Mary, Lady Chudleigh (1656–1710): Poet, Protofeminist and Patron

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‘She was a lady of great virtue as well as great understanding’, who, by ‘her own love of books, her great industry in the reading of them and her great capacity to improve herself by them enabled her to make a very considerable figure among the literati of her time’, wrote George Ballard in praise of Mary, Lady Chudleigh in Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain (1752).¹ Ballard’s adulation of Chudleigh, combined with the polemical nature of some of her poetry, was largely responsible for her lasting – albeit marginalized – standing in literary history. From the mid-eighteenth century to the present day, her reputation has endured through a handful of anthologies and biographical dictionaries under various appellations, including an ‘Eminent Lady’, a ‘Female Worthy’ and, ultimately, in the late twentieth century, a ‘First Feminist’.² Whichever title one chooses, Chudleigh made a unique contribution to an early feminist movement that employed rational arguments on behalf of women’s intellectual and spiritual autonomy.

Mary, Lady Chudleigh, was born Mary Lee to Richard and Mary (née Sydenham) Lee in the summer of 1656 and was baptized on 19 August of the same year.³ Little is known about Chudleigh’s early life, but according to one of her descendants she was well educated and encouraged in her intellectual pursuits from an early age by both her parents.⁴ With ‘her father’s consent’, on 25 March 1674, at Clyst St George, Devon, Mary Lee married George Chudleigh of Ashton, who became the third Baronet in 1691 upon his father’s death.⁵ Sir George and Mary, Lady Chudleigh, had several children, but only two of their sons, George (1683–1738) and Thomas (1687–1726), survived to adult-
hood. Chudleigh, herself, suffered from a severe rheumatic condition to which she succumbed on 15 December 1710.6

Chudleigh was a quintessential turn-of-the-eighteenth-century learned lady, since she participated in the two worlds of manuscript and print culture. The material evidence that survives also suggests that Chudleigh was involved in several epistolary networks. Letters offered Chudleigh, who was often resident in Devon, the chance to exchange poetry and to participate in the literary world from a distance. Chudleigh and her protégée, the poet Elizabeth Thomas (1675–1731), kept up a correspondence between 1701 and 1706, which was published primarily in Whartoniana (1727), Pylades and Corinna (1731) and The Honourable Lovers (1732). As well as exchanging letters and writings, Thomas also delivered letters on behalf of Chudleigh to her friends in London. In a letter dated 15 October 1703, Chudleigh says, ‘I think my self infinitely obliged to Dr. [Samuel] Garth, to whom I desire you to do me the Favour to present the inclosed Letter’;7 and, in one dated 31 May 1706, Chudleigh thanks Thomas for passing on messages to their friends Mrs Bridgeman and Mrs Hemington.8 Their letters provide an example of an epistolary network in action.

Chudleigh, however, was not only Thomas’s friend – she was also her patron. At the turn of the eighteenth century women from a wide variety of backgrounds were often drawn together because of their mutual interests in women’s role in society, specifically in relation to religion, education and marriage. As a result patron/protégée relationships often developed into friendships, despite discrepancies in social class. We do not know if Chudleigh ever gave Thomas gifts of money, but she certainly offered her other types of patronage, such as correspondence, conversation, introductions and ultimately friendship. The protofeminist inclinations of Thomas and Chudleigh drew them together and developed into a friendship, which in turn promoted further polemical and didactic writings.

_The Ladies Defence: Or, The Bride-Woman’s Counsellor Answer’d_ (1710)

John Sprint was a non-conformist minister who delivered an infamous sermon on 11 May 1699 at Sherborne in Dorsetshire which was published later that year as _The Bride-Womans Counseller._9 Aside from Chudleigh’s, Sprint’s sermon instigated one other response in print: _The Female Preacher_ (c. 1699), later published as _The Female Advocate_ (1700), by the pseudonymous writer Eugenia.