

## Soame Jenyns

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Soame Jenyns (1704–1787) was born in Great Ormond Street, London, to parents Sir Roger Jenyns and Lady Elizabeth Jenyns, on the fallacious date of January 1, 1704. Fallacious, since, uncertain of his actual date of birth (but oddly convinced of the precise hour at which he was delivered: twelve o'clock at night), Jenyns decided that his birthday of choice would align with New Year's Day because of its existing affiliations with abundance and festivity. Such a decision would have come as no surprise to those who knew him well, for they often described Jenyns in jovial terms: e.g., "Mr. Jenyns is a man of a lively fancy and pleasant turn of wit: very sparkling in conversation and full of merry conceits and agreeable drollery" (William Cole, 1714–1782).<sup>93</sup>

Jenyns spent the first seventeen years of his life at Bottisham Hall, on his family's estate in Cambridgeshire, where he was raised and privately educated. His upbringing enabled him to gain admittance to St John's College, Cambridge, as a fellow-commoner (an affluent aristocratic student) in 1722. A year after his matriculation, Jenyns left the university without a degree and promptly married his first cousin, Mary Soame, when he was twenty-two years of age. This marriage, having been orchestrated by Jenyns's father, was one, like so many unions of the eighteenth century, of necessity and convenience. It is unsurprising, then, that Soame and Mary's relationship was lacking in general affection and that, shortly after the death of Sir Roger Jenyns (1740), it informally ended when Mary eloped with William Levyns in 1742 (the same year that Jenyns became Cambridgeshire's MP). Shortly after his and Mary's affair-induced separation, Jenyns anonymously published a satirical poem titled "The Modern Fine Gentleman" (1746). Given its title, it would be appropriate to assume that "The Modern Fine Lady" (despite having been written five years later) was intended as a sister poem of sorts or, at the very least, was written in a way that drew inspiration from the creative work that preceded it. The poems are stylistically comparable and, though their subject

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<sup>93</sup> this account of Jenyns comes from one of several manuscript volumes entrusted to the British Museum by Cole himself: *Collections for an Athenae Cantabrigienses* (MSS. 5873), quotation printed in *Admissions to the College of St. John the Evangelist in the University of Cambridge: July 1715–November 1767 Part III*, p. 355 (see Further Reading)

matters are fundamentally different, both are interested in the ways in which certain types of upper-class people respond to the societal burdens and expectations of the eighteenth century.

Another notable poetic work by Jenyns is the 1727 publication of “The Art of Dancing” (a mock-heroic piece in three cantos). Though his poems were generally well-received, Jenyns’s political, theological, and literary voice was best expressed through the medium of prose. His “superior talents in controversial writing” (Charles Nalson Cole, 1790) hence served to affirm his reputation as an essayist. Much of Jenyns’s written work, be it in the form of poetry or prose, has a certain wit and ironic rhetoric, so much so that those familiar with the writer’s satiric tendencies were, upon the publication of certain works,<sup>94</sup> skeptical of Jenyns’s sincerity when it came to declaring his stance on social matters: “He is undoubtedly a fine writer but whether he is a Christian, Deist, or Atheist, I cannot tell” (John Wesley, 1776).

Not only did Jenyns’s writing cause its readers to doubt the very intentions of its author, but it also served to spark criticism and what might be described as puerile writerly antagonism. The essay *Free Inquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil* (1756) was criticized in a *Literary Magazine* review by Samuel Johnson (1757) for its simplicity and reductive inclination, as it highlighted Jenyns’s failure to acknowledge the nuances of morality. Displeased by Johnson’s words, Jenyns got his own back (after the critic’s passing, in 1784) when he wrote the sarcastic “Epitaph on Dr. Samuel Johnson”:

Here lies Sam Johnson: – Reader, have a care,  
Tread lightly, lest you wake a sleeping Bear:  
Religious, moral, generous, and humane  
He was; but self-sufficient, proud, and vain,  
Fond of, and overbearing in dispute,  
A Christian, and a Scholar – but a Brute.<sup>95</sup>

Jenyns published “The Modern Fine Lady” in 1751, two years before the death of his estranged wife and three years before marrying Elizabeth Gray (another first cousin). Written in iambic pentameter, the six-stanza poem is made up of heroic couplets and features four triplets. Its epigraph takes lines from Horace’s “To Pyrrha” (Ode 1.5) – a stylistic decision reminiscent of “The Modern

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<sup>94</sup> namely, *View of the Internal Evidence of the Christian Religion* (1776)

<sup>95</sup> printed in *The Works of Soame Jenyns ...: including several pieces never before published; to which are prefixed, short sketches of the history of the author's family, and also of his life* (1790) p. 222

Fine Gentleman,” whose epigraph takes lines from another of Horace’s Odes (1.22). Jenyns’s satiric poem is interested in the notion of appearances and observes the facade upheld by upper-class women in eighteenth-century England.

### Further Reading

- Fredricksmeier, Ernest A. “Horace’s Ode to Pyrrha.” *Classical Philology*, vol. 60, no. 3, 1965, pp. 180–185.
- Klein, Lawrence E. “Gender and the Public/Private Distinction in the Eighteenth Century: Some Questions about Evidence and Analytic Procedure” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 29, no. 1, 1995, pp. 97–109.
- Scott, Robert F. *Admissions to the College of St. John the Evangelist in the University of Cambridge: July 1715–November 1767 Part III*, 1903, pp. 352–356, 503.

### References

- Jenyns, Soame, and Charles Nalson Cole. *The Works of Soame Jenyns*, 1790.
- Johnson, Samuel. “Nature and Origin of Evil: Review of a Free Enquiry,” *The Works of Samuel Johnson*, vol. 13, 1903, p. 217.
- Wesley, John. *The Journal of the Reverend John Wesley, A.M.*, vol. 2, 1832, p. 459.

The Modern Fine Lady<sup>96</sup>

— — — — — *Miseri quibus*  
*Intentata nites.* Hor.<sup>97</sup>

SKILL'D in each art, that can adorn the fair,  
 The spritely dance, the soft Italian air,  
 The toss of quality, and high-bred fleer,<sup>98</sup>  
 Now Lady Harriot<sup>99</sup> reach'd her fifteenth year.  
 Wing'd with diversions all her moments flew, 5  
 Each, as it pass'd, presenting something new;  
 Breakfasts and auctions wear the morn away,  
 Each evening gives an opera, or a play;  
 Then *Brag's*<sup>100</sup> eternal joys all night remain,  
 And kindly usher in the morn again. 10

For love no time has she, or inclination,  
 Yet must coquet<sup>101</sup> it for the sake of fashion;  
 For this she listens to each fop<sup>102</sup> that's near,  
 Th' embroider'd colonel flatters with a sneer,  
 And the crop'd<sup>103</sup> ensign nuzzles in her ear. 15

But with most warmth her dress and airs inspire  
 Th' ambitious bosom of the landed 'squire,

<sup>96</sup> Original 1751, reprinted in London for Robert Dodsley's *A Collection of Poems in Six Volumes by Several Hands, Vol. III.*, pp. 171–175; *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*

<sup>97</sup> Horace, Ode 1.5: "To Pyrrha," ll. 12–13

<sup>98</sup> *Fleer* wry look or reaction

<sup>99</sup> *Lady Harriot* typical name for a well-bred young lady

<sup>100</sup> *Brag* popular card game

<sup>101</sup> *Coquet* flirt with, especially in a way that is playful or insincere

<sup>102</sup> *Fop* narcissistic fool

<sup>103</sup> *Crop'd* appears as 'cropt' in *Miscellaneous Pieces, in Two Volumes* (1761) and *Miscellaneous Pieces, in Verse and Prose* (1770); could refer to a short haircut

Who fain<sup>104</sup> would quit plump Dolly's<sup>105</sup> softer charms,  
 For wither'd lean *right honourable*<sup>106</sup> arms; 20  
 He bows with reverence at her sacred shrine,  
 And treats her as if sprung from race divine,  
 Which she returns with insolence and scorn,  
 Nor deigns to smile on a plebeian<sup>107</sup> born.

Ere long by friends, by cards, and lovers cross'd, 25  
 Her fortune, health, and reputation lost;  
 Her money gone, yet not a tradesman paid,  
 Her fame, yet she still damn'd to be a maid,  
 Her spirits sink, her nerves are so unstrung,  
 She weeps, if but a handsome thief<sup>108</sup> is hung: 30  
 By mercers, lacemen, mantua-makers<sup>109</sup> press'd,  
 But most for ready cash for play distress'd,  
 Where can she turn? — the 'squire must all repair,  
 She condescends to listen to his pray'r,  
 And marries him at length in mere despair. } 35

But soon th' endearments of a husband cloy,  
 Her soul, her frame incapable of joy:  
 She feels no transports in the bridal bed,  
 Of which so oft sh' has heard, so much has read;  
 Then vex'd, that she should be condemn'd alone

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<sup>104</sup> *Fain* gladly

<sup>105</sup> *Dolly* typical name for a lower-class woman, likely a servant

<sup>106</sup> *Right honourable* title given to those of high ranking or status

<sup>107</sup> *Plebeian* commoner

<sup>108</sup> *Handsome Thief* reference to Maclean, a thief “condemned for a robbery on the highway” (as per *Miscellaneous Pieces, in Verse and Prose* edition, p. 56)

<sup>109</sup> *Mercers, lacemen, mantua-makers* clothiers

To seek in vain this philosophick stone,<sup>110</sup> 40  
 To abler tutors she resolves t'apply,  
 A prostitute from curiosity:  
 Hence men of ev'ry sort, and ev'ry size,  
 Impatient for heav'n's cordial drop,<sup>111</sup> she tries;  
 The fribbling<sup>112</sup> beau,<sup>113</sup> the rough unwieldy clown,<sup>114</sup> 45  
 The ruddy templar<sup>115</sup> newly on the town,  
 Th' Hibernian<sup>116</sup> captain of gigantic make,  
 The brimful parson, and th' exhausted rake.<sup>117</sup>  
 But still malignant Fate her wish denies,  
 Cards yield superior joys, to cards she flies; 50  
 All night from rout<sup>118</sup> to rout her chairmen<sup>119</sup> run,  
 Again she plays, and is again undone.  
 Behold her now in Ruin's<sup>120</sup> frightful jaws!  
 Bonds, judgments, executions, ope their paws;  
 Seize jewels, furniture, and plate,<sup>121</sup> nor spare 55  
 The gilded chariot, or the tossel'd chair,

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<sup>110</sup> *Philosophick stone* philosophers' stone, mythic substance capable of turning base metals into gold or silver

<sup>111</sup> *Heav'n's cordial drop* reference to John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester's *A Letter from Artemisia in the Town to Chloe in the Country* (1679); "That cordial drop heaven in our cup has thrown / To make the nauseous draught of life go down" (p. 44–45)

<sup>112</sup> *Fribbling* aimless, frivolous

<sup>113</sup> *Beau* "man who gives particular, or excessive, attention to dress, mien, and social etiquette; an exquisite, a fop, a dandy" (*OED*)

<sup>114</sup> *Clown* countryman, peasant

<sup>115</sup> *Templar* barrister who occupies chambers in the Inner or Middle Temple in London

<sup>116</sup> *Hibernian* Irish

<sup>117</sup> *Rake* fashionable man with a debauched lifestyle

<sup>118</sup> *Rout* crowded party

<sup>119</sup> *Chairmen* those responsible for carrying and transporting people in sedan chairs

<sup>120</sup> *Ruin* bankruptcy, but could also imply the "dishonour of a woman caused by her seduction and subsequent abandonment; degradation resulting from this" (*OED*)

<sup>121</sup> *Plate* gold or silver dishes/utensils

For lonely seat<sup>122</sup> she's forc'd to quit the town,  
 And *Tubbs*<sup>123</sup> conveys the wretched exile down.

Now rumbling o'er the stones of *Tyburn-road*,<sup>124</sup>  
 Ne'er press'd with a more griev'd or guilty load, 60  
 She bids adieu to all the well-known streets,  
 And envies ev'ry cinder-wench<sup>125</sup> she meets:  
 And now the dreaded country first appears,  
 With sighs unfeign'd the dying noise she hears  
 Of distant coaches fainter by degrees, 65  
 Then starts and trembles at the sight of trees.  
 Silent and sullen, like some captive queen,  
 She's drawn along, unwilling to be seen,  
 Until at length appears the ruin'd *hall*  
 Within the grass-green moat, and ivy'd wall, 70  
 The doleful prison where for ever she,  
 But not, alas! her griefs, must bury'd be.

Her coach the curate<sup>126</sup> and the tradesmen meet,  
 Great-coated tenants her arrival greet, }  
 And boys with stubble bonfires light the street, 75  
 While bells her ears with tongues discordant grate,  
 Types<sup>127</sup> of the nuptial<sup>128</sup> tyes they celebrate:  
 But no rejoicings can unbend her brow,  
 Nor deigns she to return one awkward bow,

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<sup>122</sup> *Seat* country house

<sup>123</sup> *Tubbs* someone well-known for supplying people of quality with hired equipages/vehicles (as per *Miscellaneous Pieces, in Verse and Prose* edition, p. 57)

<sup>124</sup> *Tyburn-road* road in London associated with public executions

<sup>125</sup> *Cinder-wench* "female who rakes cinders from among ashes" (*OED*)

<sup>126</sup> *Curate* lowly member of the clergy

<sup>127</sup> *Types* perfect examples

<sup>128</sup> *Nuptial* relating to marriage or weddings

But bounces in,<sup>129</sup> disdain'g once to speak,  
 And wipes the trickling tear from off her cheek. 80

Now see her in the sad decline of life,  
 A peevish mistress, and a sulky wife;  
 Her nerves unbrac'd, her faded cheek grown pale  
 With many a real, many a fancy'd ail;  
 Of cards, admirers, equipage<sup>130</sup> bereft; 85

Her insolence, and title only left;  
 Severely humbled to her one-horse chair,<sup>131</sup>  
 And the low pastimes of a country fair:  
 Too wretched to endure one lonely day,  
 Too proud one friendly visit to repay, } 90  
 Too indolent to read, too criminal to pray.

At length half dead, half mad, and quite confin'd,  
 Shunning, and shunn'd by all of human kind,  
 Ev'n robb'd of the last comfort of her life,  
 Insulting the poor curate's callous wife, 95  
 Pride, disappointed pride, now stops her breath,  
 And with true scorpion rage she stings herself to death.

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<sup>129</sup> *Bounces in* chimes in, blurts out, or talks loudly

<sup>130</sup> *Equipage* vehicles

<sup>131</sup> *One-horse chair* small carriage drawn by a single horse





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