

Appendix 5.8: from *The Golden Age* (1794)

The Golden Age presents itself as an “A Poetical Epistle from Erasmus D——n, M. D. to Thomas Beddoes, M. D.” It was not written by ED but is an anonymous satire targeting him and his friend Thomas Beddoes (1760–1808) for their radicalism. A main focus is the animality of plants and thus their potential as a source of useful animal products such as cream and meat. The “Golden Age” of the title is to be brought about by such scientific improvements to nature, leading to human health and longevity, and revolutionary defeat of Kings and Priests at which cornfields and farmyard animals rejoice at the end of the poem.

Described by King-Hele as “Darwin’s most ardent disciple and most frequent correspondent in the 1790s” (*Life*, p. 220), Beddoes was a chemist, physician, and writer. He was at the University of Edinburgh with ED’s son Robert, and married Anna Edgeworth, daughter of ED’s close friend and fellow Lunar Society member Richard Lovell Edgeworth, and sister of Maria Edgeworth. He was especially interested in the medical use of gases (such as nitrous oxide), and the connections between medicine, chemistry, and social reform. He wrote a parodic imitation of ED’s poetic style, *Alexander’s Expedition down the Hydaspes & the Indus to the Indian Ocean* (1792), and addressed one of his medical treatises to ED, *A Letter to Erasmus Darwin, M.D., on A New Method of treating Pulmonary Consumption, and Some other Diseases hitherto found Incurable* (1793).

Selections copied from *The Golden Age*. London: F. and C. Rivington, and Oxford: J. Cooke, 1794.

[p. 5]

Proceed, great days! and bring, oh! bring to view
Things strange to tell! Incredible, but true!
Behold, behold, the Golden Age appears:
Skip, skip, ye Mountains! Forests lend your Ears!
See red-capt Liberty from heaven descend,
And real Prodigies her steps attend!
* No more immers’d in many a foreign dye
Shall British wool be taught to blush and lie;
But all our pastures glow with purple Rams,
With scarlet Lambkins, and their yellow Dams!
† No more the lazy Ox shall gormandize,
And swell with fattening grass his monstrous size;

* *Nec varios discet mentiri lana colores:
Ipse sed in pratis Aries jam suavè rubenti
Murice, jam croceo mutabit vellera luto:*

Sponte sua *sandyx* pascentes vestiet agnos. VIRGIL.¹

† [... *first part of fn. omitted; continued next page*]

[p. 6]

No more trot round and round the groaning field,
But tons of Beef our loaded Thickets yield!
The patient Dairy-Maid no more shall learn
With tedious toil to whirl the frothy Churn;

[...] “We know,” exclaims this egregious Chymist, “that vegetables are capable of forming oils either exactly the same as those of Animals, or very nearly resembling them. Thus we have the suet of the Croton Sebiferum,² the butter of the Phoenix Dactylifera³ and of the Butyrum Cacao.⁴ *When, from a more intimate acquaintance with them, we shall be better able to apply the Laws of organic bodies to the accommodation as well as preservation of Life, may we not, by regulating the vegetable functions, teach our woods and hedges to supply us with Butter and Tallow?*” *Observations on Calculus, &c.* p. 109.⁵

[...]

[p. 7]

But from the Hedges shall her Dairy fill,
As pounds of Butter in big drops distil!
The sottish Jews, who in a God believ'd,
And sometimes blessings, oftener plagues receiv'd,
Shouted a Miracle, when on the ground
Their boasted bread the greedy grumblers found:⁶
By no dry crusts shall Infidels be fed,
Our soil producing Butter to our Bread!
See reverend Thames, who God of Rivers reigns,
And winds meand'ring through our richest plains,
To treat the Cits,⁷ that many a sixpence give
Once in a week like Gentlemen to live,
Resign his majesty of mud, and stream
O'er strawberry beds in deluges of *Cream!*
See Tallow Candles tip the modest Thorn,
Candles of Wax the prouder Elm adorn!
See the dull Clown survey with stupid stare
Where Leaves once grew, now periwigs of Hair!
While fluids, which a wondrous change betray,
Ooze from the vernal bud, the summer spray,
Differing from animals alone in name,
(As Botanists already half exclaim).

[p. 8]

See plants, susceptible of joy and woe,
Feel all we feel, and know whate'er we know!
View them like us inclin'd to watch or sleep,
Like us to smile, and, ah! like us to weep!
Like us behold them glow with warm desire,
And catch from Beauty's glance celestial fire!
Then, oh! ye fair, if through the shady grove
Musing on absent Lovers you should rove,
And there with tempting step all heedless brush
Too near some wanton metamorphos'd Bush,
Or only hear perchance the western breeze
Steal murmuring through the animated Trees,
Beware, beware, lest to your cost you find
The Bushes dangerous, dangerous too the Wind,
Left, ah! too late with shame and grief you feel
What your fictitious Pads⁸ would ill conceal!

¹ Virgil (70–19 BCE), *Eclogues* 4:42–25. “Wool shall no more learn to counterfeit varied hues, but of himself the ram in the meadows shall change his fleece, now to sweetly blushing purple, now to a saffron yellow; of its own will shall scarlet clothe the grazing lambs” (trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, Loeb Classical Library).

² Chinese tallow.

³ Date palm.

⁴ Cocoa butter.

⁵ This is an accurate quotation, with italics added, from Beddoes' *Observations on the Nature and Cure of Calculus, Sea Scurvy, Consumption, Catarrh, and Fever, together with Conjectures upon Several Other Subjects of Physiology and Pathology* (1793). Calculus refers to a stone, such as a kidney stone.

⁶ A reference to Exodus 16 where the Israelites in the desert complain of hunger to Moses and Aaron, and the Lord sends manna from heaven. The antisemitism in these lines, where the invented speaker supposed to be ED derides the Jews for believing in God, is used to shame ED and Beddoes for questioning religion.

⁷ A derogatory short form of “citizen” used to refer to townspeople or tradespeople.

⁸ It was fashionable to wear padding to appear pregnant. A one-act play on the subject entitled *The Pad, A Farce* (1793), by Robert Woodbridge, was performed at the Theatre Royal in Covent Garden. It includes this sarcastic commentary: “All-convenient pad!—‘how various are thy uses,—with thee the fair sinner contrives to hide her failings, not, as before thy blest invention, by endeavouring to diminish, but by increasing her shape—not by endeavouring to prevent shame, but by setting it at defiance” (p. 7).