

Mary Lee, Lady Chudleigh

1656 - 1710

A devoted Anglican, Chudleigh was self-educated in religious, scientific, and philosophical works. A devoted fan of, probably acquainted with, and possibly friend to, her 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We know nothing of her relationship with her husband: both her published and unpublished writing on that aspect of her personal life remain silent on that issue.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. By 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."¹ 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 and can be found in the reference given below.

To the Ladies

By Mary, Lady Chudleigh

Note on the text: The text comes from *Poems on Several Occasions* (London, 1703).

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, [5]
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 Rigor shows: [10]
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, [15]
And fear her Husband as her God:
Him still must serve, him still obey,
And nothing act, and nothing say,
But what her haughty Lord thinks fit,
Who with the Pow'r, has all the Wit. [20]
Then shun, oh! shun that wretched State,
And all the fawning Flatt'ers hate:
Value your selves, and Men despise,
You must be proud, if you'll be wise.