

Mary Barber

Vincent Wong, Simon Fraser University

Mary Barber (1685-1755) was an Irish housewife-turned-poet. She married Rupert Barber in Dublin and lived there from 1705 to 1724. She had nine children and began writing poetry to educate them. Barber's poems embody her social conscience. In 1724 she gained recognition for a collection of poems she sent to Lord and Lady Carteret, and this collection included a poem pleading the case of an army officer's widow and her blind son in need of charity. Her poetry also attracted the attention of Jonathan Swift, one of the foremost satirists in the English language. Swiftly famously became an outspoken advocate of her work, complimenting her poetic genius and manners to many of his contemporaries. As a result of their professional relationship, Barber was included in Swift's *Triumfeminate*.³⁰³

Barber was no stranger to controversy. In 1731, a work attributed to Swift titled *Three Letters to the Queen on the Distresses of Ireland* was published, applauding Barber as the greatest female poet of all time. Swift, however, swiftly denied any involvement in writing those letters. Suspicions against Barber for forging Swift's signature arose and never disappeared. Still, Swift eventually forgave her, even leaving her a medal he received from Queen Anne and Prince George in his will. Barber was caught in another mysterious event in 1734, when she was arrested for allegedly importing into England a collection of Swift's controversial political poems attacking Prime Minister Horace Walpole, but the matter was quickly dropped. After her release, Barber moved to live in Bath with her son Rupert.

In 1734 Barber's *Poems on Several Occasions* was published with over nine hundred subscribers, a large percentage of whom were aristocrats. Notable inclusions were Swift, who subscribed for ten copies, Lord and Lady Carteret, and the Earl of Orrery, to whom she dedicated the collection. It was an unprecedented publication with an equally unprecedented number of subscribers, especially considering Barber's gender and commoner background. However, Barber was eventually forced to retire from the public eye after her battle with gout worsened. During her absence, she contributed writings, usually about gout,

³⁰³ *Triumfeminate* Jonathan Swift's nickname for a group of notable female Irish poets including Constantia Grierson, Mary Sican, and Mary Barber

to publications such as the *Gentleman's Magazine*, but they received little attention and fanfare. Unfortunately, due to a subscription model in which subscribers only had to pay after the publication of the collection, subscribers who either refused to pay or could not be reached played a role in forcing Barber to move back to Ireland in 1736 and live in poverty.

Included in Barber's 1734 collection, "To the Rt. Hon. Charlotte Lady Conway, on Her Resolving to Leave Bath" is one of many verse epistles Barber presumably wrote to friends and (potential) patrons and later published. The poem is in very typical iambic pentameter couplets and praises Lady Conway extravagantly.

Mary Barber was given prominent representation in Colman and Thornton's 1755 *Poems by Eminent Ladies* for her contributions and died the same year. Her final resting place is unknown.

Further Reading

Tucker, Bernard. "Our Chief Poetess': Mary Barber and Swift's Circle." *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, vol. 19, pp. 31–44.

To the Rt. Hon. Charlotte Lady Conway,
On Her Resolving to Leave Bath³⁰⁴

O Charlotte,³⁰⁵ truly pious, early wise!
 The Pleasures sought by others, you despise:
 Nor Bath,³⁰⁶ nor Bath's Allurements³⁰⁷ thee detain.
 Unmov'd, you quit³⁰⁸ them to the Gay³⁰⁹ and Vain.³¹⁰
 But tho' nor Health, nor Pleasure will prevail. 5
 The Happiness you give, should turn the Scale.³¹¹
 O stay, and teach the Virtues of thy Breast:
 Thousands by thy Example may be blest:
 A Mind so humble, and so truly great,³¹²
 So fitted to oblige³¹³ in ev'ry State.³¹⁴ 10
 A Manner, so engaging and discrete,³¹⁵
 A Manner, so inimitably³¹⁶ sweet!
 These, and thy thousand Charms, who can express?
 Seymour,³¹⁷ how vast a Treasure you possess!

³⁰⁴ *Poems on Several Occasions*, printed by Rivington, 1735, p. 195; *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*

³⁰⁵ *Charlotte* third wife of Francis Seymour-Conway, 1st Baron Conway of Killultagh

³⁰⁶ *Bath* a city in the west of England, known for its hot springs

³⁰⁷ *Bath's Allurements* Bath was famous for its extravagance: parades, assembly rooms, pleasure gardens, and dancing

³⁰⁸ *Quit* relinquish or leave

³⁰⁹ *Gay* lively, light-hearted, carefree

³¹⁰ *Vain* foolish, thoughtless

³¹¹ *Turn the Scale* your ability to give happiness to your friends should outweigh your dislike of the town's pleasures

³¹² *Great* admirable

³¹³ *Oblige* "to create a debt of gratitude" (*OED*)

³¹⁴ *State* people of every class

³¹⁵ *Discrete* individually distinct; possibly also "discreet," wise in a way that avoids embarrassment

³¹⁶ *Inimitably* in a way that cannot be imitated

³¹⁷ *Seymour* her husband



[This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)

© Vincent Wong, 2022

Available from:

<http://monographs.lib.sfu.ca/index.php/sfulibrary/catalog/book/103>