

Mary Barber

Molly Kurtenbach, Simon Fraser University

Arguably one of the most famous female poets of the long eighteenth century, Mary Barber was born in Ireland in 1685. We know little of her parentage or early life. In 1719, her husband came to own a house in Delville, north of Dublin, located next door to friends of Johnathan Swift. When Barber and Swift were introduced in 1728, Swift immediately took interest in Barber's poetry, dubbing her a member of his poetic "triumfeminate" along with Letitia Pilkington and Elizabeth Sican. For this reason, most interpretations of Mary Barber's professional career and poetry treat her as an "acolyte" or imitator of Swift, often disregarding her individual accomplishments entirely (Backscheider 37).

In 1734, Barber was arrested while in England along with Matthew Pilkington, husband of Laetitia Pilkington, for possessing some of Swift's political poems critical of Prime Minister Robert Walpole. Barber was devastated to discover that Matthew Pilkington had informed against her. She obtained an early release and moved to Bath with one of her sons (Coleborne). The event seems to have been detrimental to her health. Towards the end of her life, she suffered terribly with gout, a subject she wrote a few poems about. She returned to Ireland, where she passed away on 14 June 1755 at the age of seventy, survived by her four children and her vast body of poems.

In the preface to Barber's 1735 *Poems on Several Occasions*, the collection in which the following poem was published, she justifies her writing as "chiefly to form the Minds of my Children" (Barber xvii). Barber gave birth to nine children, only four of whom lived to adulthood: Constantine, Rupert, Mira, and Lucius.

"Written for my Son, and Spoken by Him at his First Putting on Breeches" is in iambic tetrameter couplets. Although some scholars, such as Lavoie, have argued that Barber's poems are for children due to their humorous and often unserious nature, this poem reads as a more adult critique of fashion customs of the time, falling into the genre of a rant.

In the long eighteenth century, a boy's first time putting on breeches, sometimes called "breeching," was a significant moment. Until around the age of four, a male child only would have worn gender-neutral infant clothing. Breeching allowed little boys to feel more masculine and grown, overall a positive experience. Barber seems to be exaggerating her son's thoughts in order to make a point about the inane customs of the time, or possibly a commentary on the nature of wearing clothing at all. We do not know which of her three sons is meant to be the speaker of this poem.

References

- Backscheider, Paula. "Inverting the Image of Swift's 'Triumfeminate.'" *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2004, pp. 37–71.
- Barber, Mary. *Poems on Several Occasions*, Printed for C. Rivington. 1735. *Internet Archive*.
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Written for my Son, and Spoken by Him at his First Putting on Breeches¹⁷

What is it our Mammās bewitches,
 To plague us little Boys with Breeches?¹⁸
 To Tyrant Custom we must yield,
 Whilst vanquish'd Reason flies the Field.
 Our Legs must suffer by Ligation,¹⁹ 5
 To keep the Blood from Circulation;
 And then our Feet, tho' young and tender,
 We to the Shoemaker surrender;
 Who often makes our Shoes so strait,²⁰
 Our growing Feet they cramp and fret; 10
 Whilst, with Contrivance²¹ most profound,
 Across our Insteps we are bound;
 Which is the Cause, I make no Doubt,
 Why Thousands suffer in the Gout.
 Our wiser Ancestors wore Brogues,²² 15
 Before the Surgeons brib'd these Rogues,
 With narrow Toes, and Heels like Pegs,
 To help to make us break our Legs.

 Then, ere we know to use our Fists;
 Our Mothers closely bind our Wrists; 20

¹⁷ *Poems on Several Occasions*, Mary Barber, 1735, pp. 13–16. *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*.

¹⁸ *Breeches*: pronounced “britches.”

¹⁹ *Ligation*: “the action of binding with a ligature; particularly in surgery” (*OED*).

²⁰ *Strait*: narrow, tight.

²¹ *Contrivance*: “the bringing to pass by planning, scheming, or stratagem; plotting; deceitful practice” (*OED*).

²² *Brogues*: “a rude kind of shoe, made of untanned hide, worn by the inhabitants of the wilder parts of Ireland and the Scottish Highlands” (*OED*).

And never think our Cloaths are neat,
 'Till they're so tight we cannot eat.
 And, to increase our other Pains,
 The Hat-band²³ helps to cramp our Brains.
 The Cravat²⁴ finishes the Work, 25
 Like Bow-string sent from the Grand Turk.²⁵

Thus Dress, that should prolong our Date,
 Is made to hasten on our Fate.
 Fair Privilege of nobler Natures,
 To be more plagu'd than other Creatures! 30
 The wild Inhabitants of Air
 Are cloath'd by Heav'n with wondrous Care:
 Their beauteous, well-compacted Feathers
 Are Coats of Mail against all Weathers;
 Enamell'd, to delight the Eye; 35
 Gay,²⁶ as the Bow that decks the Sky.
 The Beasts are cloath'd with beauteous Skins:
 The Fishes arm'd with Scales and Fins;
 Whose Lustre lends the Sailor Light,
 When all the Stars are hid in Night. 40

O were our Dress contriv'd like these,
 For Use, for Ornament, and Ease!
 Man only seems to Sorrow born,

²³ *Hat-band*: a band of leather or thick ribbon on the inside of an eighteenth-century man's hat.

²⁴ *Cravat*: a fashionable necktie.

²⁵ "*Like Bow-string...*" to "bow-string" somebody was to strangle them to death, an execution method supposedly employed by the Turkish.

²⁶ *Gay*: "to be merry, cheerful, or light-hearted" (OED).

Naked, defenceless, and forlorn.

Yet we have Reason, to supply 45
 What Nature did to Man deny:
 Weak Viceroy!²⁷ Who thy Pow'r will own,
 When Custom has usurp'd thy Throne?
 In vain did I appeal to thee,
 Ere I would wear his Livery;²⁸ 50
 Who, in Defiance to thy Rules,
 Delights to make us act like Fools.
 O'er human Race the Tyrant reigns,
 And binds them in eternal Chains.
 We yield to his despotic²⁹ Sway, 55
 The only Monarch All obey.



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²⁷ *Viceroy*: “the ruler of a colony, who exercised power on behalf of a monarch” (*OED*); Reason is weak when custom usurps Nature’s power.

²⁸ *Livery*: “a uniform worn by a servant or guard” (*OED*); in this case, it is Custom’s livery.

²⁹ *Despotic*: tyrannical.