

Mary Leapor

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Mary Leapor (1722-1746) was a prolific labouring-class poet whose love for poetry began in childhood. Because she died at the age of twenty-four, she never had the chance of seeing her lifeworks published, and it was only after her death that she had gained appreciation for her talent and her poetry. Her posthumous collection of poetry was at first positively received and beloved, deemed “extremely fit for young ladies” (Whiston 41), but it then went out of fashion, causing Leapor to fall into near obscurity until she gained recent scholarly interest.

Leapor was born in the English town of Brackley in Northamptonshire. Growing up, she showed great interest in reading and writing, especially poetry, of which her mother disapproved. Yet she never stopped writing verses, even when she was busy at work. She became a kitchen maid for one family and then another, but eventually she became unemployed. By then, however, many of her poems had circulated around her hometown. It was during this period that her verses reached Bridget Freemantle. The two became close friends, and Freemantle not only encouraged her to write more, but she was also her patroness. Freemantle came from the gentry, and she organized a subscription for Leapor, which sought to fund and thus publish Leapor’s works. But, before Freemantle could bring these poems into the public eye, Leapor unexpectedly died of measles in 1746.

Throughout her life, Leapor was generally in ill-health. She also suffered from depression and thought her own works unworthy of public attention, so much so that she even destroyed some of her earlier pieces. In fact, public attention made her anxious: “My Name to publick Censure I submit, / To be dispos’d as the World thinks fit” (Leapor, “Mira’s Will,” ll. 3–4). Yet, despite her apprehensive feelings about publicity and in turn the subscription, Leapor’s final wish was for Freemantle to publish her poetry. Through Freemantle’s efforts, Leapor’s work appeared in the *London Magazine*, then her works were printed in two volumes, gaining a larger exposure than ever before.

“The Fall of Lucia” appears in *Poems Upon Several Occasions*, which was published in 1748, two years after Leapor’s death. The poem itself is written in iambic pentameter and in the heroic couplet form, with one instance of a triplet. It is influenced by Restoration drama plots, Augustan poetry such as that by Pope

and Swift, and the pastoral genre, fashionable with upper-class readers at the time. Yet the poem is not merely typical. Leapor challenges the conventional genres of the eighteenth century, often blending them together. This is a tale of an innocent maiden who has fallen, and thereby is ruined, by having sex. The poem then shifts into a moral lesson on abstinence, vice and virtue, and female transgression. But behind those morals, there also lingers a sense of shame and guilt. Leapor either criticizes women like Lucia or she illustrates the perils of being a woman, from her own female and lower-class perspective.

Further Reading

Greene, Richard. "Biography and Reputation." *Mary Leapor: A Study in Eighteenth Century Women's Poetry*. Oxford UP, 1993, pp. 1–37.

Overton, Bill. "Mary Leapor's Verse and Genre." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, vol. 34 no. 1, 2015, pp. 19–32.

References

Leapor, Mary. "Mira's Will." *Poems Upon Several Occasions: By Mrs. Leapor of Brackley in Northamptonshire*. J. Roberts, 1748, pp. 8-10. *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*.

Whiston, John. *Directions for a Proper Choice of Authors to Form a Library*. Dodsley & Robson, 1766.

The Fall of Lucia⁴⁹⁷

LUCIA⁴⁹⁸ was fair and bright as rising Day,
 Sweet as *Arabia*,⁴⁹⁹ or the Buds of *May*;⁵⁰⁰
 Fresh as the Winds that sweep the dewy Hills,
 Or Beds of Roses wash'd by healthy Rills:⁵⁰¹
 Whose Soul was softer than a trembling Dove, 5
 Nor⁵⁰² knew a Failing till she learn'd to love.
 Nor Fraud nor Scandal to her Lips were known,
 And thought each Bosom⁵⁰³ guiltless as her own.
 Thus only arm'd with Innocence and Smiles,
 She fell the Victim of a Tyrant's Wiles.⁵⁰⁴ 10
 So⁵⁰⁵ lost from Shepherd and its mourning Dam,⁵⁰⁶
 Through some lone Desert⁵⁰⁷ roves a stragg'ling Lamb;
 No Danger fears, but as he idly strays
 Round ev'ry Bush the heedless Wanton⁵⁰⁸ plays;
 Till raging Wolves the beauteous Toy⁵⁰⁹ surround, 15
 Or foaming Tigers rend the mossy Ground:
 Then from his Heart the guiltless Purple⁵¹⁰ flows,

⁴⁹⁷ *Poems upon several occasions: By Mrs. Leapor of Brackley in Northamptonshire*. J. Roberts, 1748, pp. 48–50; *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*

⁴⁹⁸ *Lucia* her name itself means light

⁴⁹⁹ *Arabia* refers to fragrance, perfume, or spice

⁵⁰⁰ *Buds of May* springtime, alludes to youthfulness but could also refer to Shakespeare's Sonnet 18

⁵⁰¹ *Rills* brooks

⁵⁰² *Nor* neither

⁵⁰³ *Bosom* refers to the breast as a metaphor for emotions and the heart

⁵⁰⁴ *Wiles* deceitful and cunning tricks

⁵⁰⁵ *So* an indicator of the beginning of a simile

⁵⁰⁶ *Dam* mother of a sheep

⁵⁰⁷ *Desart* desert, a barren area

⁵⁰⁸ *Wanton* a person who has no regard for others

⁵⁰⁹ *Toy* refers to the actual lamb, but it is also a metaphor that denotes a person and their lack of value

⁵¹⁰ *Purple* a poetic term for blood

A grateful Morsel⁵¹¹ to his hungry Foes:
 Thus⁵¹² wrap'd in Sorrows wretched *Lucia* lies,
 Whose Sighs still answer to her streaming Eyes. } 20
 And *Damon*⁵¹³ still – Ah! faithless *Damon* cries,
 No more those Lips like dewy Roses glow;
 Her weary Lids no peaceful Slumbers know:
 But left to strike her pensive Breast in vain,
 And curse the Author of her lasting Pain. } 25
 Her Soul of Ease has took its long Adieu:
 Hear this, ye Nymphs;⁵¹⁴ but hear and tremble too,
 Ye Fair that lanch⁵¹⁵ in Pleasure's tempting Sea,
 Though Fortune crowns you with a calmer Day,
 And Joy's soft Gale⁵¹⁶ salutes your nimble Oar: } 30
 Where *Lucia's* Fame was shipwreck'd on the Shore,
 Yet let Reflexion⁵¹⁷ mark your gliding Days,
 Nor drink too deeply in the Draught⁵¹⁸ of Praise:
 For Flatt'ry is – "So say the learned Schools,
 "The Bane⁵¹⁹ of Virgins and the Bait of Fools." } 35
 How happy she whose purer Spirit knows,
 No Thought less harmless than a Saint's Repose,
 Whose guiltless Charms⁵²⁰ pursue no greater End,
 But to rejoice a Parent or a Friend:

⁵¹¹ *Morsel* the smallest amount of food

⁵¹² *Thus* here begins the second element of the simile

⁵¹³ *Damon* typical pastoral name for a man

⁵¹⁴ *Nymphs* in pastoral conventions, youthful, virginal women

⁵¹⁵ *Lanch* launch, set forth in a boat

⁵¹⁶ *Gale* "a gentle breeze" (*OED*)

⁵¹⁷ *Reflexion* alternative spelling of reflection

⁵¹⁸ *Draught* "the 'drinking in' of something by the mind or soul" (*OED*)

⁵¹⁹ *Bane* ruin and destruction

⁵²⁰ *Charms* refer to physical beauty

Whose Care it is her Passions to control, 40
And keep the Steerage⁵²¹ of a quiet Soul:
Then this shall grace her monumental Page,⁵²²
" In Youth admir'd, and belov'd in Age."

⁵²¹ *Steerage* nautical metaphor for guiding one's own life

⁵²² *Monumental Page* a written record, especially on a monument such as a tombstone



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