

John Pomfret (1667–1702)

The Choice (1700) made its obscure author John Pomfret instantly famous. As late as 1779 Dr Johnson remarked that ‘Perhaps no composition in our language has been oftener perused’. Pomfret, the son of a Luton vicar, followed his father through Cambridge, then himself entered orders in 1688 and ended up as rector in his home county of Bedfordshire, first at Maulden (1695) then at Millbrook (1702). Pomfret had started writing poetry in his teens and published *Poems on Several Occasions* in 1699. *The Choice*, published the next year, was a runaway success, passing through three editions in its first year and four in its second. All of Pomfret’s subsequent poems, ranging from pastoral love lyrics to apocalyptic pindarics, capitalized on their author’s fame by proclaiming themselves to be ‘By the Author of *The Choice*’. But Pomfret never repeated his success. He caught smallpox in London in 1702 and died at the young age of thirty-five. Johnson claimed that Pomfret had gone to the capital to try to clear his reputation (and hence improve his chances of preferment) with Henry Compton, Bishop of London, who apparently took exception to *The Choice*’s avowed preference for a mistress to a wife. The passage which compromised Pomfret was not biographical (he had married Elizabeth Wingate in 1692) but based on literary precedents such as Thomas Otway’s more sexually explicit *Epistle to R.D.* of 1684.

The Choice is modelled loosely on the opening of Horace’s Satire 2:6, which expresses the wish for ‘a piece of land not over large’, with a garden, a clear spring of water, a strip of woodland, and convivial conversation with friends far from the corruptions and extravagance of the city. Pomfret pays lip service to Horace’s ethical imperatives of frugality, honesty and stoic indifference, and his speaker is also a pious Christian and a benevolent patriot. But *The Choice*’s huge success rested not on its inner moral message but on its physical depiction of ‘blissful Ease and Satisfaction’, an escapist fantasy of an English landed gentleman’s life of rural leisure, reading books and enjoying fine wines with his male friends, free from everyday responsibilities – including wife and children. Pomfret reappropriated and made morally palatable for the ‘polite’ middle-class readers of William III’s reign the epicurean poetry of rural retirement formerly monopolized by Cavalier and Restoration court poets. Johnson astutely summed up Pomfret as ‘the favourite of that class of readers, who without vanity or criticism seek only their own amusement. His *Choice* exhibits a system of life adapted to common notions and equal to common expectations; such a state as affords plenty and tranquillity, without exclusion of intellectual pleasures.’ The following text is that of the first edition.

The Choice

If Heav’n the grateful Liberty wou’d give,
That I might chuse my Method how to live:
And all those Hours propitious Fate shou’d lend,
In blissful Ease and Satisfaction spend. 5
Near some fair Town I’d have a private Seat,
Built Uniform, not little, nor too great:
Better, if on a rising Ground it stood,
Fields on this side, on that a Neighb’ring Wood.
It shou’d within no other Things contain,
But what are Useful, Necessary, Plain: 10
Methinks, ’tis Nauseous, and I’d ne’er endure
The needless Pomp of gawdy Furniture:
A little Garden, grateful to the Eye,
And a cool Rivulet run Murmuring by:
On whose delicious Banks a stately Row 15

1 *grateful* ‘pleasing’.

5 *Seat* ‘dwelling’.

Of shady Lymes, or Sycamores, shou'd grow.
 At th'end of which a silent Study plac'd,
 Shou'd with the Noblest Authors there be grac'd.
Horace and *Virgil*, in whose mighty Lines,
 Immortal Wit, and solid Learning Shines. 20
 Sharp *Juvenal*, and am'rous *Ovid* too,
 Who all the turns of Loves soft Passion knew:
 He, that with Judgment reads his Charming Lines,
 In which strong Art, with stronger Nature joyns,
 Must grant, his Fancy do's the best Excel: 25
 His Thoughts so tender, and exprest so well;
 With all those Moderns, Men of steady Sense,
 Esteem'd for Learning, and for Eloquence:
 In some of These, as Fancy shou'd advise,
 I'd always take my Morning Exercise. 30
 For sure, no Minutes bring us more Content,
 Than those in pleasing useful Studies spent.
 I'd have a Clear and Competent Estate,
 That I might live Genteelly, but not Great.
 As much as I cou'd moderately spend, 35
 A little more sometimes t'oblige a Friend.
 Nor shou'd the Sons of Poverty Repine
 Too much at Fortune, they shou'd taste of Mine;
 And all that Objects of true Pity were,
 Shou'd be reliev'd with what my Wants cou'd spare; 40
 For what our Maker has too largely giv'n,
 Shou'd be return'd in gratitude to Heav'n.
 A frugal Plenty shou'd my Table spread,
 With healthy, not luxurious Dishes, fed:
 Enough to satisfy, and something more 45
 To feed the Stranger, and the Neighb'ring Poor.
 Strong Meat indulges Vice, and pampering Food
 Creates Diseases, and inflames the Blood.
 But what's sufficient to make Nature Strong,
 And the bright Lamp of Life continue long, 50
 I'd freely take, and as I did possess
 The bounteous Author of my Plenty bless.
 I'd have a little Cellar, Cool, and Neat,
 With Humming Ale, and Virgin Wine Repleat.
 Wine whets the Wit, improves its Native Force, 55
 And gives a pleasant Flavour to Discourse;
 By making all our Spirits Debonair,
 Throws off the Lees, the Sedement of Care.

19 *Horace* (65–8 BC), Roman author of satires and epistles, notable for his self-portraiture as a good-humoured, tolerant, urbane country-lover; *Virgil* (70–19 BC), great Roman poet of the rurally inspired *Eclogues* and *Georgics* and the epic *Aeneid*.

21 *Juvenal* Early second-century Roman satirist notable for his bitter irony and lofty invective; *Ovid* (43 BC–AD 17), Roman love poet and author of the mythopoeic *Metamorphoses*.

27 *Moderns* Contemporary (as opposed to classical) authors.

33 *Clear* 'unencumbered by debt'; *Competent* 'generating sufficient income'.

54 *Humming* 'strong', 'frothy', a colloquial term; *Virgin* 'new'. In subsequent editions lines 53–4 were replaced by the more genteel 'I'd have a little Vault, but always stor'd / With the Best Wines, each Vintage cou'd afford'.

57 *Debonair* 'affable'.

58 *Lees* The unpalatable sediment in a bottle of wine.

But as the greatest Blessing Heaven lends
 May be debauch'd, and serve ignoble Ends; 60
 So, but too oft, the Grapes refreshing Juice,
 Does many mischievous Effects produce.
 My House, shou'd no such rude Disorders know,
 As from high Drinking consequently flow.
 Nor wou'd I use what was so kindly giv'n, 65
 To the dishonour of Indulgent Heav'n.
 If any Neighbour came he shou'd be free,
 Us'd with respect, and not Uneasy be,
 In my Retreat, or to himself, or me.
 What Freedom, Prudence, and Right Reason give, 70
 All Men, may with Impunity receive;
 But the least swerving from their Rules too much;
 For what's forbidden Us, 'tis Death to touch.
 That Life might be more comfortable yet,
 And all my Joys refin'd, sincere and great, 75
 I'd chuse two Friends, whose Company wou'd be
 A great Advance to my Felicity.
 Well born, of Humours suited to my own;
 Discreet, and Men as well as Books have known.
 Brave, Gen'rous, Witty, and exactly free 80
 From loose Behaviour, or Formality.
 Airy, and Prudent, Merry, but not Light,
 Quick in discerning, and in Judging Right;
 Secret they shou'd be, faithful to their Trust,
 In Reasoning Cool, Strong, Temperate and Just. 85
 Obliging, Open, without huffing, Brave;
 Brisk in gay Talking, and in sober Grave.
 Close in Dispute, but not tenacious, try'd
 By solid Reason, and let that decide;
 Not prone to Lust, Revenge, or envious Hate; 90
 Nor busy Medlers with Intrigues of State.
 Strangers to Slander, and sworn Foes to spight,
 Not Quarrelsom, but Stout enough to Fight:
 Loyal and Pious, Friends to *Cæsar* true
 As dying Martyrs to their Maker too. 95
 In their Society I cou'd not miss,
 A permanent, sincere, substantial Bliss.
 Wou'd bounteous Heav'n once more indulge, I'd chuse
 (For, who wou'd so much Satisfaction lose,
 As Witty Nymphs in Conversation give) 100
 Near some obliging Modest-Fair to live;
 For there's that sweetness in a Female Mind,
 Which in a Man's we cannot find;
 That by a secret, but a pow'rful Art,
 Winds up the Springs of Life, and do's impart 105
 Fresh Vital Heat to the transported Heart.
 I'd have her Reason, and her Passions sway,

80 *exactly* 'perfectly'.84 *Secret* 'discreet'.86 *huffing* 'boasting', 'blustering'.88 *Close* 'rigorous'.94 *Cæsar* King William III (d. 1702).101 *Modest-Fair* 'pretty modest woman'.

Easy in Company, in private Gay.
 Coy to a Fop, to the Deserving free,
 Still constant to her self, and just to me. 110
 A Soul she shou'd have for great Actions fit,
 Prudence, and Wisdom to direct her Wit.
 Courage to look bold danger in the Face,
 No Fear, but only to be proud, or base:
 Quick to advise by an Emergence prest, 115
 To give good Counsel, or to take the best.
 I'd have th'Expressions of her Thoughts be such,
 She might not seem Reserv'd, nor talk too much;
 That shows a want of Judgment, and of Sense:
 More than enough, is but Impertinence. 120
 Her Conduct Regular, her Mirth refin'd,
 Civil to Strangers, to her Neighbours kind.
 Averse to Vanity, Revenge, and Pride,
 In all the Methods of Deceit untry'd:
 So faithful to her Friend, and good to all, 125
 No Censure might upon her Actions fall.
 Then wou'd ev'n Envy be compell'd to say,
 She goes the least of Womankind astray.
 To this fair Creature I'd sometimes retire,
 Her Conversation wou'd new Joys inspire, 130
 Give Life an Edge so keen, no surly Care
 Wou'd venture to assault my Soul, or dare
 Near my Retreat to hide one secret Snare.
 But so Divine, so Noble a Repast,
 I'd seldom, and with Moderation taste. 135
 For highest Cordials all their Virtue lose,
 By a too frequent, and too bold an use;
 And what would cheer the Spirits in distress,
 Ruins our Health when taken to Excess.
 I'd be concern'd in no litigious Jarr, 140
 Belov'd by all, not vainly popular:
 Whate'er Assistance I had power to bring
 T'oblige my Country, or to serve my King,
 Whene'er they call'd, I'd readily afford,
 My Tongue, my Pen, my Counsel, or my Sword. 145
 Law Suits I'd shun with as much Studious Care,
 As I wou'd Dens, where hungry Lyons are;
 And rather put up Injuries, than be
 A Plague to him, who'd be a Plague to me.
 I value Quiet, at a Price too great, 150
 To give for my Revenge so dear a Rate:
 For what do we by all our Bustle gain,
 But counterfeit Delight for real Pain.
 If Heav'n a date of many years wou'd give,
 Thus I'd in Pleasure, Ease, and Plenty live. 155
 And as I near approach'd the Verge of Life,

109 *Coy* 'reserved'; *free* 'open', 'generous'.115 *Emergence* 'emergency'.130 *Conversation* 'company'.134 *Repast* 'feast'.136 *highest* 'finest'.140 *litigious Jarr* 'legal dispute'.148 *put up* 'put up with'.154 *date* 'allotted span'.

Some kind Relation (for I'd have no Wife)
Shou'd take upon him all my Worldly Care,
While I did for a better State prepare.
Then I'd not be with any trouble vex't, 160
Nor have the Evening of my Days perplex.
But by a silent, and a peaceful Death,
Without a Sigh, Resign my Aged Breath:
And when committed to the Dust, I'd have
Few Tears, but Friendly, dropt into my Grave. 165
Then wou'd my Exit so propitious be,
All Men wou'd wish to live and dye like me.

166 *propitious* 'fortunate'.