

Mary Leapor, "An Essay on Woman"

Description

MARY LEAPOR

"An Essay on Woman"

Woman! a pleasing, but a short-lived Flow'r,
Too soft for Business, and too weak for Pow'r:
A Wife in Bondage, or neglected Maid;
Despis'd, if ugly; if she's fair betray'd.
'Tis Wealth alone inspires ev'ry Grace, 5
And calls the Raptures to her plenteous Face.
What Numbers for those charming Features pine,
If blooming Acres round her Temples twine?
Her Lip the Strawberry; and her Eyes more bright
Than sparkling *Venus* in a frosty Night. 10
Pale Lilies fade; and when the Fair appears,
Snow turns a Negro, and dissolves in Tears.
And where the Charmer treads her magic Toe,
On *English* Ground *Arabian* Odours grow;
Till mighty *Hymen* lists his sceptred Rod, 15
And sinks her Glories with a fatal Nod;
Dissolves her Triumphs; sweeps her Charms away,
And turns the Goddess to her native Clay.

But, *Artemisia*, let your Servant sing
What small Advantage Wealth and Beauties bring. 20
Who would be wise, that knew *Pamphilia's* Fate?
Or who be fair, and join'd to *Sylvia's* Mate?
Sylvia, whose Cheeks are fresh as early Day;
As Ev'ning mild, and sweet as spicy *May*:
And yet That Face her partial Husband tires, 25
And those bright Eyes, that all the World admires.
Pamphilia's Wit who does not strive to shun,
Like Death's Infection, or a Dog-Day's Sun?
The Damsels view her with malignant Eyes:
The Men are vex'd to find a Nymph so wise: 30
And Wisdom only serves to make her know
The keen Sensation of superior Woe.
The secret Whisper, and the listening Ear,
The scornful Eyebrow, and the hated Sneer;
The giddy Censures of her babbling Kind, 35

With thousand Ills that grate a gentle Mind,
 By her are tasted in the first Degree,
 Tho' overlook'd by *Simplicus*, and me.
 Does Thirst of Gold a Virgin's Heart inspire,
 Instill'd by Nature, or a careful Sire? 40
 Then let her quit Extravagance and Play;
 The brisk Companion; and expensive Tea;
 To feast with *Cordia* in her filthy Sty
 On stew'd Potatoes, or on mouldy Pye;
 Whose eager Eyes stare ghastly at the Poor, 45
 And fright the Beggars from her hated Door:
 In greasy Clouts she wraps her smoky Chin,
 And holds, that Pride's a never-pardon'd Sin.

If this be Wealth, no matter where it falls;
 But save, ye Muses, save your *Mira's* Walls: 50
 Still give me pleasing Indolence, and Ease;
 A Fire to warm me, and a Friend to please.

Since, whether sunk in Avarice, or Pride;
 A wanton Virgin, or a starving Bride;
 Or, wond'ring Clouds attend her charming Tongue; 55
 Or deem'd an Idiot, ever speaks the Wrong:
 Tho' Nature arm'd us for the growing Ill,
 With fraudulent Cunning, and a headstrong Will;
 Yet, with ten thousand Follies to her Charge,
 Unhappy Woman's but a Slave at large. 60

NOTES:

6 Raptures A state, condition, or fit of intense delight or enthusiasm (OED).

10 Venus Here a reference to the evening star.

12 Negro A member of a dark-skinned group of peoples originally native to sub-Saharan Africa; a person of black African origin or descent. Early use also applied to other dark-skinned peoples (OED).

15 Hymen The God of marriage in Greek myth.

18 Clay That is, her original human form.

19 Artemisia A pseudonym for Leapor's friend and patron, Bridget Freemantle.

28 Dog-Day's The hottest part of the summer (OED).

32 Woe A state or condition of misery, suffering, or emotional distress; misfortune, trouble (OED).

35 Censures Expression of disapproval or condemnation (OED).

36 grate To affect painfully, irritate (OED).

38 *Simplicus* Conventional name for a rustic or simple man.

43 *Sty* â??A human habitationâ?|no better than a pigstyâ?• (*OED*).

50 *Mira* Leaporâ??s poetic name for herself; *Walls Defenses* (*OED*).

53 *Avarice* â??Inordinate desire of acquiring and hoarding wealthâ?• (*OED*).

54 *wanton* â??Lustful; not chaste, sexually promiscuousâ?• (*OED*).

59 *Follies* Foolish actions, ideas, practices (*OED*).

SOURCE: *Poems Upon Several Occasions* (London, 1751), pp. 64-67. [Internet Archive]

Edited by Alexis Kleinberg