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JANET LITTLE 'THE SCOTCH MILKMAID' AND 'PEASANT POETRY'

Janet Little 'The Scotch Milkmaid' was born in 1759, the same year as Burns, at Nether Bogside in Ecclefechan, Dumfriesshire. The daughter of George Little, she entered into service with the Rev. Mr Johnstone, accompanying his family to Glasgow. Later she worked for Mrs Dunlop of Dunlop, Burns's patron, then became head dairymaid at Loudon estate in Ayrshire for Mrs Henri, Mrs Dunlop's sister; connections which facilitated the publication of *The Poetical Works of Janet Little, The Scotch Milkmaid* (Ayr, 1792). All poems quoted here appear in this volume. Little married a fellow worker at Loudon Castle, John Richmond, and became stepmother to his five children; she continued to run the Loudon dairy after Mrs Henri's lease expired. Apparently Little was a big woman of considerable physical presence, 'no bad representation of some of Sir Walter Scott's gigantic heroines, but without their impudence'.¹ She appreciated 'sense' in a sermon, and was a member of the Dissenting congregation of Rev. Mr Blackwood in Galston. Little died aged 54 in 1819.

The 'Scotch Milkmaid's' poetic repertoire is diverse. Many items are melancholic and composed of stock romantic formulae, for instance, 'Upon a Young Lady's leaving Loudon Castle', in which 'silent, solitary gloom' follows the departure of a lady 'milder than an April morn'. There are a number of sentimental pieces, such as 'On Happiness': 'O Happiness! where art thou to be found? / What bow'r is blest with thy perpetual gleam' (1-2). Little often moralises, but with tolerance, as in the humorous attack on vanity, 'Upon a Young Lady's Breaking a Looking Glass'. Her linguistic spectrum ranges from the formal English of 'On Reading Lady Mary Montague and Mrs. Rowe's Letters' and the pseudo-Burnsian 'From Snipe, A Favourite Dog, to his Master', to the spirited Scots of poems like 'To My Aunty', 'Wha ne'er o' wit nor lear was vaunty' (2). Undoubtedly Little's finest work is her Scots poetry, in the vernacular tradition of Ramsay and Fergusson.

Her work has not yet received the appreciation it deserves. There is Hilton Brown's lonely essay of 1950 and Donna Landry's enthusiastic reappraisal in *The Muses of Resistance* (Cambridge, 1990). Little is occasionally mentioned as a compatriot and follower of Burns. Even her grave in Loudon Kirkyard has vanished without trace: it is as if her memory had been wilfully erased. Little's belittling is integrally related to her classification as 'peasant poet', a notion which began with Henry Mackenzie's unfortunate labelling of Burns as 'Heaven-taught ploughman', in number 97 of the *Lounger*, 9 December 1786. Mackenzie helped to fix Burns's image as romantic peasant, giving rise to a 'cottage industry' with branches of 'weaver poets' in Galloway,

'shepherd poets' in the Borders, and 'artisan poets' in industrial areas. English parallels included John Clare, and Southey's *Uneducated Poets* (London, 1827) applied the stereotype to a group including Taylor the 'Water-Poet' and Stephen Duck. One hundred years later, works like John D. Ross's *Robert Burns and his Rhyming Friends* (Stirling, 1928) still presented the idea of a peasant 'school' of autodidacts. A parallel position was assumed by Robert Graves, in his essay on 'The Future of Poetry' (1926). Graves believed: 'The working classes do not read poems: they read little except the Sunday newspapers' and therefore could not be expected to create.²

Peasant poets were expected to excel in certain areas, especially the pathetic. *The Scots Magazine* of 1819 remarked:

Tragic and impassioned sentiments are nearly the same in all ranks, and often the more powerful, in proportion as they are more simply expressed. But humour is a more factitious quality; it requires a certain polish and refinement which unlettered bards can scarcely have had an opportunity of acquiring.³

No real refinement, then, could be expected of the 'peasant poet'. All that could be hoped for was a charming expression of moral (and political) conservatism. Henry Shanks, in *The Peasant Poets of Scotland* (Bathgate, 1881), asserted:

the truest test of the moral force and mental activity of a people is the number of peasant and artisan poets which it has produced. I say *peasant* and *artisan* in preference to *great* poets, because the latter will generally be found to be drawn from the upper and educated classes, and consequently do not afford so complete a proof of the permeations of poetic thought and feeling among the great body of the people – just as a sample drawn from, or near, the bottom of a tank, would more correctly represent the quality of the water contained in it than one drawn from the top only.⁴

Stressing social status meant 'peasant poets' were accorded little serious attention, and praised primarily on account of their unexpected sociological transition from ignorance to relative learning. Patronising comments, like D. M. Moir's on James Hogg, 'The Ettrick Shepherd', were commonplace:

when we consider what an unlettered peasant was able to achieve by the mere enthusiasm of his genius, we are entitled to marvel certainly – not that his writings should be full of blemishes, but that his mind ever had power to burst through the Cimmerian gloom in which his early years seemed so hopelessly enveloped.⁵

There were variations to this interpretation. Shanks perceived a 'natural affinity between poverty and poetry', 'of all the arts, the poetic, although not entirely independent of special training and cultivation, is the one, which can

best assert itself, where the opportunities for such training are denied.⁶

Little's choice of the title 'Milkmaid Poet' indicates an active assumption of the role of peasant poet. It is understandable: presenting oneself as a self-taught writer helped secure patronage, albeit limited and limiting. Assuming a work-oriented soubriquet could be a double-edged sword, and even Hogg momentarily considered rejecting 'The Ettrick Shepherd' for a new pseudonym 'J. H. Craig of Douglas', but the proposal was dropped as commercially unviable. Custom dictated that patronage should be uncritically and humbly appreciated; when it was not, as in Hogg's *Familiar Anecdotes of Sir Walter Scott* (New York, 1834), the peasant poet faced a barrage of criticism.⁷

Dedicating her collection, 'To The Countess of Loudon', 'from Your Ladyship's Ever Grateful and Obedient Humble Servant', Little self-effacingly begged indulgence for her background. While 'Nature speaks', at least her 'humble lines had birth' under a Lady's roof, where 'moral lessons spoke from ev'ry part' (15). Little thereby flattered her patron and suggested her own deserving purity: an eminently suitable stance for a peasant poet. The companion piece, 'To the Public' is a similar apology. It hints at what Shanks, himself a peasant poet, called 'rampant literary trade unionism' – the self-regulatory behaviour practised by the literati.⁸ But while, like Shanks, Little deprecates critical condescension, she exploits it when it suits:

"Vain are her hopes," the snarling critic cries;

"Rude and imperfect is her rural song."

But she on public candour firm relies,

And humbly begs they'll pardon what is wrong.

(stanza 3)

As already mentioned, Little is generally considered as an acolyte of Burns, and so some attention has been accorded to her 'Epistle to Mr Robert Burns'. It is a sincere tribute using Burns's favoured 'standard Habbie' in Scots-English, with a passing nod to the opening of 'To a Haggis':

Fair fa' the honest rustic swain,

The pride o' a' our Scottish plain;

Thou gies us joy to hear thy strain,

And notes sae sweet;

Old Ramsay's shade, reviv'd again,

In thee we greet.

(stanza 1)

Little was thoroughly familiar with Burns's corpus; as shown by references to 'Caesar and Luath' (stanza 4), 'the daisy' (stanza 7), and the love poetry which would make 'the most frigid dame ... relent' (stanza 7):

Did Addison or Pope but hear,
Or Sam, that critic most severe,
A plough-boy sing, wi' throat sae clear,
They, in a rage.

Their works wad a' in pieces tear
An' curse your page. (stanza 8)

Before Burns, 'Lov'd Thallia [*sic*], that delightful muse, / Seem'd long shut up as a recluse' (7-8). 'Thalia' is the muse of Ramsay's 'Wealth, or the Woody', and the Ramsayan and Augustan citations suggest Little was drawing on an older vernacular tradition.⁹ There is a danger of the Burns connection disguising Little's debt to the Scottish Augustans; she contributed to the obfuscation by stressing her peasant empathy with, and inferiority to, Burns. Her 'rude, unpolish'd strokes wad blot / Thy brilliant shine' (3-4).

Burns does not seem to have responded to the 'Epistle', writing to Mrs Dunlop in 1789 about 'your poetess': 'I should have written her, as she requested, but for the hurry of this new business. I have heard of her and her compositions in this country; and, I am happy to add, always to the honour of her character.'¹⁰ There is some evidence the heaven-taught ploughman liked to monopolise the 'peasant poet' tag, and this raises the intriguing question of how far the 'champion of the working classes' really supported his fellow autodidacts. Despite the Epistles to 'Davie', J. Lapraik and William Simson, written before his own rise to fame, Burns was not particularly encouraging to contemporaries trying to jump on his bandwagon: Sillar, Campbell, Fisher, Walker the tailor poet. Admittedly the pressure of responding to would-be protégés was immense – a year after the letter just quoted, he asked Mrs Dunlop not to send a 'Poem on the King by an English farmer' or the 'Ode to Hope by J.L.' (presumably Little, given her poem of this title) insisting he would prefer a sheet of Mrs Dunlop's prose.¹¹

In January 1792 Burns promised Mrs Dunlop to 'fill up my subscription-bill' for Little, and seems to have discussed the Milkmaid's *Poems*, presented to him by Mrs Dunlop, on a visit to Loudon house in December 1792. Burns's comments on that occasion led his patron to comment:

Methinks I hear you ask me with an air that made me feel as I had got a slap in the face, if you must read all the few lines I had pointed out to you of notice in Jenny's book. How did I upbraid my own conceited folly at that instant that had never subjected one of mine to so haughty an imperious critic! I never liked so little in my life as at that moment the man whom at others I delighted to honour ... I then felt for Mrs Richmond (Jenny Little), for you, and for myself, and not one of the sensations were such as I would wish to cherish in remembrance.¹²

Mrs Dunlop, then, saw Burns as rather egotistical in his preoccupations. As Hilton Brown comments, 'Perhaps Janet was just good enough to be, not certainly a rival, but a disquieting imitation ... a Scottish Milkmaid was

dangerously like a Ploughman Poet. Burns fought shy of her.'¹³

Little persevered in trying to contact Burns, making the long journey from Loudon to Ellisland and expressing her high expectations 'On a Visit to Mr Burns':

Is't true? or does some magic spell
My wondering eyes beguile?
Is this the place where deigns to dwell
The honour of our isle?

The charming BURNS, the Muses care,
Of all her sons the pride;
This pleasure oft I've sought to share,
But been as oft denied. (stanzas 1 and 2)

In dreams she has seen him but now the 'poignant dart' is no vision. The Poet arrives, with the 'dire alarm' he had broken his arm in a fall from his horse, Pegasus:

With beating breast I view'd the bard;
All trembling did him greet:
With sighs bewail'd his fate so hard,
Whose notes were ever sweet. (stanza 8)

No other evidence of the meeting exists, and it is tempting to speculate the encounter may be imagined – an ambitious but fruitless expedition paralleling McGonagall's later trip to Balmoral in the hope of meeting Queen Victoria. Little's subsequent attitude towards Burns was ambiguous, although paradoxically, according to Loudon tradition, Burns's daughter visited Little shortly before the latter's death.¹⁴

Little seems to have felt resentment – if not to Burns himself, to the double standards she faced as a woman peasant poet. Developing this position, the reductive 'Given to a Lady who asked me to write a poem' draws on the satirical tradition of Ramsay and Burns. While, 'In royal Anna's golden days, / Hard was the task to win the bays' (1-2) now the 'Hamely, uncouth rhymes' Burns 'pretends to write' are in fashion:

But then a rustic country quean
To write – was e're the like o't seen?
A milk maid poem books to print;
Mair fit she wad her dairy tent;
Or labour to her spinning wheel,
An' do her wark baith swift an' weel.
Frae that she may some profit share,
But winna frae her rhyming ware.
Does she, poor silly thing, pretend
The manners of our age to mend?

Mad as we are, we're wise enough
Still to despise sic paltry stuff.

(stanza 5)

All this and more, a critic said;
I heard and slunk behind the shade:
So much I dread their cruel spite,
My hand still trembles while I write.

(stanza 8)

Little resented the 'Lady's' requests as much as Burns did in his loaded lines, 'On a dog of Lord Eglinton's'. Burns implicitly identifies himself with the pampered beast: 'I never barked when out of season, / I never bit without a reason' (1-2).¹⁵

There is some confusion as Little strives to find her poetic voice, particularly in love lyrics. Conforming to expectations of melancholic, pastorally oriented lyrics from 'peasant poets', Little's love poems are usually fashionable literary lyrics, in English, from a male perspective; she is heavily influenced by Burns in his Sylvander mode. An 'Acrostic Upon a Young Woman', for instance, invokes a plethora of high-cultural conventions for the love effusions of a 'humble swain'. But, on occasion, Little enjoys subverting literary love conventions. 'The Fickle Pair' is founded on classical allusions and the tradition of the *Gentle Shepherd*:

Damon and Phillis, 'tother day,
To Hymen's altar hasten'd;
They talked of love along the way,
And wish'd the knot well fasten'd.

(stanza 1)

However, the wooing is dashed by Cupid's departure and the pair make alternative matches:

Philander kindly fill'd his place;
To Damon Chloe consented.
That night they wed, O woful case!
And ere next morn repented.

(stanza 8)

The ironic twist shows Little's potential for parody, rarely fulfilled elsewhere. She is more at ease in poems expressing friendship. 'Epistle to Nell, Wrote from Loudon Castle' and 'Nell's Answer' bear tribute to happy conversations in the grounds of Loudon estate; 'A Poem on Contentment' dedicated to Janet Nicol, 'a poor old wandering woman', is a convincing evocation of solidarity between women. Incidentally, Little hopes Nicol 'may never feel the pain, / We heedless scribbling fools sustain' (60-1).

Little's sense of humour is invariably at its best in Scots, for instance in the gently satirical 'On Seeing Mr. ——— baking cakes' where, as a 'crazy scribbling lass', she exposes 'frugal' Rab giving short measure to his customers. His dishonest trading recalls vernacular types: the cynical madam of Ramsay's 'Lucky Spence's Last Advice', the dishonest 'browster wives' of

Fergusson's 'Leith Races'. 'Hallowe'en' develops the Burnsian treatment of this theme. Little depicts the 'mirth' of traditional holiday poetry with consummate ease. More than traces of Ramsay and Fergusson's influences are evident. The style recalls Ramsay's additions to the very old tradition of 'Christis Kirk on the Green', and Fergusson's ebullient 'Hallow Fair' and 'Farmer's Ingle'.¹⁶ Despite the assumptions of critics that she is purely a disciple of Burns, Little belongs to an older Scottish literary tradition:

At Hallowe'en, when fairy sprites
Perform their mystic gambols,
When ilka witch her neebour greets,
On their nocturnal rambles;
When elves at midnight hour are seen,
Near hollow caverns sportin,
Then lads and lasses aft convene,
In hopes to ken their fortune,
By fweets that night.

(stanza 2)

It is symptomatic of the period that the Scots poetry is only a small element in her collection. Critics assumed true poetry was the preserve of the formally educated and the corollary was that true poetry should be composed in their language: English. Burns and Hogg were both encouraged to write in English. In considering Hogg's *The Mountain Bard* (Edinburgh and London 1807, revised 1821), *The Monthly Review* noticed a distinct improvement in Hogg's English as 'more correct, and less at variance with the rules of good taste and propriety ... he does not seek a refuge, as it were, in the obscurities of his native dialect'.¹⁷ Such misguided remarks had profound effects on Hogg as, no doubt, on Little, encouraging her to compose, in the main, in stilted English. She faced a stark choice of maintaining her artistic integrity or pleasing the 'Ladies' who patronised her. Most of the time she took the safer route.

Little's experience is typical of the autodidacts. Being a woman compounded the process. Gender was not necessarily considered a handicap to literary genius in the nineteenth century, but certain assumptions were made. There is an early statement of these in the series 'Celebrated Female Writers' in *Blackwood's Magazine* of 1824. The first profile was of the celebrated dramatist Joanna Baillie, and argued (primarily because of her moral examples) her work was supremely influential in redirecting contemporary poetic impulses:

We are aware that this is a supposition which will be considered as humiliating to the pretensions of the stronger sex; that it supposes the distinguished fraternity of bards, of whom our country is so justly proud, and who have united in forming of the reigns of George the Third and Fourth another Age of Genius, only second to that of Elizabeth, to have laboured in a region which was opened to them by the hands of a woman. But however startling this assertion may sound,

or however repulsive it may appear to our male prejudices and our tenacious love of superiority, we make this assertion without the slightest fear of contradiction, for it is supported by the incontrovertible testimony of facts.¹⁸

Baillie, of course, was a minister's daughter. Little could expect no such indulgence.

Peasant poets after Burns were involved in the process of creating a mythology of autodidacticism. While they did not tell lies, they increasingly told their stories in a way which emphasised their heaviness of labour and bleakness of life. In the end they reconstructed real biographical elements into conventionalised problems and predicaments. James Hogg is a spectacular example, complying with critical expectations in presenting personal experience. Memoirs and essays, from John Younger's *Autobiography* to Janet Hamilton on 'Self-Education' tell a standard tale of early deprivation, minimal formal education, juvenile struggles and eventual triumphing over the creative odds.¹⁹ Financial failure was inevitable because of devotion to the Muses. According to the myth, the peasant poet was to exhibit an early awareness of the attractions of the opposite sex, and the odd occasion of errant behaviour, in the tradition of Burns, was allowed the men. But basically peasant poets were expected to present themselves as family stalwarts in the tradition of 'The Cottar's Saturday Night'. Along with the emphasis on domesticity, stress was given to periods of ill health. Without demeaning the authenticity of their experiences, it seems as though early death was a frequent hazard (as with John Leyden and David Gray) which ironically ensured a certain amount of attention. This fostered the 'lad o' pairs' myth which would prove so popular in the Kailyard novels of Ian MacLaren (John Watson) et al.

There is, of course, substantial truth in the notion 'peasant poets' had specific obstacles to face. Women 'peasant' writers were particularly handicapped in terms of access to formal education. In the late nineteenth century, Janet Hamilton poignantly expressed their predicament:

Working-women, daughters of working-mothers with families, your education must have chiefly been that of the hearth and the heart. You could not be spared for years to attend school. Mother could not dispense with your assistance in nursing baby, and many other domestic services within the compass of your strength and ability.²⁰

In addition, Little would have been excluded from the educational fraternities open to men of her own station. Parallel to the Societies of the upper classes, male literary coteries flourished in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Regular literary meetings meant that Bowden, for example, a Selkirkshire hamlet, boasted several locally famous poets including Andrew Scott and the better known Thomas Aird. Little, though, did engage in literary

exchanges with Mrs Dunlop as well as another 'rustic poetess': Jean Murray, from the Muir near Mauchline.²¹ Judging from several allusions, Little may have had access to the library at Loudon Castle. This was not unknown for favoured servants, as Hogg's experience with his employers, the Laidlaws, corroborates. Above all Little, like Hogg, drew on a rich resource of vernacular songs, tales and beliefs, which provided thematic and stylistic material for her finest work.

Janet Little's treatment as an autodidact has obscured her real worth. While it is important to avoid eulogising working class poets merely in reaction to patronising criticism, Little is representative of a rich poetic tradition which, until recently, has been ignored or misrepresented.²² She has been pigeon-holed as a minor writer within the Burnsian tradition, overlooking the substantial influences of Ramsay and Fergusson on her work. Little merits reappraisal, outwith her previous typecasting as social phenomenon and disciple of Burns.

NOTES

1. The fullest biography of Little is in James Paterson, *The Contemporaries of Burns, and the More Recent Poets of Ayrshire* (Edinburgh, 1840). Tantalisingly, he refers to surviving manuscripts, printing the sentimental 'To a Blackbird', pp. 88-9 and 'Elegy on T.S.', pp. 90-1. See Hilton Brown, 'Burns and the Scottish Milkmaid', *Burns Chronicle*, second series, 25 (1950), 15-20; Maurice Lindsay, *The Burns Encyclopedia*, third edition, revised and enlarged (New York and London, 1980), pp. 218-19; Robert T. Fitzhugh, *Robert Burns: His Associates and Contemporaries* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1943), p. 8; A. M. Boyle, *The Ayrshire Book of Burns-Lore* (Ayr, 1985), pp. 78-90; *The Bloomsbury Guide to Women's Literature*, ed. Claire Buck (London, 1992), p. 751.
2. Robert Graves, reprinted in *The Common Asphodel* (London, 1949), p. 57.
3. *The Scots Magazine*, 72 (August 1819), 604-8.
4. Henry Shanks, *The Peasant Poets of Scotland* (Bathgate, 1881), p. 113.
5. D. M. Moir (Delta), *The Poetical Works of the Past Half-Century*, third edition (Edinburgh, 1856), p. 102.
6. Shanks, pp. 20, 29.
7. The suggestion of a new pseudonym appears in a letter from Hogg to Constable of 1813, National Library of Scotland MS 7200, f. 103. For reactions to Hogg's *Anecdotes* from J. G. Lockhart and others, see James Hogg, *Anecdotes of Sir W. Scott*, ed. Douglas S. Mack (Edinburgh, 1983).
8. Shanks, p. 69.
9. *The Works of Allan Ramsay*, ed. B. Martin and J. W. Oliver, Scottish Text Society (Edinburgh and London, 1945-46), I, 152-7.
10. *The Letters of Robert Burns*, ed. G. Ross Roy, 2 vols (Oxford, 1985), I, no. 362.
11. See Robert Burns, *Poems and Songs*, ed. James Kinsley (London, 1969), nos 51, 57, 58, 67, 59; Burns, *Letters*, II, no. 396.
12. Burns, *Letters*, II, no. 491; Mrs Dunlop, quoted in Lindsay, p. 218; See James A. Mackay, *Burns-Lore of Dumfries and Galloway* (Ayr, 1988), p. 121.

13. Hilton Brown, p. 15.
14. See Paterson, p. 91.
15. Burns, *Poems*, no. 622. See also 'On the death of Echo, a Lap-dog', no. 416.
16. Ramsay, *Works*, I, 22-6, 66-82. *The Poems of Robert Fergusson*, ed. M. P. McDiarmid, 2 vols (Edinburgh and London, 1947-56), II, 160-7, 89-95, 136-40.
17. *Monthly Review*, new series, 95 (August 1821), 429.
18. *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 16 (August 1824), p. 162.
19. See Hogg's 'Memoir' prefacing *The Mountain Bard* (Edinburgh and London, 1807), considerably revised, in line with 'peasant poet' conventions, in 1821; *The Autobiography of John Younger, Shoemaker, St. Boswell's* (Kelso, 1881); Janet Hamilton, *Poems, Sketches and Essays* (Glasgow, 1885).
20. Hamilton, p. 446.
21. See Paterson, p. 91.
22. Recent works remedying the situation include William Donaldson's *Popular Literature in Victorian Scotland* (Aberdeen, 1986), Tom Leonard's *Radical Renfrew* (Edinburgh, 1990) and Katherine Kerrigan's *Anthology of Scottish Women Poets* (Edinburgh, 1991).

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