

Nathaniel Cotton

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Nathaniel Cotton was born in London in 1705, studied medicine at the University of Leyden, and then settled at St Albans Hospital in Hertfordshire, working there as a physician until his death in 1788. Cotton was not well known as a poet and only slightly more renowned as a doctor. Accounts of his life suggest a longstanding preoccupation with virtue, and most of his poems are morality tales aimed at children or young adults. Many of these works are adaptations of John Gay's verse fables.

Apart from his regular medical practice, Cotton also owned and managed a private sanatorium for the mentally ill. The poet William Cowper⁴⁶² was confined in this facility from 1763 to 1765 during his first major period of mental illness. Cowper reviewed the institution positively, writing that Cotton was both empathetic and willing to engage with him intellectually. The pair held long conversations about religion, philosophy, and morality, which Cowper regarded as a great help in his recovery. Scholars of Cowper believe that this experience is the primary reason for his conversion to the evangelical Methodist interpretation of Christianity, which had profound effects on his life and writing.

Cotton's love of giving instruction about virtue also seems to have extended to his relationship with his own children, including his daughters Phoebe and Katherine. The pair served as inspiration for his poem "The Bee, the Ant, and the Sparrow: A Fable. Address'd to Phebe and Kitty C. at Boarding School." This iambic tetrameter verse fable in rhyming couplets is an example of the allegorical literature often used to pass down moral norms to children of the eighteenth century. It makes use of virtuous anthropomorphic animal characters typical of the period, as well as a character that serves to represent the vices opposite to their virtues.

Further Reading

Richie, Leslie. "Cotton, Nathaniel." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford UP, 2004.

⁴⁶² There are three Cowper poems in this anthology.

Beatty, Heather R. *Nervous Disease in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain: The Reality of a Fashionable Disorder*. Pickering and Chatto, 2012.

The Bee, the Ant, and the Sparrow: A Fable⁴⁶³

Address'd to Phebe and Kitty C. at Boarding School

MY dears, 'tis said in days of old,
 That beasts could talk, and birds could scold.
 But now it seems the human race
 Alone engross⁴⁶⁴ the speaker's place.
 Yet lately, if report be true, 5
 (And much the tale relates to you)
 There met a Sparrow, Ant, and Bee,
 Which reason'd and convers'd as we.
 Who reads my page will doubtless grant
 That Phe's the wise industrious Ant. 10
 And all with half an eye may see
 That Kitty is the busy Bee.
 Here then are two — but where's the third?
 Go search your school, you'll find the Bird.
 Your school! I ask your pardon fair, 15
 I'm sure you'll find no Sparrow there.
 Now to my tale — One summer's morn
 A Bee rang'd o'er the verdant lawn;
 Studious to husband⁴⁶⁵ every hour,
 And make the most of every flow'r. 20
 Nimble from stalk to stalk she flies,
 And loads with yellow wax her thighs;

⁴⁶³ *A Collection of Poems in Six Volumes. By Several Hands.* Vol. V, R. Dodsley, 1763, pp. 169–174;
Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive

⁴⁶⁴ *Engross* occupy

⁴⁶⁵ *Husband* manage

With which the artist builds her comb,
 And keeps all tight and warm at home:
 Or from the cowslip's golden bells 25
 Sucks honey to enrich her cells:
 Or every tempting rose pursues,
 Or sips the lilly's fragrant dew;
 Yet never robs the shining bloom,
 Or of its beauty or perfume.⁴⁶⁶ 30
 Thus she discharg'd in every way
 The various duties of the day.
 It chanc'd a frugal Ant was near,
 Whose brow was wrinkled o'er by care:
 A great oeconomist⁴⁶⁷ was she, 35
 Nor less laborious than the Bee;
 By pensive parents often taught
 What ills arise from want of thought;
 That poverty on sloth depends,
 On poverty the loss of friends. 40
 Hence every day the Ant is found
 With anxious steps to tread the ground;
 With curious search to trace the grain,
 And drag the heavy load with pain.
 The active Bee with pleasure saw 45
 The Ant fulfil her parents' law.
 Ah! sister-labourer, says she,
 How very fortunate are we!

⁴⁶⁶ *Or of its beauty or perfume* either of its beauty or its perfume (likewise, the “or...or” structures in preceding lines)

⁴⁶⁷ *Oeconomist* economist, in the sense of being concerned with planning and efficiency

Who taught in infancy to know
 The comforts, which from labour flow, 50
 Are independent of the great,
 Nor know the wants of pride and state.
 Why is our food so very sweet?
 Because we earn, before we eat.
 Why are our wants so very few? 55
 Because we nature's calls pursue.
 Whence our complacency of mind?
 Because we act our parts assign'd.
 Have we incessant tasks to do?
 Is not all nature busy too! 60
 Doth not the sun with constant pace
 Persist to run his annual race?
 Do not the stars, which shine so bright,
 Renew their courses every night?
 Doth not the ox obedient bow 65
 His patient neck, and draw the plough?
 Or when did e'er the generous steed
 Withhold his labour or his speed?
 If you all nature's system scan,
 The only idle thing is man! 70
 A wanton⁴⁶⁸ Sparrow long'd to hear
 Their sage discourse, and strait⁴⁶⁹ drew near.
 The bird was talkative and loud,
 And very pert⁴⁷⁰ and very proud;

⁴⁶⁸ *Wanton* prone to recklessness or sexual promiscuity

⁴⁶⁹ *Strait* immediately

⁴⁷⁰ *Pert* disrespectful

As worthless and as vain a thing, 75
 Perhaps as ever wore a wing.
 She found, as on a spray⁴⁷¹ she sat,
 The little friends were deep in chat;
 That virtue was their favourite theme,
 And toil and probity⁴⁷² their scheme: 80
 Such talk was hateful to her breast,
 She thought them arrant⁴⁷³ prudes at best.
 When to display her naughty mind,
 Hunger with cruelty combin'd;
 She view'd the Ant with savage eyes, 85
 And hopt⁴⁷⁴ and hopt to snatch her prize.
 The Bee, who watch'd her opening bill,
 And guess'd her fell⁴⁷⁵ design to kill;
 Ask'd her from what her anger rose,
 And why she treated Ants as foes? 90
 The Sparrow her reply began,
 And thus the conversation ran.
 Whenever I'm dispos'd to dine,
 I think the whole creation mine;
 That I'm a bird of high degree,⁴⁷⁶ 95
 And every insect made for me.
 Hence oft I search the emmet⁴⁷⁷ brood,

⁴⁷¹ *Spray* branch

⁴⁷² *Probity* the quality of adhering to moral values

⁴⁷³ *Arrant* complete

⁴⁷⁴ *Hopt* hopped

⁴⁷⁵ *Fell* vile or villainous

⁴⁷⁶ *Degree* status

⁴⁷⁷ *Emmet* ant

For emmets are delicious food:
 And oft in wantonness and play,
 I slay ten thousand in a day. 100
 For truth it is, without disguise,
 That I love mischief as my eyes.
 Oh! fie, the honest Bee reply'd,
 I fear you make base man your guide;
 Of every creature sure the worst, 105
 Tho' in creation's scale the first!
 Ungrateful man! 'tis strange he thrives,
 Who burns the Bees, to rob their hives!
 I hate his vile administration,
 And so do all the emmet nation. 110
 What fatal foes to birds are men
 Quite to the Eagle from the Wren!
 Oh! do not men's example take,
 Who mischief do for mischief's sake;
 But spare the Ant — her worth demands 115
 Esteem and friendship at your hands.
 A mind with every virtue blest,⁴⁷⁸
 Must raise compassion in your breast.
 Virtue! rejoin'd⁴⁷⁹ the sneering bird,
 Where did you learn that gothic⁴⁸⁰ word? 120
 Since I was hatch'd, I never heard,
 That virtue was at all rever'd.
 But say it was the ancients' claim,

⁴⁷⁸ *Blest* blessed

⁴⁷⁹ *Rejoin'd* retorted

⁴⁸⁰ *Gothic* antiquated

Yet moderns disavow the name;
 Unless, my dear, you read romances, 125
 I cannot reconcile your fancies.
 Virtue in fairy tales is seen
 To play the goddess or the queen;
 But what's a queen without the pow'r,
 Or beauty, child, without a dow'r?⁴⁸¹ 130
 Yet this is all that virtue brags,
 At best 'tis only worth in rags.
 Such whims my very heart derides,
 Indeed you make me burst my sides.⁴⁸²
 Trust me Miss Bee — to speak the truth, 135
 I've copyed men from earliest youth;
 The same our taste, the same our school,
 Passion and appetite our rule.
 And call me bird, or call me sinner,
 I'll ne'er forego my sport or dinner. 140
 A prowling cat the miscreant⁴⁸³ spies,
 And wide expands her amber eyes:
 Near and more near Grimalkin⁴⁸⁴ draws,
 She wags her tail, protends⁴⁸⁵ her paws;
 Then springing on her thoughtless prey, 145
 She bore the vicious bird away.
 Thus in her cruelty and pride,

⁴⁸¹ *Dow'r* dowry, the money or property given to a groom by the bride's family upon their marriage

⁴⁸² *Burst my sides* laugh hard, as in the expression "side-splitting laughter"

⁴⁸³ *Miscreant* a misbehaving or villainous person

⁴⁸⁴ *Grimalkin* a domestic cat

⁴⁸⁵ *Protends* extends

The wicked wanton Sparrow dy'd.



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