

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 enliv'ning ray : —
Far hence the lover's wish, the poet's dream, 5
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 heart's 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 prov'd,
His image cherish'd, and his mem'ry lov'd; 30
'Till heav'n, to bless her constancy, restor'd
To her despairing arms her long-lost lord.
Cou'd vulgar love, or low desires have made

Alcestis' hand her tender breast invade?
Dauntless she died; blest, with her life to save 35
Her dear Admetus from the threat'ning grave.

But rove not thus, my muse, to distant climes,
Nor think fair faith confin'd to heathen times.
Our isle can boast her Eleanor's name,
Whose living virtues grace the book of fame. 40
Yes, glorious queen! for Edward's dearer life
Thy own was stak'd; — heav'n saw the gen'rous strife, —
Preserv'd the heroine, — to her fervent pray'r
Gave her heart's lord, and crown'd her pious care.
Nor have our noblest bards invidious prov'd, 45
Well have they sung the virtuous flame they lov'd.
In Thompson's scenes fair Eleanora's tale
Shall charm each heart, till taste and nature fail.
And well has Shakespeare (ever honour'd name)
To female friendship giv'n immortal fame. 50
So dear was Rosalind to Celia's breast,
When, by her father's tyrant power oppress'd,
The fair was banish'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 smil'd.
All-righteous heav'n the gen'rous act approv'd,
And to a crown restor'd the friend she lov'd. 60

And thou, Monimia! (cou'd these humble lays
Transmit thy merit to succeeding days)
In fame's unfading page shou'd'st be enroll'd,
And all thy virtues fair shou'd there be told.
Thy faithful bosom scorns th'ignoble thought, 65
That love or friendship can with gold be bought.
Pure as the vestal's holy fire must burn
The flame, that merits such a heart's return.
Avaunt! ye frail, inconstant, faithless race!
Nor with your lips these noble names disgrace. 70
If, with the veering wind of fortune's change,
Your tutor'd hearts from breast to breast can range,
Fond love's or friendship's pow'r you ne'er have try'd,
But devious, rov'd with folly for your guide.
Henceforth her shrine adore, nor dare pretend 75
T'assume the name of lover or of friend: —
The heart that to one pow'r has prov'd untrue,
Can never pay the other homage due.
To fair Monimia and her Myra leave

These pleasing passions, nor yourselves deceive :
Their long try'd hearts no change has pow'r to move,
Alike they beat to friendship and to love.
In each one object has the heart possess'd,
And death alone can tear it from each breast.

80

NOTES:

1 *Monimia* Darwall'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* "To fester to a degree that causes pain" (*OED*).

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 Penelope'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. 484–406 BCE). According to legend, the god Apollo helped Admetus, son of the king of Pherae, to win Alcestis'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 Admetus'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

