

Ann Yearsley, "On Mrs. Montagu"

Description

ANN YEARSLEY

"On Mrs. MONTAGU"

Why boast, O arrogant, imperious man,
Perfection so exclusive? are thy powers
Nearer approaching Deity? can'st thou solve
Questions which Infinity propounds,
Soar nobler flights, or dare immortal deeds, 5
Unknown to woman, if she greatly dares
To use the powers assign'd her? Active strength,
The boast of animals, is clearly thine;
By this upheld, thou think'st the lesson rare
That female virtues teach; and poor the height 10
Which female wit obtains. The theme unfolds
Its ample maze, for MONTAGU befriends
The puzzled thought, and, blazing in the eye
Of boldest Opposition, strait presents
The soul's best energies, her keenest powers, 15
Clear, vigorous, enlighten'd; with firm wing
Swift she o'ertakes *his* Muse, which spread afar
Its brightest glories in the days of yore;
Lo! where she, mounting, spurns the stedfast earth,
And, sailing on the cloud of science, bears 20
The banner of Perfection. "Ourselves alone
Ask GALLIA'S mimic sons how strong her powers,
Whom, flush'd with plunder from her SHAKESPEARE'S page,
She swift detects amid their dark retreats;
(Horrid as CACUS in their thievish dens) 25
Regains the trophies, bears in triumph back
The pilfer'd glories to wondrous world.
So STELLA boasts, from her tale I learn'd;
With pride she told it, I with rapture heard.

O, MONTAGU! forgive me, if I sing 30
Thy wisdom temper'd with the milder ray
Of soft humanity, and kindness bland:
So wide its influence, that the bright beams
Reach the low vale where mists of ignorance lodge,
Strike on the innate spark which lay immers'd, 35

Thick cloggâ??d, and almost quenchâ??d in total night â??
On me it fell, and cheerâ??d my joyless heart.

Unwelcome is the first bright dawn of light
To the dark soul; impatient, she rejects,
And fain wouâ??d push the heavenly stranger back; 40
She loaths the cranny which admits the day;
Confusâ??d, afraid of the intruding guest;
Disturbâ??d, unwilling to receive the beam,
Which to herself her native darkness shews.

The effort rude to quench the cheering flame 45
Was mine, and eâ??en on STELLA couâ??d I gaze
With sullen envy, and admiring pride,
Till, doubly rousâ??d by MONTAGU, the pair
Conspire to clear my dull, imprisonâ??d sense,
And chase the mists which dimmâ??d my visual beam. 50

Oft as I trod my native wilds alone,
Strong gusts of thought wouâ??d rise, but rise to die;
The portals of swelling soul, neâ??er opâ??d
By liberal converse, rude ideas strove
Awhile for vent, but found it not, and died. 55
Thus rust the Mindâ??s best powers. Yon starry orbs,
Majestic ocean, flowery vales, gay groves,
Eye-wasting lawns, and Heaven-attempting hills,
Which bound thâ?? horizon, and which curb the view;
All those, with beauteous imagery, awakâ??d 60
My ravishâ??d soul to extacy untaught,
To all the transport the rapt sense can bear;
But all expirâ??d, for want of powers to speak;
All perishâ??d in the mind as soon as born,
Erasâ??d more quick than cyphers on the shore, 65
Oâ??er which the cruel waves, unheedful, roll.

Such timid rapture as young EDWIN seizâ??d,
When his lone footsteps on the Sage obtrude,
Whose noble precept charmâ??d his wondâ??ring ear,
Such rapture fillâ??d LACTILLAâ??S vacant soul, 70
When the bright Moralist, in softness drest,
Opes all the glories of the mental world,
Deigns to direct the infant thought, to prune
The budding sentiment, uprear the stalk
Of feeble fancy, bid idea live, 75
Woo the abstracted spirit from its cares,
And gently guide her to the scenes of peace.
Mine was that balm, and mine the grateful heart,
Which breathes its thanks in rough, but timid strains.

NOTES:

Title *Montagu* Elizabeth Montagu (1718-1800), literary critic, writer, and patron of the arts. She was a founding member of the Bluestockings, a group of intellectual women formed in the mid-eighteenth century (*Britannica*).

17 *Muse* – The inspiration of poetry or song (OED).

19 *spurns* – To reject with contempt or disdain (OED).

22 *GALLIA* – *S mimic sons* Ancient Latin word for France; a reference to French critics (OED).

23 *SHAKESPEARE* – *S page* A reference to Montagu's most important work, *An Essay on the Writing and Genius of Shakespear* (1769).

25 *CACUS* Three-headed, fire-breathing Roman diety killed by Hercules in his own cave after stealing cattle (*Britannica*).

28 *STELLA* Yearsley's poetic name for Hannah More (1745-1833), a poet, playwright, and member of the Bluestocking circle. She became Yearsley's most energetic patron until their falling out in 1787.

61 *extacy* – An exalted state of feeling which engrosses the mind to the exclusion of thought (OED).

67 *young EDWIN* – See the Minstrel (Author's Note). Edwin is the young poet of James Beattie's (1785-1803) popular two-part poem *The Minstrel* (1771/1774). One of the characters he encounters is a philosopher or Sage figure.

70 *LACTILLA* – The Author (Author's Note). Yearsley's poetic name for herself.

71 *bright Moralists* Most likely a reference to Elizabeth Montagu.

SOURCE: *Poems, on Several Occasions* (London, 1785), pp. 101-106. [Google Books]

Edited by Chloe Moody