

Flowing Bowl (SCA Filk): A Contrafactum Study

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The Filk vs The Original

<p>Landlord, Fill The Flowing Bowl (Original) 19th century</p>	<p>Flowing Bowl, SCA Version Filked by Hextilda & Osmær Corbett November 2025</p>
<p>Chorus: Landlord, fill the flowing bowl until it doth run over (x2) For tonight we'll merry be (x3) Tomorrow we'll be sober!</p> <p>Verses: Here's to the man who drinks water pure and goes to bed quite sober (x2) He falls as the leaves do fall (x3) And drops off in October</p> <p>Here's to the man who drinks brown ale and goes to be quite mellow (x2) He lives as he ought to live (x3) And dies a jolly good fellow</p> <p>Here's to the lass who steals a kiss and runs to tell her mother (x2) She is a very lonely girl (x3) For she'll not kiss another</p> <p>Here's to the lass who steals a kiss and stays to steal another (x2) She is a boon to all mankind (x3) For she'll soon be a mother</p> <p>Here's to Philip, king of Spain, a soldier brave and able (x2) See his shining golden plate (x3) On Francis Drake's new table!</p>	<p>Chorus: Brewer, fill the flowing bowl until it doth run over (x2) For tonight we'll merry be (x3) Tomorrow we'll be sober!</p> <p>Verses: Here's to artisans of skill, the Laurels and their students (x2) Does a project count as done (x3) Until they've bled upon it</p> <p>Here's to those who serve the Dream, the Pelicans quite helpful (2x) Watch their hands fly to the sky (x3) Despite their schedule overfull</p> <p>Here's to swordsmen brave and strong, the Knights who take the field (x2) Watch them charge the castle gates (x3) And trip over their shields</p> <p>Here's to Masters of Defense, who never can be foiled (x2) Swiftly parry every blow (x3) Their garb is never spoiled</p> <p>Here's to th'Order of the Mark, who cannot be constrained (x2) Watch their ammo in the air (x3) It won't be seen again</p> <p>Here's to all the Populace, who sit through courts quite long (x2) Watch them give another award (x3) <i>{drag this bit out, play it for laughs}</i> And so we end this song</p>

The Source

“Landlord, Fill the Flowing Bowl” is a traditional English drinking song well known within the SCA bardic community. The earliest documented evidence dates to the early 19th century in broadside ballad form, with variants appearing in both printed collections and oral tradition.¹

Its structure—repetitive verses and a simple, memorable chorus—supports communal participation, a hallmark of drinking songs and convivial music more broadly.²

Historical Practice

The practice of setting new texts to familiar tunes (contrafactum) is well documented across medieval and early modern Europe, particularly in the transmission of secular songs, religious hymns, and broadside ballads.³

Folk lyrics frequently varied across regions through both deliberate adaptation and imperfect memory. This process of variation is a defining feature of oral tradition.⁴ We see similar dynamics today in children’s rhymes and hand-clapping chants.

It was also common to add or improvise verses reflecting politics, local life, or humor. Broadside ballads in particular often reused familiar tunes while updating texts to comment on current events.⁵

Updating lyrics to reflect current communities and experiences is, therefore, historically authentic behavior within this tradition.

My Choices

I chose to introduce each peerage in the order in which the SCA recognized them⁶:

- Order of the Laurel — 1968
- Order of the Pelican — 1976
- Knights & Masters of Arms — 1968, merged to Order of Chivalry in 1981
- Order of Defense — 2015
- Order of the Mark — 2025

Including the peerages in this order creates a chronological structure that mirrors the historical development of the SCA while providing a natural progression toward the newest peerage.

Each verse is written to both honor and gently satirize its subject. The first and second lines are designed for group participation, while the third line—sung only once—serves as the punchline, reflecting the structure of many traditional comic songs.

Analysis

Chorus

Brewer, fill the flowing bowl until it doth run over (x2)
For tonight we'll merry be (x3)
Tomorrow we'll be sober!

I chose to keep the chorus nearly identical to the source material in order to preserve its recognizability and participatory function. The only substantive change was replacing “Landlord” with “Brewer.”

While “landlord” reflects the historical tavern setting of the original song, it is not a role commonly found within the SCA. “Brewer,” however, evokes both period drink production and the strong brewing traditions present in the Society today. This substitution maintains the original meaning while making the song more immediately relevant to an SCA audience.

Retaining the original chorus structure also supports rapid audience participation, as repetition allows singers to join after minimal exposure.

Verse 1 – Laurel

Here’s to artisans of skill, the Laurels and their students (x2)
Does a project count as done (x3)
Until they’ve bled upon it

It is a widely shared sentiment within the SCA that a project is not truly complete until one has “bled on it.” This acknowledges that experience directly.

Verse 2 – Pelican

Here’s to those who serve the Dream, the Pelicans quite helpful (x2)
Watch their hands fly to the sky (x3)
Despite their schedule overfull

This verse references chronic *manus helium* (“helium hand”), a humorous term for the tendency of service-minded individuals to volunteer frequently.

Verse 3 – Chivalry

Here's to swordsmen brave and strong, the Knights who take the field (x2)
Watch them charge the castle gates (x3)
And trip over their shields

The chaos of the battlefield is often entertaining to observe; I have personally witnessed fighters become entangled in their own equipment. This verse reflects both admiration and affectionate humor.

Please note: Although the history of the Order of Chivalry dates back to 1968, the actual creation of the Order was in 1981. I could have put this verse first OR third, but I liked the idea of putting all three weapons-related Orders together.

Verse 4 – Defense

Here's to Masters of Defense, who never can be foiled (x2)
Swiftly parry every blow (x3)
Their garb is never spoiled

“Foiled” functions as a double entendre, referring both to being thwarted and to the fencing weapon (foil). The verse also alludes to the rapier community’s reputation for elaborate and visually striking clothing.

Verse 5 – Mark

Here's to th'Order of the Mark, who cannot be constrained (x2)
Watch their ammo in the air (x3)
It won't be seen again

This verse refers to a common experience in missile combat activities: the frequent loss of arrows, bolts, or thrown weapons during use.

Verse 6 – Populace

Here's to all the Populace, who sit through courts quite long (x2)
Watch them give another award (x3) (*extended for comedic effect*)
And so we end this song

Many participants have experienced courts that run longer than anticipated. While awards are important, this verse humorously acknowledges that shared experience.

Ending on a verse that includes the entire populace shifts the tone from gentle satire of specific groups to shared experience, reinforcing communal identity.

Performance Context

This piece is designed for participatory bardic performance and may also be sung pre- or post-court. If performed before court, it is most effective as the final song prior to proceedings, as the final verse references lengthy courts.

Audience participation is central to the piece. The chorus is typically taught before performance, allowing participants to join immediately. Because the verses use the same melody as the chorus, singers can quickly follow along without needing to learn new musical material.

Verses may be added, removed, or adapted depending on context, reflecting the flexible and evolving nature of period song traditions.

Conclusion

While the subject of this piece is distinctly modern, its construction is not. *Flowing Bowl (SCA Filk)* draws directly on historical practices of contrafactum, oral variation, and participatory song, all of which are well-documented in period and post-period traditions.

By pairing a familiar melody with new, community-specific lyrics, this work reflects the same impulse that produced broadside ballads and other living song traditions: the desire to make music that is shared, adaptable, and immediately relevant to its audience.

In this way, filk within the SCA can be understood not as a departure from historical practice, but as its continuation—keeping alive the tradition of reshaping song to fit the needs, humor, and identity of the community that sings it.

Selected References

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