

Laetitia Pilkington (c 1709-1750)

by Norma Clark

She was born Laetitia van Lewen in about 1709 in Dublin or co. Cork where her father was a doctor like his father before him. The van Lewens were Dutch. Her mother was niece to Sir John Meade and related to an earl, connections of which Elizabeth van Lewen was proud and which were to be important to Laetitia. For six or seven years Laetitia was a petted only child, but in 1715 she acquired a brother, Meade, and in 1716 a sister, Elizabeth. The family were by then living in Dublin where John van Lewen had begun to build a successful practice in fashionable Protestant circles as a physician and man-midwife.

Laetitia was precocious, a keen reader, and ambitious. She loved reciting verse and adored the praises she received from her father's friends. Her mother, she claimed, tried to dissuade her from reading. Her love of poetry was spurred by friendship with another precociously intellectual young woman, Constantia Grierson, who for a time was a midwifery student under John van Lewen, and frequently at the family house.

On 31 May 1725, aged barely 16, Laetitia married an ambitious poet-musician-clergyman, Matthew Pilkington, and soon found herself 'a-breeding'. She was to give birth to six children altogether, three of whom survived to adulthood. Through Patrick Delany, a Trinity College classmate of her father who was one of Matthew's patrons, the couple were introduced to Jonathan Swift, the famous author of *Gulliver's Travels*, and Dean of St Patrick's. Swift took to them both. They were physically small and seem to have evoked for him his own Lilliputians. He enjoyed calling Laetitia 'her serene highness of Lillyput'. Matthew was 'mighty Thomas Thumb' and their home a Liliputian Palace'. Swift became a patron to Matthew, helping him gather together his poems and collect subscribers to print a volume. Meanwhile, he thought highly of Laetitia's wit and poetic talents, enjoyed her conversation and liked to have her company in the deanery. She was 'a bosom friend' of the dean's, as Mary Delany reported, but there seems to have been so suggestion that Swift might also help her into print.

In 1732-3 Swift arranged for Matthew to spend a year in London as chaplain to the lord mayor, who that year was Swift's old friend, the printer John Barber. Laetitia did not want him to go: she would miss him, and she was also jealous; but perhaps more importantly, she knew that Matthew's desire for the bright lights was stronger than his desire for her. In this respect she was right. Matthew became infatuated with a Drury Lane actress, Mrs Heron. In other ways too the trip was a disaster, and although Matthew returned, in April 1734, and their marriage survived in form, it was effectively over. She spent much time with her father's relation in Cork. Matthew took up with a wealthy widow. In Dublin, Laetitia drew a new circle around her who encouraged her poetry, including a young surgeon, Robin Adair. The crucial change came with the death of Dr John van Lewen, on New Year's Day 1737, and the subsequent revelation that he had little capital or property to leave his widow and children.

According to Laetitia, Matthew vowed to rid himself of an unwanted wife. He was jubilant when, one October night, his servants informed him that there was a gentleman with his wife in the marital bedroom. Accompanied by twelve night watchmen as witnesses, and possibly

Laetitia's brother Meade, Matthew broke open the door (it wasn't locked) and confronted them. The gentleman was Robin Adair.

When she wrote about it later, Laetitia Pilkington rendered this scene as comic farce, but it was far from funny at the time. She was thrown out of her home and forbidden the sight of her children. She was reduced to complete dependence on Adair. He seems to have protected her at first but by mid-January 1738 he decamped to England. As it happened, her husband's London friend James Worsdale was visiting Dublin at the time and he protected her as well as making use of her poetical skills and notoriety. Worsdale mounted a production of a ballad opera co-written by himself and Matthew Pilkington for which he persuaded Laetitia to write a 'flaming' feminist prologue. He also got her to appear in his box on the opening night. It's possible she also wrote an 'operatical farce', never published, called *No Death but Marriage*, by 'a Lady', which was acted at Smock Alley on 3 May 1738.

By then she was divorced and trying to continue living in Dublin, harassed by would-be seducers and by Matthew. Later that year she fled to London, determined to make a name for herself as a writer. She managed to sell Dodsley a long poem, *The Statues*, which he printed in a handsome quarto, and this became her calling card. As an acknowledged poet, she could ask for subscriptions to a planned volume of poems. She was able to survive for several years on a mixture of handouts and commissions, a period she wrote about in volume two of her memoirs. Many people sympathised with her plight and wanted to help her, among them the actor-manager Colley Cibber and the novelist Samuel Richardson. At one point she opened a print and pamphlet shop in St James's, at another found herself imprisoned for a £2 debt in the Marshalsea prison (October–December 1742). It was after this that she began to conceive of writing her memoirs. She felt, quite rightly, that she had an unusual story to tell; and she wanted to express her sense of grievance at the double standard of sexual morality which allowed Matthew to have a lover yet rise in the church (his patron was the Archbishop of Dublin, Charles Cobbe) while she was forced into the demi-monde and more or less forced into prostitution. Her claim that she did not sell her body has been doubted by some, and there is, of course, no way of proving or disproving the matter; however, the point, which she wanted to make loud and clear, is that the patriarchal system left her with little choice since it forced women into dependence on men. Her insistence that she was 'a noun substantive', standing alone, was a way of reinforcing her message: against all the odds, in defiance of a social structure pushing her in one direction, she turned to poetry and managed to make it support her. As she well knew and wittily implied, such an outcome was as absurd as anything in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* or *A Modest Proposal*.

By 1745-6 her funds were running low. Her daughter turned up in London, eight months pregnant. Her son Jack arrived, destitute. She was glad to be reunited with them but desperate to know how to support them. Eventually, she decided to return to Dublin, partly in hopes that she would be able to persuade Matthew to do something for Jack. She returned in May 1747. She had begun writing her memoirs and had designed an original form which incorporated most of her poems. She wrote about her parents, her childhood, her marriage, the discovery night and the events that followed, and her divorce. On the advice of Cibber she divided the work into volumes, ending the first volume with her departure from Dublin for London, and devoted the second volume to her time in London. Both volumes appeared in 1748 and were a huge success. Everybody was talking about them. Money flowed in. She had also acquired a patron, the young and dissolute and wildly extravagant Lord Kingsborough.

Laetitia Pilkington was already ill and there was sadly little time left for her to relish her

success. She began writing a third volume, somewhat padded out with miscellaneous anecdotes from earlier periods of her life. This was left unfinished at her death in July 1750, though it had been advertised as 'In the Press' as early as November 1749. Jack, who had become his mother's amanuensis, published it in 1754, along with an appendix giving a vivid impression of her last days. She was buried at St Ann's, Dawson Street, Dublin, where a plaque to her memory was unveiled in 1997 by the editor of the *Memoirs*, A. C. Elias, jnr

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