

James Merrick

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An English poet and scholar, James Merrick was born in Reading, Berkshire in 1720. Attending Trinity College Oxford, he obtained his MA in 1742. Lord North, who would become prime minister of Great Britain in 1770, was one of his pupils. Merrick was ordained by the Church of England, and, although he occasionally preached between 1747 and 1749, health issues prevented him from fulfilling any parochial¹⁸² duties. Due to his weak constitution, Merrick “retired in weak health to Reading, where he devoted himself to scholarship and to an ambitious campaign for the compiling of indexes to Greek authors” (McNamee). Merrick is most well-known for translating various Greek works, but he also converted Hebrew psalms to English verse and wrote poetry. Merrick’s scholarly and religious background became influential in his various works, including “The Bears and Bees: A Fable,” but he deliberately wrote in such a way that made his work more accessible to the masses. Merrick died in 1769 and was buried on the grounds of Caversham Church, Oxfordshire, alongside other members of his family.

“The Bears and Bees: A Fable” is a poetic fable that teaches a moral lesson in which greed leads to conflict and retaliation. It is commonplace in fables to use animals as a stand-in for people, and during Merrick’s life fables were commonly exemplary tales in which positive portrayals taught moral lessons. In contrast, “The Bears and Bees: A Fable” is a cautionary tale used to warn of the consequences that come from failing to uphold moral values. This poem is written in simple iambic tetrameter couplets, making it accessible to the majority of readers.

Further Reading

Campbell, Gordon Lindsay. “Aesop and Animal Fable.” *The Oxford Handbook of Animals in Classical Thought and Life*, 1st edition, edited by Gordon Lindsay Campbell, Oxford UP, 2014.

¹⁸² *Parochial* those of ordained members of the church such as ministers, priests, and bishops

Tieken-Boon van Ostade, Ingrid. “James Merrick (1720–1769): Poet, Scholar, Linguist.” *Historiographia Linguistica: New Approaches to the Study of Later Modern English*, vol. 33, no. 1–2, 2006, pp. 39–56.

Reference

McNamee, Robert V. “James Merrick (born 1720–died 1769.” *Electronic Enlightenment Biographical Dictionary*, vers. 3.0, edited Robert McNamee et al., Oxford, 2018.

The Bears and Bees: A Fable¹⁸³

AS two young Bears in wanton¹⁸⁴ mood,
 Forth-issuing from a neighbouring wood,
 Came where th' industrious Bees had stor'd
 In artful cells their luscious hoard;
 O'erjoy'd they seiz'd with eager haste 5
 Luxurious on the rich repast.¹⁸⁵
 Alarm'd at this the little crew
 About their ears vindictive flew.
 The beasts unable to sustain
 Th' unequal combat, quit the plain; 10
 Half blind with rage, and mad with pain;
 Their native shelter they regain;
 There sit, and now discreeter grown,
 Too late their rashness they bemoan;¹⁸⁶
 And this by dear experience gain, 15
 That pleasure's ever bought with pain.
 So when the gilded¹⁸⁷ baits of vice
 Are plac'd before our longing eyes,
 With greedy haste we snatch our fill,
 And swallow down the latent ill; 20
 But when experience opes¹⁸⁸ our eyes,

¹⁸³ *A Collection of Poems in Six Volumes. By Several Hands.* Vol. 5, R. Dodsley, 1763, p. 221; *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*.

¹⁸⁴ *Wanton* undisciplined, ungoverned; unmanageable, rebellious

¹⁸⁵ *Repast* a quantity of food and drink forming or intended for a meal or feast

¹⁸⁶ *Bemoan* to moan, lament, or weep for

¹⁸⁷ *Gilded* something decorated with a thin layer of gold

¹⁸⁸ *Opes* opens

Away the fancy'd pleasure flies.
It flies, but oh! too late we find
It leaves a real sting behind.



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