"To the Ladies"

By Mary Chudleigh

Transcription, correction, editorial commentary, and markup by Students and Staff of Marymount University

POEMS
ON
Several Occasions.
BY THE
LADY *CHUDLEIGH* , [author]
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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, [divorce]:
When she the word obey has said,
And Man by Law, [couverture] supreme has made,
Then all that's kind is laid aside,
And nothing left but State and Pride:
Fierce as an Eastern Prince, [eastern-prince] he grows,
And all his innate Rigor shows:
Then but to look, to laugh, or speak,
Will the Nuptial Contract break.
Like Mutes, [mutes] she Signs alone must make,
And never any Freedom take, [freedom]:
But still be govern'd by a Nod,
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.
Then shun, oh! shun that wretched State, [state],
And all the fawning Flatt'rers hate:
Value your selves, and Men despise,
You must be proud, if you'll be wise.

Footnotes

author Mary Chudleigh was a poet and early feminist, friends with women like Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Mary Astell. She is most well-known for her long poem *The Ladies Defense* (1701), published in response to John Sprint's *The Bride-Woman's Counsellor* , a marriage sermon he delivered in 1699 expounding on the duty of wives to their husbands. Chudleigh was a devout Anglican, and had no formal education (women were not usually formally educated for a century more), but she was self-taught and read widely. In her late teens, she married Sir George Chudleigh, a Baronet. He was an overbearing husband, and scholars suggest that her own experience was an influence for her writing. However, he did allow her to publish her work, which was not common for women of her stature. To read more about anonymity and women writers, see Greg Buzwell's short essay ot the British Library. Chudleigh bore six children with her husband.
- [TH]

divorce Until the middle of the nineteenth century, with the passage of the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, English society was essentially divorceless; members of the gentility and the aristocracy typically married for life. The only way to secure a divorce was through a very expensive Private Act of Parliament; between 1700 and 1857, fewer than 325 parliamentary divorces were granted in England. Almost all were initiated by men, and it was only granted for adultery. Women could only seek divorce if the adultery were accompanied by extreme cruelty. Those granted to women could be counted on one hand. As a result, there were many unhappy marriages, and literature focused on chosing the right mate was popular. Those in the lower classes (and sometimes those in the growing middle classes) had more flexibility, often simply agreeing among themselves to leave each other or through the practice of "wife selling." To read more about the history of divorce, see Amanda Foreman's "The Heartbreaking History of Divorce" for *The Smithsonian Magazine* .
- [TH]

couverture Upon marriage, a woman became a "femme couvert"; her legal identity was subsumed into (or "covered by") her husband's, and she was no longer able to take on debt, own property, or engage in contracts. Unmarried women and widows could. To read more about this doctrine of couverture, which was only modified in the late 19th century, see Wikipedia. It is worth noting that, in the US, it was only in 1974 (with the passage of the Equal Credit Opportunity Act) that women could open bank accounts or apply for credit without needing a male co-signer. In the UK, a similar law was passed in 1975.
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eastern-prince The Ottoman Empire was the largest empire in the world, spanning the 13th through the 20th centuries. As Emily Kugler notes in *Sway of the Ottomoan Empire on English Identity in the Long Eighteenth Century* (2012), the English in the eighteenth century depicted the Ottoman world as powerful, moreso than the English themselves, whose empire was growing and would reach its height in the 19th century. Hence, Chudleigh here uses the "eastern prince" as an image of unchecked power. This is exacerbated by perceived differences in personal and political liberties between the English and the Turkish subject, and especially the female subject.

- [TH]

mutes For an interesting discussion of the "mute" in the Turkish Ottoman Court, see "Signing in the Seraglio," by M. Miles.
- [TH]

freedom Chudleigh is drawing on the image of the Turkish seraglio as a site of female confinement and sexual enslavement. In British literature, the trope of the English captive seeking to regain their "native" or natural/innate liberties takes shape "against a detailed representation of the Orient as debased and despotic" (Snader, "The Oriental Captivity Narrative andn Early English Fiction" 268). Note that Chudleigh refers, in an earlier line, to the husband's "innate Rigor." To read more about the way the West viewed the Ottoman Empire as tyrranical and despotic, especially when it comes to the image of women, see "From Tyranny to Despotism: The Enlightenment's Unenlightened Image of the Turks" by Asli Çirakman.
- [TH]

state The "state" of marriage.
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