

Elizabeth Carter

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Elizabeth Carter (1717-1806) was born in Deal, Kent, the daughter of the town's perpetual curate.³¹⁸ Because of her father's position in the church, Carter received more education than was common for women of her time. Carter learned both Latin and Greek, the latter of which greatly influenced her poetic works. At a time when academia was male-dominated and hostile towards women, Carter was an outlier among her peers: she was well regarded among male academic circles some of whom, because of her intellect and respectability, considered her to match the ideal form of womanhood. Later in life, she joined the Blue Stockings Society, a circle of female academics who strove to further education for women. However, despite her unique position as a well-respected female academic, Carter openly abhorred early feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft for what were then radical opinions. Carter gained enough of a reputation to be personally introduced to the queen of England in 1791 and was visited by several other members of the royal family in her old age.

"Ode to Wisdom" reflects Carter's personal connection to ancient Greece and is an early example of a resurgence of interest in ancient Greek culture during the long eighteenth century in Britain. The poem is a Horatian ode with a pattern of two lines in iambic tetrameter followed by one line of iambic trimeter. The Horatian ode is stylistically inspired by ancient Greek drama and is contemplative in tone, featuring a steady and repeated metrical pattern, rhyme scheme, and stanzaic form.

The poem was briefly the centre of controversy when English writer Samuel Richardson included it in his novel *Clarissa* without crediting Carter, who responded with a strongly worded letter expressing her displeasure. Although Richardson apologized and later received Carter's blessing to use her work, the damage had already been done. "Ode to Wisdom," one of Carter's most famous works, is now mainly ascribed to Richardson.

³¹⁸*Perpetual Curate* a low-ranking priest of the Church of England

Further Reading

- Bach, Kennedy G. "The Woman Writer as Public Paradox: Elizabeth Carter and the Bluestocking Circle." *Feminisms and Early Modern Texts: Essays for Phyllis Rackin*, edited by Rebecca Ann Bach and Gwynne Kennedy, Susquehanna University Press, 2010, pp. 119–137.
- Backscheider, Paula R. "Memory, Time, and Elizabeth Carter." *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets and Their Poetry Inventing Agency, Inventing Genre*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010, pp. 241–256.
- McGeary, Thomas. "Clarissa Harlowe's 'Ode to Wisdom': Composition, Publishing History, and the Semiotics of Printed Music." *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2012, pp. 431–458.

As in the beam of day,

O PALLAS! queen of ev'ry art,
That glads the sense, and mends the heart, 20

Blest source of purer joys:
In every form of beauty bright,
That captivates the mental sight
With pleasure and surprize:

At thy unspotted³²⁹ shrine I bow; 25
Attend thy modest suppliant's³³⁰ vow,

That breathes no wild desires:
But taught by thy unerring³³¹ rules,
To shun the fruitless wish of fools,
To nobler views aspires. 30

Not FORTUNE's gem, AMBITION's plume,³³²
Nor CYTHEREA'S³³³ fading bloom,
Be objects of my pray'r:
Let AV'RICE,³³⁴ VANITY, and PRIDE,
Those envy'd glitt'ring toys, divide 35
The dull rewards of care.

To me thy better gifts impart,

³²⁹ *Unspotted* spotless, pure, or virginal

³³⁰ *Suppliant* one who pleads humbly to an authority

³³¹ *Unerring* never mistaken

³³² *Plume* feathers on a bird or on a hat as a status symbol

³³³ *Cytheria* Greek goddess of love, more commonly known as Aphrodite

³³⁴ *Av'rice* greed or desire to amass wealth

Each moral beauty of the heart,
 By studious thoughts refin'd:
 For Wealth, the smiles of glad Content; 40
 For Pow'r, its amplest, best extent,
 An empire o'er the mind.

When FORTUNE drops her gay parade,
 When PLEASURE's transient³³⁵ roses fade,
 And wither in the tomb; 45
 Unchang'd is thy immortal prize,
 Thy ever-verdant³³⁶ laurels³³⁷ rise
 In undecaying bloom.

By thee protected, I defy
 The coxcomb's³³⁸ sneer, the stupid lye³³⁹ 50
 Of ignorance and spite:
 Alike contemn³⁴⁰ the leaden³⁴¹ fool,
 And all the pointed ridicule
 Of undiscerning wit.

From envy, hurry, noise and strife, 55
 The dull impertinence³⁴² of life,

³³⁵ *Transient* impermanent

³³⁶ *Verdant* green, associated with plant-life

³³⁷ *Laurels* bushes whose branches were woven into crowns and wreathes symbolizing victory in ancient Greece

³³⁸ *Coxcomb* a vain man

³³⁹ *Lye* lie

³⁴⁰ *Contemn* to treat with contempt

³⁴¹ *Leaden* dull or of low value

³⁴² *Impertinence* irrelevance or triviality

In thy retreat I rest:
 Pursue thee to the peaceful groves,
 Where PLATO's sacred spirit roves,³⁴³
 In all thy beauties dress'd. 60

He bade Ilissus³⁴⁴ tuneful stream
 Convey thy philosophick theme
 Of Perfect, Fair, and Good:
 Attentive Athens caught the sound,
 And all her list'ning sons around 65
 In awful silence stood:

Reclaim'd, her wild licentious³⁴⁵ youth
 Confess'd the potent voice of TRUTH,
 And felt its just controul:
 The Passions ceas'd their loud alarms,
 And Virtue's soft persuasive charms 70
 O'er all their senses stole.

Thy breath inspires the POET's song,
 The PATRIOT's free, unbiass'd tongue,
 The HERO's gen'rous strife; 75
 Thine are Retirement's silent joys,
 And all the sweet engaging ties
 Of still³⁴⁶ domestick life.

³⁴³ *Peaceful groves where Plato's sacred spirit roves* references the Platonic Academy of Ancient Greece, which was in a sacred grove of olive trees dedicated to Athena outside of Athens.

³⁴⁴ *Ilissus* a river that flows through Athens, Greece

³⁴⁵ *Licentious* free from social customs and rules, often with sexual connotations

³⁴⁶ *Still* calm, quiet

No more to fabled Names confin'd,
To the supreme all-perfect Mind 80
 My thoughts direct their flight:
Wisdom's thy gift, and all her force
From thee deriv'd, eternal source
 Of intellectual light.

O send her sure, her steady ray, 85
To regulate my doubtful way
 Thro' life's perplexing road:
The mists of error to controul,
And thro' its gloom direct my soul
 To happiness and good. 90

Beneath her clear discerning eye
The visionary shadows fly
 Of Folly's painted show:
She sees thro' ev'ry fair disguise,
That all but VIRTUE's solid joys 95
 Are vanity and woe.



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