

Mary Darwall, "An Epistle to a Friend"

Description

MARY DARWALL

“An Epistle to a Friend”

Let us, Monimia, from our bosoms chace
 Each sorrow, that afflicts the human race;
 And, cheer’d by friendship’s genial warmth, survey
 The source whence issues its enlivening ray : —
 Far hence the lover’s wish, the poet’s dream, — — — — —
 — — — — —
 And female friendship be the pleasing theme.

Why does vain man accuse our gentle kind
 Of pride, and weak inconstancy of mind?
 Why should he deem the female breast the seat
 Of rankling envy, and of dark deceit? — — — — —
 — — — — — 10

As tyrant kings their subjects’ rights invade,
 As trembling kids to lions yield the shade,
 So are we robb’d of friendship’s sacred name,
 Because too timid to defend our claim.
 What, tho’ no Greek or Latian bard of old — — — — —
 — — — — — 15

Has female friends in deathless strains enroll’d,
 Who, like Euryalus and Nisus, dar’d
 Whatever fate their hearts lov’d partner shar’d;
 Yet equal faith and fortitude combin’d,
 They own, have oft adorn’d the female mind. — — — — —
 — — — — — 20

Say, what is love, but friendship’s brightest ray,
 Which softens woe, and cheers fate’s darkest day?
 What, but this gentle, this exalted flame,
 Glow’d in the breast of the Dulichian dame,
 When her lov’d lord was sever’d from her arms, — — — — —
 — — — — — 25
 Whilst twenty vernal suns beheld her charms?
 Hopeless of his return, by numbers woo’d,
 By ev’ry art, love could devise, pursu’d,

Firm in affection his chaste consort provâ€™d,
His image cherishâ€™d, and his memâ€™ry lovâ€™d; 30
Till heavâ€™n, to bless her constancy, restorâ€™d
To her despairing arms her long-lost lord.
Couâ€™d vulgar love, or low desires have made
Alcestisâ€™ hand her tender breast invade?
Dauntless she died; blest, with her life to save 35
Her dear Admetus from the threatâ€™ning grave.

But rove not thus, my muse, to distant climes,
Nor think fair faith confinâ€™d to heathen times.
Our isle can boast her Eleanoraâ€™s name,
Whose living virtues grace the book of
fame. 40
Yes, glorious queen! for Edwardâ€™s dearer life
Thy own was stakâ€™d; heavâ€™n saw the genâ€™rous strife, â€™
Preservâ€™d the heroine, â€™ to her fervent prayâ€™r
Gave her heartâ€™s lord, and crownâ€™d her pious care.

Nor have our noblest bards invidious
provâ€™d, 45
Well have they sung the virtuous flame they lovâ€™d.
In Thompsonâ€™s scenes fair Eleanoraâ€™s tale
Shall charm each heart, till taste and nature fail.

And well has Shakespeare (ever honourâ€™d name)
To female friendship givâ€™n immortal fame. 50
So dear was Rosalind to Celiaâ€™s breast,
When, by her fatherâ€™s tyrant power oppressâ€™d,
The fair was banishâ€™d, destitute, to roam,
Celia with her forsook her splendid home,
Left a fond father, bade a court adieu, 55
And with her friend to lonely woods withdrew;
Trode the brown desert, and the forest wild,
And at distress and changeful fortune smilâ€™d.

All-righteous heavâ€™n the genâ€™rous act approvâ€™d,
And to a crown restorâ€™d the friend she lovâ€™d. 60
And thou, Monimia! (couâ€™d these humble lays
Transmit thy merit to succeeding days)
In fameâ€™s unfading page shouâ€™dâ€™st be enrollâ€™d,
And all thy virtues fair shouâ€™d there be told.
Thy faithful bosom scorns thâ€™ ignoble thought, 65

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65

That love or friendship can with gold be bought.

Pure as the vestalâ€™s holy fire must burn

The flame, that merits such a heartâ€™s return.

Avaunt! ye frail, inconstant, faithless race!

Nor with your lips these noble names disgrace. 70

70

If, with the veering wind of fortuneâ€™s change,

Your tutorâ€™d hearts from breast to breast can range,

Fond loveâ€™s or friendshipâ€™s powâ€™r you neâ€™er have tryâ€™d,

But devious, rovâ€™d with folly for your guide.

Henceforth her shrine adore, nor dare

pretend 75

75

Tâ€™assume the name of lover or of friend: â€”

The heart that to one powâ€™r has provâ€™d untrue,

Can never pay the other homage due.

To fair Monimia and her Myra leave

These pleasing passions, nor yourselves deceive : 80

80

Their long tryâ€™d hearts no change has powâ€™r to move,

Alike they beat to friendship and to love.

In each one object has the heart possesâ€™d,

And death alone can tear it from each breast.

NOTES:

1 *Monimia* Darwallâ€™s poetic name for her friend for whom the poem is written. The name is likely derived from *Monimiaceae*, an evergreen shrub and a member of the *Laurales* (Laurel) order (*Britannica*).

10 *rankling* â€œTo fester to a degree that causes painâ€œ (*QED*).

17 *Euryalus and Nisus* In Greek and Roman mythology, friends and soldiers who fled together after battling in the Trojan War (*Britannica*).

24 *Dulichian dame* Penelope, wife of Odysseus. In the Homeric tradition, Dulichium was an island near Ithaca thought to be under the control of Odysseus. Over the next several lines, Darwall rehearses the story of Penelopeâ€™s love and devotion to her husband during his three-year absence from home (*Britannica*).

34-36 *Alcestis* *Admetus* In Greek legend, the beautiful daughter of Pelia, king of Iolcos and heroine of the eponymous play by the dramatist Euripides (c. 484â€“406 BCE). According to legend, the god Apollo helped Admetus, son of the king of Pherae, to win Alcestisâ€™s hand. When Apollo learned that Admetus had not long to live, he persuaded the Fates to prolong his life. The Fates imposed the condition that someone else die in Admetusâ€™s stead, which Alcestis, a loyal wife, consented to do. The warrior Heracles rescued Alcestis by wrestling at her grave with Death (*Britannica*).

39 *Eleanor* Eleanor of Castile (1241-1290), queen of England and wife to Edward I (1239-1307). According to English legend, while accompanying him on a crusade (1270-73) Eleanor saved Edward's life by sucking poison from a dagger wound he had sustained (referenced in line 41) (*Britannica*).

45 *invidious* Viewing with displeasure or ill feeling (*OED*).

47 *Thompson* James Thomson (1700-1748), Scottish poet and playwright who wrote the tragic play *Edward and Eleanora* (1739) based on the lives of Edward I and Eleanor of Castile.

51 *Rosalind to Celia* Principal characters in the Shakespeare's comedy *As You Like It* (1623) who, in Act II, flee together from the court of Celia's father.

65 *ignoble* "Not honourable" (*OED*).

67 *vestal* Pertaining to, characteristics of, a vestal virgin "marked by purity or chastity" (*OED*).

79 *Myra* Mary Darwall's poetic name for herself, an anagram of "Mary."

SOURCE: *Poems on Several Occasions* (London 1794), pp. 19-25. [Google Books]

^ Edited by Poppy Scales

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