

Aphra Behn, "The Golden Age"

Description

APHRA BEHN

"The Golden Age"

A Paraphrase on a Translation out of French

I.

Blest Age! when ev'ry Purling Stream
Ran undisturb'd and clear,
When no scorn'd Shepherds on your Banks were seen,
Tortur'd by Love, by Jealouise, or Fear;
When an Eternal Spring drest ev'ry Bough, 5
And Blossoms fell, by new ones dispossesst;
These their kind Shade affording all below;
And those a Bed where all below might rest.
The Groves appear'd all drest with Wreaths of Flowers,
And from their Leaves dropt Aromatick Showers, 10
Whose fragrant Heads in Mystick Twines above,
Exchang'd their Sweets, and mix'd with thousand Kisses,
As if the willing Branches strove
To beautifie and shade the Grove
Where the young wanton Gods of Love 15
Offer their Noblest Sacrifice of Blissess.

II.

Calm was the Air, no Winds blew fierce and loud,
The Skie was dark'ned with no sullen Cloud:
But all the Heav'ns laugh'd with continued Light,
And scatter'd round their Rays serenely bright. 20
No other Murmurs fill'd the Ear
But what the Streams and Rivers purl'd
When Silver Waves o'er Shining Pebbles curl'd;
Or when young *Zephirs* fan'd the Gentle Breez,
Gathering fresh Sweets from Balmy Flow'rs and Trees, 25
Then bore 'em on their Wings to perfume all the Air:
While to their soft and tender Play,
The Gray-Plum'd Natives of the Shades
Unwearied sing till Love invades,
Then Bill, then sing agen, while Love and Musick makes the Day. 30

III.

The stubborn Plough had then,
Made no rude Rapes upon the Virgin Earth;

Who yielded of her own accord her plentious Birth,
 Without the Aids of men;
 As if within her Teeming Womb, 35
 All Nature, and all Sexes lay,
 Whence new Creations every day
 Into the happy World did come:
 The Roses fill'd with Morning Dew,
 Bent down their loaded heads, 40
 T' Adorn the careless Shepherds Grassy Beds
 While still young opening Buds each moment grew
 And as those withered, drest his shaded Couch a new;
 Beneath who's boughs the Snakes securely dwelt,
 Not doing harm, nor harm from others felt; 45
 With whom the Nymphs did Innocently play,
 No spiteful Venom in the playful wantons lay;
 But to the touch were Soft, and to the sight were Gay.

IV.

Then no rough sound of Wars Alarms,
 Had taught the World the needless use of Arms: 50
 Monarchs were uncreated then,
 Those Arbitrary Rulers over men;
 Kings that made Laws, first broke 'em, and the Gods
 By teaching us Religion first, first set the World at Odds:
 Till then Ambition was not known, 55
 That Poyson to Content, Bane to Repose;
 Each Swain was Lord o'er his own will alone,
 His Innocence Religion was, and Laws.
 Nor needed any troublesome defence
 Against his Neighbours Insolence. 60
 Flocks, Herds, and every necessary good
 Which bounteous Nature had design'd for Food,
 Whose kind increase o'er spread the Meads and Plains,
 Was then a common Sacrifice to all th' agreeing Swaines.

V.

Right and Property were words since made, 65
 When Power taught Mankind to invade:
 When Pride and Avarice became a Trade;
 Carri'd on by discord, noise and wars,
 For which they barter'd wounds and scarrs;
 And to Inhaunce the Merchandize, miscall'd it Fame, 70
 And Rapes, Invasions, Tyrannies,
 Was gaining of a Glorious Name:
 Stiling their salvage slaughters, Victories;
 Honour, the Error and the Cheat
 Of the Ill-natur'd Bus'ey Great, 75
 Nonsense, invented by the Proud,
 Fond Idol of the slavish Crowd,

Thou wert not known in those blest days
 Thy Poyson was not mixt with our unbounded Joyes;
 Then it was glory to pursue delight, 80
 And that was lawful all, that Pleasure did invite,
 Then 'twas the Amorous world injoy'd its Reign;
 And Tyrant Honour strove t'usurp in Vain.

VI.

The flowry Meads the Rivers and the Groves,
 Were fill'd with little Gay-wing'd Loves: 85
 That ever smil'd and danc'd and Play'd,
 And now the woods, and now the streames invade,
 And where they came all things were gay and glad:
 When in the Myrtle Groves the Lovers sat
 Opprest with a too fervent heat; 90
 A Thousand Cupids fann'd their wings aloft,
 And through the Boughs the yielded Ayre would waft:
 Whose parting Leaves discovered all below,
 And every God his own soft power admir'd,
 And smil'd and fann'd, and sometimes bent his Bow; 95
 Where e'er he saw a Shepherd uninspir'd.
 The Nymphs were free, no nice, no coy disdain,
 Deny'd their Joyes, or gave the Lover pain;
 The yielding Maid but kind Resistance makes:
 Trembling and blushing are not marks of shame, 100
 But the Effect of kindling Flame:
 Which from the sighing burning Swain she takes,
 While she with tears all soft, and down-cast eyes,
 Permits the Charming Conqueror to win the prize.

VII.

The Lovers thus, thus uncontroul'd did meet, 105
 Thus all their Joyes and Vows of Love repeat:
 Joyes which were everlasting, ever new
 And every Vow inviolably true:
 Not kept in fear of Gods, no fond Religious cause,
 Nor in Obedience to the duller Laws. 110
 Those Fopperies of the Gown were then not known,
 Those vain those Politick Curbs to keep man in,
 Who by a fond mistake Created that a Sin;
 Which freeborn we, by right of Nature claim our own.
 Who but the Learned and dull moral Fool 115
 Could gravely have forseen, man ought to live by Rule?

VIII.

Oh cursed Honour! thou who first didst damn,
 A Woman to the sin of Shame;
 Honour! that rob'st us of our Gust,
 Honour! that hindred mankind first,

At Loves Eternal Spring to squench his amorous thirst.

Honour! who first taught lovely Eyes the art,

To wound, and not to cure to heart:

With Love to invite, but to forbid with Awe,

And to themselves prescribe a Cruel Law;

125

To Veil 'em from the Lookers on,

When they are sure the slave's undone,

And all the Charmingst part of Beauty hid;

Soft Looks, consenting Wishes, all deny'd.

It gathers up the flowing Hair,

130

That loosely plaid with wanton Air.

The Envious Net, and stinted order hold,

The lovely Curls of Jet and shining Gold,

No more neglected on the Shoulders hurl'd:

Now drest to Tempt, not gratify the World,

135

Thou Miser Honour hord'st the sacred store,

And starv'st thy self to keep thy Votaries poor.

IX.

Honour! that put'st our words that should be free

Into a set Formality.

Thou base Debaucher of the generous heart,

140

That teachest all our Looks and Actions Art;

What love design'd a sacred Gift,

What Nature made to be possest,

Mistaken Honour made a theft,

For Glorious Love should be confest:

145

For when confin'd, all the poor Lover gains,

Is broken Sighs, pale Looks, Complaints and Pains.

Thou Foe to Pleasure, Nature's worst Disease,

Thou Tyrant over mighty Kings,

What mak'st thou here in Shepherds Cottages;

150

Why troublest thou, the quiet Shades and Springs?

Be gone, and make thy Fam'd resort

To Princes Pallaces;

Go Deal and Chaffer in the Trading Court,

That busie Market for Phantastick Things;

155

Be gone and interrupt the short Retreat,

Of the Illustrious and the Great;

Go break the Politicians sleep,

Disturb the Gay Ambitious Fool,

That longs for Scepters, Crowns, and Rule,

160

Which not his Title, nor his Wit can keep;

But let the humble honest *Swain* go on,

In the blest Paths of the first rate of man;

That nearest were to Gods Alli'd,

And form'd for love alone, disdain'd all other Pride.

X.

Be gone! and let the Golden age again,
 Assume its Glorious Reign;
 Let the young wishing Maid confess,
 What all your Arts would keep conceal'd:
 The Mystery will be reveal'd, 170
 And she in vain denies, whilst we can guess,
 She only shows the Jilt to teach man how,
 To turn the false Artillery on the Cunning Foe.
 Thou empty Vision hence, be gone,
 And let the peaceful *Swain* love on; 175
 The swift pac'd hours of life soon steal away:
 Stint not yee Gods his short liv'd Joy.
 The Spring decays, but when the Winter's gone,
 The Trees and Flowers a new comes on
 The Sun may set, but when the night is fled, 180
 And gloomy darkness does retire,
 He rises from his Watry Bed:
 All Glorious, Gay, all drest in Amorous Fire.
 But *Sylvia* when your Beauties fade,
 When the fresh Roses on your Cheeks shall die, 185
 Like Flowers that wither in the Shade,
 Eternally they will forgotten lye,
 And no kind Spring their sweetness will supply.
 When Snow shall on those lovely Tresses lye
 And your fair Eyes no more shall give us pain, 190
 But shoot their pointless Darts in vain.
 What will your duller honour signifie?
 Go boast it then! And see what numerous Store
 Of Lovers, will your Ruin'd Shrine Adore.
 Then let us *Sylvia* yet be wise, 195
 And the Gay hasty minutes prize:
 The Sun and Spring receive but our short Light,
 Once sett, a sleep brings an Eternal Night.

NOTES:

24 *Zephirs* "The west wind, frequently personified" (*OED*).

25 *Balmy* "Delicately and deliciously fragrant" (*OED*).

30 *Bill* "To caress, make show of affection" (*OED*).

44 *boughs* Branches.

57 *Swain* "A country or farm labourer, frequently a shepherd; a countryman, rustic" (*OED*).

63 *Meads* “Meadows” (*OED*).

70 *Inhaunce* “Enhance” (*OED*).

73 *salvage* One of several Anglo-Norman spellings for “savage” in use during this period (*OED*).

135 *Miser* “A person who hoards wealth and lives miserably in order to do so” (*OED*).

137 *Votaries* “A person who has made a particular vow” (*OED*).

140 *Debaucher* “A corrupter or seducer” (*OED*).

154 *Chaffer* “To bargain, haggle about terms or price” (*OED*).

160 *Scepters* “An ornamental rod...a symbol of regal authority” (*OED*).

SOURCE: Mrs. A. Behn, *Poems upon Several Occasions: with a Voyage to the Island of Love* (London, 1684), pp. 1-12. [EBBO]

Edited by ENG 690 students (Fall 2020)