

Sarah Fyge Egerton

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Sarah Fyge Egerton was born in London, England in 1670 as one of six daughters to the physician Thomas Fyge. In 1686, Egerton published her first and arguably most famous poetic work, *The Female Advocate*, which critiqued Robert Gould's 1682 publication *Love Given O'er: Or, a Satyr Against the Pride, Lust, and Inconsistency Etc. of Women*. The reissue of Gould's work in 1686 by Bentley and Tonson may have prompted Egerton's critique. In *The Female Advocate*, Egerton challenges Gould's misogynistic views on women, establishing herself as an advocate for the just treatment of women. Egerton's father was angered by her critique and sent her to live with relatives in the countryside, where she reluctantly married her first husband, Edward Field. In the years following her marriage, Egerton continued to publish her poetry and was invited to contribute to *The Nine Muses on the Death of John Dryden* in 1700. Following Field's death in the 1690s, Egerton married her second cousin Thomas Egerton, beginning a notoriously public and unhappy marriage.

In 1703, Egerton sued her husband for cruelty and the couple filed for divorce. The public nature of this suit is evident in Delarivier Manley's *Memoirs of Europe* (1710) and *The New Atlantis* (1709), which use codenames to blame Egerton for the deterioration of her marriage leading up to the suit. Ultimately, the divorce was unsuccessful, and Egerton remained married to her husband until his death in 1720. Egerton passed away on 13 February 1723 and was buried at the parish church of Winslow.

Egerton is best known among critics for her outspoken writing, much of which reflects her personal experience as a woman in marriage and society. In 1703, the same year that she filed for divorce, Egerton published her largest collection of poetry, titled *Poems on Several Occasions* and consisting of fifty-six individual poems. It includes "The Emulation," composed in formal iambic pentameter and heroic couplets. In this poem, Egerton criticizes men for limiting female potential, highlighting the capacity of female intellect and calling on women to further their education. While "The Emulation" was largely overlooked by Egerton's contemporaries, its subject attracts many readers in our current feminist society, making it one of her works that most often appear on amateur poetry websites.

Further Reading

- Genovese, Michael. "Profess as Much as I': Dignity as Authority in the Poetry of Sarah Fyge Egerton." *The Eighteenth Century*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2010, pp. 45–66.
- Medoff, Jeslyn. "New Light on Sarah Fyge (Field, Egerton)." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1982, pp. 155–75.
- Thomason, Laura E. *The Matrimonial Trap: Eighteenth-Century Women Writers Redefine Marriage*. Bucknell UP, 2015.

The Emulation²⁷

SAY Tyrant Custom, why must we obey,
 The impositions of thy haughty Sway;²⁸
 From the first dawn of Life,²⁹ unto the Grave,
 Poor Womankind's in every State, a Slave.
 The Nurse, the Mistress, Parent and the Swain,³⁰ 5
 For Love she must, there's none escape that Pain;
 Then comes the last, the fatal³¹ Slavery,
 The Husband with insulting Tyranny
 Can have ill Manners justify'd by Law;³²
 For Men all join to keep the Wife in awe.³³ 10
Moses who first our Freedom did rebuke,³⁴
 Was Marry'd³⁵ when he writ the Pentateuch;³⁶
 They're Wise to keep us Slaves, for well they know,
 If we were loose, we soon should make them, so.
 We yield like vanquish'd Kings whom Fetters³⁷ bind, 15
 When chance of War is to Usurpers kind;
 Submit in Form;³⁸ but they'd our Thoughts controul,

²⁷ *Poems on Several Occasions, Together with a Pastoral: By Mrs. S. F.*, London, 1703, pp. 108–109;
Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive

²⁸ *Sway* to rule or command from a position of power

²⁹ *first dawn of Life* the moment a baby is born

³⁰ *Swain* a potential lover

³¹ *fatal* fated or destined

³² *Law* refers to divine law and English common law

³³ *awe* feeling of terror or dread; instilling fear into someone to control them

³⁴ *Moses who first our Freedom did rebuke* the Hebrew prophet Moses supposedly wrote the Torah,
 which includes many laws restricting marriage

³⁵ *Was Marry'd* refers to the marriage between Moses and Zipporah

³⁶ *Pentateuch* the Torah, which becomes the first five books of the Old Testament

³⁷ *Fetters* a chain or shackle

³⁸ *Submit in Form* submitting outwardly (with your body)

And lay restraints on the impassive Soul:³⁹
 They fear we should excel their sluggish Parts, 20
 Should we attempt the Sciences and Arts.
 Pretend they were design'd for them alone,
 So keep us Fools to raise their own Renown;
 Thus Priests of old their Grandeur to maintain,
 Cry'd vulgar Eyes would sacred Laws Prophane.⁴⁰ 25
 So kept the Mysteries behind a Screen,⁴¹
 There Homage⁴² and the Name were lost had they been seen:
 But in this blessed Age, such Freedom's given,
 That every Man explains the Will of Heaven;⁴³
 And shall we Women now sit tamely by, } 30
 Make no excursions⁴⁴ in Philosophy,
 Or grace our Thoughts in tuneful Poetry?
 We will our Rights in Learning's World⁴⁵ maintain,
 Wit's Empire, now, shall know a Female Reign;⁴⁶
 Come all ye Fair,⁴⁷ the great Attempt improve, 35
 Divinely imitate the Realms above:

 There's ten celestial Females⁴⁸ govern Wit,

³⁹ *impassive Soul* intelligence or emotion that is invulnerable

⁴⁰ *vulgar Eyes would sacred Laws Prophane* probably refers to the Catholic church keeping the Bible in Latin

⁴¹ *Screen* refers to a rood screen: a partition that separates priests from the general public inside of a church

⁴² *Homage* respect

⁴³ *every Man explains the Will of Heaven* Protestant sects had multiplied and each branch had a different explanation of what God wanted

⁴⁴ *excursions* "a charge, attack, or incursion into enemy territory" (*OED*)

⁴⁵ *Learning's World* education

⁴⁶ *Wit's Empire, now, shall know a Female Reign* the speaker imagines a world where women have the right to education and rule the empire of wit

⁴⁷ *Fair* women

⁴⁸ *ten celestial Females* refers to Mnemosyne and her nine daughters the female muses: Calliope, Polyhymnia, Clio, Euterpe, Terpsichore, Melpomene, Erato, Thalia, and Urania

And but two Gods⁴⁹ that dare pretend to it;
And shall these finite Males reverse their Rules,
No, we'll be Wits, and then Men must be Fools.



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⁴⁹ *two Gods* Apollo and Mercury