“To be both Patroness and Friend”¹
Patronage, Friendship, and Protofeminism in the Life of Elizabeth Thomas (1675–1731)

REBECCA M. MILLS

Since you such kind Commands are pleas’d to send,
And bless me with the charming Name of Friend:
How can I longer with your Will dispute?
No, Madam! know, your Pow’r is absolute.
So kindly you, for all my Fears provide,
What Faults the Critick sees, the candid Friend will hide.²

The charming “Friend” to whom Elizabeth Thomas writes in “To the Lady Pakington at the Bath; with these POEMS in Manuscript” is Lady Hester Pakington, the daughter and heiress of Sir Herbert Perrott of Haroldston, Pembrokeshire, and the second wife of the Tory politician, Sir John Pakington (1671–1727).³ In this short poem, attached to a manuscript of Thomas’s verses sent to Lady Pakington, Thomas offers the adulation that one might expect in praise of her social superior and patroness. It is well established that Thomas struggled most of her life to maintain her status as a gentlewoman, so her efforts to obtain patronage through her poetry and correspondence are hardly surprising. What is striking about Thomas’s attempts to gain patronage in the early eighteenth century is the emphasis she places on friendship, particularly in relation to her women patrons.

On the one hand, Lady Pakington’s condescension to Thomas in allowing her to be considered a “Friend” can be construed as just another form of patronage. Being admitted to the “conversation” of someone from a superior social class was significant at a time when social status was a type of
currency. Through her connection to Lady Pakington, as Dustin Griffin suggests, Thomas may have experienced “a rise in status, which in turn carried economic value at a time when income and access to economic resources were closely correlated with rank.” Moreover, patrons were often invited to give protection to authors’ texts—to act as friends, not critics—a role Thomas specifically requests of Lady Pakington in the final line of the quotation above.

On the other hand, Lady Pakington may have overlooked social inequalities to strike up a sincere friendship with Thomas because of their mutual interest in literature, particularly occasional poetry. Aside from Thomas lending her manuscript of poems to Lady Pakington, the two also shared a correspondence. In a letter that Lady Pakington wrote to Thomas, dated 30 May 1701, an ongoing association becomes apparent. In fact, Lady Pakington apologizes to Thomas for a lapse in their correspondence by writing, “I must always acknowledge kind Corinna (Thomas’s pseudonym) to be the best natur’d & most generous Person in ^Ye World since she can still have obliging thoughts ffor one XXXXX who so little deserves them.” Lady Pakington compliments Thomas’s “Verses,” which she still has in her possession, and says that “I was glad of an excuse not, to restore [them] when I was in London.” Lady Pakington closes the letter by expressing concern for Thomas’s health and assuring Thomas of her friendship.

Not much material evidence survives that connects Thomas to Lady Pakington, but what does survive, especially when viewed in context with other letters Thomas wrote, reveals a pattern in Thomas’s life. Thomas repeatedly sought out patronage from accomplished women, and exogamous friendships developed as a result of mutual interests. The fact that Thomas made friends with artistic, learned women was not an accident. Throughout most of her life, Thomas attempted to cultivate her mind and spirituality through carefully chosen friendships. Through her texts and letters, literary historians can glimpse an aspect of early eighteenth-century life in which like-minded women of different social classes came together and were motivated to act or write on behalf of other women. In this environment, Thomas thrived and developed a reputation for her learning and wit.

**Eighteenth-Century Women and Patronage**

Women were a part of the patronage system as both authors and patrons in the eighteenth century, but the options for women were more limited than for their male counterparts. Official positions in government or the
church were out of the question, but women could benefit from gifts of money, encouragement, conversation, introductions, companionship, advice, scribal circulation, and extended visits. Like Aphra Behn, a woman writer could have relied on the aristocracy to patronize her plays to maximize their large third-night takings; like Delarivier Manley, she could have written for a political party; like Elizabeth Singer Rowe, she could have received protection from a peer such as Lord Weymouth and his family; like Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea, she could have received encouragement and publication exposure through an established male author just as Finch did from Jonathan Swift; like Elizabeth Thomas, she could have written dedications and panegyrics and have been a humble companion; and finally, as the century progressed, she could have done exceptionally well through subscriptions, like Anne Yearsley.7

In the letters and texts that survive from polemical, protofeminist women writers of late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, one can find many examples of their attempts to gain recognition and patronage both in book dedications and with complimentary verses.8 Protofeminist women writers were no strangers to the panegyric or the dedication. After receiving some financial assistance from William Sancroft, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Mary Astell dedicated a manuscript volume of poems to him in 1689; moreover, Sarah Fyge Egerton dedicated her Poems on Several Occasions (1703) to the great universal patron, Charles Montagu, first Earl of Halifax, and one can find many panegyrics and elegies included in her compilation of poems. Mary, Lady Chudleigh dedicated her Essays on Several Subjects (1710) to Sophia, Electress of Hanover, the mother of the future George I; panegyrics also abound in her Poems on Several Occasions (1703). A protofeminist poet in her own right, Elizabeth Thomas used her poems and letters to appeal to a broad spectrum of people from different classes and political allegiances. Aside from writing poems to Lady Pakington, whose husband, Sir John, was a well-known Tory, Thomas, like her contemporary and possible acquaintance Egerton, also appealed to the great Whig patron, Charles Montagu.9 Thomas did not just target peers, since she dedicated many of her poems to members of the gentry and middle classes as well as contemporary authors and musicians.

As previously mentioned, money and gifts were not the only sources of patronage that could be useful to a woman writer. In a time when there was still a stigma attached to learned women, many women writers sought to have their authorial attempts recognized through the approval or the encouragement of their male peers. Fathers, brothers, and non-related male authors could offer a type of patronage that one might term mentoring today. Isobel Grundy has identified this type of patronage in relation to
Samuel Johnson and women writers of the mid-eighteenth century. The same could be said for the literary friendships that developed in the social writing culture of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries like those Jane Barker maintained with the Cambridge men she wrote to after her brother died, whom she mentions in her semi-autobiographical text, *A Patch-Work Screen for the Ladies* (1723). According to the female speaker of *A Patch-Work*, the students, aside from encouraging her literary endeavors, relieved my *Solitude*, and, in some Degree, dissipated that Melancholy wherewith I was oppress’d: And in their Absence (as I said before) visited me with Letters, and little Presents of the newest Pieces of Diversion that came to their Hands.

Well-known male authors such as John Locke, John Norris of Bemerton, and John Dryden often wrote to and received letters and poems from aspiring women writers. Locke had a particularly close relationship with Lady Damaris Masham, but the Lovelace collection in the Bodleian contains a large selection of letters to and from other women as well. The same is true of Dryden and Norris, who corresponded with and encouraged numerous women writers during their lives. Ruth Perry notes the important outlet that correspondence offered many aspiring women writers: “Letters permitted women to select teachers and mentors for themselves, and to establish a kind of intellectual apprenticeship that they had no other means of arranging.”

With no father or brothers to assist or encourage her, Elizabeth Thomas had to rely on her own initiative to get moral support and other kinds of patronage. Aside from relying heavily on her extended relations and family friends, she also cultivated correspondences with several contemporary authors, including John Norris and John Dryden. Literary historians have accused her of being a fortune hunter: the old *Dictionary of National Biography* (1895) states that she “contrived to extract some didactic letters from Henry [sic] Norris of Bemerton, which she published in a cheap duodecimo to relieve her necessities while in the Fleet.” In *The Works of John Dryden* (1808), Sir Walter Scott says that Thomas “contrived” to make an acquaintance with Dryden, the “good-natured poet.” Originally, Thomas had no intention of publishing the letters that Norris and Dryden wrote to her at the turn of the century—poverty and fear of imprisonment in the 1720s forced her to act desperately. Her alleged crime of receiving money for the publication of their letters decades after their actual correspondence seems to pale when one considers her dire financial situation at the time. Moreover her material gain could only have been minimal
since she did not avoid serving time in the Fleet in the first place, and in the second, she could not afford her freedom until 1730 even though it was granted by an Act of Insolvency in 1729.17

While Thomas cultivated connections with several male patrons, it is her female patrons who are the most interesting. 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 sometimes developed into friendships, despite discrepancies in social class. Such class leveling, in London in particular, has been partially explained by the city’s growing size and diversity as well as the trend in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries whereby men and women chose friends based on their common intellectual and spiritual interests rather than their social standing.18 A further explanation lies in the fact that protofeminist consciousness had developed by the end of the seventeenth century to the point whereby women from different classes had begun to identify with each other as a downtrodden political group held back by custom.19 However, the leveling between the social classes had its limits. The women at the lower end of the social scale were still respectable and came from families that would probably be middle-class today. Neither Astell nor Thomas was well-off, but they both claimed to be gentlewomen. Moreover, class could never be entirely forgotten. The letters of Astell and Thomas to their socially superior friends contain constant reminders of the gulf that divided them.

Mary Astell’s Chelsea Circle

Astell’s Chelsea circle of women patrons is a good place to start when discussing literary networks from the turn of the eighteenth century because a significant amount of material evidence survives. Astell, a poor but respectable Northerner, came to London in order to make her way in the world. Through her wit, intellectual prowess, and a little help from high Tory and possibly even some Jacobite patrons, Astell eventually gained financial independence. Patronage for Astell was vital, and she chose her patrons carefully—powerful men and women whose political and religious beliefs were in line with her own. When her relations would no longer assist her, Astell turned to William Sancroft, Archbishop of Canterbury, a churchman of high principles who patronized her in the late 1680s with gifts of money and introductions. Rich Wilkin, her bookseller and political ally, helped to start her career as a published author, and John Norris of Bemerton corresponded with her and subsequently persuaded her to publish
their letters, which brought her much literary prestige.

The most significant patrons/friends in her life, however, were the wealthy, learned women who supported her, such as Lady Elizabeth Hastings, Lady Ann Coventry, Lady Catherine Jones, and Elizabeth Hutchenson. Perry comments on the significance that friendship, particularly with like-minded women, had for Astell:

> It would be a serious distortion . . . not to detail Mary Astell’s private friendships in telling the story of her life. Self-consciously identifying herself by gender before any other social categorization, she wrote four of her books expressly for a female audience. Her sense of self was very much bound up in relationships with other women; she both needed and relied upon the community of friends who supported her.20

The same could be said of Elizabeth Thomas and her female friendships. The significance of Astell’s links to other women through friendship and patronage in relation to her work as an activist on behalf of women cannot be overstated. Independently, Astell could publish her polemical texts defending the intellectual and spiritual rights of women, but she would never have succeeded in realizing her practical goals without assistance—one case in point is that her proposal for a Protestant nunnery at the turn of the century failed without the backing of a wealthy patron. The Chelsea school, which Astell later helped to establish in 1709, was part of the charity school movement that developed rapidly in the early eighteenth century, but its establishment was also an integral part of Astell’s plan to affect positive change in relation to women’s education. The establishment and successful running of the school was protofeminism in action—her practical legacy to women’s education after years of theoretical and polemical writing. Not surprisingly, the school was also a project strongly supported by three of her closest patrons and friends, Lady Elizabeth Hastings, Lady Catherine Jones, and Lady Ann Coventry. Pious, wealthy and learned, according to Perry, “Each of these women maintained a web of connections with many women—including the relatives of their personal servants—and each manifested an impulse to support, encourage, and educate other women in a variety of ways.”21

Astell and her patrons shared a mutual admiration because of their common philosophical and religious beliefs. Although class differences could never be entirely forgotten, Astell developed sincere friendships with her like-minded patrons that turned out to be life-long. Perry claims that Astell’s ability to effect change through the support of patrons/friends was unusual and that all contemporary women writers were not so lucky:
One could actually do something in concert with such a powerful friend. The literary women in whose company Astell had inevitably found herself when she first came to London had no such power in the world but were as ineffectual as she. Elizabeth Elstob could not collect enough advance subscriptions to publish her own Anglo-Saxon translations; the poet Elizabeth Thomas was reduced for subsistence to dealing in scandalous materials, and satirized for it by Pope in *The Dunciad* as “Corinna.” Without influence or money these women could hardly help themselves, let alone help Astell realize her dream of independence.22

It is true that both Elstob and Thomas struggled financially, especially later in their lives. However, Thomas did flourish intellectually and achieve a measure of stability, especially at the turn of the eighteenth century with a set of her own wealthy women patrons/friends.

The Friends and Patrons of Elizabeth Thomas

Thomas, a gentlewoman by birth, lacked financial security in her life from the time her father died when she was two years old. Like her contemporary and acquaintance Mary Astell, she relied heavily on patronage from friends and family. In the flurry of protofeminist activity at the turn of the eighteenth century, Thomas blossomed under the protection of her friends and patrons. From the surviving letters, one can piece together several of the literary networks in which Thomas participated. Although there are others, Thomas mentions three particular women patrons/friends: Anne (Wild) West, Lady Dowager De La Warr, the wife of Charles West, the fifth Baron De La Warr; Diana (Vernatti) Bridgeman, the wife of William Bridgeman of Combs, Suffolk, M.P., clerk to the Privy Council of James II and secretary to the Admiralty; and Mary, Lady Chudleigh, the wife of Sir George Chudleigh, Baronet.23 All three women were dead by 1710.

De La Warr, whose pseudonym was Sulpitia, was known for her learning and piety; Bridgeman was known as Musidora for her musical talent and generosity to the poor; and Chudleigh was known as Marissa or Melissa for her literary talents. Thomas very well may have been a humble companion to Lady De La Warr, who died in May 1703. Later that same year, Thomas was introduced to Diana Bridgeman and her daughter, Katherine, through Chudleigh. That Thomas and her patrons/friends actively participated in varied social and literary networks is apparent from Thomas’s letters written in the first decade of the eighteenth century.
Of the selection of poems Thomas wrote to De La Warr and Bridgeman, many seem like straightforward attempts to gain favor and patronage. For instance, in “On Mrs. DIANA BRIDGEMAN’s Playing on the Lute,” Thomas commends her patron’s musical talent with the enthusiasm expected of a protégée:

When Musidora strikes the Lyre,
Such Heav’ly Charms descend,
As more than humane Joys inspire,
And all our Cares unbend

Cease! cease those speaking Strings to guide,
Our Souls are wound so high,
Unless you lay the Lyre aside,
We shall with Rapture die.24

Thomas describes Chudleigh’s literary texts with similar ardor. In “To the Lady CHUDLEIGH, The Anonymous Author of the Lady’s Defence,” Thomas introduces herself, coins Chudleigh’s pseudonym, Marissa, and praises Chudleigh’s intellectual prowess in her literary battle against John Sprint, the author of The Bride-Womans Counseller (1699):

Marissa Hail! hail Eloquence divine!
What solid Judgment sparkles in each Line!
What strenuous Proofs in ev’ry Period shine!
With such Success the happy Goal you reach,
Not Wisdom’s self could better lessons teach;
Could more impartially the Case decide,
And solve the Doubts that rose on either Side.
Fly! brutal Wretches fly! no more proclaim
Your want of Candour, and your Love of Shame:
No more the Foibles of the Sex explore
But own the Force of Virtue’s sovereign Pow’r:
Let bright Marissa! now your Rage disarm,
Whose Eyes are Darts, whose ev’ry Word’s a Charm.25

Poems addressed to De La Warr before she died also have the same complimentary tone. A first-time reader of Thomas’s poems might not notice much difference between her odes and panegyrics to other men and women, compared to the examples above, especially since Thomas is always careful to ensure a respectful tone toward her social superiors. As in the poem she wrote to Lady Pakington, however, there is a palpable difference between Thomas’s poems written to secure general patronage from people
such as Charles Montagu, Earl of Halifax, and the ones she wrote to De La Warr, Bridgeman, and Chudleigh. This difference can be found in the way Thomas frequently focuses on the friendships they shared.

Examinations of her letters, combined with close readings of several of her poems, reveal much more intimate connections than one might expect between a protégée and her patrons. Interpreting some of Thomas’s texts in an autobiographical light, especially the elegies she wrote to her three main patrons, is particularly useful when attempting to unravel her connections with them. De La Warr was the first to die in May 1703. Although not her best poetic effort, Thomas’s “On the Death of the Right Honourable Anne, Lady Dowager De La Warr” apotheosizes an enlightened woman for her great mind, wit, condescension, virtue and conduct:

Come here, ye fair One’s, hither come;  
Leave worldly Thoughts behind;  
Oh! learn to Dress you at this Tomb,  
By great Sulptitia’s Mind.  
Her Virtues will your Charms improve,  
Her Conduct yours will steer:  
Her Condescension, gain you Love;  
Her Truth, disperse your Fear:  
Her Patience, will your Griefs allay,  
Her Temper, rage disarm:  
Her Piety, might Vengeance stay,  
And salvage Atheists charm.  
But all her Worth ‘twould endless be to tell,  
Each Virtue she posset; and did in each exel.26

In many ways, Lady De La Warr shares the admirable traits possessed by Astell’s great women patrons. Thus, as with Astell, Thomas’s choice of a learned, older woman companion was not random. She cultivated relationships with women who could help her achieve her intellectual and spiritual goals as well as assisting her material needs. It seems that De La Warr with her wealth, high birth, intellect, and “Patience, Piety and Virtue” could do just that.

Since Thomas relied so heavily on De La Warr for spiritual and possibly material support, it is not surprising that Thomas expresses much grief over the loss of her friend and patron:

Oh! how can I this fatal Loss survive?  
This endless Separation bear,  
From her, whose Friendship when alive
Was most my Comfort here?
In her lov’d Bosom, all my Cares were eas’d;
My Joys were doubled; and my Griefs appeas’d:
Ev’n all my Soul so freely was reveal’d,
I’d scarce a Thought, that was from her conceal’d.
O rigid Fate!
Why was she born so soon? or I so late?
Why was I destin’d to possess
But one short, septenary Happiness?
Had she staid longer, I had still improv’d;
For by her Conduct, all my Actions mov’d:
Ah wretched Maid! now great Sulphita’s gone,
No Friend has thou, no Guide to rest upon.
Yet curb thy Sighs! thy boundless Grief conceal;
Since none can ease the Torments thou dost feel:
In secret, for thy private Loss complain;
Nor cease thy Tears, while Life and Sense remain.27

An autobiographical reading of the line, “But one short, septenary Happiness,” suggests that Thomas was De La Warr’s acquaintance/companion for seven years. De La Warr had been a wealthy widow since 1687 and had reached a great age for her time—taking on Thomas as a companion would probably have suited them both very well.28 Thomas, a young gentlewoman who could not afford to marry or live independently, most likely met De La Warr when she was twenty-one. Thomas had very few opportunities at the turn of the eighteenth century, but becoming a companion was one of them.29

Aside from losing a friend who was a great “Comfort,” Thomas may have also lost financial security. For this reason, Thomas’s elegiac composition may not just have been written for purely cathartic reasons. She may have hoped that the De La Warr heirs might remember her and continue to patronize her. It seems from the high praise in the poem, “To the Right Honourable the Lady D—, on Her first Visit,” written to the next Lady De La Warr, that Thomas was hoping for the patron/protégée relationship to carry on with the next generation of the family:

When some Illustrious Person’s blaz’d by Fame,
Charm’d by its Eccho we revere the Name:
But when th’admired Idol we behold,
How different it appears from what was told!
With Shame, we past Credulity deplore;
And call those Praises back we gave before.
But, Madam, this is otherwise in you,
And *Fame* was much too short of what is *true*:
With pleasing Wonder, I survey’d you round,
And blest *Neander* whom such Virtues crown’d:
My self I then devoted as your Slave,
And am your Victim, to destroy or save;
As you decree, resolve to fall or rise;
Low at your Feet, the *humble Trophy* Lies.\(^{10}\)

The line “Charm’d by it’s *Eccho* we revere the Name” suggests that this poem was addressed to Anne West’s daughter-in-law, Margaret (Freeman) West, the next Lady De La Warr (d. 1738), wife of John, the sixth Baron of De La Warr. Subsequent generations of the family did assist Thomas: in a letter to the Earl of Oxford, written 5 June 1730, Thomas reports that John, the seventh Baron and first Earl of De La Warr, paid some of her prison debts, and it was his mother, Margaret West, who paid for her burial in 1731.\(^{31}\) The charitable assistance given by the family is also acknowledged in the dedication of *The Honourable Lovers* (1732), Thomas’s second volume of letters:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Votive to that Right Honourable Pair,} \\
\text{The Noble Lord and Lady Delaware;} \\
\text{Whose Acts of Charity were often shown,} \\
\text{To poor Corinna under Fortune’s Frown.}\(^{32}\)
\end{align*}
\]

Isobel Grundy has also suggested that Margaret West’s daughter-in-law, Charlotte (McCarthy) West, Lady De La Warr (d. 1735), who married John, the seventh Baron and first Earl of De La Warr, may have given Thomas some small-scale help in the 1720s.\(^{33}\) The close relationship that existed between Thomas and Anne West, Lady Dowager De La Warr, however, was not carried over to the next generation. The relief Thomas received from her heirs seems to have been based more on charity rather than friendship.

After the death of the Dowager, Thomas found solace and support from another learned, older, wealthy woman, named Diana Bridgeman, who was born Diana Vernatti in Italy in about 1653. In 1674 she married William Bridgeman (circa 1649–1699), who came from an illustrious family, son of Richard Bridgeman and Katherine Watson of Combs, Suffolk.\(^{34}\) Because of her affluence and status, Diana Bridgeman would have been in a good position to help a struggling author like Thomas. During a trip to London, Chudleigh arranged the introduction of Thomas to Diana Bridgeman
and her daughter, Katherine. In a letter dated 15 October 1703, Chudleigh wrote to Thomas,

I am very glad you have had the Advantage of good Conversation. You are happy in Mrs. Bridgman's and her Daughter's desirable Company, when you see them, give them my humble Service and my Thanks for the obliging Concern they are pleased to express for me, which I shall ever look on as a Favour that can never be enough acknowledged.35

They socialized over the next four years after which Bridgeman died of an apoplexy and was buried 11 December 1707.36 In a letter Chudleigh wrote to Thomas, dated 31 May 1706, Chudleigh expresses her concern over Bridgeman’s failing health: “I thank you for carrying my Letter to Mrs. Bridgeman, I am much concerned to hear of her frequent Illnesses, I believe the Air will be the best Remedy she can use.”37 After the death of Diana Bridgeman in 1707, Thomas also wrote an emotional elegy in which she explicitly outlines their relationship in terms of patronage and friendship. In “To the Pious Memory of Mrs. DIANA BRIDGEMAN. An ODE,” Thomas names her clearly as fulfilling a dual role:

‘Tis Musidora claims thy Voice,
Dear Object of thy Tears;
‘Ere while the Patron of thy Joys,
And Partner of thy cares:
To Musidora, who could condescend
To be, as well as to be call’d a Friend.38 [my emphasis]

This poem offers readers a glimpse of a relationship between two women, unequal in society, who developed a friendship above and beyond the patron/protégée connection. Bridgeman, it seems, was more than just another literary patron, since she also made it her practice to assist struggling women. Her charity was protofeminism in action. In the same elegy, Thomas comments on Bridgeman’s acts of kindness, specifically for the benefit of poor women:

But resting not on Theory alone,
Her Principles, were in the Practice shown:
The Sick she visited, the Poor reliev’d,
And Aged Widows by her Bounty liv’d:
Yet did so secretly her Alms dispence,
They fell unseen, like Gifts of Providence.39
Although there is very little else known about her, Diana Bridgeman seems to have shared certain traits with some of Astell’s great patrons who also spread their wealth among the less fortunate.

Thomas’s last great friend and patron was Mary, Lady Chudleigh, who died in 1710. It is not known if Chudleigh ever gave Thomas gifts of money, but she certainly offered her other types of patronage, such as correspondence, conversation, introductions, visits, and ultimately friendship. In return, Thomas read her prose and poetry and sent her news and gossip from London; she also undertook London-based errands for Chudleigh when Chudleigh was in Devon. Their correspondence began some time before October 1701, when Thomas wrote to Chudleigh under the pretext of thanking her for publishing *The Ladies Defence* (1701). On 19 October 1701, Chudleigh wrote back to encourage Thomas to take up the fight on behalf of women:

But, I hope, it will not be long before some ingenious Lady will undertake the Quarrel, and do us Justice. Give me leave to say, Madam, that, since you write so incomparably well both in Prose and Verse, none can manage it to great Advantage than yourself.40

In addition to these encouragements, in a letter dated 8 December 1701, Chudleigh wrote, “the Correspondence you have so obligingly begun, shall (if you please to continue it) prove as lasting as our Lives, and I shall think my self very happy in the Conversation and Friendship of so ingenious a Person.”41 Thomas and Chudleigh visited each other regularly in the first few years of the eighteenth century, when Chudleigh came to London, and Thomas to Devon and Bath.

Friendship was something that Chudleigh held dear, which is evident in her own poems, especially “Friendship”; in these verses she states that “Friendship is a Bliss Divine.”42 Thomas evidently appreciated this poem and commented on it in a panegyric to Chudleigh entitled, “To the Lady CHUDLEIGH, On Printing Her Excellent POEMS.” Aside from complimenting Chudleigh’s “Wit, and Learning,” Thomas also writes: “With what illustrious Charms you Friendship dress.”43 One cannot help but think that Chudleigh might have condescended to Thomas initially, but their mutual admiration becomes apparent through their continued correspondence. Chudleigh was pleased with Thomas’s poem in her honor and, in a letter dated 8 December 1701, she wrote back to Thomas, “Your Verses will be a very great Ornament to my Poem; and since you are pleas’d to permit it, shall Adorn the second Edition.”44 This sentence was not published along with
the rest of the letter because it was deleted in the original manuscript. The reason for its omission is uncertain, but the fact that Chudleigh was considering such a compliment to Thomas is a mark of her esteem.

Unfortunately for literary historians, only a handful of letters between Chudleigh and Thomas survive, all of which date between 1701–1706. This small selection, however, reveals how consequential supportive friendships were to polemical writers such as Thomas and Chudleigh. It is evident that they did not develop their protofeminist ideas in a vacuum, but rather sought out like-minded women to fulfill their intellectual needs. Although I stress the support that Thomas received from Chudleigh, their relationship was by no means one-sided. In the nine years they knew each other, Chudleigh exchanged material with Thomas before publishing *Poems on Several Occasions* (1703) and *Essays on Several Subjects* (1710). In a letter dated 8 October 1703, Chudleigh informed Thomas that she had been working on some prose tracts:

> Morality has been my chief Study since I saw you; the *Essays* I’ve writ are on *Knowledge, Friendship, Life, Death, Humility, Grief* and on several other Subjects; you shall see them if I come to *London* this Winter, but that I believe I shall not.45

In the example above, Chudleigh merely mentions her intent to show some work-in-progress to Thomas; however, in several instances they actually did exchange texts. In a postscript to one of Thomas’s letters to Gwinnett called “A CONVERSATION BETWEEN MELISSA (Lady Chudleigh), MUSIDORA (Mrs. Bridgeman) CORINNA, the STOIC, (Captain Hemington) &c.,” Thomas recounts one such exchange.46 She reports that “This Paper was dropt, by my LADY [Chudleigh], into my Lap” for her perusal, which was called, “WOMAN the Crown of the CREATION.” Listed in the text were short entries written under the subtitles, “Of their CONVERSATION, MODESTY, LEARNING, PRUDENCE, and BEAUTY”; perhaps these were the rudiments of Chudleigh’s essays, or some other manuscript in circulation.47 In another letter to Thomas, Chudleigh enclosed a poem entitled “ZENOBIA,” in which she compares the excellence of a certain friend with her historical namesake:

> *Zenobia,* Empress of the *East,*  
> Aspiring *Rome,* with Wonder saw  
> ZENOBIA, Pattern of the *West,*  
> Shall keep th’ admiring World in awe.
Unsway’d by Custom’s rigid Forms,
A more superior Course she steers,
To what she likes, herself transforms,
And grateful in each Change appears. 48

In a corresponding poem with the same title, Thomas also espouses the merit of Zenobia:

ALL like your self, you still appear, I see,
Not tainted alamode with Coquettry:
No! you have kept unsullied, tho’ the Times
Even make our Innocence, and Virtue Crimes. 49

Although the order in which the poems were written is unknown, the fact that Thomas and Chudleigh exchanged protofeminist poetry reveals how their friendship encouraged the production and sharing of such writing. A similar exchange may be found by comparing their two Almystrea poems dedicated to Mary Astell. 50 The protofeminist inclinations of Thomas and Chudleigh drew them together and developed into a friendship, which in turn promoted further polemical and didactic writings.

Unfortunately for Thomas, Chudleigh died in 1710. Thomas expresses her loss in the elegy, “On the Death of the Lady Chudleigh. An ODE,” in which she wishes her “Illustrious Friend farewel.” In this poem, Thomas also bemoans the loss of her two other friends previously deceased. In stanza 3, Thomas thinks back to a time when she was fortunate to have friends who comforted and guided her and patrons who supported her:

Ill fated Wretch! oh whither wilt thou fly!
To shun impending Destiny?
Where wilt thou centre next? on what new Friend rely?
Once did I think, O foolish and prohane!
A solid Good on Earth to find;
And Friendship! sacred Friendship was my Aim!
Joy of my Heart, and Blessing of my Mind.
Beyond Desert I soon was blest,
And great Sulpitia warm’d my Breast:
Her sweet Address, the Muse inspir’d,
Her pious Life by all admir’d,
My Heart with constant Emulation fir’d.
Bright Musidora! Soul of Harmony,
What grateful Songs are due to thee,
Who gen’rously didst condescend
To be both *Patroness* and *Friend*?
Divine *Marissa!* last in *Time*, not *Place*,
But first in ev’ry God-like *Grace*.
With kind *Affection* did me bless,
Ah *Gracious Heav’n*! what Happiness
Did I in *Three* such *Friends* possess!
Proud of my *Joys*, I grew secure,
Nor fear’d a Turn of *Fate*;
For oh! what could I not endure,
When by *Experience* I was sure,
My *Friends* would ease the Weight?
Such *Love*, such *Tenderness*, in each was shewn,
As ev’ry *Joy*, or *Grief* of mine, pertain’d to them alone.51 [my emphasis]

Thomas seems to sense that 1710 was the end of an era for her. Eighteenth-century taste for hyperbole aside, there is no doubt Thomas would have felt deeply the loss of her great triad of patrons/friends, describing herself as an “Ill fated *Wretch*” with nowhere to turn for help. And although Bridgeman is the only woman specifically marked out in this poem for both her patronage and friendship, Thomas received both from De La Warr and Chudleigh as well. Thomas, who is remembered most in literary history for the unfortunate details of her life, ironically foretells her impending financial doom when she says, “oh whither wilt thou fly!/ To shun impending Destiny?.” Following the death of Chudleigh, she was never “blest” with another woman friend or patron like De La Warr or Bridgeman. After the death of her fiancé in 1717 and the contesting of his will, Thomas’s life took a downward spiral financially. From the early 1720s, all her efforts seemed focused on obtaining money to stave off her creditors. Without the moral and financial support of her friends/patrons, Thomas’s literary and social life suffered.52

By the third decade of the eighteenth century, Thomas was no longer the idealistic young writer she had been, and polemical prose and poetry in defense of women as a genre had lost its earlier popularity. She was now a poor, single, struggling woman with few friends and family on whom she could rely. She was forced to publish her poems and letters in an attempt to satisfy her creditors. Most likely out of desperation, Thomas sent copies of her 1722 *Miscellany Poems* to Chudleigh’s son, Thomas Chudleigh. The Bodleian copy of the 1722 edition contains this marginalia: “a present from Mr.55 Thomas ye author aprill ye 4th: 1722,” and on the title page the name “Tho: Chudleigh” is inscribed.53 Thomas also sent a
special presentation copy to Sarah Hoadly, a well-known painter and wife of Bishop Hoadly, who was part of her social circle at one point as well. Thomas writes:

I have had the Honour of being well known to Bishop Hoadly, and his good Lady, above 25 Years; but Time wears out all things, and one must not, cannot hope, that the many and great Favours I have received from them, should be continued for Life.

Unlike Astell, whose patron/friend relationships lasted until she died, Thomas fell into relative obscurity, first hiding from her creditors and then lingering in Fleet Prison. Although some prominent bishops and peers took pity on her condition and ultimately secured her freedom from the Fleet briefly before she died (and then paid for her burial), Thomas’s literary endeavors from this period pale compared to her earlier ones. Her writing in the last decade of her life, not surprisingly, focused mostly on her material complaints and not on protofeminist issues. With no friends to inspire her or support her, combined with ill health, her demise was inevitable. Shortly after getting out of the Fleet, Thomas died in poverty. Since then Thomas’s role as an author in literary history has been almost completely eclipsed by her role as an anecdote in Pope and Dryden scholarship.

The evidence that survives from Thomas’s letters and poems reveals that Thomas and some of her women patrons moved beyond the class boundaries of their initial relationships to develop friendships in which they sincerely cared for each other’s spiritual, intellectual, and physical well-being. Their camaraderie served as inspiration to act, whether by participating in charity work, patronizing women writers, or writing in defense of women. In Thomas’s life, her production of polemical prose and poetry can be linked to groups of like-minded women—patrons and friends—who, like the Bluestockings later in the eighteenth century, demonstrated that “learning, virtue, and friendship were inextricably linked.”
   5. Thomas wrote two poems to Pakington, including the one quoted here and “SONG. To Lady PAKINGTON,” in Thomas, *Miscellany Poems*, 133–34. This poem is also called “The DREAM.” See Elizabeth Thomas and Richard Gwinnett, *The Honourable Lovers: or, the Second and Last Volume of Pylades and Corinna. Being the Remainder of Love Letters, and other Pieces, (In Verse and Prose,) Which passed between Richard Gwinnett, Esq; Of Great Shurdington in Gloucestershire and Mrs. Elizabeth Thomas, Jun. Of Great Russel-Street, Bloomsbury* (London: Edmund Curll, 1732), 244.
   8. Joan K. Kinnaird coined the term “protofeminist” in relation to polemical women writers who were interested in women’s issues, such as “male oppression, the equal intellectual capacity of the sexes, [and] the injustice of barring women from higher learning.” See “Mary Astell and the Conservative Contribution to English Feminism,” *Journal of British Studies* 19 (1979): 53–54.


28. *Burke’s Peerage* states that Anne, daughter of John Wild of Droitwich, co. Worcester was married to Charles West, Baron De La Warr on 25 September 1642. If she was about eighteen when she married then she would have been in her eighties when she died (755).


32. Thomas, The Honourable Lovers, A3r.


37. Thomas, Pylades and Corinna, 267.

38. Thomas, Miscellany Poems, 29.

39. Thomas, Miscellany Poems, 36.


41. Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson, Letters 90, fol. 61r; Whartoniana, 2: 109; and Thomas, The Honourable Lovers, 249.


43. Thomas, Miscellany Poems, 150.

44. Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson, Letters 90, fol. 61r.


46. Thomas, The Honourable Lovers, 75–82.

47. Thomas, The Honourable Lovers, 81–82.


49. Thomas, Miscellany Poems, 220.

50. Perry, The Celebrated Mary Astell, 106–07 and 111.


53. The signature matches that of Thomas Chudleigh, the son of Mary, Lady Chudleigh, which can be found on a letter dated 2 January 1710, sent to Sophia, Electress of Hanover (British Library, MS Stowe 224).

University Press, 2004), http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy.usf.edu/view/article/13379 (accessed 24 May 2007). Thomas also wrote a poem dedicated to Sarah Hoadly, entitled “To the most ingenious Mrs. SARAH HOADLEY, excellent in Painting, &c.” (Thomas, Miscellany Poems, 12–14). Edmond Malone mentions this particular copy in The Critical and Miscellaneous Prose Works of John Dryden (London, 1800), as being part of a library owned by his friend John Bindley. It continued to appear for sale in a couple of nineteenth-century book catalogs. In 1818 it was sold with the rest of the Bindley collection, and in 1834 it is described as a “Large paper, presentation copy to Mrs. Hoadley the wife of Bishop Hoadley, red morocco, richly gilt” that sold for 12s.

55. Thomas, Pylades and Corinna, lxxvii.
Index

A
Astell, Mary 3, 5–7, 9, 13, 15, 17–20

B
Barker, Jane 4, 18
Behn, Aphra 3
Bridgeman, Diana (Vernatti) 7–9, 11–14, 16
Musidora 7–8, 12, 14–15
Bridgeman, William 7, 11, 20

C
Chudleigh, George, Sir, Baronet 7
Chudleigh, Mary, Lady 3, 7–16, 20
Marissa / Melissa 7–8, 14, 16
Chudleigh, Thomas 16, 20
Corinna 2, 7, 11, 14, 18, 20–21
Coventry, Ann, Lady 6

E
Egerton, Sarah Fyge 3, 18
Elstob, Elizabeth 7

F
Finch, Anne, Countess of Winchilsea 3

G
George I 3
Gwinnett, Richard 14, 18–20

H
Hastings, Elizabeth, Lady 6
Hoadly, Bishop 17
Hoadly, Sarah 17, 20
Hutchenson, Elizabeth 6
J

James II 7
John, Seventh Baron of De La Warr 11
John, Sixth Baron of De La Warr 11
Johnson, Samuel 4, 18
Jones, Catherine, Lady 6

L

Locke, John 4

M

Manley, Delarivier 3
Masham, Damaris, Lady 4
Montagu, Charles, Earl of Halifax 3, 9

N

Norris, John, of Bemerton 4–5, 19

P

Pakington, Hester, Lady 1–3, 8, 18
Pakington, John, Sir 1, 18
Patronage 1–8, 12–13, 16, 18
Perrott, Herbert, Sir 1
Pope, Alexander 7, 17, 20
Protofeminist 3, 5, 7, 14–15, 17–18

R

Rowe, Elizabeth Singer 3

S

Sancroft, William 3, 5
Scott, Walter, Sir 4, 19
Sophia, Electress of Hanover 3, 20
Swift, Jonathan 3

T

Thomas, Elizabeth 1-21
W

West, Anne (Wild), Lady Dowager De La Warr 7, 11
   Sulpitia 7, 9–10, 15
West, Charles, Baron De La Warr 7, 19
West, Charlotte (McCarthy), Lady De La Warr 11
West, Margaret (Freeman), Lady De La Warr 11
Wilkin, Rich 5

Y

Yearsley, Anne 3