sum flyp flap!  
God gyve it yll hap,  
Sayde Elynour for shame,  
Lyke an honest dame.  
Up she stert, halfe lame,  
And skantly could go  
For payne and for wo.  
   In came another dant,  
Wyth a gose and a gant:  
She had a wide wesant;  
She was nothyng plesant;  
Necked lyke an olyfant;  
It was a bullyfant;  
A gredy cormerant.  
   Another brought her garlyke hedes;  
Another brought her bedes  
Of ict or of cole,  
To offer to the ale pole:  
Some brought a wymble,  
Some brought a thymble,  
Some brought a sylke lace,  
Some brought a pyncase,  
Some her husbands cowne,  
Some a pyllow of dowe,  
Some of the napery;  
And all this shyfte they make  
For the good ale sake.  
A strawe, sayde Bele, stande utter,  
For we have egges and butter,  
And of pygeons a payre.  
   Than sterte forth a fysgygge,  
And she brought a bore pygge;  
The fleshe thereof was ranke,  
And her brethe strongly stanke,  
Yet, or she went, she dranke,  
And gat her great thanke  
Of Elynour for her ware,  
That she thyther bare  
To pay for her share.  
Now truly, to my thynkyng,  
This is a solempe drinkynge.  

**Septimus Passus**

Soft, quod one, hyght Sybbyll,  
And let me wyth you hybbill.  
She sat downe in the place,  
With a sory face,  
Wheywormed about;  
Garnysched was her snout  
Wyth here and there a puscull,  
Lyke a scabbyd muscull.  
This ale, sayde she, is nappy;  
Let us syppe and soppie,  
And not spyll a droppie,  
For so mote I hoppy,  
It coeth well my croppie.  
   Dame Elynoure, sayde she,  
Have here is for me,  
A cloute of London pynnes;  
And wyth that she begynnes  
The pot to her plucke,
And dranke a good lucke;  
She swynged up a quarte 
At ones for her parte;  
Her paunch was so puffed,  
And so wyth ale stuffed,  
Had she not hyed apace,  
She had defoyled the place.  

Than began the sporte  
Amonge that dronken sorte:  
Dame Eleynour, sayde they,  
Lende here a cocke of hey,  
To make all thynge cleane;  
Ye wote well what we meane.  

But, syr, among all  
That sat in that hall,  
There was a pryckemedenty,  
Sat lyke a seynty,  
And began to paynty,  
As though she would faynty;  
She made it as koy  
As a lege de moy;  
She was not halfe so wyse  
As she was pevysshe nyse.  
She sayde never a worde,  
But rose from the borde,  
And called for our dame,  
Eleynour by name.  
We supposed, I wys,  
That she rose to pys;  

But the very grounde  
Was for to compounde  
Wyth Eleynour in the spence,  
To pay for her expence;  
I have no penny nor grote  
To pay, sayde she, God wote,  
For washyng of my throte;  
But my bedes of amber  
Bere them to your chamber.  
Then Eleynour dyd them hyde  
Within her beddes syde.  

But some than sat ryght sad  
That nothyng had  
There of theyr awne,  
Neyther gelt nor pawne;  
Suche were there menny  
That had not a penny,  
But, whan they should walke,  
Were fayne wyth a chalke  
To score on the balke,  
Or score on the tayle:  
God gyve it yll hayle!  
For my fyngers ytche;  
I have wrytten to mytche  
Of this mad mummyage  
Of Eleynour Rummynge.  
Thus endeth the gest  
Of this worthy fest.

Quod Skelton, Laureat