Chapter One

Introduction

Several laboring-class women sounded themselves into the void in the course of the eighteenth century. This study charts some intersections of gender, class, and national identity in their writings. It questions how national identity might have influenced class and gender affiliations and, reciprocally, how gender determines the nature of nationalism, particularly its redeployment during the revolutionary period (1770–1800) in which most of these texts were written.

The first poet in this lineage, washerwoman Mary Collier, affirms the importance of laboring women and their work in *The Woman's Labour* (1739) while underwriting the growing prominence of English nationalism. In *The Poems of Mary Collier . . . A New Edition*, Collier further introduces a range of political poems that distinguish a gendered class identity for women like herself from that of male laborers. Her varying vantage points partly stem from changes in labor practices. The enclosure of cultivable and common land had severely affected working women like Mary Collier, although the long-term consequences of enclosure evolved gradually. In general, women's traditional functions in the workplace were eroding although women still worked alongside men in the fields;[1] the lives of laboring women remained focused on survival. Collier's experiences as a washerwoman and her description of female field workers were probably accurate for England in the late 1730s.

In terms of her attitude toward the nation, unmarried Collier's praise of the royal family as the quintessential domestic model for Britons locates her in the complex role of a loyal subject who expects women workers to be treated on a par with men. Initially she is responding to laboring poet Stephen Duck's attack in *The Thresher's Labour* on female fecklessness during harvest time. This emergence of forceful poetry by mostly working-class women from the late

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1730s to the 1790s is part of what Gerald Newman calls "the crucial years in the launching of English [and Scottish] nationalism."[2] In the decades preceding midcentury, when conventional assumptions about church and sovereign rights were dissolving, British people had begun to think about themselves and other nations and communities in new ways.[3] The papacy and allied forms of absolutism, especially royal and aristocratic, were denounced as unacceptable institutions and practices. A Protestantism linked to military patriotism had become a desirable coupling earlier in the century at the accession of George I in 1714, which secured the Hanoverian succession.[4] In John Brewer's words, Protestantism consolidated the nation's preferred self-image as "unified, morally regenerating of ancient Saxon decencies, and forward-looking."[5]

In 1774, Mary Scott's commendatory poem to women, *The Female Advocate*, culturally enhanced this Protestant worldview and national self-perception. A dissenter from Somerset, Scott creatively constructed an intellectual Protestant continuum of female writers. She traces the historical origins of female poets, prose writers, and polemicists, paying tribute to contemporary writers and to neglected as well as eminent predecessors. Scott also reaccentuates the significance of female coteries and scholarship within this recast lineage. Her virtual exclusion of Roman Catholics underscored the prevalent view that the Catholic community consisted of outsiders who created fissures from within.

Scott's concentration on female culture subtly reflects the fact that many middle-class women's lives had assumed a more private and hermetic character. For one thing, eighteenth-century middle-class women who remained single and were not independently wealthy faced a sharply limited choice of occupations. As men worked for the changing economy in an environment separate from their domestic lives, many women turned to marriage as one valuable entrée into adult society, "recommended as an alliance of sense."[6] Mary Scott's reconstruction of a cultural continuum helps to redress the sense of increasing powerlessness generated by the marginalization of bourgeois women in the marketplace.[7] Unlike her feminist predecessor Bathsua Makin, Scott does not simply recite lists of illustrious women whose existence, valor, social class, and intellect could counteract some argument from male authority with one of female authority; rather, she attempts a commendatory and compensatory historical overview. Additionally, the poem remaps the contours of national identity, principally based on the texts of Englishwomen from the middle class and aristocracy. Her inclusion of a slavewoman and a working-class Irishwoman notwithstanding,

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Scott negotiates a redefinition of English, middle-class, Protestant culture.

Mary Scott's Protestant vision was shared by a majority of the nation. Such a weltanschauung solidified precarious territorial borders and encouraged Britons to see themselves as a distinct and gifted people who constantly battled for the recovery of lost rights.[8] The growth of industry and commerce enriched this self-image of Britain as an important global force. As if to stress this national claim still further, "Britain" and "Great Britain" had superseded "England" as the names of the nation.[9]

In contrast to a united Protestant nation (that inevitably contained outsiders) was Anglo-French difference. A major commercial and imperial rival for centuries, France had long kindled cross-channel anxieties. France and French people were equated with Roman Catholicism, indolence, fashion, and immorality.[10]

By the 1780s, when the Bristol milkwoman Ann Yearsley's first volume of poems was published, a national culture that manifested some of these assumed characteristics had gradually fashioned itself. Britain was configured as a country that had cherished liberties since Alfred the Great: the people's "free-born" status was unique; the right to self-determination was an English right. A mythology about an ancient democratic social contract had come into being and was playing itself out, although its origins had largely been inherited from the seventeenth century.[11]

Yearsley displays allied concerns about class and gender that echo those of her countrywomen from the provinces, Mary Collier and Mary Scott. Both personal and political considerations explain Yearsley's shift from the more explicitly gynocentric orientation of Collier and Scott. Like Mary Collier, Ann Yearsley was dependent on outside aid for access to publishers. As a case in point, an irreversible dispute with her patron, Hannah More, affected her reputation and, specifically, the publication of her second volume of poems. Yearsley's shadowy presence on the literary scene proved that access to successful publication depended on economics as much as talent—especially for a laboring woman like herself.

Similar factors also clarify Yearsley's francophilic framework in *Earl Goodwin: A Play*, staged at the outbreak of the French Revolution. But by 1793, the milkwoman-poet had introduced gallophobic concerns that stemmed from her son's—as well as England's—military involvement in the revolutionary war. Just as Catholics disrupted the nation from within, so the French disrupted externally. Particularly during this military epoch, Englishness was encoded as the antithesis of Roman Catholicism, foreign aggression, and abso-

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lutism. Britons comprised a tough nation—they thought—that exercised sovereign power but within prescribed limits.[12] "Cultural [self-] realization was well under way."[13] The imperial conquest of others and French rivalry generated a relatively fluid national identity.

Ann Yearsley's recently discovered poems in the Bristol Public Library further complicate her radical politics. They highlight her sympathy for Thomas Chatterton's suicide, her desire for domestic order and global harmony. Most of all, they suggest how deeply discomfited she felt about her public representation and confirm that her commitment to patriotism was equivocal at best.

Concurrently with Yearsley, Janet Little uses her volume of poems, published in 1792, to protect a precarious social status and an oppositional nationalist position as a Scottish dairywoman-poet. In a class identification with Mary Collier and Ann Yearsley, Little applauds the talents of her celebrated compatriot, ploughman-poet Robert Burns, just as Mary Collier extols thresher-poet Stephen Duck. Resembling Collier's attitude toward Duck, Little's political as well as personal sentiments toward Burns also destabilize her text. Wary about attacking Scotland's new standard-bearer, she sides with Burns against the ruling elite but censures his free relations with women. The trio of Collier, Yearsley, and Little exemplifies positive laboring-class values and a sense of cultural autonomy.

Yet inevitably, Little's discourse about national identity constitutes itself slightly differently. As a Scottish poet and dairywoman, Little composes an arresting volume of poems that doubles as a gendered, anticolonial testimonial while it subtly disdains class superiors. Her poems, moreover, substantially interact with Robert Burns's life and text. Where Collier, Yearsley, and Scott uphold English liberty as a paramount tenet, Janet Little applauds Scotland and its defiant warriors.

By pondering why the English literati envy Burns, she indirectly challenges a recently constructed English nationalist formulation, avowedly cherished by England's prominent writers. That is to say, she highlights the separation of English and Scottish culture, insisting that Englishness and Scottishness are contested and competing terrains. She thwarts a collective though unconscious English presentation of British culture as homogeneous. Scottish culture, she suggests, requires a distinctly marked definition.

Simultaneously, she quietly demurs at Burns's treatment of women, her sensitivity to gender a notable feature of many poems. Occupying a recognizably Scottish patriotic position, she straddles two discrete and critical antagonisms—Britain versus the world and

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England versus Scotland. She speaks from plural vantage points that frequently conflict and overlap.

In that sense, Janet Little is a split subject; she signs an angry working-class woman and, just as importantly, a prideful Scotswoman. Introducing new tropes and figures of alterity that challenge received tenets, she renders a muted belligerent intervention in the national politic while maintaining allegiance to class and gender. Janet Little undermines a subtle praxis of cultural domination, upholding the rights of marginalized communities.

Put another way, despite class and gender alliances, Little plays out a fraught colonial relationship with the trio of English poets, Mary Collier, Mary Scott, and Ann Yearsley. Mapping new contours, she represents and introduces discontinuity, obliquely canceling a popular unitary discourse about Britishness.

Oppositional readings of this quartet of poets, then, sharpens the construction of comparative ethnic identities and the political intricacy of the class and gender axis. Collier, Yearsley, and Little constitute an emerging gendered tradition of working-class poets committed to new formulations of patriotism and national identity, raising significant issues of class and gender as part of that identity. Mary Scott complements and consolidates the trio's innovative discourse by eulogizing middle-class Englishwomen and thereby broadening cultural boundaries. Poetry may be the preferred genre of these poets, but in varied ways they circulate new cultural narratives and their diverse capacities challenge and even block out other, more received chronicles. Eighteenth-century women's poetry, I submit, redefined nation and culture in class and gendered terms.

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