

Anne Finch, The Spleen

Finch first published *The Spleen* in 1701, and later editions (slightly different each time) followed in 1709 and 1713. She identified this poem as a “Pindaric” poem, after the Roman poet Pindar (c. 552- c 443 BCE). There was a vogue for Pindar’s writing in late seventeenth and early eighteenth-century England, and many writers published “Pindaric” odes in this period. These poems varied a lot from one another, but what they had in common was that they employed much looser line-lengths and rhyme-schemes than was typical for the couplet poems that dominated the period. The goal was to use these irregular lines to mimic the train of thought and emotion being experienced by the poet, to give it material form on the page.

The “spleen” was the eighteenth-century’s way of talking about what we now call depression. It was a vestige of the humours psychology that imagined our personality as being influenced by the movement and ratio of fluids in our body; a “splenetic” or depressed person was believed to have an excess of yellow bile, which was thought to be produced by the liver. Even now, we sometimes use the word “splenetic” to describe someone who is acting out negatively, as when a writer in the *New Yorker* in July 2016 described Donald Trump as staging a “splenetic display.” Our text is taken from the Text Creation Partnership’s digitization of Finch’s 1713 *Miscellany Poems, on Several Occasions*.

http://virginia-anthology.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/01spleen_finch_add_64kb.mp3

The *SPLEEN*.

A Pindarick Poem.

What art thou, *SPLEEN*, which ev'ry thing dost ape?
Thou *Proteus* to abus'd Mankind,
Who never yet thy real Cause cou'd find,
Or fix thee to remain in one continued Shape.
Still varying thy perplexing Form,
Now a Dead Sea thou'lt represent,
A Calm of stupid Discontent,
Then, dashing on the Rocks wilt rage into a Storm.
Trembling sometimes thou dost appear,
Dissolv'd into a Panick Fear;
On Sleep intruding dost thy Shadows spread,
Thy gloomy Terrours round the silent Bed,
And croud with boading Dreams the Melancholy Head:
Or, when the Midnight Hour is told,
And drooping Lids thou still dost waking hold,
Thy fond Delusions cheat the Eyes,
Before them antick Spectres dance,
Unusual Fires their pointed Heads advance,
And airy Phantoms rise.
Such was the monstrous *Vision* seen,
When *Brutus* (now beneath his Cares opprest,
And all *Rome's* Fortunes rolling in his Breast,
Before *Philippi's* latest Field,
Before his Fate did to *Octavius* lead)
Was vanquish'd by the *Spleen*.

Falsly, the Mortal Part we blame
Of our deprest, and pond'rous Frame,
Which, till the *First degrading Sin*
Let Thee, its dull Attendant, in,
Still with the Other did comply,
Nor clogg'd the Active Soul, dispos'd to fly,
And range the Mansions of it's native Sky.
Nor, whilst in his own Heaven he dwelt,
Whilst Man his Paradise possest,
His fertile Garden in the fragrant East,
And all united Odours smelt,

No armed Sweets, until thy Reign,
Cou'd shock the Sense, or in the Face
A flusht, unhansom Colour place.
Now the *Jonquille* o'ercomes the feeble Brain;
We faint beneath the Aromatick Pain,
Till some *offensive Scent* thy Pow'rs appease,
And Pleasure we resign for short, and nauseous Ease.

In ev'ry One thou dost possess,
New are thy Motions, and thy Dress:
Now in some Grove a list'ning Friend
Thy false Suggeftions must attend,
Thy whisper'd Griefs, thy fancy'd Sorrows hear,
Breath'd in a Sigh, and witness'd by a Tear;
Whilst in the light, and vulgar Croud,
Thy Slaves, more clamorous and loud,
By Laughters unprovok'd, thy Influence too confess.
In the Imperious *Wife* thou *Vapours* art,
Which from o'erheated Passions rise
In Clouds to the attractive Brain,
Until descending thence again,
Thro' the o'er-cast, and show'ring Eyes,
Upon her Husband's soften'd Heart,
He the disputed Point must yield,
Something resign of the contested Field;
Till Lordly *Man*, born to Imperial Sway,
Compounds for Peace, to make that Right away,
And *Woman*, arm'd with *Spleen*, do's servilely Obey.

The *Fool*, to imitate the Wits,
Complains of thy pretended Fits,
And Dulness, born with him, wou'd lay
Upon thy accidental Sway;
Because, sometimes, thou dost presume
Into the ablest Heads to come:
That, often, Men of Thoughts refin'd,
Impatient of unequal Sence,
Such slow Returns, where they so much dispenfe,
Retiring from the Croud, are to thy Shades inclin'd.
O'er me alas! thou dost too much prevail:
I feel thy Force, whilst I against thee rail;

I feel my Verse decay, and my cramped Numbers fail.
Thro' thy black Jaundice I all Objects see,
As Dark, and Terrible as Thee,
My Lines decry'd, and my Employment thought
An useless Folly, or presumptuous Fault:
Whilst in the *Muses* Paths I stray,
Whilst in their Groves, and by their secret Springs
My Hand delights to trace unusual Things,
And deviates from the known, and common way;
Nor will in *fading Silks* compose
Faintly th' inimitable *Rose*,
Fill up an ill-drawn *Bird*, or paint on Glass
The *Sov'reign's* blurr'd and undistinguish'd Face,
The threatening *Angel*, and the speaking *Ass*.

Patron thou art to ev'ry gross Abuse,
The sullen *Husband's* feign'd Excuse,
When the ill Humour with his Wife he spends,
And bears recruited Wit, and Spirits to his Friends.
The *Son of Bacchus* pleads thy Pow'r,
As to the Glass he still repairs,
Pretends but to remove thy Cares,
Snatch from thy Shades one gay, and smiling Hour,
And drown thy Kingdom in a purple Show'r.
When the *Coquette*, whom ev'ry Fool admires,
Wou'd in Variety be Fair,
And, changing hastily the Scene
From Light, Impertinent, and Vain,
Assumes a soft, a melancholy Air,
And of her Eyes rebates the wand'ring Fires,
The careless Posture, and the Head reclin'd,
The thoughtful, and composed Face,
Proclaiming the withdrawn, the absent Mind,
Allows the *Fop* more liberty to gaze,
Who gently for the tender Cause inquires;
The Cause, indeed, is a Defect in Sense,
Yet is the *Spleen* alledg'd, and still the dull Pretence.

But these are thy fantastick Harms,
The Tricks of thy pernicious Stage,
Which do the weaker Sort engage;

Worse are the dire Effects of thy more pow'rful Charms.
By Thee *Religion*, all we know,
That shou'd enlighten here below,
Is veil'd in Darkness, and perplex
With anxious Doubts, with endless Scruples vex,
And some Restraint imply'd from each perverted Text.
Whilst *Touch* not, *Taste* not, what is freely giv'n,
Is but thy niggard Voice, disgracing bounteous Heav'n.
From Speech restrain'd, by thy Deceits abus'd,
To Desarts banish'd, or in Cells reclus'd,
Mistaken *Vot'ries* to the Pow'rs Divine,
Whilst they a purer Sacrifice design,
Do but the *Spleen* obey, and worship at thy Shrine.

In vain to chase thee ev'ry Art we try,
In vain all Remedies apply,
In vain the *Indian Leaf* infuse,
Or the *parch'd Eastern Berry* bruise;
Some pass, in vain, those Bounds, and *nobler Liquors* use.
Now *Harmony*, in vain, we bring,
Inspire the Flute, and touch the String.
From Harmony no help is had;
Musick but soothes thee, if too sweetly sad,
And if too light, but turns thee gayly Mad.
Tho' the Physicians greatest Gains,
Altho' his growing Wealth he sees
Daily increas'd by *Ladies* Fees,
Yet dost thou baffle all his studious Pains.
Not skilful *Lower* thy Source cou'd find,
Or thro' the well-dissected Body trace
The secret, the mysterious ways,
By which thou dost surprize, and prey upon the Mind.
Tho' in the Search, too deep for Humane Thought,
With unsuccessful Toil he wrought,
'Till thinking Thee to've catch'd, Himself by thee was caught,
Retain'd thy Pris'ner, thy acknowledg'd Slave,
And sunk beneath thy Chain to a lamented Grave.