

Benjamin Church "The Choice: A Poem'

written 1752 published 1757 EXCERPTS

The son of a influential Boston merchant, Benjamin Church wrote "The Choice" as an eighteen-year-old college student at Harvard. Assured of a future within the elite of colonial New England, he considers his choices for adulthood? What kind of wife, friends, house, and leisure does he envision? Why does he not discuss his choice of occupation? In the end, he hopes for the virtue and serenity to lead a worthy life: "WHATEVER station be for me design'd / May virtue be the mistress of my mind."

F youthful fancy might its CHOICE pursue, And act as natural reason prompts it to; If inclination could dispose our state, And human will might govern future fate; And all the glitter of a court despise: Unskill'd the proud or vicious to commend, To cringe to insolence or fools attend; Within myself contented and secure, Above what mean ambition can endure; Nor yet so anxious to obtain a name, To bleed for honor in the fields of fame; Empty parade is all that heroes know, Unless fair virtue hover in the show.

BUT in these walls, where heaven has fix'd my stay,

One half of life I'd wish to breathe away: The Fall and Winter of each future year, I'd humbly hope to spend contented here; 'Mid the fierce ravage of a wintry storm, Kind friends to cheer me, mod'rate wine to warm; Securely happy we'd delude the day, And smile the seasons cheerfully away.

No needless show my modest dome should claim.¹

Neat and genteel without, within the same; Decently furnish'd to content and please,

Sufficient for necessity and ease; Vain is the pomp of prodigal expense, Frugality denotes the man of sense; My doors the needy stranger should befriend, And hospitality my board attend; With frugal plenty be my table spread, Those, and those only, whom I love be fed: The meek and indigent my banquet share, Who love the master and approve the fare; Thy mellow vintage, Lisbon,² should abound, Pouring a mirthful inspiration 'round; While laughing *Bacchus*³ bathes within the bowl, Love, mirth and friendship swallow up the soul.

BUT at as decent hour with social heart, In love and humor should my friends depart: Then to my study eager I'd repair, And feast my mind with new refreshment there; There, plung'd in thought, my active mind should tread,

Through all the labors of the learned dead; HOMER, great parent of heroic strains, VIRGIL, whose genius was improv'd with pains: HORACE, in whom the wit and courtier join'd, OVID, the tender, am'rous and refin'd; Keen JUVENAL, whose all correcting page, Lash'd daring vice, and sham'd an impious age; Expressive LUCAN who politely sung

National Humanities Center, 2008: nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds. Accessed through Early American Imprints online, American Philosophical Society; permission pending. Complete image credits at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/becomingamer/imagecredits.htm. ¹ I.e., no ostentation in his home.

² Lisbon wine [Portugal], a common import in New England.

³ Bacchus: Roman god of wine and intoxication.

With hum'rous MARTIAL tickling as he stung; Elab'rate TERENCE, studious where he smil'd, Familiar PLAUTUS, regularly wild; With frequent visits there I would survey, And read, and meditate the hours away...⁴

THUS, till the year recedes, I'd be employ'd, Ease, health and friendship happily enjoy'd; But when the vernal Sun revolves its ray, Melting hoar Winter with her rage away. When vocal groves a gay perspective yield, And a new verdure springs from field to field; With the first larks I'd to the plains retire, For rural pleasures are my chief desire.⁵

I'D have some handsome seat⁶ not far from town, The prospect beauteous, and the taste my own; The fabric modern, faultless the design, Not large, not yet immoderately fine; But neat economy my mansion boast, Nor should convenience be in beauty lost; Each part should speak superior skill and care, And all the artist be distinguish'd there. . . .

GRANT me, kind heaven, the nymph still form'd to please,⁷

Impassionate as infants when at ease; Fair as the op'ning rose; her person small, Artless⁸ as parent *Eve* before her fall; Courteous as angels, unreserv'dly kind, Of modest carriage, and the chastest mind; Her temper sweet, her conversation keen, Not wildly gay, but soberly serene; Not talkative, not apt to take offence, With female softness join'd to manly sense; Her dress and language elegantly plain, Not sluttish, forward, prodigal or vain; Not fond to govern, but by CHOICE obeys; True to my arms in body and in soul, As the touch-needle⁹ to the attractive pole. Caution, oppos'd to charms like these, were vain, And man would glory in the silken chain; Unlike the sensual wish that burns and stains, But where the purest admiration reigns; Give me, O ! give me such superior love, Before the nectar of the gods above; Then time on downy wings would steal away, And love still be the business of the day.

. . .

BUT is the Almighty ever bound to please? Rul'd by my wish, or studious of my ease? Shall I determine where his frowns shall fall, And fence my grotto from the lot of all? Prostrate, his sovereign wisdom I adore, Intreat his mercy, but I dare no more: No constant joys mortality attend, But sorrows violate, and cares offend; Heaven wisely mixt our pleasures with alloy, And gilds our sorrows with a ray of joy; Life without storms a stagnant pool appears, And grows offensive with unruffled years; An active state is virtue's proper sphere, To do and suffer is our duty here: Foes to encounter, vices to disdain, Pleasures to shun, and passions to restrain; To sly temptation's open, flowery road, And labor to be obstinately good.

THEN, blest is he who takes a calm survey, Of all the events that paint the checker'd day; Content, that blessing makes the balance even, And pozes fortune by the scale of heaven.

I'LL let no future ill my peace destroy, Or cloud the aspect of a present joy; He who directed and dispens'd the past, O'errules the present, and shall guide the last:

⁴ Church continues the list of writers and scientists he would study: Pope, Shakespeare, Milton, Addison, Lyttleton, Dryden, Young, Gay,

Waller, Thomson, Tillotson, Butler, Newton, Locke, and Boerhaave. ⁵ Many wealthy men in colonial America who lived in urban centers had country homes, often large farms, where they would spend the warmer months.

⁶ house

⁷ Church envisions his ideal wife.

⁸ Ingenuous; without wiles or manipulativeness.

⁹ Touch-needle [chemistry]: small bar of gold and silver used to determine the purity of gold and silver articles by comparing streaks made by the article and the bar on a touchstone.

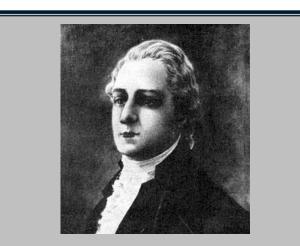
If Providence a present good has given, I clasp the boon in gratitude to heaven: May RESIGNATION fortify my mind, He cannot by unhappy that's resign'd.¹⁰

GUARD my repose thou Lord of all within! An equal temper, and a soul serene; O! teach me patience when oppos'd to wrong, Restrain the madd'ning heart, and curb the tongue:

May prudence govern, piety control All slander, rage and bitterness of soul; Peace, plenty, health and innocence be made The blissful tenants of my tranquil shade.

. . .

WHATEVER station be for me design'd May virtue be the mistress of my mind; May I despise the abandon'd and the base, Though opulent, or dignified with place; And spurn the wretch who meanly lost to shame, Thinks wealth or place a substitute for fame: If wisdom, wealth or honor heaven should lend, Teach me those talents happily to spend; Nor make so blest as I would wish to live, Beyond those moments heaven is pleas'd to give; Then when life trembles on the verge of rest, And brings expended minutes to the test, Absolve me, conscience, thou imperial power, O bless me with a self-approving hour.



Benjamin Church (1734-1776) became a noted physician in Boston. In 1774, during the early revolutionary period, he was appointed to the Massachusetts Provincial Council, yet many suspected him of harboring sympathies for the British. In July 1775 a coded letter that Church had sent to a British major was intercepted. In it Church divulged information on the American troops near Boston. Although he claimed that he was hoping to act as an intermediary with Britain, he was tried and convicted for "criminal correspondence with the enemy," briefly jailed, and released due to ill health. In 1774 Church boarded a ship bound for the West Indies; it disappeared en route.



¹⁰ I.e., resigned to fate, God's plan, etc.