

Mary Darwall

Sonia Narwan, Simon Fraser University

Mary Darwall, British poet and playwright, lived from 1738 to 1794. Although she was not as well-known as some of her peers, she wrote two books of poetry. The first was praised by critics, and in 1774 she was recognized as one of “the British Nine,” a prestigious acknowledgment of her talent (Messenger 1). However, her second book, published thirty years later, did not receive the same recognition. She published a few separate poems, including “Liberty: An Elegy” (1770), but her work faded into obscurity. She was largely forgotten as a poet and playwright until the twentieth century, when scholars in search of lost women writers rediscovered her contributions to literature.

As Ann Messenger contends, Darwall omits references to her personal life in her poems with the exception of woman friends: “it is women friends whom she yearns to see, mourns for, and defends; it is to women friends that she addresses some of her most thoughtful and her most deeply felt poems” (13). “Liberty: an Elegy” is inscribed to a Miss Loggin. In iambic pentameter quatrains rhymed ABAB, it discusses happiness, liberty, and contentment. Mary borrows the idea of happy confinement that is not really happy from Johnson’s *Rasselas* (1759). Johnson’s hero pursues happiness by leaving his Happy Valley and discovers it is a futile effort. Mary’s poem does the same. She expresses the beauty of variety and the joys of freedom to explore all that nature has to offer, but the speaker Myra, unlike *Rasselas*, is unable to leave her Happy Valley.

Further Reading

- Blain, Virginia, *et al.*, *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English: Women Writers from the Middle Ages to the Present*. Yale UP, 1990.
- Brown, Susan, *et al.*, “Mary Darwall.” *Orlando: Women’s Writing in the British Isles from the Beginnings to the Present*, Cambridge UP, 2006.
- Kennedy, Deborah. “Literary Women.” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 35, no. 2, pp. 320–23.
- Messenger, Ann, editor. *Gender at Work: Four Women Writers of the Eighteenth Century*. Wayne State UP, 1990.

References

Messenger, Ann. *Woman and Poet in the Eighteenth Century: The Life of Mary Whateley Darwall (1738-1825)*. AMS Press, 1999.

Liberty: An Elegy²²²

TO you, Eliza, be these lays consign'd,²²³

Who blest in Freedom's fair dominions live;

While I, alas! am pompously confin'd,

Bereft of every joy the world can give.

In vain for me the blushing flowrets bloom,

5

And spring eternal decks the fragrant shade;

In vain the dewy myrtle breathes perfume,²²⁴

And sounds angelic echo thro' the glade.

The marble palaces, and glittering spires,²²⁵

What are they? Pageant glare, and empty show:

10

Ah! how unequal to my fond desires,

Which tell me – Freedom makes a heaven below.

Pensive I range these ever-verdant groves,

And sigh responsive to the murmuring stream;

While woodland warblers chant their happy loves,²²⁶

15

Dear Liberty is wretched Myra's theme.

The velvet lawns diversify'd with flowers,

In sweet succession every morn the same;

Fresh gales that breathe thro' amaranthine bowers,²²⁷

²²² *A collection of poems in four volumes. By several hands. Vol. III.* [The second edition]. G. Pearch, 1770, pp. 124–126

²²³ *Lays consign'd* the speaker is entrusting these poetic thoughts to Eliza

²²⁴ *Deny myrtle breathes* the sweet fragrance of the myrtle bush associated with poetry

²²⁵ *Glittering spires* this architectural description is typical Orientalism, projecting European ideas of exotic cultures onto Ambara, which is in Ethiopia

²²⁶ *Woodland Warblers* birds in the woods

²²⁷ *Amaranthine bowers* garden seats enclosed by bushes with reddish-purple flowers

And every charm inventive Art can frame,

20

Here fondly vie to crown this favour'd place

And here, to smooth captivity a prey,

Each royal child of Abyssinian race

Consumes the vacant inauspicious day.²²⁸

Tho' festive mirth awake the laughing morn

And guiltless revels lead the dancing hours;

Tho' purling rills the fertile meads adorn,

And the wild rock²²⁹ its spicy produce pours:

25

Yet what are these to fill a boundless mind?

Tho' gay²³⁰ each scene appear, 'tis still the same;

Variety – in vain I hope to find;

Variety, thou dear, but distant name!

With pleasure cloy'd, and sick of tasteless ease,

30

No sweet alternatives my spirits cheer;

Joys oft repeated lose their power to please,

And harmony grows discord to my ear.

Blest Freedom! how I long with thee to rove,

Where varying Nature all her charms displays;

To range the sun-burnt hill, the rifted²³¹ grove,

35

And trace the silver current's winding maze!

²²⁸ this stanza refers to the royal children as captives who pass purposeless days in idleness

²²⁹ *wild rock* perhaps rocks in the stream, splashed and producing mist

²³⁰ *gay* happy

²³¹ *rifted* the forest is split apart by the stream

Free as the wing'd inhabitants of air,
 Who distant climes and various seasons see,²³²
 Regions – tho' not, like soft Ambara, fair;
 Yet blest with change, and crown'd with liberty.

40

Vain wish! these rocks, whose summits pierce the skies,
 With frowning aspect tell me – Hope is vain:
 Till, freed by death, the purer spirit flies,
 Here wretched Myra's²³³ destin'd to remain.

45



[This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)

© Sonia Narwan, 2024

²³² *Who distant climes and various seasons see* the birds can see other places where it's not perpetually lovely

²³³ *wretched Myra* the speaker of the poem