Clara Reeve, â??To my Friend Mrs. â??â??, On Her Holding an Argument in Favour of the Natural Equality of Both the Sexesâ?•

Description

[CLARA REEVE]

â??To my Friend Mrs.â??â??,
On Her Holding an Argument in Favour of the Natural Equality of Both the Sexes.
Written in the Year MDCCLVI.â?•

Silence best serves to disapprove
False reasoning in those we love.
Thoâ?? tâ??other day I held my tongue,
I thought you greatly in the wrong;
How could you so unfairly tryâ??d
With no one present to decide,
Argue the best, that woman can
Pretend to triumph oâ??er a man?
I once was half of your opinion,
But now subscribe to their dominion.
The same unchanging law that fixes,
Eternal difference of sexes,
Has for the wisest ends assignâ??d
Due bounds to either sexâ??s mind.
Your heart with argument elated,
Thinks both were equal when created,
And holds its own imagination,
That all depends on cultivation:
But to speak plainly, in reality
I donâ??t believe in this equality,
But think that partial heavâ??n designâ??d,
To them the more capacious mind;
And that their brains, dame Natureâ??s college,
And best receptacles for knowledge.
Lend me my friend a while your hand,
Iâ??ll lead you over classic land,
To hear what sages famâ??d of old
On this nice subject shall unfold.
Thus much may serve for introduction,
Leading to pleasure and instruction.

Not every one can write that chuses,
But those invited by the Muses:
These are nine wit-inspiring lasses,
Who dwell about the hill Parnassus.
Their patron whom they serve and follow,
A beardless youthâ??the Greek Apolloâ??
Still lovely, active, young, and gay,
He drives the chariot of the day,
Teaches these girls polite behaviours,
For which they grant him certain favours:
(But modest ones you may be sure,
For they are virgins chaste and pure.)
He leads their concerts, which they fill
With wondâ??rous harmony and skill;
For heâ??s the prince of all musicians,
Beside the greatest of physicians.
He finds them music for their frolics,
And cures their head-achs, nerves, and cholics.

From out the side of this famâ??d mountain,
Rises a wit-inspiring fountain;
Which murmurs music as it plays,
Laurels its banks produce and bays.
Here all the scholars drink their fill,
And then attempt to climb the hill;
(But first from trees the boughs they take,
And garlands for their heads they make;
Whose strange effects, to us a wonder,
Secure them from the power of thunder:)
With pain and care they clamber up,
And very rarely gain the top: But if they reach the Muses seat,
They have assignâ??d them a retreat.
Apolloâ??s self records their name,
And gives it to the charge of Fame;
Who first displays to earth and sky,
Then folds it up and lays it by,
In her immortal library.
Now comes our case.â??The ancients tell us,
These nymphs were always fond of fellows;
For by their records it is clear,
Few women ever have been there.
Not that it contradicts their laws,
But they assign the following cause;
The sacred Heliconian spring,
Of which old poets sweetly sing:
(Thoâ?? modern writers only flout it,
Alledging they can do without it)

Produces very strange effects,
On the weak brains of our soft sex;
Works worse vagaries in the fancy,
Then Hollandâ??s gin, or royal Nancy.
In short, to what you will compare it,
Few womenâ??s heads have strength to bear it.
See some with strong and lively fancies,
Write essays, novels, and romances.
Others by serious cares and pains,
With politics oâ??erset their brains.
Children, some call themselves of Phoebus,
By virtue of a pun, or rebus.
Some much affect the strain satyric,
And others all for panegyric.
In all, and each of these you find,
Strong markings of the female mind,
Still superficial, light and various;
Loose, unconnected, and precarious:
Life and vivacity I grant,
But weight and energy they want;
That strength that fills the manly page,
And bids it live to future age.

Now as it oft hath been evincâ??d,
We do not love to be convincâ??d;
So if conviction give you grief,
Restriction may afford relief.
Exceptions to all genâ??ral rules,
Are still allowâ??d of in the schools:
And Phoebusâ??s favours to the fair
Are not impossible, thoâ?? rare.
In Fameâ??s great library, weâ??re told,
Some female names there are enrollâ??d;
Matrons of Greece, other of Rome,
And some, to please you, nearer home:
Moderns there are, France brags of many,
And England shews as good as any.
See our Orinda swell the page,
Carter, and Lenox grace this age;
But leaving these consignâ??d to Fame,
Lusus Naturae is their name.
As some among the men we find,
Effeminate in form and mind;
Some women masculine are seen
In mind, behavior, and in mien:
For Nature seldom kindly mixes,
The qualities of both the sexes.
These instances are sometimes quoted,

As owls are shown, but to be hooted.
Dare now to ope your eyes and see,
These truths exemplified in me.
What thoâ?? while yet an infant young,
The numbers trembled on my tongue;
As youth advancâ??d, I darâ??d aspire,
And trembling struck the heavenly lyre.
What by my talents have I gained?
By those I lovâ??d to be disdainâ??d,
By some despisâ??d, by others fearâ??d,
Envyâ??d by fools, by witlings jeerâ??d.
See what success my labours crownâ??d,
By birds and beasts alike disownâ??d.
Those talents that were once my pride,
I find it requisite to hide;
For what in man is most respected,
In womanâ??s form shall be rejected.
Thus have I provâ??d to demonstration,
The fallacy of your oration.
(You need not let the fellows know it,
Theyâ??ll praise the wit, but damn the poet.)
The point illustrated, my friend,
Brings my long story to its end.
When you have read it oâ??er at leisure,
Keep itâ??or burn itâ??at your pleasure.

NOTES:

Title *Mrs.* The addressee of this poem, Mrs. â??â??, is unknown, although the volume is dedicated to a â??Mrs. Stratford.â?•

22 *capacious* â??Able to hold much; roomy, spacious, wideâ?• used here to mean men have â??largerâ?• intellectual capacity *(OED).*

32 *Muses* The nine Greek goddesses of â??poetry, philosophy, and inspirationâ?• *(Oxford Companion to Classical Civilization).*

34 *Parnassus* â??Mount Parnassus,â?• regarded as the â??source of literary, esp. poetic, inspirationâ?• *(OED).*

36 *Apollo* Greek god of â??poetry and music, the sun, and medicineâ?• *(OCCC).*

48 *nerves â??*Disordered or heightened sensitivity; anxiety, fearfulness, tension, nervousnessâ?•; *cholics* Short for â??melancholic,â?• referring to a state of â??sadness or depressionâ?• *(OED).*

49 *famâ??d mountain* Parnassus [see line 34].

52 *Laurels â??*To adorn with the leaves of the bay tree, which signified victory or poetic distinctionâ?• *(OED).*

74 *Heliconian â??*Mt. Heliconâ?• was another home for the Muses, the â??Vale of the Musesâ?• *(OCCC).*

80 *vagaries â??*Wandering or devious journeysâ?• *(OED); fancy* â??Imaginationâ?• *(OED).*

81 *Hollandâ??s gin* Also known as â??geneva or genever, a grain spirit from Belgium or the Netherlands flavored with juniperâ?•; *Nancy* â??Nants brandy or Nants wine,â?• produced in the Nantes region of France *(OED).*

88 *Phoebus* Apollo [see line 36].

89 *rebus* A representation of a word using â??pictures or symbolsâ?• *(OED).*

90 *satyric* Archaic spelling of â??satiric.â?•

91 *panegyric â??*Writing meant to praise a person or thingâ?• *(OED).*

96 *vivacity â??*Intellectual or mental animation, acuteness, or vigourâ?• (*OED).*

105 *still* Originally â??stillâ??d,â?• likely printerâ??s error.

114 *Orinda* Katherine Phillips (1631-1664), poet and translator of two plays, wrote under the alias â??Orindaâ?• in her letters.

115 *Carter* Elizabeth Carter (1717-1806), famed translator and poet, would translate the works of Epictetus from Greek in 1758; *Lenox* Charlotte Lennox (1730-1804), author of *The Female Quixote* (1752).

117 *lusus naturae* Latin for â??a freak of natureâ?• *(OED).*

120 *mien â??*Look or mannerâ?• *(OED).*

131 *lyre* A lyre is the favored instrument of Apollo *(OCCC).*

135 *witlings* Someone who pretends to be â??more cleverâ?• than they are *(OED).*

139 Reeve would revise her earlier views on womenâ??s writing in her prefatory â??Address to the Readerâ?• published in this volume: â??I formerly believedâ?¦my sex was an insuperable objection [to writing] â?¦but now am convinced of the mistake, by daily examples to the contrary,â?• and she offers the collection as a â??general apologyâ?• (xi).

143 *fallacy â??*falsehoodâ?• *(OED).*

Source: *Original Poems on Several Occasions* (London, 1769), pp. 4-11. [*Google Books*]

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