

William Shenstone

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William Shenstone was born in 1714 on the Leasowes, his family estate in the West Midlands. He pursued his education at the Solihull Grammar School near Birmingham and Pembroke College from 1732 to 1736. While he did not graduate with a degree, he anonymously published his first collection, *Poems upon Various Occasions: Written for the Entertainment of the Author, and Printed for the Amusement of a Few Friends, Prejudiced in His Favour*, in 1737, including a short early version of his most renowned poem “The Schoolmistress.” As the title of the book suggests, his intended audience was only his family and friends; however, the collection gained some public attention. He also anonymously released *The Judgement of Hercules* in 1741 and a revised version of “The Schoolmistress” in 1742. The latter was inspired by his first educational experience at a dame school (a small private school run by women for young children who could not work yet) and his teacher there, Sarah Lloyd.

In 1745, Shenstone returned to the Leasowes to take up permanent residence. Because his father had left him a fortune, he was able to experiment with landscape gardening and became one of the first practitioners in the field as he developed his own estate. We see Shenstone’s attraction toward nature throughout his poems, drawings, and landscape gardening projects. In 1748, the extended version of “The Schoolmistress” was featured in the first volume of the second edition of Robert Dodsley’s *Collection of Poems*. He later became Dodsley’s collaborator in choosing poems for collections.

Shenstone died at the age of forty-nine in 1763. In 1764, Dodsley edited and published Shenstone’s various elegies, odes, songs, ballads, and a considerable amount of poetry and prose in two volumes called *The Works in Verse and Prose*. Shenstone’s reputation has diminished since the nineteenth century, so information about him and his works is harder to obtain today.

This poem, “Ode to Indolence,” is written in quatrains of iambic tetrameter rhymed ABAB, making it appear to be a hymn that unexpectedly supports the notion of vice because the speaker endorses laziness. Aware of potential condemnation from his community, the speaker personifies and asks one of the Seven Deadly Sins, Sloth, to give him “peace.” The legendary bird of paradise, that must keep flying because it has no feet, might be admirable in its hard work

to the speaker's community. However, the speaker feels sympathy for the bird by describing it as "poor" from its "ceaseless fatigues" and unable to "find the resting place [it] loves." We can see Shenstone's desire to retreat from the world and perhaps also his interest in landscape gardening in the speaker's longing for a "rural bow'r."

Further Reading

- Jung, Sandro. "William Shenstone's Poetry, The Leasowes and the Intermediality of Reading and Architectural Design." *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 37, no. 1, Mar. 2014, pp. 53–77.
- Quintana, Ricardo, and Alvin Whitley, editors. "William Shenstone." *English Poetry of the Mid and Late Eighteenth Century: An Historical Anthology*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1963, pp. 66–68.

Ode to Indolence¹⁸⁹

AH! why for ever on the wing¹⁹⁰

 Persists my weary'd soul to roam?

Why, ever cheated, strives to bring

 Or¹⁹¹ pleasure or contentment home?

Thus the poor bird,¹⁹² that draws his name

5

 From paradise's honour'd groves,

Ceaseless fatigues his little frame;

 Nor finds the resting place he loves.

Lo! on the rural mossy bed

 My limbs with careless ease reclin'd;

10

Ah, gentle Sloth!¹⁹³ indulgent spread

 The same soft bandage o'er my mind.

For why should lingering thought invade,

 Yet every worldly prospect cloy?¹⁹⁴

Lend me, soft Sloth, thy friendly aid,

15

 And give me peace, debarr'd of joy.¹⁹⁵

¹⁸⁹ *A Collection of Poems in Six Volumes. By Several Hands*, Vol. V, ed. R. and J. Dodsley, 1763, pp. 19-20; *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online*

¹⁹⁰ *On the wing* flying

¹⁹¹ *Or* instead of using "either... or," the common practice was to use "or... or"

¹⁹² *Bird* the bird of paradise, it legendarily "had no feet and lived only in the air" (*OED*)

¹⁹³ *Sloth* laziness, one of the Deadly Sins

¹⁹⁴ *Cloy* causing disgust through abundance

¹⁹⁵ *Give me peace, debarr'd of joy* the speaker asks Sloth to give him peace since he is unable to be happy

Lov'st thou¹⁹⁶ yon¹⁹⁷ calm and silent flood,
 That never ebbs, that never flows;
 Protected by the circling¹⁹⁸ wood
 From each tempestuous wind that blows? 20

An altar on its bank shall rise,
 Where oft¹⁹⁹ thy votary²⁰⁰ shall be found;
 What time²⁰¹ pale Autumn lulls²⁰² the skies,
 And sickening verdure²⁰³ fades around.

Ye busy race, ye factious²⁰⁴ train,²⁰⁵ 25
 That haunt Ambition's guilty shrine;
 No more perplex the world in vain,
 But offer here your vows with mine.

And thou, puissant²⁰⁶ Queen! be kind:
 If e'er I shar'd thy balmy²⁰⁷ pow'r;
 If e'er I sway'd my active mind,
 To weave for Thee the rural bow'r; 30

Dissolve in sleep each anxious care;

¹⁹⁶ *Lov'st thou* do you love?

¹⁹⁷ *Yon* yonder, over there

¹⁹⁸ *Circling* surrounding

¹⁹⁹ *Oft* often

²⁰⁰ *Votary* devoted follower

²⁰¹ *What time* whenever

²⁰² *Lull* put to sleep

²⁰³ *Verdure* vegetation

²⁰⁴ *Factions* dissenting

²⁰⁵ *Train* group of followers

²⁰⁶ *Puissant* powerful and influential

²⁰⁷ *Balmy* soothing

Each unavailing sigh remove;
And only let me wake to share 35
The sweets of Friendship and of Love.



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