

**FROM PENURY TO PUBLISHED POET: THE CULTURAL JOURNEY OF
ANN YEARSLEY**

By

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ABSTRACT

Ann Yearsley (1752-1806) was a humble rural worker who sold milk for a living, but was best known as a poet. Her success in getting a significant amount of work published dismissed the contemporary notion that to be poor and uneducated precluded a life of letters. This thesis examines the constraints and repressions faced by a woman from the lower orders with a will to write. Ann Yearsley's journey into print is framed in the context of the poet's effective negotiation through an eighteenth-century society still rooted in gender and class ideology, and restraints.

This study is distinctive in offering an updated account of an unlikely literary career. This is not a literary study of Yearsley, but offers a nuanced and critical reading of Yearsley's poetry and correspondence to throw new light on her personal struggle to become a professional writer. This thesis concludes that Ann Yearsley was an important cultural figure in her time because she successfully overcame the difficulties encountered by a female writer from the lower orders. In doing this she showed that a window existed for other women from the labouring classes to become published writers.

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A CHRONOLOGY OF ANN YEARSLEY

- 1752 Born Ann Cromartie, daughter of Ann and John Cromartie.
- 1753 Baptised in Clifton, a village near Bristol. Mother Ann a milkwoman; her daughter followed her into this trade.
- 1774 Married to John Yearsley, also of Clifton.
- 1775 Son Henry born. (died at the age of four).
- 1776 Son William born.
- 1778 Son John born.
- 1780 Son Charles born.
- 1782 Daughter Ann born.
- 1783-4 Ann Yearsley and her family saved from starving by the intervention of a local man Richard Vaughan. Hannah More hears of their plight and offers to be Yearsley's patron.
- 1784 Daughter Jane born. Ann Cromartie dies
- 1785 Published *Poems on Several Occasions* under the patronage of More. Dispute with More began.
- 1786 Fourth edition of *Poems on Several Occasions* published, prefaced by Yearsley's 'Narrative' setting out her version of the dispute with More.
- 1787 Published *Poems on Various Subjects* under new patron the Earl of Bristol. Published three poems for the London newspapers: 'Ode on the Late Happy Reconciliation Between His Majesty and the Prince of Wales', 'Lines on Entering Lady Wallace's Study, her Ladyship Being Absent', 'Stanzas, Written by Mrs Yearsley on her Leaving London'.
- 1788 Published 'A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade'.
- 1789 Yearsley's historical play *Earl Goodwin* performed in Bath and Bristol.
- 1790 Published 'Stanzas of Woe'.
- 1791 Published *Earl Goodwin*.
- 1792 Published 'Reflections on the Death of Louis XVI'.

- 1793 Opened a circulating library at Bristol Hotwell.
- 1794 Published 'Poem on the Last Interview Between the King of Poland and Loraski',
and, 'Elegy on Marie Antoinette, Queen of France'.
- 1795 Published *The Royal Captives*, a novel.
- 1796 Published her last work *The Rural Lyre*, a volume of poems.
- 1803 Husband John Yearsley dies.
- 1806 Ann Yearsley dies after having retired to Melksham in Wiltshire.
Rumours of her descent into insanity were widely circulated at the time, but
appear to be groundless. She is buried at Clifton.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ann Yearsley was baptised in Clifton near Bristol in 1753. She was born into humble circumstances and was the daughter of John and Ann Cromartie. Mrs Cromartie was a milkwoman and trained her daughter in the same occupation. In 1774, by marrying John Yearsley, described as a yeoman in the documents of his mother's estate in that year, the young Ann Cromartie appeared to have elevated herself socially. But, by 1783, a series of losses and misfortunes found the pregnant Ann, her husband, and their five children, along with her dying mother, reduced to abject poverty and near starvation. The family was rescued by charitable individuals, one of whom was Hannah More who went on to become Ann Yearsley's first patron.¹

Other than being taught to read by her mother, and to write by her brother, Yearsley was without formal education. Despite this she wrote poetry from an early age, which came to the attention of fellow Bristol writer Hannah More who was well established as an author and financially independent: she was also an influential social reformer who moved in élite London circles that included David Garrick, Samuel Johnson, and the Bluestockings, along with aristocrats, and high-ranking clergy.² More, as the milkwoman's first patron, helped with her poetry and arranged subscriptions for Ann Yearsley's first volume of verse published in 1785.³ Their liaison lasted for less than a year, ending acrimoniously with a dispute over control of the profits from this work.

¹ Waldron, Mary, 'Ann Yearsley [née Cromartie] (bap. 1753, d.1806), poet and writer' in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004-2011).

² Skedd, S.J., 'Hannah More (1745-1833), writer and philanthropist' in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004-11).

³ Yearsley, Ann, *Poems on Several Occasions* (London: T. Cadell, 1785).

Ann Yearsley's words, written after she had dispensed with Hannah More's sponsorship, asserted that 'My independent spirit on the wing / she still shall soar, nor shall the Fool, / wounding her pow'rs, e'er bring her to the ground'.⁴ Here she affirmed her determination to become a professional writer, earning an income from her work. But, in the context of the time, the odds were stacked against this happening. It is this near-impossible climb from milkwoman to published author, with a significant body of writing across various genres, which makes examining and recording this personal transition an appropriate subject for study.

The two main questions asked in this thesis are firstly: How, and with what level of success did Ann Yearsley surmount the problems she encountered in her struggle to be a financially independent, published writer? And secondly: To what extent was she a culturally significant figure in her own time? This study aims to explore Ann Yearsley as a social and cultural figure and uses her literary productions, along with other primary materials, to illuminate her life. It should be borne in mind, however, that examined literary sources are works of fiction, and when used within a historical study should be approached with caution, especially when the subject of that study is from the lower orders of society who may not have any other platform from which to disseminate ideas.

Secondary sources dealing with class, gender, patronage, print culture, and Bristol, provide context which enables Ann Yearsley to be embedded as an individual in a particular time and place. The first question will also be explored by analysis of Ann Yearsley's literary development from her first volume of verse, where she mainly conformed to the expectations of polite society, through to her final volume of poetic work which shows her in a more confident light. This thesis examines how the poet negotiated

⁴ Yearsley, Ann, 'To Mr ****, An Unlettered Poet, on Genius Unimproved' in *Poems on Various Subjects* (London: G.G.J. Robinson, 1787) p.80, lines 40-42.

her life experiences in eighteenth-century society and the literary world. The importance of place in shaping Yearsley's identity and character, and the historical context of her writing years are evaluated, alongside the way in which she absorbed and participated in political debates as her work addressed a broad spectrum of concerns ranging from protest against the slave trade, social injustice at local level, and stand-alone poems on Marie Antoinette, and Louis XVI. She was confident enough by 1788, to participate in the debate on abolition, going head-to-head poetically with Hannah More on this issue.⁵ The findings of the chapters within this thesis are brought together in a final conclusion to the work. It is here that an evaluation of Ann Yearsley's cultural significance in her own time is explicitly made, thereby answering the second question asked in this thesis.

How gender and class functioned for women in the patriarchal society of the eighteenth century is dealt with in this study. Both issues affected Yearsley as a wife and mother of six children, and as an aspiring writer. The constraints and repression placed on the lower orders by those above them socially were obstacles in any potential writing career. The woman writer had not only to rise above ideology which insisted that her primary focus should be home management and childcare, but also patriarchal comment, such as that of Richard Polwhele, which negatively judged a female with a will to write.⁶ Many women straddled both public and private spheres, but Yearsley is especially important in any debate on the subject, because there were very few women from the lower orders who managed to operate successfully in the private sphere of household management and childcare, and also as a published writer in the public domain. This study also examines the notion that class was a bigger obstacle than gender for Yearsley to negotiate on her way to literary success.

⁵ Ann Yearsley's text *A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade*, published by G.G.J. and J. Robinson in 1788, and Hannah More's text *Slavery, A Poem* published by T. Cadell in the same year.

⁶ Polwhele, Richard, *The Unsex'd Females* (London: Cadell, 1798).

This thesis offers new ways of understanding the difficulties faced by an aspiring female writer from the labouring classes. The work is on one level a study of Ann Yearsley's refusal to be excluded from the eighteenth-century literary arena. On a broader level, however, the project throws light on the lives of labouring-class, female writers of the period, alongside that of women in general. Yearsley's work also allows for the possibility of the 'lower orders' developing political awareness, creating a poetic identity, and participating fully in the literary marketplace. The poet's ambiguous social status and her resistance to Hannah More's class-based patronage, illuminate the social dynamics of the period. Yearsley's writing years spanned economic changes in the marketplace in the late eighteenth century, which in turn saw changes in print culture and the way writers could get their work published.⁷ There was also increased fluidity in the literary marketplace, coupled with a shift from the older traditional patronage system towards a direct dealing with publishers: additional options were on offer for the aspiring writer. It was this easier access to print in the latter half of the century that allowed Yearsley to publicly challenge the patronage system. But this did not mean that she had a trouble-free journey towards a professional writing career. On the one hand changes in print and publishing culture may have helped Yearsley achieve her literary aspirations, but on the other an increasingly fraught political climate sought to do exactly the opposite. The last years of the period were dominated by the French Revolution and demands for democracy and political reform. The deterioration of the movement into violence and terror, according to Emma Vincent Macleod, 'provoked a crisis in Britain by providing an example of constitutional, political, social and religious upheaval which inspired some in Britain but appalled others'.⁸ This in turn led to a stricter policing of the 'mob'. Yearsley's perceived status as a

⁷ Griffin, Dustin, *Literary Patronage in England, 1650-1800* (Cambridge, U.S.A.: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1996) p.10.

⁸ Macleod, Emma Vincent, 'The Crisis of the French Revolution' in H.T. Dickinson *A Companion to Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2002) p.112.

member of an ‘underclass’, especially as she had a will to write, may have led to a perception of her as a threat in a society that actively discouraged labouring-class women’s participation in literary culture.

To answer the first question asked in this thesis it is important to embed Ann Yearsley within a historical and literary context. The issues that could have prevented her entry into the world of letters, such as class and gender ideology, are evaluated in order to provide an understanding of the difficulties to be overcome by an aspiring writer from the lower orders. It is also necessary to unpick Yearsley’s location culturally, socially, and geographically, thus determining how she was able to deal with eighteenth-century pressures, problems, and patrons that complicated her journey into and through the world of letters. In order to do this a range of secondary sources are explored in the literature review. These are reviewed chronologically within subject areas to include: writings on Ann Yearsley, patronage, Bristol and Clifton, eighteenth-century society and social status, and print culture. In the Methodology section (see page 17), a number of primary sources, many of them published didactic texts, are reviewed and evaluated according to their specific focus on aspects of everyday life of the labouring classes, thus throwing light on the society that Ann Yearsley inhabited.

Literature Review

1. Literary Biographies and Writings on Ann Yearsley.

Ann Yearsley has been studied since the early twentieth century when she became recognised as a significant literary figure. Chauncy Brewster Tinker, writing in 1915, is one of the first authors to mention her.⁹ In his study of the English Salon he sets out, in his own words, to ‘Trace as well as I can the attempts made in England between 1760 and

⁹ Tinker, Chauncy Brewster, *The Salon and English Letters: Chapters on the Interrelations of Literature and Society in the Age of Johnson* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1915).

1790 to emulate the literary world of Paris by bringing men of letters and men of the world into closer relations'.¹⁰ One of the strengths of Tinker's work is the large corpus of primary sources he uses, such as correspondence, diaries and memoirs. Tinker's text, however, is a top-down study which did not take into account the emerging class-consciousness of the period; consequently, the work offers a view of the Bluestockings and their salons from an élite perspective rather than from that of the lower orders who were usually outside of literary circles. Brewster's study includes two chapters on the Bluestockings: one details their formation as a society, and the other discusses authors within it.¹¹ Elizabeth Montagu, as the so-called Queen of the Blues, merits a chapter dealing with her reputation as a patron of letters. It is here that Ann Yearsley is briefly mentioned as one of her protégées, although Montagu was co-patron along with Hannah More. The study is limited in its viewpoint, but still conveys a sense of the eighteenth-century salon which enhances the chapter on patronage in this thesis.

J.M.S. Tompkins' essay, *The Bristol Milkwoman*, published originally in 1938, explores six forgotten writers, including Ann Yearsley,¹² and is the first study to investigate the life of 'The Bristol Milkwoman' in her own right. It contains many biographical facts interspersed with detailed commentary on Yearsley's poetry. The author, however, does not contextualise her, and therefore fails to take into account the political climate of the period, or the dominant ideology that sought to exclude labouring-class female writers from the literary arena. Tompkins does not annotate her work with references, instead places general notes at the back of the text. This makes it difficult to know how much of the background information is speculative, anecdotal or based on fact. Despite this, the

¹⁰ Tinker, *The Salon and English Letters*, p. 4.

¹¹ Bluestockings were a group of scholarly or intellectual women who first met in the 1750s. Initially formed to promote intellectual conversation, they went on to support and encourage aspiring women writers. For further information on the Bluestockings see Elizabeth Eger and Lucy Peltz, *Brilliant Women: 18th-Century Bluestockings* (London: National Portrait Gallery Publication, 2008).

¹² Tompkins, J.M.S., 'The Bristol Milkwoman' in *The Polite Marriage* (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1969).

study has been used uncritically by modern-day academics such as Mary Waldron, Kerri Andrews, and Moira Ferguson.

Donna Landry's study published in 1990 focuses on labouring-class women's poetry, taking a feminist approach.¹³ She includes a chapter on the washerwoman Mary Collier, domestic servants Mary Leapor and Elizabeth Hands, the 'Scottish Milkmaid' Janet Little, and the slave Phillis Wheatley. One and a half chapters are devoted to Ann Yearsley: one concerning the poet's alliance with Hannah More, and the other dealing with the complex contradictions of Yearsley herself. Landry posits the theory that class tensions were responsible for the break-up between Yearsley and More. She examines these labouring-class poets in the context of Marxist and feminist theory, and her examination of the poets' resistance to their class position is informative. The text uses a large amount of poetry analysis to underpin points made. Given the title of Landry's work it is her concern to portray Yearsley as a 'muse of resistance', but she does not examine the poet's work within its full historical context.

Moira Ferguson's study in 1995 examines intersections of gender, class, and national identity within a framework of feminist criticism and theory.¹⁴ Her text deals with four women poets, three from the labouring classes, with Yearsley meriting two chapters within the work. These chapters examine her published writings, along with some unpublished work, in the context of gender, which is relevant to this thesis, and also patriotism and national identity, which are less so. Ferguson insists that Yearsley is part of an 'emerging gendered tradition of working-class poets committed to new formulations of patriotism and

¹³ Landry, Donna, *The Muses of Resistance: Laboring-Class Women's Poetry in Britain, 1739-1790* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990).

¹⁴ Ferguson, Moira, *Eighteenth-Century Poets: Nation, Class, and Gender* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995).

national identity, raising significant issues of class and gender as part of that identity'.¹⁵ Ferguson's assertion positions Yearsley firmly within the labouring classes, whereas this thesis posits the theory that part of Yearsley's problem with More, and in general, was that she was always confused about her class status, and often railed against her social categorisation, constantly having to justify herself as a poet, rather than simply a milkwoman who wrote poetry. However, it is fair to say that she was not above calling herself a milkwoman when it seemed prudent to do so.

Though Ferguson sees Yearsley as a feminist, she also states that 'Ann Yearsley does not specifically address the issue of women as subordinated subjects',¹⁶ but in chapter three this thesis argues differently when analysing her poem concerning motherhood and female stereotyping.¹⁷ Ferguson also says that 'nonetheless her tough-minded fight to assert her independence and her art constitutes her as a "feminist in action"'.¹⁸ This shows Yearsley as having a positive approach towards the idea of women's emancipation, as in her poems on motherhood and marriage;¹⁹ but this is subordinated to the writer's focus on her own desire for a literary career. It must also be noted that few women from the lower orders were in a position both financially and ideologically to resist patriarchy, especially a milkwoman with six children and a husband who worked only sporadically.

At the time of writing this thesis (2018), Mary Waldron's study published in 1996 was the only published text dealing with the writer's life in full.²⁰ Her work challenges the notion that what disappears from the canon must be inferior, and is a wide-ranging, meticulously

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.5.

¹⁶ Ferguson, *Eighteenth-Century Poets*, p.113.

¹⁷ Yearsley, Ann, 'To Mira on the Care of Her Infant' in *The Rural Lyre* (London: G.G. and J. Robinson, 1796) p.113.

¹⁸ Ferguson, *Eighteenth-Century Poets*, p.113.

¹⁹ Yearsley, 'Lucy, a Tale for the Ladies' in *Poems on Various Subjects*, p.107, 'To Mira on the Care of Her Infant' and 'The Indifferent Shepherdess to Colin' in *The Rural Lyre*, pages 113 and 139 respectively.

²⁰ Waldron, Mary, *Lactilla, Milkwoman of Clifton: The Life and Writings of Ann Yearsley, 1753-1806* (Georgia, U.S.A.: The University of Georgia Press, 1996).

researched text. The work is structured chronologically and details Yearsley's early life, her engagement with the world of letters, and the patronage of, and eventual quarrel with, Hannah More. Waldron deals with all genres that Yearsley wrote across: poetry, stage drama, the novel, utilising many manuscript sources held at the British Library, Bristol Public Library, and internationally. The work is prefaced with comprehensive notes on Yearsley's texts, giving the location of the majority of her writing, along with relevant correspondence extant at the time of publication. Waldron admitted that 'Except for a few poems in modern anthology and scholarly articles, Ann Yearsley's works are not currently in print'.²¹ This was not the case more than a decade later when the majority of her work became available in facsimile – an indicator of significant interest in the poet.

Waldron's study is a literary biography focusing on Yearsley's exclusion from the literary canon, whereas the focus of this work is on Ann Yearsley as an historical figure. Her writing years are explored, detailing her transition from a milkwoman living in poverty, to a professional writer earning income from her published work. Unlike Waldron, who includes all of the genres that Yearsley wrote across, this thesis illuminates the transition using poetry alone. Yearsley did, however, write *Earl Goodwin* (1791), a play set in the time of Edward the Confessor, and *The Royal Captives* (1795), a novel set in seventeenth-century France. These texts, because they were written when Yearsley was an established and more confident writer, do showcase her political opinions, but they are not a direct articulation of her life. Ann Yearsley was known first and foremost as a poet, and it is this genre that is more personal to her, and provided a platform for the writer to express her deepest thoughts and emotions through every aspect of her journey towards a life in the world of letters.

²¹ Waldron, *Lactilla, Milkwoman of Clifton*, p. ix.

Because Mary Waldron's text was published over twenty years ago, it does not include new archival materials uncovered since. Kerri Andrews, writing in 2013, utilises these new materials to provide an updated assessment of the literary relationship between Yearsley and More.²² She argues that this liaison 'extended beyond the time of their initial patronage relationship to have important effects on the decisions taken by women in their later lives'.²³ This is a theory that is examined within this thesis to underpin the emerging picture of Yearsley as a strong and assertive writer, determined not to be thwarted by a patron equally determined to preserve the existing social order. Andrews' work presents the possibility of Yearsley engaging with radical literary networks in Bristol, and also of the poet's increasing radicalism. Both of these notions are open to question, as I argue within this thesis. Andrews has done much work on Ann Yearsley, especially on the subject of patronage, and has evaluated her alongside other female writers, but has not published a complete study of Yearsley's life and writings. She has, however, edited *The Collected Works of Ann Yearsley*, an annotated anthology, which, because it gathers all of Yearsley's work in one place, constitutes an important collection of primary sources.²⁴ At the time of writing, Andrews was working on a digital edition of Hannah More's correspondence.²⁵

2. Bristol and Clifton.

Because location was important in shaping Yearsley's identity, and in providing inspiration for some of her poetry, it is necessary to examine the writer in the context of the place of her birth. Information on the history of Bristol and Clifton has been drawn from the many comprehensive studies that are available. Patrick McGrath and Madge

²² Andrews, Kerri, *Ann Yearsley and Hannah More: Patronage and Poetry* (London: Pickering & Chatto (Publishers) Limited, 2013).

²³ *Ibid.*, p.5.

²⁴ Andrews, Kerri, ed. *The Collected Works of Ann Yearsley* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2014) 3 vols.

²⁵ Andrews, Kerri, & Sarah Crofton, *Saint Hunting: The Letters of Hannah More. A Digital Edition*, presented at the University of Birmingham, 16.03.2016.

Dresser between them cover most aspects of eighteenth-century Bristol. McGrath's study gives a vivid insight into Bristol life, whilst Dresser and Ollerenshaw chronicle the change from medieval town to modern city, paying particular attention to an understanding of its social and political life.²⁶ Dresser's in-depth study of Bristol's involvement in the slave trade is an historical and anthropological work, which seeks to shed new light on its complex history as a slaving port, assessing how this affected the social and cultural outlook in a major city. Included in the work is a short analysis of Yearsley and More's abolitionist poems.²⁷

Donald Jones provides one of the first studies specifically dedicated to the village of Clifton and gives access to its compelling history. His detailed text chronicles many aspects of Clifton relating to Ann Yearsley's life, and charts the development, socially and economically, of the village from the small rural community of her birth, to an affluent society dominated by wealthy merchants. The study is well researched and documented, and enables an overview of how this gradual change in the place of Yearsley's birth impacted on her life, on her milk-selling business, and on her writing.²⁸

Alistair Heys' collection of essays offers an insight into the life of the controversial, Bristol-born poet Thomas Chatterton (1752-1770), and his influence on the literary landscape of the city.²⁹ There are several references to Yearsley in the text, including a discussion of her poem dedicated to the young writer, in which she declared an affinity with a fellow Bristol poet, and also compared herself to him.³⁰ The information provided on Chatterton enabled an understanding and evaluation of Yearsley's poem dedicated to

²⁶ McGrath, Patrick, *Bristol in the Eighteenth Century* (Newton Abbott: David and Charles (Publishers), 1972), Dresser, Madge, and Philip Ollerenshaw, eds, *The Making of Modern Bristol* (Tiverton: Redcliffe Press 1996).

²⁷ Dresser, Madge, *Slavery Obscured: The Social History of the Slave Trade in an English Provincial Port* (London: Continuum, 2001).

²⁸ Jones, Donald, *A History of Clifton* (Chichester: Phillimore and Co Ltd, 2008).

²⁹ Heys, Alistair, ed, *Thomas Chatterton's Bristol* (Bristol: Redcliffe Press, 2005).

³⁰ Yearsley, Ann, 'An Elegy on Mr Chatterton' in *Poems on Various Subjects*, p.145.

him. Although these secondary sources do not explicitly evaluate Yearsley's background, they do assist in placing her within her location.

3. Patronage and Social Status.

Whilst this thesis does not have patronage as its main focus, studies of the topic provide an important background to chapter two in this work. Patronage was an important factor in Ann Yearsley's literary life, and aspects of it can be seen as a catalyst for the poet's determination to gain autonomy over her work. Yearsley's relationships with her sponsors are examined within the context of the changing face of patronage, paying attention to the dispute with her first sponsor, Hannah More, and foregrounding Yearsley's forceful character, which was required to resist, and eventually dispense with the high-handed and controlling nature of Hannah More. An exploration is made of how the Yearsley/More liaison differed from Yearsley's later patronage relationships, alongside a comparison between what patron and client expected from each other, and what was actually received. A discussion of patrons after More enabled Yearsley to be presented in a different light: as a writer who was able to utilise the changes happening in the patronage system, finally finding the friendship-based liaisons she so desired.

Anne Stott's well-researched study is a full-length biography of Hannah More, shedding new light on her career, and making extensive use of unpublished correspondence.³¹ Stott's work deals with most aspects of More's life and writing, using these new materials to present her subject in a different and more attractive light than some studies previously suggested. Stott's analysis of More's didactic writings, and her involvement with the *Bluestockings*, are areas that link into this thesis. In her work Stott uses More's experience with her patronage of Yearsley to underpin the fact that she could be domineering and

³¹ Stott, Anne, *Hannah More: The First Victorian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

high-handed, certainly with members of the lower orders, claiming that this incident did much to damage her image. Despite this More emerged, in her own life, and in Stott's work, as a positive character. This thesis shows that More spent time in helping Yearsley with her literary career: she raised subscriptions for the milkwoman's first work, and also assisted her with books to expand her reading. But it is a fact that Hannah More was at the forefront of policing the social order, and because of this she would not tolerate any semblance of social elevation on the part of Ann Yearsley, and was prepared to let the poet go only so far in the world of letters.

Elizabeth Eger and Lucy Peltz's work was published to accompany an exhibition entitled *Brilliant Women: Eighteenth-Century Bluestockings* held at the National Portrait Gallery, London, from 13 March to 15 June 2008.³² This work charts the changing fortunes of the Bluestockings, a group of intellectual women who first met in the 1750s, and sought to promote intellectual conversation, alongside assisting new and aspiring writers. Included in the text are individual studies of Hannah More and Elizabeth Montagu, which are relevant to this thesis and also illuminate the character of two women who played a significant part in the early literary life of Ann Yearsley. The study focuses on the Bluestockings, a literary group where Yearsley was destined to remain an outsider. Richly illustrated, the text also provides visual representations of Ann Yearsley and Hannah More. These images have been explored within this thesis, to show how the milkwoman may have been attempting to present herself as a social equal to her ex-patron.

4. Eighteenth-Century Context.

To embed Yearsley in her historical moment, it is necessary to place her within a complex and changing eighteenth-century society. Roy Porter's study of eighteenth-century society

³² Eger, Elizabeth, and Lucy Peltz, *Brilliant Women: 18th-Century Bluestockings* (London: National Portrait Gallery Publication, 2008).

is wide-ranging, and moves from top to bottom of the social spectrum, covering many diverse topics of daily life, including diet, housing, work and wages, politics, the gentry and the aristocracy.³³ When coupled with his text specifically on the Enlightenment, however, we are presented with a view of the broader, deeper issues facing Ann Yearsley and society itself: identity, science and the controversy concerning mind and body, the print revolution and the rise of the reading public, to name but a few.³⁴

John Brewer's study of eighteenth-century English culture covers the worlds of literature, art, and stage drama.³⁵ Brewer's work gives a detailed and vivid picture of the development of culture in the period. This text illuminates the cultural landscape that Ann Yearsley was trying to become a part of. Lawrence James's study deals specifically with the middle classes, illuminating an evolving and complex group, whose importance in the period was immense.³⁶ His work looks chronologically at the roots of the middle class, through to its identity in modern times. James's work throws light on a level of society that Hannah More was part of, and Yearsley, as a published writer, felt she should be part of. David Cannadine deals specifically with the changing face of class and society up to the 1990s.³⁷ His chapter on the eighteenth century gives an overview of the emerging language of class, along with an analysis of the complex social layers of the period. The clarity of Cannadine's analysis enables an understanding of the labels used to signify these layers. Utilising studies such as these allowed for an all-round view of the cultural and social landscape of the eighteenth-century society in which Ann Yearsley lived. This in turn led to an understanding of the problems facing an aspiring writer from the lower orders.

³³ Porter, Roy, *English Society in the 18th Century* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1990).

³⁴ Porter, Roy, *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2001).

³⁵ Brewer, John, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997).

³⁶ James, Lawrence, *The Middle Classes. A History* (Great Britain: Little, Brown, 2006).

³⁷ Cannadine, David, *Class in Britain* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2000).

John Barrell's study of the rural poor considers the way in which they are depicted in art,³⁸ comparing it to the contemporary literature of rural life. He considers the interplay between art and ideology in the period, and argues that an understanding of the social position of the poor is necessary in order to make sense of this depiction. Illustrating his ideas through the work of artists like Thomas Gainsborough, George Morland, and John Constable, Barrell presents a clear understanding of the influence on British art of pastoral literature, which also links into the chapter on class in this thesis, and Ann Yearsley as a member of the rural poor. It also adds another dimension to the chapter, with the use of various paintings giving a visual, though often class-biased representation of the lower orders.

The debate on separate spheres is important, with Ann Yearsley participating in both private and public arenas. Robert B. Shoemaker's study deals specifically with men and women in public and private life.³⁹ He argues that although the notion of separate spheres undoubtedly existed, women were confined to the domestic sphere of the household, whilst the public sphere was wholly dominated by men there were many areas where men's and women's activities overlapped. Shoemaker's study uses the framework of family life, work, and politics to interpret his theories. The text is wide-ranging within its subject, covering many areas of society to illuminate everyday situations. Although Ann Yearsley was a writer from the lower orders she did not, as was expected, confine herself to the domestic sphere, but because of her writing she straddled both public and private spheres. She is not mentioned within Shoemaker's work, but his examination of women's role in eighteenth-century society is relevant to Yearsley's life as a woman, as a writer, and as a mother.

³⁸ Barrell, John, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting, 1730-1840* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

³⁹ Shoemaker, Robert B., *Gender in English Society 1650-1850* (Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman Limited, 1998).

5. Print Culture.

The changes taking place in the literary marketplace towards the end of the century are an important factor in Yearsley's aspirations towards becoming a professional writer. James Raven's extensive study charts the history of the book trade, within an economic framework, from the origins of the hand press through to the nineteenth century.⁴⁰ The work is an investigation of booksellers and the literary marketplace they helped to create. The text deals with prominent publishers of the time, including T. Cadell, and the Robinson family, both of whom were linked to Ann Yearsley's progression towards becoming a professional writer. Raven details the success of Cadell in owning, by 1785, copyrights worth more than a quarter of the £200,000 estimated to be the sum of all copyrights then owned by British booksellers. George Robinson, by 1780, was reputed to have enjoyed the largest wholesale trade that was ever carried on by an individual.⁴¹ Information such as this, within Raven's text, gives an idea of Yearsley's importance as a writer at this time in her career.

Bristol's place in the developing book trade is investigated within Raven's work, being one of the first cities outside London to have its own printing press. The city was also an early participant in the newspaper trade. This merits space in his study, and also provides an historical overview for this thesis of a trade that was a factor in Yearsley's journey into print. Yearsley utilised advertisements and space extensively in the newspapers, to defend her reputation after her break-up with Hannah More, to market her new work, and also to increase its sales. Attention is paid to the importance of newspapers in reaching a larger audience than that of conventional books – a crucial factor for the rural writer from the lower classes, who may have been constrained by lack of access to travel.

⁴⁰ Raven, James, *The Business of Books: Booksellers and the English Book Trade* (New Haven, U.S.A.: Yale University Press, 2007).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pages 159, and 243 respectively.

John Feather's study of the provincial book trade deals specifically with the development of the printing trade in areas outside London. Bristol is included within this work, as an example of the rapid growth of the book trade in a provincial town. Ann Yearsley used publishers and booksellers in London rather than Bristol, so this aspect of Feather's work is relevant only in indicating the progressive nature of the poet's hometown. Feather's study does, however, provide historical background to the growth of newspapers by including references to Bristol's early newspaper trade, detailing William Bonney who was the first provincial printer after the lapse of the Licensing Act in 1695, and Felix Farley who was to become important to Yearsley by allowing her to utilise his newspaper as a platform from which to disseminate her ideas and promote her new work. Although Feather's text is not as recent as Raven's work, it does contain a substantial amount of information on Bristol's early printing development which is important in providing context for this study.⁴²

The texts reviewed here illuminate aspects of the eighteenth century in which Ann Yearsley lived and wrote. On a broader level, however, they also articulate how society functioned for women, especially those from the lower orders with a will to write.

Methodology

This thesis is a case study of how an eighteenth-century woman was able to create a professional position for herself outside the domestic sphere within which women were traditionally confined. Ann Yearsley's meteoric socio-economic climb from an uneducated milkwoman living in poverty to a professional writer earning an income from her work is analysed. It is the focus on a particular period in Ann Yearsley's life – her writing years – that makes this study distinctive. Other authors have written on aspects of Yearsley's life,

⁴² Feather, John, *The Provincial Book Trade in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

but this work moves beyond them by not only drawing out Yearsley's experiences in a society based on divisions of class and gender, but also by evaluating this information and assessing the impact made specifically on her journey into print.

Brian D. Osborne makes the point that very often, the more 'ordinary' the subject, the more difficult it is to find evidence that they ever existed.⁴³ Whilst this may not be true of Ann Yearsley as there are parish records of her birth, death, and marriage, it must be borne in mind, when using these official documents, that they are only as truthful as the people supplying the information and the officials who record it.⁴⁴ Yearsley was a member of the lower orders, however, and as such there are very few details of her life before the start of her writing career. This necessitated the use of Yearsley's poetry and correspondence to gain a sense of her feelings as she progressed towards a literary career. These sources, however, need to be treated with caution. As a member of a potentially 'voiceless' group, it was important for Yearsley to have a platform from which to tell her side of events that occurred during her journey into print: the dispute with Hannah More, and her entanglement with Levi Eames, for instance. Therefore, Yearsley's writings, in the main, are telling one side of the story, and this articulation of events will inevitably be biased in favour of the author. It must also be borne in mind that whilst her poems are a fictional source, it is argued in this thesis that they provide insights into, and a sense of, the poet's personality and aspirations.

In order to answer the first question asked in this work a contextual approach was needed in order to embed the writer in a particular time and place within the contours of eighteenth-century society, both as a woman and as a cultural figure. Secondly, it is necessary to examine aspects of the writer's character which had a bearing on her ability to

⁴³ Osborne, Brian D., *Writing Biography and Autobiography* (London: A & C Black, Publishers Limited, 2004) p.3.

⁴⁴ Gillies, Midge, *Writing Lives: Literary Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) p.72.

progress in the world of letters, and also underpinned her responses to issues concerning gender roles and class status. Therefore, a biographical approach examining factors in her life that impacted on her personality, and later on her literary aspirations, was also required.

Hermione Lee claims that ‘since biography tells the story of a person it requires or assumes a way of thinking about identity and self-hood – the best ways for biography to represent a self’.⁴⁵ This was an important factor when examining Ann Yearsley’s journey into print; and in the case of an unknown, but ambitious writer from the lower orders, fashioning identity was of major importance. An attempt is made, within this thesis, to reconstruct Yearsley’s character, which had a major bearing on her ability to gain autonomy over her work; but it was also necessary to examine the poetic identity and voice which she created for herself in order to enter and maintain a place in the literary arena. Also running parallel to this was Ann Yearsley’s identity as perceived by those above her.

The approach to evidence in this thesis involved archival research carried out in Bristol and Leeds. Bristol Parish records yielded few personal details of Ann Yearsley: her baptism date, date of her marriage, and the births of her children.⁴⁶ Other archival work was carried out at the West Yorkshire Archives in Leeds, where the Thorp Arch Estate papers are deposited.⁴⁷ These papers relate to Thorp Arch Hall in Yorkshire, owned during Ann Yearsley’s literary career by Wilmer Gossip. The publication of the contents of this archive in 2003 was a major advance in Yearsley scholarship. The documents are a cache of correspondence made up of letters and poems to and from Yearsley and her sponsors after Hannah More, including Gossip himself, Eliza Dawson, and Lord Bristol. Prior to the availability of this archival source, Yearsley’s literary life was framed by her patronage

⁴⁵ Lee, Hermione, *Biography: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) p.14.

⁴⁶ Bristol Records Office, Smeaton Road, Bristol.

⁴⁷ Thorp Arch Papers, deposited at the West Yorkshire Archive Service, Sheepscar, Leeds.

liaison with Hannah More. The documents within the Thorp Arch archive are important because they inform her later and very different patronage relationships with sponsors after More.

This thesis then considers a wide range of primary texts written by influential writers of the period and providing contemporary, though mainly patriarchal, commentary on how society should be formed and how certain members of that society should behave. These sources, more than any other, put into perspective the difficulties experienced by the labouring-class writer struggling to obtain and maintain a literary career. The eighteenth century saw a proliferation of didactic texts and conduct literature which was powerfully instrumental in defining an ideological identity, whilst appearing to give an accurate account of eighteenth-century society.⁴⁸ These texts, which included books, essays, and discourses, were conventional and predictable, with their content pitting vice against virtue, and warning against example. They predominantly targeted middle-class women, but because they also responded to an enlarging labouring-class population, they can also illuminate the social history, women's history, and the literary history of this stratum of society. Some of these texts sought to keep the lower orders content in their allotted social position, whilst promoting ideology on how they should behave. In reality they were part of a strategy deployed by the upper and middle classes who became more fearful of a perceived threat from the lower orders, as they sought to maintain control in a time of social and political instability. Detailed here are examples of texts used in this thesis, which attempted to control most aspects of labouring-class daily life.

⁴⁸ Jones, Vivien, ed, *Women in the Eighteenth Century: Constructions of Femininity* (London: Routledge, 1990) p.14.

William Paley's text is addressed directly to the 'Labouring part of the British Public'.⁴⁹ The work is one of many that reflect fear of the 'mob', with the writer anxious to maintain the social order. He insists that the poor have 'solid reasons for contentment in their stations'.⁵⁰ Thomas Broughton's 'Serious Advice and Warning to Servants' was addressed to 'Governors of Families', and is at pains to inform them of the many 'frauds, forgeries, etc', which have been committed of late years by Servants'.⁵¹ The text places responsibility for servants' good behaviour on the head of the household, exhorting him to instruct his household in matters of religion, which would apparently 'secure their fidelity to you'.⁵²

Texts also sought to control the everyday life of the lower orders, going as far as telling them what they should eat and how they should bring up their children. William Buchan, writing on the diet of the common people, disingenuously claims that his work recommends food that is 'conducive to health'.⁵³ In reality, the advice on not eating meat which may excite 'an unnatural thirst' and lead to the 'immodest use of beers and other stimulating liquors' is a barely-concealed attempt to stop the poor from getting drunk and perhaps becoming more threatening and unmanageable. Hannah More, one of the chief exponents of conduct literature, in her 'History of Tom White, The Post Boy', had written in a similar vein claiming that 'the rulers of the land had agreed to set the example of eating nothing but coarse bread'.⁵⁴ Mrs White's 'mouth-watering' dish of a sheep's head

⁴⁹ Paley, William, *Reasons for Contentment* (London: R. Faulder, 1793).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.8.

⁵¹ Broughton, William, *Serious advice and warnings to servants, more especially those of the nobility and gentry* (London: F. and C. Rivington, 1800) p.3.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Buchan, William, *Observations concerning the diet of the common people, recommending a method of living less expensively, and more conducive to health than the present* (London: A. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1797).

⁵⁴ More, Hannah, 'The History of Tom White, The Post Boy' in *The Complete Works of Hannah More, Vol. I* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1843) p.231.

stewed with grey peas and cabbage is ludicrously claimed to be ‘a dish fit for his majesty’.⁵⁵

Men also, at this time, became ‘experts’ on matters of child-rearing. William Cadogan’s text on nursing opens with the declaration: ‘It is with great Pleasure I see at last the Preservation of Children Become the Care of Men of Sense’.⁵⁶ The patriarchal state of society in the period is evident in this comment. The text attacks the practice of childcare, which is traditionally the natural province of women, claiming that ‘this Business has been too long fatally left to the Management of Women, who cannot be supposed to have proper knowledge to fit them for such a Task’. Cadogan was arrogantly dismissive of female nurses and claims that he will show them ‘How I think Children may be cloath’d, fed and managed’.⁵⁷ This work exemplifies the patriarchal control of women that was a feature of the period.

Women writers of the time also echoed patriarchal ideology. Mrs Griffith’s essays addressed to young married women reinforced what men expected from a wife. Her work is fronted with a verse by Lord Lyttelton that asserts exactly how a wife should conduct herself:

Seek to be good, but aim not to be great,
A woman’s noblest station is retreat
Her fairest virtues fly from public sight,
Domestic worth that shuns too strong a light.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.232.

⁵⁶ Cadogan, William, *An essay upon nursing and the management of children, from their birth to three years of age* (London: J. Roberts, 1750) p.3.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Mrs Griffith, *Essays Addressed to Young Married Women* (London: T. Cadell, 1782), verse written by Lord Lyttelton.

In constructing Yearsley's life to illuminate her story, there are limited sources with which to build up an identity. It has been possible to use primary sources written by Yearsley which articulate facets of her own life, along with her poetic persona. Yearsley's poetry and her later correspondence are important, as are newspapers, with their ever-expanding growth now providing a wider coverage that was useful to the provincial author. Poems from her three published volumes, along with important stand-alone works are used to give a sense of Yearsley's personality, her emotions, and her attitude to eighteenth-century society. Her poems can be self-knowing and introspective and it is possible to uncover her unique character and individuality within them. This is an important factor when trying to construct a life and identity for a little-known poet whose life before becoming a published writer is not well documented.

Yearsley's 'Narrative', addressed to the subscribers of her first volume, and Hannah More's 'Prefatory Letter To Mrs Montagu',⁵⁹ are important in illuminating the dynamics of the patronage dispute between the two. More, writing to Elizabeth Montagu, was anxious to portray her protégée as a 'natural genius', and therefore a suitable writer deserving of their joint patronage. She was insistent that the milkwoman would not be elevated socially by their sponsorship. Yearsley used her 'Narrative' as a platform from which to publicly defend herself against claims of ingratitude levelled against her by Hannah More and her associates. She did this successfully and coherently, making it clear that she would continue in her quest for a literary career without her former patron's help, asserting that 'I have ventured, without a guide on a second volume of poems'.⁶⁰

Both of these sources should be utilised with caution: More's desire to portray Yearsley as the 'perfect' candidate for patronage may have meant that some details of the poet's life,

⁵⁹ Both the 'Narrative' and Hannah More's 'Preface' are included in Yearsley's second volume of poetry *Poems on Various Subjects* (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1787).

⁶⁰ Yearsley, Ann, 'Narrative' in *Poems on Various Subjects*, p. xxiv.

and her ability, had been tailored to suit this purpose. Yearsley's 'Narrative' is inevitably laden with emotional bias in the aftermath of the dispute which ended the poet's first patronage liaison, leaving her bitter and disillusioned with the experience. It is also one side of the story, as Hannah More never replied publicly to this 'Narrative'.

Ann Yearsley's texts and correspondence were often illuminated by her emotions, ranging from effusive gratitude to anger and disillusionment, with her later poems still articulating her bitterness at More and her associates. It must be noted, however, that any of Yearsley's poetic work will undoubtedly have an authorial bias: it is a vehicle for her aspirations, for instance, and also a means of constructing a poetic identity which would maximise sales of her work. It also gave her, at times, a very public platform for her response to events such as the breakdown of her patronage relationship, anger at her treatment at the hands of More and her friends, and her sense of injustice against herself and her children.

As expected by polite society, Yearsley's first volume of poems, written under the patronage of Hannah More, contains several poems expressing gratitude and admiration to individuals, mainly her patrons.⁶¹ As with much of her work, this volume contains poems that are introspective and at times melancholy, perhaps reflecting the writer's misery at her situation in life. It is worth noting that More, in her role as patron, may have edited Yearsley's first work, and also controlled which poems were included in the published volume. Yearsley's second volume of verse was evidence that she could publish work without the editorial help of Hannah More.⁶² The writer was not, however, able to do this without financial support of some kind, but was now free from dependence on patrons who sought to control her texts and any profits from her work. Yearsley, to an extent, used this second volume as a platform to publicly declare herself a victim of injustice at the hands of

⁶¹ Yearsley, Ann, *Poems on Several Occasions*.

⁶² Yearsley, Ann, *Poems on Various Subjects*.

More and her friends. Yearsley's third volume was written some years after her second, although there were stand-alone poems published in the interim. The poet's bitterness immediately after her dispute with More is somewhat diluted, with the writer appearing calmer, and perhaps a little more radical in her writing: poems criticising the civic dignitaries of Bristol, a poem debunking the popular eighteenth-century notion that a woman can only be happy within the state of marriage, and a poem engaging with the debate on childcare, are included.⁶³

Ann Yearsley's stand-alone poem 'Stanzas of Woe', details the writer's confrontation with Levi Eames, a former mayor of Bristol.⁶⁴ The work records Eames' servant's treatment of her two boys when caught playing in that gentleman's field. The harshness of the punishment inflicted on her children – according to Yearsley it was a severe horse-whipping – caused her to miscarry the same night. She again chose to publicly challenge Eames, having been advised that, due to her financial and social situation, she would not win a court case. By advertising the publication of her poem, she was effectively able to get justice by other means, and by shaming Eames, calling him an 'Insolent Tyrant', she is able to vent her feelings outside a courtroom. The work is at heart a mother protecting her children, but it is possible, with this poem, to see how Yearsley had gained enough confidence by then, as a writer and as a public figure, to be able to challenge her 'betters' in this way. Primary sources such as this inevitably contain authorial bias: Yearsley's anger at the incident may have clouded some of the facts. And again, of course, we only have one side of the story.

⁶³ Yearsley, Ann, *The Rural Lyre* (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1796). The poems are respectively 'Bristol Elegy', 'The Indifferent Shepherdess to Colin' and 'To Mira, on the care of her Infant'.

⁶⁴ Yearsley, Ann, *Stanzas of Woe, addressed from the heart on a bed of illness to L. Eames, Esq* (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1790).

Moira Ferguson examines the unpublished poems of Ann Yearsley. These poems are transcribed and introduced at length by Ferguson for *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*.⁶⁵ This transcription of Yearsley's unpublished poems is relevant as they present Yearsley writing in a more uninhibited style. Poems such as 'To Stella' (later published in *Poems on Various Subjects* as 'To Those Who Accuse the AUTHOR of INGRATITUDE') laid bare the writer's soul, with Yearsley presenting herself as 'The Victim, urged by *Insult's* keenest pang'.⁶⁶ Both poems are a direct challenge to Hannah More, but 'To Those who Accuse the AUTHOR of INGRATITUDE', published a year after 'To Stella' was written, is a much more diluted criticism of Yearsley's patron. It is possible to see that what was published was tailored to suit the literary marketplace, and it was very different from Yearsley's emotion-laden text presented in the unpublished poem. Also included are some political poems which Yearsley, possibly because of her perceived labouring-class status, thought it wise to leave out of the public domain.

The cache of correspondence and poems relating to Ann Yearsley, preserved among the personal papers of Wilmer Gossip, and catalogued as the Thorp Arch Papers,⁶⁷ has been transcribed by Frank Felsenstein in two articles for the *Tulsa Studies*.⁶⁸ His work is primarily a discussion and analysis of these items within the framework of the politics of patronage. The first article introduces Ann Yearsley, using widely available biographical knowledge, and then goes on to critically unpick other studies of the poet: Moira Ferguson's *Unpublished Poems* of Ann Yearsley (1993), and Mary Waldron's response in

⁶⁵ Ferguson, Moira, 'The Unpublished Poems of Ann Yearsley' in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol.12, No.1. (Spring, 1993), pp.13-46.

⁶⁶ 'To Stella' in Moira Ferguson, *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, p.31, line 14, and 'To Those Who Accuse the AUTHOR of INGRATITUDE' in Ann Yearsley, *Poems on Various Subjects*, p.57.

⁶⁷ Thorp Arch Estate Papers, deposited at the West Yorkshire Archive Service, Sheepscar, Leeds. These papers were owned by Susannah Ewart when Felsenstein's work was published in 2002-2003.

⁶⁸ Felsenstein, Frank, 'Ann Yearsley and the Politics of Patronage', 'The Thorp Arch Archive, Part 1', in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 21. No.2. The Adoption Issue (Autumn, 2002), pp. 346-392. Part 2, 'Letters to and from & Papers Concerning Mrs Yearsley the Bristol Milkwoman', in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 22. No.1. (Spring, 2003) pp.12-56.

1996.⁶⁹ An in-depth analysis of the differences between these texts unfortunately leads to a foregrounding of the negative aspects of both works. This necessitated a cautionary use of the information.

Felsenstein's second article is a transcription of the twenty-two items in the catalogue dating from January 1788 to November 1789.⁷⁰ These poems and letters illuminate Yearsley's patronage relationships after her break-up with More. And, unlike Felsenstein, who utilises Yearsley's correspondence to analyse the state of patronage in a political framework, the letters and poems enabled, through a close and nuanced reading of these previously unknown materials, a way of getting closer to a more profound understanding of the poet's complex personality. Through an analysis of Yearsley, as a writer who no longer had to satisfy the requirements of polite society, a picture emerged of a poet who was able to communicate with new patrons on a more equal and friendly footing. Felsenstein brings together all of the items in the Thorp Arch Archive. This makes the items conveniently available, thus eliminating the need for further visits to the archives.

Hannah More was a prolific correspondent, and many of her letters were collected in a four-volume biography by the lawyer and journalist William Roberts.⁷¹ This work was produced in 1834, just a year after More's death, and as Anne Stott rightly points out, 'any author would have struggled to produce a four-volume biography in such a short time'.⁷² This comment throws doubt on the integrity of the work, although Roberts had direct access to More's correspondence through his sister Margaret, who was the writer's

⁶⁹ Ferguson, Moira, 'The Unpublished Poems of Ann Yearsley', in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Spring 1993) pp.13-46. Mary Waldron, 'Ann Yearsley: The Bristol Milkwoman Revisited', in *Women's Writing*, 3, No.1, (1996) pp.35-45.

⁷⁰ Felsenstein, Frank, 'Ann Yearsley and the Politics of Patronage', 'The Thorp Arch Archive, Part 1' in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol.21. No. 2. The Adoption Issue (Autumn 2002), pp. 346-392. Part 2, 'Letters to and Papers Concerning Mrs Yearsley, the Bristol Milkwoman' in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 22, No.1 (Spring 2003) pp.12-56.

⁷¹ Roberts, William, *Memoirs of the Life and Correspondence of Mrs Hannah More* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1834).

⁷² Stott, *Hannah More, the First Victorian*, p.viii.

companion and legal executrix. Stott details what she calls ‘his neglect of chronology shown by his misdating of letters and his habit of running two separate letters into one without informing the reader, along with the distortion of his subject’s character by his prim bowdlerising of her [More’s] harmless colloquialisms.’⁷³ It is essential to bear in mind comments like these when using Roberts’ work, as they do cast further doubt on the integrity of his text. More’s correspondence does, however, give a sense of her thoughts on Ann Yearsley and the events surrounding her short patronage of the milkwoman. In this respect Roberts’ collection of her letters remains, for the purpose of this study, a useful primary source.⁷⁴

Chapters

Ann Yearsley’s journey into print is examined through the following chapters. In order to determine how she was able to carve out a substantial literary career, and gain autonomy over her work, the second chapter in this thesis examines the influences that shaped her, both as a woman with a forceful and assertive character, and also as a writer. Her mother, as presented in her daughter’s poetry, played an important part in this, but the fact that Ann grew up and lived all her life within walking distance of Bristol’s centre contributed greatly. Yearsley had easy access to a location that was to feature heavily in her life and in her writing. The city itself had a vibrant and dynamic commercial and cultural life which will be examined, alongside the literary life of Bristol, focusing particularly on local writers. An in-depth exploration into Bristol’s history, which provided much inspiration for Yearsley’s poetry, also provides context to the writer’s life.

⁷³ Stott, *Hannah More, the First Victorian*, p.viii.

⁷⁴ Kerri Andrews is at present working on a ‘scholarly edition (digital) of *The Letters of Hannah More: A Digital Edition*’. The website is currently under construction and it is hoped that all 1800 of More’s surviving letters will be available within the next four years.

The third chapter is concerned with patronage and the extent of its effect on Yearsley's literary output, along with her aspirations for a professional career. The writer's patronage liaisons are examined within the context of the changing face of the patronage system, as well as changes in print culture, and the literary marketplace. Yearsley's writing career, sometimes to the detriment of her actual work, is often defined by the dispute with her first patron, Hannah More, and whilst the quarrel itself is not the main focus in this chapter, it is still an important factor in Yearsley's literary development. An exploration of the nature of patronage is made alongside a consideration of what Yearsley could have expected from a patron and what she actually obtained. Yearsley's poetry and her use of the media illuminate not only her feelings towards the system of patronage, but also towards Hannah More and patrons secured after the dispute. The literary relationship between Yearsley and More also articulates the dynamics of middle-class patronage of the lower orders in the eighteenth century.

Chapter four focuses on Yearsley's complex social status, putting it into context with others such as Hannah More and Elizabeth Montagu. Whilst the chapter does not attempt to provide a detailed analysis of class, it does explore one woman's engagement with, and the success or otherwise of her negotiation of, the class system in the eighteenth century, revealing much about an emerging class-consciousness in the period. Yearsley's texts and correspondence give an insight into her reaction and her resistance to a class-based society which sought to place and keep her at the bottom. A discussion of Yearsley's ambiguous social standing is enhanced by showing how she used this, alongside print media, to manipulate social and literary circumstances to her advantage.

Chapter five examines how, and to what extent, Ann Yearsley was, as a woman, constrained by the conventions of an eighteenth-century, male-dominated society. Most women were expected to conform to a certain pattern of womanhood, with didactic texts

written by men and women used to reinforce this ideology. An examination of how Yearsley negotiated this repression is underpinned by the writer's poems and correspondence, which articulated her engagement with, and her resistance to, female stereotyping, separate spheres, and motherhood.

Chapter six charts Yearsley's negotiation of the constraints imposed on a woman writer from the lower orders in becoming a published writer with a varied body of work: these included lack of free time to write, limited access to education, and discrimination and prejudice from the upper orders. An opposing strand of positive issues is discussed, including the period's fascination with the cult of 'natural genius', and the turmoil of the 1790s which on the one hand created increased repression of the lower orders, but on the other hand provided inspiration for many writers.

The concluding chapter of the thesis answers the second question: to what extent was Ann Yearsley culturally significant in her own time? The chapter draws together implications for a labouring-class writer with aspirations towards a professional career. In parallel, Yearsley's material needs are considered: for example, supplementing her husband's seemingly low or at times non-existent income, the necessity of feeding and clothing a large family. There follows a final assessment of Ann Yearsley's achievements, or lack of them, thus determining her significance culturally, in the literary landscape of her time

2. THE MAKING OF A 'POETICAL MILKWOMAN'

Ann Yearsley was an independent woman who, against all odds, was able to carve out a substantial literary career, and gain autonomy over the publishing of her work. How was she able to do this when other female, and many male, writers of labouring-class status usually published only one volume of work, if indeed they published at all? This chapter answers the question by examining the extent to which Ann Yearsley's forceful and assertive character, which was essential if she were to become a professional writer, was shaped by her mother's influence, the place where she was brought up and lived all her life, and the literary influences of the period and earlier. This reveals a labouring-class poet who resisted, when she felt it was necessary, the ideology and practices of the period that constrained, restricted, and repressed a woman of her social status with a will to write.

Mary Waldron, in the only full-length biography of Yearsley to date, opens her study with the poet's life up to 1784 – the year of her 'discovery' by Hannah More. In her own words, Waldron intends to take previous work done on Yearsley by J.M.S. Tompkins and 'revise it in the light of changes in attitudes since 1940 both to literary history in general and to women writers in particular'.¹ This chapter has a different focus in that it seeks to examine what we know of Yearsley's life, then using this, alongside her own writings, and in particular her poetry which is at times autobiographical, to develop a sense of how the milkwoman's character came into being and enabled her to become a published author. The chapter begins by examining aspects of the mother-daughter relationship that shaped and underpinned Yearsley's life. Mrs Cromartie's influence on her daughter's education,

¹ Tompkins, J. M.S., *The Polite Marriage* (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), Mary Waldron, *Lactilla, Milkwoman of Clifton: The Life and Writings of Ann Yearsley, 1753-1806* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1996) p. 13.

on her livelihood as a milkwoman, and most of all on her character, contributed greatly to the development of the future poet. This, along with the effects of personal tragedy (the death of her mother, and her son Henry aged four, coupled with the descent of her family into supposedly abject poverty) are reflected in her poetry, which will be used to give a sense of her development. Yearsley's early life was lived on the margins of society, and very little evidence survives. Analysis of her experience therefore requires a certain amount of speculation about this particular stage of her development. The fact that Yearsley's writings were mostly subjective, and were underpinned, for the most part, by her emotions, necessitates caution when using her texts and letters as a primary resource.

Clifton, with its proximity to Bristol was, in later years, to become a suburb of the city. Its development from a small agricultural village to a thriving spa resort is examined in the context of inspiration for Yearsley's poetry. Bristol, not only as a centre of commerce, but also as a scene of culture and cosmopolitan society, is considered in order to determine the factors that helped shape Yearsley's character, and also inspired her work. Her place in Bristol society is explored within the contexts of city and rural life, culture and commerce, and poverty and affluence. These juxtapositions form as important a part of this analysis as they did in Yearsley's life. Some space is given to the slave trade, ongoing in Bristol for much of Yearsley's adult life, as it appeared to be a catalyst for Yearsley's political involvement as an abolitionist poet.

The influence of women authors, those writing before and at the same time as Yearsley, provides an important context in which Yearsley's literary abilities and ambitions developed. Earlier women and labouring-class authors made it possible for writers such as Yearsley to exist in the literary marketplace. Bristol's literary influence on Yearsley is examined in the context of other local labouring-class writers. Hannah More, though often cast as the villain in Yearsley's story, is analysed with a view to presenting a more

balanced representation of a woman who made it possible, initially, for Ann Yearsley to get her work published.

Ann Yearsley's mother, Ann Cromartie, seems to have been the earliest influence in the writer's life. Mrs Cromartie appears to have been an intelligent and pious woman, and the absence of any mention of her husband leads us to believe that he had either died earlier, or that she was the dominant force, at least financially, in her marriage, as her daughter appeared to be in her own. Hannah More, in her Prefatory letter to Mrs Montagu, claims that Yearsley's mother 'who was a milk-woman, appears to have had sense and piety, and to have given an early tincture of religion to this poor woman's mind'.² It was Mrs Cromartie who provided her daughter with as much education and reading matter as she could, thus awakening the future writer's love of literature, and her creativity. Mrs Cromartie also provided daughter Ann with a future livelihood in the form of her milk-selling business, which she eventually 'brought her daughter up to'.³ The writer's character was forged, to some extent, in this tough world of commerce.

Ann Yearsley's mother died in 1784, just before her daughter published her first volume of poems. But it is in 'Clifton Hill', and later in 'On Remembrance of a Mother' that the writer's beloved parent is restored to her as a figure of wisdom and strength. These are the qualities, along with her mother's 'firm resolves',⁴ and 'firm precepts',⁵ that helped shape the independent and assertive personality that came to the fore during the quarrel with Hannah More, and in the difficult times after it when she needed not only to defend herself against accusations of ingratitude, but also to try and rebuild and hold onto a literary career for herself. Yearsley's grief over her mother's death was still evident in 1787 when she

² Yearsley, Ann, *Poems on Several Occasions, fourth edition*, (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1786) p.vi.

³ Tompkins, *The Polite Marriage*, p.60.

⁴ Yearsley, 'Clifton Hill', in *Poems on Several Occasions*, p.90, line 86.

⁵ Yearsley, Ann, 'On the Remembrance of a Mother' in *Poems on Various Subjects* (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1787).p.164, line 45.

published her second volume *Poems on Various Subjects*.⁶ In this work the writer admits that, in spirit, her mother is ‘ever living to my mind’, as a ‘kind, instructive shade’.⁷ She affirms the protection and influence of a beloved parent: ‘How oft with thee, when life’s keen tempest howl’d/Around our heads, did I contented sit / Drinking the wiser accents of thy tongue’.⁸ Independence seems to have been instilled in Yearsley by her mother, and it is her fortitude that empowered the writer to ‘rest on virtues all my own’.⁹

Ann Yearsley was born in Clifton, on the outskirts of Bristol, and baptised in Clifton Parish Church in 1753. During her lifetime the place of her birth developed from a small rural village into a thriving spa resort, attracting not only a rich residential population, but also visitors who included aristocracy, and famous literary and artistic figures. Clifton in Yearsley’s time had a population of around 1500 and was a tiny rural village with a church, farms, and a few smallholdings. John Latimer, writing in 1893, describes Clifton in 1700:

Clifton was divided into about a dozen dairy farms separated here and there by unenclosed common, gay with furze bloom. A single mansion, the Manor House, stood near the church, and another in Clifton Wood. Around them straggled a few cottages, the inmates of which earned a little money from the parish by killing the foxes, polecats and hedgehogs that strayed from the downs into the cultivated fields.¹⁰

In his *Bristol Directory* of 1794, Matthews describes a very different Clifton, much changed by the affluence of Bristol’s merchants:

Clifton is indubitably one of the most pleasant, healthy and elegant villages of the Kingdom; its air is so remarkably pure and salubrious, that it has been long and by various authors stiled the Montpelier of England. It commands a pleasing prospect over one corner of the city, and of the vessels sailing up and down the Avon....The delightful situation of Clifton has long since induced several opulent persons and families to make it their principal residence. And the continually new accessions of

⁶ Yearsley, *Poems on Various Subjects*.

⁷ Yearsley, ‘On the Remembrance of a Mother’ in *Poems on Various Subjects*, p.161, lines 4-5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.164, lines 50-52.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.165, line 67.

¹⁰ Latimer, John, *The Annals of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century* (printed for the Author, 1893) p.2.

inhabitants have occasioned the hill to be almost covered with elegant piles of building and separate mansions.¹¹

These two quotations show that in less than a century, Clifton had changed from a poor rural area that was sparsely populated, to an affluent village full of wealthy residents living in large expensive houses.

Clifton came into being as an upper-class tourist venue as a result of the Hotwells Spa, which was within its parish¹² The spa had a national and international reputation, although according to Little, ‘The Hotwell water, gushing up through the tidal mud ... was recommended, somewhat doubtfully, for young ladies with consumption’.¹³ Latimer, writing in the eighteenth century, reinforced this by reporting, tinged with irony, the results of scientific research into Hotwell water:

Edward Strother, M.D., forwarded, in 1723, a paper to the President of the Royal Society describing his experiments for ascertaining the constituents of the Hotwell water. The results of his researches, he said, showed that the spring was ‘Aequeo-salino-alcalino-cretaceo-aluminoso-vitriolick’ – which merely proves that the doctor was a skilful practitioner in the art of using scientific jargon to conceal profound ignorance.¹⁴

Between 1760 and 1790 the spa was at the height of its popularity and was a chic and fashionable resort which attracted aristocracy such as the Duchess of Marlborough and the Duchess of Kent. In 1816, Dr Carrick, a Clifton physician, described the spa as he had known it thirty years before: ‘It was then during the summer one of the best frequented and most crowded watering-places in the Kingdom. Scores of the nobility were to be found there every season’.¹⁵ Rich merchants seeking good views and unpolluted air were starting to build their mansions in Clifton rather than the denser developments of terraces and

¹¹ Matthews, William, *The New History, Survey and Description of the City and Suburbs of Bristol, or Complete Guide and Bristol Directory for the YEAR 1793-94* (Bristol: Printed, Published and Sold by W. Matthews, 1794) p.107.

¹² Reid, Helen, *A Chronicle of Clifton and Hotwells* (Bristol: Redcliffe Press, 1992) p.9.

¹³ Little, Bryan, *The Story of Bristol from the Middle Ages to Today* (Devon: Halsgrove, 2003) p.54.

¹⁴ Latimer, *The Annals of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century*, p.139.

¹⁵ McGrath, Patrick, *Bristol in the Eighteenth Century* (Devon: David & Charles (Publishers) Limited, for the Bristol Historical Association, 1972) p.122.

squares in Bristol itself. In 1729, a small theatre was built at Jacob's Well on the Clifton side of the city, and although the building itself was cramped and unimpressive it still attracted the fashionable visitors who were accustomed to theatre-going in London.¹⁶

Clifton was clearly an interesting and lively place and was to become a source of inspiration in Yearsley's later work. Both aspects of the village may have presented themselves to the young aspiring poet: the rural setting of which she was very much a part, along with the elegant, fashionable society that she could only gaze at from the margins. Both were reflected in her work. Her poem 'Clifton Hill', written in 1785, details natural features of the area, encompassing the harsh realities of agricultural labour: 'half sunk in snow, Lactilla, shivering, tends her fav'rite cow'.¹⁷ It is also a social critique on the fashionable habits that brought healthy young women to the spa at Clifton: 'Your high-born maids,/ Whom fashion guides, in youth's first bloom shall fade'.¹⁸ Clifton was a place where Yearsley came to reflect upon her status as a plebeian poet; these lines indicate that she was fully aware of class hostility and indifference directed at people in her situation:

The proud Croesean crew, light, cruel, vain,
Whose deeds have never swell'd the Muses' strain,
Whose bosoms others sorrows ne'er assail,
Who hear, unheeding, Misery's bitter tale.¹⁹

Here, she anticipated a rich audience's complete rejection of a poor woman's grief at the loss of her mother. According to Landry it was difficult for a labouring poet to imaginatively project profoundly painful experiences, such as loss, without risking middle-

¹⁶ McGrath, *Bristol in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 120.

¹⁷ Yearsley, 'Clifton Hill', in *Poems on Several Occasions*, p.91, lines 19-20.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.94, lines 148-150.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.91, lines 93-96.

class contempt.²⁰ This obviously did not deter Yearsley from expressing views about the middle classes, and it is here that she shows the strength gained from her mother when Lactilla's muse defies them 'and pursues her flight'.²¹

Clifton was important to Yearsley's writing and some years later, in 'Clifton Hill', the narrator, perhaps doubling for Yearsley, recalls Clifton churchyard and the many walks taken there with her mother. Here they used to read verses on tombstones and mural tablets; at that time such inscriptions provided text in the public domain, a means of learning to read for some, and also served as repositories for the popular verse of the poor.²² They are remembered in Yearsley's verse as 'these sad records mournfully surveyed'.²³ Yearsley's response to the death of her mother prompted Hannah More to declare to Elizabeth Montagu: 'You will find our Poetess frequently alluding to this terrible circumstance, which has left a settled impression of sorrow on her mind.'²⁴ This may have been why her work was often described as melancholy. Walpole commented: 'her imagination is already too gloomy',²⁵ and Anna Seward concurred, writing to the Reverend T.S. Whalley in 1786, claiming that 'Her writings breathe a gloomy and jealous dignity of spirit'.²⁶ Tim Burke, in an anthology devoted solely to Yearsley's work, gives statistics from her debut volume thus: thirty-four instances of the word 'woe', nineteen uses of 'horrors', eighteen 'glooms', seven 'terrors', and four 'agonys'.²⁷

From her elevated geographical location on Clifton Hill, Yearsley was able to look down upon the docks which so many Bristolians depended on for their livelihood. Bristol shaped

²⁰ Landry, Donna, *The Muses of Resistance: Labouring-class Women's Poetry in Britain, 1739-1796* (Cambridge, U.S.A.: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1990) p.68.

²¹ Yearsley, 'Clifton Hill', in *Poems on Several Occasions*, p.91, line 98.

²² Landry, *The Muses of Resistance*, p. 138.

²³ Yearsley, 'Clifton Hill' in *Poems on Several Occasions*, p.90, line 78.

²⁴ Yearsley, *Poems on Various Subjects*, p.ix.

²⁵ Burke, Tim, ed, *Ann Yearsley. Selected Poems* (Gloucester: The Cyder Press, 2003) p.xxiii.

²⁶ Wordsworth, Jonathan, *The Bright Work Grows. Women Writers of the Romantic Age* (England: Woodstock Books, 1997) p. 39.

²⁷ Burke, *Selected Poems*, p.xiii.

her as a person and presented a varied source of inspiration for her work. By 1753 it was a busy and industrious city enjoying what Roy Porter calls ‘spectacular growth’.²⁸ It had also, by the eighteenth century, developed into a bustling and cosmopolitan city with a vibrant cultural life. A local labouring-class poet, the pipe-maker John Bryant, described it thus:

With all her dazzling pomp, her gay parades,
Her magisterial train, in scarlet pride,
Her structures beautiful, pil’d high in air,
Her crowded theatres or splendid balls.²⁹

The so-called ‘Golden Age’ of Bristol in the eighteenth century resulted in a cramped and busy commercial environment; and from 1700 onwards there was a shift in fashion to more rural settings, with people moving outside the city boundaries.³⁰ This in turn hastened the growth of Clifton, with the burgeoning wealth of Bristol’s mercantile community enabling newly-rich merchants to move from the industrial dirt of the city to the cleaner air and pleasant outlook of the village. The village itself became part of the expansion of Bristol and, according to McGrath, ‘gradually assumed the appearance of cultured elegance which is still to be seen’.³¹ Mrs Cromartie, with her milk-selling business expanding alongside the influx of new houses and new customers, would have needed to be not only deferential with those above her socially, but also forceful if she wanted to keep her business afloat. Her daughter would have needed this same strength of character to take over what could have been by then a flourishing business in an affluent

²⁸ Porter, Roy, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Penguin Books, 1990) p.199.

²⁹ Bryant, John Frederick, *Verses by John Frederick Bryant* (London: Printed for the Author, 1787) p.42, lines 7-10.

³⁰ Dresser, Madge, and Philip Ollerenshaw, eds, *The Making of Modern Bristol* (Tiverton; Redcliffe Press, 1996) p.30.

³¹ McGrath, *Bristol in the 18th Century*, p. 128.

village, although it was eventually to decline, perhaps urging Yearsley to find a new source of income.

From the seventeenth century onwards an ‘urban renaissance’ took place; population grew, and ports such as Bristol flourished.³² Its geographical location as a west-coast port meant that it was well placed for trade with Ireland, and later with Virginia, the Carolinas, and the West Indies; it also controlled the Avon and Severn rivers which provided a major transport route for goods around Britain.³³ Bristol’s many trades and products included glass-making, soap, and sugar. The town also had its own works for smelting lead and making lead shot, along with iron foundries and tin works. Matthews claims that ‘The inhabitants of Bristol were very early addicted to Trade and manufactures’. Several contemporary writers represented Bristol as ‘the most famous place of Commerce in England next to London, frequented by merchants of many Nations’.³⁴ In 1799 *The Gentleman’s Magazine* summed up Bristol’s maritime trade:

The merchants of Bristol enjoy the trade of Ireland, and of nearly the whole of North and South Wales. In exchanging commodities with the West Indies, they employ no less than 70 ships and this is one of the most important branches of their commerce. They also traffic with Spain, Portugal, Guinea, Holland, Hamburgh, Norway, Russia, America, and Newfoundland. The refinery of sugar, and the glass and soap making are the principle manufacturers of Bristol.³⁵

Bristol’s participation in the slave trade was a significant part of the city’s economy in the eighteenth century. The city had traded in slavery since the eleventh century when children were transported to Ireland,³⁶ and although the early trade to Africa was occasional and primarily focused on gold and other goods rather than slaves, trading contacts and capital

³² Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century*, p.40.

³³ McGrath, *Bristol in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 128.

³⁴ Matthews, *Bristol Directory*, p.37.

³⁵ *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, issue 1039, 1799.

³⁶ www.discoveringbristol.org, accessed 28.01.10.

links were developed which would later facilitate the development of the so-called triangular trade from England to Africa to the Caribbean and the Americas.³⁷

Bristol grew rich on the slave trade, and between 1756 and 1786 sent out 588 ships to the African coast each year.³⁸ Judge Jeffreys, visiting Bristol in 1685, commented that ‘all the aldermen and justices were concerned in this kidnapping trade, more or less, and the mayor himself as bad as any’.³⁹ But by 1783 the movement for abolition had begun. A petition presented to the Commons, by the Quakers, argued that the slave trade was inconsistent not only with Christianity but also with humanity, justice, and the natural rights of mankind.⁴⁰ On 22 May 1787 the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade was set up and Thomas Clarkson was formally requested to investigate the trade. Clarkson, the son of a clergyman, devoted his time to travelling around Britain and gathering evidence about the slave trade from eyewitnesses such as sailors who worked on slave ships. Bristol, with its maritime links, was an ideal location and with Clarkson’s arrival there in 1788, the Bristol Anti-Slave Trade movement began in earnest,⁴¹ becoming what J.R. Oldfield calls ‘the first of the great middle-class pressure groups that have so influenced British politics and society’.⁴²

By 1788 Bristol newspapers were printing correspondence attacking and defending the slave trade. Opinion was divided: whilst many citizens abhorred the slave trade in principle, it was an acknowledged fact that three-fifths of the commerce of the port was represented by the African and West Indian trades. Bristol’s local abolitionist group was

³⁷ Dresser, Madge, *Slavery Obscured: The Social History of the Slave Trade in an English Provincial Port* (London: Continuum, 2001) p.10.

³⁸ MacInnes, C.M., ‘Bristol and the Slave Trade’ in *Bristol in the Eighteenth Century*, ed, Patrick McGrath (Newton Abbot, Devon: David & Charles (Publishers) Limited, 1972) p.169.

³⁹ MacInnes, C.M. *Bristol and the Slave Trade* (Bristol: The Historical Association, The University of Bristol, 1963) p.1.

⁴⁰ Stott, Ann, *Hannah More, the First Victorian* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) p.89.

⁴¹ MacInnes, C.M. *Bristol, A Gateway of Empire*, p.334.

⁴² Stott, *Hannah More*, p.89.

set up in 1788 to petition Parliament and help support, at grass-roots level, the campaign that William Wilberforce was to launch in Parliament.⁴³ The group organised a strong campaign and was quick to realise the importance of appeals to the heart. Poetry was deemed crucial to the mobilisation of public opinion⁴⁴ and Hannah More was commissioned by the Abolition Committee to write a didactic poem as a boost to the Abolition Bill that was about to be introduced into the House of Commons in 1788.⁴⁵ Her poem entitled ‘Slavery: A Poem’ was published in this same year. Ferguson claims that More’s cultural reputation made their choice an obvious one.⁴⁶ Volumes of her work had been published between 1773 and 1786, and much of it exemplified her commitment to charity. But the prime factor in choosing More was likely to be her connections with upper-class, evangelical Anglicans who were also influential members of the Committee. These are More’s words as she rushed to get her anti-slavery poem published: ‘I am now busily engaged on a poem to be called Slavery....If it does not come out at the particular moment when the discussion comes on in parliament, it will not be worth a straw.’⁴⁷ She was at the forefront of the anti-slavery movement, and it is obvious when she says that ‘This I shall bring out...with my name staring in the front’, that she expects her poem to make a difference.⁴⁸

Most of Yearsley’s life was lived in the shadow of Bristol’s participation in the slave trade. Her knowledge and awareness of what was going on is confirmed by the inspiration it provided for her own poem on the subject.⁴⁹ The gradual increase in maritime activity during the trade’s heyday would have been there for all to see. Yearsley may have

⁴³ Dresser, *Slavery Obscured*, p. 139.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.142.

⁴⁵ Ferguson, Moira, *Subject to Others, British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery* (New York: Routledge, 1992) p.8.

⁴⁶ Ferguson, *Subject to Others*, p. 148.

⁴⁷ Scheuermann, Mona, *In Praise of Poverty. Hannah More Counters Thomas Paine and the Radical Threat* (Kentucky USA: The University Press of Kentucky, 2002) p.83.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.83.

⁴⁹ Yearsley, Ann, *A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade* (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1788).

witnessed the material signs of slavery – ships, advertisements for the sale of slaves, and for the recovery of runaways – and would probably have heard the rumours that certain caves near the city were reputedly used for the reception of slaves; she may even have seen, in nearby Henbury churchyard, a 1720s gravestone inscribed with the name of Scipio Africanus, a teenage slave brought to Britain as a servant at the Earl of Suffolk’s house in Henbury.⁵⁰ McGrath claims that ‘Bristol’s role in the slave trade received attention out of proportion to its importance from the local and national point of view’,⁵¹ and goes on to point out the part played by Bristolians in securing its abolition. William Matthews suggested that there was a decline in the slave trade from the 1780s:

The ardor for the Trade to Africa, for men and women, our fellow creatures and equals, is much abated among the humane and benevolent Merchants of Bristol. In 1787 there were but 30 Ships employed in this melancholy traffic.⁵²

Matthews may well have been right as Liverpool became the most important slave port but, as Madge Dresser states, ‘by the late 1790s many Bristol merchants still had significant investments in the Caribbean and saw British control of the Caribbean as crucial to British interests’.⁵³

Once roused, the Bristol opposition remained firm in its determination to resist the slave trade; writers such as Southey, Coleridge, and Chatterton were catalysed into producing work that railed against the trade in human beings. Yearsley, with the writing of her slavery poem in 1788, demonstrated a political shift in her work to more global issues, and also established herself as an abolitionist and fervent opponent of the trade. In ‘A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade’ she used the city of her birth as her main focus, challenging its complicity in slavery. She opened the work with praise for the city’s past history: ‘Thine heart hath throbb’d to glory’ but then proceeded to paint a picture of the

⁵⁰ Little, *The Story of Bristol*, p.29.

⁵¹ McGrath, *Bristol in the Eighteenth Century*, p.2.

⁵² Matthews, *New History of Bristol*, p.38.

⁵³ Dresser, *Slavery Obscured*, p.180.

city as grasping and mercenary: ‘Behold that Christian! See what horrid joy/ Lights up his moody features! While he grasps / The wish’d-for gold, purchase of human blood!’⁵⁴ Yearsley reinforced Bristol’s reputation as a commerce-driven city when she suggests that the ‘crafty merchant’ would sell his own family to make money. She pointed out the double standards at work within the law: ‘Say, dost this law, that dooms the thief, protect the wretch who makes another’s life his prey?’⁵⁵ Yearsley also used her poem as an indictment of ‘English law’, not only for upholding slavery but for being framed by ‘ye few/Who fill Britannia’s senate’.⁵⁶

Within this work Yearsley demonstrated opposition to historical and contemporary tyranny. Landry tells us that ‘plebeian poets have to work both within and against the dominant culture’.⁵⁷ In this instance Yearsley’s labouring-class status put her in a better position than More’s to empathise with the victims of tyranny. The narrative addressed issues of marginality, bondage, and oppression; and by drawing on her experiences the writer was able to identify with the struggle of subjugated people. By writing this poem Yearsley demonstrated a right to express her views at local and international level; and for her to openly champion Luco, the slave in her poem, whose life as a marginalised ‘other’ mirrored her own, was a form of public confrontation. Her defiance against people who thought her too radical or subversive is made clear when she wrote in the poem ‘why gaze as thou would’st fright me from my challenge with look of anguish?’⁵⁸

Whilst there were similarities in the slave poems of Yearsley and More (they both used similar images of suffering, and both drew on a colonial lexicon – words such as ‘savage’, ‘barb’rous’, ‘denizens of the wild’, and ‘dingy skin colour’), the juxtaposition of the two

⁵⁴ Burke, *Selected Poems*, ‘A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade’, p.28, line 1, p.30, lines 80-82.

⁵⁵ Burke, *Selected Poems*, ‘A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade’, p.38, lines 375-376.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.38, lines 383-384.

⁵⁷ Landry, *The Muses of Resistance*, p.239.

⁵⁸ Burke, *Selected Poems*, ‘A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade’, p.30, line 88.

works highlighted issues of class difference. More appealed to an educated audience, and London-based Parliamentary authority, whereas Yearsley appealed directly to the leading citizens of Bristol. In the summer of 1787 More met Wilberforce and Clarkson. And whilst Yearsley may have read Clarkson's *Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, published in 1786, it is unlikely that she had any high-level, personal connection with individuals in the anti-slave movement.

Whilst she sympathetically portrayed the plight of Africans, More's cultural position seemed to demand an assertion of difference from the 'dark savage' other: they were described as having 'strong, but luxuriant virtues' that 'boldly shoot/from the wild vigour of a savage root'.⁵⁹ Her slaves remained, throughout the work, abstract, nameless and voiceless; they were dehumanised with no identity. 'Lactilla's soul', her 'rustic thought' and 'crude ideas' located Yearsley firmly within her labouring-class status, thus aligning herself with the slave as a class ally. She drew parallels between her life and Luco's: both were constrained and oppressed. Yearsley's use of the more personalised, dramatic narrative also suggested less distance and a greater sense of identification with a slave who was marginalised like herself.

For most of the eighteenth century, Bristol was second only to London as a sea port, and as a town. By this time the population had grown from about 20,000 in 1700 to 64,000 in 1801.⁶⁰ With its prosperity and key geographical location, Bristol was considered the commercial capital of the west. Commerce was the mainspring of Bristol's activity, and Yearsley, as she gazed down on the docks from her vantage point on Clifton Hill, exulted, and was inspired by the city's economic success: 'Hail, useful channel! Commerce spreads

⁵⁹ More, Hannah, *The Complete Works of Hannah More, Volume 1* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1843).

⁶⁰ McGrath, *Bristol in the Eighteenth Century*, p.128.

her wings, / From either pole her various treasure brings'.⁶¹ Thomas Cox, surveying the same frenetic dockland activity, summarised it in a less poetic, but more realistic way: 'All are in a hurry, running up and down with cloudy looks and busy faces, loading, carrying and unloading goods and merchandise of all sorts from place to place; for the trade of many nations is drawn hither by the industry and opulence of the people.'⁶² Horace Walpole had a different perspective on Bristol's industrial pre-eminence, calling it 'the dirtiest great shop I ever saw', a town where 'the very clergy talk of nothing but trade and how to turn a penny'.⁶³

Bristol was first and foremost a city of trade and commerce, which gave rise to its reputation for philistinism. Thomas Cox said of Bristol: 'It is very popular; but the people give themselves to Trade so entirely, that nothing of the Politeness and Gaiety of Bath is to be seen here.'⁶⁴ This stereotyping was reinforced by comments from the eminent literary figure Alexander Pope: 'The City of Bristol itself is a very unpleasant place and no civilised people in it.' He did, however, appear to have enjoyed the water at the Hotwell Spa.⁶⁵ By the 1760s Bristol was portrayed as an unliterary city dominated by business. Chatterton now damned the city of his birth, claiming that no serious writer would live there since 'hardly twenty in the Town can read'.⁶⁶ Of course, this vitriolic and untrue comment is underpinned by the fact that he was rejected, as a writer, by his home town.

In reality there was an immense variety of cultural activity in eighteenth-century Bristol. The city's trade co-existed with an evolving cultural scene: surplus wealth from commerce was channelled into leisure and culture. Bristol's status as a city began to grow as early as

⁶¹ Yearsley, 'Clifton Hill', in *Poems on Several Occasions*, p.96, lines 182-183.

⁶² Cox, Thomas, *Magna Britannia et Hibernia, antiqua & nova: Or, A New Survey of Great Britain* (Published 1720) p.745.

⁶³ McGrath, *Bristol in the Eighteenth Century*, p.20

⁶⁴ Cox, *Magna Britannia*, p.744.

⁶⁵ Heys, Alistair, ed., *Thomas Chatterton's Bristol* (Bristol: Redcliffe Press, 2005) p.14.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

the thirteenth century when it became the stronghold of the Plantagenets against the invasion of France.⁶⁷ King Henry III stayed there for a few months and sanctioned the first mayor.⁶⁸ Subsequent centuries saw an increase in religious establishments, the founding of hospitals, and a re-alignment of the harbour to facilitate shipping. In 1574 Queen Elizabeth visited on one of her ‘progresses’ and was entertained with, amongst other things, a mock naval battle. In the later eighteenth century Bristol could boast an artistic and literary set made up of such people as Southey, Lovell Beddoes, the Edgeworths, Hannah More, and the artist Francis Danby,⁶⁹ along with Addison, Cowper, Gay, Pope, Sheridan, and Mrs Thrale.⁷⁰ Even Chatterton, the Bristol poet famously rejected by his home town, waxed lyrical about Clifton: ‘Clifton, sweet village! Now demands the lay. / The lov’d retreat of all the rich and gay/ The darling spot which pining maidens seek /To give health’s rose to the pallid cheek.’⁷¹

Bristol had a thriving print culture with the early advent of William Bonny’s printing press set up in 1695.⁷² In 1784 further progress came in the form of a mail coach service from London to Bristol.⁷³ These coaches carried, among other things, the newspapers that were to prove crucial to Ann Yearsley as her writing career took off in the following year. Bristol’s first circulating library was opened in 1728 by Thomas Sendall.⁷⁴ This type of library was highly criticised for pandering to the penchant for novels at the time: Brewer claims that ‘the received wisdom about circulating libraries was that they were repositories of fictional pap, served up to women of leisure who had little to do but surfeit themselves

⁶⁷ Little, *The Story of Bristol*, p.9.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Reid, *A Chronicle of Bristol and Hotwells*, p.39.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.112.

⁷¹ Heys, *Thomas Chatterton’s Bristol*, p.13.

⁷² Latimer, *The Annals of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century*, p.21.

⁷³ Collins, A.S., *The Profession of Letters* (Clifton, Bristol: Augustus M. Kelly, 1973) p.37.

⁷⁴ Latimer, *The Annals of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 9.

with romantic nonsense'.⁷⁵ Paul Kaufman, on the other hand suggests that the development of circulating libraries in the eighteenth century contributed to the rapid development of an author class, and to the stirring and shaping of social and political movements.⁷⁶ Ann Yearsley achieved her ambition to open a circulating library in 1793. It was advertised in *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal* on 18 January 1793 as a 'Publick Library' which also sold 'Perfumes, Essences, Patent Medicines etc. Yearsley's library was included in *Matthews Bristol Directory* for the years 1793-94, and also, more recently, in Kaufman's check list of circulating libraries in England, alongside other proprietors such as Grace Barton, Arthur Browne, and Joseph Esmond.⁷⁷ Her library catalogue, published on opening, contained several items of travel literature, along with some of Shakespeare's plays, her own poetry, and poetic works of Thomson and Pope,. And, although she initially disapproved of novels, her library contained works by Charlotte Smith, Charlotte Lennox, and Horace Walpole.⁷⁸

Between 1740 and 1780 there was a concentrated effort on the part of Bristol's citizens to dispel the image of an uncultured city. By 1778 it could boast of a new assembly room, a Vauxhall garden, and a New Musik Room on Prime Street that opened in 1756 with the presentation of Handel's *Messiah*.⁷⁹ The Theatre Royal was built in 1764 and opened its doors on May 1766 with a prologue written by David Garrick. It is difficult to know how much of the cultural scene Yearsley was able to partake in: money and correct dress would be prohibitive before she had published any work. But in 1789, after she had published two volumes of poetry, she wrote an unpublished poem called 'To Dorinda on Hearing her

⁷⁵ Brewer, John, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Harper Collins, 1997) p.179.

⁷⁶ Kaufman, Paul, 'The Community Library: A Chapter in English Social History' in *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 57, No. 7 (1937), pp.1-67 on p.5.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Yearsley, Ann, *Catalogue of the books, tracts, etc, contained in Ann Yearsley's public library* (Bristol: printed for the proprietor, 1793).

⁷⁹ McGrath, *Bristol in the Eighteenth Century*, p.34.

Sing in an Elegant Circle at Bristol Wells'. The work suggests that she attended the performance, and these lines tell us how much she enjoyed it:

Hark! Whence those sounds? So sweetly shrill!

O'er Avon's murm'ring waves they float

Clifton, each God forsakes thy hill!

Each listening Dryad leaves his grot.⁸⁰

The poem also declares that the writer was present in 'an elegant circle', a fact that might have displeased Hannah More, who would have disapproved of her protégée elevating herself socially.

Yearsley's writing career is often defined by the quarrel with her first literary patron, Hannah More. And, although patronage and the dispute will be dealt with fully elsewhere in this thesis, it is discussed in this chapter as a crucial factor in the development of Yearsley as a professional writer and as a person. Hannah More, certainly in some contemporary and modern-day texts, was often portrayed as an overbearing and controlling patron, seeking to repress an aspiring labouring-class writer; but Yearsley's first volume of work can also be seen as a collaboration between writer and patron, thus showing More's role in the liaison as more of a mentor. However, it was the eventual severance of this relationship that brought Yearsley's strength of character, and her desire for autonomy over her work, to the fore. And, although it was never her intention, the impact of Hannah More as a catalyst on Yearsley's determination to succeed in the literary marketplace formed an important part of the poet's journey from poverty to published writer.

⁸⁰ Yearsley, Ann, 'To Dorinda on hearing her sing in an elegant Circle at Bristol Wells', in Ferguson, Moira, *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 12, No.1. (Spring, 1993), pp.13-29.

Hannah More became aware of the strength of the milkwoman's personality when the argument that was to split their patronage alliance began with Yearsley's demand for control of her own earnings. More did not expect someone from the 'lower orders' to question her control of the writer's money, let alone understand the business details behind the Deed of Trust, put in place by More, allowing only herself and Elizabeth Montagu control over Yearsley's literary earnings.⁸¹ But it is clear from the contents of Yearsley's 'Narrative' that she fully understood the implications of the document and the speed with which it was set up and sent to her for signature:

It was sent to Bristol the day my books came here, with an order for it to be signed by my husband and me immediately, and returned to London the next morning. I had no time to peruse it, nor take a copy; and from the rapidity with which this circumstance was conducted, I feared to ask it.⁸²

When analysing Yearsley and More's dispute over the milkwoman's earnings, it is possible to see Yearsley as the victim and More as a bossy and dictatorial patron; but, as can be seen in the chapter dealing specifically with patronage, there were faults on both sides. Without More's help, at least in the initial stages of her career, Yearsley may never have come to public notice at all.

More, in her preface to Yearsley's first volume, appeared to have had good and honest intentions towards helping the milkwoman:

For my own part, I do not feel myself actuated by the idle vanity of a *discoverer*; for I confess that the ambition of bringing to light a genius buried in obscurity, operates much less powerfully on my mind, than the wish to rescue a meritorious woman from misery, for it is not fame, but bread which I am anxious to secure for her.⁸³

⁸¹ Yearsley, Ann, *Poems on Various Subjects*, p.xxvii.

⁸² Yearsley, Ann, *Poems on Various Subjects*, p.xvi. Included in this volume of work is what is commonly called 'Mrs Yearsley's Narrative'. Here, Yearsley creates an effective platform from which to defend herself against the adverse criticism levelled against her after the dispute with Hannah More.

⁸³ Yearsley, *Poems on Various Subjects*, p.xiii.

But it is at this point that More misguidedly thought that she would be able to control the extent of her protégée's career, allowing the publication of 'a small volume of her Poems'.⁸⁴ More also did not see, or chose to ignore, the fact that this 'small volume of her Poems' could never be a long-term solution to Yearsley's poverty.

Madeleine Kahn claims that 'while focusing on the conflict reveals some truth, it obscures a larger truth by putting the two poets into separate categories and opposing them'.⁸⁵ She posits that the Yearsley/More literary relationship was actually a 'multi-faceted collaboration'; More's contribution to this collaboration, and to Yearsley's eventual autonomous literary career, should not be underestimated. More was, by this time, a well-established and well-published writer, and, according to Kerri Andrews, 'had given notice of the publications of Yearsley's poetry through anonymous letters and similar devices, as early as December 1784'.⁸⁶ More also arranged with her own publisher Thomas Cadell, to produce the milkwoman's first volume of poetry, thus removing for Yearsley the difficult task of acquiring a publisher.

J.M.S. Tompkins stated: 'Miss More copied the manuscripts and revised them to the extent of providing punctuation, eliminating grammatical errors, and possibly suggesting some changes of diction.'⁸⁷ This is possibly speculation, but given Yearsley's minimal education, it is safe to assume that some editorial help was needed. But, despite Yearsley's very public assertion that her second volume was 'the produce of her own uncultured genius, without any alterations or corrections', it is impossible to know the actual extent of More's editorial corrections to the milkwoman's first volume.⁸⁸ When Yearsley asked her

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p.xiii.

⁸⁵ Kahn, Madeleine, 'Hannah More and Ann Yearsley: A Collaboration Across the Class Divide', *Project Muse*, <http://muse.jhu.edu>, accessed 30 April 2010. p.203.

⁸⁶ Andrews, Kerri, *Ann Yearsley and Hannah More: Patronage and Poetry* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2013) p.33.

⁸⁷ Tompkins, 'The Bristol Milkwoman' in *The Polite Marriage*, p.68.

⁸⁸ Felix Farley's *Bristol Journal*, 25 November, 1786.

patron to return the manuscript copies of her first publication, she was told by More: ‘They are left at the Printers, Mrs Yearsley – Don’t think that I shall make use of them – They are burnt’.⁸⁹ It is perhaps indicative of More’s desire to control Yearsley, and the publication of her work, that she possessed them at all. It is possible that the manuscript was a gift from poet to patron. The burning of such documents, however, would seem a callous and senseless act.

More, by the time she became Yearsley’s patron, had acquired several influential contacts, including academics and aristocrats such as Dr Johnson, David Garrick, Elizabeth Montagu, the Duchess-Dowager of Portland, along with members of the Bluestocking circle, Elizabeth Carter and Hester Chapone. The influence of the Bluestockings may have filtered down to Yearsley. Under More’s patronage Yearsley was introduced to polite society, which was almost unthinkable for one of her perceived social status. In ‘To Stella on a Visit to Mrs Montagu’, Yearsley admitted that ‘My soul too narrow, and too low my state’ for friendship.⁹⁰ Of her protégée’s visits to some of her aristocratic friends, More writes condescendingly:

Do you know that my poor milkwoman has been sent for to Stoke, to visit the Duchess of Beaufort, and the Duchess of Rutland; and to Bath, to Lady Spencer, Mrs Montagu, &c! I hope all these honours will not turn her head, and indispose her for her humble occupation. I would rather have her *served* than *flattered*.⁹¹

It is tempting to think that More, as well as drumming up subscriptions, was parading her ‘discovery’ around her aristocratic friends rather as a curiosity than as a potential writer on the verge of a literary career.

More, however, used her connections to gain over a thousand subscribers for Yearsley’s first publication, and worked hard to obtain them: ‘I have spent over eight months entirely

⁸⁹ Yearsley, *Poems on Various Subjects*, p.xx.

⁹⁰ Yearsley, ‘To Stella on a Visit to Mrs Montagu’, in *Poems on Several Occasions*, p.52, line 4.

⁹¹ Roberts, William, *Memoirs of the Life and Correspondence of Mrs Hannah More*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, Vol.1, 1834) 2012. ‘Letter from Hannah More to Mrs Boscawen’, p.190.

in this business, I have written above a thousand pages on her subject.⁹² Yearsley, within this first work duly articulated her gratitude for her patron's assistance. In 'Night to Stella', the self-knowing milkwoman is hopeful of More's help in socialising her:

Uncouth, uncivilis'd. And rudely rough,
Unpolished, as the form thrown by Heaven,
Not worth completion of the Artist's hand.
To add a something more. Such is the mind
Which thou may'st yet illumine.⁹³

Yearsley, as if acknowledging the inadequacies of her education asked Stella (More) to 'aid my pen'.⁹⁴ In 'To the Same; on her ACCUSING THE AUTHOR OF FLATTERY', she likened her patron's influence to that of God, showing the enormity of this influence on her: 'You, I acknowledge, next to bounteous Heaven/Like his, your influence cheers where'er 'tis given'.⁹⁵ Of course everything changed when More set up the Deed of Trust which effectively robbed Yearsley of any control over her literary earnings. She soon realised that there was to be no 'social hand/ Whose friendly beckon points to realms of bliss'.⁹⁶ In fact, all More's help forgotten, she declared that her patron had, 'after chaining me down by obligations', injured her character.⁹⁷

More's sentiments in helping the poverty-stricken milkwoman were, in essence, well-intentioned, if a little high-handed. And, although her help in starting Yearsley's career should not be underestimated, More always meant to keep Yearsley, as a member of the lower orders, firmly within the bounds of her vision of the God-given social order. She

⁹² Mahl, Mary R. and Helene Koon, *The Female Spectator: English Women Writers Before 1800* (Canada: Fitzhenry & Whiteside Limited, 1977) p.284.

⁹³ Yearsley, 'Night to Stella', in *Poems on Several Occasions*, p.9, lines 135-139.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.10, line 146.

⁹⁵ Yearsley, 'To the SAME; on her ACCUSING THE AUTHOR OF FLATTERY, and of Ascribing to the Creature that Praise which is due only to the Creator', in *Poems on Several Occasions*, p.57, lines 19-20.

⁹⁶ Yearsley, 'Night to Stella', in *Poems on Several Occasions*, p.5, lines 71-72.

⁹⁷ Yearsley, *Poems on Various Subjects*, p.xvi.

made an error of judgement in thinking that she could control the strong and determined personality that was Ann Yearsley; perhaps she also underestimated the milkwoman's talents.

Yearsley identified with her native Bristol in much of her work, at times acknowledging the city's commercial aspect in a positive way. Her mother, as a business woman, would have instilled in her daughter the strong sense of commerce that showed itself in Yearsley's later life. She had a keen eye to the market, and was well aware that More's styling of her as *Lactilla*, a 'noble savage', would work for her as well as against her, and was likely to appeal to the late-century vogue for 'primitivism'. In fact, Waldron suggests that in order to attract subscribers to her work Yearsley had been willing to groom herself into the 'poor milkwoman' phenomenon.⁹⁸ Yearsley was more than capable of public self-representation through her writing and may have generated extra interest with her indignant and angry outpourings – most notably in the preface, known as 'Mrs Yearsley's Narrative', to her second volume of work where she deftly answered all of More's charges of ingratitude and insolence.⁹⁹

Ann Yearsley had numerous literary role models although, in the absence of information concerning the poet's formative literary life, we can only speculate on texts she may have read. Aphra Behn (1640?-1689) was a prolific playwright, poet, and writer of fiction, and is widely regarded as the first published female author in England known to have earned a reasonable living through creative writing. Her novel *Oroonoko*, published in 1688, is widely acknowledged as important to the development of the English novel. Behn's distinctive poetic voice is characterised by her audacity in writing about contemporary events. Her work was often regarded as scandalous with its themes of sexual desire,

⁹⁸ Waldron, *Lactilla*, p.76.

⁹⁹ Yearsley, Ann, 'Mrs Yearsley's Narrative', in *Poems on Various Subjects*, p.xv.

descriptions of male to male relationships, or depictions of her own attraction to women.¹⁰⁰ Yearsley, however, could never have touched, even remotely, on themes of a sexual nature. She was intelligent enough to understand the literary marketplace and know that as a labouring-class writer she, more than most, trod a fine line between the acceptable and the unacceptable. She would always need to be aware that, at least in her early work, she had to conform to make money.

Eliza Haywood (1693?-1756) was an actress and an author with over fifty novels published, along with plays, poetry, and her periodical *Female Spectator*. Like Behn, her work, especially her ‘scandalous memoirs’ stigmatising some of the most powerful people of her time, was controversial.¹⁰¹ And, like Behn, she also offered frank discussions of female desire in texts such as *Love in Excess*. As a single mother of two children she was, like Yearsley, forced to earn her living by writing, and was the first woman to write sustained drama criticism, along with increasingly sophisticated political writings.¹⁰² Feminist critics such as Margaret Doody, Jane Spencer, and Ros Ballaster give her credit for initiating major forms of the novel.¹⁰³

Writers such as Behn and Haywood made it possible for women from the higher orders to become part of the literary landscape; and by the 1780s it seems that gender was not an insurmountable problem for women when it came to writing. This does not appear to be the case for the labouring-class writer, however, especially if they were female. One of the earliest published male, working-class poets was Stephen Duck (1705?-1756). Born in Wiltshire into a family who were said to be poor, he had attended a charity school, leaving at fourteen to become an agricultural worker. He then began a process of self-education

¹⁰⁰ Stiebel, Arlene, *Aphra Behn*, www, poetry foundation.org/bio/aphra-behn Accessed 24.06.2013, p.4.

¹⁰¹ Backscheider, Paula R, ‘Haywood [nee Fowler], Eliza (1693?-1756) *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) online edition, Sept 2010 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/12798>], accessed 29.04.13.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p.2.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p.3.

with the help of a friend who possessed a small library. He had the good fortune to come under the patronage of Queen Caroline, who treated him well, giving him a large annuity, a house, and initially a job as Yeoman of the Guard, and then as keeper of the Queen's Library.¹⁰⁴ Duck's writings were published from 1730 onwards, with his most famous work, *The Thresher's Labour*, inspired by his own farm labouring experience. As was the custom for writers from the lower orders, Duck declares his poverty-stricken, labouring status in his first publication *Poems on Several Subjects*: 'Lately a poor *Thresher* in a Barn in the County of *Wilts*, at the wages of Four Shillings and Sixpence per week'.¹⁰⁵

Duck's work described the rigours of agricultural labour at its most unpleasant. It is told from a man's point of view with women haymakers described as 'prattling females'.¹⁰⁶ Duck's poem elicited a sharp response, not published until 1739, from Mary Collier (1689/90-1759), on behalf of labouring women. In her poem she refers, perhaps ironically, to Duck as one who deigns 'to look down on one that's poor and low/Remembering you yourself was lately so'.¹⁰⁷ There are few facts about Collier's early life, and these are drawn from the autobiographical preface to *Poems, on several Occasions, by Mary Collier ... With some remarks on her life*.¹⁰⁸ Collier declared her lowly origins:

I who am the author of these Poems was born near Midhurst in Sussex of poor, but honest Parents, by whom I was taught to read when very Young, and took great delight in it: but my Mother dying, I lost my Education, Never being put to School: As I grew up. I was set to such labour as the Country afforded.¹⁰⁹

Collier, who eventually became a washerwoman, articulated labouring women's oppression, and although she never married, she fully understood the triple burden of wage

¹⁰⁴ Stephen Leslie, 'Duck, Stephen (1705?-1756)', rev William R. Jones, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/8131>, accessed 12 Oct 2012.

¹⁰⁵ Duck, Stephen, *The Thresher's Labour, Mary Collier, The Woman's Labour* (London: Merlin Press, 1989), Preface.

¹⁰⁶ Duck, Stephen, *The Thresher's Labour*, Merlin Press, 1989 edition, p.8. line 164.

¹⁰⁷ Collier, Mary, *The Woman's Labour: An Epistle to Mr Stephen Duck*, Merlin Press Edition, p.15, line 3-4.

¹⁰⁸ Collier, Mary, *Poems, on several occasions, with some remarks on her life* (Winchester: Published by subscription and printed at the Author's own expense, 1762).

¹⁰⁹ Collier, *Poems on Several Occasions*, p.iii.

labour, housework, and childcare that constrained writers like Ann Yearsley. It seems that she never attracted aristocratic patronage as Duck did, and never wrote herself out of poverty, continuing to work as a washerwoman until she was sixty-three years old.¹¹⁰ Whilst Yearsley in much of her work showed minimal solidarity with the labouring classes, at least she would have recognised the possibilities of a place for writers from the lower orders, in the literary marketplace.

One of Yearsley's contemporary literary influences and inspirations was the Bristol-born poet Thomas Chatterton. We know that she was fully aware of his life and work because she dedicated 'Elegy on Mr Chatterton' to him.¹¹¹ He was born in 1752, the same year as Yearsley, and was the son of a poor schoolmaster who died before the young Thomas was born. He attended Colston's charity school, and at the age of fourteen was bound apprentice to an attorney, spending most of his time copying legal documents.¹¹² Chatterton is most famous for his complete, imagined medieval world, with poems written in the persona of 'secular priest', Thomas Rowley. The poet moved to London in 1770, after Horace Walpole's refusal of patronage, and died there within a few months of an accidental overdose of laudanum, although some said it was suicide.¹¹³

Yearsley, inspired by Chatterton's poem *Clifton*, wrote her own work on the village. *Clifton Hill*, written in 1785, shows Yearsley in 'pensive mood'¹¹⁴ as she follows in the footsteps of Chatterton, who also used the elevated viewpoint provided by Clifton village to 'Gaze, and pause, and muse between/And draw some moral truth from ev'ry scene'.¹¹⁵ In her poem dedicated to Chatterton she pays homage to the dead writer, her work

¹¹⁰ Lonsdale, Roger, *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) p.172.

¹¹¹ Yearsley, Ann, 'Elegy on Mr Chatterton' in *Poems on Various Subjects*, p.145.

¹¹² Groom, Nick, 'Chatterton, Thomas (1752-1770)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004. [www.oxforddnb/view/article/5189, accessed 27 May 2014.

¹¹³ Groom, 'Chatterton, Thomas' (1752-1770).

¹¹⁴ Yearsley, 'Clifton Hill' in *Poems on Several Occasions*, p.86, line 25.

¹¹⁵ Martin, Edward and Bill Pickard, eds., *600 Years of Bristol Poetry* (Arts and Leisure Committee of the City and County of Bristol, 1973) p.17, lines 13-14.

suggesting that she has visited his resting place – ‘Forgive, neglected shade! My pensive lay,/ While o’er thy tomb I hang my rural wreath’.¹¹⁶ This work reflected Yearsley’s affinity with Chatterton who had his own problems with patronage, or lack of it. Chatterton, like herself, was ‘quickly hurl’d,/ From Hope’s fair height, to Death’s unlov’d embrace’.¹¹⁷

There is a strong possibility that Yearsley interacted, at least poetically, with another of her fellow Bristol poets. John Frederick Bryant, although born in London, came to Bristol at an early age, and was then ‘put to school to an old woman who taught children to read, with whom I remained about a year, and was then kept at home’.¹¹⁸ The poet introduced himself within his work, claiming that he was a pipe maker by trade, but in hard times worked as an itinerant labourer, bearing ‘a hod’ for bricklayers, digging foundations for new buildings, working as ‘jobber in some rope-grounds’, and attending on the quays’.¹¹⁹ Bryant was set up by his patrons in ‘a Stationary, Book and Print-selling business’, but in his poem ‘The Author on his own Situation’ the writer expressed his desire to become a poet not a shop worker:

O! Would some gen’rous patronising friend
 My murth’ring woes and dire vexations end;
 Dismiss each threat’ning dun, each anxious care,
 And bid me eat and sing, devoid of fear!¹²⁰

It soon became apparent, however, that his sponsors, in accordance with the times, treated him as a charity case; he was not allowed to turn poet and produced only one volume of work, which was the norm for labouring-class poets under the aegis of a patron.¹²¹

¹¹⁶ Yearsley, ‘Elegy on Mr Chatterton’ in *Poems on Various Subjects*, p.145, lines 1-2.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.146, lines 15-16.

¹¹⁸ Bryant, *Verses by John Frederick Bryant*, pp. iii-iv.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. xviii, xvi, xvi.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, ‘The Author on his own Situation’, lines 30-33.

Bryant's poem 'Morning', like Yearsley and Chatterton, used Clifton Hill as a place of reflection, and as a place from where to praise the milkwoman poet who has become his inspiration:

O thou sweet muse! That oft on Avon's banks
 Hast tun'd the harps, and taught th'immortal verse
 Of Bristol bards – that partial didst inspire
 Lactilla's numbers, while the rocky scene
 And Clifton's villa'd heights, she sung – yet deign
 To crown my invocation with thy smiles,
 While emulous I court thy sacred aid,
 And sing the various beauties of the Morn!¹²²

Yearsley had become at once the inspiration and the inspired, for she apparently addressed Bryant in her work 'To Mr****, An Unlettered Poet, on Genius Unimproved'. In this poem, Yearsley advised Bryant that he must forego the classical muses – 'Ne'er hail the fabled Nine, or snatch rapt thoughts/ From the Castalian spring; 'tis not for thee'.¹²³ - in favour of Christian and religious themes: 'From one bright spark/Of never-erring faith,/more rapture beams/Than wild Mythology could ever boast'.¹²⁴ Both poems were written and published in 1787 so it seems a possibility that there could be inter-textuality at work here. Yearsley appeared to express, within her poem, solidarity with a fellow labouring-class writer when she wrote: 'Like thee, estranged/From Science, and old Wisdom's classic lore/I've patient trod the wild untangled path/ Of unimprove'd Idea'.¹²⁵

¹²¹ Christmas, William J., *The Lab'ring Muses: Work, Writing and the Social Order in English Plebeian Poetry, 1730-1830* (New Jersey, USA: Associated University Presses Inc, 2001) p.225.

¹²² Bryant, 'Morning', in *Verses*, p.55, lines 287-294.

¹²³ Yearsley, 'To Mr ****, An Unlettered Poet, on Genius Unimproved' in *Poems on Various Subjects*, p.78, lines 19-20.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.79, lines 22-24.

¹²⁵ Yearsley, 'To Mr****, An Unlettered Poet, on Genius Unimproved', in *Poems on Various Subjects*, pp.79-80, lines 34-37.

Yearsley seemed to have had an affinity with these Bristol poets who, like herself, had problems with patronage; and it is this, rather than class status, that she related to.

Ann Yearsley's life was shaped by personal tragedy – reduced to poverty in a hovel, and losing her son and beloved mother; it was this that urged her art and her actions. The ugly spectre of destitution that had threatened the whole family in 1784 strengthened her resolve to gain autonomy and carve out a professional writing career. Her mother shaped her strength of character, her development as a poet, and was the writer's inspiration to carry on; her poem 'On the Remembrance of a Mother' acknowledges this. Yearsley's mother, who was determined that her daughter and son should read and write, is 'ever living' to the writer, and it was her courage that empowered the poet to plumb inner depths and 'rest on virtues all my own'.¹²⁶ Yearsley's determination to succeed was born out of her mother's struggles and then her own; she required every ounce of her 'savage will' to elevate herself from milkwoman to successful writer.

Through her work she was able to declare her own history and literary background; throughout her work she challenged expectations and refused to be defined by her social class and educational disadvantage. Yearsley had to struggle with the dictates of polite society and a repressive intellectual fraternity; and it could have been professional suicide on Yearsley's part to defy Hannah More and her restrictive and editorially controlling patronage. More was one of the most influential writers of the time, and the break with her could have meant the end of any possible literary career for Yearsley. But because of her formidable personality this did not happen, and she published more poetry, a play which was performed in Bristol and Bath, and a novel.

¹²⁶ Yearsley, Ann, 'On the Remembrance of a Mother' in *Poems on Various Subjects*, p.161.

The following chapters will show how constraints on a woman from the 'lower orders' of society, such as class, gender and patronage, could have impacted negatively on any aspirations to become a professional writer. Ann Yearsley, however, negotiated eighteenth-century repression, eventually earning enough money to fulfil a life-long ambition to open a circulating library in the fashionable area of Hotwells.

3. PATRONAGE AND FRIENDSHIP

Tim Burke, in his introduction to one of the few anthologies of Ann Yearsley's work, claims that part of the earlier culture of patronage had been the 'discovery' of labouring-class poets, the most famous being Stephen Duck and his patron Queen Caroline.¹ When Hannah More became Ann Yearsley's patron she was confident that she had found a poet who conformed to the accepted poet-patron model, willing to present herself in her patron's terms. Several poems in Yearsley's debut work are addressed to Stella (More) and to co-patron Elizabeth Montagu, expressing gratitude to them.² However, by the time her second volume, *Poems on Various Subjects* was published,³ Yearsley was bitterly disillusioned with More's patronage, and even less impressed to find that rather than becoming financially independent and free from rural labour, with the proceeds from her first work, her money would be totally controlled by More who considered it 'her sense of duty' to manage the writer's finances and, by extension, her life. The ensuing acrimonious and public break with More saw Yearsley reduced from 'one of nature's miracles' to 'that odious woman' in less than a year.⁴ The writer found her patron increasingly condescending and controlling, with the servility of the liaison ever more demeaning. More, for her part, was shocked to find that a 'social inferior' should question her authority over the handling of profits from the poet's first publication. The quarrel was never to be resolved.

This chapter asks how successful was Ann Yearsley in the management and manipulation of the complex patronage system in the eighteenth century? The dimensions of patronage

¹ Burke, Tim, ed, *Selected Poems. Ann Yearsley*. (Cheltenham: Cyder Press, 2003), p. ix. This anthology offers a useful introduction to Ann Yearsley's career and the issues with which she engaged. But because Yearsley's oeuvre covers a wide range of genres this text covers a relatively small number of her published work.

² Yearsley, Ann, *Poems on Several Occasions, the fourth edition* (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1786)

³ Yearsley, Ann, *Poems on Various Subjects* (London: G.G. and J Robinson, 1787).

⁴ Roberts, William, *Memoirs of the Life and Correspondence of Mrs Hannah More* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1834) p.206 and p.210 respectively.

are examined within an eighteenth-century analytical and cultural framework, with an exploration of Yearsley's career determining her attitude to a system that was unavoidable for most writers, especially those from the labouring classes. The relationship, and its eventual breakdown, between Yearsley and More is examined within the context of the changing face of the patronage system, as well as changes in print culture, both of which made it easier for Yearsley to continue publishing after her break with her first patron. The prolific correspondence and, on Yearsley's part, poems generated by the dispute are an important primary source. Whilst these sources must inevitably be tinged with authorial bias, they still provide the basis for our understanding of both Yearsley's and More's feelings concerning the quarrel.

A brief history of patronage and its development from aristocratic or court-based to a more market-driven system provides context for this chapter. Analysis of the types of patronage available at the latter end of the period promotes discussion of how Yearsley operated within the system and also criticised it. These options are discussed generally, using the perspective provided by Paul Korshin's article from 1974 which surveys the many different forms of literary sponsorship in the period.⁵ This source is limited because, being an article, it is as Korshin himself concedes, 'such a short space' within which to answer questions. He does, however, provide a significant description of the history of eighteenth-century patronage. Other secondary sources are used in this chapter to provide context showing how patronage functioned at the time when Ann Yearsley was writing. They also articulate the dynamics of patronage, along with the class tensions that underpinned the Yearsley/More liaison. Dustin Griffin's study of patronage is a thorough and detailed

⁵ Korshin, Paul, 'Types of Eighteenth-Century Literary Patronage' in *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 7 No.4, (Summer, 1974) pp.453-473.

examination of the system and its implications for writing itself.⁶ His text lays out the workings of the patronage system and shows how authors wrote within it, manipulating it to their advantage, or resisting the claims of patrons by advancing counter-claims of their own. Griffin offers a balanced view of patrons who exploited their protégés, and also those who were generous and genuinely interested in them, judging them on literary merit rather than as a ‘philanthropic project’. This extensive detailing of the workings of the patronage system enabled, for this thesis, an unravelling of the complexities and changes within it.

The dispute with More has often defined Yearsley’s career, and whilst the quarrel itself is not the main focus of this chapter, it is inevitably a key moment in the poet’s struggle for literary emancipation and equality. With this in mind the dispute is examined as a precursor to any discussion of the Yearsley/More relationship. Comparisons are drawn between other labouring-class women poets and their patrons - Mary Leapor and Bridget Freemantle, for example - which feed into an analysis of what Yearsley could have expected from her patron, and what she actually obtained. A short profile of co-patrons Hannah More and Elizabeth Montagu provides further context to any discussion.

Kerri Andrews and Frank Felsenstein are two writers who have contributed to the work done on the Yearsley/More liaison. Writing in 2013 Andrews attempts ‘to offer an even-handed assessment of the dispute between the two parties’.⁷ Frank Felsenstein’s work on ‘The Thorp Arch Archive’ brings together correspondence to and from Ann Yearsley after her quarrel with More, alongside his discussion of modern-day writers on Ann Yearsley.⁸ Felsenstein’s work focuses on the politics of patronage, and brings the debate on the

⁶ Griffin, Dustin, *Literary Patronage in England, 1650-1800* (Cambridge, U.S.A.: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1996).

⁷ Andrews, Kerri, *Ann Yearsley and Hannah More, Patronage and Poetry* (London: Pickering & Chatto (Publishers) Limited, 2013) p.4.

⁸ Felsenstein, Frank, ‘Ann Yearsley and the Politics of Patronage. The Thorp Arch Archive’ Parts I and II, in *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, Vol.21 No.2, (Autumn, 2002) pp.346-392, Vol. 22, No. 1, (Spring, 2003), pp.12-56, respectively.

subject up to date at the time of publishing. These sources have been utilised to shed light on the dynamics of the Yearsley/More liaison.

Yearsley has, in much academic work, been defined by her patronage relationship with Hannah More rather than by her independent literary endeavours. The dispute, the eventual break-up, and Yearsley's effective dismissal of More, a major player on the eighteenth-century literary scene, made for dramatic reading, especially when the ensuing scandal was played out, by Yearsley at least, in the public eye. Whilst Hannah More is not the focus of this thesis, she is, however, a factor in Yearsley's journey to becoming a professional writer, and is unwittingly responsible for catalysing the milkwoman's quest for autonomy over her work.

Yearsley's decision to dispense with More's patronage effectively meant that, in some measure, she had taken control of her own writing. This decision might have been disastrous for the labouring-class writer who could not normally exist in the literary marketplace without some kind of support from a patron. If the dispute had happened earlier in the century, when there was less room for resistance and manipulation of the system by the writer, this might well have ended the milkwoman's career. But Yearsley's writing spanned what Dustin Griffin calls 'the overlapping "economies" of patronage and marketplace', when writing in the last years of the century saw significant changes taking place in the way writers could get their work published.⁹ Yearsley was writing at a time when increased fluidity in the literary marketplace, coupled with a shift from the older traditional patronage system towards more direct dealing with publishers, offered a range of options to the aspiring writer. The fact that Yearsley had easier access to print in the latter half of the century allowed her to challenge publicly the patronage system.

⁹ Griffin, *Literary Patronage in England*, p.10.

There is an exploration of Yearsley's relationships with her patrons after More. Primary sources include Yearsley's poetry and alongside this, material from The Thorp Arch Estate Archive, which shows that she was able to secure a wider network of patrons. Letters and papers to and from Yearsley confirm her support from Wilmer Gossip, Eliza Dawson, and Lord Bristol.¹⁰ Letters and poems show how Yearsley interacted with her correspondents, and also provide a deeper, more nuanced interpretation of the relationship between the writer and potential new patrons, promoting a discussion of the quality of patronage she received after More. Through correspondence and poems within the archive, new light is thrown on Wilmer Gossip, a previously shadowy figure in Yearsley's literary career. Frank Felsenstein's two-part article 'Ann Yearsley and the Politics of Patronage'¹¹ brings together this large cache of the Thorp Arch Archive's correspondence alongside relevant criticism of modern-day writers on Ann Yearsley's liaison with Hannah More. Felsenstein declares his intention is to 'throw new light on present-day interpretations of the politics of patronage'.¹² Letters from Eliza Dawson both to and from Yearsley, and to other potential patrons, give an overview of a friendship that was so important to the poet in the aftermath of her dispute with More. Dawson's autobiography is a primary resource which illuminates her thoughts, as a young girl, on the quarrel between Yearsley and More.¹³

Other primary resources include Yearsley's unpublished poems, written just after her quarrel with More, and at a time when the writer's outrage was at its most savage. It is this

¹⁰ Thorp Arch Estate Papers, deposited at the West Yorkshire Archive Service, Sheepscar, Leeds. This cache relates specifically to patrons after More, and is made up of several deposits of material that were received by the West Yorkshire Archive Service in Leeds between 1980 and 1993. The core of the archive relates to Thorp Arch Hall, Yorkshire, which was purchased by William Gossip (1704-1772) in 1748. On William's death his son Wilmer Gossip (1742-1790) inherited the Hall.

¹¹ Felsenstein, Frank, 'Ann Yearsley and the Politics of Patronage. The Thorp Arch Archive: Part I', in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol.21. No.2. The Adoption Issue (Autumn, 2002), pp.346-392. Part II: Letters to and from & Papers concerning Mrs Yearsley the Bristol Milkwoman, in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 22. No. 1 (Spring, 2003), pp.12-56.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.348.

¹³ Dawson Fletcher, Eliza, *Autobiography of Mrs Fletcher With Letters and Other Family Memorials* (1875), (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1875). Eliza Dawson was a seventeen-year-old young woman from Oxtou in Yorkshire, who later became the wife of a prominent Edinburgh lawyer.

body of work that gives a greater insight into the anger she felt at her treatment by More and her friends; the writer's own words tell us when and why this work remained unpublished:

The following lines were composed immediately after Miss H. More's haughty treatment of the Author. Time and Resolution having calmed Resentment in the bosom of the latter. Generosity forbade the publication of several Pieces which were written in these painful moments.¹⁴

Studies of eighteenth-century culture by John Brewer and Jeremy Black¹⁵ provide an overview of the cultural milieu during Yearsley's career. Anne Stott's comprehensive study of Hannah More illuminates the psyche of Yearsley's first patron.¹⁶ Kerri Andrews' study of the liaison between Yearsley and More, published in 2013, brings previous work done on their relationship up to date.¹⁷ Yearsley's poetry is again used to underpin an analysis of the way her texts were affected when she was free from the constraints of her first patron, and was working under the auspices of more liberal sponsors.

Early in 1784 Yearsley, pregnant with her sixth child, was reputedly forced by extreme poverty into a 'stable'. Expecting to die of hunger, which her mother shortly did, the family was supposedly saved by a gentleman, Mr Vaughan, to whom Yearsley later dedicated one of her poems.¹⁸ Hannah More's cook soon became aware of the milkwoman's impoverished domestic life when Yearsley collected the household leftovers to feed to her pigs, as she did every day according to a contract between them. Yearsley's poetry was brought to the attention of More who was impressed by her work, intrigued by

¹⁴ Headed by Yearsley's handwritten title 'Additions By the same hand', the *Unpublished Poems* are presented in the order in which they appear in the bound volume of *Poems, on Several Occasions (1785)* in the Bristol Public Library, College Green, Bristol. Taken from: Moira Ferguson: Ann Yearsley, in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol 12, No.1 (Spring, 1993) pp.30-46.

¹⁵ Brewer, John, *Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London: HarperCollins, 1997); Black, Jeremy, *Culture in Eighteenth-Century England: A Subject for Taste* (London: Hambledon and London, 2005).

¹⁶ Stott, Anne, *Hannah More. The First Victorian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

¹⁷ Andrews, Kerri, *Ann Yearsley and Hannah More: Patronage and Poetry*.

¹⁸ Tompkins, J.M.S, 'The Bristol Milkwoman' in *The Polite Marriage* (Freeport: New York: Books For Libraries Press, 1969) p.63.

the writer's background and lack of formal education. She offered to help the struggling milkwoman, and so Yearsley became the object of More's patronage.¹⁹

In the latter part of the century, when Yearsley and More met, the literary marketplace had seen aristocratic patrons replaced by knowledgeable, well-educated, middle-class sponsors such as More.²⁰ Yearsley's first volume of verse²¹ was published by subscription, which Korshin defines as 'An author or his bookseller seeking to obtain money in advance of publication from willing benefactors'.²² He also observed that the subscription method democratised literary patronage and made it possible for a community of people to contribute to the support of many others.²³

The number of subscription volumes rose rapidly between the late seventeenth century and the 1730s, levelled off until the 1760s, and spurted again in the last two decades of the century.²⁴ Many wealthy and powerful people subscribed frequently for copies of a work; this was the case with Yearsley's first publication. More worked hard to gather subscriptions for the writer's first volume and describes the arduous task of campaigning for these subscribers: 'I have spent above eight months entirely in this business, I have written above a thousand pages on her subject and with your generous concurrence have got near five hundred pounds'.²⁵ Among the subscribers were two dukes, seven duchesses, one marquis, two marchionesses, six earls, sixteen countesses, eight bishops, as well as notable figures, such as Fanny Burney, Anna Seward, and the artist Joshua Reynolds.²⁶ It

¹⁹ Waldron, Mary, Ann Yearsley (bap.1753, d.1806) (*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004).

²⁰ Griffin, *Literary Patronage in England 1650-1800*, p.1.

²¹ Yearsley, Ann, *Poems on Several Occasions*, fourth edition.

²² Korshin, 'Types of Eighteenth-Century Patronage', p.463.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.464.

²⁴ Brewer, *Pleasures of the Imagination*, p.164.

²⁵ Mahl & Koon, *The Female Spectator*, Letter from Hannah More to Mrs Montagu, Bristol, 21 July 1785, p.284.

²⁶ Waldron, Mary, *Lactilla, Milkwoman of Clifton: The Life and Writings of Ann Yearsley, 1753-1806*, (Georgia, U.S.A.: The University of Georgia Press, 1996) p.62.

was a testament to More's popularity and fame as a writer that so many people supported her literary project.

Patronage was a system so universally accepted during the eighteenth century that few writers, whether obscure or famous, were untouched by it. Samuel Johnson, referring to Lord Chesterfield's uselessness as patron of his *Dictionary*, defined a patron as 'a man who looks on with unconcern at a man struggling for life in the water, and when he reaches the bank, encumbers him with help'.²⁷ Johnson, whilst not exactly struggling in the water was, along with other eminent writers such as Dryden and Pope, part of a patronage system that was 'a pervasive feature of eighteenth-century English culture'.²⁸ However, as the period progressed, high culture became more accessible to a larger number of people, and with patronage shifting from aristocrats to a middle class who, because of economic expansion had disposable wealth, the 'patronage of the middling orders was of growing importance'.²⁹

Hannah More grew up in a patron-client society, and early on in her literary career had been the recipient of patronage. Stott claims that one of More's affluent connections, Cornish heiress Mrs Ann Lovell Gwatkin, the cultivated wife of a Bristol merchant, was one of several patrons who either loaned or gifted money to set up Mary More's upmarket school, which the young Hannah attended from the age of thirteen, eventually becoming a teacher there.³⁰ More had, from early girlhood, established an élite circle of London-based friends that included David Garrick and Samuel Johnson, and by the early 1780s was spending the second half of each year in London where she functioned as Mrs Garrick's

²⁷ Porter, Roy, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Penguin Books, 1990) p.72.

²⁸ Griffin, *Literary Patronage in England*, p.5.

²⁹ Black, *A Subject for Taste*, p.18.

³⁰ Stott, *Hannah More: The First Victorian*, p.10.

companion.³¹ More's time in London enabled her to socialise with important artistic and intellectual figures of the time, and to gain entry into an impressive literary circle, the Bluestockings, whose members included Anna Barbauld, Hester Mulso Chapone, and the renowned classical scholar Elizabeth Carter. More was also successful in gaining the friendship and patronage of the so-called 'Queen' of the Blues, Elizabeth Montagu. Montagu was the daughter of a country squire, part of the comfortable gentry, who became a member of the aristocracy on her marriage to Edward Montagu.³²

More's successful writing career spanned all genres, and in the early years she wrote plays and poetry. But it was in 1777 that she began to set herself up as a moral commentator, with her conduct book *Essays on Various Subjects Principally Designed for Young Ladies* coming out in May of that year and dedicated to Elizabeth Montagu. By 1793 she had effectively become a Government propagandist, publishing *Village Politics by Will Chip* as a counter to Paine's *Rights of Man* (1791). Paine's work, according to E.P. Thompson 'was a publication that was banned as seditious libel, but which politicised Bristol from top to bottom'.³³ It was considered by Church and King to be a real threat at a time when the libertarian ideas of the American and French Revolutions caused the poor to become increasingly restive. The modern-day writer and critic, Jonathan Wordsworth, states that Paine was a threat about which something had to be done, and that it was said that Prime Minister William Pitt had asked More to intervene, tasking her with curing the masses of discontent'.³⁴ More's *Village Politics* targeted the lower orders and was expressly addressed to 'All the Mechanics, Journeymen, and Labourers, in Great Britain'.³⁵ When

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.48.

³² Eger, Elizabeth and Lucy Peltz, *Brilliant Women: Eighteenth-Century Bluestockings* (London: National Portrait Gallery Publications, 2008).

³³ Thompson, E.P., *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Gollancz, 1963) p.9.

³⁴ Wordsworth, Jonathan, *The Bright Work Grows: Women Writers of the Romantic Age* (England: Woodstock Books, 1997) p.84.

³⁵ More, Hannah, *The Complete Works of Hannah More. Volume 1* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1843), p.58.

More was introduced to Ann Yearsley in 1784 she was writing didactic texts in earnest. Stott claims: ‘It took ten erratic but inexorable years for Hannah More to change her career by transforming herself from intermittently successful playwright to Evangelical campaigner.’³⁶ It was during this period of transition that she was introduced to Yearsley and became her patron.

By the late eighteenth century leading artists and intellectuals led the recovery and preservation of primitive and less refined forms of expression.³⁷ More turned immediately to her friend and fellow Bluestocking, Elizabeth Montagu, as a potential co-patron when she thought that she had discovered her own ‘primitive’ writer to support. Montagu had herself been a patron of a labouring-class poet, James Woodhouse, the shoemaker. He was initially ‘displayed’ by her at parties, as resident poet and curiosity, to amuse the guests. But when Montagu went on to employ him as estate manager on her Sandleford estate, he was no longer invited to dine at her table but instead had to stand in attendance. When their liaison came to a bitter end, his poetry attacked every aspect of her character.³⁸ In his chapter entitled ‘Patroness’ Montagu is styled as Dame Vanessa Scintilla, and is described as ‘Pompous, proud and vain’.³⁹ Woodhouse’s work displayed the same bitter disillusionment at the lack of patronal friendship, as that which Ann Yearsley articulated in her poetry. Although the Montagu/Woodhouse relationship had ended disastrously, according to Eger, Montagu still ‘preferred her role as literary patron above all other social duties’.⁴⁰ Both More and Montagu were attracted by the idea of bringing Yearsley’s ‘genius’ to public attention through their roles as patrons, with Montagu expressing her enthusiasm for the milkwoman’s poetry in glowing terms:

³⁶ Stott, *Hannah More: The First Victorian*, p.48.

³⁷ Brewer, *Pleasures of the Imagination*, p.xxxi,

³⁸ Keegan, Bridget, *British Labouring-Class Nature Poetry, 1730-1837* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p.57.

³⁹ Woodhouse, James, *The Life and Poetical Works of James Woodhouse* (London: The Leadenhall Press, 1896, Vol.1) pp. 67-68.

⁴⁰ Eger, Elizabeth and Lucy Peltz, *Brilliant Women*, p.43.

What force of imagination! what harmony of numbers! In pagan times, one could have supposed Apollo had fallen in love with her rosy cheeks, snatched her to the top of Parnassus, given her a glass of his best helicon and ordered the nine Muses to attend to her call.⁴¹

For almost a year More's letters to Montagu were full of what Jonathan Wordsworth calls 'gratified philanthropy'.⁴² More was anxious that Yearsley should be represented as a conspicuous example of the 'deserving poor', and gestured towards a form of primitivism in her 'Preface' to Yearsley's first work: 'You will find her, like all unlettered Poets, abounding in imagery, metaphor, and personification.....I should be sorry to see the wild vigour of her rustic muse polished into elegance or laboured into correctness.'⁴³ She was also quick to assure Montagu that her proposed protégée would not be placed 'in such a state of independence as might seduce her to devote her time to the idleness of Poetry'.⁴⁴ More made it clear that she intended to keep the milkwoman in her place.

Both patrons were enthusiastic about Yearsley's first work; it seemed to conform to the accepted poet-patron model, with poems showing the gratitude expected from a 'social inferior'. In 'Stella, on a Visit to Mrs Montagu',⁴⁵ More (Stella) was presented as the angel who has saved the poet from destruction: 'How has your bounty cheer'd my humble state/ And chang'd the colour of my gloomy fate!'⁴⁶ The poem was effusive in its gratitude and praised More and Montagu for the writer's intellectual salvation; they have helped her taste the 'nameless sweets of wit', and to move in circles where 'Genius in familiar converse sits'.⁴⁷ More, finding the poet's over-effusive gratitude unseemly, and perhaps edging a little too close to friendship, rebuked the writer for it. Yearsley's reply to this was

⁴¹ Roberts, William, *Memoirs of the Life and Correspondence of Mrs Hannah More*, p.206.

⁴² Wordsworth, *The Bright Work Grows*, p.38.

⁴³ Yearsley, *Poems on Several Occasions*, p.x.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.xiv.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.52.

⁴⁶ Yearsley, 'To Stella on a Visit to Mrs Montagu', in *Poems on Several Occasions*, p.54, lines 41-42.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.53 lines 18 and 21.

made in ‘To the Same on her Accusing the Author of Flattery’.⁴⁸ Some critics have seen this poem as the first shot in Yearsley’s war with her patron; and it is a portent of things to come when the writer declared ‘For mine’s a stubborn and a savage will’, indicating clearly that whilst she is grateful she will not be bullied.⁴⁹ In the volume’s first poem, ‘Night. To Stella’, Yearsley, or perhaps More as editor, insisted upon her labouring-class status, and confirmed her difference from her patrons in class, culture, and education by referring to herself as ‘Uncouth, uncivilised, and rudely rough’.⁵⁰ Yearsley conceded that she valued More’s literary experience – ‘Lend me *her* pen, and guide my rustic hand’, and that her influence has been beneficial – ‘Stella, how strong thy gentle argument!’⁵¹

Throughout this first work Yearsley talked of friendship and asserted a familiarity with her patrons – ‘What bliss the friendship of the wise to share’.⁵² She effectively suggested that it was only her poverty that prevented her from being intellectually equal with her patrons; in no sense is she saying that she was incapable of this equality. In reality any kind of friendship or intellectual equality with her patrons was impossible. More’s sense of immutable social structure meant that, for her, Yearsley could only ever be a milkwoman who wrote poetry. As she indicated in her prefatory letter written to Mrs Montagu in Yearsley’s first work, she did not intend to ‘indispose her for the laborious employments of her humble condition’.⁵³ Indeed, she had taken steps to ensure that Yearsley remained in her labouring-class situation, hiring ‘a little maid to help her feed her pigs, and nurse the little ones, whilst she herself sells the milk’.⁵⁴ More also spoke of plans ‘to put the poet

⁴⁸ Yearsley, *Poems on Several Occasions*, p.56.

⁴⁹ Yearsley, ‘To the Same on Her Accusing the Author of Flattery’ in *Poems on Several Occasions.*, p.56, line 8.

⁵⁰ Yearsley, ‘Night to Stella’, in *Poems on Several Occasions*, p.9, line 135.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.2, line 22, and p.13, line 199, respectively.

⁵² Yearsley, ‘To Stella on a Visit to Mrs Montagu’, in *Poems on Several Occasions.*, p.53, line 19.

⁵³ Yearsley, *Poems on Several Occasions*, p.xvi.

⁵⁴ Letter from More to Montagu, 22 October 1784, in Mahl & Koon, p.280. This action seems contrary to More’s notion of how society was ordained - a seller of milk would not be expected to have a servant, which

into a small farm'.⁵⁵ Yearsley, who anticipated freedom from labour if her writing career took off would have been horrified. At least we may read this into her reply, made in response to More's suggestion – 'she implores not to be put into any employment which must make her mix with the world and rob her of her beloved Solitude'.⁵⁶

Griffin claims that for most writers 'the patronage system was by definition oppressive and demeaning'.⁵⁷ And, indeed, it took only a few months for Yearsley to become increasingly disillusioned with the servitude of patronage. She deeply regretted her hasty signing of the 'Deed of Trust', a document that was set up by More, investing Yearsley's profits from her first work in the 'Five Percents', an early guaranteed investment scheme.⁵⁸

The poet envisaged using the profits from her work as she chose, but the Deed authorised More and Montagu, as joint trustees, 'to be at liberty to lay out, expend, apply, and dispose of, as well as the principal sum, as the interest thereof, from time to time, in such a way and manner as they shall think most for the benefit and advantage of her, the said Ann Yearsley, and her children'.⁵⁹ Yearsley, in her 'Narrative' published after the break-up, claimed that 'I felt as a mother deemed unworthy [of] the tuition or care of her family'.⁶⁰ It was the writer's reasonable request for a copy of the Deed, so that 'my children might have an undeniable claim in future',⁶¹ that was a catalyst in the dispute that terminated her relationship with More irrevocably.

Yearsley presented her side of the affair publicly in what is commonly known as 'Mrs Yearsley's Narrative', included in the fourth edition of *Poems on Several Occasions*

in itself may have given Yearsley an element of social elevation. It is not known how long this arrangement continued, or if it actually existed at all.

⁵⁵ Demers, Patricia, 'For Mine's a Stubborn and a Savage Will: Lactilla (Ann Yearsley) and Stella (More) Reconsidered', in *The Huntington Library Quarterly*, Vol. 56, No. 2 (Spring, 1993), p.139.

⁵⁶ Demers, 'For Mine's a Stubborn and a Savage Will', p.139.

⁵⁷ Griffin, *Literary Patronage in England*, p.1.

⁵⁸ Stott, *Hannah More, The First Victorian*, p.74.

⁵⁹ Yearsley, *Poems on Various Subjects*, p.xxvii.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.xvi.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.xvi.

(1786), and also in her second collection *Poems on Various Subjects* (1787). The ‘Narrative’ is a spirited attack on More’s overbearing patronage as well as an articulate and accomplished defence against her Prefatory comments in the poet’s first work. She reproaches More for her strenuous attempts to crush her:

Shielded by popular opinions, the ungenerous Stella aims at a defenceless breast – her arrows are of the most malignant kind – yet her endeavours to crush an insignificant wretch need not be so amazingly strenuous; for I should have sunk into obscurity again, had not my reputation been so cruelly wounded.⁶²

The discovery of a previously unattributed letter from Ann Yearsley to Hannah More, currently the only known correspondence between the two women, is held in ‘The Alice Bemis Taylor Collection’ at Colorado College Tutt Library.⁶³ This letter, dated 13 September 1785, before the ‘Narrative’ was published, showed Yearsley defending herself against the constricting terms of the ‘Deed of Trust’. She stresses that she ‘wish’d not for money but to enable me to bring up my children in Comfort and Improvement’.⁶⁴ Yearsley’s confrontational nature was evident here, when she questioned her patron directly: ‘And let me ask you what I have gained by your professt [sic] friendship? I find myself deprived of the money which my poems and the torturing tale of my distress have raised’.⁶⁵ Yearsley opened her letter by deflecting criticism levelled against her of ingratitude: ‘I shall begin by avowing what my feelings will never allow me to be insensible of; your goodness in protecting my publication’, but goes on to argue strongly and coherently against More’s control of her earnings:

I wish’d not to squander the money my every hope of future pleasure this side of eternity; Centers in my Children; but I wish not to divest myself either of the pleasure or Right I have by nature; and I repeat it, as the money was Collected in my name and for the purpose of relieving My Children’s wants; the right was mine to Educate and

⁶² Yearsley, *Poems on Various Occasions*, p.xxiv.

⁶³ Letter from Ann Yearsley to Hannah More, dated 13 September 1785, in Alice Bemis Taylor Collection at Colorado College Tutt Library, transcribed by Kerri Andrews, 2008, with help from Frank Felsenstein, John Goodridge, Tim Burke and David Fairer, accessed 22.02.2017.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

set them in life as their disposition may in future determine; the public generously intended the money for this benevolent purpose and I cannot think it ingratitude to disown as obligation a proceeding which must render [my surviving?] Children [word unclear] your poor dependants forever; I have trusted more to your probity than the event justifies; you have led me to sign a settlement which defrauds me and my family of our rights (and make it if ever receiv'd your peculiar Gift, [sic] you are too sensible there is no fund specified where it is placed nor do I know how it is disposed of, there is no time assign'd when my Children shall call it out): your bankruptcy or Death may lose it forever, and let me ask you Miss More what security you have ever Given my Children whereby they may prove their future Claim? I am sorry remonstrance should be needful, or your motives left bare to doubt or Suspicion.⁶⁶

Yearsley asserted her right as a mother seeking to protect and to control her children's future. More would not have expected her actions regarding financial matters to be challenged by an 'inferior', but Yearsley, arguing with such clarity on her children's behalf, was declaring her own natural state of motherhood whilst, by underlining More's name, draws attention to her ex-patron's unmarried and childless state. It is worth noting that More's didactic writing often proclaimed the importance of marriage and motherhood as appropriate roles for women. Yearsley successfully highlighted the shortcomings in More's management of her earnings, but then the poet's business background meant that discussing and clarifying financial details would be second nature to her.

More was shocked to find that a 'social inferior' should question her authority over financial matters, and embarked on a letter-writing campaign against her former protégée. In correspondence to Elizabeth Montagu on 21 July 1785 she portrayed the poet as intemperate, ungrateful, and likely to squander her earnings: 'our unhappy Milkwoman has treated me with the blackest ingratitude...nothing would appease her fury but having the money to spend'.⁶⁷ It is easy to visualise her almost comical indignation when she inferred that Yearsley is not fit to manage her financial affairs: 'I hear she wears very fine Gauze Bonnets, long lappets, gold pins etc. Is such a woman to be trusted with her poor

⁶⁶ Ann Yearsley's letter to Hannah More dated 13 September 1785. See n.63 of this chapter.

⁶⁷ Mahl & Koon, *The Female Spectator*, p.284

Children's money?'⁶⁸ At the end of her relationship with More, Yearsley felt misrepresented, and miscategorised, with the high-handedness of her patron no longer bearable. The quarrel was played out in the public eye by Yearsley, and was never resolved. More had the support of her friends in high places who were certain that Yearsley, having been dropped by publishers who also happened to be More's, would disappear from sight.

The relationship lasted less than a year. Elizabeth Montagu, who had advised More to cease to have anything to do with the milkwoman once the story appeared in the press, referred to Yearsley as 'l'ingrate', and commented that 'bestowing a gift on such wretches gives them power over one'⁶⁹ – a reference to Montagu's ill-fated patronage of James Woodhouse. Some see the break-up as inevitable: on one hand there was More, a well-intentioned but insensitive and domineering patron who became angry and shocked by the extent of Yearsley's ambition, and on the other hand there was a proud and assertive poet who quickly realised that her patron was not interested in her literary talents or friendship, seeing her only as an experimental project of rescue and improvement. Donna Landry contends that the tension between More's middle-class fear of social mobility and Yearsley's labouring-class attempt to gain autonomy over her own work was too great.⁷⁰ Waldron, however, blamed the break-up on Yearsley's contradictory class-position. Patricia Demers, in her article which reconsiders the relationship, claimed that it ended because of a variety of class, cultural and literary pressures. It is also likely that Yearsley and More had different perspectives on the professional writer: fundamentally, Yearsley needed to write for money to support her large family, whilst More, already a wealthy,

⁶⁸ Mahl & Koon, *The Female Spectator*, p.284.

⁶⁹ Demers, 'For Mine's a Stubborn and a Savage Will', p.144.

⁷⁰ Landry, Donna, *The Muses of Resistance: Laboring-Class Women's Poetry in Britain, 1739-1793* (Cambridge, USA: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1990) p.21.

established writer, subsequently concerned herself with didactic texts that promoted social reform.

In reality, it seemed that More's sponsorship of Yearsley was underpinned by anxieties regarding class mobility and the desire to 'manage' and contain a potentially dangerous member of the lower ranks. More's anxieties regarding class mobility were exacerbated, from 1789, by the French Revolution which had degenerated from a quest for democracy and political reform into violence, terror, and war. The governing classes in Britain were now alarmed that the events in France would be transferred across the sea. Fearing that political reforms placing power in the hands of the labouring masses could lead to social revolution in Britain, they started to put in place a robust policy of repression intended to quell any radical movement.

More's patronage was based on the assumption, or perhaps the assertion that the poet was content to stay in the station where God had placed her. More expected Yearsley to remain one of the 'fantasy poor' - someone who worked hard all day and then continued to work by the light of one candle at night.⁷¹ More, writing from the comfort of her picturesque, thatched cottage at Cowslip Green, lacked empathy towards Yearsley's poverty, or the poet's attempts to articulate a lifetime of it. The fact that More envisaged Yearsley publishing 'a small volume' of poems to 'mend her situation' is indicative of how far away she was from understanding that this would not be a long-term solution to the milkwoman's plight.⁷² More's letter to Elizabeth Montagu in 1789, although remaining deferential, gave an insight into the writer's concept of 'real privation': 'You great folks shou'd now and then condescend to visit us little ones, that you may see how many things

⁷¹ Scheuermann, Mona, *In Praise of Poverty: Hannah More Counters Thomas Paine and the Radical Threat* (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2002) p.37.

⁷² Ann Yearsley, 'A Prefatory Letter' in *Poems on Various Subjects*, p.xiii.

one can do without; one day of real, actual privation is worth fifty descriptions in a book'.⁷³

More's sense of a God-given social structure, which became more evident in her later writing, such as *Cheap Repository Tracts*,⁷⁴ meant that she did not offer wholeheartedly the 'intangibles' of patronage: the contacts, friendship and advice identified by Griffin.⁷⁵ More was a member of the Bluestocking Circle whose interest was to generate support for women writers. In particular, Elizabeth Carter, the daughter of a cleric, and self-educated Hester Chapone both benefited from Bluestocking support. Eger claimed: 'Through friendship and patronage Bluestocking women formed their own distinctive intellectual networks, or 'circles' of learning, as a means of overcoming some of the prejudices and constraints they experienced.'⁷⁶ But whilst Bluestockings ostensibly sought to encourage women writers, they did not intend to change the hierarchical structure of society by encouraging those from the lower orders. So even though Yearsley was introduced to Elizabeth Montagu, she was not allowed any further into this élite literary group. More's 'advice' consisted of unauthorised editing of Yearsley's verses which prompted the following denial from the poet in her 'Narrative':

It having been represented that my last work received great ornament and addition from a learned and superior genius, and my manuscripts *not existing* to contradict it, I have ventured, without a guide, on a second volume of poems, and will complete them with as much expedition as the more important duties of my family will permit.⁷⁷

This extract reveals Yearsley's sense of irony: the italicised words were the poet's own and draw attention to More's claim that Yearsley's manuscripts were burnt. That More was in possession of something so important is indicative of the degree of control she

⁷³ Huntington Library, MO 3997 p.2., in Landry, *The Muses of Resistance*, p.150.

⁷⁴ More, Hannah, *Cheap Repository Tracts Suited to the Present Times*, (London: Rivington, 1819).

⁷⁵ Griffin, *Literary Patronage in England*, pp.18-21.

⁷⁶ Eger, *Brilliant Women*, p.47.

⁷⁷ Mrs Yearsley's 'Narrative' in *Poems on various Subjects*, p xxiv.

exercised over her protégée. Yearsley also made a point of stating that her family duties come first, alluding to her patron's claims that she was an unfit mother. Yearsley's assertion that she has ventured 'without a guide, on a second volume of verse' is effectively promoting herself as an independent, professional writer.

Friendship was not an option in the alliance between More and Yearsley, even though More's personal experience with patronage was underpinned by this. David Garrick's support for More was informed by a wider culture where established writers offered various forms of assistance to an aspiring author.⁷⁸ For example, he provided for More's material needs, as well as giving her access to learned and witty company whenever she needed it.⁷⁹ Garrick was also prepared to encourage and facilitate More's writing: Martha More, writing from Hampton, Garrick's home, to another sibling, informed her that Hannah 'is to have a little table to herself, and to continue her studies'.⁸⁰ Kerri Andrews observed: 'No longer simply a protégée, or even a house guest, Hannah More had become part of the Garrick family, adopted into their household, seemingly as a much-loved, and loving daughter.'⁸¹

This kind of patron/client liaison was rare, although not unique: The Duchess of Newcastle supported Charlotte Lennox for a time within her own family, and Elizabeth Elstob, the Anglo-Saxon scholar, lived for eighteen years with the Duchess of Portland.⁸² It did, however, fall outside of the boundaries normally associated with literary sponsorship. But the breaking down of class boundaries within the patronage system was not impossible, as the relationship between Mary Leapor and Bridget Freemantle showed. Leapor, whose work was published posthumously by subscription in 1748 and 1751, was a gardener's

⁷⁸ Andrews, *Ann Yearsley and Hannah More: Patronage and Poetry*, p.18.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p.19.

⁸⁰ Roberts, 'A letter from Miss Martha More to one of her sisters, Hampton, 1776' in *Memoirs*, p.47.

⁸¹ Andrews, *Ann Yearsley and Hannah More: Patronage and Poetry*, p.18.

⁸² Korshin, 'Types of Eighteenth-Century Patronage', p.459.

daughter from Northamptonshire, and like Yearsley was from the lower orders; Freemantle, as a well-born clergyman's daughter, was in a very similar social position to Hannah More. Their relationship appears to have been based on mutual admiration and respect, as this extract from one of Freemantle's letters shows:

Nor did I admire her [Leapor] in her Poetical Capacity only; but the more I was acquainted with her, the more I saw Reason to esteem her for those virtuous Principles, and that Goodness of Heart and Temper, which so visibly appeared in her; and I was so far from thinking it a Condescension to cultivate an Acquaintance with a Person in her Station, that I rather esteem'd it an Honour to be call'd a Friend to one in whom there appear'd such a true Greatness of Soul as with me far outweigh all the Advantages of Birth and Fortune.⁸³

Freemantle seems to have performed the traditional functions of a patron: friendship, collecting subscriptions, providing her with the gift of a prized writing bureau, and promoting her work to her London acquaintances by bringing Leapor's poems to the attention of Richardson's circle. Although the Leapor/Freemantle relationship did not have to stand the test of time (Leapor died of measles at the age of twenty-four), it still showed that female alliance across class lines was not automatically impossible.

The break with More heralded the beginning of Yearsley's cultural independence, with the writer taking advantage of more progressive types of patronage which were different from the controlling style of More. Her second publication *Poems on Various Subjects* was both a declaration of independence from one patron, and a dedication to a new and more sensitive sponsor. It was ample testimony that she could manage without More who, according to Horace Walpole had 'washed and combed the trumpery verses'.⁸⁴ The work is prefaced by a dedication to 'The Right Honourable and Right Reverend Frederick, Earl

⁸³ Landry, *The Muses of Resistance*, p. 95.

⁸⁴ Tompkins, J.M.S, *The Polite Marriage* (New York: Books For Libraries Press, 1938) p.72.

of Bristol, Bishop of Derry', and here Yearsley declared 'I humbly claim your Lordship's protection'.⁸⁵

It was under the Earl's aegis that Yearsley's text attempted self-vindication in the wake of the More controversy. Bristol was an aristocrat and had far greater social status than Yearsley's ex-patron. This may have occasioned the bitter remark More made in a letter to Elizabeth Montagu in October 1785: 'Did I tell you that Lord Bristol had given her fifty pounds? how suitable the patron to the Protégée'.⁸⁶ She was no doubt referring to Bristol's reputation as a free-thinker, womaniser, and most importantly for More, a disgrace to the church with 'his increasingly outrageous behaviour'.⁸⁷ He may well have been an unconventional clergyman, described as fickle, an extravagant dresser, and exhibiting increasingly outrageous behaviour, but this same article also praised his insight into Irish politics, and his endeavours towards agricultural, architectural, and parochial improvements in Ireland.⁸⁸ Yearsley, in 'Effusion To the Right Honourable the Earl of Bristol', wrote of his rescuing her from depression: 'Bristol, my soul hangs on thee, and breathes her furrows o'er the past; yet while I droop, thy gentle voice sounds in each passing hour, till melancholy lull'd gives transient ease'.⁸⁹ She claimed that he gave her hope in adversity: 'Bristol's arm has borne my spirit from the scene, placing it high on Hope's unmeasur'd height'.⁹⁰ According to Griffin, 'Dedications were often expected by patrons. They must be read cautiously as the client may only be saying what he knows the

⁸⁵ Yearsley, *Poems on Various Subjects*, p.vi.

⁸⁶ Montagu Papers, Mo 3993, The Huntington Library.

⁸⁷ O'Brien, Gerard, 'Hervey, Frederick Augustus, fourth earl of Bristol (1730-1803) Church of Ireland, Bishop of Derry', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004-10.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.6.

⁸⁹ Yearsley, 'Effusion to the Right Honourable the Earl of Bristol', in *Poems on Various Subjects*, p.166 lines 1-5.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.167, lines 16-18.

patron may want to hear.⁹¹ In Yearsley's dedication there is, however, a tone of sincerity which was lacking in her first poems dedicated to Hannah More.

Letters from Bristol to Yearsley showed his sensitivity towards the milkwoman, and are vastly different in tone from the correspondence of More and Montagu during, and after, their patronage of the poet. This letter, written by Bristol from Dover on 20 October 1788, embodied the intangibles of patronage, and it is easy to read in it the care and consideration of her new patron, rather than the condescension and impersonality of her previous one:

Tho' I have not heard from you my dearest Madam, yet I have been unmindfull, neither of your Fame nor your Interest, both which I have as much at Heart as if I had known you, e'en from my Boyish days, I contrived to see Mrs Siddons near Warwick for your sake and warmly recommended the Patronage of your excellent Tragedy: I owe you that for the enthusiastic Pleasure it gave me. This morning too I wrote to my Daughter Lady Elizabeth Foster who lives with the Duchess of Devonshire and is of course much connected with Mr Sheridan, the Principal Manager of Drury Lane theatre – Be so good as to send her a Copy of the Play to Devonshire House in London – with a billet saying that you do it at my request.⁹²

It is obvious that Bristol worked to promote Yearsley's play, and had confidence in it; but it is his comment in this same letter, that Mr Sheridan will 'adopt it on the stage....and nobly share with you the profits', that highlights the difference between his and More's patronage. Whereas More felt it 'her sense of duty' to take total charge of Yearsley's income, Bristol had no desire to touch any profits the writer might make, or to edit her work in any way. He was obviously not as controlling as More, or, being secure in his own aristocratic status, as fearful of social mobility.

In this second volume, without the constraints of a controlling patron, Yearsley wrote more freely, criticising both her former patron and the polite world. Her texts enacted verbal revenge on More, and reflect her aspirations towards the freedom to write as she chose.

⁹¹ Griffin, *Literary Patronage in England*, p.17.

⁹² Thorp Arch Archive, Item 12.

The first poem in the collection, 'Addressed to Sensibility', spoke of her bitter disillusionment with a friendship that never really came to fruition:

Pensive I rove,
 More wounded than the hart, whose side yet holds
 The deadly arrow: Friendship, boast no more
 Thy hoard of joys, o'er which my soul oft hung;
 Like the too anxious miser, o'er his gold,
 My treasures are all wreck'd; I quit the scene
 Where haughty insult cut the sacred ties.⁹³

'To Indifference' saw the writer attempting to cope with the despair and disappointment of her liaison with More. She longs for the indifference that would give respite to her 'restless soul':

Indifference come! Thy torpid juices shed
 On my keen sense: plunge deep my wounded Heart,
 In thickest apathy, till it congeal.⁹⁴

It is within this poem that Yearsley appeared to admit that she would never be accepted into any other social group than the one she was in now, and seemed resigned to her class location:

Soft Indifference come!
 In this low cottage thou shall be my guest,
 Till Death shuts out the hour: here down I'll sink
 With thee upon my couch of homely rush,
 Which fading forms of Friendship! Love, or Hope,
 Must ne'er approach.⁹⁵

⁹³ Yearsley, 'Addressed to Sensibility', in *Poems on Various Subjects.*, p.3, lines 23-29.

⁹⁴ Yearsley, 'To Indifference', in *Poems on Various Subjects*, p.49, lines 1-4.

The language used here – ‘low cottage’ and ‘couch of homely rush’ – clearly located the writer, if only metaphorically, back in her rustic origins. This poem, for Yearsley, seemed to be a catharsis, with the words ‘All is still’ implying that a certain peace, or perhaps acceptance has been attained.⁹⁶

In ‘To those who accuse the AUTHOR of INGRATITUDE’, Yearsley expressed without reserve the anger and contempt she feels for those who condemned her behaviour to Hannah More. She equated More’s prejudice with that of the middle classes in general, and whilst More was not mentioned by name in any of the work discussed here, it is impossible, given our knowledge of the dispute, not to associate her with the texts. ‘Ingratitude’ opened with an accusation against her detractors:

You, who thro’ optics dim, so falsely view
 This wond’rous maze of things, and rend a part
 From the well order’d whole, to fit your sense
 Low, grovelling, and confin’d; say from what source
 Spring your all-wise opinions? (1-5)⁹⁷

Landry claims that ‘optics dim’ is a historical prefiguration of the term ideology, and Yearsley seemed to be implying that a certain body of people had taken ideas from the ‘well order’d whole’ and tailored them to suit their own ends. The writer criticised middle-class ideology here, and showed her contempt for those who were in a world of ‘noos’d opinions’. In disparaging their values, Yearsley was claiming her own.⁹⁸

Yearsley and Lord Bristol’s relationship stood the test of time. The writer’s final volume of poetry *The Rural Lyre*, published in 1796, was again dedicated to him, and he also

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, lines 47-52.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.53, line 56.

⁹⁷ Yearsley, ‘To those who accuse the AUTHOR of INGRATITUDE’, in *Poems on Various Occasions.*, p.57, lines 1-5.

⁹⁸ Landry, *The Muses of Resistance*, p.157.

headed the list of subscribers with a notation that he required twenty copies of the work.⁹⁹

Yearsley had become calmer and less angry, perhaps because of Bristol's influence:

Ten years are now elapsed, since in my cottage I was honoured by the preference of your Lordship. Through the cloud which then covered my confused spirit you had the goodness to discern an impatient desire for attainments so remote from my humble station, that by many they were deemed unnecessary, by most superfluous; and though by some a share of discrimination was allowed me, yet mental accomplishments were considered as incompatible with my laborious employment. This, my Lord, was not your opinion. You inspired me with hope, encouraged me to persevere, and enabled me to divide my domestic cares with the pleasures of meditation.¹⁰⁰

Her dedication was an open-hearted declaration of how she valued his support and inspiration. It was also a realisation that the popular opinion among the upper classes was that the social situation of labouring-class men or women automatically excluded them from a life of letters.

Accounts of the dispute between More and Yearsley had spread far across England. In 1785 two items appearing in the *Bristol Gazette and Public Advertiser*, on September 8 and 10, entitled 'Patroness and Client' were strongly supportive of More's version of events and were rumoured to have been written by her.¹⁰¹ More, in the eyes of her supporters, led a celibate and blameless life devoted to good works and was for many people, above reproach; Yearsley, on the other hand, was branded wicked and ungrateful.¹⁰² The poet, however, was not entirely without support: Thomas Eagles, a classical scholar and merchant of Bristol, had remained constant throughout Yearsley's writing career, and James Shiells, a respectable surveyor of Lambeth and father of the portrait artist Sarah Shiells, interceded – albeit unsuccessfully – on Yearsley's behalf in

⁹⁹ Yearsley, Ann, *The Rural Lyre; a volume of poems, etc.* (London: G.G.J and J. Robinson, 1796) p.iii, List of Subscribers.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p.vi.

¹⁰¹ Waldron, *Lactilla, Milkwoman of Clifton*, p.73.

¹⁰² Eger & Peltz, *Brilliant Women*, p.115.

her dispute with More over the Deed of Trust.¹⁰³ As far afield as Lichfield the poet Anna Seward commented in a letter to the Reverend T.S. Whalley, dated February 1786, that ‘Miss More’s letter to Mrs Montague [sic], prefixed to Lactilla’s first publication struck me with an air of superciliousness towards the Being she patronised; and the pride of genius in adversity revolted’.¹⁰⁴

Meanwhile, in the village of Oxton, near Tadcaster in Yorkshire, a young girl, Eliza Dawson, read Yearsley’s ‘Narrative’ with sympathy towards the poet. Dawson, whose mother had died soon after her birth, was the only child of a land surveyor. She was brought up by her father and grandmother and was given considerable freedom, along with being encouraged to follow her own intellectual interests: some years later she married Archibald Fletcher, a prominent Edinburgh lawyer.¹⁰⁵ Later, as Mrs Archibald Fletcher, Dawson wrote her autobiography wherein she stated her feelings concerning Yearsley’s dispute with her patron: ‘It was about this time that I read somewhere of a dispute between Mrs Hannah More and Ann Yearsley the Bristol Milkwoman..... I thought it showed a case of direct attempt by the strong to oppress the weak.’¹⁰⁶

Dawson’s friendship was to prove important to Yearsley at a time when she was lonely and depressed by events surrounding her quarrel with More. Yearsley’s poetry seemed to suggest a desperate need for friendship. This is evident in her poem ‘To Miss Eliza Dawson of Oxton, Yorkshire’,¹⁰⁷ where she declared how deeply she felt the power of that friendship, likening it to a calming influence on the storm that was the dispute with More:

¹⁰³ The Deed of Trust was a document produced by Hannah More whereby she had control over Ann Yearsley’s earnings from her published work. This document was included in *Poems on Various Subjects*, p.xxvii.

¹⁰⁴ Seward, Anna, *Anna Seward’s Letters*, (Edinburgh: Geo. Ramsay & Co, 1811), Letter 25.

¹⁰⁵ Perkins, Pam, Fletcher, Elizabeth, nee Dawson (1770-1858) *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004. [[Http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/9724](http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/9724)], accessed 21.10.2010.

¹⁰⁶ Dawson Fletcher, *Autobiography of Mrs Fletcher*, p. 29.

¹⁰⁷ Yearsley, *Poems on Various Subjects*, p.45.

All glowing, 'mid immortal fire,
 Eliza owns my rustic soul,
 Before her light'nings pale expire,
 And thunders seek the distant pole.
 Oh! Thou canst cheer the dreary wild;
 Rememb'ring thee, my sorrows die:
 Thy friendship renders horror mild,
 And calms the rude inclement sky.¹⁰⁸

The friendship, as far as we know, was conducted mainly by correspondence, and was to last for several years. In her autobiography Dawson claimed that she 'wrote to Mrs Yearsley offering to collect subscriptions for her new volume of poems advertised for publication'.¹⁰⁹ Her efforts were successful with at least 450 people subscribing to *Poems on Various Subjects*, published by the highly respected G.G.J. & J. Robinson in 1787. Dawson's enthusiasm for her project was evident in these lines from her autobiography: 'seldom had I felt more delighted than when my father put a £50 pound bank note into my hands to give immediate help to the Bristol milkwoman in bringing out her poems'.¹¹⁰

Frank Felsenstein is almost certain that it was Eliza Dawson's father who suggested that Wilmer Gossip, owner of nearby Thorp Arch Hall and a close family friend, be approached to elicit support for the subscription.¹¹¹ Gossip was listed as a subscriber in Yearsley's new work, but remained a shadowy figure in the poet's life. On reading Dawson's undated letter in the Thorp Arch Archive it appeared that he meant to remain anonymous, but that the young Eliza had 'accidentally' given his name to Yearsley: 'I was just then writing to Mrs Jameson, and my pen involuntarily transcribed to her the effusions

¹⁰⁸ Yearsley, 'To Miss Eliza Dawson of Oxton, Yorkshire' in *Poems on Various Subjects*, p.46, lines 9-16.

¹⁰⁹ Dawson Fletcher, *Autobiography of Mrs Fletcher*, p. 29.

¹¹⁰ Dawson Fletcher, *Autobiography of Mrs Fletcher*, p. 30.

¹¹¹ Felsenstein, Frank, 'Ann Yearsley and the Politics of Patronage, The Thorp Arch Archive: Part I', in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol.21, No. 2. The Adoption Issue (Autumn, 2002), pp.346-392, p.352.

of my heart in a sincere eulogium on the charity and beneficence of Mr Gossip – with whom I knew she and Mrs Jameson were well acquainted'.¹¹² It seemed that Yearsley, on finding out the name of her benefactor wrote a poem to him which he must have refused to read – perhaps fearing it to be over-effusive in its praise for him. Dawson's letter to Gossip of 16 January 1788 enclosed the work, asking him to read it in the light of an extract from Yearsley's letter to her denying any intention of meaningless flattery: 'My delicate Friend was mistaken when he fancied the poem was a Panegyrick – Panegyrick in my opinion is labour'd praise; it is soothing to the vain but fulsome to the noble mind: therefore it is seldom my theme'.¹¹³

In 'To Mr G*****', who declined making himself known to the Author',¹¹⁴ Yearsley seemed to have a distinct agenda regarding Gossip. First of all she wanted her patron, referred to in several poems as Horatio, to be less anonymous: 'Horatio say, why thus disguise thy soul? Why ne'er repose just confidence in me?'¹¹⁵ She pointed out that life was short and they should 'grasp the precious moment'. She was also quick to reassure him of her integrity: 'What tho' a rustic stranger to the scene/ Where knowledge oft, at virtue's price is bought,/ I know what Honour and what Friendship mean/ And each still holds thee to my grateful thought.'¹¹⁶

In this poem Yearsley also attempted to form a patronage relationship that was different from the one she had with More: one that was grounded in long-lasting friendship rather than distant benevolence. In effect, Yearsley was asking Gossip to dispense with the

¹¹² Felsenstein, Frank, 'Ann Yearsley and the Politics of Patronage, The Thorp Arch Archive: Part II: Letters to and from & Papers concerning Mrs Yearsley the Bristol Milkwoman, in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol.22, No.1 (Spring, 2003), pp.12-56. T/A ,18/9, Item 1: Letter from Eliza Dawson to Wilmer Gossip, undated.

¹¹³ Thorp Arch Archive, 18/9, Item 2. Letter from Eliza Dawson to Wilmer Gossip, 16 January 1788.

¹¹⁴ Ferguson, Moira, 'The Unpublished Poems of Ann Yearsley', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 12, No.1. (Spring, 1993) pp.13--46, p.35.

¹¹⁵ Yearsley, 'To Mr G*****', in 'Unpublished Poems', p.35, lines 1-2.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.36, lines 25-28.

inherent hierarchical assumptions and treat her ‘not as one of the trifling cast’.¹¹⁷ Yearsley and Gossip eventually became friends, with the poet referring to his friendship as ‘kind and consoling’.¹¹⁸ In the following January she called him ‘my generous Friend’ in response to his gift of £40, part of what Felsenstein calls Gossip’s ‘financial goodness’ in alleviating her family’s poverty.¹¹⁹

It is clear that Yearsley valued Gossip’s friendship highly, and it is possible that it was not confined to correspondence alone. On reading Dawson’s letter dated 23 March 1788 addressed to Gossip ‘at the Hot-Wells, Bristol’, it is evident that he was in the area and had met with the poet – ‘I make no doubt, but you have had some interviews with our poetess’.¹²⁰ He may have gone to see Yearsley, perhaps to combine this with a visit to take the supposedly beneficial waters of the Hotwells spa. There were references in both Yearsley’s and Dawson’s letters to Gossip of a debilitating illness, and it is his gradual decline and eventual death that confined the poet’s liaison with him to a mere twenty months.

In April 1788, Yearsley addressed a poem to Gossip on his leaving Clifton.¹²¹ In this work she made clear her views on London, where it appeared he had to go urgently, and pleaded for his speedy return:

The next is, whilst in London, seek the Air
 Tho’ I pronounce it *All* corrupted *there*.
 Up to the Nearest Heaven flies tainted breath
 Sent forth from dire Contagion, Vice, and Death
 Oh shun it quickly, and to Clifton haste.¹²²

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.36, line 29.

¹¹⁸ Felsenstein, ‘Ann Yearsley and the Politics of Patronage’, Part II, p.362.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.362.

¹²⁰ Thorp Arch Archive, 18/9, Item 3.

¹²¹ Thorp Arch Archive, 18/9, Item 5, ‘To *****On His Leaving Clifton’ poem by Ann Yearsley dated 8 April 1788.

She ended the poem with what could be construed as the words of a lovesick woman – ‘Be sure my silent pray’rs will be – *Return*’.¹²³ The poet’s italics and the grammatical isolation of the final word reinforce this notion.

Over the twenty months that Yearsley and Gossip corresponded and met, it was clear that they came to enjoy a close friendship. Waldron suggested that the poet engaged in an ‘abortive relationship’ with Gossip,¹²⁴ and the above lines do see Yearsley writing from a position of implied closeness. Felsenstein, however, claims that ‘by far the greatest likelihood is that it was never anything more than platonic’.¹²⁵ Yearsley’s letters and poems to Gossip were at times ambiguous, and can be considered suggestive of something more than friendship: ‘Fain would I woove [sic] thee to Contentment’s bow’rs’,¹²⁶ and ‘to tell you, that you have the warmest offering my gratefull [sic] heart can pay, is to say *little* – but I can say no *more*’.¹²⁷ Once again Yearsley’s italicising of pertinent words was open to misinterpretation. In the absence of any correspondence from Gossip to Yearsley, which might have thrown some light on his responses to her letters, it may be that we have to concur with Felsenstein’s notion of a platonic liaison, which can be reinforced with Yearsley’s own words claiming Gossip’s visits to her were made up of ‘guiltless pleasures’.¹²⁸

Dustin Griffin tells us that ‘For most writers the patronage system was by definition oppressive and demeaning’.¹²⁹ This statement seemed to embody Yearsley’s feelings during her short patronage by More. But when we look at the poet’s patrons after More,

¹²² *Ibid.*, p.22, lines 65-69.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p.22, line 76.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, Part II, p.351.

¹²⁵ Felsenstein, Part II, p.362.

¹²⁶ Thorp Arch Archive, 18/9, Item 5, ‘To*****On His Leaving Clifton’, poem by Ann Yearsley, dated 8 April 1788, p.45, line 45

¹²⁷ Thorp Arch Archive, 18/9, Item 12, Letter from Ann Yearsley to Wilmer Gossip dated 17 November 1788.

¹²⁸ Thorp Arch Archive, 18/9, Item 21, Letter of Ann Yearsley to Wilmer Gossip, 24 November 1789.

¹²⁹ Griffin, *Literary patronage in England*, p.1.

she was able to sustain a prolonged and seemingly trouble-free patronal relationship without the tensions of her former liaison. Her friendship with Wilmer Gossip lasted twenty months and ended only because Gossip became too ill to continue; he eventually died in 1790. The Thorp Arch letters and poems seem to suggest that this friendship, along with that of Eliza Dawson, was conducted with Yearsley as an equal, and was able to rise above perceived social boundaries, something that the poet had fervently wished for throughout her writing career.

The fact that Yearsley again chose the combination of subscription and patronage as a way of getting her second and third volumes of poetry published suggests that she was happy with this kind of support but unhappy with her first patron. It must be noted, however, that although More's patronage of Yearsley at times seemed overly controlling, and may have been underpinned by social concerns, it is a fact that without More's support, and that of her influential contacts, Yearsley may never have got into print at all. The eventual break-up was ostensibly caused by the poet's reaction to the Deed of Trust, but the complexities of class identity on both sides of the partnership were undoubtedly a contributing factor. Both Yearsley and More were trying to carve out and keep a place in society that was outside that which had been given to them at birth. Andrews states: 'When More decided to patronise Yearsley it was not from a position of clear class or social superiority, therefore, a fact which would come to be extremely significant in the eventual breakdown of their relationship.'¹³⁰ More, in keeping with her rigid view of the way society was ordered, expected complete deference and obedience from her client, and challenges to her authority were unacceptable. Yearsley, meanwhile, struggled throughout most of her writing career with what she considered an inappropriate social categorisation. She perceived herself not of the lower orders, especially when she was a published writer, and

¹³⁰ Andrews, Kerri, 'Patronal Care and Maternal Feeling: New Correspondence between Ann Yearsley and Hannah More', in *Romanticism*, 16.1(2010):43-59, p.43.

balked at any demeaning treatment she received from those who considered themselves her social superiors.

Stott claims that ‘The surplus wealth of the thriving urban societies of the eighteenth century was channelled into a range of leisure and cultural activities, creating a ‘polite’ culture of good breeding and elegant manners’.¹³¹ Hannah More, as a writer living in a thriving city, became part of this new social mobility that allowed talented men and women from relatively humble origins to mix freely with those of higher rank and greater wealth. More, conscious of the fact that she had been the daughter of a provincial schoolteacher, may have had insecurities about her position in society, just as Yearsley did. Her letters to Elizabeth Montagu were always deferential, and her desire to keep Yearsley safely in her ‘station’ may have been tinged with fear that eventually her own social position might be threatened.

Although it seemed that More was a disinterested patron stating, perhaps disingenuously: ‘I do not feel myself actuated by the idle vanity of a discoverer’,¹³² there are, however, indications that she desired the potential fame and praise accorded to the cultural philanthropy associated with patronising an ‘uneducated’ poet. Whatever her motives, she was not able to tolerate Yearsley’s aspirations towards becoming independent both financially and as a professional writer. For her part, Yearsley could not countenance what she perceived as double standards, and so the liaison ended. Yearsley’s decision to dispense with More’s patronage was a staggering one when we look at how tenuous her own position was, with gender and class inequalities making it almost impossible for a labouring-class, female writer to stand alone. Up against More and her influential associates, and without the proper support of a patron, she may well have disappeared into

¹³¹ Stott, *The First Victorian*, p.9.

¹³² Yearsley, ‘A Prefatory Letter to Mrs Montagu’ in *Poems on Several Occasions*, p.xvi.

obscurity. But, as we have seen, she successfully obtained the sponsorship of a wider, more progressive network of patrons. With this modern style of patronage she gained confidence in her own work and, free from literary constraints, gained autonomy over her writing.

Whilst Yearsley was able to utilise the changes in the patronage system to her advantage, this did not mean that the labouring-class woman, with aspirations to become a published writer, did not have other, more difficult issues to negotiate. The following two chapters show how Yearsley, subjected to the double bind of gender and class, had to work her way through an eighteenth-century ideology that attempted to repress both women and the labouring classes.

4. ANN YEARSLEY AND CLASS

The last few decades of the eighteenth century, the period when Ann Yearsley was writing, saw many people uncertain of their place in an ever-changing, fluid society, where boundaries were beginning to cloud, and social mobility was achievable for some people. Ann Yearsley often felt miscategorised, and at times her work showed resistance to, as well as compliance with, the ideology that attempted to control the poor and keep them on the lowest rung of the social ladder. Hannah More's words, written to Elizabeth Montagu about Ann Yearsley, exemplify the concerns of the higher orders regarding any attempts at social mobility by the lower ranks: 'I am utterly against taking her out of her station'.¹ But what exactly was Yearsley's 'station' in the eyes of More, and indeed of society itself? Clearly More saw Yearsley as inferior to herself and Montagu. When writing to that lady in October 1784 she refers to Yearsley as 'a milker of Cows, and a feeder of Hogs',² and in her Prefatory Letter to Yearsley's first work, states her agenda for the milkwoman's literary career, having no wish to 'indispose her for the laborious employments of her humble condition'.³ These exchanges between More and Montagu, concerning Yearsley, raise interesting questions about the social order in eighteenth-century England, and in themselves provide a platform for discussion.

This chapter asks the question of how, and with what success, Ann Yearsley negotiated the difficulties of class repression on her way to becoming a published writer. Yearsley's complex social status is put into context with others such as Hannah More, whose own

¹ Mahl, Mary. R, and Helene Koon, *The Female Spectator: English Women Writers Before 1800* (Bloomington, U.S.A. and London: Indiana University Press, 1977) p.279.

² *Ibid.*, p.280.

³ Yearsley, Ann, *Poems on Several Occasions. [With a prefatory letter by Hannah More]* (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1786, fourth edition) p.vxi.

station was ambiguous, and Elizabeth Montagu whose place in society was unquestionable. And, although this chapter does not attempt to provide a detailed analysis of class, it not only shows one woman's engagement with the class system in the eighteenth century, but also reveals much about emerging class-consciousness in the period. A nuanced reading of Yearsley's texts and correspondence gives an insight into her reaction, and her resistance, to a class-based society which sought to place, and keep people like her at the bottom. An evaluation of Yearsley's ambiguous social standing is utilised to show how she used this, alongside print media, to manipulate social and literary circumstances to her advantage when she was trying to carve out a career as a professional writer.

An analysis of society in the period provides historical context, with attention being paid to the different models used to identify people's place within it. Roy Porter's study of eighteenth-century society moves from top to bottom of the social ladder, covering many diverse topics including diet, housing, work and wages, politics, and the gentry and aristocracy.⁴ Lawrence James' study of the middle classes gives a clear insight into an evolving and complex group, whose importance in the period was immense.⁵ His work looks, chronologically, at the roots of the middle classes, through to its identity in modern times. David Cannadine deals specifically with the changing face of class and society up to the 1990s.⁶ His chapter on the eighteenth century gives an overview of the emerging language of class, along with an insight into the complex social layers of the period, and the models used to label them.

The writings of William Paley, William Buchan, Hannah More, and Thomas Broughton provide contemporary, though mainly patriarchal, commentary on how they expected

⁴ Porter, Roy, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1991).

⁵ James, Lawrence, *The Middle Class: a History* (Great Britain: Penguin Group, 2006).

⁶ Cannadine, David, *Class in Britain* (London: Penguin Group, 2000).

society to be formed, and to behave. Their essays, tracts, sermons, and treatises on the poor, often addressed to them, became more numerous from the 1780s onwards, when the upper and middle classes, as they became more fearful of a perceived threat from the lower orders, sought to control them.

Roy Porter summarises the state of eighteenth-century society as ‘disparate, fluid, and spangled with contrasts and anomalies’.⁷ This was a society undergoing immense change; with industrialisation gathering momentum, and the aristocracy being threatened by a middle class who, according to Porter, were becoming ‘more vigorous, more numerous, and more ambitious’.⁸ This rising bourgeoisie and the declining aristocracy fused together to become a powerful ruling force.⁹ John Rule defines what was referred to as ‘The Great Chain of Being’, as ‘a well-ordered sequence of ranks and degrees that was divinely ordained and part of a natural order of things which both implied that social position was a matter of birth and sanctioned an authority structure which could not be altered’.¹⁰

Despite modern day analysis of eighteenth-century society, and the labelling of different models to describe it – triadic, where the divisions are in ‘sorts’ or ‘ranks’; dichotomous, where there is one single deep division between high or low, are just two examples – there remains no single, social, scientific terminology that captures the complexity in all its entirety.¹¹ The contemporary view of this society was that it was hierarchical and ordained by God. This was constantly being affirmed, and Thomas Broughton, clergyman and writer, was one of many commentators on the subject. He states clearly how society is formed:

⁷ Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 5.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Cannadine, David, *Class in Britain*, p.5.

¹⁰ Rule, John, *Albion's People: English Society 1714-1815*, (Essex: Longman Group UK Ltd, 1992) p.31.

¹¹ Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century*, p .5.

Almighty God, the Great Governor of the world, has appointed divers orders and degrees of men here upon Earth. Some are placed by Him in high stations others in low estate. To the Former he hath given authority, to the Latter he enjoins submission and obedience.¹²

His text which purports to give advice and warning to the servants of the nobility and gentry, is prefaced with a dedication to the ‘Governors of Families’; this dedication articulates upper-class concern with an emerging lower-class consciousness: ‘The following plain Address to your Domestic was drawn up with an eye to the Safety of your Persons, and the Security of your Properties.’¹³

Inequalities were many and the distribution of wealth, for example, ranged from in excess of ten thousand pounds a year for dukes, to labourers trying to exist on ten pounds or less.¹⁴ Society, by the second half of the century, was being articulated in the language of class. One of the first official definitions of the term was included by Johnson in his *Dictionary of the English Language*, published in 1755; he defined class as the ‘rank or order of persons’.¹⁵ This meant that there were now labels which could be assigned, effectively placing everybody in their ordained station, in a chain, or on a ladder. Cannadine, whilst stating that the ‘languages of ranks and of class were used interchangeably’, also claims that ‘most people did know what their place was in Hanoverian society’.¹⁶ Porter concurs, saying ‘the discontented and oppressed often felt passionate loyalty to their place in the order of things’.¹⁷ Despite these comments there would be many who did not know, or indeed disputed, where they had been pigeon-holed. Ann Yearsley was a good example of such a person, and there is much in her history to show the ambiguities of her perceived ‘station’.

¹² Broughton, Thomas, *Serious advice and warnings to servants, especially those of the nobility and gentry. The sixth edition with additions* (London: F. and C. Rivington, 1800). Price 4d or 3s 6d a dozen, p.7.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.iii.

¹⁴ Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 48.

¹⁵ Cannadine,, *Class in Britain*, p.31.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.34.

¹⁷ Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 47.

Before her marriage, it is probably safe to assume that she wrote poetry – ‘Absence, A Juvenile Piece’, and ‘Thoughts on the Author’s own Death, Written when very Young’ – suggest this; and it is this, along with the fact that she could read and write, that may have already set her apart from most people in her rural community. She married a man designated as a yeoman, who would have been higher up the social ladder than a milk seller, although Susan Amussen states that ‘yeomen were important and respected members of their community’, but ‘their social position was ambiguous; they were theoretically inferior to the nobility and gentry, but the gentry themselves were dependent on yeomen’. She goes on to say that from the sixteenth century, it was assumed that yeomen not only had sufficient estates, but that they were married and had children, giving them some authority among their neighbours, and allowing them a certain amount of importance in the local order.¹⁸

John Yearsley, at the time of his marriage to Ann, may still have had some remnants of this social, and perhaps propertied, position. These factors – her education (although limited), her husband’s possible status, and her own economic independence with her milk-selling business – may have been enough to elevate Ann Yearsley, at least in her own eyes, above the status of rural peasant. Certainly, in the early years of her marriage, there is an argument for elevating her slightly from the bottom tier of society, although this is where she supposedly found herself, along with her husband, mother, and children, some years later when discovered starving in a barn.

Consequently, when Yearsley began her patronage liaison with More, she was undoubtedly at the lowest level of society, financially at least, having lost her home, livestock, and any money the family may have accumulated. Not much is known about how the Yearsleys came to be destitute. More claims: ‘Repeated losses, and a numerous

¹⁸ Amussen, Susan Dwyer, *An Ordered Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) pp.51-52.

family, for they had six children in seven years, reduced them very low, and the rigours of the last severe winter sunk them to the extremity of distress.’¹⁹ By 1785, when More and Montagu set up the Deed of Trust, John Yearsley is described by them as a labourer.²⁰ If this was so, in the winter of 1784 when the family was saved from starvation, he may have been doing a job that was traditionally laid off at this time of year; this would leave the family with little or no income, and six children to feed. It seems that Ann Yearsley was too proud to claim the poor relief that may have helped their situation. When asked by More why she did not apply for relief she replied: ‘To hard hearts it is useless to apply, and I cannot bear to afflict tender ones.’²¹ In reality she may have been too proud to stand at the church door with all the other paupers, or, indeed, feared the ignominy of being incarcerated in the workhouse. In rural areas each parish was responsible for its poor until 1834. Prior to this, poor relief was distributed as money, food and clothing to paupers living in their own homes. But the Central Workhouse Act of 1723 enabled parishes to build workhouses for the poor to live in. At this time paupers were generally kept inside the precincts of the workhouse. Despite Yearsley’s abject poverty, the spectre of the workhouse hanging over the family may have made living in a barn a better option.²²

Tompkins, in one of the first essays on Yearsley, claims that the family livestock was confiscated.²³ If this was true, that would also have meant the end of Ann Yearsley’s milk-selling business. This is the situation that More found Yearsley in; and whilst she may have wanted to help the milkwoman with her writing, and alleviate the family’s extreme poverty, this was not to be at the expense of improving her social status: ‘the making of

¹⁹ Yearsley, *Poems on Several Occasions*, p.vii.

²⁰ Yearsley, *Poems on Several Occasions*, p.xxvii. The Deed of Trust was set up by Hannah More and Elizabeth Montagu, ostensibly to protect Yearsley’s income from her husband. It placed control of the writer’s earnings, except for the ‘expences [sic] of printing and publishing’, into the joint administration of More and Montagu. This Deed was the root cause of the dispute between Yearsley and More.

²¹ Mahl and Koon, *The Female Spectator*, p. 278.

²² ‘The Poor Law in Bristol’, Bristol Records Office, 2009, p. 1& 5.

²³ Tompkins, J.M.S., ‘The Bristol Milkwoman’ in *The Polite Marriage* (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1969) p.62.

verses is not the great business of human life; and that, as a wife and a mother, she has duties to fill, the smallest of which is of more value than the finest verses she can write'.²⁴ Ann Yearsley was meant to stay firmly in her place, and from the start of their liaison More had no intention of allowing the milkwoman to have a literary career, or to devote her time to the 'idleness of poetry'.²⁵

Labouring-class idleness was perceived as a threat to the wealth both of the nation and of the middle- or upper-class individual; the pre-occupation with it haunted a British eighteenth-century society that was trying to define itself by its industriousness. There was a definite middle-class discourse to reinforce the fact that the poor were idle, extravagant, and unable to manage their financial affairs. Daniel Defoe, writing in 1704, said that '...there is a General Taint of Slothfulness upon our Poor',²⁶ and in 1759 John Clayton concurred, writing in his disingenuously named 'Friendly Advice to the Poor':

But it is a melancholy Truth, which cannot be concealed and must not be dissembled, that much of the Poor's Misery is owing to themselves; and may with great Justice be imputed to that Idleness, Extravagance, and Mismanagement, which are as notorious as the Poverty that proceeds from them.²⁷

Throughout the period it was fiercely asserted that the poor were essentially idle, and that they must be kept labouring. An emerging middle class, both commercial and professional, was anxious that the growth of a political reform movement in Britain since the 1760s was a threat to the established order of society.²⁸ The ever-increasing labouring population was now seen as a class apart and fears were expressed that the poor might have the time and the energy to plot revenge or revolution, and so they were coerced into labour. If they had

²⁴ Ann Yearsley, *Poems on Several Occasions*. Hannah More's Prefatory Letter, p.xv.

²⁵ Ann Yearsley, *Poems on Various Subjects* (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1787) p.xiii.

²⁶ Jordan, Sarah, *The Anxieties of Idleness: Idleness in Eighteenth-Century British Literature and Culture* (London: Associated University Press, 2003) p.37.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.37.

²⁸ James, *The Middle Class*, p.23.

to work every waking moment then they would be prevented from the ‘sin’ of idleness as well as from the ‘bad behaviour’ that went with it.

This perceived labouring-class idleness was an essential part of middle-class ideology, and for eighteenth-century writers it became a continuing source of anxiety. As the importance of ‘leisure’ became more crucial to the upholding of class status, there was a requirement to police the supposed idleness of marginalised, previously powerless members of society such as labouring-class men and women. Hannah More was one of the ‘reformers’ and was a chief proponent of conduct literature. More saw herself as the voice of the upper classes in the dangerous political atmosphere of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and her *Cheap Repository Tracts*, published between 1795 and 1798, were attempts to shape lower-class behaviour. They were written to target the poor and convince them that they were happy in their station, hopefully to keep them from the kind of actions that had such dire consequences in France.²⁹ In 1793 she published *Village Politics by Will Chip*, and in a letter to Mrs Boscawen in that same year she states dismissively: ‘It is as vulgar as heart can wish; but it is only designed for the most vulgar of readers.’³⁰ Ann Yearsley, as a member of an ‘underclass’ perceived as dangerous, was representative of the social group that More and the upper classes were trying to control. Taking this into consideration, alongside Yearsley’s determination to forge a literary career, it is unlikely that a liaison between the two could ever have worked.

More’s later work echoed the general feeling that the lower ranks should labour continuously and not have time to wrest privileges or perhaps take revenge on higher orders. Her manifesto for educating the poor, when she and her sisters set up their Mendip

²⁹ Scheuermann, Mona, *In Praise of Poverty: Hannah More Counters Thomas Paine and the Radical Threat* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University of Kentucky Press, 2002) p.10.

³⁰ Roberts, William, *Memoirs of the Life and Correspondence of Mrs Hannah More* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1834) pp.430-431.

Schools from 1789 onwards, is very clear: ‘My plan for instructing the poor is very limited and strict. They learn of weekdays such coarse work as may fit them for servants, I allow of no writing.’³¹ The latter part of this agenda may well have been fuelled by More’s experience as patron to the ‘ungrateful’ milkwoman. More strongly advocated work from an early age, and in one of her *Cheap Repository Tracts*, the eponymous Shepherd of Salisbury Plain is presented as a poor, but virtuous hero. He sets out his (or rather More’s) agenda for the early employment of his small children. The children have been bred:

... to such habits of industry, that our little maids, before they are six years old, can first get a half-penny, and then a penny by knitting. The boys, who are too little to do hard work, get a trifle by keeping the birds off the corn. When the season of crow-keeping is over, then they can glean or pick stones; anything is better than idleness, sir, and if they did not get a farthing for it, I would make them do it just the same, for the sake of giving them early habits of industry.³²

Yearsley’s precise class orientation was ambiguous, along with many others in a society whose structure was further complicated by the emergence of a middle class. The writer’s work at times reflects this confusion with her place in society: on one hand she allowed herself to be presented as ‘Lactilla’, the milkwoman poet, referring to herself in this way even after the split with More. On the other hand she was a writer trying to dispel the image of her working-class origins by flaunting her classical knowledge. She achieved this very well in her second volume of poems with ‘Addressed to Ignorance’, which abounds in classical references.³³ In her work she often speaks of herself as ‘rough’ or ‘unpolish’d’; but her writing, for the most part, belies this description and is elegant and sophisticated. Being located between social groups, however, gave her the advantage of using two poetical voices: one that echoed the established values of her audience, and one that subtly criticised and resisted them.

³¹ Roberts, , ed. *Mendip Annals* (London: James Nisbet and Co.1859 p.6.

³² More, Hannah, *The Complete Works of Hannah More. Vol.1.* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1843) p.193.

³³ Yearsley, Ann, ‘Addressed to Ignorance, Occasioned by a Gentleman’s desiring the Author never to assume a Knowledge of the Ancients’ in *Poems on Various Subjects*, p.93.

Early on in their patronage dispute, More wrote to Elizabeth Montagu, that Yearsley complained openly ‘that it was the height of insult and barbarity to tell that she was poor and a Milkwoman’.³⁴ It would seem a safe assumption then that Yearsley wanted to discard this lowly designation of her social status. But *Poems on Various Occasions*, her second volume of poetry, published in 1787 after her falling-out with More, carried on its title page a bold reference to the author as ‘a Milkwoman of Clifton, near Bristol’.³⁵ She went on, in the opening address to her new patron the Earl of Bristol, to reproduce the very tropes of ‘labour’ and ‘disadvantages’ that she had criticised More for using: ‘On perusing them, you will remember that they were written in the short intervals of a life of labour, and under every disadvantage which can possibly result from a confined education.’³⁶ It seemed that although Yearsley had gained autonomy over her work with this publication, she was aware that she was admired because she was a milkwoman and a ‘natural’ genius, rather than for her skill as a writer. With this in mind, and an eye to sales, she still deemed it prudent to continue to use the voice of the labouring-class natural genius. On the subject of her poems for the second volume, for instance, she says that ‘she will complete them with as much expedition as the more important duties of my family will permit’.³⁷ And whilst the writer seems adept at saying what polite readers want to hear – that she is not putting writing before her family duties – it is a fact that in 1787, when her second volume was published, she had five children to care for, ranging in age from 11 years down to 3 years.³⁸ This, along with household management, would not leave much time for writing. Yet Yearsley successfully manipulated her social status, managing somehow to resist the

³⁴ Letter to Elizabeth Montagu dated 21 July 1785, quoted in Mahl & Koon, *The Female Spectator*, p.284.

³⁵ Yearsley, *Poems on Various Occasions*, title page.

³⁶ Yearsley, *Poems on Various Occasions*, p.vi.

³⁷ Yearsley, *Poems on Various Occasions*, p.xxiv.

³⁸ Waldron, Mary, ‘Yearsley, Ann (bap 1753, d. 1806) *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004. [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/30205>, accessed 18 August 2009].

dominant ideology which sought to constrain a female writer from the lower orders, whilst also promoting this same status to please polite readers.

Yearsley's 'Narrative' is a good example of how the writer used print media to her advantage, at once controlling her public image and subverting More's authority. She was skilful in constructing an image of herself that fulfilled polite expectation, pointing out her continuing life of labour, telling her readers that she 'went daily' to More's house for the hogwash to feed her pigs, and so support her family.³⁹ In a footnote she apologised for her lowly position: 'I am greatly hurt in obliging my readers to descend to this poor circumstance.'⁴⁰ It was important in shaping the lowly image that Yearsley was trying to present, that she related this 'hogwash' incident. The writer showed her awareness that upper- and middle-class acceptance of a writer from her station was based on not giving up her duties to pursue a literary career. With an eye to future potential subscribers, Yearsley cleverly fulfilled their expectations. Yearsley was also at heart a business woman and may have felt that she had a contractual right to collect the pigswill that she had already paid for in an agreement with More's cook. The 'Narrative' is a statement of Yearsley's independence, and within it she successfully manipulated class-based cultural values. This second volume was Yearsley's first piece of writing free from More's editing and influence, and clearly showed that she is a sophisticated writer with refined manners, far from the allotted vocation of 'milker of Cows and feeder of Hogs', designated by her former patron.

Yearsley was, in some ways, unfortunate in having Hannah More as her first patron, although it is fair to say that without her help, Yearsley's work may never have been published at all. At the same time, however, their relationship was marred by class

³⁹ Ann Yearsley, *Poems on Various Occasions*, p.xviii.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.xviii.

tensions: on the one hand there was a poet who may have considered herself equal to her patron, and on the other hand there was a patron who had implicit belief in an ordained order of society that placed Yearsley within the lower level that she was anxious to help control. James states that ‘middle-class men and women assumed the right to govern and organise because they were educated, enlightened, and forward-looking’.⁴¹ Using James’ simplistic summary of society as a pyramid – at the top were the aristocracy, the second order or middle-ranks were churchmen, and the bottom comprised the ‘toilers’⁴² – it is possible to consider More as middle-class, Montagu as upper-class, with Yearsley at the base of the pyramid. This notion may be borne out, to an extent, when we note More’s deference to Montagu as a member of the upper classes, and her perception of Yearsley as a member of the lower orders. It must be admitted, however, that before her fall into poverty Yearsley was, because of her milk-selling business, marginally removed from the toiling agricultural peasant.

By 1790, however, Yearsley felt confident enough to engage publicly, through her poetry, with the privileged classes. In this year she published a two-poem volume: one verse celebrating her eldest son William’s apprenticeship to an engraver, and the other a vicious, verbal attack on Levi Eames, a wealthy lawyer, and a former mayor of Bristol, whose servant had horsewhipped two of her younger sons for the minor transgression of playing on his master’s land.⁴³ This small volume was announced in *Felix Farley’s Bristol Journal*, on 25 December 1790, and still showed Yearsley using her milkwoman epithet. While the title page to the poem also declared the writer to be ‘A Milk-Woman of Clifton,

⁴¹ James, *The Middle Class*, p.1.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp.13-14.

⁴³ Yearsley, Ann, *Stanzas of Woe, addressed from the heart on a bed of illness to L. Eames, Esq., etc.* (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1790).

near Bristol', directly underneath, as if to contradict her lowly status, was a pertinent quote from *King Lear*.⁴⁴

The 'Advertisement' preceding the poem told the story of the origins of the work. In 1789 Yearsley's sons, aged twelve and nine, were playing, along with other children, in Eames's field. They were chased, and savagely horsewhipped; according to Yearsley one of her son's skin 'wore a savage livery'.⁴⁵ Yearsley was advised to forget the incident, but several nights later her younger son was apparently waylaid by the same servant and 'beat till he could not stand'.⁴⁶ The writer felt that, after this repeated insult, she had no option but to sue Eames's servant. Yearsley was, however, advised by her Attorney, 'justly supposing her purse not to be *quite* so heavy as Eames's', to drop the prosecution.⁴⁷ Sometime later the same servant chased two boys to Yearsley's home, believing they were her sons. Realising his mistake, he furiously berated the writer. The shock caused the pregnant Yearsley to miscarry that same night.⁴⁸

Yearsley's articulation of her family, within the 'Dedication' to Eames, as 'Your very humble Servants', would appear to be an acknowledgement of her lowly status.⁴⁹ But the tone of the poem reads as if she is addressing an equal, at least in integrity, if not in fortune:

Insolent Tyrant! Humble as we are,
Our minds are rich with honest truth as thine;
Bring on thy sons, their value we'll compare,
Then lay thy infant in the grave with mine.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, title page.

⁴⁵ Yearsley, *Stanzas of Woe* 'Advertisement'.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 'Dedication'.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.4, lines 37-40.

She asks Eames to reflect on his own childhood, which she suggested was no different from her own children's, and implies that he was not worthy of his 'council chair', claiming that he did not have the social standing of the 'Barons' who before him had 'planted freedom'.⁵¹

Yearsley's poem fundamentally embodies the words of a woman trying to get justice for her children, using the only means at her disposal: her poetry and print media. She is grieving over a lost child and, understandably, was full of anger towards Eames and others of his class who, because they have money, were able to inflict injustice on a woman from a lower station than their own. Yearsley used her status as a 'humble' milkwoman possibly to engender sympathy, but certainly to emphasise the wrong done to her by someone who is supposedly her social superior. The poem articulated the impossibility of a person from the lower orders winning a battle against class-based attitudes. She reminded readers that Eames's class position had shielded him from prosecution, leaving her feeling 'Stabb'd in my soul *all hope of public right*'.⁵² Yearsley's footnote backed up this line from her poem: 'Mr Eames being Mayor at the period of the first injury, the Author's Attorney advised her not to dare a trial, on account of *magisterial* influence:- she submitted.'⁵³

It is probably no coincidence that the poem accompanying *Stanzas of Woe* in the volume was written to celebrate Yearsley's eldest son William's apprenticeship, at a very high premium, to an engraver. She seemed determined that her boys eventually should be respectable and self-employed, not wage-dependent. The fact that William's

⁵¹ Yearsley, *Stanzas of Woe*, p.6, lines 65, 67. Yearsley may be referring to the *Magna Carta* (Great Charter) of 1215 between the barons of medieval England and King John. It was an attempt by the barons to stop a king abusing his power, with the people of England suffering. The 39th clause would be particularly pertinent to Yearsley's situation regarding justice for her children; it gave all 'freemen' the right to justice and a fair trial. British Library: www.bl.uk/magna-carta accessed 10.12.2014.

⁵² Yearsley, *Stanzas of Woe*, p.5, line 51.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, *Stanzas of Woe*, p.5.

apprenticeship cost the high price of 100 guineas showed that she was prepared to invest her income in her children's future. It further showed that she was affluent enough by then to do so. It is also worth noting that her son's eventual profession had cultural and artistic value, rather than being in trade.

How then did the rest of society view the labouring class? Daniel Defoe, writing in 1724, saw them thus: 'To begin with the labouring poor, they are indeed the Grievance of the Nation, there seems an absolute necessity to bring them, by severe regulations, to some state of immediate Subordination.'⁵⁴ This is a quote, typical of many, responding to an ever-deepening fear of labouring-class revolution, occasioned by the rising numbers of the labour force striving to meet the demands of increasing industrialisation. Keeping the poor in their place seemed to be the responsibility of the middle and upper classes, who worked towards this goal with a proliferation of texts later in the century aimed at making sure that the labouring poor were happy with their lot.

William Paley was 'an orthodox theologian and utilitarian moralist, who tended to support established institutions but was progressive on questions of toleration and humanity'.⁵⁵ He was one of the most influential writers of the period, and during the last twenty years of his life, which was also the period of Ann Yearsley's writing career, became an intellectual colossus at Cambridge. From 1787 to the early nineteenth century his *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (1785), published in twenty English editions, and ten editions in the United States by 1814, along with French, Spanish, and German editions, was a mandatory text at the university.⁵⁶ He can also be considered as a writer of patriarchal ideology that was prevalent in the period. His tract, *Reasons for Contentment; Addressed*

⁵⁴ Defoe, Daniel, Letter iv. 'The Great Laws of Subordination Considered'. 1724. In Stephen Copley, ed, *Literature and the Social Order in Eighteenth-Century England* (Kent: Croom Helm Ltd, 1984) p.145.

⁵⁵ Crimmins, James E, 'Paley, William (1743-1805)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Online edition January 2008

[<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/21155>, accessed 12 Oct 2012].

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

to the Labouring Part of the British Public, written in 1793, stated his target audience from the very beginning. At a cost of two pence, this work ‘Addressed to the Labouring Part of the British Public’ was affordable for any clergyman using it for sermons to the poor. In the text he exhorted the working man to be ‘intent upon the duties and concerns of his own condition’.⁵⁷ Then he would not be able ‘to bestow unprofitable meditations upon the circumstances in which he sees others placed’. The ‘disturbance of envy and discontent’ will hopefully be avoided if the labouring man is kept working.⁵⁸

Paley’s text was one of many that reflect fear of the ‘mob’. He, along with many other writers, wholeheartedly believed that the order of society was ordained by God: ‘Fixed rules of property are established, for one as well as another, without knowing, before-hand, whom they may affect. If these rules sometimes throw an excessive or disproportionate share to one man’s lot, who can help it?’⁵⁹ Paley seemed to be suggesting some kind of lottery here, with the poor man as definite loser. The writer, throughout most of this work, was articulating the assumptions of the upper classes, and was therefore unable to conceive of any kind of equality, seeing that the poor man should have only what the rich man gives him. Stating that ‘Frugality itself is a pleasure’, Paley was insisting that the poor should consider that having nothing is a good thing.⁶⁰ For people living in poverty, frugality is more a question of necessity than pleasure; the rich of the period were not known for being frugal – they did not need to be.

Most of Paley’s text was concerned with pointing out the advantages of being poor compared to being rich. More than once he listed these advantages, eventually resorting to calling anyone who covets a rich man’s property ‘irreligious’. Paley’s recourse to an

⁵⁷ Paley, William, *Reasons for Contentment. Addressed to the Labouring Part of the British Public* (London: R. Faulder, 1793) cost 2d., University of California - Digitized by Microsoft. pp.3-4.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.4.

⁵⁹ Paley, *Reasons for Contentment*, p.6.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.11.

explicit threat reflected the extent of upper- and middle-class concerns over the security of their social standing:

That to covet the stations or fortunes of the rich, or so however to covet them, as to wish to seize them by force, or through the medium of public uproar and confusion, is not only wickedness, but folly; as mistaken in the end, as in the means: that is not only to venture out to sea in a storm, but to venture for nothing.⁶¹

This final paragraph is a direct warning to the labouring classes against forming any kind of rebellion which may attempt to take by force possessions, or indeed status, of the rich, as this would be futile. Paley's words here articulate how great the fears of the upper classes were when faced with growing numbers, and the potentially rebellious nature of the lower classes.

Texts sought to 'give advice' to the poor on many aspects of their life. In 1797, Scottish physician William Buchan was at pains to set out what he considered to be an appropriate diet for the 'common people'.⁶² He extolled the merits of 'peas and beans' for the lower orders as an alternative to the 'bread which, being accompanied by other dry and often salt foods, fires his blood and excites an unquenchable thirst, so that his perpetual cry is for drink'.⁶³ The 'immoderate use of beer and other stimulating liquors, which generate disease and reduce the lower orders of the people to a state of indigence',⁶⁴ presumably had a different effect on the upper classes, or was it that the lower orders became less manageable, and more threatening, under the influence of drink? Quoting from Count Rumford, he recommended such 'appetising' foods as 'hasty-pudding' or 'cabbage broth without meat', both of which he claims are 'compleat' meals which required no bread or

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.22.

⁶² Buchan, William, *Observations concerning the diet of the common people, recommending a method of living less expensive, and more conducive to health, than the present.* (London: A. Strahan, and T. Cadell jun. and W. Davies (successors to Mr Cadell): and J. Balfour, W Creech, Edinburgh, 1797).

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.17.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.7.

drink.⁶⁵ Buchan declared: ‘The roasting of meat is a wasteful mode of cooking, which ought to be avoided by the poorer sort.’⁶⁶ He gave no explanation of why only the poor should avoid this method of cooking, and once again we have the writer promoting an idea for the poor which did not seem to apply to the rich.

Social station was signified by health, nutrition, life chances (which were hard to create lower down the social scale), dress, transport, recreations, and speech, to name but a few. There was also a visual reinforcement of class difference. The poor were often described as ugly, for instance, although Hannah More was quite kind (or perhaps patronising) to Ann Yearsley, describing her as ‘not ill-made, her face plain, but not disagreeable’. She did, however, comment on Yearsley’s way of speaking – calling her pronunciation ‘vulgar and provincial’.⁶⁷ As an uneducated member of a West Country community, she would more than likely have spoken with a Somerset burr that More obviously found unattractive. Historically, dress was a visual sign of class distinction, with the law making it an offence for men and women to dress outside their perceived social status. Laws reinforced a dress code that effectively designated where one stood in the social order. James confirms this, stating that from ‘1363 onwards a series of statutes and proclamations confined specific textiles and furs to certain ranks’; and in 1465 the Sumptuary Act restricted purple silk to noblemen, and banned yeomen and those of a lesser ‘degree’ from wearing padded doublets, also insisting that labourers and servants wore cloth that cost less than two shillings a yard.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.39.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.32.

⁶⁷ More, Hannah, letter to Mary Hamilton dated 24 November 1784 in the unpublished Anson Letters, cited in Waldron Mary, *Lactilla, Milkwoman of Clifton: The Life and Writings of Ann Yearsley 1753-1806* (Georgia, U.S.A: The University of Georgia Press, 1996) p.295, n.64.

⁶⁸ James, *The Middle Class*, pp. 10-11.

William Christmas, in his study of work, writing, and social order of the period, claims that Yearsley used her wealth to remake herself in More's image.⁶⁹ He is possibly referring to an engraving in 1798, of More, after a portrait by John Opie produced in 1786, and also an engraving of Yearsley by Wilson Lowry, produced in 1787, showing both subjects in similar pose and dress. As if in imitation of More's portrait a year earlier, Yearsley was wearing the clothes of a gentlewoman, and this, along with her refined looks, appeared to reflect her new-found affluence. It was this visual image of her former protégée that may have occasioned the remark from More that 'I hear she wears very fine Gauze Bonnets, long lappets, gold pins etc', although there is no evidence of gold pins in the engraving.⁷⁰ Walpole also commented that Yearsley 'is grown extravagant and ostentatious'.⁷¹ These comments indicated the importance of dress as a social signifier in the period; it was acceptable for More to wear long lappets in her portrait, but for Yearsley to emulate this would seem as if she was trying to elevate herself socially. Furthermore, the title of the engraving, 'The Bristol Milkwoman and Poetess', simultaneously declares both her labouring-class origins and her successful literary achievement.

Both More and Walpole, and probably many others of the upper and middle classes, may have had misgivings at such a public statement from a woman from the lower classes seemingly making a literary career for herself. More's concern would be with a possible subversion of the established social order, and Walpole's with the potential infiltration of the literary élite by a writer from the 'uneducated' lower orders. More importantly, the engraving of Yearsley dressed in the manner of a gentlewoman and calling herself a poetess is visual affirmation of a member of the labouring classes whom More, as an acknowledged enforcer of a rigid social hierarchy, is no longer able to control.

⁶⁹ Christmas, William, *The Lab'ring Muses: Work, Writing, and the Social Order in English Plebeian Poetry*, (New Jersey: Associated University Press, 2001) p.248.

⁷⁰ Mahl & Koon, *The Female Spectator*, p.284.

⁷¹ Walpole, Horace, correspondence, Vol. 33.538.

A comparison of portraits found in Eger's study of Bluestockings reinforces Christmas's argument that Yearsley was making herself in More's image.⁷² The mezzotint of Yearsley, produced in 1787 by Joseph Grozer, shows the writer posing at a table, looking defiantly up from her text 'with a knowing stare, as if aware that she confounded contemporary assumptions, and was proud of the fact'.⁷³ The composition of this mezzotint is almost identical to Frances Reynold's portrait of More in 1780.⁷⁴ Both women hold a feathered pen poised as if about to write, both have hands raised to their temple as if lost in thought. It is tempting, looking at the portraits side by side, to think that the look on Yearsley's face is ironically copying her former patron in order to publicly portray herself as More's social and literary equal. It is also worth pointing out that Yearsley must have achieved a certain amount of success (or notoriety) to have merited the production of at least two portraits.

John Barrell, in his study of the rural poor in English painting, noted that there was a need to portray the lower orders in landscapes as being at work and not idle.⁷⁵ At the same time they must be shown as ragged but cheerful; even more importantly they must be depicted as content, with society portrayed as harmoniously as possible.⁷⁶ By the mid-eighteenth century, as resentment of the poor became more prominent, the rural labourer was hidden in the middle ground of a painting; it was then possible to see him working but not see his facial expressions. Barrell cited Constable as one such painter whose rural figures are so small as to be unnoticeable.⁷⁷ It was also important in landscape art that images of the poor were left in the shadows at the 'dark side of the landscape', whilst the rich and their

⁷² Eger, Elizabeth, and Lucy Peltz, *Brilliant Women: Eighteenth-Century Bluestockings* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2008).

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.47. Mezzotint of Yearsley on p. 44.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, Frances Reynold's portrait of More on p.78.

⁷⁵ Barrell, John, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: the Rural Poor in English Painting, 1730-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) p.13.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.16.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p.5.

property must be illuminated. Barrell cited George Lambert's 'Woody Landscape', painted in 1755, as a good example of this.⁷⁸

John Goodridge, in his study of the eighteenth-century rural poor, claims that the central scene of rural labour attempts and fails to reconcile forces which in the 'real world' are in conflict'.⁷⁹ Rural life was sanitised by some artists to make it more palatable for upper-class drawing rooms, resulting in a disjunction between the rural idyll and the reality of country life. Gainsborough's painting 'Peasant smoking at a cottage door' is a good example of a work that portrays a happy domesticity that seemed to be available only to those in a humble station.⁸⁰ Artistic images such as these were corroborated by literature, for example, where William Paley reinforced Gainsborough's pictorial images by providing his written version of the peasant at his cottage door:

I have heard it said that if the face of happiness can anywhere be seen, it is in the summer evening of a country village. Where after the labours of the day, each man at his door with his children, amongst his neighbours, feels his frame and his heart at rest, everything about him pleased and pleasing, and a delight and complacency in his sensations far beyond what either luxury or diversions can afford. The rich want this; and they want what they can never have.⁸¹

This idyllic portrayal of the labourer's happiness is a misrepresentation of the reality of rural life, as are the paintings of artists like Gainsborough, Constable, and Lambert. Works of both art and literature fail to reflect the fact that labourers earned barely enough to live on, and were often out of work in winter. Behind the pretty cottage door food would not be plentiful, and in winter the home would be freezing cold. Neither Paley, nor the artists mentioned had any real concept of poverty, or if they did they chose to ignore it in their work.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p.21.

⁷⁹ Goodridge, John, *Rural Life in Eighteenth-Century Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) p.57.

⁸⁰ Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape*, p. 71.

⁸¹ Paley, *Reasons for Contentment*, pp. 16-17.

This disjunction between the idea of the cheerfully and meekly toiling peasant, and the real-life poverty and oppression, aestheticised labour into a pleasing picture of rural bliss, and glorified the peasant's contentment with his station. In 'Clifton Hill' Ann Yearsley stripped rural life of the romantic veneer that wealthier poets had applied to it. Her work explored the tensions between the ideal and the reality, and gave expression to the writer's own feelings about the rural experience.

Her poem was set in winter, the harshest of months for rural labourers; seasonal work was usually finished by then and many were reduced to subsistence levels of poverty. Much written and visual work was set in the sunny summer months, but Yearsley uses the harsh winter to emphasise, intentionally perhaps, the negative effects of the seasons:

When hoary Winter strides the northern blast,
And Flora's beauties at his feet are cast,
Earth by the grisly tyrant desert made,
The feather'd warblers quit the leafless shade.⁸²

She described the hardship of agricultural labour: 'half sunk in snow, Lactilla, shivering, tends her fav'rite cow'.⁸³ Having laboured in the fields, Yearsley had a view of rural life that did not match the pastoral ideal. Her occupation as a milkmaid would have given her first-hand experience of it, and she sought to inform her readers who, unlike Lactilla, would almost certainly never have gone out at dawn on a winter's day to tend animals.

Within 'Clifton Hill' Yearsley was also able to make pointed commentary on the ways of the upper-classes, and attributes 'fell dissipation' as the cause of the illness that brought fashionable young ladies to Clifton Hotwells.⁸⁴ To accuse the upper classes of idleness at a time when the dominant ideology promulgated the notion that not working was 'hard

⁸² Yearsley, 'Clifton Hill' in *Poems on Several Occasions*, fourth edition (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1786) lines 5-8.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, lines 19-12.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, line 155.

work' for them, is a direct criticism of their way of life. It was perhaps not extreme in its subversiveness, but it was still a dangerous line for a labouring-class female writer to cross.

Clifton Hill, perhaps more than most of her poetry, articulated Yearsley's uncertainty about her social position. On one hand she located herself within the rural community, even showing solidarity with the people within it: 'Tis but LACTILLA – fly not from the green; / Long have I shar'd with you on this guiltless scene'.⁸⁵ The use of her labouring-class epithet Lactilla, which is capitalised by the poet as if to emphasise her roots, further brackets the writer with the rural community whilst disingenuously downplaying the quality of her writing – 'Blame not my rustic lay'.⁸⁶ On the other hand, however, she sought to distance herself from the lower orders: not only from the 'vulgar dissonance' of commercial Bristol, which she may well have been looking down on from Clifton Hill, but also from the sailors whose 'clumsy music' and 'rough delight' force her to 'Cross the low stream', thus distancing herself physically from the labouring scene.⁸⁷

For Yearsley, 'Clifton Hill' was a site of personal significance, with her poem becoming a transformation of the milkwoman's scene of labour into a literary landscape. The text managed to preserve its working-class origin, but was presented, paradoxically, by the poet in a well-constructed literary manner. The work was rich in observations of which the writer had personal experience; she used this knowledge to highlight the coarseness and brutality of life in a rural community such as Clifton. Although the poem did not exactly champion the cause of the poor and oppressed, it does remain grounded in Yearsley's situation as a working woman, and also commits to paper a facet of rural life and its ensuing poverty, that many people were at pains to hide.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, lines 108-109.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, lines 146.

⁸⁷ Yearsley, 'Clifton Hill' in *Poems On Several Occasions*, lines 191-193.

Mary Waldron pointed out that Yearsley's poetry never in tone, language, or subject matter hints at the true voice of the wage-dependent underclass.⁸⁸ This voice had begun to filter into the work of other labouring-class poets: Mary Leapor publishing in 1748, and Mary Collier publishing in 1739 and 1762 are two examples. We can see Yearsley's own class confusion is mirrored in her portrayal of the nurse-maid in 'Mira'. The writer came from a labouring-class background but never sought to identify with the lower orders in this work; she showed no solidarity whatsoever with a fellow wage-earner, depicting her as a coarse and furious villain:

She look'd a vulture cow'ring o'er a dove!
 "I'll teach you, brat!" The pretty trembler sigh'd,
 When, with a cruel shake, she hoarsely cried
 "Your mother spoils you, everything you see
 You covet. It shall ne'er be so with me!
 Here, eat this cake, sit still, and don't you rise,
 Why don't you pluck the sun down from the skies?"⁸⁹

Landry appears to concur with Waldron when she says that the poem founders on the question of class.⁹⁰ Yearsley negatively portrayed subjects already excluded from society: wet-nurses, and nannies who were classed as servants. The writer certainly offered no solution to class difference here; social emancipation was as far away as ever with the nurse-maid's vicious personality perhaps indicative of a repressed, regressive labouring-class.

'Mira' is placed firmly in the sphere of motherhood and is central to any discussion of gender and class in Yearsley's work. The poem embodied both feminist and class issues,

⁸⁸ Waldron, *Lactilla, Milkwoman of Clifton*, p.266.

⁸⁹ Ann Yearsley, 'To Mira, on the care of her infant', lines 108-114, in *The Rural Lyre: A Volume of Poems* (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1796) p.118.

⁹⁰ Landry, Donna, *The Muses of Resistance, Laboring-Class Poetry in Britain, 1739-1796* (Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1990) p.33.

but critics have argued that it contained only muted protests and attempts at subversion. Landry claims that neither the masculinity of the poem's infant subject, nor the question of class relations is satisfactorily resolved.⁹¹ Yearsley's treatment of the nursemaid, for instance, did not give the labouring-class woman a voice but only served to point up the writer's confusion about her own class location. This argument assumes an educational perspective that Yearsley could not possibly possess. Moira Ferguson does, however, point out that Yearsley, outside of her writing, struck a blow against class tyranny by refusing to be abused as a 'poor milkwoman'.⁹² Critics also differ on the subject of feminism in 'Mira': Landry claims that Yearsley's aim to domesticate the political required her to put a victimised woman's body at the centre of the poem;⁹³ in contrast, Waldron states that the female body in the work is not victimised but instead celebrated.⁹⁴

It is true that this poem does not exactly champion political causes – given the writer's perceived social status it is highly unlikely that she could truly conceive of a discourse specific to working-class struggle. Yet 'Mira' provided a sense of emerging class-consciousness, and told the story of the politicisation of the labouring-class writer encountering middle-class subjectivity. And, as well as celebrating and elevating motherhood, the work offered some direct criticism of middle-class behaviour. In the end it is a more radical alternative than the romance of domestic fiction or the figure of the domesticated woman.

From the beginning of her final volume of poetry 'The Rural Lyre', Yearsley questioned the possibility of equality. In her dedication to the Right Honourable, the Earl of Bristol, Yearsley suggested that anyone who is of lowly birth cannot succeed: 'It is asserted that

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p.264.

⁹² Ferguson, Moira, *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets: Nation, Class, and Gender* (New York: University of New York Press, 1995) p.55. For an in-depth discussion of 'To Mira on the care of her infant' see pp. 142-144.

⁹³ Landry, *The Muses of Resistance*, p. 173.

⁹⁴ Waldron, *Lactilla, Milkwoman of Clifton*, p.267.

“If Alexander and Caesar had been born in a cottage, they would have died in obscurity”.⁹⁵ This was a recognition, by the poet, that during her literary career, she had been judged by her social status rather than by any merit her writing may have had; and that any ‘mental accomplishments’ were considered by many ‘as incompatible with my laborious employment’.⁹⁶ Yearsley is articulating here a belief commonly held at the period that the class position of writers from the lower orders is explicitly identified as ‘low’, ‘menial’, or ‘obscure’, inferring that writers labelled thus were incapable of producing works of ‘high art’.

The poet asks forcefully: ‘Can the system of equality be sufficiently buoyant to support itself?’⁹⁷ It may be that she was talking about the equality created by Nature, but it is tempting to think, given the social confusion displayed within her work at times, that she was referring to the inequality of society itself. In ‘Address to Friendship; A Fragment’, Yearsley is still bitter and humiliated about her mistaken idea that friendship was possible with More, and speaks of the falseness that led her to feel ‘the sting of shame’:

Yet Friendship’s name oft decks the crafty lip:
Her robe is borrow’d to allure: her smile,
Whose most remote resemblance charms, put on:
Her heav’nly air and mien so falsely worn.⁹⁸

Yearsley ended the poem with a statement showing that she realised something needs to happen about equality, but is resigned to the fact that as a labouring-class writer she will not be able to change things: ‘Whilst I am cold, and banish’d from the flame/That lives but

⁹⁵ Yearsley, *The Rural Lyre* ‘Dedication’ p. v.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, ‘Dedication’, p.vi.

⁹⁷ Yearsley, *The Rural Lyre*, ‘Dedication’, p.vii.

⁹⁸ Yearsley, Ann, ‘Addressed to Friendship; A Fragment’ in *The Rural Lyre*, p.74, lines 59-62.

in EQUALITY*** *****'.⁹⁹ Of course her asterisks at the end here may indicate that the poem is unfinished and she still has more to say on the matter.

It would never have occurred to More, largely for reasons of class, that Yearsley could be anything other than a milkwoman who wrote poetry. In a letter to Elizabeth Montagu dated 27 September 1784, she makes clear her views on labouring-class poets with aspirations above their station – ‘*Stephen* was an excellent Bard as a Thrasher [sic] but as the Court Poet, and rival of Pope, detestable’.¹⁰⁰ Stephen Duck, the Thresher Poet, was born of poor parents and left charity school at fourteen to work as an agricultural labourer. He was fortunate enough to come to the attention of Queen Caroline in 1730, and in 1733 she made him a Yeoman of the Guard, also giving him an annuity of thirty or fifty pounds, along with a house in Surrey; in 1735 he became keeper of the Queen’s Library.¹⁰¹ More’s vitriolic remark about Duck may have contained an element of sour grapes when we consider his meteoric rise from farm labourer to court poet.

It would always be difficult for Yearsley to identify with a particular social group: she was alienated, by her comparative literary success and minor celebrity status, from the society in which she was brought up and still lived, but she was never accepted into society at a higher level. Any success she may have had was predicated on her remaining in a labouring-class situation; Hannah More and Elizabeth Montagu expected this. One of the most powerful blocks to any social elevation for the milkwoman was More herself. Throughout her liaison with More, Yearsley was well aware that she had been skilfully styled by her patron as a ‘noble savage’, and an ‘uneducated genius’. Yearsley’s complicity to this marketing strategy carried on for most of her writing career. Although at

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, lines 131-132.

¹⁰⁰ Mahl and Koon, *The Female Spectator*, p.279.

¹⁰¹ Stephen, Leslie, ‘Duck Stephen’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/8131>, accessed 12 October 2012].

times she showed resistance to it, for the most part she recognised that this styling of herself as a 'poor milkwoman' was an image that still, even until late in the century, had a novelty value that increased sales of her work. Primitive poets were usually defined by their patron, and were seldom given the chance to define themselves and their aspirations.¹⁰² Ann Yearsley fought hard against powerful opposition for the right to control her own work, but it is indicative of the strength of repression still exercised over the lower orders, that she was unable to break the stranglehold on labouring-class writers who attempted to rise above their 'allotted' station. She did, in the end, carve out a literary career that was based, not on her writing skill, but rather on being a 'natural genius' who somehow managed to write poetry.

¹⁰² Armstrong, Isabel and Virginia Blain, eds *Women's Poetry in the Enlightenment: The Making of a Canon, 1730-1820* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999) p.113.

5. ANN YEARSLEY AND GENDER

Eighteenth-century society was essentially hierarchical and patriarchal. Although transformation was ongoing throughout the century, social pressure to conform to certain patterns of ideal womanhood still affected women. As a member of the perceived ‘underclass’ and a writer of poetry, Ann Yearsley was considered by those above her as a potentially dangerous and subversive threat to the order of society. Women’s place in this society was very much defined by their relationship to men: as wives and daughters who were ideologically and practically discriminated against, with religion and law jointly confirming male superiority and the subordination of women. The social status of women was seen as ordained by God and Nature, a fact endorsed by influential writers of the day. Alexander Pope, one of the major literary figures of the period, made it clear in his ‘An Epistle to a Lady’ (1735), what he thought of women when he claimed that ‘Most women have no character at all’.¹ The dominant cultural belief that women’s minds were not capable of abstract thought was reinforced even a century later by writers such as Robert Southey, who in 1837 famously replied to the young Charlotte Brontë’s request for advice on her writing: ‘Literature is not the business of a woman’s life and it cannot be.’

This chapter determines how, and to what extent, Ann Yearsley was constrained as a woman, in her life and in her writing, by the conventions of an eighteenth-century, male-dominated society. Perceptions and attitudes to women are examined in the framework of conduct literature. Examples of Yearsley’s poetry will be analysed and discussed: through this articulation of her situation a picture emerged of her engagement with, and her challenge to, issues such as female stereotyping, separate spheres, marriage and

¹ Pope, Alexander, ‘An Epistle to A Lady, ‘Of the Characters of Women’, in *Alexander Pope. Selected Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) p.106.

motherhood. These poems are used with caution bearing in mind the potential for authorial bias.

Ann Yearsley needed to negotiate her way round these issues in her daily life, and as she was attempting to carve out a literary career. Her work was expected to fall within parameters provided by contemporary discourses and literature written by male and female authors. Conduct literature, which proliferated in the period, provided an important primary resource for this chapter, as it was a major contributor in the management of women, offering instruction in many areas of domestic and social behaviour. Texts by Priscilla Wakefield, James Fordyce, Mrs Griffith, and Hannah More are examples.²

Women's place in society has been studied by historians such as Vivien Jones, Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor, and Karen O'Brien³ who deal specifically with women's lives in the period of interest. Jones' anthology is focused primarily on conduct literature, which was prolific in the eighteenth century, and its implications for women. The work covers a wide range of themes including conduct, sexuality, and education. Knott and Taylor's work is made up of several essays, written by men and women, encompassing many facets of women's life in the eighteenth century. The work specifically engages with feminist issues in relation to the Enlightenment, and is international in scope rather than focusing on Britain alone. Karen O'Brien's text examines the impact of the Enlightenment on women in Britain, alongside an investigation of the writings of the time that reflected a growing interest in women as distinct and influential social members. There were many writers who

² Wakefield, Priscilla, *Reflections on the Present Condition of the Female Sex; with Suggestions for its Improvement* (London: J. Johnson, and Darton and Harvey, 1798). James Fordyce, *The character and conduct of the female sex, and the advantages to be derived by young men from the society of virtuous women. A discourse in three parts.* (London: T. Cadell, 1776). Mrs Griffith, *Essays, Addressed to Young Married Women* (London: T. Cadell and J. Robinson, 1782). Hannah More, *The Complete Works of Hannah More, Volume I* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1843).

³ Jones, Vivien, ed., *Women in the Eighteenth Century: Constructions of Femininity* (London: Routledge, 1991). Knott, Sarah and Barbara Taylor, eds, *Women, Gender and Enlightenment* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). O'Brien, Karen, *Women and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

commented on women's lives in the period, but this chapter is distinctive in focusing on one specific woman from the labouring classes, and centring on how patriarchal ideology affected her journey from poverty to published author.

James Fordyce (1720-1796), a Scottish Presbyterian minister and poet, was one of the many authors of conduct literature. His *Sermons for Young Women* was published in 1766, and in 1776 he published *The Character and Conduct of the Female Sex*. This latter publication is an example of a text that appeared to be liberal towards women, but in reality reinforced their existing subordinate place in society, along with underpinning the patriarchy that was prevalent in the period. The discourse was advertised by the author as 'intended chiefly for the improvement of Young Men,'⁴ and was in essence a critique of their corrupt morals by recommending that they only socialise with women of chastity and virtue. Fordyce's text showed how conduct literature could have double standards. He was critical of the treatment of married women, citing Greece as an example of how:

Married women were in a manner secluded from Society, being mostly confined to the interior apartments of their houses, and wholly engrossed by domestic occupation. According to our apprehensions, it is hard to conceive how a practice in appearance so uncourteous to the ladies, as well as unanimating to the men, could obtain amongst a people highly polished and uncommonly awake.⁵

The writer's seemingly liberal treatment of women here was contradicted earlier in the work when he called on 'the Sons of Reason' to converse only with the 'daughters of virtue'. These 'daughters' were to be found, not in public life, but in:

Those private scenes where show and noise are excluded, where the flutter of fashion is forgotten in the silent discharges of domestic duties, and where females of real value are more solicitous to be amiable and accomplished than alluring and admired.⁶

⁴ Fordyce, James, *The character and conduct of the female sex*. Advertisement.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.24.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.19-20.

Whilst Fordyce admitted, on the one hand, that most females were confined to a narrow sphere, on the other hand he reinforced male expectations of women and their place in society. He was vehement in his criticism of the kind of woman men should not mix with: ‘A clamorous, obstinate, contentious being, universally disgustful, and odious: fit only to be chased from the haunts of humanity’ – men should seek shelter in the ‘blessed sanctuary of domestic love and joy’. This was seemingly provided by women who were once again confined to the separate sphere of the home.⁷

The existence of separate spheres is a subject of much debate. McCalman claimed that in the eighteenth century there was an expanding masculine sphere of political, civic, and intellectual life which formed a counterpoint to the female private sphere of family life, childcare, and child education.⁸ However, Davidoff and Hall posit the notion that middle-class men who sought success as an individual were in fact ‘embedded in networks of familial and female support which underpinned their rise to public prominence’.⁹ The ideology of separate spheres had become a factor in eighteenth-century gender reconstruction and was, in fact, one of the major constraints on a woman aspiring to write poetry at that time. Hannah More echoed the sentiments of conformist women in her preface to Yearsley’s first volume of verse: ‘I hope she is convinced, that the making of verses is not the great business of human life; and that, as a wife and a mother, she has duties to fill, the smallest of which is of more value than the finest verses she can write.’¹⁰

Separate spheres ideology was reinforced in the period by a flood of medical literature that concerned itself with anatomical differences. In her article on sexuality and society Londa

⁷ Fordyce, *The character and conduct of the female sex*, p.84.

⁸ McCalman, Iain, *The Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture 1776-1832* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) p.43.

⁹ Davidoff, Leonore and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850* (Oxford: Routledge, 2002).

¹⁰ Yearsley, Ann, *Poems on Several Occasions, with a prefatory letter by Hannah More* (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1785) p.xv.

Schiebinger suggests that there was a possible connection between eighteenth-century movements for women's equality and attempts on the part of anatomists to discover a physiological basis for female 'inequality'.¹¹ In 1796, one of the first illustrations of a distinctively female skeleton was published by Samuel Thomas von Soemmerring. This lent impetus to an eighteenth-century movement which sought to define and redefine sex differences in every part of the human body.¹² A woman's skull was often portrayed as smaller than the male skull, giving credence to the notion that women's intellectual capabilities were inferior to men's. A woman's pelvis, however, was shown larger than the male's, supposedly proving that women were naturally destined for motherhood rather than anything else. Both depictions served to bolster the argument for separate spheres: man's larger brain fitting them for the public spheres of government, commerce, science and scholarship, whilst motherhood contained women in the sphere of hearth and home.¹³

This did not mean that fixed boundaries between the spheres were in place, or that there could be no overlap of the two. Robert B. Shoemaker, in his study of the emergence of separate spheres, comments that 'although many aspects of the world outside the family were male dominated, women had a significant, if distinctive role to play in religion, politics, social life and culture'.¹⁴ Karen O'Brien, in her comprehensive study of women in the eighteenth century, concurs, saying that 'Indeed, the period gave rise to a growing number of opportunities for middle- and upper-class women to exercise their talents outside the family in both informal and institutionalised settings'. She cites leisure activities such as debating societies, commercial pleasure gardens, assembly rooms, and

¹¹ Scheibinger, Londa, 'The Making of the Modern Body: Sexuality and Society in the Nineteenth Century' in *Representations*, No.14, Spring 1986, pp.42-82, <http://www.jstor.org>, accessed 06/01/2011.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.42.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.43.

¹⁴ Shoemaker, Robert B, *Gender in English Society 1650-1850: The Emergence of Separate Spheres?* (Essex: Addison Wesley-Longman, 1998) p.209.

theatres, along with social intervention such as philanthropy, petitioning or campaigning.¹⁵ Lower down the social scale there is evidence that women joined early forms of trade unions in the textile trade in the West Country, London, the Midlands, and the North.¹⁶ Knott and Taylor, in their extensive study of feminism and Enlightenment, reinforce the notion of cohesive labouring-class, female groups: 'Plebeian women, however, had long organized themselves into female friendly societies, preached as Methodists, and participated in strikes and rioted for food'.¹⁷

In politics women were particularly active participants in pressure groups such as the slave trade abolition movement; Ann Yearsley and Hannah More both wrote poems on this issue.¹⁸ According to Roger Lonsdale, in literature 'women virtually took over' as the writers and readers of popular fiction and fashionable poetry.¹⁹ Conversely, men were starting to take more interest in family life. Shoemaker points out that because men's paid employment often took place in the home, they spent more time there and began to take responsibility at least for the education of older sons.²⁰

While there may well be valid debates about the existence of separate spheres, it is still a fact that the majority of women then, as now, were obliged to spend more time in the home than men. Roberta Hamilton, in her study of patriarchy and capitalism, describes childbirth as a high-risk activity for women which resulted in periods of dependence after childbirth,

¹⁵ O'Brien, *Women and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, p.10.

¹⁶ Shoemaker, *Gender in English Society*, p. 243.

¹⁷ Knott and Taylor, *Women, Gender and Enlightenment*, p.581.

¹⁸ Yearsley, Ann, 'A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave -Trade', (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1788), Hannah More, 'Slavery: A Poem, (London: T. Cadell, 1788).

¹⁹ Lonsdale, Roger, ed, *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) p.xxxv.

²⁰ Shoemaker, *Gender in English Society*, p.306.

and low mobility during nursing. These combined effects of childbirth resulted in a woman being tied to the home, ensuring reliance on men for a large part of her adult life.²¹

Towards the end of the century, and well into the next, there was still an abundance of conduct literature insisting on the female sphere of domesticity, marriage and motherhood as the ideal state for young women. Hannah More, one of the most influential writers of the day, believed that men and women were meant to occupy separate spheres: men were naturally formed for ‘the more public exhibition’,²² whilst women were best suited to the smaller scale of the domestic, seeing the world ‘from a little elevation from her own garden’.²³ Priscilla Wakefield, in her work containing suggestions for the improvement of the female sex, restricted women’s sphere. Discussing ‘domestic instruction’ she urged that:

A woman earnestly occupied in this most interesting of all engagements, has no leisure to court the stupid gaze of casual admiration; dress and public diversion of course lose their attraction, her treasure is at home, and where the treasure is, there is high authority for believing that the heart will be.²⁴

Ann Yearsley was an assertive and strong-minded woman, as her ability to exist in the tough trade of milk-selling attests, and her robust resistance to the overbearing patronage of Hannah More showed. These qualities were considered masculine traits, leading to the poet, along with Mary Wollstonecraft, Anna Barbauld, and Mary Robinson, among others, being labelled as ‘unsex’d’ by the essayist and poet Richard Polwhele in his 1798 work ‘*The Unsex’d Females*’.²⁵ That poem was described by William Stafford as ‘the most

²¹ Hamilton, Roberta, *The Liberation of Women: A Study of Patriarchy and Capitalism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1978) p.11.

²² More, Hannah, ‘Essays Principally Designed for Young Ladies.’ (1777) pp.2-3 in Davidoff, Leonore, and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850* (Oxford: Routledge, 2002) p.169.

²³ More, Hannah, *Strictures*, volume 2, p.27 in Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, p.169.

²⁴ Wakefield, *Reflections*, p.44.

²⁵ Polwhele, Richard, *The Unsex’d Females* (London: Cadell, 1798).

systematic, explicit and comprehensive sorting of women into the approved and the disapproved'.²⁶ Polwhele described his disapproval thus:

A female band despising NATURE'S law,
 As 'proud defiance' flashes from their arms,
 And vengeance smothers all their softer charms,
 I shudder at the new unpictur'd scene
 Where unsex'd woman vaunts the imperious mien.²⁷

Wollstonecraft, 'whom no decorum checks', is branded ringleader of this new kind of female, 'what ne'er our fathers saw', and Polwhele had no compunction in dragging up her 'immoral' past: 'Yet while each heart-pulse, in the Paphian grove/ Beats quick to IMLAY and licentious love'.²⁸

Yearsley, although only mildly chastised in the work, was still well known, and presumably already thought subversive enough to be included in this illustrious, or perhaps notorious, band of radical females. However, Polwhele wasted no time in trivialising her poetic skills, reducing her verse to 'ditties', along with condemning any social aspirations she may have had:

And YEARSLEY, who had warbled, Nature's child,
 Midst twilight dews, her minstrel ditties wild,
 (Tho' soon a wanderer from her meads and milk,
 She long'd to rustle, like her sex, in silk).²⁹

Within his work Polwhele played off a radical group of women against genteel and educated females. Hannah More, as a conformist female, was included in this latter group, along with Elizabeth Montagu, Elizabeth Carter, Anna Seward, and Hester Chapone. More

²⁶ Stafford, William, *English Feminists and Their Opponents in the 1790s: Unsex'd and Proper Females* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002) p.2.

²⁷ Polwhele, *The Unsex'd Females*, lines 12-16.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, lines 156-156.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, lines 99-102.

was represented as the inspiration for them all: ‘and round their MORE the sisters sigh’d’.³⁰ The dominant culture of the period expected women to be soft and passive; but with his skilful use of language Polwhele succeeded in attributing perceived male characteristics to his ‘unsex’d’ women. More and her friends are cast as ‘sweetly scattered’, and ‘whose blushes spoke a brighter day’, whereas an unbecoming image is presented of Wollstonecraft and her followers, whose ‘vengeance smothers all their softer charms’.³¹ His work is an example of another influential man whose primary agenda is the maintenance of the distinction of gender roles. Government support for him in the shape of friendly reviews, and for Southey in his official post as laureate, show the powerful strand of prejudice in the dominant culture.

Views on women and their place in society were not only expressed by men, but also by conformist women like Hannah More. More, along with others such as Frances Burney and Maria Edgeworth, identified closely with their fathers, seeing them as the central, most important figure in their lives, and sharing their concern about the need to control sexuality and female disorder. More, writing in 1799, gave this advice to young women which, in effect, recommended their mental subordination to men:

That both, independent, enterprising spirit, which is so much admired in boys, should not, when it happens to discover itself in the other sex, be encouraged but suppressed. Girls should be taught to give up their opinion betimes even if they should know themselves to be in the right.³²

According to Roy Porter ‘Public opinion (largely male but echoed by conformist women) tight-laced women into constrictive roles as wives, mothers, housekeepers, subordinate workers, domestic servants, and maiden-aunts, from which few escaped’.³³ Social pressure to conform to certain patterns of ideal womanhood affected all women, and few managed

³⁰ *Ibid.*, line 203.

³¹ Polwhele, *The Unsex'd Females*, lines 205-206.

³² More, Hannah, *The Works of Hannah More, volume 1*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1843) p.318.

³³ Porter, Roy, *English Society in the 18th Century* (London: Penguin Group, 1991) p.22.

to escape the invisibility created by such stereotyping. Young girls were groomed for matrimony from an early age, and there were several pressures to marry. Marriage offered protection, and was often a young lady's entry into society, also relieving her of the stigma of becoming an 'old maid'. An unmarried young woman could also incur familial displeasure by becoming a financial burden on parents or brothers.

Once married, wives were subject to men whose authority was sustained through culture, custom, differences in education, and more formally through the law. William Blackstone, in his *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1896), described the hierarchy of marriage thus: 'By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of her husband.'³⁴ The common law of England ensured women's dependence and subordination by transferring ownership of her personal and real property to her husband upon marriage. Perkins, in his study of the origins of modern English society claims that 'Because of the complex economic and psychological roles of property, a woman could, by one act of infidelity imperil both a man's present security and his dynastic ambitions'.³⁵ Pope's declaration that 'every woman is at heart a rake' reinforced a commonplace notion in the period that reflected serious concerns with women's chastity, and their fidelity within marriage.³⁶ Karen O'Brien claims that 'the values of female chastity and modesty had always been, and were becoming ever more, from the late seventeenth-century, points from which British society took its moral

³⁴ Blackstone, Sir William, *Commentaries on the Laws of England. In Four Books.* (London: T. Cadell, Facsimile: Forgotten Books. Undated.

³⁵ Perkins, Harold, *The Origins of Modern English Society* (London & New York: Routledge, 1991) p.85

³⁶ Pope, Alexander, 'An Epistle to A Lady, p.106.

bearings'.³⁷ One eighteenth-century observer, Philogamus, writing in 1739, articulated what was at the heart of men's fear of wifely infidelity:

However, it is generally supposed a greater Crime in the Woman than the Man. Because she not only imposes a spurious Breed on her Husband's Family; makes a Foreigner Heir to his Estate; depriving sometimes his own real Children begotten afterwards, of their just Inheritance, or, at least, his right Heirs and next Relations, but makes the Son of a Man his Heir, who has done him great Injury.³⁸

These anxieties were real and profound to men, and were echoed in comments made by influential writers such as Samuel Johnson, sanctioning the subordination of women: 'nature has given women so much power that the law has wisely given them little'.³⁹ In polite society a lady's chastity before marriage, and reputation after, were considered crucial by a gentleman. Again Johnson voiced men's concerns about women's chastity: 'The chastity of women is of importance, as all property depends on it.'⁴⁰ He also articulated the double standards prevalent in men's thinking: 'between man and wife, a husband's infidelity is nothing ... Wise married women don't trouble themselves about infidelity in their husbands.'⁴¹

For the upper and middle classes, marriage and money were often inseparable, with a gentleman's first considerations usually being financial security, family title, and land. Arrangements for a potential union became a complex, commercial negotiation. Along with money or property, a man might expect a potential partner to conform to a checklist of personal characteristics: virtue, piety, and hopefully a decorative but passive helpmate. An example of the extremes some men were prepared to go to in order to secure the 'perfect' wife is the case of Thomas Day and Sabrina Sidney. Day, a member of the Lunar

³⁷ O'Brien, *Women and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, p. 20.

³⁸ Philogamus, *The Present State of Matrimony* (London: John Hawkins, 1739) p.12.

³⁹ Boswell, *Life of Johnson, Volume 4* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co. Ltd) p.219.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Boswell, James, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, Volume 2*, (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co. Ltd, undated) p.350.

Society and writer of children's books, believing in Rousseau's vision of women as softly submissive, acquired his own 'living doll' to transform, Pygmalion-fashion, into his idea of perfection.⁴² Day selected for his experiment a young twelve-year-old girl from the Shrewsbury orphanage, whom he named Sabrina Sidney, along with Lucretia, an eleven-year-old from the London Foundling Hospital, to act as her companion. His aim was to 'mould' the young Sabrina into the perfect marriage partner who would live in domestic retirement, devoting herself to her husband and children. To avoid scandal his experiment took place in France, and here he attempted to impress upon the young girls a contempt for luxury, fashion, and frivolity. When his maniacal attempts to train Sabrina's temper and strengthen her character – he dropped hot sealing wax on her arm, and fired blank shots at her skirts – resulted in the young girl flinching and shrieking in fright, he concluded that she had a weak mind, and subsequently packed her off to boarding school, abandoning her completely.⁴³

At the bottom of the social ladder things were very different. For the labouring classes it was a necessity that marriage brought with it a mutually beneficial household partnership. Women got protection, a home of their own, and, if they were very lucky, elevated social status. Men, on the other hand, gained a housekeeper, a mother for their children, the benefits of a working wife, and if they were very lucky, their chosen partner might have managed to scrape together a little nest egg. Once married, labouring-class women were reduced to a life of drudgery; even independent women like Ann Yearsley, who had inherited a small business from her mother, still carried the triple burden of wage labour, housekeeping, and childcare.

⁴² Porter, Roy, *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (London: Penguin Group, 2001), p.329.

⁴³ For more information on Sabrina Sidney see Dr Kate Iles' PhD thesis *Constructing the Eighteenth-Century Woman: The Adventurous History of Sabrina Sidney*, submitted to The University of Birmingham in April 2012.

There was much idealisation of marriage, with publications like *The Wife. By Mira* (1756) advising the newly-wed bride to ‘let the inward satisfaction of her condition glow on her cheeks and sparkle in her eyes, but let her tongue keep a modest reserve’.⁴⁴ Hannah More opened her *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799) by quoting Cowper’s vision of marriage: ‘Domestic happiness, thou only bliss/ Of Paradise that has survived the fall’.⁴⁵ It is obvious from some of Yearsley’s work that she was not fooled by the myth propounded by contemporary discourse, that marriage was the ultimate fulfilment for a woman. Taken at face value, Yearsley’s poem ‘The Indifferent Shepherdess to Colin’⁴⁶ is seemingly uncontroversial. On the one hand the work perpetuated the theme of female refusal of love that was so well established by the end of the century; on the other hand Yearsley seemed ahead of her time with this poem, by presenting the reader with a woman protagonist who values her independence enough to decline the supposedly safe haven of marriage. Her refusal itself is an act of liberation and thus it is possible to read the poem as a site of feminine resistance.

Roy Porter tells us that received opinion in eighteenth-century society was that a woman should permanently depend on men, ‘as daughters on their fathers, and once married on the masculine dominion of their husbands’.⁴⁷ Moira Ferguson claims that ‘the visible liminality of working women made marriage a more alternative proposition’.⁴⁸ Yearsley’s heroine in ‘The Indifferent Shepherdess’ stated in no uncertain terms her eternal plan ‘to be calm and free’, going one step further to declare that she is not even looking for a husband: ‘No snare I spread for thee’.⁴⁹ The tone of the poem is conversational, and from

⁴⁴ Fowler Haywood, Eliza, *The Wife. By Mira, ... The Third Edition* (London: H. Gardner, 1773).

⁴⁵ More, Hannah, *The Works of Hannah More, Volume 1* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1843) p.311.

⁴⁶ Yearsley, Ann, *The Rural Lyre; a Volume of Poems* (London: G.G.J. and J Robinson, 1796).

⁴⁷ Roy Porter, *English Society in the 18th Century*, p. 24.

⁴⁸ Ferguson, Moira, ed, *First Feminists: British Women Writers 1578-1799* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1985) p.6.

⁴⁹ Ann Yearsley, ‘The Indifferent Shepherdess to Colin’ in *The Rural Lyre*, p.139, line 6.

the outset, when Colin is addressed as ‘my friend’, it is obvious that her refusal is real and there is no possibility of his becoming the husband of the shepherdess.

The need to hold onto her freedom is reinforced by the repetition of ‘liberty’, used within the work to end every stanza. Usually the heroines of this genre feigned indifference or preference for another man, but in this text it is clear that Yearsley’s shepherdess had no wish to subordinate herself to ‘masculine dominion’. She effectively rejects Colin’s proposal because she knows acceptance will rob her of the autonomy she values so much: ‘My heart shall sooner break/ Than I a minion prove’.⁵⁰ Her wish to be ‘estrang’d from tyrant man’ would, in reality, be almost impossible, especially financially – and even more so in the case of a shepherdess or, indeed, a milkwoman.⁵¹

Yearsley often appeared to write from her own experience, so it is tempting to draw conclusions about her feelings on marriage when we read this poem. The work certainly exploded the myth of guaranteed virtue and happiness within marriage for a woman. The ‘Indifferent Shepherdess’ is driven by female desire for freedom, scorning male desire and control. Colin is given no voice within the work, paralleling the poet’s husband John Yearsley’s invisibility in her writings, and so is unable to answer back. The heroine has an ironic and humorous attitude towards her suitor, with Yearsley again seemingly ahead of her time, effectively displacing a male-centred poetic in favour of a female-centred one, whilst at the same time wittily reversing the traditional pastoral assumptions about romantic love, and the inevitability of marriage for a woman.

The poorer peasantry did in fact have more freedom in marriage than their more affluent counterparts, although for them too this was changing as the period progressed. According to Roberta Hamilton, ‘The poor, having little, demanded little, and so might marry as they

⁵⁰ Ann Yearsley, ‘The Indifferent Shepherdess to Colin’ in *The Rural Lyre*, p.139, lines 3-4.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.141.

could or would'.⁵² But among the yeomen, who were ostensibly further up the social ladder, there was more insistence on a profitable and therefore arranged marriage.⁵³ John Yearsley, at the time of his marriage to Ann Cromartie in 1774, was designated a yeoman. The marriage was suitable to both parties: Ann was elevating herself socially by marrying a yeoman and John was gaining an established business woman for a wife. Waldron suggests that at this time John Yearsley may well have been owner and landlord of an inn or public house, originally owned by his father, called the Golden Ball.⁵⁴ However, by 1785, when the Deed of Trust was drawn up by Hannah More, he had apparently lost his yeoman status and was described by her as a 'labourer'.⁵⁵ The Golden Ball seems to have been a substantial property, with Henry Yearsley appearing in the parish records for 1741 as paying Poor Rate on this property of eight shillings and fourpence, considerably more than the rate for shops and other small businesses at this time. It is interesting to note that some years later, in a letter to Eliza Dawson, Ann Yearsley wrote:

I mean to quit my little Cotage [sic]: wherein I have known tranquillity, and which I would never leave, was my settled income equal to the expenditures of my family: I find it not so, and to subsist upon temporary obligations wounds me: therefore think of entering upon a business which promises fair as to worldly interest but is the worst adapted to my sentiments of any; it being that of a large public House.⁵⁶

In the light of her husband's possible history, or the fact that it was quite common for women to be responsible for the day-to-day running of alehouses,⁵⁷ this suggestion does not now seem so extreme. She ends this paragraph in her letter with the words 'I do not think this Subject is pleasing to you: it is not so to me'. It was evidently not pleasing to Eliza Dawson, as it appears she wrote immediately to Wilmer Gossip of Yearsley's plan;

⁵² Hamilton, Roberta, *The Liberation of Women: A Study of Patriarchy and Capitalism* (George Allen & Unwin (Publishers) Ltd, 1978) p.31.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Waldron, Mary, *Lactilla, Milkwoman of Clifton: The Life and Writings of Ann Yearsley, 1753-1806* (Georgia, U.S.A.: University of Georgia Press, 1996) p.15.

⁵⁵ Yearsley, *Poems on Various Subjects* (G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1787) p. xxvii.

⁵⁶ West Yorkshire Archive, Leeds. Thorp Arch Archive, Item 14. Letter from Ann Yearsley to Eliza Dawson, 29 December[?], 1788.

⁵⁷ Shoemaker, *Gender in English Society*, p.274.

he had subsequently forwarded the poet forty pounds, for which she thanked him in a letter dated 25 January 1789.⁵⁸ Dawson, writing to Gossip on 31 January expresses her relief: ‘I rejoice at her relinquishment of the disgusting plan she had form’d’.⁵⁹ It may be unkind to see Yearsley’s threatened action as an act of emotional blackmail, although she was well aware that Dawson, a young and impressionable girl, was in frequent correspondence with Gossip; it may also have been a legitimate plan by Ann and her husband to take up a trade in which he may have had previous experience.

There is a suggestion that the marriage between Ann and John was an arranged one. Hannah More, in a letter to Elizabeth Montagu dated Bristol, 27 August 1784, writes that Ann ‘was sacrificed for money at seventeen to a silly man whom she did not like; the Husband had an Estate of near *Six Pounds*, a year and the marriage was thought too advantageous to be refused’.⁶⁰ A few months later, in her preface to Yearsley’s first published work, More prudently, or perhaps being in possession of a few more facts, tempers her opinion slightly, commenting that Ann ‘was married very young, to a man who is said to be honest and sober, but of a turn of mind very different from her own’.⁶¹ Given the depth of feeling that we know from Yearsley’s work existed between Ann and her mother, it seems unlikely that she would have seen her daughter married unwillingly to a man not of her own choosing. It could be, however, that family circumstances had changed and that Ann had no choice but to sacrifice herself and marry advantageously. Also, Ann’s father is not mentioned in any writings, either of the poet or of anyone else, so we do not have any details of his life or character. And whilst her mother must have been a strong woman to exist in the marketplace of a tough trade like milk-selling, Ann’s father,

⁵⁸ Thorp Arch Archive. Item 16, Letter from Ann Yearsley to Wilmer Gossip, 25 January 1789.

⁵⁹ Thorp Arch Archive. Item 17, Letter from Eliza Dawson to Wilmer Gossip, 31 January 1789.

⁶⁰ Mahl, Mary R, and Helene Koon, eds, *The Female Spectator: English Women Writers Before 1800* (Ontario, Canada: Fitzhenry & Whiteside Ltd, 1977) p.277.

⁶¹ More’s Preface dated Bristol, October 1784, in *Poems on Several Occasions. With a Prefatory Letter by Hannah More*, written by Ann Yearsley (London: T. Cadell, 1785) p.vii.

Mr Cromartie, may still have been an overbearing father who pushed his daughter into a marriage of convenience.

Ann Yearsley's poem 'Lucy, A Tale for the Ladies'⁶² is considered by Tompkins as a version of the poet's own story, with John Yearsley cast as Cymon, the undesired husband.⁶³ Considering that Yearsley appeared, at times, to articulate her situation through her poetry, it is tempting, when we read the work as a story of a forced marriage to an unloved husband, by a tyrannical father, to concur with Tompkins' opinion. In the work, Lucy fell in love with Lelius, but the marriage is forbidden by her father who, having had his own bad experience of unrequited love in his youth, told his daughter that 'Who weds for Love, is quite a fool'.⁶⁴ Early on in the poem Lucy is told by Yearsley as narrator: 'Hard lesson! – Yet, dear girl 'tis true/ For marriage rights are very few'.⁶⁵ A warning, perhaps, from the poet who had found this was the case within her own marriage. Cymon is characterised as 'A stupid, money-loving man'⁶⁶ – not a massive leap from the 'silly' man described by More in her 1784 letter. And then in More's October Preface, John Yearsley's turn of mind which was 'very different' from his wife's,⁶⁷ becomes in the poet's text: 'she pants for converse, soft, yet strong/ In vain! – none flows from Cymon's tongue'.⁶⁸ Yearsley's words, within the work, highlight the fact that the married couple have nothing in common. The telling lines: 'They silent sit, he sinks to sleep/ Leaving the choice – to think, or weep' may have reflected the sad state of her own marriage.⁶⁹

⁶² Yearsley, Ann, *Poems on Various Subjects* (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1787) p.107.

⁶³ Tompkins, J.M.S., 'The Bristol Milkwoman' in *The Polite Marriage* (New York: Books For Libraries Press, 1969) p.85.

⁶⁴ Ann Yearsley, 'Lucy, A Tale For The Ladies' in *Poems on Various Subjects*, p.115, line 110.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 111, lines 57-58.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 116, line 125.

⁶⁷ Ann Yearsley, *Poems on Various Subjects*, p.viii.

⁶⁸ Ann Yearsley, 'Lucy, A Tale For The Ladies' in *Poems on Various Subjects*, p.117, lines 137-138.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.117, lines 139-140.

Ann Yearsley's marriage, arranged or not, did not appear to conform to the stereotypical union that could be expected at this time. With six children, her literary interests would have to take second place to her mothering duties. John Yearsley did not, or could not, stand in the way of his wife's literary ambition. Although there is no evidence to suggest that Yearsley was anything but a good mother, she was obviously 'allowed' enough time, and the marital freedom, to write as she wished. It may also have been the case that John Yearsley was unable to find work and was only too glad to allow his wife to earn whatever income she could. However, as a wife she would still have had no legal status: for instance, the decision to open a circulating library in the fashionable area of Hotwells near Bristol in 1793 may have been Ann's, and the money used may well have been earned from her published work, but the project could not have gone ahead without the agreement of her husband.

In 'To Mira, on the Care of her Infant'⁷⁰ Yearsley expresses fashionably liberal trends in childrearing, and reflects changes that were happening, mid-century, in attitudes to motherhood and parenting. The impact of John Locke's work was immense at this time. His thoughts were at the centre of philosophical discussion, with his psychological and educational theories stressing the need for parents to understand and care for their children.⁷¹ Medical tracts such as William Buchan's best-selling *Domestic Medicine* (1769) promulgated the practice of breastfeeding as a moral virtue. His phrase 'She who abandons the fruits of her love to the care of her nurse, must forfeit the name of mother',⁷² may have informed Yearsley's poem. Mary Wollstonecraft, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), concurs with Buchan, claiming that 'a wife in the present state of things who neither suckles nor educates her own children scarcely deserves the name of wife, and

⁷⁰ Yearsley, *The Rural Lyre*, p. 113.

⁷¹ Locke, John, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (London: A. and J. Churchill, 1693).

⁷² McCalman, *The Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age*, p.128.

has no right to that of citizen'.⁷³ This condemnation of mothers who employ a wet-nurse and do not nurse their own children, is mirrored so closely in Yearsley's poem, written in 1795, that it seems safe to assume that the poet was strongly influenced by Wollstonecraft's work; after all, they were banded together as 'unsex'd' women by Polwhele in 1798. Yearsley appeared to conform to the prescribed pattern of ideal womanhood by using as subject matter that most feminine of conditions – motherhood. On the one hand the work seems to idealise female nursing: 'Let us whose sweet employ, the Gods admire/ Serenely blest, to softer joys retire'.⁷⁴ On the other hand Yearsley, whilst locating the poem firmly within the female sphere of motherhood, also uses this domestic arena to show resistance to issues such as class, feminism, and war.

'Mira' is written in the persona of a fully mature woman who has lived the experience on which she gave advice; Yearsley was well qualified to do so having borne six children in seven years. The poem appeared to be autobiographical, with the narrator strongly advocating breastfeeding by the mother and not a wet-nurse, as was so often the custom with the middle classes:

To thy own bosom clasp Amyntor's heir!
 See not thy babe pining with speechless grief,
 His thirsty lips craving thy kind relief:
 Relief that Nature bids the infant claim;
 Withheld by healthy mothers, to their shame.⁷⁵

She claimed that being nursed by someone other than a child's natural mother was detrimental to a child's welfare: 'And soon her babe's wan look proclaim'd the cheat'.⁷⁶

⁷³ Wollstonecraft, Mary, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London: Penguin Books, 2004, extract) p.98.

⁷⁴ Ann Yearsley, 'To Mira, on the care of her infant', in *The Rural Lyre*, p.113, lines 9-10.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.115, lines 46-50.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.116, line 63.

Lower-class women had always breast-fed their own babies as they could not normally afford a wet-nurse, but as the century progressed there was a decline in this practice for the upper orders; wet-nurses, more often than not, came from the lower orders, and now the middle- classes became fearful of unwelcome influence on their offspring. *The Ladies Dispensatory*, published in 1740, claims that it was:

Madness... to leave a Body and a Mind, formed upon noble and generous Principles, to be corrupted by the base Mixture and Allay of a Stranger's Milk, especially if your Nurse (which too frequently happens) should prove dishonest, intemperate or lewd.⁷⁷

Vivien Jones, in her study of eighteenth-century women, sees breast-feeding presented here as 'a means of social control, protecting the middle class from moral infection by lower-class wet-nurses'.⁷⁸ The nursing figure above is also ascribed characteristics often used to describe the lower orders.

In 'Mira' Yearsley focused on the centrality of women to the home and by extension the community. She seemed energetically in favour of the special maternal duties of women: 'No: whilst our heroes from their homes retire/ We'll nurse the infant and lament the sire'.⁷⁹ Yearsley may have been influenced by Mary Wollstonecraft again here; in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft presents men's work in civil society and women's work within the family as equally demanding jobs of equal value to society.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Various contributors, *The ladies dispensatory: or, every woman her own physician. Treating of the nature, causes, and various symptoms, of all the diseases, that most peculiarly affect the fair sex. With a variety of proper remedies. The second edition* (London: James Hodges, 1740) p.ix.

⁷⁸ Jones, Vivien, *Women in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 59.

⁷⁹ Yearsley, 'To Mira, on the care of her infant' in *The Rural Lyre*, p.114, lines 17-18.

⁸⁰ Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p.98.

Showalter claims that Marxist Feminists wish to focus on class along with gender as crucial determinants of literary production.⁸¹ Marxist analysis has located the original female subordination in the phenomenon of private property.⁸² The more central the role of private property became, the more ground women lost. Hamilton states that bourgeois women are the culmination of this process, and that they are socially useless, with their sole function being to produce legitimate heirs for their husband's wealth.⁸³ Having brought an infant into the world, the early eighteenth-century lady's duty to it was largely discharged, with affluent families hiring wet-nurses and nurse-maids to tend their offspring. The sentiments expressed in Yearsley's poem are a direct critique of middle-class women who, having done their duty, were not prepared to give up the social round for the sake of bringing up their children themselves. In the poem, Circe's child dies because she would not give up her social life. To an extent, Yearsley's criticism is still current where, in today's world, class divisions are blurring but a 'nanny' is still considered a privilege of the wealthy.

For the first time, in the mid-century, a large body of child-rearing books were published and were widely disseminated. Earlier in the period women were named as 'managers' of their children and of the domestic sphere, even though a parallel series of medical texts defined women as prone to hysteria and irritability because of their reproductive organs, and related diseases that influenced character and identity.⁸⁴ At the time it seemed that, though women had always cared for children as mothers, nurses and midwives, child management assumed sufficient importance for it to be directed, though not enacted, by men. William Cadogan, a Bristol physician writing in 1750, was pleased to see that:

⁸¹ Showalter, Elaine, 'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness' in *Modern Criticism and Theory*, eds, David Lodge with Nigel Wood (Essex: Pearson Education Ltd, 2000) p.308.

⁸² Hamilton, *The Liberation of Women*, p.12.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁸⁴ Nussbaum, Felicity. A, *The Autobiographical Subject: Gender and Ideology in Eighteenth-Century England* (Maryland, USA: The John Hopkins University Press, 1989) p.205.

[It is with great Pleasure I see] at last the Preservation of Children become the Care of Men of Sense!.... In my Opinion, this Business has been too long fatally left to the Management of Women, who cannot be supposed to have proper Knowledge to fit them for such a Task, notwithstanding they look upon it to be their own province.⁸⁵

Whilst it is clear that Cadogan saw men as the decision-makers in matters of nursing, it is also apparent that they wanted nothing to do with the process itself: 'It may be fed and dress'd by some handy reasonable Servant, that will submit to be directed; whom likewise it may sleep with'.⁸⁶ Cadogan was also anxious to point out that if his plan for nursing a child is adhered to, then thankfully, for the loving father 'There would be no fear of offending the Husband's ears with the Noise of the Squalling Brat'.⁸⁷ In other words, men like Cadogan wanted total control over a child's upbringing without any of the nuisance.

In 'Mira' Yearsley made no apology for being in a woman's world, and through the politics of domesticity reclaimed women's power within the household, thus undermining male pretensions to superior knowledge on childcare issues. Women were able to use the education of an infant to challenge patriarchal domination, exerting their progressive maternal influence on young, untutored minds: 'play life's springs with energy and try the increasing thirst of knowledge to supply'.⁸⁸ This would hopefully produce new experience of enlightened childhood, leading eventually to greater social liberty.

Within 'Mira' Yearsley used conventional images, but still manages to present childcare not as the all-absorbing activity that it can become, but as a complex site of social being. The work is practically a treatise on socialising a child, and breaks away from conservative theory and repression. This in itself is a move towards emancipation, and is a direct political challenge to the 'household politics' of the time:

⁸⁵ Cadogan, William, *An essay upon nursing, and the management of children, from their birth to three years of age, by William Cadogan in a letter to one of the governors of the Foundling Hospital. The fourth edition, with additions* (London: J. Roberts, 1750) p.28.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Yearsley, 'To Mira, on the care of her infant' in *The Rural Lyre*, p.118, lines 99-100.

I grant, when he the distant toy would reach,
 Stern self-denial maiden aunts would preach:
 But, contrary to this cold maxim tried,
 Bestow the gift, Indulgence be thy guide;
 Ay, give unask'd; example has its kind,
 Pouring its image on the ductile mind.
 Hence nobler spirits shall their likeness breed,
 And one great virtue take the mental lead.⁸⁹

It is worth noting here that Hannah More, Yearsley's estranged patron, was one of the chief exponents of conduct literature, and was also unmarried; so it could be that the writer, using pejoratively the term 'maiden aunt', was subtly critiquing her. This poetic sequence denounces the 'cold maxim' of previous ideas and advocates new freedom for the 'ductile mind', hopefully producing a nobler kind of being for the future.

'Mira' was written during the war with France and pitched a male military world in opposition to a female world of child education and nurturance. The first ten lines declare men to be the perpetrators of war and chaos, whilst women, operating within a domestic environment, incur the pleasure of the Gods:

Whilst war, destruction, crimes that fiends delight,
 Burst on the globe, and millions sink in night;
 Whilst here a monarch, there a subject dies,
 Equally dear to him who rules the skies;
 Whilst man to man oppos'd wou'd shake the world,
 And see vast systems into chaos hurl'd,
 Rather than turn his face from yon dread field,
 Or, by forgiving, teach his foe to yield:

⁸⁹ Yearsley, 'To Mira, on the care of her infant' in *The Rural Lyre*, pp.121-122, lines 171-178.

Let us, whose sweet employ the Gods admire,
Serenely blest, to softer joys retire.⁹⁰

This sequence implies that war was the special occupation of men. Feminists of the period opposed violent military views, especially regarding the French Revolution, in favour of gradual or evolutionary reform under the guidance of benevolent parental instruction, in accordance with the model proposed by Mary Wollstonecraft. Yearsley sought to distance herself from a specifically female militancy, troping perhaps on reports of Frenchwomen appearing as Amazons in the service of the revolution:⁹¹ 'I am no Amazon; nor would I give/ One silver groat by iron laws to live'.⁹² She declared that her 'warmth would melt the fetters to the ground',⁹³ suggesting that women possessed a power that undermined the military strength held so closely by men.

In 'To the Honourable H _ _ _ _ E W _ _ _ _ _ E on Reading *The Castle of Otranto*'⁹⁴ Yearsley successfully undercut middle-class pretensions to literary culture, and wittily subverted Horace Walpole's attitude to women, using inter-textuality with his famous 1764 Gothic novel *The Castle of Otranto*. Throughout her poem the writer used Walpole's Bianca, a servant in his work, as her narrator. Through Bianca, Yearsley was able to comment on the reactions of the protagonists, contrasting male and female characters. Waldron calls the work 'something of a romp'⁹⁵ with Yearsley adopting a playfully critical edge throughout. Walpole, in a letter to Hannah More chastising her for giving Yearsley a copy of his work, said that 'you will have made a hurly-burly in this poor woman's head

⁹⁰Yearsley, 'To Mira, on the Care of her Infant' in *The Rural Lyre*, p.113, lines 1-10.

⁹¹ Landry, Donna, *The Muses of Resistance: Laboring-Class Women's Poetry in Britain, 1739-1796* (Cambridge U.K: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1990) p.261.

⁹² Yearsley, 'To Mira, on the care of her infant' in *The Rural Lyre*, p.114, lines 19-20..

⁹³*Ibid.*, p.114, line 22.

⁹⁴ Yearsley, 'To The Honourable H****E W*****E on Reading *The Castle of Otranto*' in *Poems on Several Occasions*, p.67.

⁹⁵Waldron, *Lactilla*, p.95.

which it cannot develop or digest'.⁹⁶ He seemed impervious to Yearsley's poetic teasing, or perhaps chose to ignore it, and apparently failed to notice that the writer was able to 'develop' and 'digest' his tale well enough to use her understanding of it as an effective instrument to poke fun at Walpole's depiction of a female character.

Yearsley had reason to be interested in Walpole's work; he was a friend and correspondent of Hannah More, her ex-patron, and was also linked with the death of Yearsley's fellow Bristol-born poet, Thomas Chatterton. Walpole refused to believe in Chatterton's work and was blamed, unjustly some say, by the *Monthly Review* in 1777 for his death. Walpole himself feared his name was 'in bad odour at Bristol on poor Chatterton's account'.⁹⁷ Yearsley claims to have read his novel in 1784, and then wrote her poetic response to it. It is perhaps no coincidence that in this same year Walpole advised Yearsley to 'drive her cows from the foot of Parnassus and hum no more ditties!'.⁹⁸

Whilst Yearsley's *Otranto* cannot, in truth, be called a radical feminist work, the poem was critical of Walpole's patriarchal plotting and female characterisation in his novel. Walpole, in the preface to his book, clearly stated why he had used Bianca in the plot: her 'womanish terror and foibles ... conduce essentially towards advancing the catastrophe'.⁹⁹ She is thus a peripheral character whose only use is to emphasise, with her 'womanish terror', the horror of the plot. Yearsley seemed to resent the fusion of lower-class and female mindlessness in Walpole's characterisation of the servant, and successfully undercut this by giving the power to Bianca in her poem, thereby liberating her from male oppression: 'Bianca's Pen now owns the daring line'.¹⁰⁰ Yearsley thus successfully subverted Walpole's stereotyping of the working-class female. And when she sarcastically

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.57.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.275.

⁹⁹ Walpole, Horace, *The Castle of Otranto* (London: Penguin Group, 2001) p.6.

¹⁰⁰ Yearsley, 'The Castle of Otranto' in *Poems on Several Occasions*, p.67, line 3.

asks, within her poem, ‘And who expects *her* muse should drop from heaven’¹⁰¹ (Yearsley’s italics), she is challenging the assumption that labouring-class writers possess ‘natural genius’ but not skill. She also makes it clear that some of the ‘foibles’ Walpole seems to attribute to women also apply to men:

The empty tattle, true to female rules,
 In which thy happier talents ne’er appear,
 Is mine, nor mine alone, for mimic fools,
 Who boast *thy* sex, Bianca’s foibles wear.¹⁰²

Yearsley’s proud nature had little time for the passive Hypolita, the prince of Otranto’s wife in the novel, who meekly acquiesced to all her husband’s plans to discard her. Yearsley is contemptuous of Hypolita’s nature, which she considered ‘passive to excess’, so opposite to her own, claiming that the lady’s ‘low submission suits not souls like mine’.¹⁰³ Yearsley is openly critical of Walpole’s antifeminism throughout the text. In her poem she exalts in the hidden power of women, compared to male overt exhibitions of power:

You Manfreds boast your power, and prize your state;
 We ladies our omnipotence conceal.¹⁰⁴

Yearsley went on to attack women’s confused submission to male desire:

Implicit Faith, all hail! Imperial man
 Exact submission; reason we resign;
 Against our senses we adopt the plan
 Which Reverence, Fear, and Folly think divine.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p.67, line, 4.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p.68, lines 9-12.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, lines 49-50.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p.71, lines 59-60.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p.70, lines 53-56.

Female submission to masculine authority is represented as a plan designed by ‘Imperial’ man, not God. Landry sees this as a ‘daring challenge to the ideology of female subordination as perpetuated by both church and state’.¹⁰⁶

Throughout her poem Yearsley systematically took themes from Walpole’s story and used them in an ironic way, mocking what she saw as juvenile tendencies in the bourgeois imagination: ‘While Wisdom smiles to hear the senseless squalls’.¹⁰⁷ The text shifts to Walpole’s friendship with More, and for Yearsley it seemed that the bond of polite society, from which she is excluded, is embodied in that friendship. She presents a damning critique of their relationship directly addressed to More (Stella):

Stella! If Walpole’s spectres thus can scare,
Then near that great Magician’s walls ne’er tread,
He’ll surely conjure many a spirit there,
Till fear-struck, thou art number’d with the dead.
Oh! With this noble sorcerer ne’er converse,
Fly, Stella, quickly from the magic storm;
Or, soon he’ll close thee in some high-plum’d hearse,
Then raise another Angel in thy form.¹⁰⁸

Yearsley implied here that More’s friendship with Walpole was flimsy, and that she is easily replaced; the writer could also be speaking ironically of More’s ‘good’ works as a reformer when she calls her an ‘Angel’. Yearsley enjoined Stella to ‘trust not his art’, using two dubious exponents of the supernatural, ‘Magician’ and ‘Sorcerer’, to suggest that his ‘art’ was of the occult, and potentially non-existent, rather than the intellectual. By asking ‘Stella’ not to ‘converse’ with Walpole she is signifying that whilst More might be intimidated by his intellectual power, she – by writing this poem – was not. She suggested

¹⁰⁶ Landry, *The Muses of Resistance*, p.147.

¹⁰⁷ Ann Yearsley, ‘The Castle of Otranto’, in *Poems on Several Occasions*, p.68, line 14.

¹⁰⁸ Yearsley, ‘The Castle of Otranto’ in *Poems on Several Occasions*, p.72, lines 81-88.

that he would not hesitate to abandon More: 'He'd vanish, leave thee in the jaws of death/ And quite forget to close thy aching eyes'.¹⁰⁹ Yearsley comically feigned fear of Walpole's reprisals:

But is Bianca safe in this slow vale?
 For should his Goblins stretch their dusty wing,
 Would they not bruise me for the saucy tale,
 Would they not pinch me for the truths I sing?
 Yet whisper not I've called him names, I fear
 His Ariel would my hapless sprite torment,
 He'd cramp my bones, and all my sinews tear,
 Should Stella blab the secret I'd prevent.¹¹⁰

Yearsley, with an obvious understanding of Shakespeare's work, likens Walpole to Prospero, and alludes to the writer's associates, with their 'dusty wing', as old-fashioned. She ends the work by undercutting Walpole's high literary status, saying that she and Walpole are equal in the eyes of God:

To thee, Oh, balmy God! I'm all resign'd,
 To thee e'en Walpole's wand resigns its power.¹¹¹

Yearsley's systematic analysis of Walpole's text is witty, and shows that she fully understands the issues of gender and class that are packaged by, and for, polite society. By creating a subtext she manages to show readers that she is not taken in by what Landry calls Walpole's 'thrills and chills' mechanisms.¹¹² Yearsley shows, with this work, that she is not impressed or intimidated by the formidable intellectual powers of Walpole, or indeed Hannah More; she is more than capable of dealing with influential writers of the

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p.73, lines 91-92.

¹¹⁰ Yearsley, 'The Castle of Otranto', in *Poems on Several Occasions*, p.73, lines 93-100.

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p.74, lines 107-108.

¹¹² Landry, *The Muses of Resistance*, p. 144.

period. Walpole was an impressive intellectual force, but Yearsley had no qualms in throwing down the gauntlet to this literary giant and is successful in undercutting his pretensions to superior knowledge and understanding. Whilst Yearsley did not exactly go out on a limb with her critique of his work – contemporary opinion on Walpole's novel was mixed, with the 'Critical Review' condemning the book's subject matter¹¹³ – still, as a female, labouring-class writer, exhibiting this kind of expertise in subverting the work of an influential writer, she may well have caused ripples of apprehension in the level of society from which she was excluded.

It is evident that, by using her poetry as a platform from which to disseminate her ideas, Yearsley was able to surmount, and even resist the gender stereotyping and ideology that existed in the period. It seemed that she was able to write her way through potential intimidation from major literary figures such as Walpole and More, and to offer within the poems analysed a credible resistance to, and a subtle subversion of, writers who were above her socially. She had succeeded, through her literary endeavours, in avenging scurrilous comments from Hannah More and Horace Walpole, two of her principal detractors.

¹¹³ Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*, Introduction, p.xvi.

6. BECOMING A PROFESSIONAL WRITER

Ann Yearsley, as a labouring-class, female author was writing from the margins of society. Hannah More acknowledged her difficulties, although she could not have understood them, when she told Elizabeth Montagu that her milkwoman protégée ‘writes under every complicated disadvantage’.¹ Yearsley was disadvantaged in many respects when she tried to forge a literary career for herself. Gender was an issue for most women writers living in a patriarchal society, but despite this, as the century wore on, more and more women became professional writers, and by the 1790s, as Roger Lonsdale states:

What can hardly be doubted is that the education and literary reputation of women, particularly in the middle and upper classes, had markedly improved in the course of the century and that they had come to play an increasingly significant part, both as producers and consumers, in the rapidly expanding book trade.²

These wealthy upper-class ladies or affluent middle-class women could afford nannies for their children and servants for their homes, thus avoiding many of the constraints that stood in the way of their poorer counterparts. Yearsley, writing from the bottom of a highly stratified society, also had to contend with class stereotyping and repression if she was to make her way in the literary marketplace. The writer had six children, a home to run, and a business to attend to. She, and other labouring-class women like her who aspired to a literary career, had to use what little leisure time they may have had for writing. Here is an endearing preface to her poem ‘Soliloquy’ that illustrates this point perfectly:

Author to her son..... Go you to bed, my boy.

Son..... Do you write tonight?

Author..... I do.

¹ Yearsley, Ann, ‘Hannah More’s ‘A Prefatory Letter to Elizabeth Montagu’,’ in *Poems on Various Subjects* (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1787) p.xi.

² Lonsdale, Roger, ed, *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) p.xxi.

Son (laying his watch on the table)...See, how late it is!

Author..... No matter. You can sleep.³

It is also interesting to note, assuming this quote refers to personal experience, that Yearsley appeared affluent enough for her young son to own a watch.

The aim of this chapter is to examine how, and to what extent, Ann Yearsley, a woman writer from the labouring classes, whose makeshift education marked her as one of the inarticulate poor, managed to work her way through the constraints imposed on a woman in her station, not only to write a varied body of work, but also to get it into print. Constraints on a female writer from the labouring classes (e.g. free time to write, access to literature, education, discrimination and prejudice by upper- and middle-class men and women) are analysed. A discussion of the ‘World of Letters’, and how Ann Yearsley fitted into it, will show how she had to overcome these constraints. An opposing strand of this discussion explores experiences that helped Yearsley to become a writer: the cult of the ‘natural genius’, the Bristol cultural, political, and social landscape, and the turmoil of the 1790s when Britain was at war with France, which may have increased repression for the lower orders, but also created inspiration for many writers. The debate concerning artistic value is examined within the context of defining literary professionalism, and the respectability of writing as a commercial activity. The significance of print culture in the period, and its impact on Yearsley as a writer, forms an important part in the discussion of her meteoric rise from seller of milk to published author. If Yearsley was to realise her aspirations of becoming a published writer, she would always have to overcome the assumption that to be poor and uneducated was to be without the means of acquiring the civilising values associated with the printed word. Yearsley’s poetry, and any relevant

³ Yearsley, Ann, ‘Soliloquy’ in *The Rural Lyre* (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1796) p.43.

correspondence, is analysed to show the extent to which she defied this stereotyping, and also how she operated within it.

Jeremy Black, John Brewer, and William St Clair, in studies dealing with eighteenth-century society and culture, explore literacy and its development.⁴ These accounts are enhanced by specific studies, such as that of James Raven and John Feather, dealing with eighteenth-century British publishing.⁵ Attention is paid to the importance of newspapers in reaching a larger audience than that of conventional books. G.A. Cranfield's study of provincial newspapers, although written in 1962, is still a valuable resource when assessing their importance in bringing literature to the provinces.⁶ This chapter draws on studies of Ann Yearsley such as Mary Waldron's extensively researched work on her life and writings, and Kerri Andrews' more recent study of the patronage relationship between Yearsley and Hannah More.⁷ Andrews' work explores Yearsley's increasing radicalism, thus throwing new light on some aspects of the milkwoman's literary career. This thesis builds on previous work by showing Yearsley as a fully-fledged writer, and then evaluating the success of her published work. Primary sources include Yearsley's poetry and correspondence, along with contemporary comment by people such as James Lackington, an important bookseller of the period, Thomas Gisborne, an Anglican priest,

⁴ Black, Jeremy, *Culture in Eighteenth-Century England: A Subject for Taste* (London: Hambledon and London, 2005). Brewer, John, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1997). St. Clair, William, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁵ Raven, James, *The Business of Books: Booksellers and the English Book Trade* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007). Feather, John, *A History of British Publishing* (London: Routledge, 1988).

⁶ Cranfield, G.A., *The Development of the Provincial Newspaper 1700-1760* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

⁷ Waldron, Mary, *Lactilla, Milkwoman of Clifton: The Life and Writings of Ann Yearsley, 1753-1806* (Georgia, U.S.A.: The University of Georgia Press, 1996). Andrews, Kerri, *Ann Yearsley and Hannah More: Patronage and Poetry* (London: Pickering and Chatto (Publishers) Limited, 2013).

and Hester Chapone, daughter of a gentleman-farmer, and member of the Bluestocking circle.⁸

Ann Yearsley, whose literary career spanned the years 1785 to 1796, wrote at a time of great social and cultural change. The Printing Act, passed originally in 1662, confirming the dominance of London in the book trades, lapsed in 1696, permitting printing more widely across England.⁹ By 1774 a series of developments saw arguments over literary property and copyright settled, with publishers emerging as the dominant power in the book trade.¹⁰ Education, especially for upper- and middle-class women, expanded alongside the increasing desire to read and to retain the skill of literacy. Increased literacy, in turn, created the need for more books, a greater need for authors to write them, and publishers to produce them.

Literary activity still took place in the shadow of an oppressive patriarchy.¹¹ But, as this chapter shows, the education of women, along with their reputation, improved significantly during the period. This did not sit well with some men. Jeremy Black states that ‘Women’s reading troubled many male commentators, and indeed, some did not like them having views’.¹² Not all men sought to restrict women’s literary progress, however, and in 1798 Ralph Griffiths, a long-time editor of the *Monthly Review*, wrote optimistically that:

The Age of ingenious and learned Ladies who have excelled so much in the more elegant branches of literature, that we need not hesitate in concluding that the long agitated dispute between the two sexes is at length determined; and that it is no longer

⁸ Lackington, James, *Memoirs of the Forty-Five First Years of the Life of James Lackington, the Present Bookseller in Chiswell-Street, Moorfields, London*, (London: James Lackington, 1794) p. 420. Thomas Gisborne, *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* (London: T. Cadell jun. and W. Davies, 1801) p.224. Chapone, Hester, *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind* (London: John Sharpe, 1829, first published 1770) p.11.

⁹ Raven, *The Business of Books*, p.9.

¹⁰ Feather, *A History of British Publishing*, p.51.

¹¹ Lonsdale, *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets*, p.XX1.

¹² Black, *Culture in Eighteenth-Century England*, p.117.

a question, whether woman *is* or is *not* inferior to man in natural ability, or less capable of excelling in mental accomplishments.¹³

Women's salons and circles were now held in higher regard and it became acceptable for women to discuss literature alongside men, at tea tables.¹⁴ This was unlikely to apply to most women of the lower orders, who were mainly excluded from these venues, and also, because of their limited access to education, were intellectually ill-equipped to engage with this level of society. Lack of leisure time to participate was, for the lower orders, another factor in their exclusion. These circles, though they became more respected by men, did not normally cross social boundaries and include labouring-class women. Ann Yearsley's co-patrons, Hannah More and Elizabeth Montagu, were members of one of the period's most famous literary circles, the Bluestockings, with Montagu being labelled the 'Queen of the Blues'.¹⁵ Bluestockings were a network of mainly wealthy, educated ladies who, according to Janet Todd, provided 'a sober and decorous equivalent of the seventeenth-century courtly salons'.¹⁶ Thomas Rowlandson's satirical hand-coloured etching, however, presents a very different cartoon scene of unlady-like and aggressive members of the circle brawling and 'locked in mortal combat'.¹⁷ Whilst Bluestockings wished to nurture talent from the lower orders, they did this mainly with the acceptance of much of the gender and class ideology of the period. They had no intention of elevating the social status of writers from the lower orders, such as Ann Yearsley, who may have had the ability to write potentially seditious texts. In fact, Elizabeth Montagu's words, in a letter to Hannah More following that lady's dispute with Yearsley ('I rejoice with you that we are soon to be free from any connection with the milkwoman') show that the co-patrons were relieved to distance themselves from the writer as soon as she showed signs of breaking out of the

¹³ Lonsdale, *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets*, p.XX1.

¹⁴ Black, *Culture in Eighteenth-Century England*, p. 116.

¹⁵ Eger, Elizabeth and Lucy Peltz, *Brilliant Women: 18th-Century Bluestockings* (London: National Portrait Gallery Publications, 2008) p.16.

¹⁶ Todd, Janet, *The Sign of Angellica: Women, Writing and Fiction 1660-1800* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) p.123.

¹⁷ Eger and Peltz, *Brilliant Women*, p. 127.

mould of uneducated poet, but more importantly out of her allotted social position.¹⁸ And, whilst it was the norm for writers from the lower orders to be excluded from membership of these elite literary salons, Kerri Andrews, in her study of Hannah More's patronage of Ann Yearsley, posits the notion that Yearsley may have indeed belonged to a provincial literary circle.

According to Andrews, Bristol-born Joseph Cottle, the twenty-one-year-old proprietor of a new bookshop opened in his home town in April 1791, became established as the centre of one of the most important literary circles of his generation.¹⁹ Tim Whelan, in his contribution to the *Coleridge Bulletin*, of a reading of Basil Cottle's book, *Joseph Cottle and the Romantics*, agrees with the importance of Cottle's circle, naming some of the most influential writers of the period: Robert Southey, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and William Wordsworth, as members at various times.²⁰ And, whilst Joseph Cottle's career as a bookseller may have been short-lived (1791-1799), he published prestigious texts by these writers: Coleridge's *Poems on Various Subjects*, Southey's epic poem 'Joan of Arc', and the first printed copies of Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*, to name but a few. Richard Cronin states that in publishing poets of this calibre, Cottle advanced a claim that his native Bristol might 'just as well as London be a centre from which an ambitious young writer could launch a literary career'.²¹

Andrews adds Ann Yearsley to the list of members of Cottle's circle, and posits her friendship with him as proof. She claims that 'Yearsley was therefore one of the earliest

¹⁸ Roberts, William, 'Letter from Mrs. Montagu to Miss H. More', Sandleford, 1784 in *Memoirs of the Life and Correspondence of Mrs. Hannah More* (New York: Harper & Brothers, Vol. 1, 1834) p. 212.

¹⁹ Andrews, *Patronage and Poetry*, p.121.

²⁰ Whelan, Tim, reads *Joseph Cottle and the Romantics*, by Basil Cottle, in *The Coleridge Bulletin*, New Series, 32, Winter, 2008, p.100. www.friendsofcoleridge.com/Coleridge-Bulletin.htm, accessed 17.02.2014.

²¹ Cronin, Richard, 'Joseph Cottle and West-Country Romantics', in *The Coleridge Bulletin*, New Series, 28(NS), Winter, 2006, p.3. www.friendsofcoleridge.com/Coleridge-Bulletin.htm, accessed 17.02.2014.

members of the nascent Cottleian circle of local writers'.²² Andrews admits, however, that no details survive of how Yearsley and Cottle first became personally known to each other.²³ Cottle, in his *Reminiscences*, goes only as far as saying that he 'was well acquainted with Ann Yearsley'.²⁴ Andrews provides no evidence that Yearsley had any interaction with the more influential members of Cottle's circle. Indeed, Southey's critique of her work in his *Lives* seems to suggest that he knew hardly anything about her.²⁵ His comments on Yearsley and her work are mostly negative, stating that 'Her vocabulary...was that of the books she has read, her syntax that of the ignorant and vulgar with whom she converses'.²⁶ This hardly suggests that he would welcome her into a literary circle. His chapter on the poet was based mainly on third-party information, using much of More's Preface to Yearsley's first volume of poetry, and a notice of her novel from the *Monthly Review*.²⁷ He confesses that he had never seen 'either her novel or her tragedy'.²⁸

The evidence for a lasting friendship between Yearsley and Cottle is perhaps stronger than that for Andrews' more tenuous notion of Yearsley as a member of an elite, possibly all-male, literary circle, although Stuart Curran, in his essay on Mary Robinson, a writer who grew up in Bristol and was educated at the Miss More's celebrated academy, places her in Cottle's 'school' around the end of the century.²⁹ That Yearsley and Cottle were friends is beyond doubt. In 1793 Cottle gave the poet his financial support, and it is tempting to

²² Andrews, *Patronage and Poetry*, p.124.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

²⁴ Cottle, Joseph, *Reminiscences of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey*, originally published in 1847. A Public Domain Book, Kindle edition, no dates, location 645. Downloaded 25 October 2013.

²⁵ Southey, Robert, *Lives of the Uneducated Poets* (London: H.G. Bohn, 1836).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.127.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.131.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.133.

²⁹ Curran, Stuart, 'Mary Robinson's *Lyrical Tales* in Context', in Wilson, Carol Shiner, and Joel Haefner, eds, *Re-Visioning Romanticism: British Women Writers 1776-1837* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994) p.17.

think that it was in connection with the setting up of Yearsley's circulating library in the same year. Cottle describes his charitable act thus:

I remember in the year 1793, an imposition was attempted to be practised upon her, and she became also involved in temporary pecuniary difficulties, when by timely interference and a little assistance I had the happiness of placing her once more in a state of comfort.³⁰

Yearsley turned to him again in 1797 when her husband had apparently left the family, and the imminent failure of her circulating library was pushing her into bankruptcy. Her words: 'some of the Bills I take the liberty of sending – more I must send',³¹ suggest that she was confident of his financial support as well as his friendship. In her letter of 1796, thanking Cottle for his gift of an 'elegant production of John the Baptist', she enclosed a copy of an unpublished poem of her own praising his 'social love and early friendship'.³² This seems to reinforce the notion of friendly correspondents who respected and admired each other's work. However, the time lapse between Cottle's help and the publishing of his *Reminiscences* is fifty-four years, and the bookseller was noted for his 'poor memory'.³³

Kerri Andrews, in an internet interview in 2014, clarifies her thoughts on this issue. When asked how the new archival evidence, uncovered while researching *Ann Yearsley and Hannah More: Patronage and Poetry*, led her to reconsider their dispute and their places in wider literary networks, she replied that the new archival material indicated that Yearsley's circle of acquaintances was much wider than we had known. Andrews had found 'tantalising hints' that the poet knew some of the most prominent Bristol radicals of the day, but had not found enough evidence to conclude that Yearsley was part of the inner circle which met above Cottle's bookshop. However, it was suggestive that she was at

³⁰ Cottle, *Reminiscences*, Kindle version, location 651.

³¹ Yearsley, Ann, 'Letter to Joseph Cottle, Bristol Wells, 1797', in Kerri Andrews, *Patronage and Poetry*, pp.140-141.

³² Andrews, *Patronage and Poetry*, p.127. The poem was enclosed in a letter dated 4 November 1796. It is untitled save for the dedication: To Mr Joseph Cottle on receiving his elegant production of John the Baptist etc.

³³ Whelan, *Joseph Cottle and the Romantics*, review, p.104.

least connected to some groups of people who had not before been considered part of her social context.³⁴

The desire to repress writers from the lower orders became more urgent in the light of Thomas Paine's revolutionary pamphlet *Rights of Man*, published in 1791 at the mid-point in Ann Yearsley's career, and considered by many established figures to be one of the most dangerous revolutionary publications circulating in the early 1790s. By 1793 sales of Paine's work were estimated at 200,000 copies, a success that was made possible by the cheapness of the edition, which allowed it to circulate freely,³⁵ and also by publishers such as George Robinson who sold copies of the edition, and were eventually fined for doing so.³⁶ Paine argued for a change in the distribution of the wealth of the nation, and because his text gave a sense of class-awareness to the lower orders it was seen as an attempt to fuel radicalism; it so alarmed the upper classes that they fought back.³⁷ Christopher Wyvill, an English cleric and political reformer, wrote in 1792 that he deplored the 'mischievous effects' of Paine's work in tending to 'excite the lowest classes of the People to acts of violence and injustice'.³⁸ Like many others who feared the perceived threat of social disruption, he used his considerable influence to urge other moderate reformers to mount a counter-agitation to minimise the effect of 'Mr Paine's ill-timed...and pernicious counsels'.³⁹

³⁴ *Five Questions*, in BARS (British Association for Romantic Studies), blog posted 7 January 2014, question 2.

³⁵ Webb, R.K., *The British Working Class Reader, 1790-1848* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1955) p.38.

³⁶ Raven, *The Business of Books*, p.175.

³⁷ Scheuermann, Mona, *In Praise of Poverty: Hannah More Counters Thomas Paine and the Radical Threat* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2002) p.40.

³⁸ Wyvill, Christopher, 'Political Papers' iii, Appendix pp. 67-68', in E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1991) p.120.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.120.

Hannah More, as a well-established writer, was ‘the weapon of choice’.⁴⁰ William Weller Pepys wrote to More on 5 December 1792 saying: ‘Both Mrs Montagu and I most earnestly request you to exact your admirable Talents at this Juncture for the good of your country (which is in great Peril)...We think you would do it most successfully in the way of a Dialogue between two persons of the lower orders’.⁴¹ Following this suggested format, which was to prove successful for More, *Village Politics* was penned at ‘white-heat’ and published anonymously in 1792, thus beginning her career as a political tract writer.⁴² Between 1795 and 1798 More and her sisters, along with other contributors, wrote and published a large number of *Cheap Repository Tracts*⁴³ intended to counteract Voltaire, Paine, and French Revolutionary ideas of democracy and political reform, alongside promoting a proper regard for the social order.⁴⁴ More became a household name with the Tracts selling over two million copies between 1795 and 1796 alone.⁴⁵

Ann Yearsley, along with many others who had initially supported the French Revolution, now felt that it had become destructive. In 1793 Yearsley engaged for the first time with events in France. In this year she published two poems reflecting on the death of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette; both were advertised in *Felix Farley’s Bristol Journal*. These texts expressed horror at ‘Murders ruthless hand’ which killed Marie Antoinette, and grief at the death of Louis: ‘E’en Stoic Pride shall weep a murder’d King’.⁴⁶ These poems see Yearsley anxious to position herself on the side of conservatism and respectability. The poet was well aware that events in France made it necessary for people like herself, with a

⁴⁰ Scheuermann, *In Praise of Poverty*, p.40.

⁴¹ Stott, Anne, *Hannah More, the First Victorian* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) p.139.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.139.

⁴³ Eger and Peltz, *Brilliant Women*, p.120.

⁴⁴ Webb, *The British Working Class Reader*, p. 25.

⁴⁵ Eger and Peltz, *Brilliant Women*, p.121.

⁴⁶ Yearsley, Ann, *An Elegy on Marie Antoinette*, p.2. and *Reflections on the Death of Louis XVI*, p.4. Both texts published under Ann Yearsley’s own imprint in 1793.

reputation for even the mildest kind of political dissent, to make some sort of definitive statement regarding her political position.

Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*, by attempting to stir up political unrest among the lower classes, led to a more rigorous policing of them, and especially their writings. The Royal Proclamation, issued in 1792, against seditious publications signified the first serious alarm on the part of the government, and effectively acknowledged the depth and intensity of democratic agitation in England.⁴⁷ There was now a real fear among the ruling classes that the lower orders, if sufficiently incited, might rise up with formidable power.⁴⁸ Mary Wollstonecraft, though not of the lower orders, published her radical text *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* in 1790. This was a direct response to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the French Revolution in France*.⁴⁹ His text condemned the French who, in his opinion, had rebelled against 'an unlawful monarch'.⁵⁰ The essence of Wollstonecraft's reply emphasised women's freedom, as well as education. Two years later she published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* which took issue with male writers on women, especially Rousseau in *Emile*.⁵¹ Yearsley's poem 'To Mira on the care of her Infant', written in 1795, was influenced by Wollstonecraft's advice on wet-nursing and breast-feeding. Wollstonecraft's work was immensely influential when it was written, but as events in France became more violent and murderous, her work became notorious as a possible seditious publications.

Ann Yearsley, as a perceived member of the lower orders, presented a dual threat: the possible disruption to the social order with seditious writing, and their challenge to the dominant gender ideology. From Yearsley's point of view, she would benefit if Paine and

⁴⁷ Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p.116.

⁴⁸ Scheuermann, *In Praise of Poverty*, p. 38.

⁴⁹ Burke, Edmund, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.38.

⁵¹ Todd, Janet, *Dictionary of British Women Writers* (London: Routledge, 1991) p.728.

other radicals were to promote class and gender equality. Conversely, if the upper classes became too worried that the social order might become difficult to maintain, efforts to control writers like her could possibly accelerate. Looking at Yearsley's career after this date, it would seem that any attempts to constrain her were futile or non-existent. Her writing became more radical, and her literary output increased rather than decreased from 1790 when she published *Stanzas of Woe*, to *The Rural Lyre* at the end of her career in 1796. She also published *Earl Goodwin*, a play in 1791, along with incidental single poems, *Reflections on the Death of Louis XVI*, in 1792, *Poem on the Last Interview Between the King of Poland and Loraski*, and *Elegy on Marie Antoinette*, both published in 1793, and a novel *The Royal Captives* in 1795.

This indicates that women writers from the lower orders were not excluded from having their work published; indeed, the eighteenth-century cult of the 'natural genius' or the 'uneducated poet', ensured that many writers from the labouring classes got their work into print, if only for its novelty value. John Brewer claims that the number and variety of authors in print, from the lower orders, was remarkable, with books by Horace Walpole and Lord Chesterfield being sold alongside those by agricultural labourers such as Stephen Duck, the thresher poet, and Jane Holt, a servant. Robert Dodsley, a footman who wrote poems and plays, also became a successful publisher.⁵²

Ann Yearsley was writing at a time when gender was not an insurmountable issue for the woman writer; in fact, according to Lonsdale: 'In the first decade of the eighteenth century two women published collections of their verse. In the 1790s more than thirty did so'.⁵³ This may be what Lonsdale himself calls 'a crude measure', but it does, however, give some idea of the changing status of women in the literary marketplace. These changes

⁵² Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, pp.140-141.

⁵³ Lonsdale, *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets*, p.xxi.

were catalysed, to some extent, by the spread of literacy, and especially of reading. John Brewer claims that 'Books, print and readers were everywhere'.⁵⁴

A new reading public was steadily growing, and William St. Clair states that the development of reading had progressed far enough for:

A man of limited education, who had previously been restricted to an ancient chapbook with a few pages and a crude woodcut, could afford to buy *Robinson Crusoe*. A woman who could not herself read with ease could hear Thomson's *Seasons* read aloud by a member of her family.⁵⁵

James Lackington (1746-1815), a wealthy bookseller credited by some with revolutionising the British book trade, and whom we can safely say was well in touch with book sales, comments thus:

I cannot help observing, that the sale of books in general has increased prodigiously within the last twenty years. According to the best estimation I have been able to make, I suppose that more than four times the number of books are sold now than were sold twenty years since.⁵⁶

The rise of the reading public saw women writers become more numerous, and women readers more influential in the literary marketplace. This in turn created new anxieties about literacy, culture, social conflict, and social control. Women's reading troubled many male commentators who considered it potentially seditious. Books provided women with a way of staying inside their domestic sphere, but able to communicate with the public sphere outside; this led to the perception that the separate spheres ideology was being subverted.

Conduct books, written by men and women, were held to be the best way to shape expectations of womanhood. They sought to reinforce the separate spheres ideology by

⁵⁴ Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, p. 187.

⁵⁵ St. Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*, p. 138.

⁵⁶ Lackington, *Memoirs*, p.420.

giving dire warnings against reading literature that was not chosen by the church, parents or teachers. A woman must not neglect her domestic duties to read books which were purely for pleasure. Maria Edgeworth and Hannah More repeatedly depicted wives reading with husbands, mothers with children, daughters with parents, as a means of figuring literacy as domesticity.⁵⁷ Women commentators such as Chapone, More and Edgeworth were in effect promoting patriarchy.

Texts seeking to advise women and young girls on how to behave often included instructions on what they should or should not read. Hester Chapone, writing in 1773 to her fifteen-year-old niece, devoted much of her letter to advice on reading. She forcefully claimed that ‘Your Bible must be your chief study and delight’, and then proceeded to give in-depth instructions on what she should read from it.⁵⁸ She goes on to recommend scripture-related books such as Dr Delaney’s *Life of David*,⁵⁹ and tells her niece that she ‘must hate and avoid everything, both in books and in conversation, that conveys impure ideas’.⁶⁰ She warns the young girl against reading novels, which raise expectations of extraordinary adventure, and cause readers to admire extravagant passion, thus leading to dissatisfaction with their life. Chapone is firmly persuaded that ‘the indiscriminate reading of such kind of books corrupts more female hearts than any other cause whatsoever’.⁶¹ Even Ann Yearsley, in a letter to Eliza Dawson, condemned the reading of novels, claiming that ‘I never read *Novels*’, and that her new young friend and patron should ‘Soar above them, my dear Girl! move not in the hackney’d trammels of the present female taste;

⁵⁷ Pearson, Jacqueline, *Women’s Reading in Britain 1750-1835: A Dangerous Recreation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.96.

⁵⁸ Chapone, *Letters*, p.11.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.26.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.57.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.145.

it is light, trifling and despicable, and void of noble energy of thought'.⁶² Despite attempts to repress it, the trend of reading and writing novels did not go away; and although Yearsley, in her recommendation to her friend, was seeking to be a literary critic rather than a social one, she herself subsequently published her own novel *The Royal Captives* in 1795, which could not be described as 'light' or 'trifling': she also had copies of novels such as *Desmond* and *Celestina* by Charlotte Smith in her circulating library which she set up some years later.⁶³ St. Clair states that women's reading was also feared because it took the imaginations of women and young people away from the social control of families. Conduct books advised that 'No book should be read in private which could not, with propriety, be read aloud among the whole family'.⁶⁴ Hannah More concurred, but went a step further saying that 'The reading of novels in private had much the same effect on women as drunkenness had on men – it made them morally unfit for their duties'.⁶⁵ In reality More is expressing concern that women will not only neglect their duties in favour of reading novels, but also that they may become discontented with domesticity.

Thomas Gisborne (1758-1814), an Anglican priest, poet, and member, along with William Wilberforce, of the abolitionist group The Clapham Sect, was in agreement with More. In his text on the duties of the female sex, he insisted that 'To every woman, whether single or married, the habit of regularly allotting to improving books a portion of each day, and, as far as may be practicable, at stated hours, cannot be too strongly recommended'.⁶⁶ Gisborne's 'improving' books, like Chapone's, were mainly religious. He also condemned the reading of novels, claiming that 'To indulge in a practice of reading novels is, in

⁶² Felsenstein, Frank, 'Ann Yearsley and the Politics of Patronage. The Thorp Arch Archive' Part II: Letters to and from & Papers concerning Mrs Yearsley the Bristol Milkwoman, in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 22:1 (2003) p.36. Item 14: Letter from Ann Yearsley to Eliza Dawson 29 December (?) 1788.

⁶³ Yearsley, Ann, *Catalogue of the books, tracts, etc. Contained in Ann Yearsley's public library, No.4 Crescent, Hotwells* (Bristol: Printed For The Proprietor, 1793) pp.20, 21.

⁶⁴ St. Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*, p. 282.

⁶⁵ Hannah More, 'Moral Sketches of Prevailing Opinions, Manners, Foreign and Domestic' (1819), in St. Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*, p.283.

⁶⁶ Gisborne, *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex*, p. 224.

several other particulars, liable to produce mischievous effects'; this practice, he warns, could also be habit-forming.⁶⁷ What Gisborne was doing, within this work, was articulating the underlying patriarchal fear of losing control over women. This notion was exemplified when we see the scare-mongering he resorted to in order to reinforce his warnings: 'Let her remember that there is an all-seeing eye, which is forever fixed upon her, even in her closest retirement'.⁶⁸

As the ability to read spread, so did its value in social prestige; further pressure was exerted on the need for literacy with the spread of industrialisation and its increasing demand for skills and responsibility. Even though the ruling classes sought to control reading matter, reading became an unstoppable force that involved all classes from top to bottom of the social spectrum. Webb claims that 'the craze for cheap fiction is the outstanding characteristic of popular literature'.⁶⁹ An earlier form of low-priced literature available to the poorer classes was the chapbook, which usually consisted of up to twenty-four pages of scandal and tales couched in earthy humour, printed on poor quality paper, selling for as little as a farthing. Novels were also now selling in cheap versions published in penny or twopenny volumes.⁷⁰ Lackington summarised the extent of reading thus:

The poorer sort of farmers, and even the poor country people in general, who before that period spent their winter evenings in retailing stories of witches, ghosts, hobgoblins, etc, now shorten the winter nights by hearing their sons and daughters read tales, romances, etc, and on entering their houses, you may see *Tom Jones*, *Roderick Random*, and other entertaining books stuck upon their bacon rack, etc....In short, all ranks and degrees READ.⁷¹

Hand-in-hand with the spread of reading and literacy came the spread of printing. The Licensing Act of 1662, and its reinforcement in 1684, with a new charter granted to the Stationers' Company, ensured that the government could monitor publications and also

⁶⁷ Gisborne, *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex*, p. 228.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.225.

⁶⁹ Webb, *The British Working Class Reader*, p. 31.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.31.

⁷¹ Lackington, *Memoirs*, p.421.

maintain a monopoly of commercial publishing. The lapse of this act in 1696 effectively removed major legal constraints, but did not entirely remove government control or create a completely free market at that point.⁷² This relaxing of constraints, however, gave rise to a swift response in the provinces, and within a few weeks Bristol had a press set up by William Bonny; Shrewsbury, Exeter, and Norwich followed suit over the next few years.⁷³

Whereas, previously, most publications had been confined to London, subsequently provincial presses produced a diverse amount of literature: the 1730s saw the rise of the magazine, the 1740s the rise of the novel, and by 1760 the local newspaper had been firmly established as an essential part of country life.⁷⁴ Advances in transportation and the postal service also saw reading matter from London become more accessible to the provinces. The activity of groups with Post Office franking privileges lowered the costs of newspaper distribution, thus enabling them to be more widely available throughout the country.⁷⁵ Raven states that ‘From mid-century, bookselling and newspaper publishing in the country towns increased sharply’.⁷⁶ John Feather concurs, saying that ‘by the end of the eighteenth century, millions of copies of newspapers were leaving London for the provinces every year’.⁷⁷

Not only did newspapers give an insight into many aspects of eighteenth-century life, they did so for a small cost. Whilst, initially, the cost of a newspaper was prohibitive due to the severity of tax imposed, there were ways around this for the poorer classes: as well as being able to buy half-price newspapers on the second day of publication, one copy of the newspaper itself could be read by up to thirty people.⁷⁸ Cranfield claims that, according to

⁷² Brewer, *Pleasures of the Imagination*, p.131.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁷⁴ Cranfield, *The Development of the Provincial Newspaper*, p. vi.

⁷⁵ Raven, *The Business of Books*, p.104.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.14.

⁷⁷ Feather, *A History of British Publishing*, p. 100.

⁷⁸ Webb, *The British Working Class Reader*, pp. 32-33.

contemporary commentators, the poor were reading newspapers above everything else.⁷⁹ Even though most were illiterate they could still listen to a newspaper being read aloud. Country printers were quick to realise that if they were to be successful they needed to appeal to a humbler type of reader. The *Bristol Weekly Intelligencer* insisted that its paper was suitable for ‘all persons of all Orders and either sex, and for all Degrees and Capacities’.⁸⁰ This covered more or less everybody in everyday eighteenth-century society; and for the lower orders this was sometimes the only reading matter available.

There is no reason to suppose that Ann Yearsley would be excluded from this cheaper form of cultural experience because of the cost. In her formative years her mother was a business woman – it was her milk-selling business that daughter Ann was to take over, initially with a regular income. It seems that Mrs Cromartie was a parent eager to see her children well educated, and was said to have borrowed books from her customers, possibly the affluent residents of Clifton where she sold milk, so it is likely that the family would have been able to afford either to take a newspaper, or at least share in the reading of a copy.

The content of newspapers was as varied as its readership, with crime, especially of a sexual nature, as much a feature of some newspapers then as now. Entertainment also featured significantly, with book reviews, adverts for books, and theatrical news all available for the readers. Foreign news became a good page-filler, with *The Bristol Oracle*, for example, from 26 June to 11 December 1742, devoting a page of every issue to social and political events in Russia.⁸¹ Newspapers often provided political items and comments, and were seen as active forces contributing to social and political change. From a literary point of view, most provincial newspapers, along with advertising and reviewing books,

⁷⁹ Cranfield, *The Development of the Provincial Newspaper*, p. 188.

⁸⁰ Cranfield, *The Development of the Provincial Newspaper*, p. 184.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

also found space for the work of local writers: *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal* featured poetry in 1770, 'Written by a Brewer's Daughter'. The young Thomas Chatterton's work first appeared in the same publication.⁸²

The dissemination of literature into the provinces was important to a labouring-class writer such as Ann Yearsley, who could easily have become isolated, not only from the community because she wrote poetry, but more importantly if she was to have a career in writing, from the progress and trends in the burgeoning literary marketplace. She was lucky in this respect, because Bristol as a dynamic and prosperous port city, as well as a centre of nonconformity, was among the first wave of cities outside London to have its own provincial newspaper. As John Latimer (1824-1904), a journalist who wrote a history of Bristol, proudly commented: 'As Bristol was at the time the second city in the kingdom as regarded manufacturers and commerce, it was fitting that she should be the first to follow the example of London in the establishment of a newspaper.'⁸³

According to Raven: 'In 1700, there were no provincial newspapers in England; but between 1701 and 1721, forty provincial newspapers had been started, many proving an important prop to the printers who moved out of London in the early years of the century.'⁸⁴ Among the pioneers of the newspaper trade was William Bonny who, in 1695, arrived in Bristol from London to set up the first printing press in the area; the city may even have produced one of the first newspapers outside London. According to Cranfield, very few copies of the earliest provincial newspapers have survived, but one of the oldest is the issue of William Bonny's *Bristol Post Boy* dated 12 August 1704.⁸⁵ This publication survived until at least December 1715, when it was superseded by *Farley's Bristol Post*

⁸² *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 10 November, 1770.

⁸³ Latimer, John, *The Annals of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century* (Printed for the Author, 1893) p.48.

⁸⁴ Raven, *The Business of Books*, p.261.

⁸⁵ Cranfield, *The Development of the Provincial Newspaper*, p. 13.

*Man.*⁸⁶ Bristol was lucky to have the Farley family as the driving force behind its newspaper industry, and playing a major part in publications, with practically every member of the family at one time or another setting up their own newspaper, and engendering healthy competition amongst themselves as a family, and with other publishers.⁸⁷

Unlike other newspapers at the time, the Farleys were not afraid to voice their political views; and it was in *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal* that the riots which occurred on 30 September 1793, following the imposition of tolls on Bristol Bridge, were reported. The disturbance allegedly necessitated the reading of the Riot Act three times. The military were called in when the toll houses were set on fire: shots were fired by soldiers, resulting in twenty deaths and forty wounded.⁸⁸ This incident was the inspiration for Yearsley's 'Bristol Elegy' (*Rural Lyre*, 1796), a poem which saw the writer engaging with an intensely political situation. Her text presented a vivid and dramatic picture of the riot as seen from the viewpoint of an apparent eye-witness, and contained notes by the author providing background information to some of the people who were killed in the incident – it is possible that Yearsley had utilised some of the information from the newspaper report.

According to Raven, the advertisement dominated the newspaper.⁸⁹ For the aspiring local writer, newspapers, with their ever-expanding coverage, were a cheap way to advertise their work. Ann Yearsley's first volume of poetry was promoted in *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal* dated 11 June 1785:

The Bristol MILKWOMAN'S POEMS, with a PREFACE, are this Day published by T. Cadell, in the Strand, LONDON to whom Subscribers are requested to send for their Books. Also to J. Lloyd and T. Mills, Booksellers, in Wine-street, Bristol: also at

⁸⁶ Penny, John, *An Examination of the Eighteenth-Century Newspapers of Bristol and Gloucester* (Bath Spa University College, December 1996) p.2. <http://fishponds.org.uk/brispapr.html> accessed 26.4.2013.

⁸⁷ Cranfield, *The Development of the Provincial Newspaper*, p. 56.

⁸⁸ *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, October 1793, p.3.

⁸⁹ Raven, *The Business of Books*, p.268.

E. Shiercliffe, opposite the Draw Bridge. A few unsubscribed for Copies may be had – Price 6s. Sew'd.⁹⁰

These newspaper advertisements became even more crucial to Yearsley after her break-up with Hannah More, when she could so easily have disappeared from the public eye. They gave her a platform from which to defend herself against criticism, and also gave her the opportunity to promote herself and her work. The fourth edition of the poet's first volume, *Poems on Several Occasions*, originally published in 1785, was promoted in *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal* in 1786, as having 'prefixed a succinct narrative, explaining the cause of the present difference between her late patron and the author'. This same edition also advised, in 'Proposals for publishing by Subscription', that Ann Yearsley's 'A Collection of POETRY in BLANK VERSE, etc, etc on various subjects never before published' was 'the produce of her own uncultivated genius, without any alterations or corrections'.⁹¹ It seemed that the newspaper had given Yearsley the opportunity to defend the accusation made against her, that More had 'washed and combed her trumpery verses',⁹² to make them fit for public consumption. It is also interesting to note that within this same advertisement Yearsley still found it prudent to maintain the image of the 'natural genius' that More originally presented her as. She hoped her work 'will prove an amusing novelty to those who may prefer 'Nature's unclipt wing of poetic fancy'.⁹³ Of course it may be that Yearsley was being ironic; she certainly overemphasises the 'naturalness' of her work, and of herself, within this advertisement.

Yearsley also took the opportunity to publicly accuse More of 'mean artifice and false representation practised to ruin her reputation (and with it to sink her poor children to the

⁹⁰ *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 11 June 1785, p.3.

⁹¹ *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 25 November 1786, p.3.

⁹² Lonsdale, *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets*, p.393.

⁹³ *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 25 November 1786.

lowest ebb of misery)'.⁹⁴ It seemed that the poet was not above using her children to reinforce her case against More. The promotional piece about Yearsley was above average in size for a literary advertisement in *Farley's Journal*. Unusually, it included an itemised list of 'most illustrious Personages', subscribers including more than a dozen aristocrats, one of whom, The Rt. Hon. The Earl of Bristol, became Yearsley's new patron.⁹⁵ It is tempting to think that this list of wealthy subscribers was printed for the benefit of Hannah More and her friends, who would not be pleased that the milkwoman appeared to have elevated herself socially.

Yearsley seemed free to use Felix Farley's newspaper to publicly berate More, but then More had done much of the same, although less publicly within her correspondence to her friends, in a battle that had become bitter and vitriolic on both sides. In 1788, when both Yearsley and More had written poems on the slave trade, Felix Farley published, along with an extract from the poem, a notice of Yearsley's publication 'POEM on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade', complete with its dedication to 'The Right Honourable and Right Reverend Frederick, Earl of Bristol, Bishop of Derry, etc'.⁹⁶ The newspaper gave the Earl his full and extensive title which not only looked good for Yearsley, but also may have aroused More's concern that her lowly ex-protégée now had aristocratic connections. Felix Farley championed Yearsley throughout her writing career, featuring advertisements for all her future work, and running an advertisement in 1793 promoting the opening of her circulating library.⁹⁷ Support of the writer continued until her death,

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Yearsley, *Poems on Various Subjects*, p.xxxi.

⁹⁶ *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 9 February, 1788.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 19 January 1793.

with *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal* for 10 May 1806 carrying a respectful mention of her demise.⁹⁸

As we have seen, Ann Yearsley used the image of the 'unlettered genius' when it suited her, although at other times she resented the title. In a letter to William Pepys dated 1785, More tells of Yearsley's indignation at her labouring-class epithet: 'There is hardly a species of slander the poor, unhappy creature does not propagate against me, in the most public manner, because I have called her a milkwoman.'⁹⁹ Of course, More's comment is underpinned by the disbelief that she could be challenged by a social inferior.

Gustav Klaus, in his study of labouring-class writers, claims that there were two waves of plebeian poetry, with the first phase effectively beginning in 1730 with Stephen Duck's publication of *The Thresher's Labour*.¹⁰⁰ This opened up the floodgates for writing from all sections of the lower orders: Bloomfield and Woodhouse were cobblers, Mary Leapor was the daughter of a gardener, Mary Collier was a washerwoman, and John Bryant was a pipe-maker. All were hoping to emulate the thresher's spectacular rise from farm labourer to court poet. As Robert Tattersal, a bricklayer from Kingston-on-Thames, put it: 'Since Rustick Threshers entertain the Muse/Why may not Bricklayers too their Subject chuse?'¹⁰¹

The second phase occurred in the last quarter of the century from about 1770 onwards, when labouring-class poets were beginning to have a consciousness of themselves as a separate, specific literary group. This notion was given legitimacy for the first time in 1836 by Robert Southey who was an influential literary figure and had been appointed Poet

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 10 May 1806.

⁹⁹ Roberts, *Memoirs*, Vol. 1, p. 219.

¹⁰⁰ Klaus, Gustav, *The Literature of Labour: 200 Years of Working Class Writing* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1985) p.2.

¹⁰¹ Tattersal, Robert, *The Bricklayer's Miscellany: or, poems on several subjects: written by Robert Tattersal ... The second edition* (London: J. Wilford, 1734), Introduction.

Laureate in 1831. His work, *Lives of Uneducated Poets*, featured Stephen Duck, Ann Yearsley, John Frederick Bryant, and John Jones, amongst other labouring-class writers; and by devoting a book to uneducated poets, an eminent writer and literary personage of Southey's stamp gave credence to the existence of a labouring-class tradition. However, whilst Southey may have given credence to the genre of the uneducated poet, he was not so much championing them, as making a distinction between the language of 'high' and 'low' culture, claiming that:

The mother tongue of the lower classes ceased to be the language of composition; that of the peasantry was antiquated, that of the inferior citizens had become vulgar. It was not necessary that a poet should be learned in Greek and Latin, but it was that he should speak the language of polished society.¹⁰²

Southey also undermined any real talent writers from the lower orders may have had by referring to 'the poets in low life, who with more or less good fortune had obtained notice in their day'.¹⁰³ Southey here aligned himself with most patrons of labouring-class writers who, more often than not, undermined their protégé's work; More, in her preface to Yearsley's first work, said the milkwoman's work 'looked like skill'.¹⁰⁴ Southey's criticism of Ann Yearsley was mainly negative, trivialising her writing, and dismissing her circulating library. He incorrectly stated that Yearsley's play *Earl Goodwin*, published in 1791, was the milkwoman's last work; in fact, *The Rural Lyre*, her last volume of poetry, was not published until 1796. *Earl Goodwin*, according to Southey, was 'represented with little success at the Bristol and Bath theatres'.¹⁰⁵ That her play was shown in these theatres at all is a measure of Yearsley's success as a writer. Southey confessed that 'I have never

¹⁰² Southey, *Lives of the Uneducated Poets*, p.13.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p.12.

¹⁰⁴ Yearsley, *Poems on Several Occasions, fourth edition* (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1786), p. xi.

¹⁰⁵ Southey, *Lives of the Uneducated Poets*, p.13.

seen either her novel or her tragedy'.¹⁰⁶ His comments on Yearsley as a writer appear to be uninformed by the actual texts.

One of the characteristics of this second phase was a pre-occupation with writers from the lower orders – the ‘uneducated’ or ‘natural genius’. The upper and middle classes thought that writers who had not been formally educated retained a certain unadulterated ‘naturalness’ in their work. They were praised for the spontaneity of their poetic voice, but were also expected to stay within their station. There were not many writers from the lower orders who could enter the literary marketplace without some form of patronage; and because this patronage was often a whim, or a desire to be part of a trend, many of them were only able to publish one volume of work before they were summarily discarded. Ann Yearsley was an exception in that she published several works spanning poetry, prose, and drama.

These so-called ‘uneducated’ poets were often taken up by patrons and marketed for their ‘amazing’ ability to produce works of literature, although great care was taken not to elevate their texts to the level of ‘high culture’. In this new tradition most writers, or often their patrons, declared in a preface to their text what they did for a living. Yearsley was promoted by More as ‘Lactilla’, the milkwoman poet, thus making clear to readers exactly which stratum of society she came from, and thereby excluding her from elevation socially. Whilst this ‘novelty’ aspect may have made their work more desirable for the reading public, it could, however, have blinded readers to any real merit the work may have had.

In her Prefatory Letter to her potential co-patron Elizabeth Montagu, Hannah More went to great lengths to ensure that Ann Yearsley appeared to fit the upper-class, ideological,

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.132-133.

perception of the ‘uneducated’ poet, portraying her as a ‘poor illiterate woman’ who was ‘born and bred in her perfect humble station, and had never received the least education, except that her brother taught her to write’.¹⁰⁷ The apparent paucity of Yearsley’s education was however, ‘correctly’ underpinned by ‘The Study of the Sacred Scriptures, which has enlarged her imagination and ennobled her language’.¹⁰⁸ She summarised the milkwoman’s literary accomplishments thus:

With the Night Thoughts, and Paradise Lost, I found her well acquainted: but she was astonished to learn that Young and Milton had written anything else. Of Pope, she had only seen the Eloisa, and Dryden, Spenser, and Prior were quite unknown to her, even by name. She has read a few of Shakespeare’s Plays, and speaks of a translation of the Georgics, which she has somewhere seen, with the warmest poetic rapture.¹⁰⁹

More stressed Yearsley’s apparent lack of education, claiming that she ‘does not know a single rule of Grammar, and who has never even *seen* a Dictionary’.¹¹⁰ She elaborated how her new-found protégée had obtained what little education she had: ‘When I expressed to her my surprise at two or three classical allusions in one of her Poems, and inquired how she came by them, she said she had taken them from the little ordinary prints which hung in a shop-window’.¹¹¹ Webb, in his study of the British working-class reader, claims that ‘Walls, vehicles, shop windows, newspaper offices, and bookstalls made the streets a sort of poor man’s library’.¹¹² It is hard to believe that More, who already had some of Yearsley’s work in her possession, did not see that while it was one thing to pick up ‘classical allusions’ from prints in a shop window, it was quite another to have the poetic ability to use them correctly in context within her work.

More was keen to emphasise the ‘naturalness’ of Yearsley’s work – she would be sorry to see the ‘wild vigour of her rustic muse polished into elegance, or laboured into

¹⁰⁷ Hannah More’s ‘Preface’ in Ann Yearsley’s *Poems on Various Subjects*, p.viii.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p.x.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p.ix.

¹¹⁰ Hannah More’s ‘Preface’ in Ann Yearsley’s *Poems on Various Subjects*, p.xi

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.xii.

¹¹² Webb, *The British Working Class Reader*, p. 24.

correctness'.¹¹³ When, however, More, contradicting her own comments about the milkwoman's work, stated that Yearsley 'abounds in false concords, and inaccuracies of various kinds; the grossest of which have been corrected',¹¹⁴ she effectively admitted to editing the poet's texts. It may be, however, that More was anxious to let Elizabeth Montagu, know that she was able to control what a poet from the lower orders produced, and so prevent any seditious writing coming through.

Davidoff and Hall state that a minority of middle-class girls, especially those from professional families, had access to a general, liberal education.¹¹⁵ Moralists and educationalists were unanimous that there had to be a good reason for a girl to be educated at school rather than at home.¹¹⁶ Essentially the difference in schooling for boys and girls was underpinned by the debate on separate spheres. Schools were said to give boys the confidence they needed for an adult life in the public sphere, whereas home education was preferred for girls since their 'moral and physical development could be more closely supervised'.¹¹⁷ Alexander Jardine, military officer and close friend of William Godwin, whilst recommending, in his publications of 1788 and 1793,¹¹⁸ equal education for women, insisted that this should take place at home because no school could sufficiently resemble the family',¹¹⁹ thereby cementing women's place in the private sphere of domesticity.

For the lower orders, some sons might be sent to school, but daughters were mainly kept at home 'to milk, sew, cook, and bear children'.¹²⁰ They were expected to make do with the

¹¹³ Hannah More's 'Preface', in *Poems on Various Subjects*, p. x.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850* (Oxford: Routledge, 2002) p.290.

¹¹⁶ Cohen, Michèle, 'To think, to compare, to combine, to methodise': Girls' Education in Enlightenment Britain' in Knott, Sarah and Barbara Taylor, eds., *Women, Gender and Enlightenment* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) p. 227.

¹¹⁷ Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, p. 290.

¹¹⁸ Alexander Jardine, *Letters from Barbary, France, Spain, and Portugal* (1788), and *An Essay on Civil Government, or Society Restored* (1793 in Knott and Taylor, *Women, Gender and Enlightenment*, p.734.

¹¹⁹ Knott and Taylor, *Women, Gender and Enlightenment*, p.234.

¹²⁰ Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, p.291.

teaching of unpaid kin and friends.¹²¹ There is no evidence that Ann Yearsley attended any kind of school, but if she did it was the norm for girls' education to last only one or two years with possible interruptions of family demands. Yearsley's education fitted almost exactly into this pattern of schooling for the lower orders. She was taught to read by her mother, who also had a milk-selling business to run, and to write by her brother, who, it seems, had some kind of formal education and may have contributed towards sister Ann's knowledge of the classics. Yearsley's education, however she obtained it, was more than sufficient, as her poetry, with its elegance and many references to the classics, demonstrates.

More, in her Prefatory Letter, was either intentionally understating the level of Yearsley's learning, so that Elizabeth Montagu would be able to safely place the milkwoman in the category of 'natural genius', rather than a learned writer, and so would be more inclined to sponsor her; or More naively thought that she would be able to control Yearsley and keep her within the confines of the lower orders. More, on hearing from the milkwoman that she enjoyed Virgil's *Georgics*, commented 'How I stared. She sounded so professional!'¹²² This was a portent of what was to come, with More inadvertently articulating Yearsley's aspirations towards a literary career, rather than being limited to the 'small volume' that her patron had in mind.¹²³

In her first production under the tutelage of Hannah More, Yearsley appeared to conform to More's portrayal of her. The first poem in the collection 'Night. To Stella' (Stella was Yearsley's name for More) showed the writer, as if to reinforce the absence of education,

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² Hannah More's letter to Elizabeth Montagu dated Bristol, 27 August 1784, in Mahl & Koon, *The Female Spectator*, p.278.

¹²³ Yearsley, *Poems on Various Subjects*, p.xiii.

claiming that ‘learning, Heaven’s best gift is lost to me’,¹²⁴ signifying herself as ‘Uncouth, uncivilised and rudely rough/Unpolished, as the form thrown bye by Heaven’.¹²⁵ In reality ‘Night’ is an atmospheric work littered with classical terms, all used correctly in context. The tragic muse Melpomene is invoked, for instance, and the language of the work itself is sophisticated and cultured. Perhaps More was too entranced by the amount of flattery Yearsley wisely included within this text to see that her protégée’s work exhibited a skill and sophistication, along with a breadth of reading, which belied More’s perception of what a labouring-class poet should or would be able to produce.

In Ann Yearsley’s second volume of poetry, *Poems on Various Subjects*, the author was determined to show that the quality of her work owed nothing to More’s corrections and instructions. The text was emphatically advertised as her own, and was in defiance of rumours that only More’s revision of her first volume of poetry made it tolerable. Yearsley included her poem ‘To MR****, An Unlettered Poet, on Genius Unimproved’.¹²⁶ Within this poem, she had enough confidence in her education, however limited it may have been, to flaunt her breadth of reading with the inclusion of multiple references to the classics. It is worth noting that Yearsley, in this second volume of work, was still calling herself ‘A Milkwoman of Clifton, Near Bristol’, and claiming, in her dedication to the Earl of Bristol, that her poems in this second volume were ‘the effusions of NATURE only’, and that she herself is ‘unadorned by art’ and ‘unaccomplished by science’. She asks the Earl to ‘Remember that they were written in the short intervals of a life of labour, and under every disadvantage which can possibly result from a confined education’.¹²⁷ Evidently, this early in her career, she still deemed it prudent to be poor and a ‘natural genius’. By the 1790s the tradition of natural genius began to decline. Dugald Stewart, a Scottish philosopher

¹²⁴ Yearsley, Ann, ‘Night. To Stella’ in *Poems on Several Occasions*, p.6, line 79.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.9, lines 135-136.

¹²⁶ Yearsley, *Poems on Various Subjects*, p.77.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.vi.

originally involved in the successful promotion of Robert Burns to cult status in 1787, now rejected the notion. It is a tribute to Yearsley's determination to carve out a literary career that she published more after the start of this decline than before it.

Ann Yearsley aspired to become a professional writer with a successful literary career. Although Hannah More and her friends tried to thwart these ideas, Yearsley's tenacity and desire for literary autonomy meant that she was able to overcome the potentially insurmountable obstacle of losing both her patron and her publisher, and carry on with her ambitions. The first and perhaps most difficult step towards becoming an author was to find a publisher. More, as a well-established writer, was the conduit between Yearsley and her own publisher, Thomas Cadell, at least for the milkwoman's first work. Brewer claims that the intimidating task of securing a publisher was best accomplished in London, in person, which was not always possible for the provincial writer.¹²⁸ Yearsley, living in Clifton, was distanced logistically and socially from London publishers, but it seemed that she had no difficulty in securing new publishers, G.G.J. and J. Robinson, who went on to publish all her future work.

George Robinson was a major bookseller who published prominent literary women of the day such as Ann Radcliffe, Hester Lynch Thrale, and Elizabeth Inchbald.¹²⁹ Robinson gained a reputation as one of the greatest literary investors of the second half of the eighteenth century, and was characterised by William West as 'The King of Booksellers'.¹³⁰ According to G.E. Bentley, the Robinson firm was 'of a liberal political persuasion', and was not averse to taking risks – they were fined in 1793 for publishing

¹²⁸ Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, p. 154.

¹²⁹ Raven, *The Business of Books*, p.175.

¹³⁰ Bentley, G.E. Jr., 'Copyright Documents in the George Robinson Archive: William Godwin and Others, 1713-1820', p.68, in *Studies in Bibliography*, Vol. 35 (1982), pp.67-110.

Paine's *Rights of Man*.¹³¹ From a publisher's point of view, 'Lactilla, milkwoman of Clifton' was hardly unknown, and hardly a risk, as the flurry of publicity surrounding her dispute with More saw Yearsley become a controversial, and therefore very marketable, commodity. Many people may have wanted to buy her work out of curiosity, and to read the work of a writer who had fallen into abject poverty, but had risen to poetic fame, ostensibly engineered by Hannah More, a famous writer of the day.

As the century progressed and authors became less dependent on patronage, books published by subscription rose rapidly, with poems, sermons, music, novels and plays printed in this way.¹³² Hannah More, as patron, had worked tirelessly to raise subscriptions for Yearsley's first work written under her tutelage. Subscriptions numbered over a thousand and included members of the aristocracy and clergy, along with members of the Bluestockings, and other famous intellectual figures.¹³³ Yearsley's second publication had under half as many subscribers, but this time included her new patrons and friends: the Earl of Bristol ordered twenty copies, six of Eliza Dawson's family subscribed, along with the poet's new friend and financial helper, Wilmer Gossip.¹³⁴ Yearsley's third and last publication, *The Rural Lyre*, had an even shorter list of subscribers, fewer than two hundred, but it is probably safe to assume that she was well-known enough for her publishers to be confident that her work would sell.¹³⁵

Brewer states that two versions of a writer were in existence: one was a slave to the market, writing for money, and the other was a writer above commerce.¹³⁶ The high-ranking social and financial status of aristocratic and upper-class female writers such as Mary, Lady Chudleigh, Anne Finch, Countess of Winchelsea, and Elizabeth Montagu

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p.68.

¹³² Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, p. 164.

¹³³ Yearsley, subscription list in *Poems on Several Occasions*, 1785.

¹³⁴ Yearsley, subscription list in *Poems on Various Subjects*, 1787.

¹³⁵ Yearsley, Ann, *The Rural Lyre* (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1796), List of Subscribers.

¹³⁶ Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, p. 149.

usually meant that they were able to publish without remuneration. Ann Yearsley may not have wanted to be a slave to the market, but her financial circumstances dictated that this must be so. However, she had been brought up in the world of commerce as a single trader selling milk, so earning money from her writing may have been second nature to her. Also, she was in good company here, as many of the major literary figures of the century such as Pope, Johnson, and Goldsmith depended on the popularity of their writing for their income. By the late 1790s, mid-way through Yearsley's career, the professional female author was virtually established, with at least three to four hundred women published in the decade.¹³⁷ Trends changed, however, and poetry lost ground to the stage and the novel. Ann Yearsley had the skill required to write across these genres, and thereby keep up with the literary marketplace. Her grounding in commerce meant that she always had an eye to the market, demonstrating adeptness in capitalising on its requirements from the perspective of the self-taught, labouring-class writer.

Yearsley, along with most 'unlettered' poets, was caught between the valorisation of the 'natural genius' and attempts by the upper and middle classes to maintain the social order. This contradiction was exemplified by Hannah More in her 'Preface' to Yearsley's first volume of poetry. She tells of the milkwoman's 'rustic muse', which is both 'bold and vehement' and 'striking and original',¹³⁸ but then goes on to say that the poet should not be 'indisposed', presumably by a writing career, from carrying on with the 'laborious employments of her humble condition'.¹³⁹ Yearsley was constantly thwarted by those above her, with her talent and skill ignored, or at best undermined. Many writers from the lower orders were pawns in the power games of their patrons, who trivialised their protégés as curiosities and commodities.

¹³⁷ Todd, *The Sign of Angellica*, p. 214.

¹³⁸ Yearsley, *Poems on Several Occasions*, p.x.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p xvi.

Many disadvantages and constraints could have affected Yearsley's writing career: gender and class ideology of the period, lack of formal education, and a patron who was at the forefront of maintaining the social order. This was in addition to her personal circumstances: at the start of her writing career she had six children under the age of ten to care for, along with running her milk-selling business. These factors alone would have daunted most writers from her class. As a milkwoman turned poet, Yearsley endured social stigma and contestation all her creative life. The labouring-class writer, to succeed in any measure, not only had to attain the necessary literary skills, but also to fashion an identity and an acceptable poetic voice. Yearsley proved surprisingly adept at manipulating circumstances, and at times, people, to her advantage and attaining these requirements. A literary career, in the light of repression from above, and adverse personal circumstances, was rendered an unlikely achievement. But Yearsley, through her poetry, articulated her determination to carry on forging a writing career against the odds. Somehow, with the help of a few friends and supporters, and her own self-confessed 'stubborn and a savage will', she made it happen, eventually writing herself out of poverty and the need for manual work.

7. CONCLUSION

Ann Yearsley's writing career spanned the years from 1785 to 1796, and encompassed many political moments: some influenced her writing whilst others influenced her life. It was difficult for aspiring authors from the lower orders to work their way through these times, given the constraints and ideology imposed by the upper and middle classes in their attempt to maintain the status quo. This makes the story of a lowly milkwoman's journey into the world of letters highly improbable. The fact that Ann Yearsley made the transition from poverty as a labouring milkwoman to professional writer earning an income from her work reflects her tenacity and determination to obtain and maintain a literary career. The changing face of patronage in the last decade of the eighteenth century enabled, but also limited, Yearsley's rise into print. Her refusal to accept the popular eighteenth-century notion that to be poor and without a classical education precluded entry into the world of letters informs a broader understanding of how professional authorship functioned in the latter years of a century when writing was still a precarious option for women.

The first question asked in Chapter 1 of this thesis is how, and with what level of success, did Ann Yearsley surmount the obstacles of eighteenth-century attitudes in her struggle to become a financially independent writer? The second question asks how important was she as a cultural figure in her own time? To answer the first question this study set out to examine aspects of eighteenth-century society and of Yearsley's life that impacted on the writer in her quest to become a professional writer. This examination yielded several conclusions which are detailed by chapter, and are then drawn together to give a final summary of the overall conclusion of the thesis. The second question is answered at the end of this Conclusion.

Chapter 2 of this thesis examines facets of Ann Yearsley's personality and character. It is necessary, in the absence of information about her formative years, to place her in the context of Bristol and Clifton in order to construct the basis of an identity. The available primary and secondary sources enable a view of Bristol as a primarily commercial city, of which the poet's mother, and later Ann Yearsley herself, were very much a part with their milk-selling business. Yearsley, influenced mainly by her mother, acquired the strength of character that was necessary to exist in the tough world of commerce and bring up a large family. Chapter 2 concludes that by the time Yearsley was 'discovered' by Hannah More, she had developed the characteristics necessary to surmount the first obstacle in her quest for a professional writing career: a controlling patron who felt it was her duty to manage the milkwoman's work and finances and, by extension, her life.

The literary relationship between Yearsley and More, which is examined in chapter 3, demonstrated the dimensions and dynamics of patronage in the latter years of the 1790s, along with Yearsley's response to them. Yearsley was able to utilise the changing face of patronage at this time, to eventually obtain sponsors who were more progressive than Hannah More, and were also able to provide the friendship so desired by the poet. Through an examination of Yearsley's patronage liaisons an insight is gained into the way patronage functioned at the end of the eighteenth century. More importantly this is articulated from a labouring-class perspective. A nuanced reading of Yearsley's poetry and correspondence allows an opportunity to see first-hand the emotional effect a controlling patron could have on an aspiring writer from the lower orders. This study, with its examination of patronage liaisons other than Yearsley's, confirms that successful cross-class sponsorship was possible. This is attested to by Yearsley's interaction with patrons after More: The Earl of Bristol, Eliza Dawson, and Wilmer Gossip.

Many writers could not exist without some sort of financial sponsorship. This was crucial for aspiring authors from the lower orders. Yearsley's first patronage relationship with Hannah More was fraught with class tensions, and underpinned by More's anxiety that Yearsley posed a threat to established class relations. More's also desired to 'manage' and control a potentially subversive member of a perceived 'underclass', although Yearsley's class status was closer to More's than her patron was prepared to acknowledge. Yearsley, when she was not allowed access to earnings from her first published work, soon realised that More would restrict or disallow entirely, any move made by the milkwoman to advance herself in the literary marketplace, and by extension in society. In reality Yearsley had already advanced herself, with the publishing of her poetry, into the middle classes. This could not be tolerated by More, and it is testament to Yearsley's resilience that she was able to secure further patronage liaisons, after the dispute with her first patron.

Yearsley's liaison with More, in the end, proved to be a factor in the poet's development as a professional writer. Although More is criticised in some modern and contemporary work for her overbearing and tyrannical style of patronage, she can also be considered the catalyst, albeit unwittingly, in igniting Yearsley's determination to succeed as a writer. It was the severance of their literary relationship that brought Yearsley's strength of character to the fore, along with her desire for autonomy over her work and finances. Having a patron with the literary and social standing of Hannah More makes Yearsley's achievements seem even greater, demonstrating that dispensing with More's sponsorship was arguably the biggest act of resistance made by the writer to the repression imposed by those above her. The chapter dealing with patronage and friendship concludes that Ann Yearsley successfully managed and manipulated a complex eighteenth-century patronage system. Having dispensed with Hannah More, she was able to secure progressive patrons

who provided disinterested financial help, along with the friendship and intellectual equality the poet so desired.

Chapter 4 argues that class was a bigger obstacle than gender for Yearsley to overcome in her quest for a literary career. The chapter demonstrates that, whilst Yearsley opened up a space for a cross-class female voice, she was not successful in elevating herself socially. Slavery poems by Ann Yearsley and Hannah More are included and analysed in this thesis: firstly, because they demonstrate Yearsley engaging politically at an international level, thereby reflecting women's importance in this movement; and secondly, because both poems, published in the same year (1788), offer different perspectives which are underpinned by class.¹ Yearsley's poem puts a marginalised 'other' at its centre, echoing the poet's own status, and identifying with the struggles of subjugated people. With her labouring roots, Yearsley is in a better position than More to empathise with the victims of tyranny. More, writing from a higher cultural position, asserts in her slavery poem a difference from the unnamed and voiceless 'dark savage', the opposite of Yearsley's protagonist Luco, whose tragic life is graphically told within her poem. The comparison between the two slavery poems made within this thesis leads to the conclusions that firstly, Ann Yearsley, by the very act of contributing to the abolitionist debate demonstrated her right to be part of a wider literary culture. Secondly, the fact that her poem came out at more or less the same time as Hannah More's demonstrates of the level of confidence she had attained at that point in her writing career.

Chapter 4 concludes that, although Ann Yearsley overcame many obstacles in order to gain autonomy over her work, she was never able to completely resist the strength of repression and containment still imposed on the lower orders in the period. Ultimately, she

¹ Yearsley, Ann, 'A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade', (London: G.G. and J. Robinson, 1788). Hannah More, 'Slavery, A Poem', (London: T. Cadell, 1788).

was unable to break the stranglehold on labouring-class writers who attempted to rise above their 'allotted station'. Her reputation as a published author was based not on her writing skill, but on being a labouring 'natural genius' who somehow managed to write poetry. She did, in the end, carve out a substantial literary career which, in effect, elevated her to the middle classes, although this was never acknowledged.

As examined in chapter 5 few women in the period managed to escape social pressure to conform to gender stereotyping. Yearsley's poem 'To Mira, on the Care of her Infant' is examined within this work because it is firmly placed within the private sphere of motherhood. This domestic arena is then used to show resistance to class, gender, and war, whilst at the same time celebrating motherhood. In 'The Indifferent Shepherdess to Colin', Yearsley presents a woman who is politically conscious, valuing her independence enough to decline the supposedly safe haven of marriage. In 'To the Honourable H_ _ _ _ _ W_ _ _ _ _ on Reading The Castle of Otranto', Yearsley cleverly uses intertextuality with Horace Walpole's novel of the same name to subvert his attitude to women. The chapter concludes that, despite the attempts of a patriarchal society to tight-lace women into a subordinate social position, Ann Yearsley, by using her poetry as a platform, was able to mount a credible resistance to, and a subtle subversion of, writers such as Horace Walpole and Hannah More who were above her socially. Writers such as Walpole were trying to keep literature exclusively the domain of the male, classically educated writer, whilst More and others were anxious to maintain the 'God-given' order of society which kept the labouring classes at the bottom.

Chapter 6 examines how Ann Yearsley successfully negotiated many constraints and difficulties that could have prevented her from becoming a published writer: gender and class ideology of the period, a lack of formal education, and a controlling first patron who was a well-established writer and at the forefront of maintaining the social order.

Yearsley's personal circumstances (a large family to care for, and initially a business to run) were not conducive to a life of writing. Chapter 6 concludes that despite many obstacles Ann Yearsley had the necessary literary skills along with the ability to fashion an acceptable poetic voice, both of which enabled her to publish a body of work across several genres. This constituted a significant literary career and attested to the success of her climb from the cowsheds of Clifton to the world of letters.

Further conclusions drawn from the examination of the poet's texts confirm that Yearsley's work displays the intellectual capacity to engage in radical and revolutionary change. However, this innate ability was tempered by the writer's awareness that her literary livelihood, so important in sustaining her large family, depended on wealthy upper- and middle-class readers. Yearsley also had a tendency to channel her intellectual energy into areas of injustice directed at herself and her family, for example, in her confrontation with Levi Eames, former mayor of Bristol, as articulated in 'Stanzas of Woe'. Yearsley's dispute with Hannah More was followed by several poems exacting verbal revenge on that lady and her friends for the way they had treated the poet in the aftermath of the literary break-up. Of course, Yearsley wanted more than anything to be a professional writer, and it was this that remained firmly in her focus, and demanded most of her mental energy.

Yearsley's literary success can be measured by her significant body of published work across multiple genres in a relatively short writing career (1785-1796). Other than labouring-class male writers such as Robert Burns and John Clare, very few women writers from this social order were as prolific or as well known in their time as Ann Yearsley. This study has shown that she was successful in writing herself out of poverty and earning sufficient income from her literary endeavours to support her large family. She was also able, through her writing, to gain access to a public platform not usually available

to a member of the 'voiceless' lower orders, from which to disseminate her ideas and views.

Ann Yearsley demonstrated that a socio-economic rise from poverty to published writer was possible for a woman writer from the lowest level of society. An examination of her literary development determined the extent of her ability to overcome the constraints and repression inflicted on an eighteenth-century writer as she tried to carve out a professional literary career. The fact that Yearsley had, by the end of her writing years, had published three volumes of poetry, several occasional poems including three in the London newspapers, a play, and a novel, is the best confirmation that she was indeed a financially independent writer. This thesis offers a distinct view of a writer of note from the labouring classes, and details Yearsley's struggle to enter the world of letters. This in turn illuminates how most women in the period were affected by the gender and class ideology designed to control not only women, but also women with a will to write and who were perceived as doubly subversive.

Cheryl Turner has suggested that writing in the eighteenth century was still a very precarious option for women, with market preferences for particular writers or genres difficult to predict. Ann Yearsley had risen to fame at a time when work by the 'natural genius' was in vogue. Then, as now, trends changed and the passion for this genre waned. Yearsley had the necessary writing skills and was talented enough to respond to the decline in 'peasant poetry' with two plays, *Earl Goodwin* and *Bawdin* (now lost), along with a novel entitled *The Royal Captives*. This study maintains that Yearsley attained a high level of success in her writing career, the timing of which coincided with a particular trend in poetry. We cannot know how successful she would have been without this literary

development. This thesis concludes, however, that whilst women writers, especially those from the labouring classes, were undoubtedly in a precarious position when it came to becoming a professional writer, Ann Yearsley demonstrated that it was possible.

Aphra Behn is often considered to be the first professional female writer. Turner, in her study, uses the term 'professional' to distinguish between those who received payment for their work and those who did not. She also uses the term 'dependent professional' to mean those who used writing as a means of earning a living.¹ Ann Yearsley never truly managed her career without some kind of financial support from others, so in this respect she falls into the latter category. We can be fairly sure that Yearsley, constantly faced with the dread of a return to poverty and manual work, needed to earn money from her writing. She was caught up in the dilemma of wanting to write for artistic merit but needing to maximise her income to support her large family.

Yearsley instinctively knew, through her experience in the commercial world of milk-selling, that in the emerging literary marketplace writing was also a commodity to be sold for a good price. She may have wanted to write poetry for artistic merit, but it was an unfortunate fact that with six children and a husband who appeared to be employed sporadically as a rural labourer, this was impossible. Yearsley was prudent enough to fashion a dual identity: one where she was able to exhibit her knowledge of the classics, and another where she made the most of being a 'natural genius'. Although she never wrote, like most of her counterparts, a poem expressly detailing her life as a milkwoman, she did maintain the epithet 'Lactilla, the Milkwoman Poet' throughout her literary career.

How then does this thesis relate and contribute to the existing research landscape? Ann Yearsley's story contributes to several layers of history and of women's – and labouring-class women's – history specifically. Further contributions are made by this thesis to the

debate on separate spheres, women's contribution to the abolitionist movement, and how gender and class ideology impact and impede the success of women writers from the labouring classes. Yearsley's journey into print illuminates the changes in print culture towards the end of the eighteenth century, focusing on the expanding newspaper trade, with its growing distribution becoming an important factor in Yearsley's promotion of her work, and as a means of disseminating her ideas. Yearsley's entry into the world of letters is also testimony to an increasing inclusivity within the literary marketplace. Whilst contextualising Yearsley in Bristol as the place of her birth, there emerged an historical overview of a vibrant commercial and culturally dynamic city, and the role of place in helping to shape an individual's life and culture

The second question addressed in this thesis asked how important was Ann Yearsley culturally in her own time? On one level, Yearsley's story contributes to gender and class history, especially regarding the labouring-class female. She demonstrated that it was possible to operate successfully in both the public sphere of writing for a living, and the private sphere of motherhood and domesticity. This could usually be achieved by the upper and middle classes, but rarely by a person of Yearsley's social status. On another level her story adds to the history of eighteenth-century print culture by articulating the difficulties of publishing for the marginalised female writer from the lower orders. Ann Yearsley is important because she made a stand for patronised labouring-class women writers, demonstrating that it was possible to manipulate the patronage system in order to become a professional writer. Yearsley's success in wresting control of her work from her first patron also tapped into the debate on who could or should have control over literary productions. The tensions and class complexities inherent in the Yearsley/More literary liaison mirrored those of society itself. More was representative of a new middle-class, aware that its social position was tenuous in the face of mounting class-consciousness, of

which Ann Yearsley was representative. This study also adds to a still-growing collection of work by writers such as Mary Waldron, Moira Ferguson, and Kerri Andrews on forgotten and ignored poets of the eighteenth century. Ann Yearsley has fared better than most as she is now being included in anthologies, and her work is freely available in facsimile. Her poetry, in part, can also be seen as a source of information about the rural labouring classes.

Yearsley's story articulates what life was like in the eighteenth century for women, and for women writers, particularly from the lower orders. Betty Rizzo calls Yearsley 'the bravest patronised poet of all', because she managed to subvert the typical situation of writers from that order of society.¹ Moira Ferguson echoes this notion, claiming that Yearsley 'fashioned a subversive multiple identity'.² This study has shown that Ann Yearsley was adept at creating and fusing the identities of the milkwoman and the poet when it suited her. This did, however, add to the confusion surrounding her social status.

Friendship is an emerging theme throughout this thesis: friendships gained or lost, disillusionment with the lack of friendship, and a constant need on the part of Yearsley for an equal and lasting relationship. Friendship is also a recurring theme in her poetry: in 'Address to Friendship', Yearsley states 'My soul's ambitious, and its utmost stretch/ Would be to own a friend – but that's deny'd'.³ The words can be read as genuinely heartfelt or as an attempt to obtain pity. Yearsley was in a no man's land socially: she was isolated from her rural community because she was literate and wrote poetry. She may have had nothing in common with her peers, and may have felt socially superior because of her writing skills, especially when she became well-known. She was, however,

¹ Rizzo, Betty, 'The Patron as Poet-maker: The Politics of Benefaction' in *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, Vol.20, 1991, pp.241-266 (Baltimore, U.S.A.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991) p.258.

² Ferguson, Moira, *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets: Nation, Class, and Gender* (Albany, U.S.A.: State University of New York, 1995) p.74.

³ Ann Yearsley, 'Address to Friendship' in *Poems on Several Occasions*, p.65, lines 72-73.

excluded from the literary *élite* because of her humble origins, and her perceived status as a member of the ‘mob’. It is the contradictions and ambiguities that manifest themselves in Yearsley’s constant quest for friendship, and are articulated in her poetry and correspondence, that open up further avenues of exploration, offering another perspective on the life of a female writer from the lower orders.

Consideration is given within this thesis to the importance placed by Yearsley on friendship based on intellectual equality. Her dismissal of Hannah More, when it became clear that there was to be no friendship, literary or otherwise, was potentially a career-ending moment for the poet. It is a tribute to her resilience that she was able to forge future friendships with both male and female acquaintances. These new relationships provided not only essential financial support, but also the much-needed emotional support for the rest of her literary career.

Eighteenth-century literacy enhanced an increasingly vigorous print culture, and Ann Yearsley’s literary journey shows the extent to which this was happening. The writer successfully utilised the expanding newspaper trade as a platform from which to defend herself against her detractors, and also to market her new work. When she was dropped by More’s publishers, T. Cadell, in the aftermath of their literary dispute, she was able to secure the Robinsons, who were much more progressive publishers. This is indicative of the developing nature of print culture; the fact that Yearsley, as a writer from the lower orders, was able to get a substantial amount of work into print confirms that the book trade was becoming more inclusive.

This thesis is distinctive in explicitly addressing Ann Yearsley’s journey into print. Other studies have explored aspects of the writer’s life, but these works do not have the sole focus of examining the poet’s quest for professional status as a writer. While Donna

Landry's critical study positions Yearsley firmly within the labouring classes, this thesis suggests a reassessment of her social status. Mary Waldron's literary biography focuses on Yearsley's exclusion from the history of literature. This study, however, presents a woman poet who successfully fought for the right to intellectual equality with male and upper-class female writers. This in turn enabled a discovery of the scale of constraints and repressions that existed for the labouring-class female writer in the eighteenth century.

This work moves beyond other studies by specifically focusing on Ann Yearsley's transition from a humble milkwoman to a professional writer participating fully in the world of letters. A contextual approach enabled Yearsley's experiences in a society based on gender and class to be drawn out. This information was then examined and analysed to determine how the writer developed the resilience required to overcome obstacles that may have impacted negatively on her journey into print.

Ann Yearsley achieved some measure of fame with her published work, and indeed, because of this, forged a place in Bristol's print culture history. Bristol also had several circulating libraries, and Yearsley, for a time, fulfilled an ambition of owning and managing a circulating library in Hotwell a prestigious area of Bristol. Literary success, however, did not come easily for the labouring-class writer with high aspirations. This thesis demonstrates that Ann Yearsley endured social struggle and contestation throughout her writing career. But, as she declared in her poetry, hers was a 'stubborn and a savage will', one not afraid of confrontation and debate. This study confirms that such a will could and did enable the writer to defend herself against her 'betters', and then go on to obtain a literary career that allowed for full participation in the world of letters.

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