

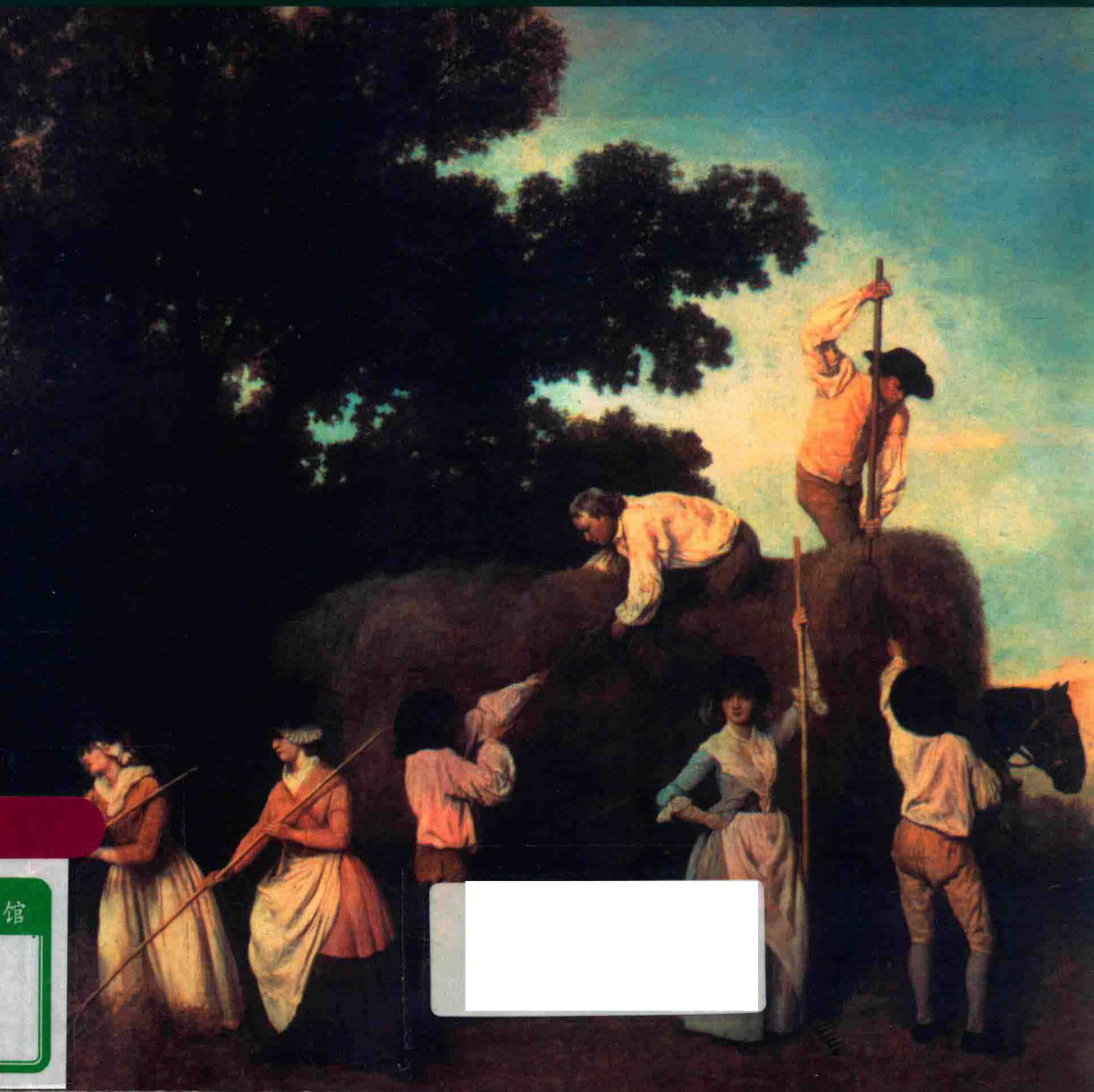
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# THE MUSES OF RESISTANCE

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Laboring-class women's  
poetry in Britain,  
1739-1796

DONNA LANDRY



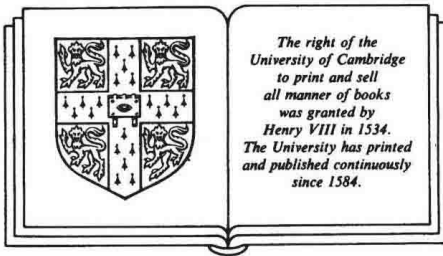
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*Laboring-Class Women's Poetry in Britain, 1739–1796*

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*A cottage girl shelling pease.*

W. R. Bigg Pinxit/P. W. Tomkin Sculpt./30 May 1787

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'I certainly esteem myself a steady, reasonable kind of body,' she said; 'not exactly from living among the hills and seeing one set of faces, and one series of actions, from year's end to year's end; but I have undergone sharp discipline, which has taught me wisdom: and then, I have read more than you would fancy, Mr. Lockwood. You could not open a book in this library that I have not looked into, and got something out of also: unless it be that range of Greek and Latin, and that of French; and those I know one from another: it is as much as you can expect of a poor man's daughter.'

(Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*)

*She* would notice her; she would improve her; she would detach her from her bad acquaintance, and introduce her into good society; she would form her opinions and her manners. It would be an interesting, and certainly a very kind undertaking; highly becoming her own situation in life, her leisure, and powers. . . . [Harriet's] early attachment to herself was very amiable; and her inclination for good company, and power of appreciating what was elegant and clever, shewed that there was no want of taste, though strength of understanding must not be expected.

(Jane Austen, *Emma*)





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## Illustrations

<i>A cottage girl shelling pease</i> (courtesy of Huntington Library)	<i>frontispiece</i>
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## 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!*<sup>1</sup> (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.<sup>2</sup>  
(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

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 – <sup>3</sup>

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."<sup>4</sup> 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

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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup>

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”<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup>

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,<sup>14</sup> 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