



LADY HARRIET MORDAUNT

(Joanna Berryman), oil on canvas, 60 x 92 cm

Lady Harriet Mordaunt, was the daughter of a Scottish baronet. She married Sir Charles Mordaunt on 7 December 1866. Sir Charles was a stolid country squire who spent his time hunting, shooting and fishing or sitting in Parliament, while Harriet entertained numerous lovers, including the future King Edward VII and several of his aristocratic friends.

In 1869, Harriet gave birth to an illegitimate daughter, and then confessed everything to Sir Charles, who was enraged and sued for divorce. The historical record shows that the Prince of Wales was never named as a correspondent in the divorce case, but Mordaunt threatened to do so.

Harriet's father, who had several other daughters to marry off, announced that she was mad. That would prevent a divorce trial and save the family reputation. She was incarcerated in various rented houses, and after some weeks either broke down or agreed to feign madness: smashing plates, eating coal, howling and crawling. The case was brought to court and the Prince of Wales was called as a witness, he admitted visiting Lady Mordaunt but nothing further was proved.

In 1875, Sir Charles sued again. Viscount Cole (father of Harriet's child) pled guilty to adultery with her, so Sir Charles got his divorce. Sir Charles married again, on 24 April 1878, to Mary Louisa Cholmondeley, a 16-year old parson's daughter.

Harriet was kept in asylums for the rest of her remaining 36 years.

"The harrowing circumstances surrounding my character's incarceration and her subsequent death were resonant throughout my sitting. I felt enraged, powerless and quite muted in moments.

"To be shoved into the periphery of existence based on these grounds seems unthinkable. I have a real appreciation for the age we live in and the relative freedom of expression most women have now. Madonna and Magdalene archetypes are obsolete and we can comfortably inhabit both if we so desire. My voice is the most fundamental part of who I am. Lady Mordaunt had her's usurped by the key men in her life, rendering her ineffective and inhuman.

"Under Alice's watchful and nurturing gaze these emotions eventually lifted. I relaxed into the role of being a sexually charged woman consciously not allowing full surrender; it felt appropriate to draw strength from a little self protection."

Jo Berryman



