

“To Mrs. Carlyle”

BESSIE CHANDLER (b. 1856) [ELIZABETH CHANDLER PARKER], LIKE SO many female writers of the nineteenth century, is now consigned to library dust. Yet, during her lifetime, she was a well-known contributor of poems and short stories to periodicals with august names like *The Century*, *The New England Magazine*, and *St. Nicholas: Illustrated Magazine for Young Folks*. One of her poems, “To Mrs. Carlyle,” was first published in *The Century* 27.1 (November, 1883): 160. From the context of the poem, a sympathetic, almost feminist reach into the life of Jane Welsh Carlyle, it seems likely that Chandler, an American from upstate New York, was responding to the recent publication of *The Letters and Memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle* (1883), carefully edited by James A. Froude, whose always arching intent was to prove via Geraldine Jewsbury’s alleged disclosure that Jane died unravished. Chandler’s spirited sentiments, as might be expected, decidedly lean toward Froude’s vision of the unfulfilled, domestic Jane. They further represent an early historical record of the growing interest in the Carlyles’ marriage, which three decades subsequent would end up in the hands of the celebrated Virginia Woolf, who also, more considerately, sided with Froude.

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To Mrs. Carlyle

I have read your glorious letters,
Where you threw aside all fetters,
Spoke your thoughts and mind out freely in your
 own delightful style,
And I fear my state’s alarming;
That my heart I lay before you—take it,

Jeannie Welsh Carlyle.
 And I sit here thinking thinking,
 How life was one long winking
 At poor Thomas' faults and failings, and his un-
 due share of bile!
 Won't you own, dear, just between us
 That this living with a genius
 Isn't, after all, so pleasant—is it
 Jeannie Welsh Carlyle?

There was nothing that's demeaning
 In those frequent times of cleaning,
 When you scoured and scrubbed and hammered
 in such housewifely style;
 And those charming teas and dinners,
 Graced by clever saints and sinners,
 How you ground T. Carlyle's axes,
 Making him the more dependent on you—
 Jeannie Welsh Carlyle.

Through it all from every quarter
 Gleams, like sunshine on the water,
 Your quick sense of dun and humor, and your
 bright bewitching smile;
 And I own, I fairly revel
 In the way you that you say "devil,"
 'Tis so terse, so very vigorous, so like
 Jeannie Welsh Carlyle.

And all the time, say; were you missing
 Just a little love and kissing—
 Silly things, that help to lighten many a weary,
 dreary while?
 Never a word you say to show it;
 We may guess but never know it;
 You went quietly on without it—loyal
 Jeannie Welsh Carlyle.