

‘Now wenches, listen, and let lovers lie’:
Women’s storytelling in Bloomfield and Clare¹

John Goodridge

This essay involves two ‘borders’. The first is the border of gender, between male poet and female subject. The second is a cultural border, much criss-crossed in the early modern period, but still tricky for the nineteenth-century ‘labouring-class’ poets to negotiate: the border between oral and printed culture. If I do not on this occasion cross the river Tweed, I am nevertheless keenly aware here that John Clare’s ‘absent’ grandfather was an itinerant Scottish schoolmaster, and that Scotland itself in the period was, as Hamish Henderson reminds us, the very powerhouse of British balladry and folk culture.²

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There is a notorious passage in Stephen Duck’s poem ‘The Thresher’s Labour’ (1730), in which he berates women fieldworkers for talking too much and working too little. Locked into the competitive masculine rituals of corn-scything, Duck seems to resent the sociability the women enjoy, claiming that they all talk at once so that ‘Standers-by can naught distinguish plain’ (l. 180), and wishing that ‘their Hands’ were ‘as active as their Tongues’, so that they got more work done. In her robust and witty reply to this slander, ‘The Woman’s Labour’ (1739), Mary Collier comprehensively counter-attacks. Duck is adding insult to injury, she says, by pouring his ‘Scorn’ on woman, who having fallen from a matriarchal golden age in which she was respected and even worshipped, now has to work far harder than man, having housework and childcare to add to her regular heavy labour of harvesting, gleaning and domestic service. His behaviour can only be compared to that of an eastern tyrant:

For none but *Turks*, that I could ever find,
Have Mutes to serve them, or did e’er deny
Their Slaves, at Work, to chat it merrily. (ll. 66-8)

And she further chides him with two pointed rhetorical questions:

Since you have Liberty to speak your mind,
 And are to talk, as well as we, inclin'd,
 Why should you thus repine, because that we,
 Like you, enjoy that pleasing Liberty?
 What! would you lord it quite, and take away
 The only Privilege our sex enjoy? (ll. 69-74)

Collier does not trouble to argue with Duck's charge of incomprehensibility: her satirical eloquence does the job for her. Nor does she deny that women like to talk in the harvest field; on the contrary, sociability at work, talking in the fields, is the 'only privilege' that women workers enjoy, and it is a privilege she fiercely defends.³

Duck's desire to silence women fieldworkers may have its roots in the misogynist backlash against women's speech, sociable dialogue and forms of oral narrative described by Adam Fox in his important study, *Oral and Literate Culture in England 1500-1700*.⁴ Fox identifies this with the 'rhetoric of the Reformation' and the rise of rationalistic and scientific discourse. By the early sixteenth century 'old wives' tales' were strongly derided by official male culture. Reformation rhetoric, Fox argues, 'did much to help secure for this phrase, and the assumptions which it betrayed, a place in the fabric of the language and the commonplaces of the learned elite' (p. 175). He goes on to detail with gloomy relish the silencing process that ensued, showing how such tales became in 'almost every area of cultural and intellectual life', a metaphorical dumping ground for 'all the erroneous and superstitious rubbish which needed to be stripped away from the essence of truth' (p. 176). Underlying this process was a gendered division of culture which associated women with spoken language, which was then devalued, as may be seen in a series of familiar sayings that Fox quotes: 'For words they are women, and deeds they are men'; 'a woman's tongue wags like a lamb's tail', and so on (p. 177). So-called 'scolding' and 'gossiping' were singled out for particular opprobrium; but above all the system of orally-transmitted knowledge associated with old women was derided (most sinisterly, of course, by labelling it as witchcraft).

What this knowledge actually was, of course, was folk belief, custom and narrative, of many kinds and in many forms. In this essay I want to look at one form, the 'repertoire of yarns woven by wives and mothers as they sat and worked or sewed around the evening hearth', as Fox calls it (p. 189). The weaving metaphor suggests an association between this kind of storytelling and women's domestic labour, and these stories were indeed often an accompaniment to sewing and similar activities, and to other kinds of labour, such as the fieldwork of Mary Collier's working women.

Fox has a problem in finding early sources of information about this non-written cultural form, and ironically he has to rely to quite an extent on precisely the sort of hostile witnesses who gave women's narrative a bad name, for example Reginald Scot in *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584). In a more enlightened period, though, we can find more positive accounts, and I want to look in this essay at two major labouring-class poets from the early nineteenth century who offer significant representations of women as workplace storytellers and listeners. Both were male, knew fieldwork at first hand, and both Robert Bloomfield and John Clare clearly admire and are strongly influenced in their own narrative techniques by women's storytelling. These two poets address the world of rural life and labour from perspectives that are to an exceptional degree shaped by their youth and boyhood. Looking back from the darker perspectives of adulthood to the seemingly happier world of rural childhood, they celebrate women's work-talk as an essential element of rural life, the element indeed (one might argue) that links the world of rural labour which shaped them with the world of polite poetry to which they aspired. Clare and Bloomfield focus on women's skills as story-tellers able to command an audience, construct and dramatised a story, control pace and timing, character and speech, humour and pathos. I shall look at several examples of the female narrators the two poets portray, and consider the ways in which their storytelling is represented. Since both these poets' narrative works are still greatly neglected, and since much of what I have to say concerns narrative technique, I shall quote quite a lot from the poems.

Although Bloomfield's most extensive exercise in narrative verse, *May Day with the Muses* (1822), is largely a male-narrated sequence of stories, 'Rosamund's Song of Hope' is read on her behalf by the host Sir Ambrose, whilst Ellen, the patient wife in 'The Drunken Father,' is given the best speech in the poem to win her errant husband back to sobriety at the end of the story. Other Bloomfield poems centre on women's stories, notably 'The Broken Crutch', a Hardy-esque tale of innocence endangered whose protagonist is the 'poor, young and friendless' Peggy. Among the lyric poems, 'The Widow to her Hour-glass', a meditation on time and mortality, is movingly and naturalistically written in the widow's own voice, as she watches the hourglass measure out her spinning, her singing, and her sense of passing time:

While thus I spin and sometimes sing
 (For now and then my heart will glow)
 Thou measur'st Time's expanding wing:
 By thee the noontide hour I know:
 Though silent thou,
 Still shalt thou flow,

And jog along thy destin'd way:
 But when I glean the sultry fields,
 When Earth her yellow Harvest yields,
 Thou get'st a Holiday. (ll. 21-30)⁵

The hourglass gets a holiday when the widow goes gleaning because it would not be taken afield. Gleaning is communal women's work, so the sense here is of a chance to escape the time-counting solitude of spinning. One might note alongside this another spinning poem, 'To a Spindle', Bloomfield's tender portrait of his dying mother, besieged at the end by 'Giants grim and bold, / Three mighty ones she fear'd to meet' (ll. 14-15), winter, old age and poverty. Bloomfield's affecting introduction to the poem describes her determination to 'spin' on, even *in extremis*:

During the tearful paroxysms of her last depression, she spun with the utmost violence, and with vehemence exclaimed, '*I must spin!*' A paralytic affection, struck her whole right side, while at work, and obliged her to quit her spindle when only half filled, and she died within a fortnight afterwards. I have that spindle now.

Thus the poet addresses the half-filled spindle she left behind:

Half fill'd wert thou—half finish'd when she died!
 —Half finish'd? 'Tis the motto of the world:
 We spin vain threads, and strive, and die
 With sillier things than spindles on our hands! (ll. 24-7)⁶

Bloomfield's own 'spinning' of narrative threads dominates even his sturdy didactic poem on smallpox vaccination, *Good Tidings; or, News from the Farm* (1804). Here he ventriloquises the voice of the mother of a smallpox-blinded child, tearfully recalling the terrible day when disease and disaster struck down her son:

'My boy was healthy, and my rest was sound,
 When last year's corn was green upon the ground:
 From yonder town infection found its way;
 Around me putrid dead and dying lay.
 I trembled for his fate: but all my care
 Avail'd not, for he breath'd the tainted air;
 Sickness ensu'd—in terror and dismay

I nurs'd him in my arms both night and day.' (ll. 47-54)⁷

The 'terror and dismay' described here, as uncurable disease sweeps out from the town into the countryside, is redolent of Chaucer's plague-story 'The Pardoner's Tale', and the words spoken in it by the boy to the three rioters: 'Ther cam a privee theef men clepeth Deeth [...] He hath a thousand slayn this pestilence' (ll. 675, 679).⁸

In each of these examples, women's narrative is melodramatic or tragic. This is hardly surprising since Bloomfield is, as Ronald Blythe has argued, a poet of rural sickness and mortality, and is never afraid of emotion or sentiment (the *Dictionary of National Biography's* claim that he lacked manliness may indicate Victorian distaste for his emotionalism as much as for his alleged inability to support his family).⁹ But the most memorable example of women's storytelling in Bloomfield's poetry, though it is framed in a remembrance of mortality, is in fact entirely celebratory. This is 'The Horkey', a 'provincial ballad' as Bloomfield styles it, about a riotous end-of-harvest frolic or feast. The poem is largely spoken by a female narrator, Judie Twitchet, and the poem highlights her verbal energy and vivacity, her use of dialect words (which are emphasized in italics), and her pleasure in the recollection of happy days and nights. It begins with the framing device of the poet's own fond remembrance of Judie as a purveyor of 'Suffolk fun', able with her women friends to talk the sun down, a dextrous knitter of stockings and stories:

What gossips prattled in the sun,
 Who talk'd him fairly down,
 Up, Memory! tell; 'tis Suffolk fun,
 And lingo of their own.

Ah! *Judie Twitchet!* though thou'rt dead,
 With thee the tale begins;
 For still seems thrumming in my head
 The rattling of thy pins.

Thou Queen of knitters! for a ball
 Of worsted was thy pride;
 With dangling stockings great and small,
 And world of clack beside! (ll. 1-12)

The poem then moves immediately into Judie's voice; she is in full flow, and her theme is the same as Bloomfield's: pleasure recollected in tranquillity:

'We did so laugh; the moon shone bright;
 More fun you never knew;
 'Twas Farmer Cheerum's *Horkey night*,
 And I, and Grace, and Sue—

But bring a stool, sit round about.
 And boys, be quiet, pray;
 And let me tell my story out;
 'Twas *sitch* a merry day! (ll. 13-20)

Judie hospitably draws in her audience here, warmly inviting it to sit down. This is a domestic working environment: she is knitting, indicated by Bloomfield's punning references to a 'world of clack'—that is, a world of 'clacking' knitting needles and the 'clacking' tongues of lively talk, by the rattling of 'pins' (knitting needles) that still seems to fill his head, and by Judie's pride at the end of the poem in having timed her story perfectly to last for the same duration as the piece of knitting she has been doing:

'That's all my tale, and all the fun,
 Come, turn your wheels about;
 My worsted, see! that's nicely done,
 Just held my story out!' (ll. 189-92)

The instruction in the second line of this, 'Come, turn your wheels about' suggests that her audience consists of women or girls who are also working, spinning at their wheels (though the reference to 'boys' in the earlier verse quoted would suggest a wider, mixed-gender audience being drawn in).

The horkey night itself is described largely in terms of appetites and pleasures, including the pleasures of practical jokes, misrule and knockabout humour. There is a moonlit midnight pursuit, in which 'Simon' is chasing '*arter* Sue' but finds himself instead, in his drunken triumph, hugging a dead pig:

She car'd not, dark nor light, not she,
 So, near the dairy door
 She pass'd a clean white hog, you see,
 They'd *kilt* the day before.

High on the *spirket* there it hung,—
 ‘Now, Susie—what can save ye?’
 Round the cold pig his arms he flung,
 And cried, ‘Ah! here I have ye!’ (ll. 129-36)

Long after Simon has fallen asleep, Judie and her companions are wide awake—and intent on seeing that the ‘menfolks’ rise to the occasion:

The clock struck one—some talk’d of parting,
 Some said it was a sin,
 And *hitch’d* their chairs;—but those for starting
 Now let the moonlight in.

Owd women, loitering *for the nonce*,
 Stood praising the fine weather;
 The menfolks took the hint at once
 To kiss them altogether. (ll. 153-60)¹⁰

One might perhaps compare this with the final stanza of John Clare’s festive poem, ‘St Martins Eve’, set in a different season but similar in some ways:

—The merry maiden & the noisey clown
 Prepare for home & down the stragglings town
 To seek their cottages they tittering go
 Heartened with sports & stout ale berry brown
 Beside their dames like chanticleer they crow
 While every lanthorn flings long gleams along the snow (ll. 211-16)¹¹

Clare had certainly learned much from Bloomfield’s narrative poetry and greatly admired it, describing two of the poems, ‘The Broken Crutch’ and ‘Richard and Kate’, as ‘inimitable and above praise’. He was also deeply influenced by a charismatic female storyteller in the Judie Twitchet mould from his own village: Granny Bains the Helpston cowherd, from whom as a boy he learned songs, stories and folklore.¹²

Clare creates several framing narratives which introduce powerfully and distinctively voiced female narrators, and he uses a range of techniques to do so. His story of ‘The Two Soldiers’ for example, takes us through a sequence of smoothly contrived but seemingly false starts. It begins with a first-person formulation that Clare uses again and again to open his lyrical and descriptive poems, ‘I love’:

I love to hear a summer tale
 When all the fields are green
 When sheep are grazing hill & dale
 & villagers are seen
 On sundays taking pleasant walks
 Through corn & grass & hay
 & maidens lost in laughing talk
 Along their milking way (ll. 1-8)

We are then moved to a group of shepherds who in Bloomfieldian style ‘talk the sun to bed’ with ‘storys that were never read / In any printed books’ (ll. 17, 19-20), and then on again to ‘Goody’—the name is a diminutive for ‘goodwife’, a married or older woman—who knows ‘many better tales’ (ll. 21, 24). We are also moved out of the summer sunlight and into a ‘dismal dark’ rainy night on which, surrounded by a ‘merry group’ (ll. 29, 37), Goody begins an appropriately dark story. The superiority of her tales has everything to do with her presence as a narrator, mediating especially the supernatural and gothic elements in the story. She speaks in ‘terrors undertone’, and the thought of the ‘ancient hall’ which is the setting of the tale ‘checkt her breath’ (ll. 44, 41, 45). She pauses mid-narrative to reflect on the tale, reminding her listeners of their comfort and safety, their distance from the narrative, and even keeping them in suspense and trying their patience ‘a minute more’ (l. 112) while she fussily attends to some roasting apples on the fire. In her story, two soldiers have knocked on the door in the night, and a terrified maid must answer it. She recommences the story after her interlude with an observation:

Soldiers though men of guns & swords
 Know kindliness as well
 & have a mort of tender words [a mort of = many]
 That suit the women well (ll. 113-16)¹³

She is drawing this general comment apparently to deflect and further delay recommencing the story, but is also cannily using it to manipulate the narrative, heightening tensions and complicating expectations. Soldiers are violent ‘men of guns & swords’ as well as being capable of ‘kindliness’. But will *these* soldiers show their tender side—or will they be a danger to the maid? Bloomfield uses similar dramatic ambiguities in ‘The Broken Crutch’ to create ambiguity and heighten the story’s melodrama.

Bloomfield had been careful to authenticate 'The Horkey' by telling us in a footnote that Judie Twitchet was 'a real person, who lived many years with my mother's cousin Bannock, at Honington'. Two of Clare's best narrative poems similarly use the idea of an authenticated experience, but their authentication comes through the mediation of narrators who claim to remember the tragic events they describe, and indeed to have been close friends with the doomed protagonists of their tales. Both stories concern young women who are destroyed through being betrayed in love. This is a common theme for Clare, whose grandmother's desertion in pregnancy by her child's father (Clare's Scottish grandfather) is an emblematic moment in the family's history.

In 'The Cross Roads or Haymakers Story' the narrator emerges from a group of female fieldworkers who have broken off from their labours to take shelter from the rain. These women fall naturally into two conversational groups, the 'young ones' (l. 11) who talk of fortune-telling, love-tokens and secrets, and a group of older women who are wary of male sexual treachery, and anxious to disabuse the younger ones on the subject of love. One of the older women decides to speak about this, and does so by telling a story. I have quoted the opening of her speech elsewhere, but it is worth looking at again. She begins:

'Now wenches listen & let lovers lye
 Ye'll hear a story ye may profit bye
 I'm your age threble wi some oddments to't [= I'm more than three
 & right from wrong can tell if ye'll but do't times your age]
 Ye neednt giggle underneath yer hats
 Mines no joke matters let me tell you that
 So keep yer quiet till my storys told
 & dont despise your betters cause theyre old
 I wish ye well upon my soul I do
 & just another pinch & I'll pursue. [= pinch of snuff]
 That grave ye've heard off w[h]ere the four roads meet
 W[h]ere walks the spirit in a winding sheet
 Oft seen at night by strangers passing late
 & tarrying neighbours that at market wait
 Stalking along as white as driven snow
 & 's long 's ones shadow when the sun is low
 The girl thats buried there I knew her well
 & her whol[e] history if ye'll hark can tell' (ll. 25-42)

The narrator's seizing of authority here, controlling and turning the party's mood, is remarkable. The imperative verb 'listen' represents a claim to narratorial authority that stretches right back to the Anglo-Saxon story-teller's command of 'hwæt!' ('attend!'). The narrator presents herself sternly, rebuking the youngsters for giggling and disrespecting the old, but then softens a little with 'I wish ye well', once she has their attention. She draws them in further by beginning with a crossroads burial and a ghost that she knows they are very well aware of. By the end of the passage, firmly in control, she can boldly echo Hamlet in the assertion 'I knew her well', and can offer the 'whol[e] history' of her doomed friend Jane, whose fatal innocence and fate indeed closely resemble Ophelia's. (The intertextual resonances with *Hamlet* are also carried through the language of flowers, in the image of Jane in happier days gathering among other flowers 'long purple' (l. 123), the flower to which, as Queen Gertrude famously reveals, 'liberal shepherds give a grosser name, / But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them' (*Hamlet*, IV.vii.142-3).)

The narrator pauses again in the middle of her story, as she recounts hearing a dreaded bell tolling, in order to steady her nerves with another pinch of snuff before she must describe the pathetic figure of her friend drowned, her reputation consumed in a vicious feeding frenzy of village gossip. Like Gertrude her narrative control is unwavering, no matter how strongly the story touches her heart. But there is a price to pay for this control. The speaker seems to become *too* controlling, *too* insistent that the young women she is addressing must learn the story's lesson and distrust men, a message she launches into again the moment she closes the story of Jane's life:

'But now she's gone—girls shun decietfull men
 The worst of stumbles ye can fall agen [= against]
 Be deaf to them & then as 'twere ye'll see [= as it were you will see]
 Yer pleasures safe as under lock & key
 Throw not my words away as many do
 Theyre gold in value tho theyre cheap to you
 & husseys hearken & be warnd from this
 If ye love mothers never do amiss' (ll. 219-26)

Despite—or perhaps because of—this plea for sexual caution, the youngsters seem to lose patience with her story. Clare nicely observes the implied rebellion that overtakes the end of the narrative, as he moves back out to the framing device. The narrator senses that she is losing her audience, and ends her tale by accusing her young listeners of having other things on their minds:

‘But ye I’ll bound for’t like a mort the best [= but you, I’ll bet,
 Loves tickling nick nacks & the laughing jest like much the best]
 & ten times sooner th[a]n be warnd by me
 Wou[l]d each be sitting on some fellows knee
 & sooner ’lieve the lyes wild chaps will tell [= believe]
 Th[a]n old dames cautions who woud wish ye well
 So have yer wills’—she pinchd her box again [= snuffbox]
 & ceasd her tale & list[e]nd to the rain [...]
 The maids impatient now old goody ceasd
 As restless childern from the school releasd
 Right gladly proving what she’d just foretold
 That young ones stories was preferd to old
 Turn to the wisperings of their former joy
 That oft decieve but very rarely cloy (ll. 275-82, 287-92)¹⁴

The narrator’s beady-eyed exasperation with her young audience is emphasised in her rich phrasing, full of internal rhyme and assonance (‘for’t like a mort’, ‘tickling nick nacks’, ‘lieve the lyes wild’). Her talking ends in a faltering sequence of ‘w’ and ‘y’ sounds (‘who woud wish ye well / So have yer wills’), punctuated by the third and final pinch of snuff that she takes before lapsing into the poignant silence of listening to the rain. Clare’s elegantly Popean final line, ‘That oft decieve but very rarely cloy’, enacts the eclipsing of her story by the even more powerful eloquence of youthful optimism and desire.

The last example I have deals with human tragedy through a rhetoric that is cast more in sorrow than in anger, as its title indicates: ‘The Sorrows of Love or the Broken Heart’ is narrated by a mother who wishes (somewhat like the narrator of ‘The Cross Roads’) to ‘sober wi sad truths the laughing mirth / Of rosey daughters’ (ll. 1-2). Here is the opening passage. I’ll start with Clare’s epigraph from *As You Like It*, which sets the mood well:

Good shepherd tell this youth what tis to love
It is to be all made of sighs & tears—
——All made of faith & service
All made of passion & all made of wishes
All humbleness all patience & impatience
Shakspeare

To sober wi sad truths the laughing mirth

Of rosey daughters round the cottage hearth
 Who in the innosence that youth beguiles
 Haild new years eve like holidays wi smiles
 & pass the winters lengthend eve away
 A mother told the tale of sally Grey
 'How time' she said '& pleasure passes bye'
 & stopd to whipe the tear drops from her eye
 'Twenty or thirty years when past away
 Seem like an hour glass turnings for one day
 Nay fifty years to come the same when gone
 Lives in our memorys scarce the length of one
 Ere half a bottom from the spool is wound
 Or falling water soaketh in the ground
 Time gains upon us distance unawares
 Stealing our joys and changing them for cares
 Tis nine & thirty years this very day
 Since I beheld the last of Sally Grey'
 Then pausd & lookd above her w[h]ere she sat
 & reachd the bible down to prove the date
 Whose blank leaves did a catalogue display
 Of names & dates the year & month & day
 When boys & girls were born & old friends dyd
 These still existed memorys certain guide
 That lay wi penny storys rustling near
 & almanacks prese[r]vd for many a year
 Stopping the story till she found the place
 Pulling her glasses from their leathern case
 Twas right & from her lap in saddend vein
 She took her knitting & went on again (Epigraph and ll. 1-30)

The company here is 'round the cottage hearth' rather than afield, and it is new year's eve, a time for the young to look forwards and the older generation to look back (hence the reappearance here of the widow's 'hour glass' of Bloomfield's poem). Whereas the other narrators I have discussed draw their authority from experience and knowledge, this storyteller authenticates the narrative by pausing to take down the family bible in which are written the dates of family births and deaths, to check that it is indeed 'nine & thirty years' to the day since she saw the last of her friend, whose melancholy story she is to tell. There is another interesting detail here: we are told

that the bible 'lay wi penny storys rustling near / & almanacks prese[r]vd for many a year' (ll. 25-6). These printed artefacts may suggest competing narrative forms, a theme that is perhaps taken up at the end of the poem, as we shall see.

It is evidence of Clare's canny understanding of the storyteller's art, learned no doubt from the likes of Granny Bains, that his narrator paces this opening in the way she does. We start with an unfixed, unstable idea of time as something that can telescope terrifyingly from decades to days: 'Twenty or thirty years...Nay fifty years', in the mother's discussion of time as the treacherous thief of pleasure and opportunity. The tale emerges suddenly from this melancholy moralising, and begins with a highly specific and dramatic time reference: 'Tis nine & thirty years this very day / Since I beheld the last of Sally Grey'. No sooner is this said, though, than Clare allows his narrator to stop the story in its tracks, so that the storyteller can check this dating. This is narrative deferral by a kind of pedantry, keeping the listener or reader hanging on, but also claiming another kind of authority and continuity from the list written in the bible. It is brilliantly managed, I think.

As with 'The Cross Roads' the narrator falters at the end, this time through being overcome with the grief of remembrance, but also by the implied intrusion of the printed 'penny storys'. She has ended her long story as it began, with herself at Christmas time reaching down the family bible. This time she wants to look up the psalm that was sung at her friend's graveside, her sadness poignantly contrasting, as in 'The Cross Roads', with the love-whisperings of the youngsters:

'Last christmass eve when ye were at the door
 Whispering wi sweethearts your love secrets oer
 I took my glasses to amuse myself
 & reachd the bible down from off the shelf
 To read the text & look the psalms among
 To find the one that at her grave was sung
 The place had long been doubld down before
 & much I wishd ye in to read it oer
 Your fathers read it to me many a time
 When ye were young & on our laps woud climb
 Nay keep your work tis not worth while to leave
 I'll sit & hear it on to morrow eve
 For even if the night woud time alow
 My hearts so sad I cannot hear it now
 Ive talkd till I have almost tir[e]d my tongue
 Folks say old womens tales are always long

So here I'll end & like it as ye may
 I wish ye better luck th[a]n sally grey.' (ll. 541-58)¹⁵

Even as she tries to draw her daughters into the remembrance of her friend, she apparently has to wave away their own eagerly-offered stories, with a 'Nay keep your work'. She will sit and hear their material the next night, but clearly she had rather wished that they had read Sally's psalm instead. What is implied, I think, is the narrator's displacement by a younger generation whose storytelling is written rather than oral, coming perhaps from the 'penny storys' that were 'rustling' at the beginning of the poem. The elegy, then, may not be just for Sally Grey, but for a kind of oral remembrancing and storytelling which was increasingly superseded in the rural world by popular print culture.¹⁶

In Bloomfield and Clare, indeed, we get a glimpse of what may have been the final phase in what was clearly a tremendously vibrant tradition of rural storytelling. It would no doubt be an exaggeration to see this as a purely oral tradition being displaced by a purely printed tradition. Oral and printed culture had cross-fertilised each other since the middle ages and would continue to do so, as Adam Fox's book illuminatingly argues. Nonetheless the particular kind of women's workplace and domestic storytelling represented here would hardly survive its century. It would be simplistic too, to suggest that this was an exclusively female tradition: both poets also use male narrators, sometimes very effectively (for example the eloquent Shepherd and Forester of Bloomfield's *May Day with the Muses*).¹⁷ But it is by and large the women who are the most richly portrayed narrators, and appear to bring the greatest emotional energy and focus to their storytelling, perhaps because oral storytelling had a greater centrality in their lives—certainly in their lives as represented by these two male poets.

I have written elsewhere about the importance of this storytelling tradition as a repository of knowledge, and an unofficial education in the rural world.¹⁸ As well as being an entertaining and sociable way to beguile worktime and labour, it represented a kind of folk memory, something that needed to be passed on as well as utilised immediately. Clare and Bloomfield's rich literary representations of storytelling are in the spirit of the need to 'pass on' a tradition, the same urgency that fuels the transaction in which the old tell memorialising stories to the young, in the manner that we have just seen. No wonder Mary Collier thought that the women's right to talk in the cornfield was worth defending: thanks to Bloomfield and Clare, we have some idea of what they might have been saying to each other.

NOTES

1. This essay draws on papers given to a seminar on 'Clare and Bloomfield: Romanticism, Influence and Material Culture' at the MLA Convention, New Orleans, December 2001; to the 20th annual John Clare Festival at Helpston, July 2002; and to The Nottingham Trent University English Research Seminar, April 2003. It follows on from two earlier essays on Clare and oral narrative culture, cited in note 18, below. I am grateful for their kind help to John Coletta, Scott McEathron and the John Clare Society of North America, as well as my colleagues in the John Clare Society and at Nottingham Trent University, and (as ever) my partner Alison Ramsden.
2. Hamish Henderson, *Alias MacAlias: Writings on Songs, Folk and Literature* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1992), p. 1. On Clare and Scotland see Ian Bowman, 'John Clare: The Scottish Connection', *The Scots Magazine* (March 1988), 580-5; John Goodridge and Kelsey Thornton, 'John Clare: the Trespasser', Haughton, pp. 87-129 (108-13); Ronald Blythe, 'John Clare in Scotland', *JCSJ* 19 (2000), 73-81.
3. *The Thresher's Labour by Stephen Duck; The Woman's Labour by Mary Collier: Two Eighteenth Century Poems*, ed. by E.P. Thompson and Marian Sugden (London: The Merlin Press, 1989). It is perhaps worth noting that in his earliest commissioned poem, 'The Shunamite', Duck has a female narrator, and that Joseph Spence considered that 'The Woman introduc'd to tell her Story, is a new Cast of his own', i.e. this is Duck's invention. See Stephen Duck, *Poems on Several Occasions 1736*, with an Introductory Note by John Lucas (Menston, Yorkshire: The Scholar Press, 1973), p. xvi.
4. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
5. Robert Bloomfield, *Selected Poems*, ed. by John Goodridge and John Lucas, with an Introduction by John Lucas (Nottingham: Trent Editions, 1998), pp. 52-3.
6. Bloomfield, *Selected Poems*, pp. 65-6.
7. Bloomfield, *Selected Poems*, pp. 59-60. Bloomfield's own preferred title for the poem was 'The Vaccine Rose', but his patron Capel Lofft disliked this and it was not used: see Lofft's letter to Bloomfield of 10 July 1803, in W.H. Hart (ed), *Selections from the Correspondence of Robert Bloomfield* (London: Spottiswoode, 1870), Letter 32, and the fair copy manuscript of the poem, British Library, Add. MS 28266, f. 38 and ff. The poem is discussed by Tim Fulford and Debbie Lee in 'The Jenneration of Disease: Vaccination,

- Romanticism and Revolution', *Studies in Romanticism*, 39 (Spring 2000), 139-63.
8. *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. by F. N. Robinson, second edition (London and Oxford, 1957), p. 152.
 9. Ronald Blythe protests at the *DNB*'s verdict: see his *Talking About John Clare* (Nottingham: Trent Books, 1999), pp. 129-30.
 10. Bloomfield, *Selected Poems*, pp. 74-81. I have here removed stanza numbers for greater clarity.
 11. 'St Martins Eve', in *John Clare, Poems of the Middle Period, 1822-1837, Volume III: The Midsummer Cushion*, ed. by Eric Robinson, David Powell, and P.M.S. Dawson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 269-78.
 12. Clare to Allan Cunningham, 9 September 1824, *Letters*, p. 302. On Granny Bains see Frederick Martin, *The Life of John Clare* [1865], second edition with an Introduction and Notes by Eric Robinson and Geoffrey Summerfield (London: Frank Cass, 1964), p. 8; June Wilson, *Green Shadows: The Life of John Clare* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1951), pp. 22-3.
 13. John Clare, *Cottage Tales*, ed. by Eric Robinson, David Powell and P.M.S. Dawson (Ashington and Manchester: Carcanet and the Mid-Northumberland Arts Group, 1993), pp. 10-17.
 14. Clare, *Cottage Tales*, pp. 18-25. In these and the next quoted passages I have added some basic punctuation without which some of the lines make little sense, and standardised quotation marks for further clarity.
 15. Clare, *Cottage Tales*, pp. 82-97.
 16. I am grateful to Dr Paul Dawson, who offers the alternative (and equally credible) reading of 'Nay keep your work tis not worth while to leave / I'll sit & hear it on to morrow eve': that it is a response to one of the daughters, who is putting down her 'work' (probably a piece of knitting, since this is what her mother is doing) and is offering to read out Sally's psalm.
 17. A male workplace storytelling tradition is also referred to by one of Stephen Duck's early imitators, Robert Tattersal, in his building-site poem *The Bricklayer's Labours* (1734): 'While to divert the sult'ry Hours along, / One tells a Tale, another sings a Song' (ll. 60-1).
 18. John Goodridge, 'Out There in the Night: Rituals of Nurture and Exclusion in Clare's "St Martin's Eve"', *Romanticism*, 4, no. 2 (1998), 202-11; 'Telling Stories: Clare, Folk Culture, and Narrative Techniques', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 29, no. 3 (Summer 1998), 164-7.

