The Caterpillar

Anna Laetitia Barbauld

The Mouse’s Petition

Parcere subjectis, & debellare superbos. —Virgil

Oh! hear a pensive prisoner’s prayer,
For liberty that sighs;
And never let thine heart be shut
Against the wretch’s cries.

For here forlorn and sad I sit,
Within the wiry grate;
And tremble at th’approaching morn,
Which brings impending fate.

If e’er thy breast with freedom glowed,
And spurned a tyrant’s chain,
Let not thy strong oppressive force
A free-born mouse detain.

Oh! do not stain with guiltless blood
Thy hospitable hearth;
Nor triumph that thy wiles betrayed
A prize so little worth.

The scattered gleanings of a feast
My frugal meals supply;
But if thine unrelenting heart
That slender boon deny,

The cheerful light, the vital air,
Are blessings widely given;
Let nature’s commoners enjoy
The common gifts of heaven.

—1773

The Caterpillar

No, helpless thing, I cannot harm thee now;
Depart in peace, thy little life is safe,
For I have scanned thy form with curious eye,
Noted the silver line that streaks thy back,
The azure and the orange that divide
Thy velvet sides; thee, houseless wanderer,
My garment has enfolded, and my arm
Felt the light pressure of thy hairy feet;
Thou hast curled round my finger; from its tip,

1 [Barbauld’s note, 1792 edition] Found in the trap where he had been confined all night by Dr. Priestley, for the sake of making experiments with different kinds of air. [Dr Priestley Chemist Joseph Priestley (1733–1804), who discovered oxygen, and who tested the properties of various gases on mice. Barbauld visited him in the summer of 1771.]

2 Parcere … superbos Latin: “To spare the conquered and to subdue the proud.” From Virgil, Aeneid 6.853.

3 If mind … same Reference to the theory of the transmigration of souls.
Precipitous descent! with stretched out neck,
Bending thy head in airy vacancy,
This way and that, inquiring, thou hast seemed
To ask protection; now, I cannot kill thee.
Yet I have sworn perdition to thy race,
And recent from the slaughter am I come
Of tribes and embryo nations: I have sought
With sharpened eye and persecuting zeal,
Where, folded in their silken webs they lay
Thriving and happy; swept them from the tree
And crushed whole families beneath my foot;
Or, sudden, poured on their devoted heads
The vials of destruction. —This I’ve done,
Nor felt the touch of pity: but when thou—
A single wretch, escaped the general doom,
Making me feel and clearly recognise
Thine individual existence, life,
And fellowship of sense with all that breathes—
Present’st thyself before me, I relent,
And cannot hurt thy weakness.—So the storm
Of horrid war, o’erwhelming cities, fields,
And peaceful villages, rolls dreadful on:
The victor shouts triumphant; he enjoys
The roar of cannon and the clang of arms,
And urges, by no soft relentings stopped,
The work of death and carnage. Yet should one,
A single sufferer from the field escaped,
Panting and pale, and bleeding at his feet,
Lift his imploring eyes—the hero weeps;
He is grown human, and capricious Pity,
Which would not stir for thousands, melts for one
With sympathy spontaneous: ’Tis not Virtue,
Yet ’tis the weakness of a virtuous mind.
—1825

1 vials of destruction I.e., pesticides.