

## Some Predecessors of Clare: 2. The Response to Duck

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In the last article I looked at the career of Stephen Duck the 'Thresher Poet'. Duck's poems went through seven pirated editions in 1730, the year he was 'discovered' and presented to Queen Caroline. For many, Duck was simply the novelty of the season, a grotesque sideshow in which a real farm-worker was shaped to imitate the fake singing-shepherds of pastoral art and literature. There had been in the past other such literary 'novelties': a 'Water Poet', a 'Blind Poet', even a 'Highwayman Poet', and Duck was seen as the latest such 'curiosity of nature'.<sup>1</sup> But for other aspiring writers of his social class Duck's example was serious, and enabling. Since 1730 self-taught poets have been a continual, if marginalised presence in literature, and in this movement Duck was an important pioneer. I will be looking here at his immediate successors, and at the ways Duck's example affected them.

Much printed poetry has been lost, and we therefore cannot be statistical about the self-taught poets, but certainly a significant number emerged in the remaining 25 years of Stephen Duck's life.<sup>2</sup> His influence on them was three-fold. Firstly, his example enabled others to 'find a voice', to 'dare to speak', by no means an obvious right within the more rigid class-differentiation of the period. The voices that emerged sometimes faltered a little, perhaps surprised that they could 'speak' at all. A good example is John Frizzle (*fl.* 1733), 'an Irish Miller', whose poem addressed to Duck appeared in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in February 1733 (III, 94):

O Stephen, Stephen, if they gentler Ear  
Can yet a rustick Verse unruffled hear,  
Receive these Lines, but look not for much Skill,  
Nor yet for Smoothness, from a Water-mill.  
I near the Hopper stand with dusty Coat,  
And, if my Mouth be open, dusty Throat. (ll. 1-6)

As with *The Thresher's Labour*, the conditions of work are the deadly enemy of self-expression. Here this is graphically shown: the 'mouth' that opens to speak, the 'throat' that strives to vocalise, is literally 'choked' by the flour-dust, as the dust of 'sooty pease' in *The Thresher's Labour* had spoiled Duck's pastoral homecoming by turning him into a dehumanised 'bugbear'. We also see here Duck's second area of influence, in the way his poem had licensed the self-taught poets to write about their own lives, their conditions of work and their labour, offering those who worked on threshing floors and in 'dark satanic mills' a means of expressing their otherwise closed-off lives.

Duck offered a new genre which was ideal for these purposes. The generic origins of Duck's anti-pastoral labouring poem have not been analysed. Some 'anti-pastorals' were written in the early Eighteenth Century,<sup>3</sup> as were poems about different labouring professions,<sup>4</sup> but the particular combination of the two in *The Thresher's Labour*, with its striking reversal of normal poetic usage of the yearly cycle, seems to have been Duck's own invention. The self-taught poets seized on the form, adapting its conventions to their own 'situations', and producing some of their best work as a result.

Thirdly, Duck offered the example of his success. Literary success in the Eighteenth Century meant patronage, and (King George the Second being no lover of

books) the Queen was the highest patron of all. Many of the self-taught poets were dazzled by this success: Frizzle, for example, ends his poem with some over-the-top praise for Queen Caroline, as does the bricklayer Robert Tatersal, whose work we will be looking at shortly. For some this dazzlement was disastrous, when their society failed to reward their expectations and efforts. Even where they did succeed, there were longer-term dangers. Horace Walpole may have exaggerated when he told Hannah More that as a result of the Queen's patronage of Duck 'twenty artisans and labourers turned poets and starved' (Walpole-More, 13 November 1784), but the history of the self-taught poets, as I mentioned in the last article, has a notably high incidence of alcoholism, mental illness and suicide: John Clare was one of many who found themselves, in modern terms, 'famous for fifteen minutes', but quickly forgotten when their 'novelty' wore off, and left socially stranded, displaced from both the village and the literary culture.

Against the dangers of failure, isolation, poverty and social displacement, some of the emerging self-taught poets were able to build psychological and practical defences. Two of Duck's contemporaries, for example, did so by adapting their aspirations according to the literary weather, by 'diversifying'. Robert Dodsley (1703-64) began with the small advantage of being a schoolmaster's son, was briefly a weaver's apprentice, then became a footman, less literally stifled than a thresher or a miller, though possibly as intellectually stifled. His first publication, *Servitude, a Poem* (1729) preceded but failed to anticipate *The Thresher's Labour*. In it 'brothers in servitude' are offered advice on how best to succeed in their profession, under the heads of 'Honesty', 'Carefulness', 'Obedience', 'Diligence', 'Submission to Rebukes', 'Neatness' and 'Discretion'. It is as far away from Duck's complaint as one could imagine, and like Dodsley's later poem 'Agriculture' (1753), is a rather uninspiring attempt at serious didactic work. Dodsley's response to Duck's success, though, is instructive. By 1731 *Servitude* had become *The Footman's Friendly Advice* and Dodsley had produced *A Sketch of the Miseries of Poverty* and *An Epistle from a Footman to Stephen Duck*. His first collection of poetry, published in 1732, was entitled *The Muse in Livery: or the Footman's Miscellany*. Advancing under cover of a proletarian vocation, Dodsley would in due course emerge from what was essentially protective colouring, to take his place as a mainstream playwright, anthologist and publisher, a 'respectable name' as Robert Southey (p. 113) revealingly calls him.

Less obviously successful, but pursuing the same kind of adaptive tactics, John Bancks or Banks (1709-51) announced his presence with *The Weaver's Miscellany or Poems on Various Subjects, by John Bancks, now a poor weaver in Spittlefields* (1730). Like Dodsley, Bancks had begun as a weaver's apprentice, and used the title of 'Weaver' as one of a number of strategies for finding a way into the literary world, which included setting up a bookstall, apprenticing himself to a bookbinder, and later branching out into historical writing and editing. A cautious, self-deprecating attitude to his own writing was an important element of Duck's survival strategy, and Bancks substituted for this another kind of protective shield: a mock-arrogant humorousness. Thus his epigram to *The Weaver's Miscellany* declares:

Criticks, stand off, for you there is no room;  
Tho' nothing's sacred else, revere the Loom;  
If the best-natur'd Readers, I can please,  
'Tis all the Fame I seek—I wrote for these.

This is 'weaving' in the sense that boxers use the term, as Bancks neatly remodels the totemic significance of his trade into the equivalent of saying 'pax', or 'you can't hit a man with glasses'. Bancks had been disabled in an accident that cut short his career as a weaver, and his resilience, born of necessity, may be seen in the two full and energetic volumes of *Miscellanies* he produced in 1738. His confidence and application seem to have enabled him to survive in the literary world despite his disadvantages, though he died in his early forties.

In a similar way Robert Tatarsal (fl. 1734-5), who describes himself as 'A poor Country Bricklayer, of Kingston upon Thames,' and unlike Bancks acknowledges his title (*The Bricklayer's Miscellany*<sup>5</sup>) as an 'Allusion to Stephen Duck', uses humour, and a Bancksian epigraph:

Since Rustick Threshers entertain the Muse;  
Why may not Bricklayers too their Subjects chuse?

The most talented of three 'bricklayer poets' of the period,<sup>6</sup> Tatarsal includes in his work what were by now the two standard elements, praise of Stephen Duck, and a description of his own work, but he keeps them clearly apart. Nor is his poem to Duck (from which his epigraph is drawn) simply another piece of 'praise'. It is in fact an English folk version of the old Scottish makars' art of 'flyting' or poetic disputation. What Tatarsal calls his 'servile badges' of bricks and mortar conceal, he says, 'some secret sparks above a common ray', and he recruits the most eminent bricklayer-poet of all to his side, in an epic battle between the bricklayer's trowel and the thresher's flail:

Some Ages past the Trowel \* was in Praise,\* Ben Jonson  
And bravely fought for Honour of the Bays;  
Yea, modern Times afford a Rustick Flail,  
Whose threshing Lays cou'd over Queens prevail;  
And why not Bricklayers exercise their Quill,  
Whose Art surmounts a Country Thresher's still:  
A Flail, a Trowel, Weapons very good,  
If fitly us'd, and rightly understood;  
But close engag'd, beware the useless Flail;  
The Trowel then can terribly prevail.  
(from 'To Stephen Duck, The famous Threshing Poet')

Tatarsal shows here an astute awareness of contemporary Grub Street attacks on Duck,<sup>7</sup> but he eschews the class-hostility of Grub Street, adapting their jokes about flails and threshing to a more popular and celebratory kind of writing.

He also applies his humour and energy to the description of his work, in 'The Bricklayers Labours'. The self-taught poets of Duck's time have often been criticised for kowtowing to current fashions in 'poetic diction', but in this poem Tatarsal leaves behind the cliches of 'Nocturnal minutes' and 'crimson blushes' with the dawn, finding a new language of 'Thread-bare Coat and Hose', 'Quartern Loaf' and 'Dram of Gin' with which to start the working day. The eighteenth-century building site clearly has all the sweat and dust of Duck's threshing-floor and Frizzle's flour mill, but Tatarsal also conveys sound and movement well:

A Line, a line, the Foreman crys, my Boys;

When Tuck and Pat with Flemish bound they run,  
Till the whole Course is struck, compleat, and done:  
Then on again, while two exalts the Quoin,  
And draws the midmost Men another Line.  
The Course laid out, when thro' the fleeting Air,  
A solemn Sound salutes the willing ear;  
When universal Yo-ho's eccho strait,  
Our constant Signal to the Hour of Eight.  
(from 'The Bricklayers Labours')

Tatarsal describes the sequence of the work carefully here: among the other areas of interest in poems of this kind is the fact that they give often unique first hand accounts of the different labouring jobs they address.<sup>8</sup>

Rayner Unwin sees Tatarsal's approach to poetry as that of a 'cynical and unsuccessful racketeer' (p. 73) trying to muscle-in on Duck's success, a view often expressed by critics about Duck's immediate followers. A number of points need to be set against this idea. Firstly, it is inadequate to see in the desire to emulate Duck merely the eighteenth-century equivalent of the dream of winning the pools. The struggle that clearly went into the literary work these writers produced speaks of a genuine impulse to write, and to give meaning to their lives in doing so. For many, *The Thresher's Labour* had made this possible for the first time, and we cannot reasonably accept value and meaning in (for example) the way Duck's contemporary Alexander Pope turns his life into poetry in his *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* (1735), and yet denigrate the same impulse in less advantaged writers, whatever the results may have been. Unwin's characterisation of Tatarsal as a 'most shameless poetaster' (p. 114) begs the question of why it should be 'shameful' for a bricklayer to try and write poetry.

The 'cynical' reading perhaps over-reacts to what Raymond Williams calls the 'creeping humility' (p. 134) of these writers, as they praise Duck, the Queen, and patrons in general, belittle their own efforts, and display their humble occupations, to borrow Tatarsal's astute phrase, as 'servile badges'. I have noted an element of self-protection in this, but it also follows a pattern of ritually bowing to the powerful which was enacted just as scrupulously by 'professional' poets like Pope and Thomson. The self-taught poets did not invent the system of patronage, but for them to reject or ignore it could only make more total their exclusion from a literary culture already weighted against their participation. The 'blame' for the more degrading rituals of eighteenth-century literature cannot fairly be placed with the powerless.

The last and most impressive of the first wave of poets to respond to Duck's example, and the first self-taught woman poet to achieve publication, was Mary Collier (1690?-c.1762).<sup>9</sup> Her major poem, *The Woman's Labour*, and her 'Remarks' about her life show the multiple hardships facing a working-class woman in the early Eighteenth Century. Her education, such as it was, stopped short when her mother (who was also her teacher) died. The next period of her life was taken up in looking after her father, and being 'set to such labour as the Country afforded'. When he died Collier moved from Midhurst to the larger town of Petersfield, again taking whatever work was offered, 'Washing, Brewing and such labour'. Books were a hobby fitted into 'what leisure time I had', and Donna Landry (p. 102) has made the point that only by avoiding the more usual 'triple shift' involved in having children could this have been possible. Into this tiny area of freedom came Duck's poems and the inspiration of poetic justice: Duck's anti-feminist remarks againsts womens' alleged

‘tattling’ and idleness in the harvest fields awoke in her a ‘propensity to call an Army of Amazons to vindicate the injured Sex’.

Having marshalled her army into couplet formation Mary Collier was not so much discovered as ambushed by the reading classes. A transcript of the poem was taken on the basis of an empty promise of confidentiality, her poem became the talk of the town, and Collier was ‘advised’ by ‘many’ to go into print, which she did, though to little enough effect despite three editions: ‘I lost nothing’, she writes, but ‘neither did I gain much, others run away with the profit’; and she worked on as a washer woman to the age of sixty-three, then as a farm servant until seventy, when she retired to ‘a Garret (The Poor Poets Fate) in Alton where I am endeavouring to pass the Relict of my days in Piety, Purity, Peace, and an Old Maid’. A tone of mild triumph sits alongside the disappointment here: the busy discoverers of the literary world took what they wanted and moved on, but if she failed to win a pension or the praise of the Queen she had also avoided the agonies that finally caught up with Duck, whose suicide drew from her a heartfelt elegy.<sup>10</sup>

But in leaving Mary Collier to an old age of mixed feelings the literary world showed bad judgment, for hers is at once the wittiest and the fullest poetic description of proletarian life the period offers. Duck’s casual hostility to women’s sociability is for him a mere building-block towards the epic simile he is carefully constructing, having learnt how to do so in the course of conquering *Paradise Lost* with a Dictionary and a ‘sort of English Grammar’. When he has completed the description of the women running to shelter from the rain and falling silent he will be able to declare in a tone of hard-won triumph:

Thus have I seen on a bright Summer’s day,  
On some green brake a Flock of Sparrows play.  
From twig to twig, from bush to bush they fly,  
And with continu’d chirping fill the Sky,  
But on a sudden, if a Storm appears,  
Their chirping noise no longer dins your ears;  
They fly for shelter to the thickest bush,  
Their silent sit, and all at once is hush.

(from *The Thresher’s Labour*, 1730 edition)

Collier clearly sees this purpose, as her parodying of Duck’s epic machinery show, but she also feels the injury, and sees the unconscious irony by which Duck, in the midst of his own struggle to speak, casually denies women the right to do the same. Her way of making him see this is (like Tattersal) to deploy a kind of flyting. Her version is characterised by E.P. Thompson as ‘the old folk-mode of “the argument of the sexes”’ (p. x). She parodies Duck’s poem by ‘trumping’ his every reported hardship with a greater one from her own life. She plays her ‘blood’ against Duck’s ‘sweat’, outbids his bad dreams by saying she doesn’t have time to dream at all, and ends with a solid account of a working life many degrees harsher than his. She opens the poem with an ironically exaggerated version of the conventional praise of a respected predecessor, which lead to a literary-historical critique of Duck’s flaw. The present ‘slavery’ of womankind is compared with a golden age in which women were respected, and praised by poets. Duck has turned his back on the ancient poets’ respectful ‘adorning’ of women, in order to ‘adorn’ his own verses instead, and (even worse) he has slandered women to achieve his literary effects, adding insult and

indecorum to injury. Collier had learned Duck's poetry by heart, was well attuned to it, and is in many ways his most perceptive early critic.

In addition to her astute critique of Duck, Collier offers a vivid description of her own life in *The Woman's Labour*; and there are numerous fine touches in the poem, like her witty mock-sympathy with Duck and:

Those mighty Troubles which perplex your Mind,  
(Thistles before, and Females come behind)

or her pouncing on a distortion in Duck's account of haymaking, which she accurately throws back at him in italics. The meal-break over:

...we must get up again,  
And nimbly turn our hay upon the plain,  
Nay, rake and prow it in, the case is clear  
Or how should Cocks in equal rows appear?

Collier's defence of the right to speak is especially important, not only because to 'chat merrily' was as she says 'the only Privilege our sex enjoy', but because the history of the self-taught poets is above all the history of a struggle for this right: a right to literacy, a right to be heard, and in Clare's phrase 'a right to song'. In the second half of the Eighteenth Century many new self-taught poets were to join this struggle, and I will be looking at some of them in the next article.

## NOTES

I am indebted to Helen Boden, Christine Gerrard and Barbara Rosenbaum for their kind assistance. The full titles of works I have cited by surname and page number in the text and notes are given in 'Further reading', below. Other abbreviations used in the notes are:

*DNB*: *The Dictionary of National Biography*. *ECBB*: F.J.G. Robinson et al (eds), *Eighteenth-Century British Books* (5 vols., Folkestone, 1981). Foxon: David Foxon (ed), *English Verse 1701-1750* (2 vols., Cambridge, 1975). *NCBEL*: G. Watson (ed), *The New Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature* (vol II, Cambridge, 1971, unless otherwise indicated). *STC*: W.A. Jackson et al (eds), *A Short Title Catalogue of Books Printed...1475-1640* (2nd edition, 2 vols, 1986).

1. John Taylor, 'The Water Poet' (1580-1653), a Thames boatman, wrote prolifically in many different styles; his work is listed in *DNB* and in *NCBEL* (vol I). Thomas Gills or Gill, 'The Blind Man of Bury-Saint-Edmunds' (fl. 1707-16) wrote *Thomas Gills...upon the recovery of his sight* (?1710), *The Blind Man's Case at London* (1712) and some didactic poems for children (Foxon G156-68, *ECBB*). John Clavel (1603-42), poet and highwayman, wrote *A recantation of an ill led life. Or a discoverie of the high-way law* (1628), which went into three editions (*DNB*, *STC*).
2. Davis (1926) counts five self-taught poets who appeared in the wake of Duck's success, but the number is higher. Horace Walpole writes of 'twenty' artisan

poets after Duck, and the *Monthly Review* (February 1778) writes of ‘certain journeymen taylors, shoemakers, barbers, Spitalfield weavers’. The present research has located about a dozen self-taught poets of the period 1730-1756. None were tailors or barbers, so there are clearly others still to seek, or not yet identified as ‘self-taught’. See Davis, p. 61; Walpole-Hannah More 13 November 1784; Unwin (1954), p. 69.

3. In addition to the anti-pastorals of Swift and Gay, possible influences include *Hogland; or a description of Hampshire. A Mock-heroic poem* (1728), and William Diaper’s ‘Brent’ (published in his *Miscellanea*, 1726). Duck may have seen an early broadside version of ‘Brent’, published in Bury St. Edmunds in 1720 as Lincolnshire.
4. There was a spate of poems celebrating trades and crafts in the 1720s and 1730s, including poems by Miles Aston on Baking, Spinning, Brewing and Weaving (1727-34, Foxon A356-7, A359-60); and by Robert Aston on the journeymen shoemakers (1725-6, Foxon A344, ECBB); John Morgan’s ‘A Poem on the Taylor Craft’ (1733, Foxon M445); some occupational poems by Henry Nelson (see note 6); and a ‘Poem Descriptive of the Manners of the Clothiers written about the year 1730’, in manuscript in Leeds Reference Library.
5. Davis (p. 65) and Unwin (p. 195) misquote the title of Tatersal’s collection, and several sources note only one volume. Both the Bodleian and the British Library have two volumes, one dated 1734 and styled the second edition, which contains ‘The Bricklayer’s Labours’; and a ‘second part’ dated 1735. The *Scriblerian* XIX (1986), i, 89 notes a further set of the ‘two-part Bricklayer’s Miscellany by Robert Tatersal, 1734-5’, and both Unwin and *ECBB* cite a two-part collection, the latter adding that the second part is a first edition. Thus it seems the (missing) first edition was a single volume, printed after Duck’s success in 1730 and before 1734. This went into a second edition in 1734, and Tatersal then added a second volume to it the following year. The Bodleian copy of the 1734 volume is entitled:

THE / Bricklayer’s Miscellany: / OR, / POEMS / ON / Several Subjects: /  
Written by / ROBERT TATERSAL, / A poor Country Bricklayer, of  
Kingston upon / Thames, in Allusion to STEPHEN DUCK. / [epigraph] /  
The SECOND EDITION. / LONDON: / Printed for the AUTHOR; and  
sold by J. WILFORD, / behind the Chapter-House in St. Paul’s Church-  
Yard. / [rule] / MDCCXXXIV. / [Price Six Pence.]

6. The two other bricklayer-poets were Henry Nelson (fl. 1725-9), whose poems in celebration of civic pageantry and of various trades, printed in Dublin in the 1720s, are described in Foxon (N20-33) and *ECBB*; and Henry Jones (1721-70), whose work is listed in *NCBEL*. James Eyre Weeks wrote a parody of Jones’s *Bricklayer’s Poem* (1745), called *The Cobler’s Poem* (1745).
7. The literary world found various ways of tormenting Duck while cashing-in on his success, including piracies, parodies, and satires on his name and occupation. For details see Davis, 40-60.

8. 'The Bricklayers Labours' is in Lonsdale (1984). Other self-taught poets of the period who wrote of their life and work include the gardener, Peter Aram, author of 'Studley Park' (in Thomas Gent, *The Ancient and Modern History...of Ripon*, York, 1733); and the groom William Hardy, whose *Poems on Several Subjects* (1737) includes some Duckian chauvinism as well as praise of both his 'crooked mare', and 'good ale'.
9. For Collier, see 'Further reading', below. It could be argued that most women writers of the period were 'self-taught', as no secondary or higher education was available to them. Among those writing in the 1730s and 1740s who seem to have had little or no formal education were Mary Masters (1694?-1771), author of *Poems on Several Occasions* (1733) and *Familiar Letters and Poems* (1755); Jean Adams (1710-65), author of *Miscellany Poems* (Glasgow, 1734); Elizabeth Teft (fl. 1741-7), author of *Orinthia's Miscellanies* (1747), and Mary Leapor (1722-46), author of *Poems on Several Occasions* (1748). Adams, Teft and Leapor are represented in Lonsdale (1989). For Masters see *Poems by Eminent Ladies*, ed. Colman and Thornton (1755) and *DNB*.
10. Mary Collier, 'Remarks of the Authors Life' and 'Elegy upon Stephen Duck', *Poems on Several Occasions* (Winchester, 1762).

### Further reading

Stephen Duck's *The Thresher's Labour* and Mary Collier's *The Woman's Labour* have twice been reprinted together recently. The edition of E.P. Thompson and Marian Sugden (London: Merlin Press, 1989) uses the 1730 pirated text of Duck's poem, which is generally less 'classicized' than the official 1736 text. Moira Ferguson's edition (Los Angeles, California: Augustan Reprint Society, Publication no. 230, 1985) uses the 1736 text. Both editions print the first edition of *The Woman's Labour* (1739) and have useful introductions.

The standard biography of Duck is Rose Mary Davis's *Stephen Duck, the Thresher-Poet* (Orono, Maine: University of Maine Studies, 2nd ser. 8, 1926). Collier is the subject of 'The Resignation of Mary Collier', by Donna Landry, in *The New 18th Century: Theory, Politics, English Literature*, ed. Felicity Nussbaum and Laura Brown (1987), 99-120. Landry's forthcoming book, *The Muses of Resistance: Labouring-class women's poetry in Britain, 1739-1796*, will be of interest to students of Collier and other self-taught women poets of the period.

Many early self-taught poets are represented in *The New Oxford Book of Eighteenth Century Verse* (1984) and *Eighteenth Century Women Poets: an Oxford Anthology* (1989), both edited by Roger Lonsdale. A modern account of the subject is Rayner Unwin's *The Rural Muse: Studies in the Peasant Poetry of England* (1954). Robert Southey's *The Lives and Works of the Uneducated Poets* (1831, ed. J.S. Childers, Oxford 1925) also remains useful. There are some relevant materials in C.B. Tinker, *Nature's Simple Plan* (1922); Edmund Blunden, *Nature in English Literature* (1929); Maren-Sofia Rostvig, *The Happy Man* (vol. 2, rev. ed., Oslo and New York, 1971); Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (1973); Janet Todd, *Dictionary of British and American Women Writers 1660-1800* (1984); Moira Ferguson, *First Feminists* (Indiana UP, 1985); and H. Gustav Klaus, *The Literature of Labour* (Brighton: Harvester, 1985).

