

Classic Poetry Series

Lady Mary Chudleigh

- poems -

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Lady Mary Chudleigh(1656 - 1710)

A devoted Anglican, Chudleigh was self-educated in religious, scientific, and philosophical works. A fan of, probably acquainted with, contemporary Mary Astell, Chudleigh acknowledged her intellectual debt to Astell. Both women, along with Elizabeth Thomas, "Cleanthe", "Clorissa," "Lucinda," and "Eugenia", formed part of the literary circle centered around Dryden. Unlike Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle just 2 generations earlier, Lady Chudleigh did have a network of supportive feminist female friends.

We know nothing of her relationship with her husband: both her published and unpublished writing on that aspect of her personal life remain silent on that issue. Some authors contend that hers was an unhappy marriage. Yet, whether her husband was a model for the misogynist country boor, Sir John Brute in *The Ladies' defence*, or the lover who has the sense to prize wit in a woman with a beautiful mind, we do not know. We do know that he permitted her to both write and publish 3 feminist works during his lifetime and permitted them to be reprinted after her death.

Although she did not begin publishing any works until 10 years before her death, they were reprinted 4 times before she died. Her poems were quoted in various anthologies throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, indeed, until our own time and her name continued to appear without qualification in biographical dictionaries of important poets throughout the intervening years. Through exploring human reactions many of her poems had appeal to both men and women. Yet, her feminist poems continued to be reprinted, too.

Her best remembered feminist work, *The Ladies Defence: or the Bride-Woman's Counsellor answered: A Poem. In a Dialogue Between Sir John Brute, Sir William Loveall, Melissa, and a Parson* (1701, verse), is a response to a wedding sermon given by John Sprint in 1699 in which he advocated woman's total subjection to her husband. (Eugenia and Elizabeth Thomas also responded to this sermon.) She explored a number of themes that still resonate with feminists: "the negative attitudes of males and their demeaning expectations of women; the role of the church in propagating pernicious ideas about women, couched as protection of public morals; the duties of a wife to be silent, abjectly obedient, and tolerant of physical and psychological abuse; and the conventional dismissal of female education." Deeply untrusting of men and fully aware of the unequal and unfair power structure in the family, Chudleigh believed that only single women could freely pursue intellectual interests.

Her three feminist works, *The Ladies' Defence*, *Poems on Several Occasions* (1703), which celebrates the friendships women have with one another, and *Essays upon Several Subjects* (1710) have been reprinted by Oxford University Press

From The Ladies Defence

Melissa: I've still rever'd your Order [she is responding to a Parson] as Divine;
And when I see unblemish'd Virtue shine,
When solid Learning, and substantial Sense,
Are joyn'd with unaffected Eloquence;
When Lives and Doctrines of a Piece are made,
And holy Truths with humble Zeal convey'd;
When free from Passion, Bigottry, and Pride,
Not sway'd by Int'rest, nor to Parties ty'd,
Contemning Riches, and abhorring strife,
And shunning all the noisy Poms of Life,
You live the awful Wonders of your time,
Without the least Suspicion of a Crime:
I shall with Joy the highest Deference pay,
and heedfully attend to all you say.
From such, Reproofs shall always welcome prove,
As being th' Effects of Piety and Love.
But those from me can challenge no Respect,
Who on us all without just Cause reflect:
Who without Mercy all the Sex decry,
And into open Defamations fly:
Who think us Creatures for Derision made,
And the Creator with his Works upbraid:
What he call'd good, they proudly think not so,
And with their Malice, their Prophaneness show.
'Tis hard we shou'd be by the Men despis'd,
Yet kept from knowing what wou'd make us priz'd:
Debarr'd from Knowledge, banish'd from the Schools,
And with the utmost Industry bred Fools.
Laugh'd out of Reason, jested out of Sense,
And nothing left but Native Innocence:
Then told we are incapable of Wit,
And only for the meanest Drudgeries fit:
Made Slaves to serve their Luxury and Pride,
And with innumerable Hardships try'd,
'Till Pitying Heav'n release us from our Pain,
Kind Heav'n to whom alone we dare complain.
Th' ill-natur'd World will no Compassion show;
Such as are wretched, it wou'd still have so:
It gratifies its Envy and its Spight;

The most in others Miseries take Delight.
While we are present they some Pity spare,
And feast us on a thin Repast of Air:
Look Grave and Sigh, when we our Wrongs relate,
An in a Compliment accuse our Fate:
Blame those to whom we our Misfortunes owe,
And all the Signs of real Friendship show.
But when we're absent, we their Sport are made,
They fan the Flame, and our Oppressors aid;
Joyn with the Stronger, the Victorious Side,
And all our Suff'ring, all our griefs deride.
Those gen'rous few, whom kinder Thoughts inspire,
And who the Happiness of all desire;
Who wish we were from barb'rous Usage free,
Exempt from Toils, and shameful Slavery,
Yet let us, unprov'd, mis. spend our Hours,
And to mean Purposes employ our nobler Pow'rs.
They think, if we our Thoughts can but express,
And know but how to Work, to Dance and Dress,
It is enough, as much as we shou'd mind,
As if we were for nothing else design'd,
But made, like Puppets, to divert Mankind.
O that my Sex wou'd all such Toys despise;
And only study to be Good, and Wise;
Inspect themselves, and every Blemish find,
Search all the close Recesses of the Mind,
And leave no vice, no ruling Passion there,
Nothing to raise a Blush, or cause a Fear:
Their Memories with solid Notions fill,
And let their Reason dictate to their Will,
Instead of Novels, Histories peruse,
And for their Guides the wiser Ancients chuse,
Thro' all the Labyrinths of Learning go,
And grow more humble, as they more do know.
By doing this, they will Respect procure,
Silence the Men, and lasting Fame secure;
And to themselves the best Companions prove,
And neither fear their Malice, nor desire their Love.

Lady Mary Chudleigh

Song

Why Damon, why, why, why so pressing?
The Heart you beg's not worth possessing:
Each Look, each Word, each Smile's affected,
And inward Charms are quite neglected:
Then scorn her, scorn her, foolish Swain,
And sigh no more, no more in vain.

Beauty's worthless, fading, flying;
Who would for Trifles think of dying?
Who for a Face, a Shape, wou'd languish,
And tell the Brooks, and Groves his Anguish,
Till she, till she thinks fit to prize him,
And all, and all beside despise him?

Fix, fix your Thoughts on what's inviting,
On what will never bear the slighting:
Wit and Virtue claim your Duty,
They're much more worth that Gold and Beauty:
To them, to them, your Heart resign,
And you'll no more, no more repine.

Lady Mary Chudleigh

The Wish

Would but indulgent Fortune send
To me a kind, and faithful Friend,
One who to Virtue's Laws is true,
And does her nicest Rules pursue;
One Pious, Lib'ral, Just and Brave,
And to his Passions not a Slave;
Who full of Honour, void of Pride,
Will freely praise, and freely chide;
But not indulge the smallest Fault,
Nor entertain one slighting Thought:
Who still the same will ever prove,
Will still instruct and still will love:
In whom I safely may confide,
And with him all my Cares divide:
Who has a large capacious Mind,
Join'd with a Knowledge unconfin'd:
A Reason bright, a Judgement true,
A Wit both quick, and solid too:
Who can of all things talk with Ease,
And whose Converse will ever please:
Who charm'd with Wit, and inward Graces,
Despises Fools with tempting Faces;
And still a beauteous Mind does prize
Above the most enchanting Eyes:
I would not envy Queens their State,
Nor once desire a happier Fate.

Lady Mary Chudleigh

To The Ladies.

WIFE and servant are the same,
But only differ in the name :
For when that fatal knot is ty'd,
Which nothing, nothing can divide :
When she the word obey has said,
And man by law supreme has made,
Then all that's kind is laid aside,
And nothing left but state and pride :
Fierce as an eastern prince he grows,
And all his innate rigour shows :
Then but to look, to laugh, or speak,
Will the nuptial contract break.
Like mutes, she signs alone must make,
And never any freedom take :
But still be govern'd by a nod,
And fear her husband as a God :
Him still must serve, him still obey,
And nothing act, and nothing say,
But what her haughty lord thinks fit,
Who with the power, has all the wit.
Then shun, oh ! shun that wretched state,
And all the fawning flatt'ers hate :
Value yourselves, and men despise :
You must be proud, if you'll be wise.

Lady Mary Chudleigh