
CHARLES SACKVILLE, EARL OF DORSET
1643–1706

The Earl of Dorset, rich by birth and even richer because of the many dignified offices he filled, was a munificent patron of the arts and of poets, particularly Dryden. Thus one must discount many of the things which were said by contemporaries (particularly Dryden) about his keen understanding and fine literary talent. In fact, he wrote very little. But some of his lyrics (collected posthumously) have a genuine, careless, scoffing kind of grace.

Song

Methinks the poor town has been troubled too long
 With Phyllis and Chloris in every song,
 By fools who at once can both love and despair
 And will never leave calling them cruel and fair;
 5 Which justly provokes me in rhyme to express
 The truth that I know of bonny black Bess.¹

This Bess of my heart, this Bess of my soul,
 Has a skin white as milk, and hair black as coal;
 She's plump, yet with ease you may span round her waist,
 10 But her round swelling thighs can scarce be embraced;
 Her belly is soft, not a word of the rest,
 But I know what I think, when I drink to the best.

The plowman and squire, the arranter clown²
 At home she subdued in her paragon gown;³
 15 But now she adorns the boxes and pit,
 And the proudest town-gallants are forced to submit;
 All hearts fall a-leaping wherever she comes,
 And beat day and night, like my Lord Craven's⁴ drums.

I dare not permit her to come to Whitehall,⁵
 20 For she'd outshine the ladies, paint, jewels, and all;
 If a lord should but whisper his love in a crowd,
 She'd sell him a bargain⁶ and laugh out aloud;
 Then the Queen, overhearing what Betty did say,
 Would send Mr. Roper⁷ to take her away.

1. Her name was probably Mrs. Barnes; she was a town prostitute.

2. Yokel.

3. A gown made of camlet, a fabric of mixed wool and silk.

4. Commander.

5. The court.

6. Make him look like a fool

7. Page of honor to the Queen

25 But to those that have had my dear Bess in their arms,
She's gentle, and knows how to soften her charms;
And to every beauty can add a new grace,
Having learned how to lisp and to trip in her pace;
And with head on one side, and a languishing eye,
To kill *us* by looking as if *she* would die.

1668

1671