

Mary Barber

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Mary Barber (1685-1755) was born in Dublin, Ireland and married Jonathan Barber, a failing woolen draper, in 1705. There is not much known of Barber's childhood or lineage, but she was an Irish housewife-turned-poet who suffered from various health issues. She had nine children with her husband, and she claimed to write poetry with the intention of teaching her children.

Jonathan Swift noticed Barber's skill in writing, and she was part of what he called his 'Triumfeminate', a group of Irish women writers including Mary Barber, Constantia Grierson, and Laetitia Pilkington. Swift was vocal in his support for Barber and assisted her in traveling to accumulate subscriptions to publish her poems. Members of the community could pay for a subscription which would include their name in the text and that payment would go towards publishing fees; this was a common method of publication for lower-class citizens and unknown writers. Barber published her volume of poetry, *Poems on Several Occasions*, in 1734 with over nine hundred subscribers, which was impressive for someone who was a commoner. Many of Barber's subscribers were well-known and/or aristocrats, such as Swift, the Earl and Countess of Orrery, and the Duchess of Ormond.

Poems on Several Occasions included not only poems by Barber, but also a few poems by her sons and other affiliates. After its publication, Barber did not become more financially stable, and, to help, Swift gave her the rights to his *Polite Conversations*, so she received the funds when it was published. While Barber wrote very little after the publishing of *Poems on Several Occasions*, she wrote some poetry about her health issues that were featured in *The Gentleman's Magazine*. After this, Barber continued to battle with gout and sadly passed away in 1755. Her place of rest is unknown.

Due to her position as an unestablished, lower-class housewife, she was able to have more complex engagement with larger social issues that her more privileged counterparts could not. "An Unanswerable Apology for the Rich" (1734) is an example of the ways Barber would use satire to speak to larger issues concerning gender and socioeconomic standing.

In her poem "On Seeing the Captives, Lately Redeem'd from Barbary by His Majesty," Barber addresses the slave trade that existed along the coast of North Africa. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, pirates and

corsairs on the Barbary coast would raid ships traveling through the Mediterranean to capture (white) Europeans for slavery. In Barber's poem, she is referring to European slaves who are freed and returning home, thanks to the King who paid their ransom. This is an occasional poem (a poem written for a specific occasion) in iambic pentameter and also a Pindaric ode, in its passion, irregular form, and public nature. Barber is speaking to a larger social issue, one little known today.

Further Reading

- Budd, Adam. "'Merit in Distress': The Troubled Success of Mary Barber." *The Review of English Studies*, vol. 53, no. 210, 2002, pp. 204–227.
- Capp, Bernard. *British Slaves and Barbary Corsairs, 1580-1750*. Oxford UP, 2022.
- Davis, Robert. "Counting European Slaves on the Barbary Coast." *Past and Present*, vol. 172, no. 1, 2001, pp. 87–124.

On Seeing the Captives, Lately Redeem'd from Barbary by His Majesty¹⁵⁷

A sight like this, who can unmov'd survey?
Impartial Muse, can'st¹⁵⁸ thou with-hold thy Lay?¹⁵⁹
See the freed Captives hail their native Shore,
And tread the Land of LIBERTY once more:
See, as they pass, the crouding¹⁶⁰ People press,
Joy in their Joy, and their Deliv'rer bless.

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NOW, SLAVERY! no more thy rigid Hand
Shall drag the Trader to thy fatal Strand:¹⁶¹
No more in Iron Bonds the Wretched groan;
Secur'd,¹⁶² BRITANNIA, by thy Guardian Throne.

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SAY, mighty PRINCE! can Empire boast a Bliss,
Amidst its radiant Pomp,¹⁶³ that equals this?
To see the Captives, by thy Pow'r set free,
Their Supplications¹⁶⁴ raise to Heav'n for Thee!

THE god-like Bounty scatters Blessings round,
As flowing Urns¹⁶⁵ enrich the distant Ground:
No more shall Woes the fainting Heart destroy;

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¹⁵⁷ *Poems on Several Occasions*, London, Rivington, 1734, pp. 271-274; *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*

¹⁵⁸ *can'st* can you

¹⁵⁹ *Lay* music or song

¹⁶⁰ *crouding* crowding

¹⁶¹ *Strand* waterfront land or a shoreline

¹⁶² *Secur'd* protected

¹⁶³ *Pomp* grandiose or pretentious behaviour

¹⁶⁴ *Supplications* desperate appeals to an influential person

¹⁶⁵ *Urn* a vessel for dispensing water

The *House of Mourning*¹⁶⁶ now is turn'd to *Joy*:
 See Arms in Grief long folded up, extend,
 To clasp a Husband, Brother, Kinsman, Friend: 20
 See hoary¹⁶⁷ Parents, tott'ring o'er the Grave,
 A Son long-wail'd,¹⁶⁸ to prop¹⁶⁹ their Age, receive:
 And, Have we liv'd to see thy Face? they cry;
 O! 'tis enough----We now in Peace shall die:
 O bless'd be Heav'n! and bless'd, while Life remains, 25
 Shall be the Hand, that has unbound thy Chains!

FORBEAR,¹⁷⁰ my Muse; know Art attempts in vain,
 What Nature pictures to the Breast humane.

To WAGER¹⁷¹ turn; for WAGER raise thy Voice;
 To feed the Hungry, long has been his Choice, 30
 And make the Heart, born down by Care, rejoice.

SAY, ye Luxurious, who indulge your Taste,
 And, by one Riot,¹⁷² might a Thousand feast;
 Do you not blush to see his Care to feed
 The Captives by your Monarch's Bounty freed? 35

THE bitter Cup of Slavery is past;

¹⁶⁶ *House of Mourning* a home where a death or tragedy has taken place

¹⁶⁷ *hoary* grey-haired

¹⁶⁸ *long-wail'd* long mourned for

¹⁶⁹ *prop* to hold up or assist

¹⁷⁰ *FORBEAR* to stop oneself or to hold back

¹⁷¹ *WAGER* [author's note] the person "who entertain'd the Captives at their coming to London, Nov.11. 1734"

¹⁷² *Riot* party, wild entertainment

But pining Penury¹⁷³ approaches fast.

AND shall the ROYAL RACE¹⁷⁴ alone bestow?

Shall not Compassion from the *Subject* flow? 40

Shall not each free-born *Briton's*¹⁷⁵ Bosom melt,

To make the Joys of Liberty more felt?

So, *Albion*,¹⁷⁶ be it ever giv'n to thee,

To break the Bonds, and set the Pris'ners free.



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¹⁷³ *Penury* poverty, or only having a penny

¹⁷⁴ *ROYAL RACE* [author's note] "when the Captives attended his Majesty at St. James's in their Habits, to return Thanks for their Deliverance, his Majesty was graciously pleas'd to order 100 Guineas to be distributed among them; and their Royal Highness the Duke and the Princess gave above 50 more."

¹⁷⁵ *Briton's* a person from Britain

¹⁷⁶ *Albion* referring to or addressing Britain