

John Gay, "Epistle to a Lady. Occasioned by the Arrival of Her Royal Highness"

Description

JOHN GAY

"EPISTLE TO A LADY. Occasioned by the Arrival of HER ROYAL HIGHNESS"

MADAM, to all your censures I submit,
And frankly own I should long since have writ:
You told me, silence would be thought a crime,
And kindly strove to ease me into rhyme:
No more let trifling themes your Muse employ, 5
Nor lavish verse to paint a female toy:
No more on plains with rural damsels sport,
But sing the glories of the *British* court.

By your commands and inclination sway'd,
I call'd th' unwilling Muses to my aid; 10
Resolv'd to write, the noble theme I chose,
And to the Princess thus the Poem rose.

*Aid me bright Phoebus; aid, ye sacred Nine;
Exalt my Genius, and my verse refine.
My strains with Carolina's name I grace, 15
The lovely parent of our royal race.
Breathe soft, ye winds, ye waves in silence sleep;
Let prosperous breezes wanton o'er the deep,
Swell the white sails, and with the streamers play,
To waft her gently o'er the watry way. 20*

Here I to Neptune form'd a pompous prayer,
To rein the winds, and guard the royal Fair;
Bid the blue Tritons sound their twisted shells,
And call the Nereids from their pearly cells.

Thus my warm zeal had drawn the Muse along, 25
Yet knew no method to conduct her song:
I then resolv'd some model to pursue,
Perus'd French Criticks, and began anew.
Long open panegyrick drags at best,
And praise is only praise when well address'd. 30

Strait *Horace* for some lucky Ode I sought:
And all along I trac'd him thought by thought:
This new performance to a friend I show'd;

For shame, says he, what, imitate an Ode!
 Iâ??d rather ballads write, and *Grubstreet* lays, 35
 Than pillage *Casars* for my patronâ??s praise:
 One common fate all imitators share,
 To save mince-pies, and cap the grocerâ??s ware.
 Vexâ??d at the charge, I to the flames commit
 Rhymes, similies, Lords names, and ends of wit; 40
 In blotted stanzas scraps of Odes expire,
 And fustian mounts in Pyramids of fire.

Ladies, to you I next inscribâ??d my lay,
 And writ a letter in familiar way:
 For still impatient till the Princess came, 45
 You from description wishâ??d to know the dame.
 Each day my pleasing labour larger grew,
 For still new graces openâ??d to my view.
 Twelve lines ran on to introduce the theme,
 And then I thus pursuâ??d the growing scheme. 50

Beauty and wit were sure by nature joinâ??d,
And charms are emanations of the mind;
The soul transpiercing through the shining frame,
Forms all the graces of the Princely Dame:
Benevolence her conversation guides, 55
Smiles on her cheek, and in her eye resides.
Such harmony upon her tongue is found,
As softens English to Italian sound:
Yet in those sounds such sentiments appear,
As charm the Judgment, while they sooth the ear. 60

Religionâ??s chearful flame her bosom warms,
Calms all her hours, and brightens all her charms.
Henceforth, ye Fair, at chappel mind your prayâ??rs,
Nor catch your loverâ??s eyes with artful airs;
Restrain your looks, kneel more, and whisper less, 65
Nor most devoutly criticize on dress.

From her form all your characters of life,
The tender mother, and the faithful wife.
Oft have I seen her little infant train,
The lovely promise of a future reign; 70
Observâ??d with pleasure evâ??ry dawning grace,
And all the mother opâ??ning in their face,
The son shall add new honours to the line,
And early with paternal virtues shine;
When he the tale of Audenard repeats, 75
His little heart with emulation beats;
With conquests yet to come, his bosom glows,

*He dreams of triumphs and of vanquishâ??d foes.
Each year with arts shall store his ripâ??ning brain,
And from his Grandsire he shall learn to reign.* 80

Thus far Iâ??d gone: Propitious rising gales
Now bid the sailor hoist the swelling sails.
Fair *Carolina* lands; the canons roar,
White *Albion*â??s cliffs resound from shore to shore,
Behold the bright original appear, 85
All praise is faint when *Carolina*â??s near.
Thus to the nationâ??s joy, but Poetâ??s cost,
The Princess came, and my new plan was lost.

Since all my schemes were baulkâ??d, my last resort,
I left the Muses to frequent the Court; 90
Pensive each night, from room to room I walkâ??d,
To one I bowâ??d, and with another talkâ??d;
Enquirâ??d what news, or such a Ladyâ??s name,
And did the next day, and the next, the same.
Places, I found, were daily given away, 95
And yet no friendly Gazette mentionâ??d *Gay*.
I askâ??d a friend what method to pursue;
He cryâ??d, I want a place as well as you.
Another askâ??d me, why I had not writ;
A Poet owes his fortune to his wit. 100
Strait I replyâ??d, with a courtly grace,
Flows easy verse from him that has a place!
Had *Virgil* neâ??er at court improvâ??d his strains,
He still had sung of flocks and homely swains;
And had not *Horace* sweet preferment found, 105
The *Roman* lyre had never learnt to sound.

Once Ladies fair in homely guise I sung,
And with their names wild woods and mountains rung.
Oh, teach me now to strike a softer strain!
The Court refines the language of the plain. 110

You must, cries one, the Ministry rehearse,
And with each Patriotâ??s name prolong your verse.
But sure this truth to Poets should be known,
That praising all alike, is praising none.

Another told me, if I wishâ??d success, 115
To some distinguishâ??d Lord I must address;
One whose high virtues speak his noble blood,
One always zealous for his countryâ??s good;
Where valour and strong eloquence unite,
In council cautious, resolute in fight; 120

Whose generous temper prompts him to defend,
And patronize the man that wants a friend.
You have, 'tis true, the noble Patron shown,
But I, alas! Am to *Argyle* unknown.

Still every one I met in this agreed, 125
That writing was my method to succeed;
But not preferments so possess'd my brain,
That scarce I could produce a single strain:
Indeed I sometimes hammer'd out a line,
Without connection as without design. 130
One morn upon the Princess this I writ,
An Epigram that boasts more truth than wit

*The pomp of titles easy faith might shake,
She scorn'd an empire for religion's sake:
For this, on earth, the British crown is given,
And an immortal crown decreed in heav'n.* 135

Again, while GEORGE's virtues rais'd my thought,
The following lines prophetick fancy wrought.

*Methinks I see some Bard, whose heavenly rage,
Shall rise in song, and warm a future age; 140
Look back through time, and, rapt in wonder, trace
The glorious series of the Brunswick race.*

*From the first George these godlike kings descend,
A line which only with the world shall end.
The next a generous Prince renown'd in arms, 145
And bless'd, long bless'd in Carolina's charms;
From these the rest. 'Tis thus secure in peace,
We plow the fields, and reap the year's increase:
Now Commerce, wealthy Goddess, rears her head,
And bids Britannia's fleets their canvas spread; 150
Unnumber'd ships the peopled ocean hide,
And wealth returns with each revolving tide.*

Here pass'd the sullen Muse, in haste I dress'd,
And through the croud of needy courtiers press'd;
Though unsuccessful, happy whilst I see, 155
Those eyes that glad a nation, shine on me.

NOTES:

Title First published in 1714, this is Gay's revised version; *Her Royal Highness* Caroline of Ansbach (1683-1737). She married George Augustus of Great Britain in 1705, and became Princess of Wales in 1714, and Queen in 1727.

13 *Phoebus* â??Greek God Apollo: God of music, poetry, sun, and lightâ?• (OED); *Sacred Nine* The nine Muses: Calliope (epic poetry), Clio (history), Erato (lyric poetry), Euterpe (music), Melpomene (tragedy), Polyhymnia (religious music), Terpsichore (dance), Thalia (comedy), and Urania (astronomy).

15 *Carolina* Caroline, Princess of Wales in 1714. She became the first woman to receive the title at the same time her husband received his.

21 *Neptune* Roman god of the sea.

23 *Triton* Greek sea deity, son of Poseidon.

24 *Nereids* Sea nymphs.

29 *Panegyrick* Public speech or text delivered in high praise of a person or thing. (OED).

31 *Horace* Quintus Horatius Flaccus (65 BC â?? 8 BC) Latin lyric poet and satirist under the emperor Augustus. Known for his odes.

35 *Grubstreet* â??Used for the tribe of mean and needy authors, or literary hacksâ?• (OED).

36 *Casar* Augustus Caesar (63 BC â?? 14 AD), founder of the Roman Empire and its first Emperor. Horaceâ??s second ode, â??To Augustus Caesar,â?• celebrated its addressee as savior of the Empire.

42 *Fustian* â??Coarse cloth made of cotton or flaxâ?• (OED).

75 *Audenard* Battle of Oudenarde July 11, 1708. The Grand Alliance (Great Britain, the Dutch Republic, and the Holy Empire) held victory over the French.

81 *Propitious* â??Of God, the fatesâ?• (OED).

84 *Albion* â??The island of Britainâ?• (OED).

96 *Gazette* Newspaper.

103 *Virgil* Publius Vergilius Maro (70 BC â?? 19 BC), Roman court poet.

124 *Argyle* John Campbell, 2nd Duke of Argyle (1680-1743). A noted commander in the British Army during the War of the Spanish Succession, and also known to be a patron of the arts.

132 *Epigram* A short, witty poem.

134 *She scornâ??dâ?|religionâ??s sake* Caroline rejected the suit of Archduke Charles of Austria (who would later become King of Spain) on religious grounds.

137 *George* George Augustus (1683-1760), Prince of Wales in 1714.

139 *Bard* An ancient Celtic poet whose primary function was to compose and sing (usually to the harp) verses celebrating the achievements of chiefs and warriors.

142 *Brunswick* A reference to the Duchy state of Brunswick and L¹/₄neberg, in Northern Germany, from which the Hanoverian kings came.

143 *first George* King George I of Great Britain (1660-1727), reigned from 1714.

145 *Prince* George Augustus, Prince of Wales, later King George II of Great Britain, reigned from 1727-1760.

Source: *Poems on Several Occasions, Volume 2* (London, 1731), pp. 3-11. [Google Books]

Edited by Jennifer Fong