The Tower Verses

Attributed to Lady Jane Grey, 1554

NORTH PASS PRESS

2026

The Tower Verses
Attributed to Lady Jane Grey, 1554

Published by North Pass Press, 2026
https://northpass.press

The texts are in the public domain.
Published as a free public resource.

"Seventeen—and knew eight languages—in music
Peerless—her needle perfect, and her learning
Beyond the Churchmen; yet so meek, so modest,
So wife-like humble to the trivial boy
Mismatched with her for policy! I have heard
She would not take a last farewell of him;
She feared it might unman him for his end.
She could not be unmanned—no, nor outwoman'd.
Seventeen—a rose of grace!
Girl never breathed to rival such a rose;
Rose never blew that equalled such a bud."

Tennyson, *Queen Mary*, Act 3, Scene 1

Lady Jane Grey

1537–1554

Proclaimed queen of England in July 1553 and executed at sixteen in February 1554. The lines below are traditionally said to have been scratched with a pin on the wall of her lodging in the Tower of London.

Verses Written in the Tower[1]

Non aliena putes homini quæ obtingere possunt:
Sors hodierna mihi, cras erit illa tibi.

Think not, O mortal! vainly gay,
That thou from human woes art free:
The bitter cup I drink to-day
To-morrow may be drunk by thee.

Deo juvante, nil nocet livor malus,
Et non juvante, nil juvat labor gravis.
Post tenebras spero lucem.

Endless all malice, if our God is nigh,
Fruitless all pains, if he his help deny.
Patient I pass these gloomy hours away,
And wait the morning of eternal day.

[1] Latin and English as printed in James Anderson, *Ladies of the Reformation* (Glasgow: Blackie and Son, 1854), vol. 1, p. 303. Anderson does not name the translator.

Sources and Editorial Notes

The verses. The Latin lines are traditionally said to have been scratched with a pin on the wall of Lady Jane Grey's lodging in the Tower of London shortly before her execution on 12 February 1554. The inscription no longer survives, and the attribution rests on later sources. The lines were already printed as hers in eighteenth-century reference works, and an early manuscript copy with an English rendering survives in the British Library (Egerton MS 2642, f. 213v; Cheshire, late sixteenth or early seventeenth century).

Latin text. As given by Anderson, except that the second line reads *cras erit* ("tomorrow it will be yours") where Anderson prints *cras erat*, which appears to be a misprint. The Egerton manuscript and the 1823 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* read *tunc erit* ("then it will be yours"), a variant that means much the same, with "then" in place of "tomorrow." Set in the traditional order, with *Non aliena putes* first. Spelling is otherwise unchanged.

English text. The verse translation is printed as in James Anderson, *Ladies of the Reformation: Memoirs of Distinguished Female Characters Belonging to the Period of the Reformation in the Sixteenth Century* (Glasgow: Blackie and Son, 1854), vol. 1, p. 303. Anderson does not name the translator. We have not altered the translation.

Epigraph. Lines spoken by a character in Alfred Tennyson, *Queen Mary: A Drama* (London: Henry S. King, 1875), Act 3, Scene 1, as quoted in W. H. Davenport Adams, *Child-Life and Girlhood of Remarkable Women* (1883), p. 127.

Further reading. Clarck Drieshen, "Lady Jane Grey's letters from the Tower of London," British Library blog, 20 February 2021 (CC BY 4.0), which discusses the verses and Jane's documented marginal notes in her prayer book (Harley MS 2342).

North Pass Press

North Pass Press is an independent publisher dedicated to recovering neglected literature and creating faithful editions and educational resources for modern readers.

Visit northpass.press to explore our complete catalog of books, commentary series, and free downloadable resources.