Mary Barber, â??The Prodigy. A Letter to a Friend in the Countryâ?•

Description

[MARY BARBER]

â??The Prodigy. A Letter to a Friend in the Countryâ?•

THOâ?? Rhyme serves the Thoughts of great Poets to fetter,
It sets off the Sense of small Poets the better.
When Iâ??ve written in Prose, I often have found,
That my Sense, in a Jumble of Words, was quite drownâ??d.
In Verse, as in Armies, that march oâ??er the Plain,
The least Man among them is seen without Pain.
This they owe to good Order, it must be allowâ??d;
Else Men that are little, are lost in a Croud.

So much for Simile: Now, to be brief,
The following Lines come to tell you my Grief.
â??Tis well I can write; for I scarcely can speak,
Iâ??m so plaguâ??d with my Teeth, which eternally ake.
When the Windâ??s in the Point which opposes the *South*,
For Fear of the Cold, I canâ??t open my Mouth:
And you know, to the Sex it must be a Heart-breaking,
To have any Distemper, that keeps them from speaking.

When first I was silent a Day and a Night,
The Women were all in a terrible Fright.
Supplications to JOVE, in an Instant, they makeâ??
â??Avert the Portentâ??a Woman not speak!
Since Poets are Prophets, and often have sung,
The last Thing that dies in a Womanâ??s her Tongue;
O JOVE, for what Crime is *Sapphira* thus curst?
â??Tis plain by her Breathing, her Tongue has dyâ??d first.
Ye Powers celestial, tell Mortals, what Cause
Occasions Dame Nature to break her own Laws?
Did the *Preacher* live now, from his text he must run;
And own there was something new under the Sun.
O JOVE, for the future this Punishment spare;
And all other Evils weâ??ll willingly bear.â?•

Then they throng to my House, and my Maid they beseech,
To say, if her Mistress had quite lost her Speech.
Nell readily ownâ??d, what they heard was too true;

That To-day I was dumb, give the Devil his Due:
And frankly confessâ??d, were it always the Case,
No Servant could eâ??er have a happier Place.

When they found it was Fact, they began all to fear me;
And, dreading Infection, would scarcely come near me:
Till a Neighbour of mine, who was famous for Speeching,
Bid them be of good Cheer, the Disease was not catching;
And offerâ??d to prove, from Authors good Store,
That the like Case with this never happenâ??d before;
And if Ages to come should resemble the past,
As â??twas the first Instance, it would be the last.
Yet against this Disorder we all ought to strive:
Were I in her Case, Iâ??d been buryâ??d alive.
Were I one Moment silent, except in my Bed,
My good naturâ??d Husband would swear I was dead.

The next said, her Tongue was so much in her Powâ??r,
She was sullenly silent almostâ??half an Hour:
That, to vex her good Man, she took this Way to teaze him;
But soon left it off, when she found it would please him:
And vowâ??d, for the future, sheâ??d make the House ring;
For when she was dumb, he did nothing but sing.

Quite tirâ??d with their Talking, I held down my Head:
So she who sat next me, cryâ??d out, I was dead.
They callâ??d for cold Water to throw in my Face:
Give her Air, give her Airâ??and cut open her Lace.
Says good Neighbour *Nevil*, Youâ??re out of your Wits;
She oft, to my Knowledge, has these sullen Fits:
Let her Husband come in, and make one Step thatâ??s wrong,
My Life forâ??t, the Woman will soon find her Tongue.
Youâ??ll soon be convincâ??dâ??Oâ?? my Conscience, heâ??s hereâ??
Why whatâ??s all this Rout?â??Are you sullen, my Dear?

This struck them all silent; which gave me some Ease,
And made them imagine theyâ??d got my Disease.
So they hasted away in a terrible Fright;
And left me, in Silence, to pass the long Night.

Not the Women alone were fearâ??d at my Fate;
â??Twas reckonâ??d of dreadful Portent to the State.
When the Governors heard it, they greatly were troubled;
And, whilst I was silent, the Guards were all doubled:
The Militia Drums beat a perpetual Alarm,
To rouze up the Sons of the City to arm.
A Story was rumourâ??d about from *Lambey*,
Of a powerful Fleet, that was seen off at Sea.
With Horror all list to the terrible Tale;

The Barristers tremble, the Judges grow pale;
To the Castle the frighted Nobility fly;
And the Council were summonâ??d, they could not tell why;
The Clergy in Crouds to the Churches repair;
And Armies, embattled, were seen in the Air.

Why they were in this Fright, I have lately been told,
It seems, it was sung by a *Druid* of old,
That the HANOVER Race to *Great-Britain* should come;
And sit on the Throne, till a Woman grew dumb.

As soon as this Prophecy reachâ??d the Pretender,
He cryâ??d out, *My Claim to the Crown I surrender*.

NOTES:

1 *fetter* â??A restraint or check on someoneâ??s freedom to actâ?• (*OED*).

12 *plaguâ??d* Plagued; â??tormentedâ?• (*OED*); *ake* Ache.

16 *Distemper* Ailment.

19 *JOVE* Another name for Jupiter, Zeusâ??s counterpart in Roman mythology (*New World Encyclopedia*).

20 *Avert* â??Prevent or ward offâ?• (*OED*); *Portent* â??A sign or warning that a momentous or calamitous event is likely to happenâ?• (*OED*).

23 *Sapphira* Biblical reference to the wife of Ananias, â??(Acts 5: 1â??11); both died from shock when confronted by Peter about a case of fraudâ?• (*Oxford Reference*).

26 *Dame* â??An elderly or mature womanâ?• (*OED*).

27 *Preacher* Jesus.

28 *there was something new under the Sun* An inversion of the biblical passage, â??The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sunâ?• (*Ecclesiastes 1:9).*

31 *beseech* â??Ask (someone) urgently and fervently to do somethingâ?• (*OED*).

34 *give the Devil his Due* An idiom; â??If someone or something generally considered bad or undeserving has any redeeming features these should be acknowledgedâ?• (*OED*).

36 *Place* Position or place of work.

54 *dumb* â??Temporarily unable or unwilling to speakâ?• (*OED*).

58 *Lace* The cord or ribbon that laces up a womanâ??s corset.

64 *Rout* â??A disorderly or tumultuous crowd of peopleâ?• (*OED*); S*ullen* â??Bad-tempered and sulkyâ?• (*OED*).

75 *Lambey* Lambay Island in the Irish Sea near Dublin.

77 *list* Listen.

78 *Barristers* Lawyers.

81 *repair* â??Go to (a place)â?• (*OED*).

84 *Druid* â??A priest, magician, or soothsayer in the ancient Celtic religionâ?• (*OED*).

85 *HANOVER Race* The British Royal house of Hanover (1714-1901) (*Britannica*).

87 *the Pretender* â??The Old Pretender,â?• James Francis Edward, Prince of Wales (1688-1766), son of King James II of England who reigned from 1685 to 1688 (*Brittanica*).

88 *My Claim to the Crown I surrender* The Glorious Revolution (1688-89) saw James II deposed, replaced by William III and Mary II, and exiled to France. His son James, â??The Old Pretender,â?• made several attempts to reclaim the British throne, but never succeeded (*Brittanica*).

Source: ***Poems on Several Occasions*** **(London, 1735), pp. 22â??27. [*Google Books*]**

Edited by Laura Hannibal