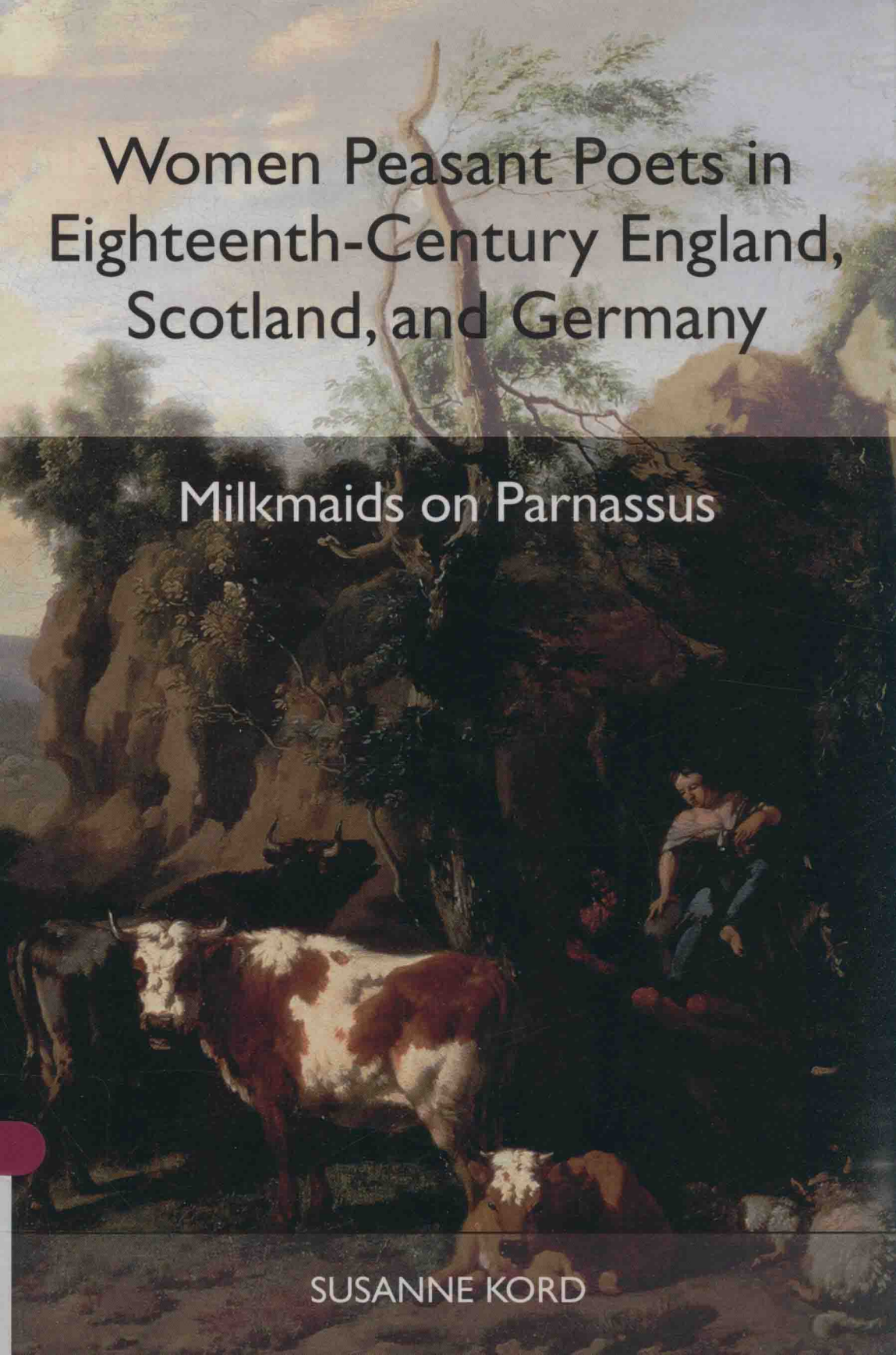
Women Peasant Poets in Eighteenth-Century England, Scotland, and Germany

Milkmaids on Parnassus



SUSANNE KORD

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Women Peasant Poets in Eighteenth-Century England, Scotland, and Germany

Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture

Edited by James Hardin
(South Carolina)

To my friend and mentor,
Susanne Zantop (1945–2001)

We go to Nature for comfort in trouble, and sympathy in joy, only in books. Admiration of those beauties of the inanimate world, which modern poetry so largely and so eloquently describes, is not, even in the best of us, one of the original instincts of our nature. As children, we none of us possess it. No uninstructed man or woman possesses it. Those whose lives are most exclusively passed amid the ever-changing wonders of sea and land are also those who are most universally insensible to every aspect of Nature not directly associated with the human interest of their calling. Our capacity of appreciating the beauties of the earth we live on is, in truth, one of the civilised accomplishments which we all learn as an Art . . .

— Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (1859–60)

What you call rags I call romance. What seems poverty to you is picturesqueness to me.

— Oscar Wilde, "The Model Millionaire" (1887–91)

[. . .] if Alexander and Caesar had been born in a cottage, they would have died in obscurity.

— Ann Cromartie Yearsley, *The Rural Lyre* (1796)

Acknowledgments

IF WRITING WERE, as so many aesthetic treatises have claimed, inspired by Nature, authors would be entirely self-sufficient. To perceive writing, including one's own, within a context is to acknowledge a debt. My work on this book over the years has benefited from an excellent support system composed of friends, colleagues and institutions. I would here like to express my gratitude to some of them:

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The audiences at the following universities and conferences where I lectured on materials on which this study is based: the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, Edinburgh; the German Section, School of European Languages and Cultures, University of Edinburgh; the Day School on Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Women Writers, University of Glasgow; the Modern Language Association conventions in Chicago (1999) and New Orleans (2001); the University of Alberta, Edmonton; The Faculty, The Queen's College, University of Oxford; Myths and Mythmaking: International Women in German Studies Conference, University of Edinburgh; Image Into Identity Conference, University of Hull; and the German Department at the University of Sheffield.

None of these lectures ended up in this book, but the responses, criticisms, and questions of colleagues and students who heard me speak on related issues have nonetheless shaped this project in fundamental ways.

* * *

This book is dedicated to the memory of Professor Susanne Zantop of Dartmouth College. As my friend and mentor, Susanne has centrally influenced my writing, from my first project — my dissertation, which she read chapter by chapter although she wasn't on my committee — to this one. This book, more than any other I have written, is indebted to her: her expertise in Comparative Literature, her pioneering role in unearthing early women writers, her concerns with the rediscovery and re-evaluation of lesser-known but no less interesting literary traditions, her interest in the social history of literature, her fearlessness and sense of joyous exploration in venturing into a new field are the models this project has sought to emulate. To both her and her husband Half, who died with her in January 2001, I owe a debt of gratitude for their unvarying friendship and their company and conversation whenever time and distance allowed. I will remember each of these occasions with fondness and gratitude, and I consider myself blessed to have known them both.

Contents

Illustrations

Introduction: Aesthetic Evasions and Social Consequences

LITERARY HISTORY, as it has been written for eighteenth-century Britain and Germany, has traditionally assumed three things: first, that most, if not all, "great" writers of the age were male and middle class; second, that this was directly related to the bourgeoisie's rise to power and cultural preeminence following the emancipation of the middle-class artist from seventeenth-century aristocratic patronage; and finally, that the two aspects that make the new bourgeois art "Art"[1] and that have, in fact, from the eighteenth century on defined *all* Art as such, are its independence from social, political, and biographical context and its resulting ability to embody universally *human* values, transcending all specificities of gender and class. If this study concentrates on women writers of the lower orders — authors who were neither male nor middle-class —, if it moreover professes itself indebted to both Marxist and feminist criticism, it places itself outside of these parameters. In contrast to books on Goethe or Coleridge, whose relevance is assumed, such a study is forced to explain *why* it makes its subject literature that is so manifestly not "Art" by the bourgeois definition, why it should matter that this literature was produced by lower-class women rather than proper writers, and why a study that will automatically be assumed to be

[1] Throughout the book, I use lower-case "art" neutrally to refer to any art form (writing, painting, music, sculpture, etc.), with my concentration in this book on the art of writing, and capitalized "Art" to refer to the *sanctification* of art throughout its reception since the eighteenth century as transcendentally human, moral, or humane. The same will apply to all derivatives of the term, such as artistic, art form, or artist. Two exceptions will be the eighteenth-century usage of the term "art" or its derivatives in other meanings (e.g., "artless" to mean innocent, "art" as indicating artificiality, or "arts" as indicating skills) and usage of the term in quotations from other authors. In the first instance, all occurrences of "art" are rendered in lower case; in the second, the original author's spelling is retained.

A problem with the distinction between "art" and "Art" occurs in passages where I have translated German quotations using the term "Kunst" into English. In all such cases, I have tried to avoid preempting the reader's interpretation of the passage by translating "Kunst" neutrally as "art," even in cases where I believe the author's usage of "Kunst" to be closer to my usage of "Art."

social and political in outlook should be able to lay claim to a readership primarily interested in the aesthetic.

This book is the first comparative investigation of the literature of lower-class women poets in eighteenth-century England, Scotland, and Germany. It links this literary tradition with one of the major eighteenth-century aesthetic trends in all three countries: the Natural Genius craze, which culminated in highland primitivism in Britain and in the Sturm und Drang in Germany. One of the main considerations that have influenced this study is the idea that aesthetic theory and poetic practice were *mutually* influential, that not only poetic practice was judged within the parameters of contemporary aesthetics, but also that this aesthetic was re-evaluated in direct response to some of this literature. Thus, a link can be drawn between the reception of female lower-class poets and the establishment of aesthetics that ultimately conceptualized all forms of Art, including writing, as predominantly male-produced and as chiefly originating in the middle classes.

This book introduces the reader to some of this fascinating literature, a task that has already been begun by pioneering scholars like Donna Landry, Moira Ferguson, Mary Waldron, and Richard Greene. However, in contrast to these previous studies, which have concentrated on the lives and works of women peasant poets, my project is as concerned with the bourgeois response and the consequences for the development of middle-class aesthetics as it is with these women authors themselves. This book explores four related areas: It traces the now-common establishment of writing, understood as Art, as a predominantly male and middle-class tradition back to the reception of eighteenth-century lower-class poets and the aesthetic debate this phenomenon sparked. It thus establishes that this identification of Art with masculinity and the middle classes was not exclusively, as is commonly held, developed in dissociation from aristocratic culture, but also and more significantly in dissociation from lower-class art forms. It then links this phenomenon with the reception of middle-class women's writings by examining the role that works by women of their own class played in the theorizing of eighteenth-century bourgeois men. And finally, it examines how peasant poets responded to their becoming instruments in the service of middle-class aesthetics, how they viewed the bourgeois project of Art and authorship, and how they sought to participate in this project.

For reasons that will be explained later,[2] not the least of which is the much higher lower-class literacy rate in England and Scotland compared

[2] See chapter 1.

with Germany, poetry by women peasants is a tradition much better established in Britain than it was in Germany.[3] We know of at least thirteen published lower-class women poets in eighteenth-century England: the Norwich cordwainer's daughter Elizabeth Bentley (1767–1839); the domestic servants Jane Cave (ca. 1754–1813), Elizabeth Hands (Bourton, no dates available), Susannah Harrison (no dates available), Jane Holt (Oxford, no dates available), and Molly Leapor (Northamptonshire, 1722–46); the Suffolk cottager Ann Candler (1740–1814); the Hampshire washerwoman Mary Collier (1689/90–after 1762); possibly Mary Masters (occupation unknown, 1694?–1771 or 1706?–59?); the Somerset linen merchant's daughter Mary Scott (ca. 1752–90); the farmers Jane West (Leicestershire, no dates available) and Mary Whateley Darwall (Worcestershire, 1738–1825); and — most famously — the Bristol milkmaid Ann Cromartie Yearsley (1752–1806).[4] In Scotland, at least five peasant women published or publicly performed their work: Jeanie Glover from Kilmarnock (1758–1801), "a — and a thief" according to Robert Burns;[5] the Ayrshire milkmaid Janet Little (1759–1813); the Aberdeen carpenter's wife Christian Milne (1773–after 1816); Jean Murray from Muir near Mauchline (late eighteenth century); and the Muirkirk cottager Isobel (Tibbie) Pagan (1741–1821).[6] In Ireland, three lower-class poets have been documented: the Dublin wool clothier's wife Mary Barber (1690?–

[3] This is a point already made by Klaus, who claims that there was no such tradition in Germany (*Literature of Labour,* 1).

Throughout the book, citations refer to author and page numbers only (for full bibliographical information, see Works Cited at the end of the volume), or author, abbreviated title and page numbers in cases where more than one work by the same author appears in the list of Works Cited.

[4] Brief biographies and bibliographical references to the poets' publications and relevant secondary sources appear in the Appendix for all poets whose poetry is interpreted in this volume. Information on these poets can be found in the following sources: Landry, *Muses* (on Mary Collier, Molly Leapor, Ann Yearsley, Elizabeth Hands, Elizabeth Bentley, and Janet Little); Ferguson, *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets* (on Mary Collier, Mary Scott, Ann Yearsley, and Janet Little); Klaus, "Stephen Duck und Mary Collier"; Landry, "The Resignation" (on Collier); Ferguson, "The Cause of My Sex" (on Scott); Rizzo, "Christopher Smart" and "Molly Leapor" (on Leapor); Messenger on Whateley Darwall; and Ferguson, "Unpublished Poems," Waldron's works, Demers, Tompkins, Zionkowski, and the anonymously published "An Historical Milkwoman" on Yearsley. Carter's dissertation also includes one chapter on Yearsley. There is no sustained analytical literature to date on Susannah Harrison, Jane Cave, Jane Holt, Ann Candler, Mary Masters, or Jane West.

[5] Burns's remark is quoted in Paterson, 34.

[6] For information on Janet Little, cf. the sources cited in footnote 2 as well as Bold and Hilton Brown. Little, Glover, and Pagan make a brief appearance in Paterson; Milne is treated briefly in Spence. I have been unable to find any sources on Murray.