Belisarius
I am poor and old and blind;
The sun burns me, and the wind
Blows through the city gate,
And covers me with dust
From the wheels of the august
Justinian the Great.

It was for him I chased
The Persians o’er wild and waste,
As General of the East;
Night after night I lay
In their camps of yesterday;
Their forage was my feast.

For him, with sails of red,
And torches at mast-head,
Piloting the great fleet,
I swept the Afric coasts
And scattered the Vandal hosts,
Like dust in a windy street.

For him I won again
The Ausonian realm and reign,
Rome and Parthenope;
And all the land was mine
From the summits of Apennine
To the shores of either sea.

For him, in my feeble age,
I dared the battle’s rage,
To save Byzantium’s state,
When the tents of Zabergan
Like snow-drifts overran
The road to the Golden Gate.

And for this, for this, behold!
Infirm and blind and old,
With gray, uncovered head,

Three Friends of Mine

I.
When I remember them, those friends of mine,
Who are no longer here, the noble three,
Who half my life were more than friends to me,
And whose discourse was like a generous wine,
I most of all remember the divine
Something, that shone in them, and made us see
The archetypal man, and what might be
The amplitude of Nature’s first design.
In vain I stretch my hands to clasp their hands;

Beneath the very arch
Of my triumphal march,
I stand and beg my bread!

Methinks I still can hear,
Sounding distinct and near,
The Vandal monarch’s cry,
As, captive and disgraced,
With majestic step he paced,—
“All, all is Vanity!”

Ah! vainest of all things
Is the gratitude of kings;
The plaudits of the crowd
Are but the clatter of feet
At midnight in the street,
Hollow and restless and loud.

But the bitterest disgrace
Is to see forever the face
Of the Monk of Ephesus!
The unconquerable will
This, too, can bear;—I still
Am Belisarius!

Three Friends of Mine
victor allowed to inflict any punishment on the loser. Apollo was declared winner and flayed Marsyas alive.

635.3  "Be bold!" Cf. The Faerie Queene, Book III, xi, 54.


624.1  Belisarius] General (c. 503–565) of the Byzantine emperor Justinian (483–565); when accused of conspiring against the emperor, he was imprisoned, but was set free after six months restored to favor. A later story tells of his having been blinded in punishment.

624.21  Aonian realm] Italy; according to legend, the people of Italy were descendants of Aeson, son of Ulysses and Calypso.

624.22  Parthenope] In ancient poetry, a name for Naples; from its founder, the siren Parthenope, who was cast up on its shores.

624.29  Zabergan] Zabergana, Persian ambassador to Byzantium.

624.5  Gelimer, whom Belisarius defeated in A.D. 534.

624.18  Monk of Ephesus] Theodosius, adopted son of Belisarius, became the lover of Belisarius’s wife, Antonina; according to the Secret History ofProcopius, he became a monk at Ephesus to avoid danger.

624.22  Three Friends of Mine] Cornelius Conway Felton (1807–62), professor of Greek at Harvard, and afterward its president; Louis Agassiz (1807–73), who owned a summer house near Longfellow’s at Nahant; and Charles Sumner (1811–74).

624.25  Musagetes] Literally “Leader of the Muses,” an epithet of Apollo.

625.5  Maenides] An epithet for Homer.

625.3  Kéramos] Greek word for potter’s clay.

625.13  Palissy] Bernard Palissy (c. 1509–89), French potter and enamelist, noted for scientific and technical experiments; he devoted 16 years to developing a process to produce enameled.

625.26  Francesco Xanto] Avelli Xanto, Italian painter and ceramist of the 16th century, who worked in Urbino 1537–42.

625.30  Maestro Giorgio] Giorgio di Pietro Andreoli (c. 1390), also called “Maestro Giorgio,” Italian sculptor and ceramist, whose pottery motifs were often inspired by Raphael. He developed a carmine tint for which the majolica of Gubbio became famous.

624.9  Aonian.] See note 624.21.