

William Melmoth

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William Melmoth the younger was named after his father, William Melmoth the elder. Melmoth was born in 1710 London. There is little known about his life. Melmoth was a classical scholar who began a legal career in 1732, moved to Ealing, West London, and married Dorothy King, daughter of William King. He wrote and published his first book, *Letters on Several Subjects*, which includes “Epistle to Sappho,” in 1742 under the pseudonym Sir Thomas Fitzosborne. Melmoth wrote numerous poems, and his wife was commonly the subject of his verse epistles.

Melmoth’s “Epistle to Sappho” includes the themes of vice, virtue, and women. The poem is a verse epistle (a poetic letter) in iambic pentameter heroic couplets, though not in this case to his wife. The poem addresses a pre-pubescent young lady and advises her, as she grows up and is exposed to the world, to remain virtuous because of the principles that she was taught at a young age and to suppress the immoral and wicked behaviour that comes with her gender.

Melmoth dedicated much of his time to translating the works of Roman writers, including Pliny and Cicero. His works were praised for their accuracy, and some claimed that they were better than the originals. Melmoth also wrote a second volume of *Fitzosborne's Letters* in 1748. In 1761, after the passing of Melmoth’s wife, he moved to Bath and remarried. Melmoth continued to publish translations, though his last work was a book dedicated to his father, titled *Memoir of a Late Eminent Advocate*, published in 1796. Melmoth passed away in 1799 and was buried in Batheaston.

Further Reading

Doyle, Paul A. *William Melmoth: A Critical Biography*, Fordham University, 1955.

Wilson, Penelope. “Melmoth, William.” *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004.

Epistle to Sappho³⁶¹

WHILE yet no amorous³⁶² youths around thee bow,
 Nor flattering verse conveys the faithless vow;³⁶³
 To graver³⁶⁴ notes will Sappho's³⁶⁵ soul attend,
 And ere³⁶⁶ she hears the lover, hear the friend?
 Let maids less bless'd employ their meaner arts³⁶⁷ 5
 To reign proud tyrants o'er unnumber'd hearts;³⁶⁸
 May Sappho learn (for nobler triumphs born)
 Those little conquests of her sex to scorn.
 To form thy bosom to each generous deed;
 To plant thy mind with every useful seed;³⁶⁹ 10
 Be these thy arts: nor spare the grateful toil,³⁷⁰
 Where Nature's hand has bless'd the happy soil.³⁷¹
 So shalt thou know, with pleasing skill, to blend
 The lovely mistress, and instructive friend:
 So shalt thou know, when unrelenting Time 15
 Shall spoil those charms³⁷² yet opening to their prime,
 To ease the loss of Beauty's transient³⁷³ flower,

³⁶¹ *A Collection of Poems in Four Volumes by Several hands*, edited G. Pearch, 2nd edition vol. 2, 1770, pp. 137–138; *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*

³⁶² *Amorous* affectionate, related to sexual desire

³⁶³ *Vow* promise of fidelity

³⁶⁴ *Graver* more serious

³⁶⁵ *Sappho* typically a name for a wise woman

³⁶⁶ *Ere* before

³⁶⁷ *Meaner arts* schemes or artifice

³⁶⁸ *Unnumber'd hearts* large group of male suitors

³⁶⁹ *Seed* seed of an idea

³⁷⁰ *Toil* here, education and practice

³⁷¹ *Soil* her mind and heart

³⁷² *Charms* pleasing (sexual) traits

³⁷³ *Transient* existing briefly, temporarily

While reason keeps what rapture³⁷⁴ gave before.
 And oh! while Wit, fair dawning, spreads its ray,
 Serenely rising to a glorious day, 20
 To hail the growing lustre oft be mine,
 Thou early favourite of the sacred Nine!³⁷⁵
 And shall the Muse³⁷⁶ with blameless boast pretend,³⁷⁷
 In Youth's gay³⁷⁸ bloom that Sappho call'd me friend:
 That urg'd by me she shunn'd the dangerous way, 25
 Where heedless maids in endless error stray;³⁷⁹
 That scorning soon her sex's idler³⁸⁰ art,
 Fair Praise inspir'd and Virtue warm'd her heart;
 That fond to reach the distant paths of Fame,
 I taught her infant genius where to aim? 30
 Thus when the feather'd choir first tempt³⁸¹ the sky,
 And all unskill'd their feeble pinions³⁸² try,
 Th' experienc'd sire prescribes th' adventurous height,
 Guides the young wing, and pleas'd attends the flight.

³⁷⁴ *Rapture* sexual pleasure

³⁷⁵ *Sacred nine* nine daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, the muses

³⁷⁶ *Muse* a poet's inspiration

³⁷⁷ *Pretend* claim

³⁷⁸ *Gay* to be positive, cheerful, or happy

³⁷⁹ *Endless error stray* wandering into bad behavior

³⁸⁰ *Idler* a person who idles, one who spends time aimlessly

³⁸¹ *Tempt* shortened version of attempt

³⁸² *Pinions* the outer part of a bird's wing including the flight feathers



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