

Matthew Prior (1664-1721)

2 *Henry and Emma*

A Poem.

Founded on the Ancient Ballad of the Nut-brown Maid.

TO CLOE.

Thou, to whose eyes I bend, at whose command  
(Though low my voice, though artless be my hand)  
I take the sprightly reed, and sing, and play,  
Careless of what the censuring world may say:  
Bright Cloe, object of my constant vow, 5  
Wilt thou awhile unbend thy serious brow;  
Wilt thou with pleasure hear thy lover's strains,  
And with one heavenly smile o'erpay his pains?  
No longer shall the Nut-brown Maid be old;  
Though since her youth three hundred years have roll'd: 10  
At thy desire she shall again be raised;  
And her reviving charms in lasting verse be praised.  
No longer man of woman shall complain,  
That he may love, and not be loved again;  
That we in vain the fickle sex pursue, 15  
Who change the constant lover for the new.  
Whatever has been writ, whatever said,  
Of female passion feigned, or faith decayed:  
Henceforth shall in my verse refuted stand,  
Be said to winds, or writ upon the sand. 20  
And, while my notes to future times proclaim  
Unconquered love, and ever-during flame;  
O fairest of the sex! be thou my Muse:  
Deign on my work thy influence to diffuse;  
Let me partake the blessings I rehearse, 25  
And grant me, love, the just reward of verse!  
As beauty's potent queen, with every grace  
That once was Emma's, has adorned thy face;  
And as her son has to my bosom dealt  
That constant flame, which faithful Henry felt; 30  
O let the story with thy life agree,  
Let men once more the bright example see;  
What Emma was to him, be thou to me.

Nor send me by thy frown from her I love,  
 Distant and sad, a banished man to rove. 35  
 But oh! with pity, long-entreated, crown  
 My pains and hopes; and when thou say'st that one  
 Of all mankind thou lov'st, oh! think on me alone.  
 Where beauteous Isis and her husband Tame  
 With mingled waves for ever flow the same, 40  
 In times of yore an ancient baron lived;  
 Great gifts bestowed, and great respect received.  
 When dreadful Edward with successful care  
 Led his free Britons to the Gallic war,  
 This lord had headed his appointed bands, 45  
 In firm allegiance to his king's commands;  
 And (all due honours faithfully discharged)  
 Had brought back his paternal coat enlarged  
 With a new mark, the witness of his toil,  
 And no inglorious part of foreign spoil. 50  
 From the loud camp retired and noisy court,  
 In honourable ease and rural sport,  
 The remnant of his days he safely passed;  
 Nor found they lagged too slow, nor flew too fast.  
 He made his wish with his estate comply, 55  
 Joyful to live, yet not afraid to die.  
 One child he had, a daughter chaste and fair,  
 His age's comfort, and his fortune's heir;  
 They called her Emma; for the beauteous dame,  
 Who gave the virgin birth, had borne the name; 60  
 The name the indulgent father doubly loved;  
 For in the child the mother's charms improved.  
 Yet as, when little, round his knees she played,  
 He called her oft in sport his Nut-brown Maid,  
 The friends and tenants took the fondling word 65  
 (As still they please, who imitate their lord);  
 Usage confirmed what fancy had begun;  
 The mutual terms around the lands were known;  
 And Emma and the Nut-brown Maid were one.  
 As with her stature, still her charms increased; 70  
 Through all the isle her beauty was confessed.  
 Oh! what perfection must that virgin share,  
 Who fairest is esteemed, where all are fair!  
 From distant shires repair the noble youth,  
 And find report for once had lessened truth. 75

By wonder first, and then by passion moved,  
 They came, they saw, they marvelled, and they loved.  
 By public praises, and by secret sighs,  
 Each owned the general power of Emma's eyes.

In tilts and tournaments the valiant strove, 80  
 By glorious deeds to purchase Emma's love.  
 In gentle verse the witty told their flame,  
 And graced their choicest songs with Emma's name.  
 In vain they combated, in vain they writ:  
 Useless their strength, and impotent their wit. 85  
 Great Venus only must direct the dart,  
 Which else will never reach the fair one's heart,  
 Spite of the attempts of force, and soft effects of art.  
 Great Venus must prefer the happy one;  
 In Henry's cause her favour must be shown; 90  
 And Emma, of mankind, must love but him alone.

While these in public to the castle came,  
 And by their grandeur justified their flame;  
 More secret ways the careful Henry takes;  
 His squires, his arms, and equipage forsakes, 95  
 In borrowed name and false attire arrayed,  
 Oft he finds means to see the beauteous maid.

When Emma hunts, in huntsman's habit dressed,  
 Henry on foot pursues the bounding beast;  
 In his right hand his beechen pole he bears, 100  
 And graceful at his side his horn he wears.  
 Still to the glade, where she has bent her way,  
 With knowing skill he drives the future prey;  
 Bids her decline the hill, and shun the brake,  
 And shows the path her steed may safest take; 105  
 Directs her spear to fix the glorious wound,  
 Pleased in his toils to have her triumph crowned;  
 And blows her praises in no common sound.

A falconer Henry is, when Emma hawks;  
 With her of tarsels and of lures he talks; 110  
 Upon his wrist the towering merlin stands,  
 Practised to rise, and stoop at her commands.  
 And when superior now the bird has flown,  
 And headlong brought the tumbling quarry down;  
 With humble reverence he accosts the fair, 115  
 And with the honoured feather decks her hair.  
 Yet still, as from the sportive field she goes

His downcast eye reveals his inward woes;  
And by his look and sorrow is expressed,  
A nobler game pursued than bird or beast. 120

A shepherd now along the plain he roves,  
And, with his jolly pipe, delights the groves.  
The neighbouring swains around the stranger throng,  
Or to admire, or emulate his song;  
While with soft sorrow he renews his lays, 125  
Nor heedful of their envy, nor their praise.  
But, soon as Emma's eyes adorn the plain,  
His notes he raises to a nobler strain,  
With dutiful respect, and studious fear;  
Lest any careless sound offend her ear. 130

A frantic gipsy now, the house he haunts,  
And in wild phrases speaks dissembled wants.  
With the fond maids in palmistry he deals:  
They tell the secret first, which he reveals;  
Says who shall wed, and who shall be beguiled; 135  
What groom shall get, and 'squire maintain the child.  
But, when bright Emma would her fortune know,  
A softer look unbends his opening brow;  
With trembling awe he gazes on her eye,  
And in soft accents forms the kind reply; 140  
That she shall prove as fortunate as fair;  
And Hymen's choicest gifts are all reserved for her.

Now oft had Henry changed his sly disguise,  
Unmarked by all but beauteous Emma's eyes;  
Oft had found means alone to see the dame, 145  
And at her feet to breathe his amorous flame,  
And oft the pangs of absence to remove  
By letters, soft interpreters of love.  
Till Time and Industry (the mighty two  
That bring our wishes nearer to our view) 150  
Made him perceive, that the inclining fair  
Received his vows with no reluctant ear;  
That Venus had confirmed her equal reign,  
And dealt to Emma's heart a share of Henry's pain.

While Cupid smiled, by kind occasion blessed, 155  
And, with the secret kept, the love increased;  
The amorous youth frequents the silent groves;  
And much he meditates, for much he loves.  
He loves; 'tis true; and is beloved again:

Great are his joys, but will they long remain? 160  
 Emma with smiles receives his present flame;  
 But smiling, will she ever be the same!  
 Beautiful looks are ruled by fickle minds;  
 And summer seas are turned by sudden winds.  
 Another love may gain her easy youth: 165  
 Time changes thought; and flattery conquers truth.  
     O impotent estate of human life,  
 Where hope and fear maintain eternal strife!  
 Where fleeting joy does lasting doubt inspire,  
 And most we question what we most desire! 170  
 Amongst thy various gifts, great Heaven, bestow  
 Our cup of love unmixed; forbear to throw  
 Bitter ingredients in; nor pall the draught  
 With nauseous grief; for our ill-judging thought  
 Hardly enjoys the pleasurable taste; 175  
 Or deems it not sincere, or fears it cannot last.  
     With wishes raised, with jealousies oppressed  
 (Alternate tyrants of the human breast),  
 By one great trial he resolves to prove  
 The faith of woman, and the force of love. 180  
 If scanning Emma's virtues he may find  
 That beauteous frame enclose a steady mind,  
 He'll fix his hope, of future joy secure;  
 And live a slave to Hymen's happy power.  
 But if the fair one, as he fears, is frail; 185  
 If, poised aright in reason's equal scale,  
 Light fly her merit, and her faults prevail;  
 His mind he vows to free from amorous care,  
 The latent mischief from his heart to tear,  
 Resume his azure arms, and shine again in war. 190  
     South of the castle, in a verdant glade,  
 A spreading beech extends her friendly shade;  
 Here oft the nymph his breathing vows had heard,  
 Here oft her silence had her heart declared.  
 As active spring awaked her infant buds, 195  
 And genial life informed the verdant woods,  
 Henry, in knots involving Emma's name,  
 Had half expressed and half concealed his flame,  
 Upon this tree; and, as the tender mark  
 Grew with the year, and widened with the bark, 200  
 Venus had heard the virgin's soft address,

That, as the wound, the passion might increase.  
As potent Nature shed her kindly showers,  
And decked the various mead with opening flowers;  
Upon this tree the nymph's obliging care 205  
Had left a frequent wreath for Henry's hair;  
Which as with gay delight the lover found,  
Pleased with his conquest, with her present crowned,  
Glorious through all the plains he oft had gone,  
And to each swain the mystic honour shown; 210  
The gift still praised, the giver still unknown.

His secret note the troubled Henry writes,  
To the known tree the lovely maid invites;  
Imperfect words and dubious terms express,  
That unforeseen mischance disturbed his peace; 215  
That he must something to her ear commend,  
On which her conduct, and his life depend.

Soon as the fair one had the note received,  
The remnant of the day alone she grieved;  
For different this from every former note, 220  
Which Venus dictated, and Henry wrote;  
Which told her all his future hopes were laid  
On the dear bosom of his Nut-brown Maid;  
Which always blessed her eyes, and owned her power;  
And bid her oft adieu, yet added more. 225

Now night advanced. The house in sleep were laid;  
The nurse experienced, and the prying maid;  
And last that sprite, which does incessant haunt  
The lover's steps, the ancient maiden-aunt.  
To her dear Henry Emma wings her way, 230  
With quickened pace repairing forced delay;  
For love, fantastic power, that is afraid  
To stir abroad till watchfulness be laid,  
Undaunted then o'er cliffs and valleys strays,  
And leads his votaries safe through pathless ways. 235  
Not Argus with his hundred eyes shall find  
Where Cupid goes, though he, poor guide! is blind.

The maiden first arriving, sent her eye  
To ask, if yet its chief delight were nigh;  
With fear and with desire, with joy and pain, 240  
She sees, and runs to meet him on the plain.  
But oh! his steps proclaim no lover's haste:

On the low ground his fixed regards are cast;  
His artful bosom heaves dissembled sighs;  
And tears suborned fall copious from his eyes. 245

With ease, alas! we credit what we love;  
His painted grief does real sorrow move  
In the afflicted fair; adown her cheek  
Trickling the genuine tears their current break;  
Attentive stood the mournful nymph; the man 250  
Broke silence first, the tale alternate ran.

HENRY.

Sincere, O tell me, hast thou felt a pain,  
Emma, beyond what woman knows to feign?  
Has thy uncertain bosom ever strove  
With the first tumults of a real love? 255  
Hast thou now dreaded, and now blest his sway,  
By turns averse, and joyful to obey?  
Thy virgin softness hast thou e'er bewailed;  
As Reason yielded, and as Love prevailed?  
And wept the potent god's resistless dart, 260  
His killing pleasure, his ecstatic smart,  
And heavenly poison thrilling through thy heart?  
If so, with pity view my wretched state,  
At least deplore, and then forget my fate;  
To some more happy knight reserve thy charms; 265  
By Fortune favoured, and successful arms:  
And only, as the sun's revolving ray  
Brings back each year this melancholy day,  
Permit one sigh, and set apart one tear,  
To an abandoned exile's endless care. 270  
For me, alas! out-cast of human race,  
Love's anger only waits, and dire disgrace;  
For lo! these hands in murder are imbrued,  
These trembling feet by justice are pursued;  
Fate calls aloud, and hastens me away, 275  
A shameful death attends my longer stay;  
And I this night must fly from thee and love,  
Condemned in lonely woods, a banished man, to rove.

EMMA.

What is our bliss, that changeth with the moon;  
And day of life, that darkens ere 'tis noon? 280

What is true passion, if unblest it dies,  
 And where is Emma's joy, if Henry flies?  
 If love, alas! be pain, the pain I bear  
 No thought can figure, and no tongue declare.  
 Ne'er faithful woman felt, nor false one feigned, 285  
 The flames which long have in my bosom reigned:  
 The god of love himself inhabits there,  
 With all his rage, and dread, and grief, and care,  
 His complement of stores, and total war.  
 O! cease then coldly to suspect my love; 290  
 And let my deed at least my faith approve.  
 Alas! no youth shall my endearments share;  
 Nor day nor night shall interrupt my care;  
 No future story shall with truth upbraid  
 The cold indifference of the Nut-brown Maid; 295  
 Nor to hard banishment shall Henry run,  
 While careless Emma sleeps on beds of down.  
 View me resolved, where'er thou leadst, to go,  
 Friend to thy pain, and partner of thy woe;  
 For I attest fair Venus and her son, 300  
 That I, of all mankind, will love but thee alone.

HENRY.

Let Prudence yet obstruct thy venturous way,  
 And take good heed, what men will think and say;  
 That beauteous Emma vagrant courses took,  
 Her father's house and civil life forsook: 305  
 That, full of youthful blood, and fond of man,  
 She to the woodland with an exile ran.  
 Reflect, that lessened fame is ne'er regained;  
 And virgin honour, once, is always stained:  
 Timely advised, the coming evil shun; 310  
 Better not do the deed, than weep it done.  
 No penance can absolve our guilty fame;  
 Nor tears, that wash out sin, can wash out shame.  
 Then fly the sad effects of desperate love;  
 And leave a banished man through lonely wood to rove. 315

EMMA.

Let Emma's hapless case be falsely told  
 By the rash young, or the ill-natured old:  
 Let every tongue its various censures choose,



Absolve with coldness, or with spite accuse;  
Fair truth at last her radiant beams will raise, 320  
And malice vanquished heightens virtue's praise.  
Let then thy favour but indulge my flight,  
O! let my presence make thy travels light,  
And potent Venus shall exalt my name,  
Above the rumours of censorious Fame. 325  
Nor from that busy demon's restless power  
Will ever Emma other grace implore,  
Than that this truth should to the world be known,  
That I, of all mankind, have loved but thee alone.

HENRY.

But canst thou wield the sword, and bend the bow, 330  
With active force repel the sturdy foe?  
When the loud tumult speaks the battle nigh,  
And wingèd deaths in whistling arrows fly;  
Wilt thou, though wounded, yet undaunted stay,  
Perform thy part, and share the dangerous day? 335  
Then, as thy strength decays, thy heart will fail,  
Thy limbs all trembling, and thy cheeks all pale;  
With fruitless sorrow, thou, inglorious maid,  
Wilt weep thy safety by thy love betrayed:  
Then to thy friend, by foes o'ercharged, deny 340  
Thy little useless aid, and coward fly:  
Then wilt thou curse the chance that made thee love  
A banished man, condemned in lonely woods to rove.

EMMA.

With fatal certainty Thalestris knew  
To send the arrow from the twanging yew; 345  
And, great in arms, and foremost in the war,  
Bonduca brandished high the British spear.  
Could thirst of vengeance and desire of fame  
Excite the female breast with martial flame,  
And shall not love's diviner power inspire 350  
More hardy virtue, and more generous fire?  
Near thee, mistrust not, constant I'll abide,  
And fall, or vanquish, fighting by thy side.  
Though my inferior strength may not allow,  
That I should bear or draw the warrior bow; 355  
With ready hand, I will the shaft supply,

And joy to see thy victor arrows fly.  
Touched in the battle by the hostile reed,  
Shouldst thou (but Heaven avert it!) shouldst thou bleed;  
To stanch the wounds, my finest lawn I'd tear, 360  
Wash them with tears, and wipe them with my hair;  
Blest, when my dangers and my toils have shown  
That I, of all mankind, could love but thee alone.

HENRY.

But canst thou, tender maid, canst thou sustain  
Afflictive want, or hunger's pressing pain? 365  
Those limbs, in lawn and softest silk arrayed,  
From sunbeams guarded, and of winds afraid;  
Can they bear angry Jove! can they resist  
The parching dog-star, and the bleak north-east?  
When, chilled by adverse snows and beating rain, 370  
We tread with weary steps the longsome plain;  
When with hard toil we seek our evening food,  
Berries and acorns, from the neighbouring wood;  
And find among the cliffs no other house,  
But the thin covert of some gathered boughs; 375  
Wilt thou not then reluctant send thine eye  
Around the dreary waste; and weeping try  
(Though then, alas! that trial be too late)  
To find thy father's hospitable gate,  
And seats, where ease and plenty brooding sate! 380  
Those seats, whence long excluded thou must mourn;  
That gate, for ever barred to thy return:  
Wilt thou not then bewail ill-fated love,  
And hate a banished man, condemned in woods to rove?

EMMA.

Thy rise of fortune did I only wed, 385  
From its decline determined to recede;  
Did I but purpose to embark with thee  
On the smooth surface of a summer's sea;  
While gentle zephyrs play in prosperous gales,  
And fortune's favour fills the swelling sails; 390  
But would forsake the ship, and make the shore,  
When the winds whistle, and the tempests roar?  
No, Henry, no: one sacred oath has tied  
Our loves; one destiny our life shall guide;

Nor wild nor deep our common way divide. 395  
 When from the cave thou risest with the day,  
 To beat the woods, and rouse the bounding prey;  
 The cave with moss and branches I 'll adorn,  
 And cheerful sit to wait my lord's return.  
 And, when thou frequent bring'st the smitten deer 400  
 (For seldom, archers say, thy arrows err),  
 I 'll fetch quick fuel from the neighbouring wood,  
 And strike the sparkling flint, and dress the food;  
 With humble duty and officious haste,  
 I 'll cull the furthest mead for thy repast; 405  
 The choicest herbs I to thy board will bring,  
 And draw thy water from the freshest spring;  
 And, when at night with weary toil oppressed,  
 Soft slumbers thou enjoy'st, and wholesome rest;  
 Watchful I 'll guard thee, and with midnight prayer 410  
 Weary the gods to keep thee in their care;  
 And joyous ask, at morn's returning ray,  
 If thou hast health, and I may bless the day.  
 My thoughts shall fix, my latest wish depend,  
 On thee, guide, guardian, kinsman, father, friend: 415  
 By all these sacred names be Henry known  
 To Emma's heart; and grateful let him own,  
 That she, of all mankind, could love but him alone!

HENRY.

Vainly thou tell'st me, what the woman's care  
 Shall in the wildness of the wood prepare: 420  
 Thou, ere thou goest, unhappiest of thy kind,  
 Must leave the habit and the sex behind.  
 No longer shall thy comely tresses break  
 In flowing ringlets on thy snowy neck;  
 Or sit behind thy head, an ample round, 425  
 In graceful braids with various ribbon bound:  
 No longer shall the bodice, aptly laced,  
 From thy full bosom to thy slender waist,  
 That air and harmony of shape express,  
 Fine by degrees, and beautifully less: 430  
 Nor shall thy lower garments artful plait,  
 From thy fair side dependent to thy feet,  
 Arm their chaste beauties with a modest pride,  
 And double every charm they seek to hide.

The ambrosial plenty of thy shining hair, 435  
 Cropped off and lost, scarce lower than thy ear  
 Shall stand uncouth: a horseman's coat shall hide  
 Thy taper shape, and comeliness of side.  
 The short trunk-hose shall show thy foot and knee  
 Licentious, and to common eye-sight free: 440  
 And, with a bolder stride and looser air,  
 Mingled with men, a man thou must appear.  
     Nor solitude, nor gentle peace of mind,  
 Mistaken maid, shalt thou in forests find;  
 'Tis long since Cynthia and her train were there: 445  
 Or guardian gods made innocence their care.  
 Vagrants and outlaws shall offend thy view;  
 For such must be my friends, a hideous crew.  
 By adverse fortune mixed in social ill,  
 Trained to assault, and disciplined to kill; 450  
 Their common loves, a lewd abandoned pack,  
 The beadle's lash still flagrant on their back:  
 By sloth corrupted, by disorder fed,  
 Made bold by want, and prostitute for bread.  
 With such must Emma hunt the tedious day, 455  
 Assist their violence, and divide their prey:  
 With such she must return at setting light,  
 Though not partaker, witness of their night.  
 Thy ear, inured to charitable sounds  
 And pitying love, must feel the hateful wounds 460  
 Of jest obscene and vulgar ribaldry,  
 The ill-bred question, and the lewd reply;  
 Brought by long habitude from bad to worse,  
 Must hear the frequent oath, the direful curse,  
 That latest weapon of the wretches' war, 465  
 And blasphemy, sad comrade of despair.  
     Now, Emma, now the last reflection make,  
 What thou wouldst follow, what thou must forsake:  
 By our ill-omened stars, and adverse Heaven,  
 No middle object to thy choice is given. 470  
 Or yield thy virtue to attain thy love;  
 Or leave a banished man, condemned in woods to rove.

EMMA.

O grief of heart! that our unhappy fates  
 Force thee to suffer what thy honour hates:

Mix thee amongst the bad; or make thee run 475  
 Too near the paths which virtue bids thee shun.  
 Yet with her Henry still let Emma go;  
 With him abhor the vice, but share the woe;  
 And sure my little heart can never err  
 Amidst the worst, if Henry still be there. 480

Our outward act is prompted from within;  
 And from the sinner's mind proceeds the sin;  
 By her own choice free virtue is approved,  
 Nor by the force of outward objects moved.  
 Who has assayed no danger, gains no praise. 485  
 In a small isle, amidst the widest seas,  
 Triumphant Constancy has fixed her seat,  
 In vain the Syrens sing, the tempests beat:  
 Their flattery she rejects, nor fears their threat.

For thee alone these little charms I dressed: 490  
 Condemned them, or absolved them by thy test.  
 In comely figure ranged my jewels shone,  
 Or negligently placed for thee alone;  
 For thee again they shall be laid aside;  
 The woman, Henry, shall put off her pride 495  
 For thee: my clothes, my sex, exchanged for thee,  
 I'll mingle with the people's wretched lee;  
 O fine extreme of human infamy!  
 Wanting the scissars, with these hands I'll tear  
 (If that obstructs my flight) this load of hair. 500  
 Black soot, or yellow walnut, shall disgrace  
 This little red and white of Emma's face.  
 These nails with scratches shall deform my breast,  
 Lest by my look or colour be expressed  
 The mark of aught high-born, or ever better dressed. 505  
 Yet in this commerce, under this disguise,  
 Let me be grateful still to Henry's eyes;  
 Lost to the world, let me to him be known:  
 My fate I can absolve, if he shall own,  
 That, leaving all mankind, I love but him alone. 510

HENRY.

O wildest thoughts of an abandoned mind!  
 Name, habit, parents, woman, left behind,  
 Even honour dubious, thou prefer'st to go  
 Wild to the woods with me: said Emma so?

Or did I dream what Emma never said? 515  
O guilty error! and O wretched maid!  
Whose roving fancy would resolve the same  
With him, who next shall tempt her easy fame;  
And blow with empty words the susceptible flame.  
Now why should doubtful terms thy mind perplex, 520  
Confess thy frailty, and avow the sex:  
No longer loose desire for constant love  
Mistake; but say, 'tis man with whom thou long'st to rove.

EMMA.

Are there not poisons, racks, and flames, and swords,  
That Emma thus must die by Henry's words? 525  
Yet what could swords or poison, racks or flame,  
But mangle and disjoint this brittle frame!  
More fatal Henry's words, they murder Emma's fame.

And fall these sayings from that gentle tongue,  
Where civil speech and soft persuasion hung; 530  
Whose artful sweetness and harmonious strain,  
Courting my grace, yet courting it in vain,  
Called sighs, and tears, and wishes, to its aid;  
And, whilst it Henry's glowing flame conveyed,  
Still blame the coldness of the Nut-brown Maid? 535

Let envious jealousy and canker'd spite  
Produce my actions to severest light,  
And tax my open day, or secret night.  
Did e'er my tongue speak my unguarded heart  
The least inclined to play the wanton's part? 540  
Did e'er my eye one inward thought reveal,  
Which angels might not hear, and virgins tell?  
And hast thou, Henry, in my conduct known  
One fault, but that which I must never own,  
That I, of all mankind, have loved but thee alone? 545

HENRY.

Vainly thou talk'st of loving me alone:  
Each man is man; and all our sex is one.  
False are our words, and fickle is our mind;  
Nor in love's ritual can we ever find  
Vows made to last, or promises to bind. 550

By nature prompted, and for empire made,  
Alike by strength or cunning we invade;

When armed with rage we march against the foe,  
 We lift the battle-axe, and draw the bow;  
 When, fired with passion, we attack the fair, 555  
 Delusive sighs and brittle vows we bear;  
 Our falsehood and our arms have equal use;  
 As they our conquest or delight produce.  
 The foolish heart thou gav'st, again receive,  
 The only boon departing love can give. 560  
 To be less wretched, be no longer true;  
 What strives to fly thee, why shouldst thou pursue?  
 Forget the present flame, indulge a new;  
 Single the loveliest of the amorous youth;  
 Ask for his vow; but hope not for his truth. 565  
 The next man (and the next thou shalt believe)  
 Will pawn his gods, intending to deceive;  
 Will kneel, implore, persist, o'ercome, and leave.  
 Hence let thy Cupid aim his arrows right;  
 Be wise and false, shun trouble, seek delight; 570  
 Change thou the first, nor wait thy lover's flight.  
 Why shouldst thou weep? let nature judge our case;  
 I saw thee young and fair; pursued the chase  
 Of youth and beauty: I another saw  
 Fairer and younger: yielding to the law 575  
 Of our all-ruling mother, I pursued  
 More youth, more beauty; blest vicissitude!  
 My active heart still keeps its pristine flame;  
 The object altered, the desire the same.  
 This younger, fairer, pleads her rightful charms; 580  
 With present power compels me to her arms.  
 And much I fear, from my subjected mind  
 (If beauty's force to constant love can bind),  
 That years may roll, ere in her turn the maid  
 Shall weep the fury of my love decayed; 585  
 And weeping follow me, as thou dost now,  
 With idle clamours of a broken vow.  
 Nor can the wildness of thy wishes err  
 So wide, to hope that thou mayst live with her.  
 Love, well thou know'st, no partnership allows: 590  
 Cupid averse rejects divided vows:  
 Then from thy foolish heart, vain maid, remove  
 An useless sorrow, and an ill-starred love;  
 And leave me, with the fair, at large in woods to rove.

EMMA.

Are we in life through one great error led; 595  
Is each man perjured, and each nymph betrayed?  
Of the superior sex art thou the worst?  
Am I of mine the most completely cursed?  
Yet let me go with thee; and going prove,  
From what I will endure, how much I love. 600

This potent beauty, this triumphant fair,  
This happy object of our different care,  
Her let me follow; her let me attend  
A servant (she may scorn the name of friend).  
What she demands, incessant I 'll prepare; 605  
I 'll weave her garlands; and I 'll plait her hair:  
My busy diligence shall deck her board  
(For there at least I may approach my lord);  
And, when her Henry's softer hours advise  
His servant's absence, with dejected eyes 610  
Far I 'll recede, and sighs forbid to rise.

Yet, when increasing grief brings slow disease;  
And ebbing life, on terms severe as these,  
Will have its little lamp no longer fed;  
When Henry's mistress shows him Emma dead; 615  
Rescue my poor remains from vile neglect:  
With virgin honours let my hearse be decked,  
And decent emblem; and at least persuade  
This happy nymph, that Emma may be laid  
Where thou, dear author of my death, where she, 620  
With frequent eye my sepulchre may see.  
The nymph amidst her joys may haply breathe  
One pious sigh, reflecting on my death,  
And the sad fate which she may one day prove,  
Who hopes from Henry's vows eternal love. 625  
And thou forsworn, thou cruel, as thou art,  
If Emma's image ever touched thy heart;  
Thou sure must give one thought, and drop one tear  
To her, whom love abandoned to despair;  
To her, who, dying, on the wounded stone 630  
Bid it in lasting characters be known,  
That, of mankind, she loved but thee alone.

HENRY.



Hear, solemn Jove; and conscious Venus, hear;  
And thou, bright maid, believe me whilst I swear;  
No time, no change, no future flame, shall move 635  
The well-placed basis of my lasting love.

O powerful virtue! O victorious fair!  
At least excuse a trial too severe:  
Receive the triumph, and forget the war.

No banished man, condemned in woods to rove, 640  
Intreats thy pardon, and implores thy love:  
No perjured knight desires to quit thy arms,  
Fairest collection of thy sex's charms,  
Crown of my love, and honour of my youth!  
Henry, thy Henry, with eternal truth, 645  
As thou mayst wish, shall all his life employ,  
And found his glory in his Emma's joy.

In me behold the potent Edgar's heir,  
Illustrious earl; him terrible in war  
Let Loyre confess, for she has felt his sword, 650  
And trembling fled before the British lord.

Him great in peace and wealth fair Deva knows;  
For she amidst his spacious meadows flows;  
Inclines her urn upon his fattened lands;  
And sees his numerous herds imprint her sands. 655

And thou, my fair, my dove, shalt raise thy thought  
To greatness next to empire; shalt be brought  
With solemn pomp to my paternal seat:  
Where peace and plenty on thy word shall wait.  
Music and song shall wake the marriage-day: 660  
And, whilst the priests accuse the bride's delay,  
Myrtles and roses shall obstruct her way.

Friendship shall still thy evening feasts adorn,  
And blooming peace shall ever bless thy morn.  
Succeeding years their happy race shall run, 665  
And age unheeded by delight come on;  
While yet superior love shall mock his power,  
And when old Time shall turn the fated hour,  
Which only can our well-tied knot unfold;  
What rests of both, one sepulchre shall hold. 670

Hence then for ever from my Emma's breast  
(That heaven of softness, and that seat of rest)  
Ye doubts and fears, and all that know to move  
Tormenting grief, and all that trouble love,

Scattered by winds recede, and wild in forests rove. 675

EMMA.

O day the fairest sure that ever rose!  
Period and end of anxious Emma's woes!  
Sire of her joy, and source of her delight;  
O! winged with pleasure take thy happy flight,  
And give each future morn a tincture of thy white. 680

Yet tell thy votary, potent queen of love,  
Henry, my Henry, will he never rove?  
Will he be ever kind, and just, and good?  
And is there yet no mistress in the wood?  
None, none there is; the thought was rash and vain; 685  
A false idea, and a fancied pain.

Doubt shall for ever quit my strengthened heart,  
And anxious jealousy's corroding smart;  
Nor other inmate shall inhabit there,  
But soft Belief, young Joy, and pleasing Care: 690

Hence let the tides of plenty ebb and flow,  
And fortune's various gale unheeded blow.  
If at my feet the suppliant goddess stands,  
And sheds her treasure with unwearied hands;  
Her present favour cautious I'll embrace, 695  
And not unthankful use the proffered grace:

If she reclaims the temporary boon,  
And tries her pinions, fluttering to be gone;  
Secure of mind, I'll obviate her intent,  
And unconcerned return the goods she lent. 700

Nor happiness can I, nor misery feel,  
From any turn of her fantastic wheel:  
Friendship's great laws, and love's superior powers,  
Must mark the colour of my future hours.  
From the events which thy commands create 705  
I must my blessings or my sorrows date,  
And Henry's will must dictate Emma's fate.

Yet while with close delight and inward pride  
(Which from the world my careful soul shall hide)  
I see thee, lord and end of my desire, 710  
Exalted high as virtue can require;  
With power invested, and with pleasure cheered;  
Sought by the good, by the oppressor feared;  
Loaded and blest with all the affluent store,

Which human vows at smoking shrines implore; 715  
Grateful and humble grant me to employ  
My life subservient only to thy joy;  
And at my death to bless thy kindness shown  
To her, who of mankind could love but thee alone.

While thus the constant pair alternate said, 720  
Joyful above them and around them played  
Angels and sportive loves, a numerous crowd;  
Smiling they clapped their wings, and low they bowed:  
They tumbled all their little quivers o'er,  
To choose propitious shafts, a precious store; 725  
That, when their god should take his future darts,  
To strike (however rarely) constant hearts,  
His happy skill might proper arms employ,  
All tipped with pleasure, and all winged with joy:  
And those, they vowed, whose lives should imitate 730  
These lovers' constancy, should share their fate.

The queen of beauty stopped her bridled doves;  
Approved the little labour of the loves;  
Was proud and pleased the mutual vow to hear;  
And to the triumph called the god of war: 735  
Soon as she calls, the god is always near.

Now, Mars, she said, let Fame exalt her voice,  
Nor let thy conquests only be her choice:  
But, when she sings great Edward from the field  
Returned, the hostile spear and captive shield 740  
In Concord's temple hung, and Gallia taught to yield;  
And when, as prudent Saturn shall complete  
The years designed to perfect Britain's state,  
The swift-winged power shall take her trump again,  
To sing her favourite Anna's wondrous reign; 745  
To recollect unwearied Marlborough's toils,  
Old Rufus' hall unequal to his spoils;  
The British soldier from his high command  
Glorious, and Gaul thrice vanquished by his hand:  
Let her at least perform what I desire; 750  
With second breath the vocal brass inspire;  
And tell the nations, in no vulgar strain,  
What wars I manage, and what wreaths I gain.  
And, when thy tumults and thy fights are past,  
And when thy laurels at my feet are cast, 755

Faithful mayst thou, like British Henry, prove:  
And, Emma-like, let me return thy love.

Renowned for truth, let all thy sons appear;  
And constant beauty shall reward their care.

Mars smiled, and bowed: the Cyprian deity 760  
Turned to the glorious ruler of the sky;

And thou, she smiling said, great god of days  
And verse, behold my deed, and sing my praise,  
As on the British earth, my favourite isle,  
Thy gentle rays and kindest influence smile, 765

Through all her laughing fields and verdant groves,  
Proclaim with joy these memorable loves.

From every annual course let one great day  
To celebrated sports and floral play  
Be set aside; and, in the softest lays 770

Of thy poetic sons, be solemn praise  
And everlasting marks of honour paid,  
To the true lover, and the Nut-brown Maid.

*1709*

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