THE OAK AND THE APPLE TREE

BY: T. BARLOW[1]

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An Oak, standing lone on the side of a hill,
A mile from the farm-house, or more,
Whose branches with verdure o'ershadowed the rill
Meandering down to the door:

Once he said to himself: 'How unhappy am I,
On this barren hill to have grown,
Where tempests which darken the earth and the sky,
Are spent on my branches alone!

'O had I but grown where the Apple-tree grows!
Dressed gaily in elegant flowers;
Where the violet smiles, and the jessamine[2] blows,
And Beauty reclines in her bowers!

'I'll propose to the Apple-tree,' then said the Oak,
'To exchange our condition to-day;'

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[1] T. Barlow has two other poems of this time period published. One, "Deity", was first published in *The Portland Magazine* on January 1, 1836. This poem reads almost as an ode to God and how he created our world (Barlow, "Deity"). The other, "The West", was first published in *Rose of the Valley* on October 1, 1839. "The West" describes the travel to the West and conquering of it from Native Americans (Barlow, T., "The West").Both of these poems, along with 'The Oak and the Apple-tree", address topics that were relevant to the antebellum period and have ambiguous imagery that can hold multiple meanings.

[2] Jessamine is a type of evergreen vine with small yellow flowers in spring (Jessamine, *The Lady Bird Johnson Wildlife Center*).

And bowed his rich verdure in gloom, as he spoke
That verdure to barter away.

On a broad rugged leaf he wrote then in haste,
And the leaf he let fall on the stream,
Which bore it away to the rude rocky waste,
Ere the garden had waked from its dream.

The bright sun arose, and the Apple-tree there
Waved proud in the glory of spring,
As free from all cankering trouble and care,
As a bird on its sun-glancing wing.

A nymph[3], who in sandals bespangled with dew,
Was dancing 'neath rose-bush an vine,
Gave the note to the tree, as she tremblingly flew,
To the grove, dark with cedar and pine.

And she sighed her first sigh, as she timidly fled,
A sigh like the first one of youth;
For with maidenly instinct she hoped to have read
Some tale of affection and truth.

The Apple-tree gazed on the message in green,
Read the words it so freely expressed,
And blushed in a million of blossoms, a queen,
Whose beauty and pride are addressed.

The garden was hushed as the breath of a bird,
Mute the zephyr's Æolian song[4];
While the Apple-Tree read, and the flowers all heard,
The Oak's tale of sorrow and wrong.

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[3] A nymph is "any of the minor divinities of nature in classical mythology represented as beautiful maidens dwelling in the mountains, forests, trees, and waters" ("Nymph", *Merriam-Webster*). Specifically, the Hamadryades in Greek mythology were nymphs of Oak trees and the Maliades, Meliades, or Epimelides were the nymphs of Apple trees (Dryades and Oreiades, *Theoi Project*).. These tree nymphs were believed to die with their tree because they came into the world with the tree (Dryades and Oreiades, *Theoi Project*).

[4] The "zephyr's Æolian song refers to a musical sound coming from the west wind ("zephyr"*dictionary.com*; "Aeolian", *dictionary.com*). This phrase also comes from many literary works prior to this poem, including "Aeolian Harp" published in *Philadelphia Repository and Weekly Register* on January 5, 1805 ("Aeolian Harp").

'Fair Queen of the garden! my tale shall be brief,
(The dew must this letter adorn,)
I write with a heart and a story of grief,
Unnoticed, unfriended, forlorn!

'I feign would exchange my condition for thine,
Leave this hill and solitude drear,
For the yard where the ivy and holly-branch twine,
And the rose and the lily are near.

'O could I dress in thy mantle of flowers,
And vie with the lily and rose,
Have the nightingale sing her sweet song in my bowers,
And the nymph seek my shade to repose!

'Then say, canst thou change, with no sorrow, nor sigh?
If this thy approve but meets,
I'll grow a bouquet for each star in the sky,
And load every zephyr with sweets!'

The Apple-tree read the epistle with care,
And hastened to answer it then,
She wrote on a blossom all glowing and fair,
That a favorite blossom had been.

The wind was now coming away from the lake,
(It had slept on the lake all night,)
And it skipped up the fields, over bramble and break,
As free as a sun-beam or light.

It took the epistle off the gay bough,
As joy doth a tear from the cheek,
And carried it safe to the Oak, who had now
Prepared for a merrisome week.

A moment the wind seemed to flirt with the leaves,
And sing of the Spring on its lute;
Then went like the smile of a lover, who grieves
That smiles are so transient and mute.

The Oak took the letter, in raptures of joy,

Perused its fair lines o'er and o'er;
Now deeming no sorrow could sadden or cloy
His pleasures, oft saddened before.

'Proud King of the Forest! forgive my surprise,
Dos thou truly sorrow and pine?
Alas! I had thought thee contented and wise,
And had wished thy condition were mine.

'There is pleasure in solitude; oft I have longed
To escape from this cluster of trees,
Where branches and blossoms are hidden and thronged,
To grow in the sun and the breeze.

'Where zephyrs which kissed the pure dew from my flowers,
Could sing my branches alone,
And stars looking down through the moon's silver showers,
Could watch but the slumbers of one.

'I'll change with thee gladly!—the hill shall be mine!
(Farewell, little wild rose, farewell!)
Come down, if thou scornest that glory of thine,
And with the pale jessamine dwell.'

At the root of the Oak, a moss-covered Stone,
Heard both of the letters read o'er,
And his honest old heart impatient had grown,
Till he could be silent no more.

Like the words of some spirit, who rides on the breeze,
To keep note when sad mortals complain,
These words of the Stone to the listening trees
Were spoken—alas! but in vain.

'Ye trees who repine at the verdict of fate,
Who would barter your stations away,
Give an ear to a Stone, who has envy nor haste,
To hear his monitions today.

'Does the face give its joy to the rapturous heart,
Or the heart throw its smile to the face?

Can nature be gay with the tinsel of art,
Or change with the changes of place?

'I remember a flower, a beautiful flower,
A wild rose, that grew by the stream,
And she longed to blow forth while the evening sun
Set in twilight's effulgent gleam.

'So scorning Aurora[5] and all her array,
Of pure air, sweet perfume, and light,
She opened her charms at the *close* of the day,
And was killed by the frost of the night.

'Ah! could she have known what the winter-green knows,
That the night-frost no pity could show,
She had passed a gay life, as sweet as a morning rose,
Nor had longed in the twilight to blow.

'The Apple-tree planted where flourished the Oak,
When the first mountain storm should assail,
Would be stripped of her verdure, uprooted, and broke,
By the force of the pitiless gale.

'O then would she value her fellowship fair,
With violet, daisy, and rose,
And learn, when too late, that her station was there,
That her pride was the worst of her foes.

'But how would the Oak in the garden appear,
With her flowing robe, gorgeous and gay?
Alas! every dew-drop would turn to a tear,
Each blossom a sign of decay.

'Slow, slow would he sicken for sun-light and blast,
The strength of his own native air;
And branch after branch would fall piece-meal at last,
Till he stood in his lone ruin there!

[5] Aurora means the dawn. The name Aurora comes from the Roman goddess of the dawn (Aurora, *dictionary.com*).

'And then what to him were the nightingale's song,
The odor and bouquet so fair?
He would learn that the heart bears its canker and wrong,
That we smile, when no sorrow is there.

'As soon should the tear say it loved not the eye,
The song that it loved not the lute,
As the Apple-tree envy a station so high,
Or the Oak sigh for blossom or fruit.

'Be wise then, ye trees, nor seek elsewhere to find
Those joys that bloom only at home;
The sun of all bliss is contentment of mind;
The heart is its cradle and its tomb!'

EDITOR'S NOTE

"The Oak and the Apple-tree" by T. Barlow is rooted in Greek mythology, Roman mythology, nature terminology, and a world rooted in nature personified into a human one. The trees want to move to the other's living space, yet would perish if they were to move. This poem has historical and literary significance to the antebellum period and can be used to understand today's society. The overall moral is to stay where you were born because there is a reason you are there. This moral is gendered in this poem, which attests to the significance of the inequality women faced during this time period. In the *Chambers' Edinburgh Journal* of November 30, 1939, the anonymous author states, "American women are, in fact, spoiled children" ("Women in America"). Whoever wrote this clearly believes that women are treated too well in America, even though they were seen as less than men. The fact that women were treated with any respect seemed to aggravate many men of the time, as seen in "Women in America". Even though the poem expresses the ominous deaths of both the male (Oak) and the female (Apple-tree), the images throughout the poem lean more towards a weakening of the female.

This poem is a cautionary tale, seen through the Stone's final message to the Oak and the Apple-Tree. A cautionary tale is a story with a moral at the end. They are used to scare readers and listeners, specifically children, into behaving in a certain way. Here, the Stone makes an ominous warning at the end, telling the trees to stay where they belong so they will not perish. Modern readers might be interested in the gendered significance of this

cautionary tale. The trees are different in type and this is why they could not survive in other environments. The trees are also described in terms of emotions, which makes the poem complex. The Oak, the perceived male of the two, is independent, alone, and is in deep sorrow. The Apple-tree, on the other hand, is innocent, surrounded by a community, and has no sorrow. Even though the trees could not survive in terms of physicality, the poem suggests they would also not survive due to these gendered differences. The Apple-tree, the woman, is seen as too weak and social to live in solace. This perspective seems stronger to the poem as a whole. The Oak, even though he is suffering in sorrow and would die with the Apple-tree, is described as a more important tree to this world. This juxtaposition plays throughout the poem, including in the Stone's warning. The Stone seems to be warning them to stay in their respective gender roles, regarding the time period.

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