

Mary Leapor, "An Essay on Woman"

Description

MARY LEAPOR

• An Essay on Woman •

Woman's a pleasing, but a short-lived Flow,
Too soft for Business, and too weak for Power:
A Wife in Bondage, or neglected Maid;
Despised, if ugly; if she's fair betray'd.

'Tis Wealth alone inspires every 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 Evening 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 list'ning 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
 A Slave at large.

NOTES:

6 *Raptures* – A state, condition, or fit of intense delight or enthusiasm (QED).

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 (QED).

15 *Hymen* The God of marriage in Greek myth.

18 *Clay* That is, her original human form.

19 *Artemisia* A pseudonym for Leaporâ€™s friend and patron, Bridget Freemantle.

28 *Dog-Day*â€™s â€œThe hottest part of the summerâ€•(OED).

32 *Woe* â€œA state or condition of misery, suffering, or emotional distress; misfortune, troubleâ€•(OED).

35 *Censures* â€œExpression of disapproval or condemnationâ€•(OED).

36 *grate* â€œTo affect painfully,â€•irritateâ€•(OED).

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

43 *Sty* â€œA human habitationâ€•no better than a pigstyâ€•(OED).

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

53 *Avarice* â€œInordinate desire of acquiring and hoarding wealthâ€•(OED).

54 *wanton* â€œLustful; 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