

**Jane Barker. “On the Difficulties of Religion.” A Patch-Work Screen for the Ladies. 1723.**

A Patch-Work Screen for the Ladies is a prose narrative with intermixed verses consisting primarily of moral reflections. The work is narrated by “Galesia,” Barker’s protagonist from her earlier Love’s Intrigues (1713; revised as The Amours of Bosvil and Galesia, 1719) and the author’s prefatory note presents the work as “the sequel of Galesia’s story” (“To the Reader”). The poem “On the Difficulties of Religion” (37 lines) is a shortened version of “Fidelia arguing with her self on the difficulty of finding the true religion” (79 lines), a poem found in Barker’s unpublished manuscript (Magdalen College, Oxford, MS 343). This poem belongs to a section of the manuscript that consists of poems written during Barker’s voluntary exile in France with the court of James II, to which she remained loyal after the Revolution of 1688. Barker had converted to Roman Catholicism and followed the Jacobite court into exile with others of her family. She returned to England in 1704, to live on and manage the family farm at Wilsthorp. During this time she published several works, including A Patch-Work Screen, but remained poor and returned to France in 1727 and died there in 1732.

In what follows, I draw on the text and notes in Carol Shiner Wilson, ed., The Galesia Trilogy and Selected Manuscript Poems of Jane Barker (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997), 163-65. The poem is also reprinted in Tim Cook, ed., The Wordsworth Book of Eighteenth Century Verse (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1997), 79-80.

“On the *Difficulties* of Religion.”

O Wretched World! but Wretched above All,  
Is Man; the most unhappy Animal!  
Not knowing to what State he shall belong,  
He tugs the heavy Chain of Life along.  
So many Ages pass, yet no Experience shows                 5  
From whence Man comes, nor, after, where he goes.  
We are instructed of a Future State,  
Of Just Rewards, and Punishments in That;  
But ign’rant How, or Where, or When, or What.  
I’m shew’d a Book,\* in which these Things are writ;                 10  
And, by all Hands, assur’d, all’s True in it;  
But in this Book, such Mysteries I find,  
Instead of healing, oft corrode the Mind.  
Sometimes our *Faith* must be our *only* Guide,  
Our *Senses* and our *Reason* laid aside:                                 15  
Again to *Reason* we our *Faith* submit,  
This spurs, that checks, we curvet, champ the Bit,  
And make our future Hopes uneasy sit!  
Now *Faith*, now *Reason*, now *Good-works*, does All;  
Betwixt these Opposites our Virtues fall,                                 20

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\* The BIBLE. [Barker’s note.]

Each calling each, *False* and *Heretical*.

And, after all; What Rule have we to show,  
Whether these Writings Sacred be, or no?  
If we alledge, The Truths that we find there,  
Are to themselves a Testimony clear, 25  
By the same Rule, such all good Morals are.  
Thus we by Doubts, & Hopes, & Fears, are tost,  
And in the Lab'rinth of Disputes are lost.

Unhappy! who with any Doubts are curst!  
But of all Doubts, *Religious* Doubts are worst! 30  
Wou'd I were dead! or wou'd I had no Soul!  
Had ne'er been born! or else been born a Fool!  
Then future Fears, wou'd not my Thoughts annoy,  
I'd use what's truly mine, the present Joy.  
Ah! happy *Brutes!* I envy much your State, 35  
Whom Nature, one Day, shall Annihilate;  
Compar'd to which, wretched is Human Fate!