

Mary Barber, "The Prodigy. A Letter to a Friend in the Country"

Description

[MARY BARBER]

•The Prodigy. A Letter to a Friend in the Country•

THO' Rhyme serves the Thoughts of great Poets to fetter,
It sets off the Sense of small Poets the better.
When I've written in Prose, I often have found,
That my Sense, in a Jumble of Words, was quite drown'd.

In Verse, as in Armies, that march o'er the
Plain, 5

The least Man among them is seen without Pain.
This they owe to good Order, it must be allow'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. 10

'Tis well I can write; for I scarcely can speak,
I'm so plagu'd with my Teeth, which eternally ake.
When the Wind's in the Point which opposes the South,
For Fear of the Cold, I can't open my Mouth:

And you know, to the Sex it must be a Heart-breaking, 15
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 make

"Avert the Portent" a Woman not
speak! 20

Since Poets are Prophets, and often have sung,
The last Thing that dies in a Woman's her Tongue;
O JOVE, for what Crime is *Sapphira* thus curst?

'Tis plain by her Breathing, her Tongue has dy'd first.
Ye Powers celestial, tell Mortals, what Cause 25
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. 30

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, 35
No Servant could eâ€™mer 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; 40
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: 45
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: 50
That, to vex her good Man, she took this Way to tease 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: 55
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: 60
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, 65
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. 70
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*, 75
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; 80
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; 85
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:

- 1â€™ *fetter* â€™A restraint or check on someoneâ€™s freedom to actâ€™(QED).
- 12â€™ *plaguâ€™d* Plagued; â€™tormentedâ€™(QED); *ake* Ache.
- 16â€™ *Distemper* Ailment.
- 19â€™ *JOVE* Another name for Jupiter, Zeusâ€™s counterpart in Roman mythology (*New World Encyclopedia*).
- 20â€™ *Avert* â€™Prevent or ward offâ€™(QED); *Portent* â€™A sign or warning that a momentous or

calamitous event is likely to happenâ€•(QED).

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

26 *Dame* â€œAn elderly or mature womanâ€•(QED).

27 *Preacher* Jesus.

28 *there was something new under the Sun* An inversion of the biblical passage, â€œThe 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€œAsk (someone) urgently and fervently to do somethingâ€•(QED).

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

36 *Place* Position or place of work.

54 *dumb* â€œTemporarily unable or unwilling to speakâ€•(QED).

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

64 *Rout* â€œA disorderly or tumultuous crowd of peopleâ€•(QED); *Sullen* â€œBad-tempered and sulkyâ€•(QED).

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

77 *list* Listen.

78 *Barristers* Lawyers.

81 *repair* â€œGo to (a place)â€•(QED).

84 *Druid* â€œA priest, magician, or soothsayer in the ancient Celtic religionâ€•(QED).

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

87 *the Pretender* â€œThe Old Pretender, 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€œThe Old Pretender, 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