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“AGAINST AND WITHIN”:
NEOCLASSICISM AND THE SOCIAL PLAN IN EARLY ROMANTIC
LABORING-CLASS POETRY

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A THESIS

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Abstract

This paper will argue that rather than using neoclassical forms as a means of garnering influence, pleasing patrons, or, in the case of couplet verse, ease of “memorability,” these Romantic period laboring-class poets also found in working both “against and within” Augustan modes and ideologies a unique and powerful way of understanding and writing their modern lives, and of addressing their cultural masters. Their use of neoclassical modes in every case is related to a democratic impulse, more powerful than a belief in that great eighteenth-century maxim *poeta nascitur non fit*. We will see, in exploring the topoi of labor, gratitude, and the prospect view, that Hands, Yearsley, and Bloomfield desired to close the social and professional distance between laboring- and comfortable-class poet.
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I. Introduction

Some pieces, I think, ... are pretty correct;
A stile elevated you cannot expect:
To some of her equals they may be a treasure,
........................................................................
You may stile it prosaic, blank-verse at the best;
Some pointed reflections, indeed, are expressed...

Elizabeth Hands, “On the Supposition of the Book having been
published and read”

The wid'ning distance which I daily see,
Has Wealth done this?—then wealth's a foe to me!
Foe to our rights—that leaves a powrful few
The paths of emulation to persue
For emulation stoops to us no more

Robert Bloomfield, The Farmer's Boy

Dung, clods, ashes, horse, cow, plough, sow, wheat...

According to Joseph Warton, this list of “palpable barbarisms” would
have been intolerable to an urban, refined eighteenth-century reader, even in the
practical georgic mode (qtd in Barrell Dark Side 12). The offense caused by
practical words in poetry likely had more to do with aesthetics than politics.
Joseph Addison insisted that successful neoclassical poetry was never artless in
its reportage: “Where the [prose-writer] sets out as fully and distinctly as he can,
all the parts of the truth, which he would communicate to us; the other singles
out the most pleasing circumstances of this truth, and so conveys the whole in a
more diverting manner to the understanding” (381-2). Accuracy of
representation was “not to be achieved at the expense of decorum” or
refinement, and too much practical information was not just distracting, but
essentially contrary to the very enterprise of supposedly rustic, agriculture-
themed neoclassical poetry (Goodridge, Rural Life 5). But such a reaction to
practical vocabulary also reflects the trend of cultural estrangement between city
and country that occurred in the late eighteenth century. The division of refined metropolis from rustic countryside was more visible than ever at the end of the eighteenth century, but it had its roots in the highly codified social structure of Britain. This was a time when the “poor” were coming to be thought of (wrongly) as a single class of “distant generalized objects” (Barrell *Dark Side* 3). The rural, or rather rustic, poor were seen through the wrong end of a telescope; to bring them into focus would be a gesture equal to uttering one of those “palpable barbarisms” Warton warns against. Aesthetic distance and social or economic distance were blurred in the push towards literary refinement.

As Robert Bloomfield suggests, the increasing concentration of wealth in metropolises and country gentry seats created what Bloomfield sees as a widening distance in the different levels of the “social plan / That rank to rank cements, as man to man” (“Summer,” lines 341-2). “Refinement,” he writes, was “the peasant’s curse / That hourly makes his wretched station worse” (lines 338-9). This was a time, as John Barrell suggests, when social distance was being “wid’ned” through visual representations of the poor—or rather, through non-representations, as pastoral and georgic writing and painting made the poor into picturesque objects, if the poor were represented at all. This paper will examine why laboring-class poets at the end of the eighteenth-century adopted the same “refinement” (exemplified in the use of neoclassical conventions) that they could blame for furthering social and aesthetic marginalization. Rather than using neoclassical forms as a means of garnering influence, pleasing patrons, or, in the case of heroic couplets, ease of memorability, these Romantic-period laboring-class poets also found in working both “against and within” Augustan modes and ideologies a unique and powerful way of understanding and writing their
lives as both “peasants” and poets, and of addressing their cultural masters. Their use of neoclassical modes is related to a democratic impulse, more powerful than a belief in that great eighteenth-century maxim *poeta nascitur non fit*. We will see, in exploring the topoi of labor, gratitude, and the prospect view, that Elizabeth Hands, Ann Yearsley, and Robert Bloomfield desired to close the social and professional distance between the laboring-class and refined poet.

I choose to examine these questions in the last decade and a half of the eighteenth century, in the period that may be called early Romantic—beginning with the publication of Ann Yearsley’s *Poems, On Several Occasions* (1785), including Elizabeth Hands’s *Death of Amnon* (1789), and ending with Robert Bloomfield’s *The Farmer’s Boy* (1800). The fact that this trend occurs during the early Romantic period is foundational to my argument, for keeping this in mind exposes an important contrast between the poetry of Hands, Yearsley, and Bloomfield and much of the poetry being produced in their time. Hands owes more to John Milton and Alexander Pope than to any contemporary, Yearsley (though arguably the most “Romantic” of my three poets) as much to Edward Young and James Thomson as Anna Laetitia Aikin, and Bloomfield (in *The Farmer’s Boy* especially) as much to Thomson and Dryden as Oliver Goldsmith. Though these three poets also had their fingers on the pulse of current philosophical and poetical trends, evidencing familiarity with contemporary labor discourses of the likes of Hannah More, as well as Bluestocking verse and the philosophies of Adam Smith, John Locke, and Thomas Malthus, they connect more to one poet than anyone else: Virgil.

Their familiarity with and affinity for Virgil’s works would not have been possible without Dryden’s 1697 translation of the *Eclogues*, the *Georgics*, and the
Aeniad, and likely without also James Thomson’s *The Seasons* (1730), the “peak” of the vogue of the English georgics (Low 17). Virgil not only wrote on rural issues with which Hands, Yearsley, and Bloomfield were familiar with; he also offered a model for re-considering or even marginalizing “the monumentality of history” (Bhabha, *Location of Culture* 87). Since Virgil, who first incorporated contemporary political and social commentary into his pastoral, “structures of incongruity and opposition” characterize the English neoclassical modes that later imitated him (Young 523). In both English and Virgilian georgics, a background of time and change allows georgic’s adaptive qualities to come into play,” adaptive qualities that were well suited for laboring-class poets’ reformist undertakings (Fairer, “World of Eco-Georgic” 207-8). It is also true that in the eighteenth century, social, literary, and economic proprieties were “inextricably linked,” and “whatever progress could be made towards the production of a more homely [realistic] poetry of rural life could be made only within the established conventions of that literature” (Barrell, *Dark Side* 12). This is why Hands, Yearsley, and Bloomfield so often blend Virgilian modes, as understood by their neoclassical predecessors, with each other and with elements of more “realistic” life writing. The differences between pastoral, georgic, and epic allowed poets to shift between a variety of discourses while staying within the morally and socially sanctioned model provided by Virgil and then adapted to English poetry via Dryden, Pope and Thomson, among others. On the other hand, the coded language and extensive vocabulary of metaphor afforded them by the classical mythological themes of these modes allowed for both explicit and implicit resistance to the examples of genteel poets.
Critics are now very fruitfully considering the ways that laboring-class poets worked both “against and within,” received classical or canonical English modes and genres (Bhabha, *Location of Culture* 89; Keegan, “Georgic Transformations” 552). If we change our customary ways of reading, we see that adopting literary conventions does not signal a lack of agency or imagination. Drawing on Homi Bhabha’s theory of mimicry, this paper will offer a theoretical and critical framework for reading late eighteenth-century laboring-class poetry. I argue that Hands, Yearsley, and Bloomfield saw themselves as working both against and within the neoclassical conventions they adopt, in an attempt to close the aesthetic (if not also the social) distance between themselves and the neo-Virgilian poets (Milton, Dryden, Pope, Thomson, and others) whom they both admired and, as my epigraphs from Hands and Bloomfield show, felt effaced by. Read this way, their use of pastoral, georgic, and epic modes evidences their leveling ambitions to be read alongside the refined poets of their day.

Their leveling efforts are thus rather more literary than political, but both literary and political thinking have their roots in a particular kind of historical thinking. Hands, Yearsley, and Bloomfield could trace their poetical lineage through English translators and interpreters like Dryden and Thomson all the way back to Virgil and the Roman Golden Age of poetry and agriculture. Hans-Georg Gadamer’s discussion of effective-historical consciousness can shed light on this mindset of laboring-class poets who read and adopted neoclassical conventions. He writes:

> Just as in a conversation, when we have discovered the standpoint and horizon of the other person, his ideas become intelligible, without our necessarily having to agree with him, the person who
thinks historically comes to understand the meaning of what has been handed down, without necessarily agreeing with it, or seeing himself in it. (Gadamer 735)

Gadamer’s understanding of reading as a kind of conversation is a model through which we can temporarily set aside the imperative to either judge or to sympathize with a text that originates outside our own cultural and historical horizon. True historical consciousness is, of course, impossible, and in a way simply acknowledging this impossibility can help us move outside of our own horizon. Gadamer’s model illuminates how laboring-class poets may have appreciated a neoclassical genre like pastoral without necessarily “agreeing with it, or seeing [themselves] in it.” Poets did or did not necessarily see themselves in georgic or pastoral writing, but it is a fact that they appreciated and emulated it.

For example, Robert Bloomfield’s commitment to writing in blank verse was so strong that it almost got in the way of the publication of his georgic The Farmer’s Boy (1800); his editor worried that the blank verse was so much like Dryden, and the four-season cycle so Thomsonian, that Bloomfield’s effort would transform the georgic “from its own pure native Gold into an alloyed metal of comparably less splendor, permanence, and worth” (qtd in Steedman 18). Such a negative reaction from his editor can account for Bloomfield’s observation that only a “powrful few” could pursue “paths of emulation” to literary refinement. Yet Bloomfield persisted in using neoclassical conventions, topoi, and modes—and his resulting work is certainly more than insipid imitation, and it well rewards close reading. Clearly there is more to laboring-class “emulation” of neoclassical conventions than the fact that poets admired and perhaps related to the agricultural content of Virgilian genres.
Donna Landry notes that laboring-class poets who used neoclassical conventions seemed “to be striving for aesthetic ground of equivalence” between themselves and masters like Alexander Pope and Jonathon Swift (*Muses of Resistance* 99). We have to keep in mind that in the early eighteenth-century, a time when neo-Virgilian modes found their best and fullest expression, poetry was the most current and engaging mode of expression (de Bruyn 661; Steedman 2-3). To write poetry was not merely an aesthetic exercise, but also very nearly a pre-requisite for joining any kind of social or political discourse. Earlier laboring-class poets such as Stephen Duck and James Woodhouse as well as Yearsley “had their hearts set on mastering the heroic couplet” (Rizzo, “Patron as Poet-Maker” 261). That these poets desired to write in the same lauded form that “serious [male] poets” of the day employed for “ambitious” intellectual works suggests they had a leveling aesthetic and perhaps also social impulse behind their decision to adopt such conventions (Hunter). They wished to join in, even as they may have disagreed with, the dominant discourse (especially in regards to labor) of their time, “challeng[ing] the conventions they exploit” (Fairer, *English Poetry* x).

To illustrate, we can see that there is little doubt that an earlier laboring-class poet, Mary Leapor’s, choice in adopting neoclassical conventions was not merely from the influence of her patron Bridget Freemantle, but was an attempt to conform to the poetic of the standard of the time and join in an aesthetic dialogue with her poetic fathers Swift and Pope (Greene 81). In an essay on Leapor, Betty Rizzo suggests that Leapor and other laboring-class poets used neoclassical forms, particularly as set out by Pope and Dryden, because of their “anxiety for influence” in a poetic community that sought to exclude them (332).
Resistance is particularly visible in Hands and Yearsley, and is apparent even in *The Farmer’s Boy*—for although Bloomfield “play[s] to both sides of the political divide,” his protagonist Giles is consistent in his condemnation of “refinement” (Christmas, “Contemporary Politics” 27).

Poets’ perceptions of their place in society and in the poetic community were absolutely fundamental to their agendas in writing both “within and against.” Understanding the difference, John Barrell argues, between what place rural laborers actually held in British society and how they were depicted is a matter of “understanding the constraints—often apparently aesthetic but in fact moral and social—that determined how the poor could, or rather, how they could *not* be represented” (*Dark Side* 1). Laboring-class poets writing about labor could be accused of moral as well as aesthetic failings if their poetry came too close to depicting the realities of their rural lives and their exclusion from the ranks of poetic masters. Thus they had to resist being subsumed in their own landscapes, considered merely a proxy mouthpiece for all laborers, and for this reason they adopted highly stylized and difficult conventional modes in their search for poetic legitimacy. The marginalization of the poor through aesthetic effacement reflected the vast social distance between the rustic laborers and refined art consumers; conversely, when the poor took up pens, their efforts to make themselves not only visible but also refined, according to the dominant aesthetics of their time, could be seen to reflect a social and moral as well as a literary agenda. They could choose, as Rizzo describes, between being “natural” poets born with poetic passions and instincts, or between being simply *poets* who kept to the poetic standard of the time (“Anxiety for Influence” 332-6). Hands, whose poetry is explicitly aspirational in mode, content and style, and who,
unlike Yearsley, offered little biographical para-textual material justifying her verses in terms of her low station in life, seems to have chosen the latter option.

Indeed, the poetic output of all three poets suggests that they chose the latter identity for themselves, but found the former more profitable. More often than not, poets consciously conformed to the images of natural and uncultivated geniuses they invoked in the popular British consciousness. Christmas notes that both Yearsley and Bloomfield engaged in complicated re-fashionings and idealizations of their “genius” and their labor experiences, in order to produce calculated effects on readers—often, simply to sell more books (Lab’ring Muses 254-5; 269-271). The humorous and self-mocking epitaph that Bloomfield wrote for himself is a good example of this self-fashioning: “First made a Farmer’s Boy, and then a snob, / A poet he became, and here lies Bob” (Bloomfield 182). How these poets perceived their places in society is just as important as how readers perceived them. Hands, Yearsley and Bloomfield show an acute consciousness of class that permeates their writings. Their poems demonstrate that they viewed themselves as writing from the margins, adopting the conventions of a culture which was not their own.

Bearing in mind the fact that they saw themselves as marginalized and even suppressed voices in their society, we may potentially compare these writers to the colonized peoples from whom Homi Bhabha draws his theory of mimicry. Although their circumstances were certainly distinct from Bhabha’s colonized subalterns, enough parallels remain that Bhabha’s concepts may provide a productive vehicle for interpretation. Mimicry is:

   discourse that is uttered inter dicta: a discourse at the crossroads of what is known and permissible and that which though known
must be kept concealed; a discourse uttered between the lines and as such both against the rules and within them. The question of difference is therefore always also a problem of authority. (Bhabha, *Location of Culture* 89)

Laboring-class writers adopting neoclassical conventions were also adopting a mode that was effectively forbidden, as such conventions were the domain of the refined author and reader. A laborer writing on labor has, on the one hand, the ultimate authority on the subject, and on the other, as soon as he reveals too much of what is not permissible (in other words, practical or vernacular language), no authority. In the equation of difference between Alexander Pope and Stephen Duck, for example, the problem of authority is essentially a problem of class. Pope codified the rules of polite discourse, while Duck’s “Thresher’s Labour” mimicked them. Duck’s mimicry, “passing” as neoclassical poetry but also disclosing some unpleasant details of rural life, managed to undermined pastoral, prompting, as Fairer notes, a reconsideration of the mode’s conventions in future uses of the mode (*English Poetry* 193).

Writing both “within and against” custom—to write within neoclassical conventions and yet produce an image or an argument that calls into question the dominant discourse—is a complicated line to walk, and requires “a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power” (Bhabha, *Location of Culture* 86). Through the very conventions they copied, poets reformed, regulated, and disciplined their own feelings of marginalization by the genteel Other. There is every reason to believe, too, that these poets genuinely enjoyed reading poetry that employed the same neoclassical conventions they did. In the case of white British laborers, the
“Other” was socially rather than racially constructed; for this reason, the “Other” who controlled not only the dominant discourse, but also the economic and social system, was all the more disagreeable because of its resemblance to themselves. If these poets could appropriate the complex neoclassical modes and conventions through which the genteel poetic establishment visualized power, intellect, and art, then what stood between Hands, Yearsley, Bloomfield, and the likes of Thomson, Aikin, More, and Smith? Bloomfield gives the answer: refinement, or what he called the social plan. And this is why laboring-class neoclassical poetry is ultimately a democratic or leveling endeavor, that is at first aesthetic but ultimately also political: Hands, Yearsley, and Bloomfield modestly and civilly assert that their perspectives and their poetry deserve a place among the dominant discourse of comfortable poets.

“The menace of mimicry,” Bhabha writes, “is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial [I would instead say dominant, or even dominating] discourse also disrupts its authority” (Location of Culture 88). There are a number of ambivalences relevant to this study of the late eighteenth century: in pastoral, the tension between moral industriousness and the nondisclosure of everyday hardship in the laboring poor; in patronage, the acknowledgment of talent, intelligence and maturity in the patronized poet that went hand in hand with paternalistic control of her poetry and finances; and in georgic, an emphasis on the importance of agriculture for the country’s continued success simultaneous with the increasing marginalization and poverty of agricultural communities. Hands, Yearsley, and Bloomfield maintain such a “double vision” in their poetry, mimicking powerful and beautiful neoclassical
conventions while also disclosing their problematic ambivalences and thus disrupting their controlling ideologies.

Of the theoretical, literary, and cultural issues that might be taken up in a study of laboring-class neoclassical poetry and mimicry, I believe that the topics of labor, gratitude, and the prospect view are particularly rewarding and important as specific sites for analysis. How Hands, Yearsley, and Bloomfield depict labor is a critical aspect of my argument throughout, because all three poets engage with it in some way or another. But it is of central importance to the first section of this study, subtitled “Re-Writing Daphne and Strephon: Labor and Leisure in the Pastorals of Elizabeth Hands.” It not so surprising that pastoral poems should be organized so closely around labor, for labor is the other side of the coin of the most important feature of pastoral: leisure. In this sense, pastoral and georgic are not opposite forms but, as Barrell suggests, they are “complementary” (Dark Side 12). Hands blends the two, as well as epic, effortlessly throughout the poems she calls “pastoral,” connecting in interesting ways late eighteenth-century discourses on labor, love, and morality.

The distinction between what Ann Wallace calls “head-work” and manual labor is central to my second section on the theme of gratitude: “Proxy and the Gratitude Topos in Ann Yearsley’s Bluestocking Poems.” I explore how Yearsley uses the georgic mode to expose her role as a proxy for More’s social ambitions and politics, and to argue against her marginalized position in the social plan. Kurt Heinzelman observes that at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, which witnessed both the Industrial and the Romantic revolutions, the georgic mode disappeared, not only among laboring-class poets but among refined poets who wielded it with more cultural
legitimacy (196, 199). In part this was because the conventions of pastoral were shifting towards greater “workday realism,” an emphasis on industriousness that was just as ideologically-based and just as damaging to laborers’ (and laboring poets’) agencies as Virgilian pastoral—more so, because the illusion reproduced in this “half image” became more convincing as it became more English (Barrell, *Dark Side* 13-6). By the end of the eighteenth century, the new “pastoral-georgic poetry was rejected by most of the writers of the polite classes, to be appropriated by radical writers, and by the humble poets of rural complaint, who demanded some of that leisure for the ploughman and thresher, which the shepherd and gentleman-philosopher had long enjoyed” (Barrell, *Dark Side* 81). Among these “humble” poets, Hands, Yearsley, and Bloomfield included, the manual labor of the milkwoman, the maid, and the farm boy are distinguished from the cultural work of the shepherd’s song and the patron’s efforts to secure subscription lists.

Physical labor and writing cannot be of one kind; the aspirational qualities of Hands, Yearsley, and Bloomfield’s poetry rests on the assumption that writing has more prestige and is more comfortable (if not more secure) than laboring life. I argue that Yearsley resented being excluded from the bluestocking salon that her patron frequented, and especially begrudged having to be content with second-hand accounts of the esteemed intellectual work that took place in them. Thus, while in the popular discourse surrounding her contentious split with More, Yearsley was considered “not grateful enough,” her poems that invoke the gratitude topos show that she scarcely had much to be grateful about. The subtext of these poems, in large part accomplished by Yearsley’s deft use of
neoclassical conventions, is an exposé of More and Montagu’s ulterior motives for patronage: they used poets as proxies for their own goals.

In my final section, I examine the importance of the prospect view and eco-georgic mode in the way Yearsley and Bloomfield construct their regional poems. “Clifton Hill” and The Farmer’s Boy express the negative effects of the marginalization of rural farm communities through a heightened attention to interconnectedness between humans and nature, labor and bounty, and city and countryside. Their use of refined conventions, especially the prospect view and the georgic mode, in conjunction with an emergent “green language” evidences an attempt to connect “natural” poetry and the issues of their rural lives with the refined poetry of the city.
II. Re-Writing Daphne and Strephon: Labor and Leisure in the Pastorals of

Elizabeth Hands

While great ones make a splendid show,

In equipage or dress,

I’m happy here, nor wish below

For greater happiness.

(“On Contemplative Ease,” Hands 100, lines 17-20)

With these lines Elizabeth Hands, a rural maid or cook, appears to eschew aspirations to a higher station. Though Hands only published one volume, The Death of Amnon: a Poem with an Appendix, Containing Pastorals and Other Poetical Pieces (1789), Donna Landry believes she was “among the most literary” and possibly “the most accomplished comic poet of plebian women writers” (Muses of Resistance 193, 187). Hands was in service in several houses, and a contemporary reviewer suggests Hands “was permitted to make Use of [the libraries of] the Families to Which she was a Servant” (qtd. in Dereli 171). Thus, although she was self-educated, Hands was steeped in neoclassical tradition. Her poem “Critical Fragments on some of the English Poets” suggests she was deeply read in the Bible, Milton, Shakespeare, Young, Swift, Pope, Prior, and Butler (127). As Landry suggests, Hands had perhaps a greater claim to the Scriblerian and neoclassical traditions as any other female laboring-class poet. It is thus unsurprising that the poem’s opening lines complicate the complacence of the lines above, placing her both within and against the poetic establishment:

Rejoice ye jovial sons of mirth,

By sparkling wine inspir’d;
A joy of more intrinsic worth
I feel, while thus retir’d.

Excluded from the ranting crew,
Amongst the fragrant trees
I walk, the twinkling stars to view,
In solitary ease. (lines 1-8)

The speaker supposes that polite satirical poets are motivated by wealth and even drunk while composing their lines, which amount to little more than “ranting” amongst each other. Hands makes her own work out to be the product of an inward (“intrinsic”) moral or even artistic power that transcends class boundaries; she also recasts her rural setting as retirement, a topos in aristocratic pastoral poetry like that of Katherine Phillips, rather than poverty. Her poem is organized from a single and subjective point of view, focusing on her silent experience of nature and a moment in which both she and wild birds are equally “hush’d” (lines 13, 15), drawing attention to the equation of “women and the vulgar” with ignorance and nature. This somewhat dehumanizing idea that women were somehow closer to nature than men was widely accepted (though contested by men and women alike) in the eighteenth century (Messenger 51; Barrell, Dark Side 19). She makes the connection not to suggest that she is a part of nature, but to distinguish herself from the “ranting crew” of male establishment poets. The persona in poem writes, “My passion’s hush’d as calm as these, / No sigh my bosom heaves” (15-6). She is no pastoral nymph herself; she is a rational, contemplative, and accomplished poet.
Hands’s focus on “twinkling stars” is important, too, as it engages with perspective, a contentious issue in eighteenth-century aesthetic depictions of social rank and agency (line 7). Hands’s station places her below the “great ones,” but her view is not restricted to her immediate surroundings, as later poets expected of laboring-class poets. She refuses to be, as Thomas Tickell in 1713 notes of plebeian writers, “one of those who are merely in the landscape” (Barrell, “Politics of Taste” 25, my emphasis); instead, her perspective is fixed on the expansive universe above her, reaching beyond the landscape and in so doing challenging her relegation to the lower order of not only poets, but humans. There is much more to this poem than an “inoffensive” imitation. Her poem exhibits imaginative liberation and perceptive protest: for though Hands is excluded from the circle of polite poets, she has the moral high ground and access to the same truths and questions. The poem works on numerous rhetorical levels and is striking in its compactness and simple, sensual language. If we overlook it, and poems like it, on the basis of the presence of conventions such as some fragrant trees and twinkling stars, we miss potentially rich observations about what laboring-class poets really do with neoclassical conventions. In Hands’s case, we miss important connections between labor, leisure, and social prestige that together argue for her inclusion among the genteel poets she admired, as they challenge the exclusionary ideologies behind neoclassicism in the eighteenth century.

For the most part conventional pastoral poems of female laboring-class poets, including Elizabeth Hands, have not been much interest to scholars, even those most committed to recovering the works of laboring-class writers. The main reason for this, I propose, is that to some scholars, highly-conventional
laboring-class pastorals—featuring stock neoclassical characters conversing about love in idyllic rural retreats—seem blandly derivative of more aristocratic pastoral, or, worse, conform to aristocratic expectations of laboring-class self-representation by embodying simple mindedness, piety, and acceptance of their social and economic lot (Christmas, Lab’ring Muses 19). We find that the pastoral dialogues of Elizabeth Hands, who spent most of her life in service, do not provide the anti-pastoral or georgic realism typically favored when scholars recover a poet. Many scholars and editors assume that pastorals have relatively little to offer in terms of insights into laboring-class poetics, as they are so intentionally abstracted from “real life.” As critics of a time past examining highly conventional poetry, we are, as Laura Mandell suggests, trying to recover “histories of difference through cultural artifacts that intrinsically exclude those histories” (553).

Overflowing with idyllic panoramas, weeping Daphnes, and complaining Strephons, the pastoral poems of Elizabeth Hands have particularly frustrated scholars. Up to this point scholarship has focused instead on her socially realistic poems, such as her satirical “Supposition” poems and the long biblical poem, The Death of Amnon. Her pastorals have been almost completely neglected by modern critics. Roger Lonsdale calls them “insipid” and William Christmas says they are her “least interesting poems” (Lonsdale qtd. in Lab’ring Muses 230). Christmas’s dissatisfaction is palpable:

[Hands] does not write about her former working life as a domestic servant in a rural setting… The predominate image Hands creates of herself is of a poet sitting atop “a Cock of Hay” and writing about idealized rustic characters, Corydons and Pastoras,
Strephons and Daphnes, Damons and Therons... Instead of working, these characters meditate and argue about the nature of love and the value of true virtue... (Lab’ring Muses 229)

Even sympathetic scholars, such as Christmas, are disappointed when they approach her pastorals, especially when seeking the same “social realism” Hands employs in other modes (Lab’ring Muses 230). However, we should keep in mind that, as Sarah Jordan has argued, the issue of un-productivity, otium, was itself extremely important, controversial and evocative in laboring-class poetry. Exploring the issue of leisure in Hands’s poetry, I propose that Hands takes on such an aesthetic, leisure-driven and contrived mode as pastoral (as opposed to georgic or autobiography) in order to rewrite her doubly-marginal status as both a woman and a laborer.

There is much to be gained in viewing her poems as “art” rather than “artifact,” as Bridget Keegan proposes, and avoiding “evaluating context over and above (and even instead of) the text” (“Georgic Transformations” 561). However, to arrive at an understanding of how Hands modulates her social distance from poets like Alexander Pope, Jonathon Swift, Aphra Behn, John Milton and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, we must also be aware of some of the social, economic, and aesthetic contexts of her time, particularly the issue of leisure and labor. From such a broad study, we see that Hands’s pastorals make a strong argument for her consideration alongside neoclassical poetic masters. They are technically adroit, deeply insightful, often humorous, and always layered, and they deserve modern critical attention. Even though Hands was “an agile ventriloquist of the masculine canon,” close reading reveals undercurrents of class and gender disharmony in her poetry (Landry, Muses of Resistance 190-3).
In dismissing them as mere imitations, unhelpful to ethnographies we hope to build or the politics we hope to forward, we miss not only the contradictions inherent in the pastoral mode but also the complex and ambitious ways that Hands seeks to assimilate, and expand on, the works of received poetic masters whom she both admired and disagreed with. Labor discourses in Hands’s pastoral poems show that by writing seemingly conventional pastorals in the voice of a sophisticated female laborer, she asks readers to consider the complexities rather than the harmony of rural life. Ultimately, in a gesture of aesthetic if not also social leveling (and, as my introduction suggests, the two were so blended as to be inextricable), she is also asking to be considered a legitimate poet.

In offering new approaches to laboring-class women’s pastorals, I do not mean to claim that Hands’s pastorals are her only or her best poems. Some laboring-class women poets, including Hands, sometimes “use their carefully disciplined poems as a kind of life-writing” (Backscheider 106). Hands’s most popular poems, much more politically genial to modern readers than their pastorals, are written in this vein. Her “Supposition” poems, for example, witness upper-class snobbery and ignorance from an outsider’s perspective, not unlike the maidservant Hands herself (Steedman 20). They thus seem to offer readers a sense of documentary realism, even though—featuring characters named “Mrs. Consequence,” “Miss Coquetella,” “Miss Rhymer,” and “Miss Prudella”—they are hardly less contrived than pastoral (Hands 47-8). The difference, of course, is that we easily perceive the conventions of satire; that there may be humor, or even satire, in pastoral escapes our customary readings of the latter mode. That such satirical poems are more widely read and studied is
proof of the success of recovery efforts of the last few decades. Hands’s wit, often imitating male masters such as Pope and Swift, leads some scholars to conclusions like Lonsdale’s, that the pastorals are comparably “insipid” compared to “the barefaced cheek” of her political poems (Steedman 11).

Knowing that Hands wrote such incisive poems of protest, we might (wrongly) view her pastorals, as Paula Feldman and Landry do, as self-contradictions: as if engaging with pastoral and affirming its conventions are a potential collaboration in her own oppression (Feldman 257, Muses of Resistance 197).

However, in fact, given the decline of the form’s popularity during the nineteenth century, as modern readers, we may be insensitive not only to how poets subvert the mode in very specific and pointed ways, but also how they use conventional pastoral topoi to good effect. In an essay on Stephen Duck, the first laboring-class poet to be celebrated in the eighteenth century, Keegan argues that Duck’s conventionality in “The Thresher’s Labour” (to say nothing of his later work) is “entirely self-conscious, insofar as Duck also revealed himself to be entirely aware of the laws of the genre within and against which he worked” (“Georgic Transformations” 548). Conventionality is not, for Duck, collaboration in the class system that insists on his oppression, but is instead collaboration with an aesthetic system that he hopes to emulate and expand on even as he may disagree with its content.¹ We can approach Hands with the same

¹ The play of pastoral and georgic conventions in Duck’s poem “The Thresher’s Labour” is too complicated to engage with fully in this poem, and it is important to acknowledge that he does not simply imitate Pope, Thomson, or even Dryden,
understanding: for her, adopting classical pastoral conventions—an upper-class form that, in the late eighteenth-century, was being redefined by Romantic poets—was not affirming or protesting her class, but putting her class aside. Hands could write pastoral as well as the masters she imitated because she was a good poet, not because she was of the class ostensibly described in pastoral. After all, the peasants described by both English and Virgilian pastoral were not a real class of peasants, but fictionalized projections of aristocrats in an impossible Utopian countryside.

To suggest that there is a pure pastoral in any eighteenth-century poet’s work obscures the complexities inherent in this seemingly simple mode. By the Romantic period, to employ the form was simultaneously to make a statement on its stylistic, thematic and ideological conventions and content. Studies of pastoral by Ann Messenger, John Barrell, David Fairer, and Paula Backscheider thus tend to focus on the tensions built in to pastoral. Indeed, these tensions had been an important, even defining, aspect of pastoral art since Virgil’s *Eclogues*, in which the author foregrounds moments of tension and conflict rather than suppressing them (Fairer *English Poetry* 83, Young 523). Rejections and denials are central moments in pastorals, since they also represent moments of conflict between the content and the form of the poems—in other words, moments when a poet might be trying to talk about things which pastoral intrinsically seeks to exclude. Hands exaggerates these moments of tension—for example, pairing a

but rather, like those poets themselves, mixes classical modes. See Keegan, “Georgic Transformations,” and also Goodridge, *Rural Life*. 
neoclassical Theron with a contemporary Jessy (“Damon and Theron” 74-5).

Barrell writes,

One of the main pleasures that sophisticated readers take in pastoral is that it exhibits a state of mind which is delightfully simple in itself, at the same time as it promotes the delightful reflection that we are emancipated from its bondage, from the tyranny of external impressions which we cannot control and organize. (“Politics of Taste” 24-25)

Pastoral is a mode that seeks to organize the tensions of daily life into a neat aesthetic package, which has merely the illusion of simplicity. Pastoral does not erase tensions; it contains them, and the threat of their coming free is what makes reading pastoral exciting, enlightening, and as Barrell says, “delightful.”

In the eighteenth century, the pastoral mode, with its emphasis on simplicity, retirement and innocence, seemed more particularly suited to a female author than any other form. In 1717, Thomas Purney wrote in his study A full enquiry into the true nature of pastoral: “Simplicity and Tenderness… constitute the very Soul and Essence of Pastoral,” and its “design,” like a woman’s duty, was “to soothe and soften the mind” (qtd. in Messenger 7). A woman’s use of the conventionally gentle pastoral mode did not seem like an attempt to depose male authorship. However, as Young writes, “Pastoral is, perhaps, a ‘ladylike’ form, one categorically disempowered by the critical generic hierarchy. But it is also a particularly subversive form that, in the hands of such an accomplished female poet as Aphra Behn, challenges conventions of both genre and gender” (523). At the bottom of Virgil’s poetical hierarchy, pastoral occupies a “disempowered” status similar to that of women in the time
(especially laboring-class women). Idyllic pastoral landscapes could become kind of ideological and aesthetic testing grounds for poets like Behn, Leapor, and later Hands, who sometimes draw a parallel between erotic and authorial propriety.

Pastorals by both Aphra Behn and Hands show the “effects of the sex-gender system” and women’s attempts to complicate the system with their own perspectives (Backscheider 105). Elizabeth Young writes, “Taking on a seemingly circumscribed identity as a pastoral poet, Behn carefully maneuvers herself into a position of creative autonomy as she shifts the focus of pastoral from shepherd to shepherdess and from women as the subject of the poetry to women as the subject, the agent of action, in the poetry” (541). A number of Behn’s poems, including “The Golden Age,” which Janet Todd notes “includes some risky notions and lines,” were included in Coleman and Thornton’s volumes that Hands likely had access to (38). Even though Behn’s contribution to the 1780 edition of the volume, the one Hands was most likely to have encountered, was “drastically” reduced from forty-nine to only four poems, the editors still include “Silvio’s Complaint,” which concerns female agency and companionate marriage (Todd 39). Behn’s female perspective within the pastoral, using conventional disruption to signal ideological disruption, could have been a model for Hands’s pastorals, which feature similar female subjectivity and authority. Hands, too, rejects normative, male controlled heterosexual courtship (Landry, Muses of Resistance 90-1), replacing the traditional male voice “with a central dominating female figure who could speak her mind” (Feldman 257).

Laboring-class poets—male or female—were possibly subject to even more limiting expectations and scrutiny in their writing than female poets. While Messenger acknowledges that pastorals could exploit “the gap between the tidy
artifice of form and the messy realities of human life” (183), this does not mean that reading audiences were necessarily genial to the exposure of such a gap. Rural laboring-class poets were equated with nature and expected to evidence honesty, industry, simplicity, and piety in all their writing (Christmas, *Lab’ring Muses* 19, 229). Hands published by subscription and was well aware of the interests of her aristocratic, bourgeois, and religiously-inclined readership (Dereli 174).\(^2\) Writing about leisure, promiscuity, and idleness, Hands knew, ran counter to upper-class expectations of laboring-class writers’ self-representation. Otium, privilege for the comfortable classes, was a moral and secular offense for the laboring classes, as time was “not passed but spent” (Thompson 61). Defenders of class hierarchy like poet and Yearsley’s patron, Hannah More (who is discussed in more detail in the next section of this paper), even equated industriousness and poverty with morality and utility (Jordan 45, 48-9). Further, aristocratic readers believed that to “engage in the mental labor of writing was also to labor against the cultural idea that the poor should work only with their bodies” (Jordan 43). Hands reacts to these ideas explicitly in her “Supposition” poems, as Carolyn Steedman has shown (19-22). In her pastorals, too, Hands’s sophisticated voice and her depictions of laboring-class leisure challenge the burgeoning capitalist line of reducing time into discipline and lives into “hands.”

With this understanding of pastoral in mind, we are equipped to recover laboring-class pastoral writing, contextualizing it and reading deeper into disruptive moments. By focusing exclusively on Hand’s political or socially

\(^2\) For more on subscription lists in the period, see Griffin, “Subscription and Patronage” (267-9) in *Literary Patronage*. 

25
realistic poems and occluding her pastorals, which adopt many of the patterns of their upper-class counterparts, we miss her success at adopting the received poetic standards of her time and the very complicated interplay between gender, class, and poetic conventions that her pastorals may show. This criticism of Hands scholarship may, of course, be more widely applied. Like Duck, Leapor and Behn’s, Hands’s exercises in pastoral were an attempt to join the masters in a received mode, emancipating her from her class and gender constraints rather than focusing attention on them. I will explore moments of tension between conventionality and unconventionality in Hands’s writing in order to show that she is aware of the apparent impropriety of her aspirational neoclassical verse, as throughout her pastorals she links her act of writing with other, likewise democratizing, gestures: love and leisure.

It is, hopefully, now clear that we should be suspicious of Dereli’s suggestion that Hands represents “a consistent and honest point of view on rural life and values” (169). This assertion finds value in her poetry because of its accuracy rather than its artistry and intellectual depth. When Hands writes about impassioned nymphs and swains, she is not describing “ordinary people as she knows them…from whose behavior she can draw a general moral” (Dereli 179). Landry counters, “the studied quality of Hands’s characters directs our reading towards both sympathy and self-parody” (Muses of Resistance 196). Where Dereli would simplify Hands’s pastorals as another kind of life writing, I hope to build upon Landry by drawing out her poetry’s complexity, and the complexity of the

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3 This area of Duck studies is especially interesting—see Keegan, “Georgic Transformations”; Goodridge, *Rural Life*; and also Batt.
rural life Hands describes. Thus, there is no reason to believe that her depictions of her community and class are not written in the same spirit of Horatian satire as, for example, Pope’s *Rape of the Lock* (1712). Following Behn in writing a dominant female voice into her pastorals, Hands was participating in important and wide-reaching literary trends, not necessarily reporting “consistent and honest” remarks. To return to Barrell’s point, Hands’s pastorals, in their deceptively “delightful [simplicity],” are showing the complexity of rural life and her desire to “control and organize” her lived experience through the medium of poetry. As my introduction suggests, writing poetry appealed to laboring-class writers like Hands for a number of reasons, but above all because it offered her a way to work both against and within the dominant discourse of her time. Instead of simply meditating on and confirming “the nature of love and the value of true virtue” (*Christmas Lab’ring Muses* 229), Hands is redefining the former—the nature of love—from a female and plebeian point of view and almost wholly rejecting the latter—the value of “true” or conventional virtue, especially the relationship between work and virtue that I explain above.

Dereli claims that Hands’s choice to work in pastoral makes her poetry “close enough to the tradition of the pastoral to be inoffensive to her betters” (179). Yet her protest poems (for example, the “Supposition” studied in depth by Landry and Steedman) do not attempt to be “inoffensive.” Dereli is probably thinking of poems like “On Contemplative Ease” (100), which as I’ve shown is much more complicated than it first appears. Another indication that Hands is

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4 The “shining Belle” Belinda implies familiarity with *Rape of the Lock* (Hands, “Leander and Belinda” and “An Epistle”).
trying to counter stereotypes of her gender and her class is the way she characterizes herself in her poems. Hands published her first poems in Jopson’s Coventry Mercury under the pseudonym “Daphne” (Landry, Muses of Resistance 196). In “Wit and Beauty. A Pastoral” and “Love and Friendship. A Pastoral,” Hands’s persona Daphne mediates contests of amatory discourse between two of her friends. She is characterized as more rational and discerning than either of her friends. In both poems, she is an observer of, rather than participant in, passionate romance, implying that she is sober, intelligent, and somehow outside of the social landscape of her friends. She inverts the pastoral in one way by writing an oratorical contest between two nymphs rather than two swains (Young 524). She is also inverting social custom by making a laboring-class woman the arbitrator of a contest between two laboring-class women. Hands excludes men entirely from this contest, and doing so inverts both poetic and social custom. Daphne is shown to be intellectually capable as she performs what is a man’s job according to the custom of pastoral contests; she is also, throughout the pastorals, un-femininely unemotional.

5 Middle and upper-class men made sport of contests between laboring women, called “smock races,” acting as judges and offering undergarments and accessories like hats and gloves as prizes (Rizzo, “Eighteenth-Century Sporting Women” 74). The old women’s footrace in Fanny Burney’s Evelina is one record of this practice, but it was more often young women than old, since the races were a chance for ogling by every class of men. Such men were also threatened by “any indication of similarity—equal abilities intellectual or physical” (71).
In the pastoral “Written While the Author Sat on a Cock of Hay,”
Daphne—supposedly the lovesick heroine—is merely “sullen” (line 37) and cries but one “silent tear” (line 45), defiantly un-pastoral in her lack of passion (Hands 97-9). When Daphne defines her ideal lover in “The Favourite Swain,” the outward signs of love she notices and looks down on in her peers are absent; indeed, Daphne’s favorite swain is desirable precisely because he is unaware of the modern “arts” of romance:

But I some artless youth must find,
That knows not how to veil his mind,
But speaks without disguise;
...
No passions like the northern wind,
Must discompose his steady mind,
By seriousness possest;
...
No headstrong passion must incline
Him to my arms, or make him mine,
But reason must approve... (pages 82-4)

Landry says that Daphne’s unimpressive affect and her swain’s artlessness is a part of Hands’s “parody of pastoral conventions” (Muses of Resistance 206). However, it might be more useful to read Hands as contradicting the assertions of male poets like Pope and Swift, whose works sometimes equate women with artlessness and emotion. In this sense, she writes in the same tradition as Lady Mortley Montagu, whose ballad “The Lover” catalogues the showy men who could never win Montagu’s affections: the coquet, toasters, songsters, the lewd
rake, the fopling (lines 41-5) (Fairer and Gerrard 185-6). Demanding an artless, rational, steady, serious, and honest man, Daphne is every bit as discerning as Montagu. Hands’s persona Daphne is also, then, aspiringly aristocratic in her rationality and lack of affect. Hands’s descriptions thus stand for more than satire, for in emphasizing rationality rather than passion, Hands she asserts that laboring women are just as equipped as patrician women to discern affability, intelligence, and compatibility as well as act with “propriety”—though laboring women are also empowered to act improperly.

Hands’s desire to liberate herself from customs of class and gender, at least as they relate to her poetic material, surface in a poem titled “Damon, Laura, and Daphne: A Pastoral,” first published in her local periodical Jopson’s Coventry Mercury (Hands 62-5). In this poem Hands expresses her feeling of liberation from the class and gender systems, particularly labor and courtship, she was tied to. It begins with an encounter between Damon, who loves Daphne, and Laura, who “long time…fair Daphne’s friend had been” (line 8). She notices that Damon is eager to abandon his labors for passion:

While yet his passion labour’d in his mind,
He walk’d abroad his straying steeds to find; (lines 5-6)

[He] walk’d abroad, [his] straying steeds to see;
But [his] fond heart was still pursuing thee; [Daphne]
They were [his] small, but thou [Daphne] [his] greater care…
(lines 43-45)

The only thing laboring in these lines is Damon’s “passion.” A central proposition underlying my reading of Hands’s poetry is that in middle and
upper class conceptions of rural life in the eighteenth century, idleness was connected to spiritual and secular danger, despair and spiritual aridity, melancholy and spleen (Jordan 19). The connection between labor and love or sex is as old as discourse on labor; Kevis Goodman argues that the “vexed relationship between ‘labor’ and ‘amor’ is….the central problematic of” georgic writing since Virgil (416-8). She is especially attentive to the connection between labor and eroticism in Milton as well, a poet we know Hands read and admired. On Milton, Hands writes: “Milton, in pond’rous verse, moves greatly on / Wielding his massy theme; with wond’rous strength / He labours forward” (126). Hands emphasizes Milton’s great poetic undertaking and characterizes his writing as a kind of “labour.” This suggests she also saw her own writing as a kind of labor, an observation that democratizes the role of poet by showing that she, another poet, is as entitled to the same labors as the refined English poets she catalogs in the poem. It also suggests that throughout her poetry she is willing to use labor beyond its literal meaning—as a conventional and neoclassical metaphor for other things, such as writing, courtship, and sex. Mentions of labor (and by extension leisure) are not meant to be documentary or life-writing; in an instance of what Bhabha refers to as mimicry and resistance, Hands develops metaphors of labor and leisure based on the poetic masters she aspires to be on a level with.

It is especially significant to the leveling agenda of Hands’s poetry that while Damon figures his passion as a kind of labor, Daphne is the one actually working (and by extension, resisting the call of erotic desire). Throughout Hands’s pastorals, female laborers rather than men and masters determine when and how women work and love. Thus it is hardly coincidental that Hands
connects labor to promiscuity and then to pity/sympathy, and that Landry also connects idleness to sex: “the test of erotic desire is the abandonment of labor” (*Muses of Resistance* 202). This context makes Damon’s eagerness to abandon his work all the more understandable. We see a woman laboring with similar commitment to Daphne’s in another of Hands’s poems, “The Widower’s Courtship” (104). A new widower—Roger “Full eighteen weeks had been” alone, Hands sarcastically remarks (line 2)—decides to court and marry Nell. He “accost[s]” her on “the green” and starts his courtship by asking if he can carry her milking pail for her (lines 6-8). This seems to be the eighteenth-century equivalent of asking to carry her books to class for her, but in this case the labor allusion is explicit and important. In response,

Says Nell, indeed my milking-pail
You shall not touch, I vow;
I’ve carried it myself before,
And I can carry it now. (lines 9-12)

It might be anachronistic to see this as a proto-feminist assertion of Nell’s independence and agency; instead, we should read it as Hands relating women’s choice in love to (the illusion of) women’s choices in their work. This is an illusion because, after all, Nell can choose to hand off her pail or carry it herself, but the task *will* be completed.

Still, labor is somewhat exercised within women’s power, just as love is. “Nell,” she writes, “understood his meaning well,” and “briskly” answers him with a clever quip: “You may see me at any time, / If you look where I be” (lines 17-20). Nell understands Roger but intentionally appears not to; her resistance shows the genteel “obligation for women to appear naïve and yet be knowing
enough to resist men” (Young 535). In “Clifton Hill,” Ann Yearsley presents a very different vision of country courtship, warning that young women may be unequipped to resist men’s advances:

Ye blooming maids, beware,
Nor the lone thicket with a lover dare.
No high romantic rules of honour bind
The timid virgin of the rural kind.
No conquest of the passions e’er was taught…

(Fairer and Gerrard 484, lines 53-7)

Rustic women, Yearsley suggests, are not knowing enough to control their passions or emotions, and are thus vulnerable to being preyed upon by swains. Nell and Daphne, on the other hand, are quite rationally discriminating—Daphne looking for a clever and a constant suitor rather than a fop. Nell’s commitment to carrying her own pail is a direct metaphor for her commitment to remaining independent. In this pastoral dialogue, Nell sends Roger off, showing that men as well as women control the terms and boundaries of courtship. As in “On Contemplative Ease,” Hands’s female protagonists are as (if not more) satisfied with solitude than the company of men. This egalitarian vision of courtship is in line with Hands’s leveling deployment of neoclassical conventions; as women seem to choose their labors and their men, Hands chooses her modes and her subjects.

In “Damon, Laura, and Daphne,” Daphne’s work begins when she finds a lost dog “wand’ring on the green,” and tasks herself with returning it. The same labor/courtship metaphor that Hands deploys in “The Widower’s Courtship” controls this poem. Daphne, therefore, like Nell, recognizes that Damon is not
only interested in her labors, but recognizes that he is suspicious that “some rival led her [Daphne] to the grove” (line 16)—in other words, that another shepherd-swain has led Daphne away for a tryst in some pastoral grove. Without assuaging Damon’s fears, Laura explains:

Much does the shepherd-swain his loss deplore,
The nymph is gone the wand’rer to restore.

DAMON.

Ah, wretched Damon! doom’d to love in vain,
She loves the dog, she loves the shepherd-swain;
Oh Daphne! I’ll to death thy loss deplore… (lines 17-21)

The shepherd in question is Thirsis, a figure who shows up in a number of poems as Daphne’s lover, and who marries her in another poem. Damon echoes Laura (“his loss deplore,” “thy loss deplore”) instead of the other way around, showing again that women can control romantic discourse. This is reinforced in Laura’s reply to Damon: “Despair not, Damon, of fair Daphne’s love, / Thy vows repeated, may her pity move” (lines 23-4). It is not the workings of Damon’s passion, but Daphne’s pity, that may yet bring the lovers together. Damon spies Daphne across the green plain:

Swift are the feet of messengers, that bring
Glad news of conquests to their sov’reign King;
But up the steep more swiftly Damon came,
Love, urg’d by fear, has swifter wings than fame.
The lovely Daphne smil’d to see him run… (lines 29-34)

Damon is motivated by fear of rejection and betrayal, rather than virility and confidence. His desperate pursuit of Daphne across the plain recalls the lost dog
she found, also on the plain, and the parallel amuses her. The dog is a “wand’rer,” setting up a parallel between the lost dog and both Damon and Daphne’s wandering affections—this poem shows Damon straying from Doris and trying to lure Daphne from her usual lover Thirsis.

While Damon is quick to give up on his labors, Daphne is more persistent. She argues, “This fav’rite dog, the swain does much lament, / I’ll lead him home, and give the swain content” (lines 31-2). The choice between the abandonment of labor for Damon and the completion of a task for the shepherd sets up a typical pastoral competition between the two men. To return the dog would mean Daphne’s return to the shepherd-swain Thirsis, her first suitor. Daphne’s resolve to bring the dog home might indicate, instead of her dedication to the demands of her work, her attempt to control romantic discourse and, as in Nell’s case, insist on her independence. To return the dog would also be a return to the realm of public propriety. The eventual abandonment of Daphne’s resolve to the completion of this task, which we will see just a few lines later, indicates a resistance to propriety and scrutiny rather than giving in to her lover’s advances.

It is critical to note that Daphne and Damon can apparently choose when to be idle, as the act of returning the dog to its proper owner would also be a return to labor, from which she and Damon have “gone astray.” Rather than submit to a system out of their control, Daphne and Damon resist its rules and conventions. This kind of leisure is a typical pastoral topos, but coming from the pen of Elizabeth Hands, a laborer herself, Daphne’s conscious and rational embrace of leisure feels subversive. This is what Barrell calls an emphatically “aristocratic” attitude (Dark Side 10): “how absurd it seems when distinctively English rustics claim the right to put their love before their work” (11). That
Daphne has the liberty to task herself with something and choose whether or not to carry it out reminds us that Hands is working in the pastoral mode, not life-writing. Furthermore, this a topos of a by-gone pastoral mode, that, as Jordan pointed out, had lost currency in the ideology of the 1780s, which emphasized industriousness and honesty over otium in the lower classes. Barrell’s study exposes the same trend, noting that after Goldsmith’s _Deserted Village_ (1770) “the rhetoric of writers and artists whose work seems to confirm the status quo had become more exclusively and more severely georgic” (Dark Side 81). In writing such anachronistically and emphatically pastoral characters, Hands is not only writing in the voice of masters; she is writing from an ideological standpoint that was counter to the “status quo” of dominant labor discourse in her time.

Daphne’s decision to abandon her labor and her first suitor signals condescension (in the positive eighteenth-century sense), agency, and subversion, rather than tacit acquiescence—suggesting that women, in their control of the courtship system, construct their own boundaries through rational enactments of sympathy. Unlike Yearsley’s timid virgins, Hands’s women do control their passion, and their “condescension” is a sympathetic, and aristocratic, response to men’s courtship. “The maid consented, making no reply; / What maid could such a small request deny?” (Hands, lines 37-8). Landry argues that in Hands’s pastoral “women’s silence regarding men’s questions can be read as their tacit acquiescence in the circuit of courtship” (Muses of Resistance 205). But remember Laura’s advice to Damon, to count on Daphne’s “pity” if not her love. We should read the poem differently from Landry and conclude that Daphne is not silent, but answers Damon with yet another question. Her response is thoughtful, playful and imaginatively sympathetic rather than silent,
passive, and submissive. Damon and Daphne do eventually head off to “Those verdant meadows, where fresh daisies grow” (72), and the poem heads into conventional pastoral description. We might hope that when Daphne and Damon go down the isolated “other side” of the hill, Hands will sexualize the landscape, a gesture fellow female pastoralist Behn would not be able to resist.

Instead, Damon acts out his courtship by telling Daphne a “pleasing tale,” a pastoral convention but also possibly a reference to Hands’s own writing. He’s trying very hard to woo her, as swains are apt to, through song and story—“Soft were the whisp’rings of the western gale, but with more softness Damon told his tale” – but Daphne “prefer[s]” the “gentle swain” to the story (lines 49-52). In an unconventional pastoral move, Hands suggests that her swain is not such a good poet, as Daphne is (scandalously) more attracted to his physical body than his song. Hands ends the poem with another reminder of the work that Daphne and Damon are shirking: “The swain ne’er thought to go, his steeds to find, / The nymph forgot to leave her dog behind” (lines 79-80). In one sense, the abandonment of labor confirms that Daphne and Damon have passed Landry’s test of erotic desire, and Landry argues that the shift from georgic issues of labor to pastoral love marks Hands’s appropriation of pastoral for laborers as well as genteel poets (Muses of Resistance 202). I don’t entirely agree with this reading, mostly because the reminder of work at the end of the poem reveals that the pastoral space that Hands describes is very consciously temporary.

The metaphor that Hands draws between labor, love, and independence is very much related to her mimicry of pastoral conventions, a mimicry whose potential for subversion she recognizes in her “Supposition” poems. While the “pastoral vision of society,” Barrell writes, could be “appropriated as a radical
ideology,” in Hands’s case it is not so much radical as aspirational (Dark Side 81). She does not necessarily present an argument against the belittling ideologies of the time; the reminder of work at the end of the poem exposes the genteel assumption that the laboring body is not valuable because of its passions or its range of intelligence and experience, but for its labor value in the work that Daphne and Damon are missing. Damon’s story-telling (though he’s not as good a teller as Hands), during work hours and in a sexual context, is also a reflection on Hands’s own pastoral songs, suggesting that she recognizes that her writing must take place in a marginal, borrowed but not stolen, space. She recognizes that both love and writing are threats to the “time-work discipline” because love and writing require isolation and a cessation of labor (Thompson 61), but we have no doubt that Damon and Daphne will return to work. However, we also have a new appreciation for stolen spaces, and by extension stolen poetical modes, an appreciation of Hands’s promiscuous blending of pastoral and georgic and the realms of labor, love, and leisure.

In Hands’s pastorals, love cannot be extricated from economics and the labor system, and certainly cannot replace them, even if the interested parties have little to “bestow” (“On a Wedding” 85). In “Lob’s Courtship” (Hands 86), Lob decides to begin a courtship during his labors:

As Lob among his cows one day,
Was filling of their cribs with hay;
As he to th’ crib the hay did carry,
It came into his head to marry;
Says he, there’s little merry Nell,
I think I like her very well;
But she, perhaps, at me will scoff,
Besides, she lives a great way off… (lines 1-8)

The distance from Nell (certainly the same cheeky Nell we met in “The Widower’s Courtship”) might interfere with Lob’s creature comfort (Dereli 178). But traveling far would also interfere with his labors—his hauling hay from one crib to another is one of the only instances of truly physically-demanding labor we see in Hands. Even Lob’s name, which rhymes with job, brings georgic rather than pastoral issues to the reader’s attention in this poem; his decision to marry the pastoral “merry Nell” is directly related to his labors. As Duck and Mary Collier show in their georgics, Nell can offer more than love—though not much. Goodridge notes that “the cottage-door scene” of rural laborers’ marriage was not “a real compensation, a genuine reward”; Duck’s laborers’ recompense for their fatigue is “the ‘good expecting Wives’ [who] must now provide comfort” (Rural Life 73-4). Mary Collier represents rural home life as “a male privilege,” and any recompense the husband takes is a product of the wife’s second shift of work (75-6). Such a marriage may appeal to Lob, but offers little to poor Nell.

So, while Landry reads this poem as a rejection of “coupling” “in favor of female independence” (Muses of Resistance 204), the issue of male dependence on women is just as, if not more, apparent. Lob is too poor even to afford a whole sheet of paper, but must make due with “the best that he could find” (line 13); Nell’s want is hardly less, as she “lik’d the [two] apples” Lob sent along “better” than the letter, which she throws into her fire (lines 24-7). The theme of labor returns when Lob asks Nell to join him by a “stile” and a “close,” both

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6 Rural Life, “Homecomings,” 71-88. See also Stone 375.
agricultural terms related to livestock enclosure. “Lob’s Courtship” shows a laboring-class man trying to improve his hard conditions through marriage. Economic necessity is more likely than love or passion to be Lob’s motivation for marriage. Poor Lob is doomed to fail in his courtship because true erotic desire, Hands has shown, is the abandonment of labor. Hands’s attention to labor in this poem is related to her leveling use of pastoral conventions throughout her poetry, as she calls into question the very heart of pastoral courtship dialogues. The term for this type of laboring-class critique of pastoral eludes consensus among scholars, though many have been proposed. The name for Hands’s resistance might just as well be called mimicry; for, all of the aristocratic posturing of prior Damons and Strephons comes under erasure with the realization that truly rustic couplings have more to do with comfort than love.

While not a formally conventional pastoral, the poem “Written, Originally Extempore, on Seeing a Mad Heifer Run through the Village Where the Author Lives” (115), shows most expressly Hands’s mastery of numerous neoclassical conventions. It begins with a pastoral passage:

When summer smil’d, and birds on ev’ry spray,
In joyous warblings tun’d their vocal lay,
Nature on all sides shew’d a lovely scene,
And people’s minds were, like the air, serene;
Sudden from th’herd we saw an heifer stray,

Proposed terms: Counter-pastoral (Williams 13-34), anti-pastoral (Goodridge 12), counter or mock-pastoral (Landry, Muses of Resistance 188-93), pastoral upside-down (Messenger 157-172).
And to our peaceful village bend her way. (lines 1-6)

Simple, happy rustics inhabit a simple, happy, and idyllic scene. Hands is clearly working within the pastoral tradition; but is she working so emphatically within it that it becomes caricature? The idea that a summer day in a working village could be “serene” is especially suspect, and the sudden eruption of a young female cow from the herd shows that disruption, rather than serenity, is the subject. The poem shifts almost without break into epic mode:

She spurns the ground with madness as she flies,
And clouds of dust, like autumn mists, arise;
Then bellow loud: the villagers alarm’d
Come rushing forth, with various weapons arm’d… (lines 7-10)

The heifer’s jolt shakes the village out of summer ease and instantly turns their attention to autumn, to the mists of dust that arise as a result of their georgic harvest labors. The cow also mimics Satan’s flight out of Hell in Paradise Lost: Milton writes that Satan “in the surging smoak / Uplifted spurns the ground” (2.938-9). This is an accomplished blend of several conventional forms, and the short poem confirms Hands’s mastery of forms proper for her to utilize (pastoral, to less extent georgic) as well as her aspirations to higher forms (epic, mock epic). Hands’s manipulation of formal elements is a “redirection of attention towards the complexity” (rather than the serenity or simplicity) “of rural lived experience in the face of studied literary aestheticization or indifference” (Muses of Resistance 193). Though Landry does not say so explicitly, she acknowledges that Hands is working both within and against neoclassical traditions and conventions. The apparent reference to Milton, especially, guides us to read this as a mock-epic, very intentionally both within and against neoclassical conventions, especially
too as it is written in heroic couplets that describe a sad, hodgepodge army’s encounter with a silly (but potentially deadly, as the women’s fear will show) assailant. It is wonderful to reflect on the fact that Hands sold this poem to readers as being composed “Extempore”—what cheek, to suggest that she is, truly, such a poeta nascitur that neoclassical conventions simply flow through her onto the page.

The issue of labor is not absent in this poem, either, and in a rare comment on “the material conditions of village life,” Hands calls attention to the village’s “general condition of decay and irreparability” (Landry, Muses of Resistance 193):

Some run with pieces of old broken rakes,
And some from hedges pluck the rotten stakes;
Here one in haste, with hand-staff of his flail,
And there another comes with half a rail:
Whips, without lashes, sturdy plough-boys bring,
While clods of dirt and pebbles others fling… (lines 11-16)

“Here,” Landry writes, “is a possible intimation of the effects of the capitalization and final marginalization of agricultural work” (Muses of Resistance 193). No doubt she is correct, but she also misses, through her inattention to the connection between labor and love throughout Hands’s pastorals, the important comment Hands is making about social change she is witnessing.

The heifer represents a woman, and a particularly sexual woman at that: since the seventeenth century, “heifer” was used as slang meaning “wife” (OED). Some villagers cheer (“huzza”) at the headstrong heifer; others curse her, indeed
attack her, with rakes, flails, and rails. Both flails\textsuperscript{8} and raillery, instruments of physical or verbal abuse, were historically a husband’s prerogative to use to control a less than obedient wife. And in her poem “Leander and Belinda: A Tale” (93), Hands writes about a woman’s encounter with a different kind of “rake” in Leander, whose control over Belinda leads to her ruin. It is important, however, to recall that these implements are decaying in the villagers’ hands (“Whips, without lashes,” “old broken rakes”); male control may be similarly weakening in light of historical and social changes, and Stone evidences this change in a rise of male targets (“husbands who beat their wives”) in community shame punishments called “charivaris” or “Skimmingtons” (375). The poem may be superficially about a cow, then about the danger of female passion, but it is finally an erotic scene in which community controls are ineffective. Furthermore, the implements used to control women are implements of labor. Hands cannily connects work and industriousness to morality, a connection that was an absolutely controlling feature of the discourse on work and the rural poor in the 1780s (\textit{Dark Side} 1-3, Jordan 19; see section III below). The cow’s rebellion against these systems, and the villagers’ ineffectual implements of control, show that industriousness is losing its sway in the hamlet. Hands’ effort in pastoral suggests the same, as she faces resistance from the courtiers in her “Supposition” poems but reaches publication nonetheless.

\textsuperscript{8}OED: “a. An instrument for threshing corn... b. \textit{fig}. Also in phrase \textit{to be threshed with your own flail}: to be treated as you have treated others... c. A military weapon...”
The genteel reactions to this poem that Hands anticipates are extremely
telling of the democratizing impulse behind the poem. Hands not only
successfully employs neoclassical conventions, but also connects rural life to
upper-class hypocrisy, suggesting that the morality and constraints they impose
on the lower classes are customary rather than legitimate. “On Seeing A Mad
Heifer” was not published before *Death of Amnon*, but it is referenced explicitly in
“On the Supposition of the Book having been published and read”:  

O law! Says young Seagram, I’ve seen the book, now
I remember, there’s something about a mad cow.
A mad cow!—ha, ha, ha, ha, return’d half the room;
What can y’expect better, says Madam Du Bloom?
They look at each other,—a general pause—
And Miss Coquettella adjusted her gauze. (Hands 54)

Madem Du Bloom’s question—“What can y’expect better” of the lower
classes?—is turned around and projected onto the aristocrats in the room, and
laughter thus turns into uncomfortable silence when the courtiers connect the
runaway, estrus heifer and Miss Coquettella. In suggesting that they could be the
same, Miss Coquettella and the heifer, Hands undermines the layers of
refinement and social distance between the village and the drawing room. When
these poems are read next to each other, it becomes apparent that Hands is
attempting to close the social, moral, and aesthetic distance between herself and
her readers, and between herself and the poets she emulates.

This intriguing poem, and the others discussed, reveal how all of Hands’s
poetry, not just the more explicitly political, might reward close reading. In
taking her pastorals seriously we see how in the eighteenth century a laboring-
class woman’s act of writing poetry might be considered a kind of emancipation, a parallel to the cessation of labor and promiscuity she describes. Like courtship and sex, writing requires leisure and isolation, which genteel expectations of laboring-class industriousness sought to prevent. Young says of Behn’s pastorals: “The reader experiences the sensation of truth shifting as what we ‘know’ from previous experience of pastoral is cut down before our eyes” (528). The same is true of Hands’s pastorals, with the additional caveat that what we expect from “previous experience” of laboring-class writing is also upset. Her ability to inscribe humor, leisure and abandon into the working landscapes she knew is a testament to her skill as a poet. While Hands is one of the more significant laboring-class women pastoralists of the age, an analysis of her poems suggests that it would be useful to examine whether the neoclassical writing of prior or subsequent laboring-class women offers similarly productive complications, should we choose to take their pastoral verse seriously.

From my identification of Hands’s connections between labor, love, and independence, we can also take away an important lesson about reading Romantic period laboring-class writing. While these poets adopt somewhat unfashionable ideologies and modes, it is not necessarily because their reading customs were behind the times or limited. In fact, just as we witness Hands responding to ideas on the sympathetic imagination and to the moral coercion common in dominant labor discourse of the time, we will also see Yearsley and Bloomfield engage with important contemporary philosophies and politics related to the social plan through their use of neoclassical conventions. It is likely that for Hands, Yearsley, and Bloomfield, earlier neoclassical models were more to their liking than contemporary verse not only because they allowed them to
prove their chops, but because they allowed them to trace their poetic and their political ideals to a Golden Age, independent of overbearing patrons (section III) and damaging economic and agricultural developments (section IV).
III. Proxy and the Gratitude Topos in Ann Yearsley’s Bluestocking Poems

While it is apparent from her long and local subscription list that Hands had support and encouragement in her community, it is unclear if she had a traditional patron (indeed, the fact that we do not know is convincing evidence that she did not). We know in great detail, on the other hand, of Ann Yearsley’s patronage relationship. Hannah More and Yearsley had one of the most notorious patron/poet rifts in eighteenth-century literary history. The details have been amply documented elsewhere;\(^9\) as such, I will not rehearse the story. Instead, I focus on an issue I am identifying as “proxy” in this public fight, a controlling feature of many eighteenth-century patron/poet relationships. One of those most visible manifestations of proxy in the works of patronized poets is the “gratitude topos,” an explicit reference to the patron in thanks for his or her support of the author. Yearsley’s protest against More in her bluestocking poems, “To Stella, on a Visit to Mrs. Montagu” and “On Mrs. Montagu,” uses the language of her mistresses and ironically the gratitude topos to reveal her marginalization, a gesture similar to Bhabha’s description of mimicry among colonized writers. For Yearsley, neoclassicism was a way of getting around More and Montagu, and establishing a relationship with a true poetic forbearer, Virgil. Yearsley uses neoclassical modes, especially the georgic, to undermine her own use of the gratitude topos and protest her position as a proxy poet. In this

enterprise, she shows the same democratizing impulse that appears elsewhere in her poetry.

Proxy is an important issue to consider with patron/poet relationships, because it can explain the construction of social distance that happens in patronage, what Donna Landry calls the “counterrevolutionary tendenc[ies]” of patrons (qtd in Rizzo, “Patron as Poet-Maker” 260). Patrons sometimes supported poets to further their own political, aesthetic and social ends, and the livings laboring-class poets made from their patronized poetry was anything but independent (Griffin, Literary Patronage 29-41). The term “proxy” can describe the way the patron attempts to prune the poet into representing the patron’s agenda. Poets do the work of the patron’s representation to a larger public by showing their gratitude for the patron’s wonderful work, reputation and genius through the gratitude topos. This poetical work is evocative of more literal work and more literal proxy. Carolyn Steedman suggests that servants worked “as kinds of proxy,” “exercising [their masters’] own (unused) capacity” to do the labor houses and estates required (9). Literate servants could act as their lady’s “proxy, or prosthesis,” delivering her instructions in writing; likewise, the patronized poet sometimes finds herself acting as her patron’s proxy, acting from her “humble condition” to deliver verses the patron has deemed properly virtuous and learned, and which she has taken pains to correct when the less-educated poet shows “inaccuracies” (More xii, viii). More’s role as teacher, instigator, director, and corrector of Yearsley’s poetry is more like an overseer than an editor. Her efforts to make Yearsley’s poetry public and, more importantly, presentable also have the effect of making Yearsley into a kind of proxy for work she could be doing herself—did do herself, in fact, after the split. After losing her
laboring-class proxy Yearsley, More fabricated a humble voice (much less refined than that of her imperfect proxy, Yearsley) in her *Cheap Repository Tracts* (1795-1797), to convince lower class readers to accept their pre-ordained and limited positions in society (Christmas, *Lab’ring Muses* 258; Jordan 40, 47-54).

A letter from Anna Seward, dated 1 February 1786 (just one year after the first advertisement for Yearsley’s 1785 *Poems on Several Occasions*, organized by Hannah More), describes the public split and Yearsley’s desire for independence:

> Miss More’s letter to Mrs. Montagu, prefixed to Lactilla’s\(^{10}\) first publication [in place of a preface], struck me with an air of superciliousness towards the Being she patronized; and the pride of genius in adversity revolted. So, in a similar situation, would surly Samuel Johnson have spurned the hand that, after it had procured him the bounty of others, *sought to dictate to him its use*; and the resentment, which, in *her*, is universally execrated, would, coming down to us now as a record of *his emerging talents*, have been generally excused, and probably, with whatever little reason, admired. (Radcliffe, my emphasis)

Seward emphasizes More’s condescension as much as Yearsley’s pride, even suggesting in her parallel to Samuel Johnson that Yearsley’s self-importance could be a sign of genius. More’s biggest mistake as patron, Seward suggests in the same metaphor, was her attempt to “dictate” to Yearsley the proper use of her own talents. Rizzo notes that More, like “Caroline, Richardson, Montagu, 

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\(^{10}\) Lactilla was Yearsley’s nom de plume, referencing her milkwoman’s labor. See section I, and Christmas, *Lab’ring Muses* 269-271.
wished the natural geniuses they sponsored to remain conveniently beneath them where they could be manipulated” (“Patron as Poet-Maker” 260). Seward is not blind to the negative effect of these manipulations on the poets; in this same letter, she worries that the fallout may lead Yearsley to suicide as it supposedly had with her fellow Bristolean Thomas Chatterton (Seward my also have been thinking of Duck, famously patronized by Queen Caroline, and also a presumed suicide). As Seward’s letter and the poems I examine make clear, the rift between Yearsley and More was over more than money; it was, in part, about Yearsley’s protest of her marginalized status as a patronized, proxy poet.

As was typical of laboring-class poets under patronage, Yearsley had an “all but contractual obligation to be grateful” (Rizzo, “Patron as Poet-Maker” 261). The gratitude topos was not an eighteenth-century development; Virgil wrote his Georgics at the behest of a patron (de Bruyn 662) and Dryden, in his translation of the Georgics, observes that after invoking all of the relevant gods and muses, Virgil “addresses himself in particular to Augustus, whom he compliments with divinity” (Dryden 95). The deeply ironic tone of Yearsley’s invocations of the gratitude topos is central to my argument, because it is a feature of Yearsley’s impulse to level the social distance between herself and refined patrons and poets. Even poets in relatively equitable and comfortable patronage situations were compelled to employ the gratitude topos in their

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11 Yearsley makes a similar (and, as Andrews comments, controversial) gesture are the end of both of bluestocking poems, comparing her patronage to conversion and by extension More to a deity; the sacrilegiousness of this gesture would not have been lost on the radically evangelical More.
writing. In an example from another patron/poet relationship, Mary Leapor and her patron Bridget Freemantle enjoyed a remarkably close and positive relationship. But Freemantle still feels compelled in her patron’s preface to represent Leapor as one of the “deserving poor” (Greene 152-3). Leapor's friendly and intimate letters to Freemantle, published posthumously in a volume of miscellanies and by their very nature private, even confessional, suggest that the gratitude topos employed by Leapor in her many poems dedicated to Freemantle was sincere and authentic. Elsewhere, Leapor employs an explicitly political and leveling voice, but she does not sink her gratitude topos in irony; perhaps she felt on a kind of level with her patron based on their camaraderie.  

At the other end of the spectrum, one would be hard-pressed to find either a more obvious, or a more ironic, iteration of the gratitude topos than Yearsley’s first bluestocking poem, “To Stella: On a Visit to Mrs. Montagu.” It initially appeared as an advertisement for Yearsley’s upcoming publication Poems, on Several Occasions (1785). On 24 February 1785, almost one year exactly before Seward’s letter, the Bath Chronicle published a version of “To Stella” as “The first specimen we have been able to procure, and we believe the first which has appeared in print, of the poetical talents of Mrs. Yearsley (the celebrated milk-woman of Clifton)” (Radcliffe). The anonymous author notes that “A collection of the poems of this extraordinary woman, we hear, is on the point of publication” and emphasizes that Yearsley has only “lately [been] introduced to

12 Another hint of their surprisingly close friendship: Leapor addresses these letters to “Biddy,” rather than “Artemisia,” her pen-name Freemantle. See Greene and Ann Messenger.
the notice of the public by Miss H More, to whom this beautiful Epistle is
addressed.” From her first introduction to the public, Yearsley is also identified
in connection with More, and her first poem is presented as an exercise in the all-
important gratitude topos required of patronized poets. In advertisements and
prefaces, patrons wanted to shape readers’ perceptions of their poets’ morality
and modesty. Advertisements for Yearsley emphasized that all proceeds from
subscriptions would be “for the benefit of her Family” (Yearsley front matter,
liii). More insisted that Yearsley be situated in her socio-economic class, which
readers could marvel at or use an excuse for any perceived deficiencies in her
poetry. Patrons also wanted to illustrate that poets like Yearsley had access to the
right books, to show that they had the right knowledge base (More vi-vii). But as
will be shown, poets adopted the conventions of these right books with their own
democratizing agendas.

The “beautiful Epistle” included in the Bath Chronicle advertisement is
more complicated than More and the anonymous reviewer led readers to believe.
The poem “To Stella” (“Stella” was Yearsley’s pseudonym for More) is written in
blank verse and it describes the benefits “Lactilla” reaps from her patron’s
attendance at the literary salon of Elizabeth Montagu. But Yearsley also analyzes
the space she herself inhabits, which is significantly more limited than the
expansive but exclusive world Montagu and More occupy. Analysis of the poem
is further complicated by the fact that there are two published versions of the
poem,¹³ and the differences between them show that on the one hand, Yearsley

¹³ From here on out, 1785a refers to the first, Bath Chronicle, version of the poem,
and 1785b to the authority version of the poem from Poems, On Several Occasions.
was marketed as a proxy poet, patronized as much for More’s gain as her own. One the other hand, she sought to market herself as a more independent poet, using neoclassical conventions to protest her marginalized position in an act of mimicry. The poem that first appeared as part of the Bath Chronicle advertisement is 44 lines long; the poem that was included in Poems, on Several Occasions (1785) was 60 lines long. There were not merely additions to the final version; the poems share only 34 lines and have very different middle sections. 1785a has a ten-line highly conventional description of winter that was cannibalized to become the beginning of Yearsley’s georgic prospect poem, “Clifton Hill,” also in Poems, on Several Occasions. The 1785b middle section is 26-lines long. The first octave describes in laudatory terms the brilliant colloquies that take place in Montagu’s salon; the rest describes a natural genius and his introduction to traditional wisdom. Fairer and Gerrard suggest that More supervised these revisions in order to “[smoothe] out Yearsley’s rugged individual style” (479), but the changes may be a case instead of More deciding what was really appropriate for her patronized poet to write about patron and poet.

The winter passage from 1785a that More apparently found objectionable paints a gloomy picture of winter and Yearsley’s social and poetic marginalization:

In that lone hour, when angry forms descend,
And the chill’d soul forgets the name of friend,
When all her sprightly fires neglected lie,
And gloomy objects fill the mental eye;
When hoary winter strides the northern blast,
And Flora’s beauties at his feet are cast;
Earth by the grisly tyrant defect made,
The feather’d warblers quit the leafless\textsuperscript{14} shade,
Quit those dear scenes where life and love began,
And cheerless seek the savage haunt of man… (lines 17-26)

Yearsley’s people are silenced, earth barren, birds hushed, imagination dead. The sense of community that helps define us as human is absent in this vision of winter. Yearsley’s lines capture the georgic picture of a fallen, embattled world (Fairer English Poetry 91-2, Heinzelman 187-9), and she echoes some of the closing lines of James Thomson’s georgic “Winter”:

‘Tis done! dread Winter spreads his latest glooms,
And reigns tremendous o’er the conquered year.
How dead the vegetable kingdom lies!
How dumb the tuneful! horror wide extends
His desolate domain. Behold, fond man! (lines 1024 – 8)

The same quiet birds and poets, the same lack of greenery, but somehow, Thomson’s man stays “fond,” despite the hard times of winter. Both Yearsley and Thomson figure the season as a feared tyrant, but their perspectives differ: Thomson emphasizes Winter’s tremendous reign, describing the wintry scene as if from a prospect view—behold how wide the desolation extends. This is not

\textsuperscript{14} Radcliffe gives this phrase as “The feather’d warblers quit the feather’d shade,” but I choose to adopt the line as it is written in the final version of “Clifton Hill” (1785), where the word is “leafless.” I rationalize this because it seems like a simple transcription error, and common sense tells us that trees in winter are “leafless,” not “feather’d” with foliage.
necessarily the point of view of a conquered person, and the speaker seems instead like an outside observer. Yearsley’s view, on the other hand, is earthbound, focusing on the tributes that the occupied and oppressed earth must offer unto its master. What Yearsley describes happens within her bounded view is much the same as Thomson’s: clouds descend, people are depressed, views gloomy, vegetation dead, birds silent. But Yearsley rewrites Thomson’s scene from a laborer’s perspective to show the different experiences produced by their different social positions. Thomson’s indifferent and distanced speaker stays mostly above the literal oppressive effects of winter, but Yearsley’s speaker is enmeshed in them, and most importantly, her speaker’s voice is nearly silenced by the harsh season: “all her sprightly fires neglected lie, / And gloomy objects fill the mental eye.” The worst effect of winter, for Yearsley, is its obliteration of poetic images and inspiration. This is not the proper humble, pious and industrious thinking expected of laboring-class poets (Christmas, Lab’ring Muses 19). Yearsley aspires not to work, but to write, and her use of the gratitude topos in conjunction with the georgic mode in this section ironically also offers a glimpse of Lactilla’s aspirations not to labor.

Still, for Yearsley’s democratizing agenda, it was the georgic, among all neoclassical literary modes and conventions, that offered an appropriate form of resistance to More. Frans de Bruyn writes that in the eighteenth century, “georgic proved indispensable as a mode of literary and cultural mediation,” reconciling pastoral and epic, aestheticism and didacticism, “retirement and engagement,” eternity and progress (661, my emphasis). As a kind of mediation, it also offered poets like Yearsley the chance to speak with more authority than their proxy status typically granted them, that is, allowed to speak on subjects they knew
more about than their masters. For laboring-class writers like Duck, Leapor, Yearsley and Bloomfield, georgic was always a “privileged but contested generic space”—privileged, of course, because the poets’ biographies seemed to authenticate the documentary realism of georgic (Keegan, “Georgic Transformations” 552). However, for laboring-class writers, the generic space was contested in large part because of the difficulties laboring-class poets had writing from a social position that minimized their agency, by turning them into proxies for the leisure classes and denying them claim to leisure of their own, which the georgic mode ironically insists upon from its authors. When Yearsley writes on winter in the opening lines of 1785b, her depiction of plebeian want and depression goes beyond Thomson’s “desolate domain” to depict the artistic and intellectual void wrought by poverty and winter, which genteel writers do not (can not?) acknowledge.

“The probability and credibility of [georgic] statements,” de Bruyn writes, “depended on the authoritativeness of the source, and that, in turn, inevitably became bound up with matters of social and cultural prestige” (671). Yearsley’s class status and lack of social and cultural prestige render her conclusions subversive, and this may be why the passage was removed from the gratitude poem in the months between the advertisement and the publication of Poems, On Several Occasions. Thomson suggests that the pains of winter will be softened by virtue, the “never-failing friend of Man, / His guide to happiness on high” (lines 1039-1). Man can be consoled with the knowledge that the “great eternal scheme” will take care of everything:

Ye good distressed!
Ye noble few! who here unbending stand
Beneath life’s pressure, yet bear up awhile,
And what your bounded view, which only saw
A little part, deemed evil, is no more:
The storms of Wintry Time will quickly pass,
And one unbounded Spring encircle all. (1063-9)

Religious message aside (the last two lines especially echo the beatitudes),
Thomson is emphatically reiterating the social plan from which he benefits. He
enjoys a distanced view of nature and of the “good distressed,” while laborers
like Lactilla, who “only [see] / A little part,” take on the actual physical burden
of winter. The vast majority of people in Thomson’s Britain lived under life’s
pressures and with bounded views, but Thomson only ennobles the folks who
do so uncomplainingly. In a pastoral gesture, Thomson wants his laborers to be
virtuous and happy and for their views to be constrained to their immediate
surroundings without consciousness of the systems that exploit them; this is a
stance that became virtually obsolete when another laboring-class poet, Stephen
Duck, published *The Thresher’s Labour* (1730) a few years after Thomson (*English
Poetry* 90). In a georgic gesture, Thomson celebrates the laborers’ heroism even as
he shows his interest in keeping the vast distance between them, for the upper
classes that popularized Augustan conventions relied on proxy labor and travails
for the comfortable positions from which they wrote. Men (and women, to some
extent) of the upper-classes, who were responsible for how the country’s politics,
economics, and religion were run, cultivated distance from the literal and
quotidian details of how the country ran itself (*Barrell, Dark Side* 8 and “Politics
of Taste” 19-20). Patrons and genteel writers absented themselves from literal
labors because, as Barrell writes, they were increasingly interested “in the
efficient management of their estates, if less often the details of husbandry itself” (Dark Side 8). The comfortable classes (to use Sarah Jordan’s encompassing term for those not in manual labor, including professional, middle- and upper-classes) made a virtue of otium and even indolence, because busy days and demands on their time would prevent the kind of contemplative, disinterested running of affairs (or in the case of poets, mere description of the affairs) they were meant to be doing (Goodman 415, Jordan 39-47).

Though she appropriates his language and conventions, Yearsley does not accept Thomson’s social plan. His idea of long-suffering virtue is as absent as every other human quality in Yearsley’s “savage haunt of man.” Instead, Yearsley finds relief in what “bounty” More can bring her back from Montagu’s salon, “intellectual table scraps” leftover from the bluestocking salon (Yearsley line 15, Christmas Lab’ring Muses 240). Yearsley does not cheer at the thought of the turning over of winter into a new season—a spring that brings new duties and hardly relieves life’s pressure (Thomson line 1065). She is rather soothed by the thought of More’s return: “Then shall your image soothe my pensive soul, / When slow-pac’d moments big with mischief roll” (lines 27-8). Again, Yearsley highlights her ambitions not to labor, but instead to escape to a life of improved ease (“slow-pac’d moments”), mischief and other intellectual pursuits. Even the abbreviated version of this sentiment found in 1785a is subversive, as it undermines the power and influence of the patron. Yearsley’s deft use of georgic conventions simultaneously prove herself as a writer and suggest that she deserves more than bluestocking table scraps, deserves to be included in the intellectual circle that she is barred from by social custom. No wonder it was cut.
Montagu’s editor notes that Yearsley, along with demanding control of her own money that Montagu and More controlled in a trust, “told [More] that she had ruined her verses by her corrections and her reputation by her Preface” (qtd in Fairer and Gerrard 479). Yearsley was especially upset that “her manuscript poems had all been burnt at the printer’s following the publication of her book; these poems included both the originals of those printed—which she had wished to compare to the printed text to identify unauthorized alterations—and the originals of some not printed” (Rizzo, “Patron as Poet-Maker” 261). This suggests that some of the changes between the two poems came not only at More’s direction, but possibly even by her hand. However, in the case of Yearsley’s original writing, it is unclear how much More would have considered that these really were Yearsley’s manuscripts at all. It is interesting to note that the only manuscript version extant of “Clifton Hill” is in More’s holograph (Fairer and Gerrard 483). As Dustin Griffin says, in the patronage relationship “the artist is only a craftsman: the true author and only begetter of a work is a patron” (Literary Patronage 30). More may have considered that her hard work in organizing the successful subscriptions for Yearsley’s volume had earned her some control over how she and her friends would be portrayed in the published version. In this enterprise, More treats Yearsley as a proxy for accomplishing the patron’s positive self-representation and furthering the social distance between patron and poet.

Bhabha writes that resistance through received forms is not “less effective, but effective in a different form” (“Signs Taken” 1883). It is a special kind of ambivalence, a term whose definition we recall is not lack of assurance but the act of holding two contrary ideas in mind simultaneously. Laboring-class poets
like Yearsley, writing using the conventions of neoclassical genres, were also interpreting and appropriating these conventions in an act of literary liberation. Gadamer says, “What we call ‘classical’ is something retrieved from the vicissitudes of changing time and its changing taste” (726). Laboring-class poets, especially Yearsley, “retrieve” the conventions of classical poetry from Virgil via Pope or Dryden, not from their overbearing patrons; Yearsley in particular may have wanted to be a part of a timeless tradition of poetry apart from, what was for her, a commoditizing proxy-driven model of patronage. Unfortunately, the subversive features of her, and other laboring-class poets’, mimicry may be lost on modern audiences. Read out of context, the works of a poet as conventionally skillful as Yearsley can easily blend in with the canon of canonical writers she emulated, such as Thomson, Edward Young, and Anna Laetitia Aikin (later Barbauld). “The desire to emerge as ‘authentic,’” Bhabha writes, “through mimicry—through a process of writing and repetition—is the final irony of partial representation” (Location of Culture 88). We must also keep in mind that Yearsley, like Leapor and Bloomfield, certainly did desire to blend in with her genteel contemporaries. This is the logos of her leveling impulse; there are some critics who believe that Yearsley identified with the bluestockings and did not believe herself to be laboring-class. Theorizing on the means of her assimilation and her social and historical context does not detract from the virtuosity of her poetry, and in fact it can lead to a deeper understanding of her layered meanings.

A “change of perspective” on laboring-class neoclassical poetry, from viewing it as part of a patron’s imposition to seeing it as a conscious act of mimicry by the laboring-class poet, “reveals the ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses on authority and enables a form of subversion, founded on
that uncertainty, that turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention” (Bhabha “Signs Taken” 1883). Yearsley recognizes the authority of dominating modes of discourse in adopting the gratitude topos, but her use of other neoclassical conventions presents deeply-coded objections to the patronage system. Thus her use of refined classical conventions can be seen as participation and intervention in, if not also resistance to, the institutionalized social distance between patron and laboring-class poet. Yearsley’s engagements not only with the gratitude topos but also with the prospect view and other Virgilian modes are quite sophisticated, as they prove her skill as a poet while simultaneously protesting her exclusion from the wider poetic community.

In both versions of “To Stella,” Yearsley begins by describing the Bluestocking salon. It is a space from which Yearsley is excluded, a place that celebrates wit and conversation rather than dress or etiquette, a place “where genius in familiar converse sits” (1785b line 21). Yearsley gives no description of the physical space or the people who actually sit in it. This is because the place of More and Montagu’s exchange of wisdom is not quite physical—it is instead “skies” where ideas “soar” and “pour out” (both versions lines 5, 6). This infinite space recalls again the difference between Thomson’s view and Yearsley’s bounded view in the winter sections above. The salon, the place of wisdom, is the “native sky” of Montagu and More (both versions line 10), but Yearsley cannot aspire to join them:

Unequal, lost to th’ aspiring claim,
I neither own nor ask the immortal name
Of Friend — oh no, its ardours are too great,
My soul too narrow, and too low my state;
Stella, soar on, (to nobler objects true)
Pour out your soul with your lov’d Montague.
But ah! should either have a thought to spare,
Slight, trivial, neither worth a smile nor tear,
Let it be mine... (both versions lines 1-9)

This is where Yearsley most explicitly begs for those intellectual table scraps Christmas identifies. She is almost uncomfortably modest. Just describing the space is presumptuous; immediately thereafter, the poet must check herself as she recognizes she is stepping outside of her station, and transgressing the boundary between noble patron and laboring-class poet: “Quick let me from the hallow’d spot retire, / Where sacred Genius lights his awful fire” (lines 13-14). Yearsley’s poetic persona must adopt a humbler posture here, as this section comes a bit too close to the world Yearsley is barred from. 1785b significantly expands this flattering description of Montagu’s salon, and establishes a contrast between this space and the humble miser’s cell in the second part of this additional passage. This is a move that emphasizes the gratitude topos over Yearsley’s skillful use of neoclassical conventions in 1785a. In the new version, the space Montagu and More inhabit can “glow,” “flow” and expand with ideas (1785b lines 23, 24), and is delimited by certain prerequisites, a space which More may physically visit and return from, while Yearsley humbly waits at home.

These prerequisites are foregrounded in the section new to 1785b; presumably inspired by More’s interventions, Yearsley places the figure of the lonely, laboring-class poet in a bounded indoor space, the miser’s cell, rather than an unbounded outdoor space like the expansive salon. This addition also shows the meeting between the poet figure and the saving patron who deigns to
descend to the natural (suffering) genius and offer support, if the miser can
overcome his habitual pride:

O, powers of Genius! even the Miser’s heart,
In the sweet transport, bears a transient part;
He thrills, unconscious whence his pleasures come,
Who ne’er had dreamt of rapture but at home;
But, ah! the slight impression quickly dies,
Or on the noxious surface floating lies;
The momentary virtue ne’er was brought
To frame one bounteous deed, one generous thought,
His harden’d spirit only knows to shun
The lore of wisdom, and the genial sun
Of warm humanity; ah! joyless breast,
Which never hail’d a self-rewarding guest!
Then fly, cold wretch, to thy congenial cell,
And quit the haunts where sweet sensations dwell. (lines 27-40)

Yearsley represents a miser whose genius is “unconscious” and natural. Even
though this passage mostly describes the miser’s “cell”—not a landscape or
garden—I would argue that Yearsley is nonetheless joining a debate to
eighteenth-century conceptions of nature, genius, and poetic authority, and
especially important to More’s self-conscious promotion of Yearsley’s “natural
and strong expression” of genius (More iv). The miser has natural genius, but
genius is importantly not enough; he has just a part of that genius which flows
and expands in the bluestocking salon space. Why does his “slight impression [of
genius] quickly” die? Specifically, the miser shuns “a self-rewarding guest” and
“the lore of wisdom, and the genial sun / Of warm humanity.” The genial (“life-giving,” according to Fairer and Gerrard [480]) sun suggests the miser rejects both a supportive patron and the actual sun, as if he or his genius is a plant that might wither. The self-rewarding guest clearly represents More, a patron who may reap some reward from the patronage of the humble poet.

More’s actions as a patron were directly related to her own experience as a patronized poet and part of her socially mobile agenda. It is important to note, as both Mary Waldron and Kerri Andrews have, that the social distance between Yearsley and More, while seeming wide, was not nearly as vast as More wished it to be (Waldron 23-25). Yearsley was probably familiar with More’s history, and knew that she was from a relatively humble home herself and the grateful recipient of patronage from David Garrick, who introduced her to the Bluestocking Society. For Yearsley, finding herself in the position of a proxy for a patron she may have believed to be hardly more genteel than herself would have been hard to swallow. In the poem, her position under More requires that she differentiate herself from the miser—she, after all, has embraced all three things the miser shuns—but she also signals her own marginalization and, perhaps, regret. She cannot come to Montagu’s salon, but must wait (impossibly) for the salon to come to her. She might as well be in a cell. The miser has a “congenial cell,” which may mean a friendly space, but also echoes the “genial sun” three lines above: both word pairs come at the end of their lines. Thus the miser’s congenial cell is also, in a sense, “life-giving,” as it is suited to the life he has chosen. Yearsley’s descriptions of the miser’s cell and the salon “where sweet sensations dwell” challenge the reader to place her in one or the other space—to define her as a miser, or a soarer.
Yearsley’s genre-bending “To Stella” and “On Mrs. Montagu” could both be considered georgics of patronage explicitly written in gratitude to her hard-working bluestocking patrons, but they also both implicate these patrons in Yearsley’s own artistic subjugation. Yearsley captures in a kind of georgic mode the way patrons saw themselves as laboring quite bravely to bring notice to their laboring-class poets. But she also shows how plebeian poets could be skeptical both of these efforts as legitimate labor and of the vast distance between poet and patron that such efforts implied. “On Mrs. Montagu” appears to be an evolution of the themes in “To Stella,” in which Yearsley adopts her patron More’s voice to build an oral history of bluestocking patronage, in which Montagu and More seem more like opportunists than missionaries. More (“Stella”) says the poets that Montagu finds to patronize are, first, like the cattle Hercules rescues from a fire-breathing monster—“Horrid as Cacus in their thievish dens”—and then like “trophies” and “pilfer’d glories” (lines 25-7). If uneducated geniuses are cattle, and Montagu is Hercules, then whom Cacus represents is quite challenging: either Yearsley suggests illiteracy has stolen from the poets their poetic potential (a bit awkward), or another many-headed thieving monster is keeping uneducated geniuses in darkness. It may be overreaching to claim a political message in this allusion; then again, it may not be, as such criticism is appropriate to the economic and political bent of Virgil’s middle form of poetry (Heinzelman 197, 200). The reader must also wonder if, since the poem is written in “Stella’s” (More’s) voice, Montagu’s heroism is as much caricature as it is hyperbole. Yearsley’s use here of the gratitude topos could be satirical, rather than sincere, expressing Yearsley’s skepticism that More and Montagu deserve such praise for their “work” when Yearsley is the real poet.
A unifying theme of laboring-class georgics is that they evidence poets’ heightened attention to the distinction between “head-work” and manual labor. This is a distinction that would be lost by the turn of the nineteenth century in the larger poetic community, leading to the extinction of the laboring-class georgic. Actual physical labor was depicted less frequently in refined poetry (and more frequently in non-poetic genres such as agricultural tracts or radical treatises) as “head-work” was becoming, by the turn of the nineteenth century, paradoxically a more legitimately georgic endeavor than manual labor (Wallace 510, 512-14; see also Siskin, 102-4). Anne Wallace and Scott Hess both trace such a blurring of the distinction between intellectual and physical work in the works of William Wordsworth. As early as Virgil, poets thought that intellectual effort was a kind of labor (Heinzelman 198, Siskin 104; see section II). Wallace notes that georgic “interlaces agriculture and poetry making and civilization building...as metaphorically inseparable varieties of one work, cultivation” (513). Genteel and laboring-class poets may blur the two—Elizabeth Hands after all referred to Milton’s poetical undertakings as a kind of labor (“Critical Fragments on some of the English Poets,” 126; see above, section II). Earlier in the century, Jonathon Swift teased that the thresher Stephen Duck “threshed his Brains” out in writing poetry (qtd in Christmas, Lab’ring Muses 20). Duck, though, saw his professionalization as a way out of labor, as a respite rather than a new shift of work (Christmas, Lab’ring Muses 92-4). Generally laboring-class poets emphasize a difference “between labor of the head and labor of the hand” (Griffin, Literary Patronage 30). The former certainly had more prestige, was more comfortable, and was not less stable than the rural laborer’s life.
The aggressive means by which Montagu “bears in triumph back” uneducated geniuses speaks to how she and More seem to Yearsley to benefit just as much as she does from the patronage system. Montagu is reminiscent of classical and biblical conquerors and rapists, reinforced by Stella’s boasting about the epic feat (line 28). Poets are taken out of their “dark” spaces into light, but only to be exploited. Virgil places the tale of Cacus and Hercules on the Palatine Hill, the future site of Rome, and Hercules in his attempts to kill Cacus tears off the top of the mountain and much of its vegetation and rocks (Hamilton 340). The allusion may seek to establish a parallel between the rape of cattle and destruction of landscape in Rome, and slave trading and the institution of enclosure Yearsley witnessed in late eighteenth-century Bristol. Yearsley’s coded allusion to these labor issues—dangerously unsustainable farming and industrial practices, the exploitation of humans through slavery, and the closing of commons (also a pertinent issue for Bloomfield, below)—is no coincidence. In this coded metaphor, Yearsley draws an unfavorable comparison between georgic issues (the exploited and appropriated cattle) and the abstract intellectual and cultural work that patrons labor in (the many-headed thieving monster).

Next to Yearsley’s depictions of real work, More and Montagu’s patronage and head-work pale.

Significantly, in a spirit of independence from patronage, Yearsley’s discourse on her natural genius figures her “alone.” Her original genius (pre-

15 Christmas writes that Yearsley “never wrote a poem chronicling a milkwoman’s labors” (Lab’ring Muses 255) but in section IV, I contradict him by examining the georgic elements of “Clifton Hill.”
More) is inspired by her “native wilds,” grand “beauteous imagery,” the stars, oceans, and mountains, and leads her “ravish’d soul to extasy untaught, / To all the transport the rapt sense can bear” (lines 51-62). She has “Strong gusts of thought,” but they are trapped inside the hermetic and defined space of her ignorance (and socioeconomic class), so that her poetry, finding no “vent,” suffocates. The unruliness and energy of the poem reaches its climax here, in the wilds of Yearsley’s untaught mind, “the Mind’s best powers.” Its resolution begins as Yearsley gazes on the ocean: “All [thoughts] perish’d in the mind as soon as born, / Eras’d more quick than cyphers on the shore, / O’er which the cruel waves, unheedful, roll” (64-67). Nature is both her inspiration and her figurative destroyer. These lines recall what Gadamer calls the “viscissitudes of changing time and its changing taste.” They refer to what Yearsley might have expected to happen to her verse with or without a patron, and we may also view them as a “hybrid discourse” (Nature Poetry 7, 113) or an example of Bhabha’s ambivalence or “sly civility” (Location of Culture 97). For while she celebrates the positive effect her patron has had on the preservation and dissemination of her poetry, this is also a reflection on the tenuousness of her status and the semi-permanent nature of her verses, many of them dedicated to living people. Verses may be composed and thrown out only to be ignored and rolled over by unheedful critics. Likewise, supposedly important figures to whom Yearsley has been encouraged to dedicate her poetry will fade into oblivion. Generous bluestocking patrons could provide some quick support, but the way that Yearsley has described the geographical distance between herself and the soaring, expansive patrons makes More and Montagu seem very nearly as vast and changeable as nature itself. Yearsley’s poetry, the product of a constrained
space and a constrained genius, is thus destined to be received differently from bluestocking productions; proxy poetry has less force, by dint of its “second-hand” quality. Yearsley wishes to be “alone,” to return to nature’s isolated wilds, because the proxy poet forced into the gratitude topos was more like a craftsman than an artist.

In the last section, Yearsley shifts into an explicitly georgic mode, presenting patronage as an effort of improvement on laboring poets by patrons, an effort that transforms them merely into proxies for expressing their patrons’ whims or ideologies. More is figured as a gardener who “Deigns to direct…[and] to prune” Yearsley, who is now a part of the landscape itself instead of an observer of it. She is placed in a defined and controlled space, this time actually bound to earth. Her patrons More and Montagu possess her and direct her as they would a plant, resulting in a harvest of “budding” or “feeble fancies” (a far cry from the ravished ecstasies of wild nature) that her patrons “bid” “live” (line 75). This recalls the way Duck described his patronage relationship with Queen Caroline: he “writes to the queen [Caroline] that she has the same ‘Right’ to his poems ‘as you have to the Fruits of a Tree, which you have transplanted out of a barren soil into a fertile and beautiful garden’” (Griffin, Literary Patronage 30). A century later, this proxy model persisted: John Clare’s patron Lord Radstock used similarly evocative and georgic language when he suggested to Clare that “some two or three poems” “might be expunged, in order to make room for others of riper and purer growth” (my emphasis, Goodridge, Class and the Canon 75). Like Duck, Radstock characterizes poetic output in agricultural terms, implicitly connecting Clare and nature. This georgic language aligns natural
poets, cultivated on British soil, with nature itself, and makes the social distance between refined patron and natural poet seem too wide to be overcome.

These poems show Yearsley’s reluctance both to made into a means for More’s ideological and social ends and her leveling belief that she is as entitled to write poetry as More or Montagu. “To Stella” and “On Mrs. Montagu” show that even as More and Montagu once deigned to “woo” and “guide” her, they now seek to control her. At the end of “On Mrs. Montagu,” despite Yearsley’s description of her “grateful heart, / Which breathes its thanks in rough, but timid strains,” the reader cannot forget the patrons’ aggressiveness and Yearsley’s wild, now pruned and tempered, genius (78-9). As in “To Stella,” the meeting between the patron and the poet is not entirely positive. Thus Yearsley and the reader have every reason to suspect that “the scenes of peace” to which she alludes are temporary, and Yearsley has every reason to be “timid” in addressing her patrons (lines 77, 79). Yearsley’s poem expresses a troubling ambivalence about her position as a patronized poet, doomed to be a proxy for her patrons’ charitable but paternalistic ambitions.

These georgics of patronage might seem to valorize intellectual work, but it is important to keep in mind that Yearsley’s poems, as my analysis suggests, seem to be ironic rather than sincere. They were published in her first volume, while she was still More’s poet to be cultivated, and thus her critique is deeply coded in what appears to be gratitude for More and Montagu’s labors as patrons. Yearsley’s images of her wild, unconquerable, natural genius undermine these seeming celebrations of patronage and “pruning.” Considering the issue of proxy and labor, the idea of social or literal “distance” is an important point to press on. The poet who sanctified herself in the figure of suffering Queen Emma in “Earl
Goodwin” (performed in Bristol, undoubtedly to More’s chagrin, in 1789) could hardly have been satisfied as a mouthpiece for More and her conservative social agenda. Yearsley’s poetry and More’s interventions show that More very likely considered her work as patron to be just as legitimate a kind of labor as Yearsley’s writing and even her milking. This is the logical conclusion of proxy thinking: eventually, literal labor becomes so completely effaced through the distance of proxy that the master’s efforts at management take on the illusion of labor. Understanding the force and currency of proxy in neoclassical writing can lead to a new valuation of laboring-class georgics like Yearsley’s “Clifton Hill” and Bloomfield’s The Farmer’s Boy.
IV. The Leveling Prospect of Eco-Georgic Regionalism in “Clifton Hill” and The Farmer’s Boy

Rejoice, dear Nymph! enjoy your happy grove,
Where birds and shepherds warble strains of love,
While banish’d I, alas! can nothing hear,
But sounds too harsh to sooth a tender ear.
Here gilded beaux fine painted belles pursue,
But how unlike to village-swains and you;
.................................
The vulgar way of counting time they scorn,
Their noon is evening, and their evening morn.
But what is yet more wonderful than all,
These strange disorders they do pleasures call:
Such tinsel joys shall ne’er my heart obtain,
Give me the real pleasures of the plain,
Elizabeth Hands, “The Rural Maid in London, to her Friend in the Country”

My epigraph, from one of Elizabeth Hands’s pastoral epistles, reflects the cultural trend of estrangement between city and country that occurred in the late eighteenth century. Hands makes the social distance between country maids and city belles into a literal, physical distance, and clearly finds the city wanting.

However, as is often the case in pastoral, generally Hands’s landscape poems are not really chorographical; landscape is relegated to setting, sometimes brought into the foreground but generally merely a static, idyllic background (see section II). The landscapes in “Clifton Hill” and The Farmer’s Boy, on the other hand, are changing, georgic scenes. They are also topographically realistic and even potentially documentary, as they are based on “real” regions: Yearsley’s footnotes to “Clifton Hill” identify Leigh Wood, St. Vincent’s Rock, and Severn Beach among other landmarks (Fairer and Gerrard 483-489), and Bloomfield sets The Farmer’s Boy in Suffolk, “Where Noble Grafton spreads his rich domains /
Round Euston’s water’d Vale and sloping plains” (“Spring” 37-8). This reflects another cultural trend in the eighteenth-century, for Fairer records that after Thomson’s The Seasons, “Attention turned increasingly to specific and more localized landscapes, where ideas of growth and change were still crucial, but operated in more social terms… the poet is more of an economist than a visionary, becoming concerned with the way resources are managed and structures organized” (English Poetry 193). Yearsley and Bloomfield’s poems are both “economical”—an understanding of economy that is intimately connected with modern conceptions of ecology, as both derive from the Greek root oikos (or home)—but in the manner in which they privilege their own regions over London and the nation, they are also political in the sense that they resist the dominating nationalist and patriotic discourse of their day.

The georgic landscape, while it can represent of the nation’s prosperity, is effectively a local landscape. Farming is literally rooted in a place, and cannot be extricated from its locality. This is important because, in this period at the tail end of the agricultural revolution, the line between local and national, private and public, was never more contentious. The most dramatic example of this is enclosure, that most insidious intrusion of early agri-business practices on local communities. From one perspective, enclosure was an innovation even more important than Jethro Tull’s new cultivation methods for the “improvement of land,” for enclosure was “a potential means of transforming the nation and of bringing prosperity not only to the individual landowner but to society as a whole” (Low 354). Of course, enclosure was as bad for regional communities as it was good for the nation’s wealth and production; Anthony Low notes that it also resulted in “Expropriations, forced and voluntary sales, enclosures, and the
expulsion of tenants… Forests were cut down, fields were plowed up, rents were doubled again and again” (124). Enclosure was just one urban innovation that contributed to the marginalization of rural communities for the sake of Empire. The burgeoning time-work discipline that began to dominate labor discourse was another (see section II; Thompson 61). In the 1790s, in part to disguise the injustices occurring at a local level, “rural subjects were seen in a strongly nationalistic light” (Barrell, Dark Side 21). But the views of the people (and the poets) within these damaged landscapes contradict these “refined” depictions of farm communities. Yearsley and Bloomfield’s attention to ecological connections in their georgics shows the negative impact of London’s encroachment on their land, and the damaging effects wrought by the social and literal distance between country and city life.

“The landscape poem,” writes Fairer, “was a constant reminder that London was not the nation” (English Poetry 205). London was not the nation, but London determined what was meant by “refinement” and what qualified as poetry; by the end of the eighteenth century, the georgic mode hardly qualified any more as a refined medium of expression, as its authority had decayed with the rise of agricultural treatises and societies (Heinzelman 182; Crawford 129). We should thus consider the prospect topos in these poems a “distancing procedure,” invoked as a means of refinement in counterbalance to the practical, economic, and political subject matter of their poems (Goodridge, Rural Life 5). For Yearsley and Bloomfield, the unbounded prospect view obtained for two reasons: because of its capacity to turn local situations into iterative protests against dominant discourse, and because of its very conventionality, which allows the poets to show their ability to communicate within the larger poetic
scene. Local landscapes could become iterative because “the small individual landscape tests out at local level the state’s capacity to harness into an effective economy those potentially competing forces: freedom and obedience, change and continuity, individual and social good” (Fairer, *English Poetry* 94). Bloomfield and Yearsley are thus working “against and within” georgic to try to correct their own effacement. “Whatever its political tendencies, a ‘prospect’ was usually characterized by a degree of confidence and spatial command” (Fairer, *English Poetry* 207). Saying that their landscapes and their people are as important as the nation and London is a leveling gesture; saying that their prospects and their perspectives are as important as (or perhaps even more urgent than) polite and urban poets’ is likewise potentially democratic. These prospect views also evidence Yearsley and Bloomfield’s canny recognition that the breaking of clods and flinging of dung were perhaps offensive, and became less so from a distance (Addison 381-2). If they were to address the quotidian realities of village life for an urban, genteel audience, they had to do so within the controlled and acceptable models provided by refined poets.

Yet the poets do repeatedly descend from distanced prospect views on purpose to examine more closely nature and labor’s systems. In fact, both “Clifton Hill” and *The Farmer’s Boy* can be characterized as exercises in either ascent to or descent from one or many prospect views. Ecological awareness of geographical and societal interconnectedness exists in the traveling, working spaces between prospect views, and in the views themselves, which are more in line with the closer, documentary, and objective prospect view of the neoclassical period than the Romantic subjective and ego-centric perspective (Aubin 65-7). Raymond Williams mentions the “green language” of the two poems almost in
the same breath (134). Green language is “the investment of nature with a quality of creation that is now, in its new form, internal; so that the more closely the object is described, the more directly, in a newly working language and rhythm, a feeling of the observer’s life is seen and known” (Williams 133). A sense of the poet’s mind is seen and known through the way she constructs her relationship with nature. In this tradition, Yearsley and Bloomfield respond more to Thomson than to contemporary poets like Cowper or Oliver Goldsmith. Robert Aubin describes Thomson’s perspective, both georgic and prospect-oriented, as an “eye-on-the-microscope method—a return once more to science and descriptive poetry” (61). Aubin’s description of Thomson’s eye-on-the-microscope method anticipates Williams’s definition of green language; both perspectives have the same end, a heightened attention to the systems of nature for the sake of understanding nature itself, and for a better understanding of the human observer of nature.

Thomson’s view was not only scientific and economical; he was, as John Sitter has argued, aware of his own anthropocentrism, the limits of even his unbounded prospect view. His construction, for example, of chickens as “household feathery people” is not an attempt to equalize himself and the chickens, but, “since to name something is to suggest what is not being named,” it also calls into attention “the larger, unmentioned, but highly relevant category of non-household feathery people, or the also relevant category of unfeathery people” (Sitter 18). There is an implicit hierarchy in this kind of categorization, with “unfeathery people” obviously at the top, as the normative standard against which other kinds of “people” can be measured. Thomson’s use, then, of the
descriptive term “people” for nature is as much a reinforcement of his distance from nature as it is an attempt to bridge it.

This gesture of distancing and bridging is foundational to Yearsley and Bloomfield’s use of the prospect topos and a nascent “green language,” to expose the interconnectedness of people and nature, region and nation. For example, Lactilla cries, upon frightening some sheep during her climb,

Ye bleating innocents! dispel your fears,
My woe-struck soul in all your troubles shares;
’Tis but Lactilla—fly not from the green:
Long have I shar’d with you this guiltless scene. (lines 106-9)

Lactilla sees the sheep as part of a scene, but she also sees herself in them, and herself as separate from some other category. She says, “’Tis but Lactilla,” suggesting that another human might scare them, but she is low enough to enjoy a communion with them that goes beyond mere appreciation. This is not to say that she sees herself as part of nature. Recalling Sitter’s notion that “to name something is to suggest what is not being named,” it is apparent that when Lactilla calls the sheep “innocents,” she is at once identifying with their innocence and guiltlessness, and calling attention to her own lack of innocence. Just before this, Lactilla notes that humans are the “only foe” of the sheep (line 105). Lactilla shares in all the sheep’s troubles, so we can also infer that she shares their foe. “’Tis but Lactilla,” then, takes on further meaning as it expresses Lactilla’s feelings of oppression from other humans. The image of a sheep as an objective correlative for marginalization will return with even more weight in Bloomfield’s “Spring.” In Yearsley and Bloomfield we find influence from Thomson and attention to little things, but their impulse to descend from the
prospect view as often as they ascend reflects their attention to nature and the damage wrought by London’s infringement on the country, rather than mere scientific or eco-theological interest. The complicated perspectives that gazers Lactilla and Giles (the protagonist of Bloomfield’s *The Farmer’s Boy*) suggest an interconnected view of nation and region, and laboring-class and refined poet.

The proto-ecological awareness I identify in Yearsley and Bloomfield seems paradoxical from a modern perspective, as Landry observes (“Georgic Ecology” 254-5). But as Yearsley makes clear, the connection between nature and labor was sometimes inextricable. The following lines come right after the section cannibalized from the 1785a version of “To Stella”:

The feather’d warblers quit the leafless shade;
Quit those dear scenes where life and love began,
And, cheerless, seek the savage haunt of man;
How mourns each tenant of the silent grove!
No soft sensation tunes the heart to love;
No fluttering pulse awakes to Rapture’s call;
No strain responsive aids the water’s fall.
The Swain neglects his nymph,
The Nymph, indifferent, mourns the freezing sky;
Alike insensible to soft desire,
She asks no warmth—but from the kitchen fire… (lines 8-15)

As I note in section III, Yearsley is participating in an earlier poetic tradition through Thomson, which sets her apart from her contemporaries: Fairer and Gerrard note that, compared to John Dyer’s georgic and William Cowper’s picturesque scenes, “the associations of [Yearsley’s] scene are discomforting”
(483). This is in large because Yearsley’s scenes are from a close-up, rather than distanced, perspective, so the poet and the reader experience the full impact of winter’s effects. These scenes are also disturbing because they are empty. Unlike Thomson, Dyer, and other georgic poets who show laborers working together, Yearsley shows tenants isolated and inactive. This is disturbing, Barrell suggests, because “the anxiety over images of men not working is…caused not by the fact that these images are unrealistic, but by the fact that they are unpatriotic, and unsafe” (Dark Side 21). Yearsley’s indolent workers undermine the nationalist and patriotic agenda of georgic. Even birds refuse to do their own sort of work, to sing; poets, then, might find less inspiration and beauty in this dark season (again, see section III). The Swains do not woo; the Nymphs do not miss them, their hearts chilled by the anti-pastoral, barren air of winter. And all occurs in the locality of a rural village, the “savage haunt” of rural laborers, where the absence of labor actually has the effect of calling traditional georgic associations to the front of the reader’s mind. Recall Thomson’s moralist directions to the poor to stay strong and bear the brunt of winter for the rest of the nation; Yearsley’s workers do not seem to be following his advice. It is a mark of Yearsley’s skill that even as the last of these lines brings the scene indoors, constructing yet more isolation and indolence, the scene is, in a way, heroic, as it portrays the poor battling the elements and eschewing more pastoral concerns like love and music. The complex modulation of neoclassical modes suggests that Yearsley is working within the strictures of refined poetry, even as the content of her scene expresses discontent with her social position.

A major issue in this final section, then, is also Yearsley’s foregrounding of leisure in the georgic and laboring-class setting she describes; her workers would
rather sit indoors by the fire than work (or indeed engage in another productive and patriotic activity, procreation). Yearsley’s walking out of doors, out of warmth, to tend her cows, evidences her rejection of leisure and marks her as morally superior. She describes her lone venture tending her cow, “shivering” and “half sunk in snow” (lines 19-20). This brief but important glimpse at Yearsley’s laboring life contradicts Christmas’s assertion that she never gestures to her milkwoman’s labors (though I would not call even this georgic description a “documentation” of the way she made her living).16 Similar to the way she described her village through a bounded perspective, Lactilla is “half sunk in snow,” literally half-buried in the landscape, emphatically earthbound rather than describing the scene from a boundless prospect position. This sets up the poem as a kind of evolution of perspective, for Yearsley begins with her work life and her bounded view, then, as she climbs Clifton Hill, her views widen, her authority grows, and eventually her prospect becomes so encompassing that Lactilla herself is no longer even a part of the scene.

But, returning to earth and the beginning of the poem, Yearsley expresses her impulse to equalize country and city through a georgic and ecological ethos. It would thus be impossible to talk about Yearsley and Bloomfield’s regionalism without the context of studies in georgic ecology. This ethos surfaces even more clearly in the next two lines, when Yearsley relates how her flocks depend on

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16 In fact, “dairying was the most economically valuable and the most arduous form of women’s agricultural work” (Landry, *Muses of Resistance* 26). This reflects Waldron’s observation that milkwomen, like other agricultural laborers, would have been “at the mercy of weather and ‘bad times’” (14).
“the bounteous human hand” for subsistence—even for water, as the winter season has locked their “chrystal streams in frozen fetters” (21-22). In an extreme close-up view of her labors, Yearsley demonstrates Keegan’s description of the georgic ecological ethos: “recogniz[ing] human dependence on nature, ….we must care for nature if we wish to preserve ourselves” (Nature Poetry 14). While Lactilla takes milk from the cows for her subsistence, she ensures theirs as well by heroically trudging through the snow to feed them and breaking up ice for them to drink. Later in the poem, Yearsley takes a wide prospect view, “stretch[ing] the ardent eye / O’er Nature’s wilds” to herds below in “The tufted grove, and the low-winding vale” (lines 193-9):

Low not, ye herds, your lusty Masters bring
The crop of Summer; and the genial Spring
Feels for your wants, and softens Winter’s rage,
The hoarded hay-stack shall your woes assuage;
Woes summ’d in one alone, ‘tis Nature’s call,
That secret voice which fills creation all. (lines 200-205)

From her prospect view on top of Clifton Hill, Yearsley sees the land laid out in front of her, and its needy animal as well as robust human inhabitants. She is also able to see beyond the present time, to describe the cycle of the seasons and anticipate the georgic tasks of each season even as she is currently stuck in winter. Nature’s plan is inscrutable, “secret,” but it fills everything and explains all (seasonal) woes as necessary to the overall system. This echoes Pope’s description in his “Essay on Criticism” of the natural world as an “amazing whole” (qtd in Sitter 12). Thinkers in the eighteenth century were interested in “œconomies” (of finance, nature, body, mind, and nation) of closed systems: that
is, “how forces operate within a system, and how any organized structure manages its resources” (Fairer 193). Nature does not exist merely to support human life, nor is it a sounding board for human emotion or intellect; indeed, the closed ecological system demands consumption of humans and nature, in the form of labor and bounty, respectively (Landry, “Georgic Ecology” 253). This materialist stewardship model represents a stepping-stone between instrumental Enlightenment thinking (Landry, “Georgic Ecology” 254) and ideological Romantic thinking. Georgic ecology relies implicitly on nature’s promise of renewal, on the fact that the system is self-replenishing if properly cared for, and on the assumption that resources are consumed with an eye for the greater good.

An extension of this thinking concludes that the nation, too, is a closed ecological system, and urban centers like London demand the countryside’s production, even as they offer economic support of satellite regional economies. Giles’s complaint against the city’s wasteful consumption of his cheeses, in “Spring,” is a good example of this regional awareness:

Provision’s grave! thou ever-craving mart,
Dependent, huge Metropolis, where Art
Her poring thousands stows in breathless rooms
Midst pois’nous smokes, and steems, and ratling Looms,
Where grandure revels in unbounded stores
Restraint a slighted stranger at their doors
Thou, like a whirlpool drain the Country round… (lines 237-243)

Giles, though he never leaves the Suffolk countryside, takes a kind of virtual prospect view of London to describe its industrial “grandure.” Londoners do not drain the country’s resources because they need them, but because of their
“unbounded” greed. Thus the seat of British nationalism and industry is more concerned with capital than with the appreciation for Suffolk’s bounty, and urban disregard of rural authenticity is a moral as well as an economical and ecological wrong. It is apparent that Bloomfield is not using georgic as a “patriotic mode,” which would celebrate “The improving of British industry and trade” (Fairer, *English Poetry* 95), for he also connects urban consumption to the industrialization of London, which relied on country labor for food but also threatened rural livelihoods. Referring to the city’s “smokes and steems” and “ratling looms,” Bloomfield connects the city’s greedy consumption to its polluting industry, and comments on how market demands from the political, industrial center dwarf the basis needs of the rural poor. The distanced view of the city inverts the typical perspective; Giles sees the city’s poor and its refined alike as “ever-craving,” “poring thousands,” not discriminating factory-worker from professional in his description. He has turned Londoners into “distanced, generalized objects,” thus closing the social distance between himself and those refined poets who saw him through this lens.

Bloomfield’s georgic mode could be mistaken for pastoral because of its attentiveness to the past and to nature’s aesthetic qualities (Christmas, *Lab’ring Muses* 269); compared to Yearsley’s stark winter scenes, cheerful guileless Giles does seem a bit too blithe to be truly georgic, though he does a lot more work than Yearsley’s Lactilla. However, *The Farmer’s Boy* differs from previous laboring-class georgics because of Bloomfield’s focus on sustainability rather than disruption, on the nobility of responsible stewardship against rapaciousness and waste rather than, as in Yearsley’s georgics, the laborer’s heroic triumph against an unfair patron or punishing work conditions. But while Giles “submits
to the old (supposedly) natural order of things, and does not represent any of the disruptive, leveling energy that was everywhere in evidence among rural and urban laborers in the 1790s,” it is not necessarily true that Bloomfield was likewise apolitical (Christmas, “Contemporary Politics” 31). The Farmer’s Boy was celebrated in its time for “reinvigorating the pastoral,” but Christmas argues that beneath the laboring-class poet’s “self-consciously sugar-coated” descriptive verses, Bloomfield engages in a second “reformist” discourse that is both class- and eco-conscious and responds to contemporary cultural and economic changes (Christmas, Lab’ring Muses 270). Tim Fulford notes that The Farmer’s Boy “was a new kind of Georgic not just because it spoke of rural work from the perspective of a labourer rather than a landowner but also because it spoke from the city” (Banks 2). Bloomfield was perhaps better equipped than other georgic poets to comment on the distance between city and country, as he had grown up in Suffolk but composed his poem among radical shoemakers in London.

When the social plan intrudes on Bristol and Suffolk to negative effect, as both “Clifton Hill” and The Farmer’s Boy show, then poets’ close attention to nature can also become a kind of resistance. The close perspective of “green language” ultimately reveals, contrary to pastoral thinking, that nature’s bounty is not un-worked for (Williams 25). Problems in nature can therefore reflect problems in the human world. Providing evidence of a stark contrast between the way city people view resources and the way rural people do, Giles describes how intimately the people and the land support each other. This is quite similar in its ecological attention to Yearsley’s description of stewardship of her herds:

Beyond bleak Winter’s rage, beyond the Spring
That rolling Earth’s unvarying course will bring,
Who tills the ground looks on with mental eye,
And sees next Summer’s sheaves and cloudless sky;
And even now, whilst Nature’s beauty dies,
Deposits SEED, and bids new harvests rise;
Seed well prepar’d, and warm’d with glowing lime,
’Gainst earth-bred grubs, and cold, and lapse of time…

(“August” lines 51-58)

The laborer cares for the earth against the ravages of “Winter’s rage,” and warms, protects and nourishes seeds when nature itself might fail. Stewardship is parental and reproductive. Bloomfield’s language here is vernacular and descriptive but it is not practical in a way Warton or Addison would object to (see section I). The aesthetic qualities of this passage stand out as much as the didacticism; he delicately writes “deposits” instead of “sows,” and effaces the realities of mud, horses, dung, and other important (but potentially unpleasant) details; thus, he is writing within the strictures of “refinement.” However, his message that the earth supports rural life as rural labor perpetuates itself through care of the earth has a political undertone. Christmas notes that this “is more than a straightforward description of wheat sowing as Bloomfield anticipates the fears of his readers by providing assurances of continued food production” (“Contemporary Politics” 31). The impulse to confirm readers’ hopes and needs is natural in 1799, as the worst years of dearth in Great Britain in this period fell just before Bloomfield began his composition, in 1794 to 1796 (Crawford 144). Christmas does not linger on the complex issues of perspective invoked by Giles’s foresight, which contain a more important political, even reformist, import. Like Lactilla, Giles does not imagine, but “sees” “beyond” the temporal
horizon, into the next three seasons and even the next autumn. It is, of course, the
not natural but necessarily cultivated sight of the farmer, who must in the
struggle against extinction plan for his future. “The Farmer’s life desplays in
every part / A moral lesson to the sensual heart” (“Summer” lines 1-2). Refined
readers can learn from country life. The farmer’s is, in fact, not a natural sight,
and it provides a stark contrast to “Provision’s grave,” the city where restraint is
a stranger and inhabitants lack the kind of foresight Giles shows. The laboring-
class perspective penetrates further and with more mind for future prospects
than the urbane Londoners’; Bloomfield suggests that Giles is better equipped for
the mental labors of agriculture than urban gentry.

This extreme prospect view is a stark contrast to a different kind of
prospect in “Summer”:

Stretch’d on the turf [Giles] lies, a peopled bed
Where swarming insects creep around his head
The small dust-colour’d Beetle climbs with pain
Oer the smooth plantain-leaf—a spacious plain!
Thence higher still by countless steps convey’d
He gains the summit of a shiv’ring blade
And flirts his filmy wings, and looks around
Exulting in his distance from the ground.
The tender speckl’d Moth here dancing seen,
The vaulting Grasshopper of glossy green,
And all prolific Summer’s sporting train,
Their little lives by various pow’rs sustain.
But what can unassisted vision do?
What, but recoil where most it would pursue… (lines 75-86)

Giles identifies himself with the smallest, plainest creatures, even referring to them, echoing Thomson, as “people.” But he is also using a poetic convention, the prospect, that in his time signaled confidence, command, even grandiosity (Fairer, English Poetry 207). We witness Giles’s sympathy for the beetle’s “pain,” and in personifying the beetle, Bloomfield is also simultaneously identifying with the beetle and distancing himself from it (Sitter 17-9). Is the beetle’s journey important for its own, non-anthropocentric reasons, or has the beetle become an object for Giles to project upon while he rests for a moment? It would seem the latter; the beetle’s journey over leaves and grass foreshadows Giles’s prospect to follow a few lines later. But it does come first, and in this prospect Bloomfield evokes a realistic, almost verifiable topography: climbing over a spacious plain, then up a steep hill, the beetle finally gains a summit to survey the ground below and the happy creatures and nature’s bounties contained therein. When readers see Bloomfield trace a similar path in his own journey to a prospect view (“Summer” 117-138), they might consider him following in the beetle’s footsteps.

On closer perusal, Bloomfield’s close and penetrating “green language” here reveals that both bounty and happiness are wanting in the beetle’s prospect view. Summer has a “prolific” “sporting train” of unnamed “little lives,” ready to sustain the “vaulting” and “dancing” follies of a moth and a grasshopper. Through the prospect of the “small dust-colour’d beetle,” a stark contrast to the imperious glossy green grasshopper, Bloomfield emphasizes the little lives that “by various pow’rs” support the insect hierarchy, drawing a parallel between natural and societal economies. We might also observe that the beetle’s masterful imitation of the prospect topos contains an implicit critique: even a beetle can
copy it. Just when the beetle’s gaze lands on the “various powers” that sustain the little lives below—that is to say, the labor that supports the community he surveys—his “unassisted vision” fails him. Limited by distance and convention, the beetle, like refined poets, “recoils where most it would” (read: should) “pursue.” In this early prospect, Bloomfield promises to give readers a less anthropocentric, more realistic and perhaps, as Christmas suggests, a more political prospect of Suffolk (“Contemporary Politics” 269-70). But demonstrating here his skill with conventions, he shows that his presentation of nature and social realities will not be less mediated through art and culture simply because it comes from a laboring-class poet.

In his elegy to “Trouncer,” which treats the dog like a fallen general (“Autumn” lines 303-26), or to “Dobbin,” the belabored carthorse, who like any human laborer “endures [hardships] for Gold” (“Winter” lines 155-64), Bloomfield shows that animals contribute to rural labors as participants and not just as fuel or implement. Humans also reciprocate that level of care in their loving stewardship of nature. However, British nationalism threatens the traditional model. Bloomfield’s allegiance to the cultural practices of the countryside leads to tensions with the values and demands of a frequently urbanized nation. In “Summer,” the animals, he makes clear, are overworked and neglected by Suffolk’s “Children of Want” (line 138): Ball’s “short clip’t” tail makes him fly bait (liens 207-216); the ewes need to be shorn with more care and treated for fly-strike (lines 218-220); and the cows need to be milked and let out of their pens (lines 221-224). The didactic nature of these lines is very explicitly georgic, but Bloomfield is more (or less) than prescriptive since his emphasis is on critical description rather than scientific exposition of problems. His attention
is not on how to fix the animals, but instead on the cause for the animals’
distress, because the animals’ neglect gives the lie to the happy and heroic labors
of his rustic swains. The “want” of the human caretakers forces them to neglect
nature, which has economic consequences: the suffering cow knocks over a pail
of milk, which now cannot be sold. Want is imposed from the city onto the
countryside, as the cheese-making section makes clear, and instead of just some
spilled or thrice-skimmed milk, the results are a perversion of nature’s plan. The
Children of Want cannot provide for their herds as Yearsley and Bloomfield both
describe is the real end of eco-georgic labor. The effect of their georgic mode and
wide prospect view of nature is a critique of the distance and imperialism of
London over their regions.

One animal for whom Bloomfield has no sympathy is the goose, a gaggle
of whom seem to have absorbed some urban values and are terrorizing the rest
of the already suffering farm animals:

I’st not enough that plagues like these molest?
Must still another foe annoy their rest?
He comes, the pest and terror of the yard
His full-fledged progeny’s imperious Guard
The Gander … spiteful, insolent, and bold,
At the Colt’s footlock takes his daring hold
There, serpent-like escapes a dreadful blow
And straight attacks a poor defenceless Cow…
(“Summer” lines 225-232)
The geese are spiteful, insolent, bold, and worst of all “of self-importance full”
(line 235). They continue their reign of terror against the cows and bulls for
twenty more lines. Finally they descend upon the Swine, who isn’t bother by the “insults of the gabling throng, / That march exulting round his fallen head / As human victors trample on their dead” (line 252). Bloomfield glorifies the violence other animals attempt against the geese, celebrating the broken wing of one goose and “The utmost efforts of the Bully’s rage” (line 246). In personifying the geese as self-important intruders and imperious conquerors, Bloomfield connects them to the Empire’s seat in London. The violent acts against the geese are, then, a kind of vicarious revenge on London, but the payoff is pitiful compared to the human and animal “want” he illustrates. The barnyard scene reaches equilibrium when the geese and swine come to a mutual and reciprocal arrangement: their nibbling “is wellcome pleasure to his bristly hide” (line 248), and the geese can march about as much as they like. Nature’s creatures, even its most bombastic, have a way of working things out among themselves. The mock-epic qualities of this section signal that Bloomfield is once again working within the strictures of refinement of the dominant discourse in his time.

What Bloomfield’s poem shows, rather than documentary realism (recall Addison’s quote: the georgic poet “singles out the most pleasing circumstances of this truth”), is a sense of regionalism that conflicts with the georgic mode’s strong tendency toward nationalism. In “Spring,” Immediately following his criticism of profligate urbanites, Bloomfield notes that mature, “long confin’d sheep” “starve, and pine, with plenty at their feet,” not unlike city dwellers who let their stores of food go to waste (lines 296-298). This leads into one of the most practical and most disturbing scenes of The Farmer’s Boy: the slaughter of the yearling lambs. Like the sale of the best dairy produce, this is done with a view toward the greater good, the continued flourishing of the flock. Keegan notes,
“[If] Giles or Mr Austin succumbed to the allure of the lambs as particularly charismatic megafauna and kept them alive for future vegetarian readers, there would be larger environmental and social consequences... Spare the lambs, spoil the farm” (Nature Poetry 22-23). Bloomfield draws a figurative parallel between this sacrifice of the lambs for sustainability and the indigence of rural laborers for the sake of city and nation, especially in his careful use of Malthusian and Lockean language. Bloomfield notes that Giles “makes a sport of life and liberty” when he destroys his “gay companions” (“Spring” lines 348-9); any lambs that do survive the culling only do so because they are permitted by their stewards to live. While Keegan notices parallels with Malthusian theory in the practice of culling (Nature Poetry 25), the poem’s Lockean language is another clue that Bloomfield means to connect the young lambs with rural farmers whose lives, liberty, and property are threatened by enclosure and industrialization. This political and philosophical consciousness calls into question Fulford’s assertion that Bloomfield’s “childhood land” was a place “in which the power of capital had not yet disturbed the culture or the consciousness” (3). Bloomfield recognizes that nature and rural livelihoods continue to exist only because they are permitted to do so, because it is in the best interest of the ecology of the British nation. The Farmer’s Boy thus evidences a crisis of nationalism for Bloomfield, the realization that what is good for the nation is not necessarily good for continuing rural livelihood and its cultural authenticity, which depends so heavily on a relationship with nature.

The “wid’ning distance” that Bloomfield daily sees between country and city is the same distance that would bar him, Yearsley, and Hands from “emulation” of refined forms. All three resist this. Hands finds her own intrinsic
worth in “On Contemplative Ease.” Yearsley will not give in to the “Crosean crew’s” demands for satire in “Clifton Hill,” insisting instead on an elevated prospect perspective and refined georgic mode. And Bloomfield, perhaps more within the tradition of “refinement” than either Hands or Yearsley, mediates his practical georgic subject matter through a thick layer of refined language, prospect views and pastoral blitheness, though he still arrives at the same conclusion as Yearsley and Hands: the social plan is contrary to his poetic ambitions, just as it is antagonistic to his Suffolk region’s eco-georgic way of life.
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