

# **THE BALLAD OF BEFANA**

## **Phyllis McGinley (1905 - 1978)**

Befana the Housewife, scrubbing her pane,  
Saw three old sages ride down the lane,  
Saw three gray travelers pass her door -  
Gaspar, Balthazar, Melchior.

"Where journey you, sirs?" she asked of them.

Balthazar answered, "To Bethlehem,  
For we have news of a marvelous thing.  
Born in a stable is Christ the King."

"Give Him my welcome!"

Then Gaspar smiled,  
"Come with us, mistress, to greet the Child."

"Oh, happily, happily would I fare,  
Were my dusting through and I'd polished the stair."

Old Melchior leaned on his saddle horn.

"Then send but a gift to the small Newborn."

"Oh, gladly, gladly I'd send Him one,  
Were the hearthstone swept and my weaving done.

"As soon as ever I've baked my bread,  
I'll fetch Him a pillow for His head,  
And a coverlet too," Befana said.

"When the rooms are aired and the linen dry,  
I'll look at the Babe."

But the Three rode by.

She worked for a day and a night and a day,  
Then, gifts in her hands, took up her way.  
But she never could find where the Christ Child lay.

And still she wanders at Christmastide,  
Houseless, whose house was all her pride,  
Whose heart was tardy, whose gifts were late;  
Wanders, and knocks at every gate,

Crying, "Good people, the bells begin!  
Put off your toiling and let love in."

