

Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady

[written c. 1717; published, *Works*, 1717]

What beck'ning ghost, along the moonlight shade
Invites my step, and points to yonder glade?
'Tis she!—but why that bleeding bosom gor'd,
Why dimly gleams the visionary sword?
Oh ever beauteous, ever friendly! tell, 5
Is it, in heav'n, a crime to love too well?
To bear too tender, or too firm a heart,
To act a Lover's or a Roman's part?
Is there no bright reversion in the sky,
For those who greatly think, or bravely die? 10
Why bade ye else, ye Pow'rs! her soul aspire
Above the vulgar flight of low desire?
Ambition first sprung from your blest abodes;
The glorious fault of Angels and of Gods:
Thence to their Images on earth it flows, 15
And in the breasts of Kings and Heroes glows!
Most souls, 'tis true, but peep out once an age,
Dull sullen pris'ners in the body's cage:
Dim lights of life that burn a length of years,
Useless, unseen, as lamps in sepulchres; 20
Like Eastern Kings a lazy state they keep,
And close confin'd to their own palace sleep.
From these perhaps (ere nature bade her die)
Fate snatch'd her early to the pitying sky.
As into air the purer spirits flow, 25
And sep'rate from their kindred dregs below;
So flew the soul to its congenial place,
Nor left one virtue to redeem her Race.
But thou, false guardian of a charge too good,
Thou, mean deserter of thy brother's blood! 30
See on these ruby lips the trembling breath,
These cheeks, now fading at the blast of death:
Cold is that breast which warm'd the world before,
And those love-darting eyes must roll no more.

Title] See the Duke of Buckingham's verses to a Lady designing to retire into a Monastery compared with Mr. Pope's Letters to several Ladies, p. 206. She seems to be the same person whose unfortunate death is the subject of this poem. [P]

8. To act a . . . Roman's part] to commit suicide.
25 f. The image is from chemistry.

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Thus, if eternal justice rules the ball, 35
Thus shall your wives, and thus your children fall:
On all the line a sudden vengeance waits,
And frequent hesses shall besiege your gates.
There passengers shall stand, and pointing say,
(While the long fun'erals blacken all the way) 40
Lo these were they, whose souls the Furies steel'd,
And curs'd with hearts unknowing how to yield.
Thus unlamented pass the proud away,
The gaze of fools, and pageant of a day!
So perish all, whose breast ne'er learn'd to glow 45
For others' good, or melt at others' woe.
What can atone (oh ever-injur'd shade!)
Thy fate unpity'd, and thy rites unpaid?
No friend's complaint, no kind domestic tear
Pleas'd thy pale ghost, or grac'd thy mournful bier; 50
By foreign hands thy dying eyes were clos'd,
By foreign hands thy decent limbs compos'd,
By foreign hands thy humble grave adorn'd,
By strangers honour'd, and by strangers mourn'd!
What tho' no friends in sable weeds appear, 55
Grieve for an hour, perhaps, then mourn a year,
And bear about the mockery of woe
To midnight dances, and the publick show?
What tho' no weeping Loves thy ashes grace,
Nor polish'd marble emulate thy face? 60
What tho' no sacred earth allow thee room,
Nor hallow'd dirge be mutter'd o'er thy tomb?
Yet shall thy grave with rising flow'rs be drest,
And the green turf lie lightly on thy breast:
There shall the morn her earliest tears bestow, 65
There the first roses of the year shall blow;
While Angels with their silver wings o'ershade
The ground, now sacred by thy reliques made.
So peaceful rests, without a stone, a name,
What once had beauty, titles, wealth, and fame. 70

35. ball] the orb, the emblem of the world, often placed in the hand of statues of Justice.

64. *Sit tibi terra levis* was so common on Roman gravestones that it was often abbreviated to S.T.T.L. Pope is adding the final touches to his Roman elegy.

68. The expression has reference to ver. 61. 'No sacred earth allowed her room', but her remains have 'made sacred' the common earth in which she was buried.

How lov'd, how honour'd once, avails thee not,
 To whom related, or by whom begot;
 A heap of dust alone remains of thee;
 'Tis all thou art, and all the proud shall be!

Poets themselves must fall, like those they sung; 75
 Deaf the prais'd ear, and mute the tuneful tongue.

Ev'n he, whose soul now melts in mournful lays,
 Shall shortly want the gen'rous tear he pays;
 Then from his closing eyes thy form shall part,
 And the last pang shall tear thee from his heart, 80
 Life's idle business at one gasp be o'er,
 The Muse forgot, and thou belov'd no more!

74. Pope reverts to l. 43: the lady's proud persecutors will die as she has died.

78. *want*] in the sense of 'lack' and also of 'need'.