

Sarah Fyge Egerton

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Sarah Fyge Egerton (1670-1723) was an English poet whose work highlights the limitations faced by women in Restoration and early eighteenth-century England. Born into a prosperous London family, she was the daughter of Thomas Fyge, a successful physician and city councilman, and his first wife, Rebecca Alcock. Egerton began her literary career at fourteen with *The Female Advocate* (1686), a poem defending women against Robert Gould's satire *Love Given O're*. Through her early writing in *The Female Advocate*, Egerton challenged the prevailing idea that women's intellect was inferior to men's. This marked the beginning of her lifelong opposition to social norms that restricted women's rights and self-expression.

Egerton's personal life reflected the limitations she criticized in her poetry. Despite her achievements, her father disapproved of her writing, leading to her temporary removal from London to Buckinghamshire under family supervision. In 1693, she married Edward Field, who died shortly afterward, leaving her a young widow. Her second marriage, to Rev. Thomas Egerton, was marked by conflict and scandal, culminating in an unsuccessful attempt to divorce him in 1703. These personal struggles reinforced the themes of freedom and autonomy that became central to her work.

"The Liberty" is one of Egerton's significant works, composed in heroic couplets—a form of rhymed iambic pentameter popular in the long eighteenth century. Egerton uses this elevated and dignified form to critique the restrictive social expectations imposed on women, particularly the idea that women should be confined to domestic roles and discouraged from intellectual pursuits. Egerton uses phrases such as "Fetters of Formality" to convey the restrictive customs that limited women's lives. She expresses her refusal to conform to societal norms unless they align with her values, emphasizing a commitment to live by her own principles.

"The Liberty," published during Egerton's lifetime but initially overlooked after her death in 1723, was recognized as an early feminist text in the twentieth century. Today, the poem stands as a significant work advocating for autonomy, noteworthy for its early engagement with issues of women's rights and self-determination.

Further Reading

- Feldman, Paula R. "Women Poets and Anonymity in the Romantic Era." *New Literary History*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2002, pp. 279–89.
- Genovese, Michael. "'Profess as Much as I': Dignity as Authority in the Poetry of Sarah Fyge Egerton." *The Eighteenth Century*, vol. 51, no. 1/2, 2010, pp. 45–66.
- Tague, Ingrid H. "Love, Honor, and Obedience: Fashionable Women and the Discourse of Marriage in the Early Eighteenth Century." *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2001, pp. 76–106.

The Liberty⁷⁰

Shall I be one, of those obsequious⁷¹ Fools,
 That square their lives, by Custom's scanty Rules;⁷²
 Condemn'd for ever, to the puny⁷³ Curse,
 Of Precepts taught, at Boarding-school, or Nurse,
 That all the business of my Life must be, 5
 Foolish, dull Trifling, Formality.
 Confin'd to a strict Magick complaisance,⁷⁴ }
 And round a Circle, of nice visits Dance,
 Nor for my Life beyond the Chalk⁷⁵ advance:
 The Devil Censure,⁷⁶ stands to guard the same, 10
 One step awry, he tears my ventrous Fame.
 So when my Friends, in a facetious Vein,⁷⁷
 With Mirth⁷⁸ and Wit, a while can entertain;
 Tho' ne'er so pleasant, yet I must not stay,
 If a commanding Clock, bids me away: 15
 But with a sudden start, as in a Fright,
 I must be gone indeed, 'tis after Eight.
 Sure these restraints, with such regret we bear, }
 That dreaded Censure, can't be more severe,
 Which has no Terror, if we did not fear; 20

⁷⁰ *Poems on Several Occasions, Together with a Pastoral*. London, printed and sold J. Nutt, 1703, pp. 19–21; *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*

⁷¹ *obsequious* obedient or submissive

⁷² *Custom's scanty Rules* restrictive and limited social conventions

⁷³ *puny* weak, feeble

⁷⁴ *complaisance* desire to please

⁷⁵ *the Chalk* the line, as in to cross the line

⁷⁶ *Censure* harsh judgment and criticism

⁷⁷ *facetious Vein* playful mood or manner

⁷⁸ *Mirth* joy and amusement

But let the Bug-bear,⁷⁹ timerous Infants fright,
 I'll not be scar'd, from Innocent delight:
 Whatever is not vicious, I dare do, }
 I'll never to the Idol Custom⁸⁰ bow, } 25
 Unless it suits with my own Humour too.
 Some boast their Fetters, of Formality, }
 Fancy they ornamental Bracelets be, }
 I'm sure they're Gyves, and Manacles⁸¹ to me.
 To their dull fulsome Rules, I'd not be ty'd, } 30
 For all the Flattery that exalts their Pride:
 My Sexs forbids, I should my Silence break,
 I lose my Jest,⁸² 'cause Women must not speak.
 Mysteries must not be, with my search Prophan'd,⁸³
 My Closet not with Books, but Sweat-meats⁸⁴ cram'd } 35
 A little *China*,⁸⁵ to advance the Show,
 My *Prayer Book*, and seven *Champions*,⁸⁶ or so.
 My Pen if ever us'd imploy'd must be, }
 In lofty Themes of useful Houswifery, }
 Transcribing old Receipts of Cookery: } 40
 And what is necessary 'mongst the rest,
 Good Cures for Agues,⁸⁷ and a cancer'd Breast, }
 But I can't here, write my *Probatum est*.⁸⁸ }

⁷⁹ *Bug-bear* an imaginary being invoked by nursery maids to scare children

⁸⁰ *Idol Custom* restrictive norms that society worships

⁸¹ *Gyves, and Manacles* shackles or restraints

⁸² *lose my Jest* may not make my joke

⁸³ *Prophan'd* "profaned" or disrespected

⁸⁴ *Sweat-meats* sweet treats and candies

⁸⁵ *China* decorative household item

⁸⁶ *seven Champions* *The Seven Champions of Christendom* (1597), a popular old romance

⁸⁷ *Agues* fever or chills

⁸⁸ *Probatum est* a phrase used in prescriptions to mean that the remedy has been tried and proven

My daring Pen, will bolder Sallies⁸⁹ make, 45
 And like myself, an uncheck'd freedom take;
 Not chain'd to the nice Order of my Sex,
 And with restraints my wishing Soul perplex:
 I'll blush at Sin, and not what some call Shame,
 Secure my Virtue, slight precarious⁹⁰ Fame. 50
 This Courage speaks me, Brave, 'tis surely worse,
 To keep those Rules, which privately we Curse:
 And I'll appeal, to all the formal Saints,
 With what reluctance they indure restraints.



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⁸⁹ *Sallies* sudden actions or ventures

⁹⁰ *precarious* uncertain or unstable