

Elizabeth Carter

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Elizabeth Carter (1717-1806) was born in Deal, Kent and was the eldest daughter of Nicolas and Margaret Carter. Her father was both a linguist and a perpetual curate¹⁸³ and believed in equal education for boys and girls. Consequently, Carter received a rigorous education from him, acquiring both his knowledge of classical languages and his strong religious convictions. Carter was an extremely diligent student; she learned nine languages, including Greek, Hebrew, and Latin, and studied academic subjects such as Astronomy and Mathematics. Living with her widowed father and her step-siblings, much of Carter's time was dedicated to domestic responsibilities. Thus, she was well-known for her proficiency in both academic and domestic pursuits. The renowned intellectual Samuel Johnson famously observed, "My old friend, Mrs. Carter, could make a pudding as well as translate Epictetus from the Greek, and work a handkerchief as well as compose a poem" (Boswell n351). Although she was revered by many men and likely received several marriage proposals, Carter remained unmarried, which suited her independent lifestyle. She cherished female companionship and formed several close friendships with other female writers. She was a founding member of the Blue Stockings Society, a circle of academic women. Through this network, Carter mentored and encouraged other female authors.

Encouraged by her father, Carter began publishing poems at the age of seventeen in *The Gentleman's Magazine*. Throughout her life she continued to write and publish poems, essays, and translations. Her most famous accomplishment was her translation of the works of the stoic Greek philosopher Epictetus, entitled *All the Works of Epictetus, Which Are Now Extant*. Published in 1758, it remained the standard English translation for over a century. Although she was already highly regarded for her academic achievements, this translation earned her a reputation as one of the most learned women in Europe. From this work, Carter also earned a sizable sum of money, enough to support herself in her unmarried life.

"Ode to a Lady in London" was published in 1758 in the first edition of Robert Dodley's *A Collection of Poems in Six Volumes. By Several Hands*. It also appeared several years later in Carter's final published work, *Poems on Several Occasions* (1762). Although the poem does not have stanza breaks, it follows the ballad stanza's meter and rhyme scheme. As a Horatian ode, the poem is homostrophic and has a contemplative tone. The name of the "Lady in London," to whom the poem is addressed, is not given, and could therefore either be a specific or a generic person.

Carter's annual retreats from the city and her love of nature are apparent in the poem's praise for rural life. Like many of her other pieces, this poem has a strong emphasis on the afterlife and reflects Carter's anticipation of eternal life and aversion to indulging in worldly pleasures. She believed in leading a minimalistic life and fulfilling duties as the means to happiness.

¹⁸³ A clergyman of low rank in the Church of England

Further Reading

- Bigold, Melanie. “Elizabeth Carter: ‘A Very Extraordinary Phaenomenon in the Republic of Letters’” *Women of Letters, Manuscript Circulation, and Print Afterlives in the Eighteenth Century*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, pp. 169–212.
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- Uściński, Przemysław. “Escaping the Crowds: The Harmonious Environments of Sociability in Eighteenth-Century Writings.” *Literature and History*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2023, pp. 144–158.

References

- Boswell, James. *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, edited by George Birkbeck Hill, vol. 1, Pembroke College, Oxford, 1887. *Project Gutenberg*.

Ode, to a Lady in London¹⁸⁴

WHILE soft through water, earth, and air
 The vernal¹⁸⁵ spirits rove,¹⁸⁶
 From noise, my dear, and giddy¹⁸⁷ crowds
 To rural scenes remove.¹⁸⁸
 The mountain snows are all dissolv'd, 5
 And hush'd the blust'ring gale,
 While fragrant Zephyrs¹⁸⁹ gently breathe
 Along the flowery vale.¹⁹⁰
 The circling planets' constant rounds¹⁹¹
 The wintry wastes¹⁹² repair,¹⁹³
 And still from temporary death 10
 Renew the verdant¹⁹⁴ year.
 But ah! when once our transient¹⁹⁵ bloom,
 The spring of life, is o'er,
 That rosy¹⁹⁶ season takes its flight,
 And must return no more. 15
 Yet judge by Reason's sober¹⁹⁷ rules,
 From false Opinion free,

¹⁸⁴ *A Collection of Poems in Six Volumes. By Several Hands*, edited by Robert Dodsley, printed by J. Hughes, for R. and J. Dodsley, vol. V, 1763, pp. 309–310. *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*.

¹⁸⁵ *Vernal*: of springtime.

¹⁸⁶ *Rove*: to travel aimlessly over a large area.

¹⁸⁷ *Giddy*: foolish and easily distracted.

¹⁸⁸ *Remove*: to move to a new location.

¹⁸⁹ *Zephyrs*: a soft breeze, also the name of the Greek god of the west wind.

¹⁹⁰ *Vale*: a wide, flat valley often transversed by water.

¹⁹¹ *Rounds*: in the 1st edition of Dodsley's collection, the word appears as "round."

¹⁹² *Wastes*: desolate expanse of land, may be covered in snow.

¹⁹³ *Repair*: to restore to a proper state.

¹⁹⁴ *Verdant*: green with abundance of vegetation.

¹⁹⁵ *Transient*: lasting only for a brief time.

¹⁹⁶ *Rosy*: cheerful and optimistic.

¹⁹⁷ *Sober*: grave, rational.

And mark how little pilfering¹⁹⁸ years
 Can steal from you or me. 20
 Each moral pleasure of the heart,
 Each smiling charm of truth,
 Depends not on the giddy bud¹⁹⁹
 Of wild fantastic²⁰⁰ youth. 25
 The vain coquet,²⁰¹ whose empty pride
 A fading face supplies,
 May justly dread the wintry gloom
 Where all its glory dies.
 Leave such a ruin to deplore²⁰² 30
 To fleeting forms confin'd;
 Nor age, nor wrinkles, discompose
 One feature of the mind.
 Amidst the universal change,
 Unconscious of decay, 35
 It views unmov'd the scythe²⁰³ of Time²⁰⁴
 Sweep all besides away.
 Fix'd on its own eternal frame
 Eternal are its joys,
 While borne on transitory²⁰⁵ wings 40
 Each mortal pleasure flies.
 While every short-liv'd flower of sense
 Destructive years consume,

¹⁹⁸ *How little pilfering*: the small amount that the years can steal.

¹⁹⁹ *Bud*: something undeveloped.

²⁰⁰ *Fantastic*: having foolish imaginations.

²⁰¹ *Coquet*: a flirtatious person.

²⁰² *Deplore*: to mourn or have strong regret.

²⁰³ *Scythe*: a curved blade used for cutting grass or crops in broad, smooth strokes.

²⁰⁴ *Time*: the personification of time, often referred to as (Old) Father Time. Traditionally, he was represented as an old man carrying a scythe and often an hourglass.

²⁰⁵ *Transitory*: lasting only briefly.

Through friendship's fair enchanting walks

Unfading myrtles²⁰⁶ bloom.

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Nor with the narrow bounds of time

Its beauteous prospect ends,

But lengthen'd through the vale of death²⁰⁷

To paradise extends.



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²⁰⁶ *Myrtles*: a family of evergreen trees and shrubs with fragrant leaves and flowers, often symbolizes “love, peace, honor” (*OED*).

²⁰⁷ *Vale of death*: likely an allusion to “the valley of the shadow of death” in Psalm 23. The psalmist uses this phrase in the figurative sense, referring to the trials in this world. However, the vale of death in this poem is literal, bringing us to paradise.