

John Barleycorn

In modern times, John Barleycorn has become synonymous with drinking, but just take a look at its origins! "John Barleycorn" is an English folksong. The character of John Barleycorn in the song is a personification of the important cereal crop barley and of the alcoholic beverages made from it, beer and whisky. In the song, John Barleycorn is represented as suffering attacks, death and indignities that correspond to the various stages of barley cultivation, such as reaping and malting.

Scholar Kathleen Herbert draws a link between Beowa (a mythical figure stemming from Anglo-Saxon paganism that appears in early Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies whose name means "barley") and the figure of John Barleycorn. Herbert says that Beowa and Barleycorn are one and the same, noting that the folksong details the suffering, death and resurrection of Barleycorn, yet also celebrates the "reviving effects of drinking his blood."

Barleycorn, the personification of the barley, encounters great suffering before succumbing to an unpleasant death. However, as a result of this death bread can be produced; therefore, Barleycorn dies so that others may live. Finally his body will be eaten as the bread. A popular hymn, "We Plough the Fields and Scatter", is often sung at Harvest Festival to the same tune.

On the other hand, in their notes to the *Penguin Book of English Folk Songs* (London, 1959), editors A L Lloyd and Ralph Vaughan Williams ponder whether the ballad is "an unusually coherent folklore survival" or "the creation of an antiquarian revivalist, which has passed into popular currency and become 'folklorized'". It is in any case, they note, "an old song", with printed versions dating as far back as the sixteenth century.



Countless versions of this song exist. A version of the song is included in the *Bannatyne Manuscript* of 1568, and English broadside versions from the 17th century are common. Robert Burns published his own version in 1782, and modern versions abound. Burns' version makes the tale somewhat mysterious and, although not the original, it became the model for most subsequent versions of the ballad.

Burns' version begins:

*There was three kings into the east,
Three kings both great and high,
And they hae sworn a solemn oath
John Barleycorn should die.*

An early English version runs thus:

*There was three men come out o' the west their fortunes for to try,
And these three men made a solemn vow, John Barleycorn must die,
They ploughed, they sowed, they harrowed him in, throwed clods upon his head,
And these three men made a solemn vow, John Barleycorn was dead. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Barleycorn]*