

Mary Barber

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Mary Barber (1685-1755) was born in Dublin, Ireland to unknown parents and much of her childhood is unknown. She married Rupert Barber, a woollen-draper, in 1705 and had nine children with him. Four survived to adulthood. She claimed that her work was born out of a desire to educate her children and support her family financially. She often wrote on behalf of her children in order to help them succeed in life, such as “An Apology Written for my Son to the Reverend Mr. Sampson, Who had Invited Some Friends to Celebrate Lord Carteret’s Birth-Day at Mount Carteret near Dublin, and Desir’d my Son to Write on that Occasion,” which involved her taking on her son’s responsibilities in order to further his chances for success.

“The Widow Gordon’s Petition to the Right Hon. The Lady Carteret,” also known as “The Widow’s Address” (1725) shows Barber’s concern not just with her children but with social justice. This poem was a commentary on the socioeconomic struggles of women, particularly widowed women, who struggled to support their children while facing lack of care from the government. Another early publication of hers with a moral involving the rich being generous to the poor is *A Tale, Being an Addition to Mr. Gay’s Fables* in 1728.

One of Barber’s chief literary supporters was Anglo-Irish poet Jonathan Swift. He placed her in his “Triumfeminate,” a group of three female Irish writers under his patronage who helped each other with their poetry; however, the other writers, Constantia Grierson and Elizabeth Scian, allegedly considered her a poorer writer than they were and thought their edits vastly improved Barber’s work. Barber was a rare case of a writer who allowed her work to be heavily edited as her end goal was to financially support her family—not maintain artistic integrity. In 1731 someone sent a letter supposedly from Swift praising Barber to Queen Caroline, but Swift denied it and suspicion for the forgery fell on Barber.

Barber wrote over one hundred poems, seventy-six of which were letters or addresses, mostly on behalf of her children or regarding her children’s education. The majority of her work was published in *Poems on Several Occasions* in 1734, by subscription. This form of publishing, which involved people paying in advance and getting their name on a list in the text, was the main form of publishing that was accessible to her as someone lower-class and unestablished.

Her poetry collection was prefaced with a letter from Swift, whose glowing review of her work helped her to gain an audience. One of the poems in *Poems on Several Occasions* is "A Letter to a Friend, on Occasion of some Libels written against Him," a verse epistle in iambic tetrameter couplets. In it, she advises a friend that, just as people envious of someone's wealth will inadvertently make him richer by trying to ruin his credit, so the people who have been libeling the friend will only increase the friend's fame in the end.

Barber suffered from a severe case of gout that first afflicted her in 1732 and prevented her from returning to Ireland from England when she initially wished to. The amount of writing she produced subsided over the years as she remained ill. Her last poem was written in 1741; however, in 1755, a large swath of her poetry was published in Colman and Thornton's *Poems by Eminent Ladies*. She passed away later that same year.

Further Reading

Coleborne, Bryan. "Barber, Mary (c.1685–1755)." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Edited by H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison, Oxford UP, 2004.

Fanning, Christopher. "The Voices of the Dependent Poet: The Case of Mary Barber." *Women's Writing*, vol. 8, iss.1, 2001, pp. 81–97.

Huber, Alexander. "Mary Barber." *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*.

A Letter to a Friend, on Occasion of some Libels
written against Him²⁹³

AS in some wealthy, trading Town,²⁹⁴
Where Riches raise to sure Renown,²⁹⁵
The Man, with ample Sums in Store,
More than enough, yet wanting more,
Bent on Abundance, first secures 5
His Rails,²⁹⁶ his Windows, and his Doors,
With many a Chain, and Bolt, and Pin.
To keep Rogues²⁹⁷ out, and Riches in;
Ranges²⁹⁸ his Iron Chests in View,
And paints his Window Bars with Blue,²⁹⁹ 10
Discounts your Notes,³⁰⁰ receives your Rents,
A Banker now, to all Intent.

SUPPOSE his more successful Labours
Should raise him high above his Neighbours:
As sure, as if *Apollo*³⁰¹ said it, 15
They'll all combine to blast his Credit:
But if, in solid Wealth secure,
Their vain Assaults he can endure;

²⁹³ *Poems on Several Occasions*, 1734, pp. 68–69; *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*

²⁹⁴ *Some wealthy, trading town* possibly Dublin, Ireland

²⁹⁵ *Renown* fame, honour

²⁹⁶ *Rails* railings outside the home

²⁹⁷ *Rogues* lawbreakers

²⁹⁸ *Ranges* arranges

²⁹⁹ *Paints his window bars with blue* paint was used to seal and hide the exposed ends of window bars

³⁰⁰ *Notes* banknotes

³⁰¹ *Apollo* Greek god of the sun, prophecy, poetry, and more

Their Malice but augments³⁰² his Gain,
And swells the Store it meant to drain. 20

THE Case in ev'ry Point's the same,
In Funds of Wealth, and Funds of Fame:
Tho' you're secur'd by ev'ry Fence
Of solid Worth, and Wit, and Sense;
In vain are all your utmost Pains, 25
Your Virtue's Bars, and Wisdom's Chains;
Nor Worth, nor Wit, nor Sense, combin'd,
Can bar the Malice of the Mind.

THE firmest, and the fairest Fame
Is ever Envy's surest Aim: 30
But if it stand her Rage, unmov'd,
Like Gold, in fiery Furnace prov'd;
Unbiass'd Truth, your Virtue's Friend,
Will more exalt you in the End.

³⁰² *Augments* increases



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