

Mary Alcock

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Mary Alcock, born approximately 1741, was an English poet and writer born into a respectable family of six in eighteenth-century England as Mary Cumberland. Her father, Denison Cumberland, was a clergyman—who became a bishop later in life—and her mother, Joanna Bentley, had been the daughter of a Cambridge Trinity College scholar. Like Mary Alcock, her brother, Richard Cumberland, was also a writer. More specifically, he was a novelist and a playwright known for his many comedies. Her husband is still considered unknown, though there are many theories to who he was. Mary Alcock is best known for her poems “The Air Balloon; or, a Flying Mortal,” “A College Life,” and “The Confined Debtor: A Fragment from a Prison.” The latter two were published posthumously (after her death), like the majority of her works. She died in 1798 after becoming ill subsequent to visiting family in Bath. Although Alcock has not amassed much critical attention, after her passing at age fifty-seven, she has been recognized as a strong female author with confident disregard for old-fashioned gender roles.³²³

“A College Life” is a semi-comedic poem about the trials and tribulations of the average college student, originally published in *Poems Etc. Etc. By the Late Mrs. Mary Alcock*. She liked to keep her poems private, and mainly wrote them for her own enjoyment, having only officially published two herself before this collection was released publicly in 1799 by her niece, Joanna Hughes. The poem is in heroic couplets, meaning rhyming couplets in iambic pentameter. Although the *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive* currently tags it as an occasional poem, “A College Life” seems to better fit under the genre of “lampoon” because of its ironic and sarcastic nature. The subtitle says the poem was written for the vase at Bath-Easton, which means that she likely would have written it when visiting Lady Miller, another English poet who requested guests to put works into a vase she owned. It has not been confirmed whether she actually submitted it. Currently, not much else is known about this particular poem, but it is unlikely that this is written about a real situation. Something to note, however, is that higher education for women was unattainable during the eighteenth century.³²⁴

³²³ O’Connell, Michelle. *Mary Alcock*. Alexander Street Press, 2008.

³²⁴ “A History of Women’s Education in the UK.” *Oxford Royale*, Oxford Royale, www.oxford-royale.com/articles/history-womens-education-uk/. Accessed 31 Oct. 2024.

Considering her brother's work, it is clear a vein of comic humour runs in the family because of the way the last two lines undercut the rest of the poem, for the enjoyment of both those familiar with the post-secondary education experience and those who are not.

Further Reading

"A History of Women's Education in the UK." *Oxford Royale*, Oxford Royale, www.oxford-royale.com/articles/history-womens-education-uk/. Accessed 31 Oct. 2024.

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References

"A History of Women's Education in the UK." *Oxford Royale*, Oxford Royale, www.oxford-royale.com/articles/history-womens-education-uk/. Accessed 31 Oct. 2024.

Lonsdale, Roger. *Eighteenth Century Women Poets: An Oxford Anthology*. Oxford University Press, 1989.

O'Connell, Michelle. *Mary Alcock*. Alexander Street Press, 2008. Internet publication.

A College Life³²⁵

For the Vase at Bath-Easton

A COLLEGE life! I scorn the odious³²⁶ phrase;
 So dull a theme shall ne'er employ my lays:³²⁷
 A life indeed! 'twere fitter stil'd a death,
 Unless 'tis life merely to draw upon your breath;
 By fusty³²⁸ walls coop'd up, as in a pen, 5
 'Mongst fusty books, and still more fusty men.
 Can this be life, by gothic³²⁹ rules compell'd
 To part from liberty, or be expell'd?
 At early dawn roused by the bell to matin,³³⁰
 The live long day confined to Greek and Latin; 10
 At such an hour amongst old dons³³¹ to dine,
 Yet not allow'd a social glass of wine;
 With cap in hand across the court to go,
 But not to touch the grass-plat³³² with your toe,
 Lest dire expulsion for that breach of laws 15
 Seize on the culprit with its iron claws.
 If when fatigu'd at ev'ning, he should take
 A nap too long, and not to pray'rs awake,
 Strait through the College shall his name resound,

³²⁵ *Poems, &c. &c. by the Late Mrs. Mary Alcock*. London: Printed for C. Dilly, Poultry, 1799, pp. 115-117; *Eighteenth Century Poetry Archive*

³²⁶ *odious* "Deserving of hatred; exciting hatred or repugnance" (OED)

³²⁷ *lays* songs, poems

³²⁸ *fusty* dull, musty, out of fashion

³²⁹ *gothic* medieval, old-fashioned

³³⁰ *matin* morning prayers

³³¹ *dons* (plural) "A learned person; a scholar, esp. a fellow or tutor at an Oxford or Cambridge college; (now also, more generally) a lecturer or professor" (OED)

³³² *grass-plat* undergraduates were forbidden from walking on the grassy plots inside their college quadrangles

Dead or alive, the caitiff³³³ must be found: 20
 Or if perchance some friend or lady fair
 Should draw him forth to taste the noontide air,
 Then as a squirrel,³³⁴ who his chain has broke,
 Or slave new ransom'd from his galling yoke,³³⁵
 His liberty he hugs, with joy elate, } 25
 He for a while forgets his servile³³⁶ state,
 Nor e'er reflects on bars, or keys, or gate.
 But now the college clock with gloomy knell³³⁷
 Assails his ear, and like conjurer's spell
 Strikes thro' his heart — with horror in his face 30
 Sudden he starts — his short-liv'd joy gives place.
 With eager strides swift thro' the streets he hies,³³⁸
 And at the portal for admittance cries,
 But cries in vain — for ah! 'tis all too late;
 The porter³³⁹ hears, but won't unbar the gate; 35
 Abash'd³⁴⁰ the youth retires with thoughtful pace,
 Dreams of jobation,³⁴¹ lectures and disgrace;
 Next morn by Master, Tutor, Fellows rated,³⁴²
 In short, not much unlike a bear when baited.³⁴³

³³³ *caitiff* a miserable or unpleasant person or captive

³³⁴ *squirrel* squirrels were often kept as pets in the long eighteenth century

³³⁵ *galling yoke* an irritating or offensive restraint or bond

³³⁶ *servile* to be serving of others; slave-like

³³⁷ *knell* "The sound made by a bell when struck or rung, esp. the sound of a bell rung slowly and solemnly, as immediately after a death or at a funeral" (*OED*)

³³⁸ *hies* to hasten or move with speed

³³⁹ *porter* a gatekeeper or doorkeeper in charge of an entrance

³⁴⁰ *Abash'd* "Feeling embarrassed or unsettled" (*OED*)

³⁴¹ *jobation* "a reprimand, esp. a lengthy and tedious one" (*OED*)

³⁴² *rated* berated

³⁴³ *baited* bearbaiting was a sport in which men set dogs to attack a captive bear

Since this a College Life, peace to that pair,³⁴⁴ 40
 Who dying left me to a Guardian's care,
 And he, thank Fortune, to unbend my mind,
 Chose a young Tutor, gay,³⁴⁵ polite and kind,
 Who, anxious much my morals to advance,
 Took me a tour thro' Italy and France; 45
 Gave me the Graces,³⁴⁶ which I more admire
 Than all the learning I could else acquire:
 This, this is life, but that within a College,
 Which musty pedants³⁴⁷ term the Seat of Knowledge,
 Let pedants take — I will not see their faces, 50
 But live and die devoted to the Graces.

Thus Florio³⁴⁸ talk'd — much noise and little matter,
 'Tis thus, that puppies yelp, and monkies chatter.



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³⁴⁴ *that pair* his parents

³⁴⁵ *gay* lively and good-humoured

³⁴⁶ *Graces* social etiquette and graceful behaviour

³⁴⁷ *pedants* people who show off their learning in great detail

³⁴⁸ *Florio* his name literally means “flowery”; a foppish name, typifying a male who is more concerned with status or appearance than brains