

James Beattie

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The life of James Beattie began in Kincardineshire, Scotland, in 1735. He was the youngest out of his six siblings, with a tenant farmer and village shopkeeper father who died when Beattie was only seven years old. At the age of fourteen, Beattie received a bursary to Marischal College in Aberdeen to study a four-year Arts MA program that specialized in Greek and Moral Philosophy. After concluding his time at University, Beattie struggled to find employment regarding his studies, resulting in “four solitary years” as a parish clerk and schoolmaster in 1753 (Jeffrey 173.) Then, at the very university he had studied at, Beattie was appointed a professor in Moral Philosophy and Logic at the age of twenty-five. However, his earlier solitude is when Beattie began writing, acting as a catalyst for some of his most celebrated work, including *Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth* (1770), a piece of critical analysis of modern skepticism written between 1766 and 1769.

Beattie and his wife, Mary Dun, spent their marital years battling mental health problems, resulting in their choice to live separately. Beattie equally encountered physical and mental illnesses, writing about his challenges with depression, vertigo, and his relationship with domestic tragedies, to name a few. Throughout his literary career, he openly discussed his problematic and debilitating relationship with his health. Thirteen years after the death of his last living son, and estranged from his wife since 1784, Beattie died in Aberdeen in 1803 after suffering from a series of strokes for four years.

Beattie’s “The Hermit” takes on a Sentimentalist stance, with his speaker living in solitude, escaping traditional society to reconnect with God and the natural world. Beattie’s poem embodies the ethos of Scottish existential concerns at a time of growth and religious disparities. In its melancholy tone of isolation, the poem echoes the questioning of agency and identity following the Acts of Unions in 1707, which saw the Scottish nation lose its independence to the making of Great Britain. A religious ode, “The Hermit” mirrors several of Beattie’s previous works in religious partisanship. The poem has four eight-line stanzas of anapestic tetrameter, an unusually light meter for such a serious subject matter.

Further Reading

Nobbs, Douglas. "The Union of 1707." *England and Scotland*, Routledge, 2023, pp.157–168.

Matytsin, Anton M. *The Specter of Skepticism in the Age of Enlightenment*. Johns Hopkins UP, 2016.

Jones, E. A. *Hermits and Anchorites in England, 1200-1550*. Manchester UP, 2019.

References

Jeffrey, Francis. "ART. XII. An Account of the Life and Writings of James Beattie, L.L.D. Late Professor of Moral Philosophy and Logic in the Marischal College and University of Aberdeen: Including many of his original Letters." *The Edinburgh Review*, 1802-1929, vol. 10, no. 19, 1807, p.173.

The Hermit²¹⁰

AT the close of the day, when the hamlet²¹¹ is still,

And mortals the sweets of forgetfulness prove,

When nought but the torrent is heard on the hill,

And nought but the nightingale's song in the grove;²¹²

'Twas then, by the cave of a mountain, reclin'd,

5

An Hermit²¹³ his nightly complaint thus began,

Tho' mournful his voice, his heart was resign'd,²¹⁴

He thought as a sage,²¹⁵ but he felt as a man.

"Ah, why thus abandon'd to mourning and woe,²¹⁶

"Why thus, lonely Philomel,²¹⁷ slows thy sad strain?

10

"For Spring shall return, and a lover bestow,

"And thy bosom no trace of dejection retain;

"Yet if pity inspire thee, ah, cease not thy lay,

"Mourn, sweetest complainer, man calls thee to mourn,

"O soothe him whose pleasures like thine pass away,

15

"Full swiftly they pass, but they never return.

"Now gliding remote on the verge of the sky,

"The moon, half extinct, her wan²¹⁸ crescent displays:

"Yet lately I saw, where majestic on high,

²¹⁰ *A Collection of Poems in 4 Volumes. By several hands*, vol. 3, published by G. Pearch, 1770, pp. 47–

48; *Eighteenth Century Poetry Archive*

²¹¹ *hamlet* a small village or community of houses

²¹² *grove* a group of trees

²¹³ *Hermit* "one who from religious motives has retired into solitary life" (*OED*)

²¹⁴ *resign'd* surrendered to the inevitable

²¹⁵ *sage* a wise and knowledgeable person

²¹⁶ *woe* expressing grief

²¹⁷ *Philomel* "a poetic or literary name for the: nightingale (in allusion to the myth of the maiden Philomela's transformation into that bird)" (*OED*)

²¹⁸ *wan* a poetic term for going pale

"She shone, and the stars were conceal'd in her rays;
 "Roll on, thou fair orb, and with gladness pursue 20
 "The path that conducts thee to splendor²¹⁹ again;
 "But man's faded glory no change shall renew,
 "Ah, fool! to exult in a glory so vain.

"'Tis dark, and the landscape is lovely no more,
 "I mourn not, ye woodlands, I mourn not for you; 25
 "For morn shall return, all your charms to restore,
 "Perfum'd with fresh fragrance, and glittering with dew:
 "Nor yet for the ravage of Winter I mourn,
 "Kind Nature the embryo blossoms shall save;
 "But when shall Spring visit the mouldering²²⁰ urn?
 "Oh, when shall it dawn on the gloom of the grave?"²²¹ 30



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²¹⁹ *splendor* "great brightness" (OED)

²²⁰ *Mouldering urn* a container for cremated remains, decaying slowly

²²¹ the 1776 revised edition has a further two stanzas:

"'Twas thus, by the glare of false Science betray'd,
 'That leads, to bewilder; and dazzles, to blind;
 'My thoughts wont to roam, from shade onward to shade,
 'Destruction before me, and sorrow behind.
 "O pity, great Father of light," then I cry'd,
 "Thy creature who fain would not wander from Thee!
 "Lo, humbled in dust, I relinquish my pride:
 "From doubt and from darkness thou only canst free."

'And darkness and doubt are now flying away.
 'No longer I roam in conjecture forlorn.
 'So breaks on the traveller, faint, and astray,
 'The bright and the balmy effulgence of morn.
 'See Truth, Love, and Mercy, in triumph descending,
 'And Nature all glowing in Eden's first bloom!
 'On the cold cheek of Death smiles and roses are blending,
 And Beauty Immortal awakes from the tomb.'