

## OF HUMILITY

by Mary, Lady Chudleigh  
From *Essays upon Several Subjects* (1710)

Of all the Virtues which adorn the humane Nature, there is none more admirable than *Humility*. 'Tis the most charming Ornament of the Mind, that which gives the finishing Stroke to all its other Perfections; it invites the admiring Spectator, and joins Love with Veneration; while *Pride*, like the fiery Guardian of *Paradise*, keeps us at a Distance, and mixes Fear and Aversion with the Honours we pay the Great.

But 'tis highly advantageous to us on several other Accounts, besides that of the Service it does us in giving us a Title to the Affection of those we converse with: it makes us watchful over our selves, fences us against Flattery, furnishes us with a necessary Diffidence, a needful Circumspection, keeps us reserv'd and silent, modest and respectful, attentive to what is said, and willing to be instructed, makes us easie in Conversation, not apt to be passionate, dogmatical, or imposing, ever ready to submit to the Decision of Reason, and never better pleas'd, than when we make a Part of the Triumphs of Truth.

The humble Mind is still improving, always employ'd in discovering its Defects, and in filling up Vacancies; it sees its own Worthlessness, and blushes at it, feels every Malady, and endeavours to cure it; while the Proud are despising and censuring others, this is finding fault with its self. While they are ridiculing Mankind, making uncharitable Reflections, malicious Remarks, ruining Reputations, misconstruing innocent Actions, making wrong Comments on Words, and magisterially dictating to all about them: This is nicely examining it self, making a narrow Scrutiny into every Intention, following the Soul into her most hidden Recesses, tracing her through all the Labyrinths of Thought, through all the intricate Mazes of the Understanding; and then passing an impartial Judgement on whatever it finds amiss: 'Tis always ready to acknowledge its Errors, to beg Pardon for its Faults, and still places reproofs among the greatest Favours; is never tempted to envy the more Deserving, nor concern'd to see others more valued; is neither to be provoked by Contradictions, nor inrag'd by Affronts; the first it can bear with Ease, because the Knowledge it has of its own Ignorance keeps it from being tenacious of its Sentiments, or too much bigoted with its own Notions; and the other it can sustain with Patience, support with a becoming Temper, because it assumes nothing to it self, lays no claim to Praise. Now such a Disposition cannot but be infinitely desirable, as being the Source of an uninterrupted Serenity, and the Foundation on which the noblest and most beautiful Superstructures imaginable may be raised.

The tow'ring self-sufficient Mind  
Hastily leaves the World behind;  
Like *Icarus*, does soar too high,  
Too near the melting Heat does fly:  
It tempts the Dangers it should shun,  
And by Presumption is undone:  
While such as with a prudent Care,  
By small Essays for Flight prepare;

Who raise themselves by slow Degrees,  
First only perch upon the Trees  
Or on the Summit of some Hill,  
E're they their great Designs fulfil,  
There prune their Wings, and thence with Fear  
Explore the dusky Atmosphere;  
Which having done, they higher rise,  
And trembling mount the upper Skies:  
Then, more embolden'd take their Way  
Thro' purest Air to brightest Day,  
May roam at large in Fields of Light,  
And safely leave both Earth and Night.

Those who rise by such secure Steps, who mount gradually, who frequently try their Strength, often use and extend their Wings, and for some considerable time fly near the Ground, (where should they fail, their Fall would not be very hazardous) before they venture to soar aloft, will, by their Prudence and necessary Caution, be able to maintain their Station, to live in the Heights to which their Industry and Merit have elevated them, and will be so happy to see themselves out of danger of being involv'd in the Misfortunes of the *Phaetons* of the World, who think themselves capable of driving the Chariot of the Sun, of ordering the Affairs of the Universe, of managing the great Machine of Nature, and were the admirable Frame now to be set together, would, with the audacious *Alphonsus*, be so arrogant, as to presume to advise the Almighty Architect, and think themselves wise enough to assist him in the Government of the World. 'Tis wonderful that Men should be so little acquainted with themselves, be such Strangers to the Narrowness of their Faculties, to the Limitedness of their Understandings! But that which is most amazing is, that such as have the smallest Share of Sense, who are but one Remove from Idiots, should have a high Opinion of their Reason; that Blockheads should take themselves to be Wits, and Fools set up for Teachers of Wisdom.

They whose Fire does dimly shine,  
In Smoke hid from themselves remain;  
Their Heat cannot their Dross refine,  
Nor chase thick Vapours from their Brain:  
They think they see, yet still are blind,  
Think they alone are blest with Sight.  
This, for their Good, has Heav'n design'd,  
That they may still enjoy Delight:  
For if it should the Vail remove,  
They quickly would themselves despise;  
From Ignorance proceeds their Love,  
In that alone their Dotage lies.

Self-love and Ignorance please the generality of Mankind; they make the bitter draught of Life go down; they not only quicken and exhilarate their Spirits, give a Relish to all their Enjoyments, but make them easie in every State, under every

Circumstance: They support the poor Man and comfort the Miserable, make the Great Man exult amidst ten thousand Cares, the haughty Courtier fawn and wheedle, the proud affected Fop, the empty tawdry Beau, the fantastick noisy Woman, pleas'd and satisfy'd with themselves; they keep the greatest part of the World in Humour, and are as of much use to Fools, as Wisdom is to Men of Sense. For were their Eyes open, their Understandings enlighten'd, could they see themselves distinctly, view their Faces in Mirrours and fancy they rather saw Monkeys playing Tricks, than Men acting rational Parts; rather a Company of Buffoons diverting a senseless Mob, than intelligent Beings, than Pretenders to Wisdom. Thus they appear to us, and thus we appear to them: Those we laugh at this Day, perhaps will laugh at us to Morrow; and those very Qualities we admire in our selves may render us despicable to others. Thus the Frolick goes round, and we scorn, and are scorn'd by Turns.

Now, should any body be so generous, as to endeavour to undeceive us, so kind as to tell us, that we have no reason to be so childishly fond of our selves, that we foolishly view our selves at the magnifying End of the Perspective, that we set too high a Value on our Possessions, on our Persons, our Acquirements, and the Endowments of our Minds, exalt Molehills into Mountains, think our selves Giants in Understanding, when we are but Pygmies in Sense; *Narcissus's* for Beauty, when perhaps we have no more Pretence to it than the *Thersite's* of the *Esops* of the Age, we should grow angry, so little are we able to bear the Language of Truth. Such obliging Reprovers would meet with *Socrates's* fate they would make Enemies, engage the greatest part of Mankind against them. *Humility* is a solitary Virtue, few desire her Society, she palls their Joy, abates their Tumour, lowers their tow'ring Imagination, and gives them a mortifying Prospect of themselves: They praise her because they think it decent to do so, because 'tis for their Reputation; but they keep her at a Distance, will not make her an Inmate, will not treat her as a Friend, lest she should grow too familiar, should presume to unmask them, and by discovering them to themselves, rob them of the Satisfaction of fancying they have some Pretence for their Pride.

Had *Socrates* been unsollicitous about the Reason why *Apollo* pronounc'd him the wisest of Men, he had remain'd secure; had he acquiesced in the humble Thoughts he had of himself, he had been exempted from the Persecution of his ungrateful Countrymen; but when he resolv'd to try if he could find any wiser than himself, when he begun the allarming Search, when he pulled his *Athenians* out of their belov'd *Asylum*, endeavour'd to convince them of their Ignorance, to perswade them they were not the persons they took themselves to be; that in pretending to know Things, they only render'd their Folly the more conspicuous: and that they fell infinitely short of him, to whom the God gave so desirable a Title, on no other Account but because he humbly disclaim'd all Knowledge, all Pretences to Wisdom, he made them his implacable Enemies: Not only the Politicians, the Masters of Eloquence, and the Poets, but also the Tradesmen, those whose Enquiries ought to have been confin'd to their Shops, to the business of their respective Callings; both the Wits and the Fools, the Nobles and the Peasants, the Boasters of Sense and the brutish Multitude, were all intrag'd against him, and he fell the glorious Martyr of Truth. Who would not envy such a Fate? and much rather chuse to be the humble, patient, dying *Socrates*, than the haughty, passionate, vainglorious *Alexander*? Methinks, I see him take the Cup, and with a meek, forgiving, cheerful Air, a Look

that speaks Content, and shows a modest, a submissive Temper, drink off the welcome Draught. O how much happier was he, than his accusers.

Give me a lowly Mind, a Mind like his, and take who will the Trifles of the Earth; from them my Soul has long been wean'd. Where-e'er I look, there's nothing tempting; nothing without deserves my Notice, and within my self I cannot see enough to merit my Regard; my Thoughts are dark, confus'd and full of Error, and there's not any thing I can truly say I know; with him I freely own my Ignorance. But O! I fear I have not yet attain'd his firmness, his calm unalter'd temper: I could not, like him, without Emotion, bear Reproaches, hear unconcern'd myself expos'd, and made the publick Jest: Calumnies like his would grate upon my Spirits, make my Life uneasie, and prove much worse to be endur'd, than Poverty or Pain, or Death it self. But what's the Source of this? From whence proceeds this Tenderness? This Sense of Ills which have their Being but in Fancy, are Creatures of Opinion: Alas! It must proceed from Pride. Were I as humble, my Apprehensions sure would be the same with his, and I should be as little mov'd at Censure as Applause, which, till I am, I have no Pretence to Happiness; my Satisfaction will not be my own, but in the Power of every envious Wretch, every base Detractor; which to prevent, I will strive to learn this needful Lesson, prepare myself for what may happen, will still encourage depreciating Thoughts, accustom myself to Reprehension, to be told my Faults; and if it be in Anger, yet to bear it with a mild and gentle Temper.

Reproaches often useful prove,  
Malice may be as kind as Love;  
No matter what the Bad intend,  
If I'm the better, I've my End:  
If that I to my self propose,  
I shall defeat my greatest Foes.

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### **Further Reading**

Margaret J. M. Ezell, *The Poems and Prose of Mary, Lady Chudleigh*. Oxford University Press, 1993.