

Elizabeth Carter, "Thoughts at Midnight. 1739"

Description

ELIZABETH CARTER

Thoughts at Midnight. 1739

WHILE Night in solemn shade invests the Pole,
And calm reflection soothes the pensive soul;
While Reason undisturb'd asserts her sway,
And life's deceitful colours fade away:
To thee! all-conscious presence! I devote
This peaceful interval of sober thought.
Here all my better faculties confine,
And be this hour of sacred silence thine.

If by the day's illusive scenes misled,
My erring soul from Virtue's path has stray'd:

If by example snar'd, by passion warm'd,
Some false delight my giddy sense has charm'd,
My calmer thoughts the wretched choice reprove,
And my best hopes are center'd in thy love.
Depriv'd of this, can life one joy afford!

Its utmost boast a vain unmeaning word.
But ah! how oft my lawless passions rove,
And break those awful precepts I approve!

Pursue the fatal impulse I abhor,
And violate the virtue I adore!

Oft when thy gracious Spirit's guardian care
Warn'd my fond soul to shun the tempting snare,
My stubborn will his gentle aid repress,
And check'd the rising goodness in my breast,
Mad with vain hopes, or urg'd by false desires,
Still'd his soft voice, and quench'd his sacred fires.

With grief oppress'd, and prostrate in the dust,
Should'st thou condemn, I own the sentence just.
But oh thy softer titles let me claim,
And plead my cause by Mercy's gentle name.
Mercy, that wipes the penitential tear,
And dissipates the horrors of despair:

From rigorous Justice steals the vengeful hour:

Softens the dreadful attribute of power;

Disarms the wrath of an offended God, 35

And seals my pardon in a Saviour's blood.

All powerful Grace, exert thy gentle sway,

And teach my rebel passions to obey:

Lest lurking Folly with insidious art

Regain my volatile inconstant heart. 40

Shall ev'ry high resolve devotion frames,

Be only lifeless sounds and specious names?

Or rather while thy hopes and fears controul,

In this still hour each motion of my soul,

Secure its safety by a sudden doom, 45

And be the soft retreat of sleep my tomb.

Calm let me slumber in that dark repose,

Till the last morn its orient beam disclose:

Then, when the great Archangel's potent sound,

Shall echo thro' Creation's ample round, 50

Waked from the sleep of Death, with joy survey

The opening splendors of eternal day.

NOTES:

1 *Pole* = The sky, the heavens (OED).

2 *pensive* = Implying thought, anxiety, or melancholy (OED).

9 *illusive scenes* = Deceptive; illusory (OED).

13 *reprove* = To censure, condemn (OED).

16 *Its* The copy text reads 'It's', a printer's error.

17 *rove* = Waver, vacillate (OED).

31 *penitential tear* = Indicative of repentance (OED).

40 *volatile* = Changeable, fickle (OED).

48 *orient beam disclose* The rising of the sun (OED); *its* The copy text reads 'eit's', a printer's error.

49 *the great Archangel's potent sound* A reference to a Christian tradition (more literary than Biblical) that has the archangel Gabriel blowing a trumpet or horn to wake the dead and announce the return of Jesus on Judgment Day (S. Vernon McCasland, "Gabriel's Trumpet," *Journal of Bible and Religion*, vol. 9, no. 3 [August 1941], pp. 159-161).

Source: *Memoirs of the Life of Mrs. Elizabeth Carter: With a New Edition of Her Poems; to Which Are Added, Some Miscellaneous Essays In Prose, Together With Her Notes On the Bible, And Answers to Objections Concerning the Christian Religion*, ed. Rev. Montagu Pennington. (London, 1808), vol. II, pp. 37-39. [Google Books]

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