

# Mary Barber

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Mary Barber was born around 1685 in Dublin, Ireland and died in 1755, having lived in different English and Irish towns but primarily in Bath. Barber suffered from gout for the majority of her life and likely went to Bath to visit the spas, which many believed would aid in the treatment of the disease. During her life, she would only publish one work, titled *Poems on Several Occasions* (1734), while she was living in England.

Interestingly, in the preface to *Poems on Several Occasions* Barber states that she only wrote poetry to teach her children. Despite this supposed disinclination to write, her poetry was noticed with the help of Jonathan Swift, who had inducted Barber into his group he called the Triumfeminate, made up of three Irish women writers. The Triumfeminate was Swift's play on words on a triumvirate, typically a political group of three powerful men. The other women in Swift's group were Constantia Grierson (editor and poet) and Elizabeth Sican (a literary critic and poet). Swift was certainly Barber's most vocal supporter and once called her the best female poet in both Ireland and England. At the time, Barber's peers did not share the same admiration for her work. Laetitia Pilkington, an Anglo-Irish poet, said her work "might ... be seen in the Cheesemongers, Chandlers, Pastrycooks, and Second-hand Booksellers Shops" (383), in other words recycled as food wrappers.

In 1731, Barber was at the center of a moment of controversy when a letter, signed by Swift, praising Barber and her poetry was delivered to Queen Caroline. Despite Swift's friendship with Barber, he claimed that he had not written to the Queen, thus revealing that someone had forged the letter. Swift's rejection of the letter led some to believe that Barber was the one who had written it, and, although this theory was never proven, the suspicion remains.

Barber's poem "Written at Bath to a Young Lady, Who Had Just Before Given Me a Short Answer," was one of the poems included in her single publication. It is one of the less commonly studied poems, and not much academic writing is available on it. The poem is in iambic tetrameter couplets and is a satiric epistle against satire that ultimately serves as a defence of herself and the way she responded to being treated poorly.

### **Further Reading**

Coleborne, Bryan. "Barber, Mary (c.1685-1755)." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford UP, 2004.

"City of Bath." *UNESCO World Heritage Centre*, 1999-2022, [whc.unesco.org/en/list/428/](http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/428/).

### **References**

Pilkington, Laetitia. *Memoirs of Laetitia Pilkington*. U of Georgia P, 1997.

Written at Bath to a Young Lady, Who Had Just  
Before Given Me a Short Answer<sup>454</sup>

YOU us'd me ill, and I withdrew,  
Intent on satirizing you.  
The *Muses*<sup>455</sup> to my Aid I call;  
They came; and told me, one and all,  
That I mistook their Province<sup>456</sup> quite, 5  
They never sully'd<sup>457</sup> what was bright;  
And said, If Satire was my Aim,  
I ought to chuse another Theme.

I HEARD with Anger, and Surprize;  
Begg'd they'd inspire, and not advise. 10  
In vain I begg'd – they all withdrew;  
When to my Aid a Phantom<sup>458</sup> flew,  
And vow'd she'd give my Satire Stings,  
And whisper'd some resentful Things—  
Said, You delighted, all your Days, 15  
To torture her a thousand Ways:  
Bid me revenge her Cause, and mine,  
And blacken you in ev'ry Line.

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<sup>454</sup> *Poems on Several Occasions*]. London, C. Rivington, 1734, pp. 124–125; *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*; a *Short Answer* means a rude reply

<sup>455</sup> *Muses* the nine muses of Greek mythology associated with the arts, including poetry

<sup>456</sup> *Province* “a sphere of action, influence, or responsibility; the proper function or area of concern of a particular person or group” (*OED*)

<sup>457</sup> *Sully'd* dirtied

<sup>458</sup> *Phantom* humanoid figure lacking a physical presence

THIS I resolv'd;<sup>459</sup> but still in vain  
We both must unreveng'd remain:  
For I, alas! remember now,  
I long ago had made a Vow,  
That, should the *Nine*<sup>460</sup> their Aid refuse,  
*Envy* should never be my *Muse*.<sup>461</sup>

20

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<sup>459</sup> *Resolv'd* decided to do

<sup>460</sup> *Nine* the nine muses

<sup>461</sup> *Muse* artistic inspiration



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