

New Directions on Mary Leapor and Ann Yearsley

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This special topics issue on the poetry of Mary Leapor (1722-1746) and Ann Yearsley (1753-1806) adds to a steadily growing collection of work on previously forgotten, ignored, or neglected poets of eighteenth-century Britain, many of whom were laboring-class or otherwise considered by posterity to sit outside the mainstream literary culture of the period. While the debt to earlier recovery work by feminist, Marxist, and cultural-materialist critics will be evident, this issue represents an intervention in the kinds of discussions we have about laboring-class poets, women writers, the direction of recovery research now, and the progress that has been made.

Since the 1970s and 1980s, and especially since the publication of Roger Lonsdale's field-changing anthologies in 1984 and 1989, previously neglected poets have enjoyed increasing critical, and indeed popular, attention.¹ Two groups in particular—laboring-class male writers and middle-class women writers—benefited early from the opening up of literary criticism of the long eighteenth century. During the last thirty or forty years, there has been a wealth of studies that have radically reshaped the literary landscape. Mary Poovey, in her 1984 *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer*, makes the case for the importance of cultural-materialist approaches to female writers:

only by expanding our interpretive perspectives, only by seeing imaginative creation in relation to social and psychological behavior and conditions, will we begin to grasp the complex relationship between the ways we are socially and psychologically constituted, between what we are taught to be and what we feel we are, between what we do and what we dream.²

John Barrell and Raymond Williams led the way in the decade before Poovey in establishing the means by which critics might “expand” their “interpretive perspectives” in relation to laboring-class male writers, especially John Clare. In *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place, 1730-1840: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare* (1972), Barrell is keenly interested in the social, political, and cultural circumstances that shaped Clare's work, focusing particularly on the effects of enclosure and the influence of landscape painting, which are brought together as a means to better understand Clare's artistic concerns; this approach enables Barrell to offer wider-reaching discussions of how ideas such as place, meaning, identity, and self were constructed in the long eighteenth century. A year after

Barrell's study was published, Raymond Williams's crucial and wide-ranging monograph *The Country and the City* (1973) appeared, bringing together canonical and noncanonical writers from across the long eighteenth century and beyond on equal terms. Williams's approach has come to underpin the ways in which critics discuss many noncanonical writers.

The influence of Williams, Barrell, and also E. P. Thompson's pioneering work can be seen in John Goodridge's *Rural Life in Eighteenth-Century English Poetry* (1995) and, most recently, his *John Clare and Community* (2013). Simon Kövesi, Mina Gorji, Kelsey Thornton, Ronald Blythe, Jonathan Bate, and many others have made use of related methodologies in their discussions of Clare's poetry and his relationship with place and in reconstructing the material circumstances of his life. The result has been to recover Clare so successfully that he has been "canonised in Poet's Corner and the National Curriculum [in English schools], quoted approvingly in government reports on the environment, and vigorously argued over in the scholarly and broadsheet press."³ It is now difficult to discuss Romantic-era literary culture without reference to Clare, and while Clare's life continues to fascinate, the quality and importance of his poetry are so firmly established that the poet is in no danger of being subsumed by the man.

Goodridge has also been crucial, along with Tim Fulford, Tim Burke, Simon White, Bridget Keegan, and others, in bringing the writings of Robert Bloomfield to wider notice; all these critics have paid close attention to various aspects of the historical, social, and, crucially, literary contexts that helped shape Bloomfield's work. Stephen Duck, the progenitor, perhaps, of the laboring-class poetic tradition, has recently benefited from the application of similar approaches, particularly in the work of Jennifer Batt, William J. Christmas, Stephen Van-Hagen, and Keegan. Van-Hagen and Keegan have contributed to significant advances in our understanding of the poetry of James Woodhouse, and other laboring-class poets such as Henry Jones are increasingly being made visible as a result of their inclusion in anthologies, scholarly editions, and databases of laboring-class poetry.⁴

Similar successes were achieved in the 1980s for middle-class women writers as a result of the adoption of the methodologies pioneered by Barrell and Williams in their discussions of laboring-class male poets. Poovey's analysis of the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen is interested in the material contexts that gave rise to the "subjectively experienced" "femaleness" articulated by the three writers in much the same way that Barrell examines the material contexts that shaped and informed Clare's poetry and representations of the laboring poor in landscape paintings (p. x). Poovey's work contributed to a growing interest in

how gender roles as “part of familial, political, social, and economic relationships” were fundamental to how, when, and why these women “became professional authors” (p. x).

The 1980s and early 1990s saw studies whose cultural-materialist approach to women’s writing would prove hugely influential, not least amongst them Stuart Curran’s seminal 1988 essay “The I Altered,” which helped lead the way in taking seriously the material circumstances of Charlotte Smith’s literary career and which argues that the poetry of the everyday—often the subject of women’s poetry—is worthy of sustained critical engagement.⁵ Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Haefner, too, in their important collection of essays, *Re-visioning Romanticism: British Women Writers, 1776-1837* (1994), describe of an area of scholarship undergoing a paradigm shift as a result of the adoption of sociohistorical methodologies. They note that between 1981 and 1992, before the adoption of these methodologies, most articles and books on Romanticism, with few exceptions, looked at male writers or at women writers in terms of their relations (familial or sexual) with male writers. However, the appearance of “New historicist, cultural, and feminist scholarship, with a different set of questions, concerns, and areas of study” meant that accounts of the literature of the period could never be the same again.⁶

Anne K. Mellor, too, makes a compelling case for a more rigorous and sustained “knowing” of neglected voices in *Romanticism and Gender* (1993), arguing that “no description of [the] female literary corpus” can be relied upon “until we know the work of most of the women writing during this period.”⁷ It is one of the principal aims of this special topics issue not only to contribute to this better “knowing” but also to challenge and expand the sorts of knowledge currently available about Leapor and Yearsley and, indeed, women laboring-class poets more broadly.

Others have, of course, made significant contributions to the better knowing of women writers active in the long eighteenth century, including Susan J. Wolfson (who in 2010 reiterated the importance of the “practices and possibilities of cultural criticism” in recovering such individuals⁸), Anne Janowitz, Stephen Behrendt, Angela Keane, Adriana Craciun, and Amy Garnai, all of whom have utilized cultural-materialist approaches to great effect in their discussions of a range of political, aesthetic, and historical contexts in which women writers of this period operated.

Strongly rooted in both these parallel recoveries of the neglected and noncanonical voices of male laboring-class and female middle-class writers is Donna Landry’s ground-breaking study of laboring-class women’s writing, *The Muses of Resistance: Laboring-Class Women’s Poetry in Britain, 1739-1796* (1990). One of the first critics to pay attention to this group, Landry

argues that closer attention to their writing has the potential to transform evaluations of the literature of the period. On the first page of her monograph, Landry notes that

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.⁹

Yet Landry's study also points to what would be lingering difficulties with a full recovery of laboring-class women's poetry, the sort of recovery increasingly well-established for middle-class women writers and for John Clare and some of his brother workers. Landry observes that "a materialist feminist project must remain vigilant against replicating both the exploitative and the sentimental tendencies of eighteenth-century 'discovery' and patronage" or risk reproducing the "class hierarchies and inequities of power . . . that a radical and emancipatory feminist criticism cannot afford to endorse" (pp. 17, 22). "Surely," Landry argues, "we should be at least as bold, in the context of our own historical moment, as many of these poets were in theirs" (p. 22). Boldness for Landry involves not making laboring-class women poets emblems of a particular class consciousness or of particular gender-inflected subject positions nor seeking to rediscover their writing only to neglect the works in favor of a gossipy interest in their lives.

That boldness, however, has at times been lacking, and criticism of laboring-class women's writing still tends towards the biographical or the emblematic. Where Curran saw the "quotidian" of women's poetry as aesthetically challenging work that enforced in the artist "a discipline of particularity and discrimination that is a test of powers" (p. 190) or where, in Clare's work, Goodridge saw the coalescing of a range of influences from the rural and everyday to the national and literary, women's laboring-class verse has been subjected to relatively little serious aesthetic or theoretical criticism. Consequently, such writers too frequently languish in what Landry and Christmas, in a special 2005 issue of *Criticism*, call the "biographical prison house": a construct of unimaginative literary criticism within which female laboring-class writers in particular are separated from their craft.¹⁰ Fifteen years after her original call to scholars to be "bold" in treating these writers as poets, Landry, with Christmas, reminds scholars that

to subordinate, if not bury entirely, formal and aesthetic questions in favor of social and political ones is to be once again complicit in tying laboring-class writers so tightly to their social difference from polite culture that their achievements cannot be appreciated artistically, but only sociologically. (p. 414)

Ten years after this second warning, there has yet to be a significant shift to treating women laboring-class writers' work as poetry worthy of serious and sustained aesthetic and theoretical criticism.

Therefore while this special topics issue opens up no new field of study and openly acknowledges its position in a long and well-established critical tradition of applying cultural-material methodologies to neglected texts of the long eighteenth century, it does set out to apply these methodologies to an area of literature that has received less from this approach than it should. As the essays that follow indicate, such methodologies have the potential to yield exciting and challenging results that will further complicate our understanding of the literary culture of the period by asking, to reiterate Wilson and Haefner's words, "a different set of questions" of laboring-class women's writing than has generally been posed. The contributors and I share the hopes of Landry and Christmas that such questions "might go some way toward rectifying previous critical imbalances between history and the literary, or politics and aesthetics" (p. 414). It is past time that laboring-class women's writing was freed from its "biographical prison house."

The eight essays collected here all attempt, through various means, to refocus our attention on the cultural, material, and historical contexts of Leapor's and Yearsley's writing. In the opening essay, Bill Overton calls our attention to the matter of genre in terms both of Leapor's poetry and of wider eighteenth-century literary culture. Overton argues that scholarship in general has not paid sufficient attention either to the generic shifts occurring in the period or to the consequences of those shifts in the poetry being produced. While Overton allows that a laboring-class poet like Leapor might be expected to follow generic conventions—given widely held assumptions about what was appropriate for such writers to attempt—he argues convincingly that Leapor's generic range is large, challenging, and often innovative and that closer attention to it yields insights into the period's literary culture, not just Leapor's individual artistic practices. William J. Christmas's essay evidences this claim with its focus on the soliloquy poem, a form utilized by Leapor and Yearsley and a form that itself has enjoyed little scholarly attention. In addition to offering perhaps the first genealogy of the soliloquy poem in the eighteenth century, Christmas argues that a tighter critical focus on genre must lead to wider views of Leapor's and Yearsley's poetry in terms both of the individual works that receive attention and the sort of attention they receive. Sharon Young, too, places genre at the center of her discussion of Leapor's work in considering the ways in which the poet works with, as well as against, the country house poem. Young urges a shift away from biographically inflected readings of

what is perhaps Leapor's most famous poem, "Crumble-Hall" (1751), in favor of an approach that pays closer attention to the historical and cultural factors that shaped the genre and that affected Leapor's own engagement with it. As a result, Young's essay showcases one means by which scholarship might correct the "imbalances" noted by Landry and Christmas "between history and the literary, or politics and aesthetics."

Anne Chandler and Brycchan Carey, looking at Leapor and Yearsley respectively, offer essays that demonstrate both writers' sophisticated use of literary and cultural networks of influence; they argue that we have not yet got it right in terms of understanding whose work shaped the poetry of either woman. Chandler and Carey suggest that the two writers were better read, and better readers, than has generally been acknowledged. First, Chandler explores Leapor's poetry in relation to the work of John Dryden and, in doing so, indicates that Dryden should sit alongside Alexander Pope as an accepted key influence on Leapor's poetic development. Chandler argues that acknowledging the presence of Dryden in Leapor's work is especially important to understanding her views of monarchy and her attempts to articulate her place in the world. Carey in turn challenges the notion that Hannah More's antislavery poetry was the most significant influence on Yearsley's *Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade* (1788). By examining a range of abolitionist verse, Carey locates Yearsley's poem within a much wider, more diverse, and more problematic cultural *milieu* than has previously been allowed. Carey convincingly challenges a common critical myopia that looks no further for influences in Yearsley's work than More. Chandler's and Carey's essays together argue that a much broader range of literary, cultural, and historical influences need to be recognized if we are to fully understand the extent and sophistication of these writers' works.

My own essay presents previously unknown poetry by Yearsley that was published in several London newspapers during the late 1780s. The decision to place poetry in the papers represented a significant shift in Yearsley's strategy for developing her literary career. The range of the poems written for the papers—an ode on the relationship between the king and his eldest son, a portrait of one of Yearsley's new well-to-do London friends, a loco-descriptive poem, and an intimate reflection on life as a professional author and a working mother—indicate considerable topical, generic, and personal ambition and, I argue, make excluding Yearsley from discussions of early Romantic-era writing increasingly hard to justify.

Anne Milne then offers a novel and important reading of Leapor as a poet of place and in place; her use of ecocriticism demonstrates the potential benefits of more rigorously theorized approaches to Leapor as a poet. As Curran argued in 1988 that women's poetry of the day-to-day merited serious attention—and indeed represented genuinely challenging, aesthetically demanding work—Milne makes the case that Leapor's poetry of the

local, of the provincial, of the unsophisticated, of the undramatic, utilizes surprisingly sophisticated literary techniques and demonstrates considerable artistic accomplishments that ought to be recognized. By putting Leapor in her place, so to speak, through her use of ecocritical theory, Milne shows how a more sustained application of literary theory might enable critics to ask a “different set of questions” (to borrow Wilson and Haefner’s phrase again) of Leapor’s poetry that more effectively explores her poetic practices, her generic experimentation, and her aesthetic accomplishments.

Closing the issue is David Fairer’s nuanced and timely discussion of the literary merit of the writing of Leapor, Yearsley, and others like them, which offers a compelling answer to the condescending question frequently asked of noncanonical writers (as Landry and Christmas note): “But were they any good?” (p. 413). Fairer argues for a considered and sustained move away from overtly biographical readings of the poetry of lower-class writers towards a criticism that accepts them, unapologetically and without defensiveness, as *poets*—as “practitioners of the poetic craft” with their own specific concerns, unique styles, and individual ideas.¹¹ By treating Leapor’s and Yearsley’s works as poems that operate within literary, cultural, and material contexts rather than as repositories for cultural data or as emblems for gender or class identities, Fairer points to the possibility of Leapor and Yearsley being referred to simply as poets with no adjectives to preface, classify, or limit their works or themselves.

All eight essays brought together here attempt to take Leapor and Yearsley seriously as “practitioners” of poetry, eschewing older patterns of reading their work in favor of exploring different ways of contextualizing their poetry, presenting newly discovered material, and taking novel approaches to the theorization of their writing. It is to be hoped that the topics and approaches explored here not only indicate potential directions for future scholarship but also provoke debate about what it is we do when we read “laboring-class poetry” as a category apart. We also ask what the canon might look like with Leapor and Yearsley firmly positioned within it and argue that a more consistent application of the approaches taken in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s—first to laboring-class male poets and then to middle-class women writers—to laboring-class women poets is absolutely necessary if we are to truly “know” the literature of the eighteenth century. The richness of their poetry, as these essays show, demands such sustained critical, textual attention.

I am delighted that these essays on Leapor and Yearsley should have found a home with *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*. The words of Germaine Greer, writing the preface to the first issue of the journal in 1982, remain pertinent to the work collected here; while women’s writing

generally conceived has enjoyed a prolonged and hopefully now irreversible recovery, the prejudice that “the work of women poets is slight and will not reward close investigation” still persists regarding female laboring-class poets’ literary efforts.¹² Given Greer’s forceful appeal for a new way of doing things, for closer attention to be paid to the “matrix” in which literary works “took root” and grew, for studies in women’s writing to “cut across . . . resistant boundaries,” it is fitting that this special topics issue, which aims to do just these things for the study of laboring-class women’s poetry, should be published by the journal that Greer founded (pp. 8, 9). Nor is this the first time the journal has supported the publication of ground-breaking work on Leapor and Yearsley. Moira Ferguson introducing and editing “The Unpublished Poems of Ann Yearsley” (1993), Elizabeth Veisz’s article “Writing the Eighteenth-Century Household: Leapor, Austen, and the Old Feudal Spirits” (2011), and Frank Felsenstein’s two contributions publishing and contextualizing the first correspondence by Yearsley to become known to scholars (2002, 2003) have helped further studies on both writers. *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* was founded to foster work in “the less trodden ways of literary scholarship,” which, as this introduction indicates, still unfortunately includes work on Leapor and Yearsley (p. 23). It is my hope, however, and that of the contributors, that this special issue will contribute to a greater critical frequenting of their most interesting literary ways.

Professor Bill Overton: A Dedication

This special issue of *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* had its origins in a series of roundtable panels on eighteenth-century poetry that was organized by Bill Overton of Loughborough University for the British Society for Eighteenth Century Studies annual conferences in 2011 and 2012. Bill’s innovation was to select an individual poem that would form the basis for the roundtable; the audience could come having read the text, and participants were asked to present different approaches to that poem. First to be chosen was Mary Leapor’s “Crumble-Hall.” The result was a richly stimulating session in which the discussion considered the question of “what next?”—not just for Leapor but for the study of laboring-class women’s poetry more broadly. Enthused by the thought-provoking nature of this discussion, the roundtable’s participants agreed to turn their short presentations into full articles for inclusion in a journal issue centered on the new directions we had begun to explore. Additional contributions were solicited from other scholars in the field.

What the participants did not know at the time was that Bill Overton had become ill with what would prove to be terminal cancer, and he was forced to withdraw from the subsequent roundtable in 2012 (on Oliver

Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village*). Bill's interest in and support for this special issue continued despite the rapid decline in his health, and he was able to produce a draft essay on Mary Leapor in the summer before his death, included here with the consent of his widow, Elaine Hobby, also of Loughborough University. It is entirely fair to say that this collection of essays would not exist were it not for Bill and his commitment to finding new and enriching ways to explore eighteenth-century poetry. This commitment was also evident in his class on eighteenth-century women's poetry at Loughborough University, which I was lucky enough to take in my second year as an undergraduate there. Bill's enthusiasm for eighteenth-century poetry, especially its marginalized voices, can be seen in his published work and in his last project, a scholarly edition of the poetry of John, Lord Hervey, currently being completed by Elaine Hobby and Jim McLaverty. The edition is forthcoming with Cambridge University Press.

It is therefore with the greatest respect for Bill's work as a scholar, as a teacher, and as a mentor, and with gratitude for his life, that the contributors and I dedicate this special issue to his memory.

Acknowledgments

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Finally, to Elaine and to Bill: thank you, for all you have done.

NOTES

¹ See Roger Lonsdale, ed., *The New Oxford Book of Eighteenth-Century Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); and Lonsdale, ed., *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets: An Oxford Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

² Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), xix. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

³ John Goodridge and Simon Kövesi, introduction to *John Clare: New Approaches* (Helpston: John Clare Society, 2000), xv.

⁴ See, in particular, Goodridge, ed., *Eighteenth-Century English Labouring-Class Poets: 1700-1800*, 3 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2003); Goodridge, ed., *Nineteenth-Century English Labouring-Class Poets: 1800-1900*, 3 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005); and *Labouring-Class Poets Online*, ed. Goodridge, accessed 9 March 2015, <http://laboringclasspoetsonline.omeka.net>.

⁵ Stuart Curran, "The I Altered," in *Romanticism and Feminism*, ed. Anne K. Mellor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 185-207. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

⁶ Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Haefner, introduction to *Re-visioning Romanticism: British Women Writers, 1776-1837* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 2-3.

⁷ Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (London: Routledge, 1993), 2.

⁸ Susan J. Wolfson, *Romantic Interactions: Social Being and the Turns of Literary Action* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 13.

⁹ Donna Landry, *The Muses of Resistance: Laboring-Class Women's Poetry in Britain, 1739-1796* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 1. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically in the text.

¹⁰ Landry and William J. Christmas, introduction to "Learning to Read in the Long Revolution: New Work on Laboring-Class Poets, Aesthetics, and Politics," ed. Landry and Christmas, special issue, *Criticism*, 47 (2005), 414. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

¹¹ David Fairer, "Flying atoms in the sightless air': Issues of Coherence and Scale in Leapor and Yearsley," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 34 (2015), 159.

¹² Germaine Greer, "The Tulsa Center for the Study of Women's Literature: What We Are Doing and Why We Are Doing It," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 1 (1982), 11. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.