
Introduction

HOBNELIA seated in a dreary Vale,
 In pensive Mood rehears'd her piteous Tale,
 Her piteous Tale the Winds in Sighs bemoan,
 And pining Eccho answers Groan for Groan.

...

But hold – our *Light-Foot* barks, and cocks his Ears,
 O'er yonder Stile see *Lubberkin* appears.
 He comes, he comes, *Hobnelia's* not bewray'd,
 Nor shall she crown'd with Willow die a Maid.
 He vows, he swears, he'll give me a green Gown,
 Oh dear! I fall *adown, adown, adown!*¹ (John Gay, *The Shepherd's Week*)

She, wretched matron, forced, in age, for bread,
 To strip the brook with mantling cresses spread,
 To pick her wintry faggot from the thorn,
 To seek her nightly shed and weep till morn;
 She only left of all the harmless train,
 The sad historian of the pensive plain.²
 (Oliver Goldsmith, *The Deserted Village*)

On those occasions when the laboring woman has appeared in canonical eighteenth-century verse, she has been represented as an object of satire or pathos. Yet between the publication of Gay's pastorals and Goldsmith's elegy to the English georgic a poetic discourse was developed both by and about women of the laboring classes, a discourse coextensive with, yet in some ways discontinuous from, the eighteenth-century verse of traditional literary history. Satire and pathos may be found there, but, once read, these women's texts forever complicate our notions of plebeian female consciousness and the culture of an emergent "working class" to which high literary representation alludes but which it also effaces. If the project of a feminist literary history necessitates a thorough questioning and overhaul of existing literary-historical canons, a materialist feminist literary history attends to issues of class, race, and sexuality as well as gender in the encounter with traditional valuations. No feminist literary history that seeks to trace a "female" tradition while

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remaining blind to the operations of class difference, conflict, and deliberate or unconscious repression will come close to giving a sufficiently nuanced account of women's literary production in previous centuries.

Gay's *Hobnelia* represents the resituation of neoclassical pastoral in a vernacular English context, a move which allows the satire to extend two ways. A slavish neoclassicism is rendered ludicrous as a means of representing rural life in Britain, but that very "rural life" is itself subjected to satire, to a privileged fixing of forms and imaginative possibilities from which both the significance of labor and the subjectivity of the laborer are excluded. This exclusion is particularly noticeable where women are concerned. When women's work does surface in *The Shepherd's Week* – as when we read of what Marian the milkmaid is *not* doing because she is lovelorn:

Marian that soft could stroak the udder'd Cow,
Or with her Winnow ease the Barly Mow;
Marbled with Sage the hard'ning Cheese she press'd,
And yellow Butter *Marian's* Skill confess'd;
But *Marian* now devoid of Country Cares,
Nor yellow Butter nor Sage Cheese prepares –³

we are reminded that Gay's poem began with a literary quarrel between Pope and Ambrose Phillips and Thomas Tickell over "realism" in English pastoral, and that Gay took Pope's side. The interest of labor represented thus is intended to lie with its impropriety, its ludicrousness and potential bawdiness as a feature of the eclogue. We are supposed, not to delight in the skill signified by Marian's milking, her sage cheese, and her use of a sieve to reduce a heap of barley, but to find in her actions a comically lascivious potential, a low joke for men only. Thus it should come as no surprise that the repetitions of *Hobnelia's* sorrow are easily cut short by the belated reappearance of Lubberkin, and that *Hobnelia's* mock resistance to sexual urgency seals her fate with a slapstick swoon. Even the reading that finds a delightful "realism" in Gay's satire bespeaks a certain repressive recuperativeness in relation to the jolly quaint labors and sorrows of poor country-dwellers, a certain neutralizing of class differences – a function of the text that leaves the polite reader unthreatened by the possible otherness of working-class subjectivity. When the history of rural life is written from above, and from London, the possibility of complex subjectivities, let alone political consciousness, among "the folk" is cancelled in advance.

When Goldsmith gives us his "sad historian of the pensive plain," of the vanishing village communities whose fate is sealed by the last phase of eighteenth-century enclosure, he makes her poor, old, and female, the most marginal of the already marginalized rural poor. But her history is never delivered, her narrative of Auburn never written; Goldsmith's narrator writes it for us, forever rendering her silent and pathetic, downtrodden and weeping,

most powerless of the powerless. The sad historian of “the harmless train,” seen as inarticulate, comes to stand for the laboring poor as objects of pathos, incapable of self-representation, incapable of political consciousness, incapable of protest. A whole tradition of oral political culture is banished from the scene, the figure of the laboring woman as “historian” at once cancelled and preserved.

Gay’s and Goldsmith’s figures of the laboring poor are class- and gender-specific productions; they represent two forms of an important tradition in English literary history, but not “the” tradition. Ironically, against the silencing and objectification of female labor to be found in high literary discourse, we can place a countertradition of poetic production by working-class women. It is a discourse marked by many constraints, a far from unfettered radical discourse, but its historical and subjective complexity, political consciousness, and strategies of protest work against any simple critical acquiescence in either Hobnelia’s comedy or the wretched silence of Goldsmith’s “sad historian.” These muses of resistance demand that a new, and feminist, literary history be written from below.

Each of the terms of this book’s title requires some qualification. The subjects of this study, who are women poets from the laboring classes publishing in eighteenth-century Britain, attend to the “muses of resistance,” but it is never entirely clear where the resistance is coming from. The political desires, both theirs and mine, out of which such an investigation and reconstruction emerge can never be fully articulated. The project of a materialist feminist literary history would, however, be unthinkable without the grounding provided by the discontinuous theories and practices of marxist historical writing, feminism, what is called in Britain “cultural materialism,” and its Foucauldian counterpart in the United States, “New Historicism.” And so such a project announces its awareness of the inevitability of political engagement in advance.

This is a study of the social–textual articulation of class and gender in a largely forgotten literary discourse. But neither class nor gender can be addressed unproblematically. Social historians, following suggestions made by E. P. Thompson, Gareth Stedman Jones, and others, have advised us to treat class “with some skepticism, as at most an ideal type, reworked and developed to take account of a much wider and more subtle range of social formation,” while we learn to pay attention to “significant social phenomena which too rigid a class interpretation can overlook or underestimate, such as gender and religion or nationalism and regionalism.”⁴ In this respect the work of Stedman Jones and much of what is published in *History Workshop Journal* seems to me exemplary. As Stedman Jones comments, “in England more than in any other country, the word ‘class’ has acted as a congested point of intersection between competing, overlapping or simply differing forms of discourse – political, economic, religious and cultural – right across the

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political spectrum.” Rather than beginning with an essentialist definition of “class” or “the social” as something existing outside and logically prior to its articulation through language, he argues, “we should start out from the other end of the chain”:

Language disrupts any simple notion of the determination of consciousness by social being because it is itself part of social being. We cannot therefore decode political language to reach a primal and material expression of interest since it is the discursive structure of political language which conceives and defines interest in the first place. What we must therefore do is to study the production of interest, identification, grievance and aspiration within political languages themselves.⁵

As Joan Scott has remarked, Stedman Jones himself fails to pay sufficient attention to signification (the ways in which meanings and texts are constructed) and the symbolic operations of gender within such meaning-construction:

We cannot understand how concepts of class acquired legitimacy and established political movements without examining concepts of gender. We cannot understand working-class sexual divisions of labor without interrogating concepts of class. There is no choice between a focus on class or on gender; each is necessarily incomplete without the other . . . To study [the history of the material link between gender and class] requires attention to “language” and a willingness to subject the very idea of the working class to historical scrutiny.⁶

I would like to refocus the concept of “political languages” to include such arguably gender- and class-specific texts of interest, identification, grievance, and aspiration as the printed collections of poems and other forms of writing produced in Britain between 1739 and 1796 by women characterized therein as members of the laboring classes.

It is not, however, a simple matter of adding the categories of gender and sexuality to a pre-existing class analysis, even if that analysis were linguistically based and informed by the textual subtlety of post-Althusserian and post-structuralist criticism. A feminist critique and a marxist or materialist one will always be discontinuous, at crucial moments threatening mutual subversion rather than lending themselves easily to analyses of their mutual construction. For the social historian, as Sally Alexander notes, the problem of this discontinuous articulation poses itself as follows:

How can women speak and think creatively within marxism when they can neither enter the narrative flow as fully as they wish, nor imagine that there might be other subjectivities present in history than those of class (for to imagine that is to transgress the laws of historical materialism)? . . .

Feminist history has to emancipate itself from class as the organizing principle of history, the privileged signifier of social relations and their political representations.⁷

This does not mean the abandoning of class, as both Alexander and Scott make clear, but rather the interrogation of those historical and textual moments when what Pierre Macherey has called “the unconscious which is history”⁸ emerges around these categories, erupts in contradictions, fissures, gaps. Within the discipline of social history, Alexander suggests, “The questions for the historian of feminism are why at some moments does sexual difference and division take on a political significance – which elements in the organization are politicized, what are the terms of negotiation, and between whom?” (Alexander, p. 135).

Within the discipline of literary history, one is more immediately concerned with textual readings. Here the work of Gayatri Spivak, dedicated to the mutually interruptive discourses of literary criticism and history, and alert to the textual pressures and effects of gender, class, and race, has been most helpful.⁹ Such a model requires a sophisticated notion of ideology, and Louis Althusser’s sense of it as a “representation” of the imaginary, lived relation between individuals and their real conditions of existence is indispensable.¹⁰ At the same time, an historical understanding of the concept of ideology in its various usages, such as Raymond Williams provides, is illuminating for a study of eighteenth-century writing.¹¹ Particularly in the interrogation of the textual politics of literary productions of the past, with their half-suppressed, often inchoate or incompletely articulated traces of resistance or desire which may be both uncannily familiar and historically alien to us, a model of ideology as a field of contestation and change is essential. I have found Macherey’s discussion of ideology and the literary text as typically possessed of contradictory projects, tendencies, and desires especially useful.¹² At the level of the sentence and even the individual word, Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia, of historical and ideological struggle enacted within language, makes legible the dialogic potential of much eighteenth-century English verse, though Bakhtin himself gives pride of place to the novel as the genre of linguistic conflict and dialogism.¹³

It would not be misleading to read the scene of writing for these laboring women, these upstarts, these cookmaids, milkmaids, laundresses, field hands, and women of obscure parentage, as a site of resistance. Although the desire to imitate the upper classes, sometimes aroused in servants by their “having been introduced to new tastes, new forms of beauty in the furnishing, decorations, flowers and gardens of the houses where they worked,” may be one possible source of working-class conservatism,¹⁴ the experience of domestic service among these women produces a social critique. For the laboring population maintained many forms of elaborately coded class opposition, and, as social

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historians have shown, “Resistance could take other forms than flight or the escape into fantasy of servants’ romantic literature” (Davidoff, p. 136). Writing verse that ventriloquizes and thus challenges the verse forms and values of mainstream culture is a way of speaking out, and of altering social discourse. This is ventriloquism in the sense employed by Margaret Doody and others,¹⁵ that is, ventriloquism with a subversive twist. It is as if the dummy did not merely serve to demonstrate the master’s skill at speaking through another’s body, but took on a life of its own, began to challenge the master by altering the master’s texts.

Theirs is a discourse that comes to reflect satirically on its own mode of production, reception, and poetic conventionality, as exemplified by the servant Elizabeth Hands’s “A Poem, On the Supposition of an Advertisement appearing in a Morning Paper, of the Publication of a Volume of Poems, by a Servant Maid” (1789):

A servant write verses! says Madam Du Bloom;
Pray what is the subject? – a Mop, or a Broom?
He, he, he, – says Miss Flounce; I suppose we shall see
An Ode on a Dishclout – what else can it be?

...

For my part I think, says old lady Marr-joy,
A servant might find herself other employ:
Was she mine I’d employ her as long as ’twas light,
And send her to bed without candle at night.
Why so? says Miss Rhymer, displeas’d; I protest
’Tis pity a genius should be so deprest!
What ideas can such low-bred creatures conceive,
Says Mrs. Noworthy, and laught in her sleeve.
Says old miss Prudella, if servants can tell
How to write to their mothers, to say they are well,
And read of a Sunday the Duty of Man;
Which is more I believe than one half of them can;
I think ’tis much *properer* they should rest there,
Than be reaching at things so much out of their sphere.¹⁶

(II–14, 21–34)

Here we have the use of tetrameter, a popular meter for lightly handled satire, in the service of a class-conscious and protofeminist critique of working-class women’s subordination, the simultaneous suffocation and exploitation of their talents and desires. If Swift or Butler has served as inspiration, Hands manages not to sound exactly like either of them. This is far from a slavish form of imitation, if imitation it can be called. As Luce Irigaray has hypothesized, feminine imitation of masculine forms also serves to subvert

mimesis because women are simultaneously outside and inside the discourse that they imitate:

If she can play the role so well, if it does not kill her, quite, it is because she keeps something in reserve with respect to this function. Because she still subsists, otherwise and elsewhere than where she mimes so well what is asked of her.¹⁷

The existence of this form of literary production signifies that working-class consciousness and working-class feminism have histories that predate their usual association with the nineteenth century. The achievement of this marginal writing, from the perspective of our disciplinary practice as literary historians, ought to be the vindication of modes of literary production hitherto denigrated or ignored: writing that has been dismissed as derivative, conventional, or imitative needs now to be reread for its dialogic, innovative, and critical possibilities, for its muted protests and attempts at subversion, its curtailed yet incorrigible desires.

There are a number of historical and aesthetico-critical grounds upon which this study has been built. I have defined a poetic discourse by delineating its shifting margins in terms of both chronology and critical reading. This is a comparative study in the sense that Ann Messenger means when she suggests that, whatever one's commitment to feminist politics, women historically have not written in strict homosocial segregation and so, "Men's writing cannot be ignored . . . I look at these writers in their various relations to other writers," including "the better known ones of the opposite sex."¹⁸ Any such study thus implicitly engages questions of the canon and of valuation. As Morag Shiach comments in her study of popular culture, the female "peasant poets" she examines were doubly marginalized by virtue of their gender and class positions, and any attempt to redress the balance must confront the obstacle of "hundreds of years of cultural neglect" that cannot simply be wished away: "The challenge of producing interesting and powerful accounts of poetic writing which has never before been part of critical discussions is daunting, particularly when set beside the proliferation of critical responses to the work of James Thomson, Stephen Duck or John Clare."¹⁹

Between 1739 and 1796 an identifiable discourse of working-class women's poetry emerges in Britain, only to fold back on itself after the turn of the century with the increasing popularity of working-class prose autobiography, a gradual defusing of working-class combativeness, and increasing class defensiveness. Thus Mary Collier's *The Woman's Labour* (1739) and Ann Yearsley's *The Rural Lyre* (1796) mark important moments in the history of this discourse. They are also texts that yield a great deal, critically speaking, when read with feminist and marxist questions in mind, texts whose textuality enacts struggle, contradiction, and ideological and subjective con-

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testation. After 1796, I shall argue, there is a waning of engagement and affect within this discourse, which rapidly becomes “residual” in Ann Candler and Elizabeth Bentley.²⁰

But what of earlier women writers of less than genteel origins, and how is one to determine what constitutes for the period the “working classes?” Mary Barber (1690?–1757), for instance, was the wife of a wool clothier, and in 1837 we find her coupled with Mary Leapor by a writer in *Blackwood's Magazine* because of their lower-class situations, and the consequent expectation that they will write enthusiastic religious verse:

Mary Barber was the wife of a shopkeeper in Dublin, and Mary Leapor a cook, but neither of them had so much of the *mens diviniior* as might have been expected from their occupation.²¹

Similarly, Mary Masters (1706?–1759?) is introduced in Colman and Thornton's *Poems by Eminent Ladies* as having been “shut out from all commerce with the polite world,” with her desire to write poetry “always brow-beat and discountenanced by her parents.”²² But if we read Barber and Masters carefully, their social circumstances appear incomparably more genteel than Collier's or Yearsley's, and there is no question of their ever having been “in service.” Mary Barber is not only a friend of Swift, but of Mary Caesar, the wife of a Tory M.P. Her poems address such topics as dining with Lord Carteret and the Speaker of the House of Commons, the marriage of Lady Margaret Harley, daughter of the former Tory Lord Treasurer Robert Harley, and the education of her son Constantine, who would become President of the College of Physicians in Dublin. Her verses were approved by Swift, and both Pope and his mother subscribed to them, along with the Lords Bathurst and Cobham, the Duke and Duchess of Buckingham, the Duchess of Ormonde, Sir Robert Walpole, and Sir William Windham.²³ Of Mary Masters we know rather less, but her verses were perhaps revised by Samuel Johnson, she may have lived with the publisher Edward Cave, and the *D.N.B.* claims that she “seems to have been known to most of the *literati* of the day.”²⁴ She was certainly patronized by the Earl of Burlington. Here, too, signs of genteel social connection work against equating “laboring class” with what it might mean to be of “humble” or “obscure” birth. And so, while I have discussed Masters's poem “To the Right Honourable the Earl of Burlington” as a representative response to Pope, I have not analyzed Masters's entire corpus, because to do so would be to militate against the claims of those poets of the laboring classes whose literary production was even more exceptional.

A marginal case in the determination of social class, Elizabeth Bentley (1767–1839) represents a later instance of a lower-class poet whose *œuvre* I have not treated fully because of the relative “respectability” of her circumstances. The only daughter of a journeyman cordwainer or shoemaker who

suffered a stroke which reduced him to hawking garden produce until he was appointed bookkeeper for a coaching company, Bentley was poor, but there is no evidence of her ever having gone into service. She eventually became proprietor of a small school.²⁵ Her situation and literary identification with her social superiors suggest the importance of education and the possession of both mental and manual skills among the artisanal class. In her case, this distancing of herself from the laboring poor through a resolute clinging to relatively genteel work like writing and teaching is linked with anti-Jacobinism and other forms of political conservatism.²⁶ Although I discuss several of her poems, I have limited the scope of my analysis of her work in recognition of her borderline status as a “working-class” woman poet.

This question of the specificity of a woman writer’s “class” is of paramount importance because the class position of the women whose writing this study investigates was, in every case, explicitly identified during their brief moments of literary recognition as “low,” “menial,” or “obscure,” but, as we have seen, such labels did not necessarily designate members of the laboring population. Even such apparently common strategies among women writers as the appropriation of poetic languages and styles from master texts by men may manifest themselves differently when the social and economic circumstances of literary production and reception differ as widely as they do for a penurious middle-class woman and a female agricultural laborer or domestic servant.

The writers I have chosen to examine at length were all “working class” in that they were employed in laboring occupations, and all were the daughters of laboring families. I am thus interested in addressing certain historical, political, and discursive continuities between the experience of the laboring classes in a still predominantly agrarian economy, in which capitalism was already emergent, and the experience of their descendants during industrialization – a usage of “working class” sanctioned by the documentary work of Ivy Pinchbeck, E. P. Thompson, Stedman Jones, and other social historians. Across this economic history of developing capitalism, relations of patronage and clientage function in a backward-looking way, reminiscent as they are of “traditional,” that is, feudal, social relations and exchanges of service. The supplementary use of such terms as “laboring class” and “poor” or “plebeian” writers emphasizes, in each case, a slightly different valence: for “laboring class,” read workers in an agrarian economy; for “the poor,” a need on the part of contemporaries to signify a certain pathos within socio-economic hierarchies; for “plebeian,” the mainly cultural opposition to “patrician” or “polite.”

The aesthetico-critical grounds for selection of writers to explore at length are more problematical than the historical delimiting outlined above. It is arguable that Susannah Harrison’s (1752–84) *Songs In The Night: By a Young Woman under deep Afflictions* (1780), which by the 1820s had gone through

fifteen British and six American editions,²⁷ was in terms of reception and impact on possible readerships the most important publication by a plebeian female poet. It may be that in another historical moment, such highly conventional devotional verse, so popular in its day, but now nearly unreadable according to our post-Romantic critical codes, will seem more interesting and important than Leapor's or Yearsley's, or that another of the poets mentioned here will prove a more crucial discovery for another critical agenda. But in our moment the literary innovations, and protofeminist and potentially radical social criticism offered by the writing of Collier, Leapor, Yearsley, Hands, Little, and Wheatley cannot fail, I think, to engage us most fully.

This is not a book about the literary representation of female agrarian workers, domestic servants, or plebeian prodigies. Nevertheless, readers will doubtless encounter the relatively unfamiliar texts of Elizabeth Hands and others in this book with certain representations of working-class women already in mind. I hope that the testimonies of these laboring women of letters will help resituate and reflect our readings of such figures as Emily Brontë's Nelly Dean and the unholy couple formed by Emma Woodhouse and Harriet Smith in Jane Austen's *Emma*.

Nelly, whose self-discipline, devoted service to masters, vicarious familialism, and intense narration mark the socially repressive, politically containing functions of literacy and middle-class acculturation among the working classes: Nelly works behind the scenes, between the lines and in the margins of her own narration, to bring about traditional propertied and wedded closure. Apparently working against her own interests because she has identified them so totally with the family she serves, she is the chief agent of patriarchy, of the rule of the father, within Emily Brontë's novel, the chief prop of traditional hierarchies and exclusions.²⁸

But we cannot now "rescue" Nelly, nor can we protest the repressive function of those scars, those marks of the "sharp discipline" she has undergone, without risking entrance as well into the role of the do-gooding, ultimately self-serving middle-class patron: Jane Austen's Emma, who appoints herself sponsor of Harriet Smith. Emma patronizes Harriet without understanding her, interprets Harriet's needs and desires to suit her own. Neither Emma nor Austen credits the socially inferior Harriet with much intelligence. And where "strength of understanding must not be expected," it may also be found suspect, if not distinctly objectionable, as we shall see. Clever complicity with one's own subjection, or insufficient intellect to challenge it: between these two possible relations to subjection, this simple dichotomy, lie many others, many actual practices of reading, writing, and self-representation by laboring-class women.