Aphra Behn, â??The Golden Ageâ?•

Description

APHRA BEHN

â??The Golden Ageâ?•
A Paraphrase on a Translation out of French

I.

Blest Age! when evâ??ry Purling Stream
Ran undisturbâ??d and clear,
When no scornâ??d Shepherds on your Banks were seen,
Torturâ??d by Love, by Jealouise, or Fear;
When an Eternal Spring drest evâ??ry Bough,
And Blossoms fell, by new ones dispossest;
These their kind Shade affording all below;
And those a Bed where all below might rest.
The Groves appearâ??d all drest with Wreaths of Flowers,
And from their Leaves dropt Aromatick Showers,
Whose fragrant Heads in Mystick Twines above,
Exchangâ??d their Sweets, and mixâ??d with thousand Kisses,
As if the willing Branches strove
To beautifie and shade the Grove
Where the young wanton Gods of Love
Offer their Noblest Sacrifice of Blisses.

II.

Calm was the Air, no Winds blew fierce and loud,
The Skie was darkâ??ned with no sullen Cloud:
But all the Heavâ??ns laughâ??d with continued Light,
And scatterâ??d round their Rays serenely bright.
No other Murmurs fillâ??d the Ear
But what the Streams and Rivers purlâ??d
When Silver Waves oâ??er Shining Pebbles curlâ??d;
Or when young *Zephirs* fanâ??d the Gentle Breez,
Gathering fresh Sweets from Balmy Flowâ??rs and Trees,
Then bore â??em on their Wings to perfume all the Air:
While to their soft and tender Play,
The Gray-Plumâ??d Natives of the Shades
Unwearied sing till Love invades,
Then Bill, then sing agen, while Love and Musick makes the Day.

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,
All Nature, and all Sexes lay,
Whence new Creations every day
Into the happy World did come:
The Roses fillâ??d with Morning Dew,
Bent down their loaded heads,
Tâ??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 whoâ??s boughs the Snakes securely dwelt,
Not doing harm, nor harm from others felt;
With whom the Nymphs did Innocently play,
No spightful 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:
Monarchs were uncreated then,
Those Arbitrary Rulers over men;
Kings that made Laws, first broke â??em, and the Gods
By teaching us Religion first, first set the World at Odds:
Till then Ambition was not known,
That Poyson to Content, Bane to Repose;
Each Swain was Lord oâ??er his own will alone,
His Innocence Religion was, and Laws.
Nor needed any troublesome defence
Against his Neighbours Insolence.
Flocks, Herds, and every necessary good
Which bounteous Nature had designâ??d for Food,
Whose kind increase oâ??er spread the Meads and Plaines,
Was then a common Sacrifice to all thâ?? agreeing Swaines.

V.

Right and Property were words since made,
When Power taught Mankind to invade:
When Pride and Avarice became a Trade;
Carriâ??d on by discord, noise and wars,
For which they barterâ??d wounds and scarrs;
And to Inhaunce the Merchandize, miscallâ??d it Fame,
And Rapes, Invasions, Tyrannies,
Was gaining of a Glorious Name:
Stiling their salvage slaughters, Victories;
Honour, the Error and the Cheat
Of the Ill-naturâ??d Busâ??ey Great,
Nonsence, 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,
And that was lawful all, that Pleasure did invite,
Then â??twas the Amorous world injoyâ??d its Reign;
And Tyrant Honour strove tâ??usurp in Vain.

VI.

The flowry Meads the Rivers and the Groves,
Were fillâ??d with little Gay-wingâ??d Loves:
That ever smilâ??d and dancâ??d and Playâ??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;
A Thousand Cupids fannâ??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 admirâ??d,
And smilâ??d and fannâ??d, and sometimes bent his Bow;
Where eâ??er he saw a Shepherd uninspirâ??d.
The Nymphs were free, no nice, no coy disdain,
Denyâ??d their Joyes, or gave the Lover pain;
The yielding Maid but kind Resistance makes:
Trembling and blushing are not marks of shame,
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 uncontroulâ??d did meet,
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.
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
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 robâ??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;
To Veil â??em from the Lookers on,
When they are sure the slaveâ??s undone,
And all the Charmingst part of Beauty hid;
Soft Looks, consenting Wishes, all denyâ??d.
It gathers up the flowing Hair,
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 hurlâ??d:
Now drest to Tempt, not gratify the World,
Thou Miser Honour hordâ??st the sacred store,
And starvâ??st thy self to keep thy Votaries poor.

IX.

Honour! that putâ??st our words that should be free
Into a set Formality.
Thou base Debaucher of the generous heart,
That teachest all our Looks and Actions Art;
What love designâ??d a sacred Gift,
What Nature made to be possest,
Mistaken Honour made a theft,
For Glorious Love should be confest:
For when confinâ??d, all the poor Lover gains,
Is broken Sighs, pale Looks, Complaints and Pains.
Thou Foe to Pleasure, Natureâ??s worst Disease,
Thou Tyrant over mighty Kings,
What makâ??st thou here in Shepherds Cottages;
Why troublest thou, the quiet Shades and Springs?
Be gone, and make thy Famâ??d resort
To Princes Pallaces;
Go Deal and Chaffer in the Trading Court,
That busie Market for Phantastick Things;
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,
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 Alliâ??d,

And formâ??d for love alone, disdainâ??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 concealâ??d:
The Mystery will be revealâ??d,
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;
The swift pacâ??d hours of life soon steal away:
Stint not yee Gods his short livâ??d Joy.
The Spring decays, but when the Winterâ??s gone,
The Trees and Flowers a new comes on
The Sun may set, but when the night is fled,
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,
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,
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 Ruinâ??d Shrine Adore.
Then let us *Sylvia* yet be wise,
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* â??The west wind, frequently personifiedâ?• (*OED*).

25 *Balmy* â??Delicately and deliciously fragrantâ?• (*OED*).

30 *Bill* â??To caress, make show of affectionâ?• (*OED*).

44 *boughs* Branches.

57 *Swain* â??A country or farm labourer, frequently a shepherd; a countryman, rusticâ?• (*OED*).

63 *Meads* â??Meadowsâ?• (*OED*).

70 *Inhaunce* â??Enhanceâ?• (*OED*).

73 *salvage* One of several Anglo-Norman spellings for â??savageâ?• in use during this period (*OED*).

135 *Miser* â??A person who hoards wealth and lives miserably in order to do soâ?• (*OED*).

137 *Votaries* â??A person who has made a particular vowâ?• (*OED*).

140 *Debaucher* â??A corrupter or seducerâ?• (*OED*).

154 *Chaffer* â??To bargain, haggle about terms or priceâ?• (*OED*).

160 *Scepters* â??An ornamental rodâ?¦a symbol of regal authorityâ?• (*OED*).

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

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