**Background, Context and Some Analysis**

**Biography**

**Sarah Egerton** (née Fyge, later Field)  (1670-1723)  
  
Born in London, she was one of the six daughters of Thomas Fyge (d. 1706), a physician descended from a land-owning family at Winslow, Buckinghamshire, and his wife Mary Beacham (d. 1704). In 1686 she published *The Female Advocate* (revised edition, 1687), a reply to Robert Gould's *Love Given O're: Or, A Satyr Against the Pride, Lust and Inconstancy, &c. of Woman* (1682). For this teenage indiscretion her father forced her to leave London and live with relatives in the country, as she complains in some of her early autobiographical poems. She eventually married an attorney, Edward Field, who had died before 1700. She may have known John Dryden, on whose death in 1700 she published an ode in *Luctus Britannici* and, as 'Mrs. S.F.', contributed to *The Nine Muses* (1700), a collection of verse by women on the late poet, edited by Mrs. Manley. By 1703, the dedication to the Earl of Halifax of her *Poems on Several Occasions. Together with a Pastoral* was signed 'S.F.E.' indicating that she had remarried (The book was reissued as *A Collection of Poems on Several Occasions ... by Mrs. Sarah Fyge Egerton* (1706), *The Female Advocate*being reprinted in the same year, but with the date 1707.)  
  
Her second husband was the Revd Thomas Egerton, a second cousin, who had been Rector of Adstock, Buckinghamshire, since 1671. A wealthy widower with adult children, he was some twenty years older than she. Before and after this marriage she was apparently in love with Henry Pierce, an attorney's clerk and a friend of her first husband ('Alexis' in her poems). Evidence has recently come to light that as early as 1703 the Egertons were involved in an acrimonious divorce suit, she accusing him of cruelty, he accusing her of desertion, but the divorce seems not to have been granted. She had been friendly, but later quarrelled, with Delariviere Manley, who gave a remarkable and no doubt heightened account of the Egerton marriage in her *Secret Memoirs ... from the New Atlantis* (1709). Manley's limited sympathy is reserved for her husband, 'an old thin raw-bon'd Priest', who is persecuted by his hysterical and violent wife ('a She-Devil incarnate'). Such is his punishment for marrying a younger wife, 'when I had Children grown up to keep my House, and administer comfortably to my Necessities'. With a good estate and income, he could keep a coach and four servants for her, but her violence had driven away his children, and 'Then she's in love with all the handsome Fellows she sees; but her Face, I believe, protects her Chastity ... [it] is made in part like a Black-a-more, flat-nos'd, blubber-lipp'd, there is no sign of life in her Complexion, it savours all of Mortality; she looks as if she had been buried a Twelve-month'. As for her incomprehensible verse, 'Deliver me from a poetical wife.... She rumbles in Verses of *Atomes,* Artic and Antartic, of *Gods,* and of strange things, foreign to all fashionable Understanding'. In her *Memoirs of Europe* (1710), the relentless Manley referred to her again as the 'shockingly ugly' woman who had presented the literary patron Julius Sergius (the Earl of Halifax) with 'the Labours of her Brain'. The unhappy marriage was evidently notorious: it was ridiculed again, together with her poetic ambitions, in *The Butter'd Apple-Pye* (1711), a broadsheet verse satire.  
  
She had no children and died in February 1723 (her husband having died in 1720). She left £1 a year to the poor of Winslow, which failed to reach them because of the 'abuse' of her executor, a local mercer. In the course of some correspondence about her identity in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1780-1, one 'M.J.' claimed to own some 120 of her letters, but these have not come to light.

**Dictionary Definition (*taken from Dictionary.com*)**

**emulation**

/ˌɛmjʊˈleɪʃən/

noun

1.

the act of emulating or imitating

2.

the effort or desire to equal or surpass another or others

3.

(**archaic**) jealous rivalry

**Word Origin and History**

*n.*

1550s, from Middle French *émulation*(13c.) and directly from Latin *aemulationem*(nominative *aemulatio*), from past participle stem of *aemulari*"to rival, strive to excel," from *aemulus*"striving, rivaling" (also as a noun, "a rival," fem. *aemula*), from Proto-Italic *\*aimo-*, from PIE*\*aim-olo*, from root *\*aim-*"copy".

**The Enlightenment**

European politics, philosophy, science and communications were radically reoriented during the course of the “long 18th century” (1685-1815) as part of a movement referred to by its participants as the Age of Reason, or simply the Enlightenment. Enlightenment thinkers in Britain, in France and throughout Europe questioned traditional authority and embraced the notion that humanity could be improved through rational change. The Enlightenment produced numerous books, essays, inventions, scientific discoveries, laws, wars and revolutions. The American and French Revolutions were directly inspired by Enlightenment ideals and respectively marked the peak of its influence and the beginning of its decline. The Enlightenment ultimately gave way to 19th-century Romanticism.

**‘The Emulation’**

In this poem, Sarah Fyge posits an attack on the institutions of Law and Custom, institutions which she saw as tyrannical. The term ‘emulation’ was coined in the eighteenth century as part of the Enlightenment. It was a belief that the public, or students, in the widest sense of the term, could participate in (or emulate) the grandeur of the learned. Emulation, then was key to ensuring that man would fulfill his intrinsic intellectual capabilities

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the term ‘emulation’ could encompass both the positive sense of ‘an endeavour to equal or surpass others’, but also a negative grudge against the superiority of others’. Much perhaps depended on which side was using it.

**The Poem in Brief**

*Summary:*Questioning why women have to obey tyranny, especially that of marriage (“the last, the fatal slavery” [7]). Refers to religious men who use religion as a tool to keep women down. However, in reference to Roman gods—there were 10 who were female (the muses) who “govern wit” while only two males who “pretend to it” (35-6). So, in the end, women rule.

*Formal Features:* Plays off of the charged and ambiguous (for the time) term “emulation.” Iambic pentameter.