

James Merrick

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James Merrick (1720-1769) was born in Reading, Berkshire, and was the second son of John and Elizabeth Merrick. While earning his MA (1742) at Trinity College, Oxford, Merrick specialized in Greek and Latin translation and paraphrasing. Merrick's most famous translation, *The Psalms, Translated or Paraphrased in English Verse* (1765), was critically acclaimed, gaining a considerable following. Alongside his translation work, Merrick also wrote several original and well received poems: Thomas Warton suggested that Merrick had "a flow of poetical language, and richness of imagery, which [gave] dignity to the subject, without departing from the sense of the inspired writer" (Watson). Merrick was a devout Christian and a priest in the Church of England; however, he only occasionally preached (1747-1749) because of a chronic illness that prevented him from taking on more responsibilities. In 1769, James Merrick died due to his prolonged illness and was buried near his family at Caversham Church, Oxfordshire.

"The Trials of Virtue" is from Merrick's 1763 published collection *Poems, on Sacred Subjects*. Within the collection, he writes primarily in ballad stanza: ABAB rhymes with alternating iambic tetrameter and trimeter. His "sacred subjects" include vice and virtue. The speaker in "The Trials of Virtue" understands that, although his heart is virtuous, the vices and temptations of the world call to him. These vices manifest themselves within chaotic ocean imagery, which Merrick's speaker constantly refers to as "the deep." The evil temptations of the deep are held at bay by faith in God along with God's literal words of affirmation. Minor changes in posthumous editions of the poem intensify its religious fervour but may be by an editor or executor.

Further Reading

Ticken-Boon van Ostade, Ingrid. "James Merrick (1720-1769): Poet, Scholar, Linguist." *International Journal for the History of the Language Sciences*, vol. 33, no. 1-2, 2006, pp. 39-56.

Reference

Watson, J.R. "Merrick, James." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004.

The Trials of Virtue³⁸³

Plac'd on the verge of Youth, my mind
 Life's op'ning scene survey'd:
 I view'd its ills² of various kind,
 Afflicted and afraid.

But chief my fear the dangers mov'd, 5
 That Virtue's path inclose:
 My heart the wise pursuit approv'd;
 But O, what toils oppose!

For see, ah! see, while yet her ways
 With doubtful step I tread, 10
 A hostile World its terrors raise,
 Its snares delusive spread.

O! how shall I, with heart prepar'd,
 Those terrors learn to meet?
 How from the thousand snares to guard 15
 My unexperienc'd feet?

As thus I mus'd, oppressive Sleep
 Soft o'er my temples drew
 Oblivion's veil.³ The watry Deep,
 An object strange and new, 20

Before me rose: on the wide shore
 Observant as I stood,
 The gath'ring storms around me roar,
 And heave the boiling flood.

³⁸³ *Poems on Sacred Subjects*, 1763, pp. 20–25; *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online*

² *Ills* changed to *hills* in *A Collection of Poems in Four Volumes. By Several Hands*, G. Pearch, 1770, pp. 144–147

³ *Drew* / *Oblivion's veil* caused forgetfulness

Near and more near the billows⁴ rise; 25
 Ev'n now my steps they lave;⁵
 And Death to my affrighted eyes
 Approach'd in every wave.

What hope, or whither to retreat?
 Each nerve at once unstrung, 30
 Chill Fear had fetter'd⁶ fast my feet,
 And chain'd my speechless tongue.

I feel my heart⁷ within me die;
 When sudden to mine ear
 A voice descending from on high 35
 Reprov'd my erring⁸ fear.

"What though the swelling surge thou see
 Impatient to devour?
 Rest, Mortal, rest on God's decree,
 And thankful own³⁹¹ his pow'r." 40

"Know, when he bade the Deep appear,
 Thus far, th' Almighty said,
 Thus far, nor farther, rage; and Here
 Let thy proud waves be stay'd."

I heard: and lo! at once controul'd, 45
 The waves in wild retreat
 Back on themselves reluctant roll'd,
 And murm'ring left my feet.

Deeps to assembling Deeps in vain

⁴ *Billows* a swelling of the ocean waves produced by wind

⁵ *Lave* to wash against/flow past a body of water

⁶ *Fetter'd* to shackle

⁷ *Heart* continuation of a heart symbolic of virtue

⁸ *Erring* to have wrong judgement or opinion

³⁹¹ *Own* acknowledge

Once more the signal gave: 50
 The shores the rushing weight sustain,
 And check th' usurping wave.

Convinc'd, in Nature's volume wise
 The imag'd truth I read;
 And sudden from my waking eyes 55
 Th' instructive Vision fled.

Then why thus heavy, O my Soul?⁹
 Say why distrustful still,
 Thy thoughts with vain impatience roll
 O'er scenes of future ill. 60

Let Faith suppress each rising fear,
 Each anxious doubt exclude:
 Thy Maker's will has plac'd thee here,
 A Maker wise and good.¹⁰

He to thy ev'ry trial knows 65
 Its just restraint to give,
 Attentive to behold thy woes,
 And faithful to relieve.

Then why thus heavy, O my Soul?
 Say why distrustful still, 70
 Thy thoughts with vain impatience roll
 O'er scenes of future ill.

Though griefs unnumber'd throng¹¹ thee round,
 Still in thy God confide,
 Whose finger marks the Seas their bound, 75
 And curbs the headlong Tide.

⁹ *Soul?* in 1770 edition question mark changed to exclamation mark

¹⁰ *Good* in 1770 edition stanza ends in exclamation mark

¹¹ *Throng* gather



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