

Matthew Prior

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Matthew Prior was born in 1664 in Westminster in London, England. He was the only surviving son of a carpenter originally from Dorset. Prior went to school until his father died in 1675. After his father's death, he worked for his uncle until the Earl of Dorset agreed to pay his tuition to continue at Westminster School. He was taught by Richard Busby who "emphasized strict discipline" (Rippy 95). After completing his primary education, he received a scholarship to study at St John's College at Cambridge in 1683. Prior's university studies focused on politics and logical reasoning, but he wrote verses and experimented with prose, both in English and Latin. He said, "I would advise no man to attempt [poetry] except he cannot help it, and if he cannot, it is in vain to dissuade him from it [...]. As to my own part I found this impulse very soon, and shall continue to feel it as long as I can think" (Prior 1). Prior wrote poetry on specific occasions, mainly to his family, friends, and the Earl of Dorset, who continued to support him through school. His use of verses helped him form bonds with people, which became a tool for his later diplomatic career. First there were attempts at a poetic career and brief studies in medicine. In 1690, after having a job as a tutor, he was hired as Lord Dursley's secretary at The Hague. This job would be the beginning of his diplomatic career. Prior spent seven years at his post at the Hague. During his time there he would meet one of the three mistresses of his life (he remained unmarried). In 1697 he moved to Paris to work at the British embassy. He moved back to London in 1699, and the next decade would prove to be a steady incline in his career with more and more recognition of his poetry. The poems written during this time contained pastoral and mythological elements. Prior's life had many transitions: he moved around Europe, experimented with many different writing styles, and passed from the Whig party to the Tory party when it was apparent to him that the switch was necessary. He pursued politics as his main occupation, but his enthusiasm was for poetry.

Prior's "Love Disarm'd" is a poem published in 1718 and written in iambic tetrameter. It was published in a collection titled *Poems on Several Occasions* that gained international recognition. The poem showcases an encounter between a woman named Cloe and the God Cupid. Mythology was a very popular trope in the eighteenth century. Cupid is the Roman god of love and attraction, often depicted as a toddler-sized man with a bow and arrows that he uses to pierce a

person's heart. In the beginning of the poem, Cloe surprises Cupid and binds him with the lace from her bodice, completely disarming him, and eventually she takes his weapon to use however she wishes. Prior writes a poem that places a woman in a position of power and Cupid in a place of weakness and vulnerability. This poem was written during a time when consent was not a relevant topic, and the word "no" was an assumed "yes."

Further Reading

- Wright, H. Bunker. "Matthew Prior's Cloe and Lisetta." *Modern Philology*, vol. 36, no. 1, 1938, pp. 9–23.
- Prior, Matthew. *The Literary Works of Matthew Prior*, edited by H. Bunker Wright and Monroe K. Spears, 2nd ed., Clarendon Press, 1971.

References

- Prior, Matthew. *The Literary Works of Matthew Prior*, edited by H. Bunker Wright and Monroe K. Spears, 2nd ed., Clarendon Press, 1971.
- Rippy, Frances Mayhew. *Matthew Prior*. Twayne, 1986.

Love Disarm'd¹³¹

Beneath a Myrtle's¹³² verdant Shade
 As Cloe half asleep was laid,
 Cupid perch'd lightly on Her Breast,
 And in That Heav'n desir'd to rest:
 Over her Paps¹³³ his Wings He spread:
 Between He found a downy Bed,
 And nestl'd in His little Head.

}

5

Still lay the God: The Nymph¹³⁴ surpriz'd,
 Yet Mistress of her self, devis'd,
 How She the Vagrant¹³⁵ might inthral,
 And Captive Him, who Captives All.

10

Her Boddice half-way She unlac'd:
 About his Arms She slily cast
 The silken Bond, and held Him fast.

}

The God awak'd; and thrice¹³⁶ in vain
 He strove to break the cruel Chain;
 And thrice in vain He shook his Wing,
 Incumber'd in the silken String.

15

Fluttering the God, and weeping said,

¹³¹*Poems on Several Occasions [English poems only]*. Tonson and Berber, 1718, pp. 72–74. *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*

¹³² *Myrtle* a plant associated with poetry and a woman's sexuality

¹³³ *Paps* breasts or nipples

¹³⁴ *Nymph* a young woman

¹³⁵ *Vagrant* a person who wanders from place to place

¹³⁶ *thrice* three times

Pity poor Cupid, generous Maid,¹³⁷ 20
 Who happen'd, being Blind, to stray,
 And on thy Bosom lost his Way:
 Who stray'd, alas! but knew too well,
 He never There must hope to dwell.¹³⁸
 Set an unhappy Prisoner free, 25
 Who ne'er intended Harm to Thee.

To Me pertains not, She replies,
 To know or care where Cupid flies;
 What are his Haunts, or which his Way;
 Where He would dwell, or whither stray: 30
 Yet will I never set Thee free:
 For Harm was meant, and Harm to Me.

Vain Fears that vex thy Virgin Heart!¹³⁹
 I'll give Thee up my Bow and Dart:
 Untangle but this cruel Chain, 35
 And freely let Me fly again.

Agreed: Secure¹⁴⁰ my Virgin Heart:
 Instant¹⁴¹ give up thy Bow and Dart:
 The Chain I'll in Return unty; ¹⁴²
 And freely Thou again shalt fly. 40

¹³⁷ *generous Maid* kind virgin (but generous may have a sexual implication)

¹³⁸ *dwell* remain

¹³⁹ *Virgin Heart* the speaker has not been in love

¹⁴⁰ *Secure* guarantee to protect

¹⁴¹ *Instant* immediately

¹⁴² *Unty* untie or undo

Thus She the Captive did deliver:
The Captive thus gave up his Quiver.¹⁴³

The God disarm'd, e'er since that Day
Passes his Life in harmless Play;
Flies round, or sits upon her Breast, 45
A little, fluttering, idle Guest.

E'er since that Day the beauteous Maid
Governs the World in Cupid's stead;
Directs his Arrow as She wills;
Gives Grief, or Pleasure; spares, or kills. 50



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¹⁴³ *Quiver* a container for arrows