

Notes on To the Ladies by Lady Mary Chudleigh:

Mary Chudleigh's poem "To the Ladies" provides commentary on the institution of marriage. The author begins by putting forth her heartfelt conclusion:

Wife and servant are the same.

In other words, once a woman becomes a wife, she also becomes a servant—the words are synonymous; the difference between "wife" and "servant" is simply a question of semantics.

The author addresses the sentiments of marriage. Whereas marriage is often referred to as "tying the knot," the author states that it is a fatal knot. "Fatal" here is used very precisely, and is a word associated with death: the threat or actuality of dying. "Fatal" is a warning.

The lines of a wedding ceremony, "...let no man put asunder" are alluded to: the bonds of matrimony shall never be severed—though the author's description makes it sound more like a curse. She writes:

...which nothing, nothing can divide...

The repetition of the word "nothing" stresses the permanent nature of this bond. Once the woman says her vows, promising to "obey," the "law supreme" (more likely society's laws rather than God's) makes certain she adheres to those promises not just in spirit, but in deed.

The following line indicates that after the vows, the wooing is over and things get very serious.

Then all that's kind is laid aside...

The love notes, flowers, and flirtations are at an end. It is now time to pay attention to the serious nature of marriage. When a woman takes her vows, she then belongs to her husband. Like an "eastern prince," the man grows more powerful, and the woman becomes powerless. When the speaker refers to "...And all his innate rigor shows," she is explaining that once married, a husband's natural tendency toward stiff, unbending behavior awakes.

The author goes on to describe the rules for the new wife: looking, laughing, or speaking when not permitted to do so may be all that is necessary to break the wedding vows. Like one who is "mute," the new wife must "make signs" rather than open her mouth. This may be literal (unable to speak), but a figurative meaning seems more likely. The author's suggestion may be that the wife is no longer free to say what is on her mind, but may share only those "approved" sentiments expected of a good wife.

The next section explains that the bride will have no freedom; she will be instructed by her husband's nod and she must fear him as if he were God. Every day she will be expected to serve and obey; she may not have any original thoughts—her only thoughts are those her husband approves of. He exerts the power in their world; he is the one with the intelligence, not his wife.

Finally, with all these dire circumstances presented, the author issues her final warning. Women should do anything possible to avoid ("shun") the ["wretched"] state of marriage. (Her intent is

seen in her repetition of "shun.") If a man approaches a woman with flattery and fawning (giving exaggerated attention), detest him. Beyond all things, a woman must remember her importance and her value as an individual, and spurn the attention of men. A woman must be proud, wise, and single in order to be happy.

Although Lady Mary Chudleigh was herself married, and a mother of five children, she was not unknown to speak out against things occurring that affected women of the time. She wrote another poem called "The Ladies Defense," influenced by an angry sermon preached against the fair sex.