

## York in the late 18<sup>th</sup> early 19<sup>th</sup> Century: Female Creativity, Leisure and Class:

All text and illustrations c Jonathan Brockbank unless otherwise noted.

### Female Space: Jonathan Brockbank

To be creative a woman needed leisure, motivation and space. Virginia Woolf's 1929 essay 'A Room of One's Own' concentrates on the problem of space. Jane Austen's novels and her life engage this problem before it was defined. She fitted her writing into the life of the family she grew up in, amidst her domestic duties. Though women are expected to occupy domestic space, they are not expected to own that space. Even Lady Susan, who pursues her sexual and material interests with a directness unusual amongst Austen's characters, depends on friends and family to provide or recommend lodging for her.

The York artist Mary Ellen Best (1809-1891) has points of overlap with Jane Austen. Her subjects are domestic; like Austen she makes no attempts to imagine male experiences she is unfamiliar with; but they are depicted lovingly rather than with a detached wit. Like Austen, especially the late Austen of *Sanditon*, Best has a strong vein of *reportage*, unlike Austen she had an interest in lifestyles outside her class, recording many scenes of Yorkshire cottage life and rural industry. She tempered her domesticity with continental travel, recording scenes of Germany. Where Austen shows no sentimentality about children and babies, Best anticipated the middle-class Victorian creation of childhood as a time of innocence and wonder. These qualities are displayed by *Frederic Stansfield Herries* in the on-line gallery. Perhaps the most significant picture of this collection is 'the Artist in her Painting Room'; she did have a room of her own.

<http://www.wikigallery.org/wiki/artist35158/Mary-Ellen-Best/page-1>

In the early years of her life she exhibited and sold her watercolours through dealers. A *Still Life* of 1829 won a silver medal from the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce. (*The World of Mary Ellen Best*, Caroline Davidson, London, Chatto & Windus, 1985, 56) She gave up public exhibiting not through lack of success but through inheriting a fortune and later marrying. (Davidson, 56 et seq., 104 et. seq.) Nevertheless, her work was forgotten by the end of the century and not rediscovered until the 1980s.

### The Brontes

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* paints but Charlotte is determined that her heroine's pictures should not be mistaken for mere 'accomplishments'. From the eighteenth to the nineteenth century women of a privileged backgrounds were mostly trained in accomplishments rather than given the education of their brothers. These could be pejoratively considered crafts not arts and included needlework, embroidery, piano playing and painting in watercolours. George Eliot is alert to the feminist implications. In *Mill on the Floss* Maggie Tulliver is envious of the education given to her brother Tom, an education that means little to him. In *Daniel Deronda* Gwendolen Harleth is made painfully aware by a family financial crisis that none of her 'accomplishments' can earn her a living.

Best's insistence that her art was as marketable as a man's represents one facet of feminist struggle, Charlotte's Jane shows another. Where Best's subject matter could be dismissed by a hostile male viewer as merely domestic, Jane shows women's capacity to create imaginative space. Charlotte is not content with the realism of Best and Austen, instead she allows a strong visionary strain to surface in *Jane Eyre*. Jane's pictures include such 'unfeminine' subjects such as 'a drowned corpse glanced through sea water' and 'the pinnacle of an iceberg piercing a polar winter,' (ed Q. D. Leavis, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1966 [1847] p157). It is more than coincidence that these paintings sound like those of Jonathan Martin. Martin was a painter admired by all the Brontes, who owned engravings of his work. Martin specialised in vast paintings of apocalyptic visionary scenes, usually of divine punishment, such as the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah or the Flood.

There is a comprehensive site devoted to John Martin at

<http://www.wojm.org.uk>

; reproductions of his pictures are filed under 'works'. There is a useful article on him on a Guardian website:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2011/mar/04/artist-john-martin-comeback>

John Martin's brother Jonathan has a disastrously direct connection with York. On February 2<sup>nd</sup> 1829, after escaping from a private asylum, Jonathan attempted to burn down the Minster believing it was too High Church and Papist. The fire destroyed the 15<sup>th</sup> century carvings in the choir. He was arrested and put back into an asylum. A brief discussion of his case and an example of his self-taught art is halfway down the Bethlehem Royal Hospital archives; the original 'Bedlam'.

[http://www.bethlehemheritage.org.uk/gallery\\_collection.asp](http://www.bethlehemheritage.org.uk/gallery_collection.asp)

Above all else Jane resents dependence, especially depending on others for housing and shelter. Rather than become Rochester's mistress she walks out to risk death on the moors (*Jane Eyre*, Cps 27,28). The most powerful scene of the 2011 film showed Jane curled in a foetal position, battered by sleet, emphasising the nearly fatal cost of her drive for independence. (*Jane Eyre*, directed by Cary Fukunaga, starring Mia Wasikowska and Michael Fassbender, 2011). A trailer can be viewed from

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1229822/>

The importance of imaginative space for the Brontes is best demonstrated by an incident in 1845. The Brontes took advantage of the new social mobility provided by the train to take holidays. Returning by train from York, Emily and Anne pretended they were Royalists fleeing a Republican rebellion in their imaginary land of Gondar. (*The Brontes*, Juliet Barker, London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1994, p450-1). They weren't teenagers; Emily was 27 and Anne 25. The last trip of Anne's life was by railway to Scarborough in the hope the sea air would alleviate the symptoms of TB. She died there and her grave is on a headland below Scarborough Castle.



*Anne Brontë's grave with the recent commemorative slab (2011)*

### **Leisure 1: Fashionable society**

**Austen's heroines find private space in an unlikely area; the public dance. A longways dance allowed a couple the chance to dance and talk uninterrupted by a chaperone. Most of Austen's balls are private affairs but *Northanger Abbey* opens in the public dance rooms of Bath. York's equivalent, The Assembly Rooms were built in 1730-36. By the 1760s the place was little used and a brief**

revival from 1770-80 was followed by a slump. (*A History of Yorkshire: The City of York* ed P. M. Tillot, London, Oxford University Press, 1961, 531b, 532a)



*The Assembly Rooms, Blake Street, York*

The De Gray Rooms were founded in 1842 principally as the officers' mess of the Yorkshire Hussars but the rooms were also used for public entertainments including concerts and balls, to fill the gap left by the assembly rooms. (*A History of Yorkshire: The City of York* 533b) A magnet for the Lydia Bennets of York?



*The De Gray Rooms, St Leonard's Place, York*

For more about Leisure and Literacy see 'Woolf Literacy'

### **Leisure 2: Rural Labourers**

**Male rural labourers let alone their wives and daughters had little leisure time. They had few holidays and the ones they had coincided with the quite times of the agrarian year. This work was often idealised by painters of the time,**

especially as the century developed accompanied by the spread of industry and urbanisation. For John Linnell harvest work could be seen as a religious experience and a covenant with God. His picture *The Harvest Cradle* is now in the collection of York Art Gallery. There are elements of realism in the picture; the woman in the foreground has brought along her children, as Tess does in Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, but the overall impression is idealistic. The bodies of men and women alike are bent reverently over their work as they make bread by the sweat of their brows as the Bible proclaimed. The wheat seems extraordinarily tall even for 19<sup>th</sup> century strains.

[http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f1/John\\_Linnell\\_-\\_The\\_Harvest\\_Cradle.JPG](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f1/John_Linnell_-_The_Harvest_Cradle.JPG)

The painter Peter De Wint painted more secular but equally optimistic pictures of the countryside and its workers. John Clare, who admired him, praised his 'sunny truth of nature' ('To Dewint', *The Rural Muse*, ed R K R Thornton, Ashington, Carcanet New Press, 1882), p119, lns7/8). The Tate website has a good selection:

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/peter-de-wint-148>

Mary Collier does not represent work in the fields alongside children as blessed. Provoked by Duck's condescending line in 'The Thresher's Labour': 'Ah were their Hands so active as their tongues,' (*Poems on Several Occasions*), section ten of 'The Woman's Labour' makes articulately clear that women face a life of double drudgery; labour in the fields alongside men, labour for men and families at home. The poem thanks no one, least of all God, for the lives led by the wives and daughters of agricultural labourers.

Stephen Duck, who rose from a ploughboy to a reverend, might have come to share Linnell's perspectives but not whilst he was actually working. 'The Thresher's Labour' translates the work of the rural classes into neo-classical Augustan couplets. The god of this world is 'Ceres' and the labourers' tools are 'CYCLOP'S Hammer'. This trope neatly avoids more radical consideration of the difference between the lives of the owners and the workers. His *Poems on Several Occasions* at

<http://books.google.de/books?id=SyvdUzWST1EC&printsec=frontcover&dq=p+o+e+m+s+o+n+s+e+v+e+r+a+l+o+c+c+a+s+i+o+n+s+d+u+c+k#v=onepage&q=p+o+e+m+s+%20o+n+%20s+e+v+e+r+a+l+%20o+c+c+a+s+i+o+n+s+%20d+u+c+k&f=false>

opens with thanks to the patrons who have spared him from the world of 'Sweat', 'Dust' and 'suffocating Smoke' (*Poems* p7). His Dedication to Queen Anne compares her to God: 'like the supreme Being, who continually supports the meanest Creature, which his Goodness had produced,' (*Poems* vi). His Preface thanks 'those worthy Persons who first took Notice of me in the midst of Poverty and Labour,' (*Poems* pxiv). Duck's writings and life reveal no challenge to the idea of a social hierarchy that would have been familiar to Malory; humans arranged in ranks beneath God and monarch.



*Charcoal Burner from a photograph by Sir Benjamin Stone c.1890s. Sir Benjamin Stone was a Tory MP who mostly photographed the picturesque poor, charities and other survivals of Olde Englande. From the 18<sup>th</sup> century foreign tourists frequently commented on that the British rural labourers had no national dress but simply wore poorer versions of what the richer classes did.*

The nearest equivalent to Stephen Duck in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was John Clare (1793-1864). Marketed as a 'peasant poet' he was content to allow patrons to change his spelling and grammar into socially acceptable forms. Later in his career he was able to do this himself. His 1835 collection *The Rural Muse* transformed his experience of life on the land into a pastoral guise, through invocations of classical muses and lyres. Simultaneously he wrote many blunt, plain, anti-idealistic sonnets about country life and work from 1832 to 1837. Many were not published until 1995 when they were collected as *The Northborough Sonnets* and printed in Clare's original spelling and grammar. These poems make clear how poverty-stricken and deprived the lives of rural workers were. In this world an old bible is only useful for sharpening a razor:

& the old bible book is taen away

To serve for razor straps another day.

(*John Clare: Northborough Sonnets*, ed Eric Robinson, David Powell and P.M.S. Dawson, Ashington, Carcanet Press, 1995, p68a, lns13-14).

A boy rides out wrapped in sacks to keep off the weather:

Lapt up in sacks to shun the rain & wind

& shoes thick clouted with the sticking soil

(*Northborough Sonnets*, p71b, lns 1-2).

He was more ambiguous than Duck about the culture of the class he came from. Though his communications about rural customs in the introduction to *The Village Minstrel* are couched in expectedly humble terms: 'the simple customs of Labours harvest holidays' he was a keen collector of traditional songs and a fiddle-player, who learned his fiddling from gipsies. (*John Clare and the Folk Tradition*, George Deacon, London, Sinclair Browne, 1983, p290)

Though by the 18<sup>th</sup> century many rural labourers could read and write to some extent, often with spellings or grammar dominated by local dialects, the culture they shared was predominately oral. Many of the songs that circulated amongst them came from 'Broadside ballads', cheap sheets of song-words sold at fairs and on the streets, others may be local compositions but they were often passed on orally. Men would sing in pubs, women would sing during social work, both sexes might sing to their family and so the song would pass into oral transmission. Judging from the songs they sang, the men that actually did the harvesting were proud of the incessant work they accomplished during the seasonal round but not spiritually uplifted as the 'north country song' 'The Painful Plough' shows:

Come all you jolly ploughmen of courage stout and bold,

That labour all the winter in the stormy winds and cold,



## To clothe the fields with plenty

The song 'Father's Acre' emphasised the travail of season work by comically diminishing it; in the song's world ploughing is accomplished by not horse or oxen and plough but 'twae [two] tom cats']

(*Songs of the Ridings: The Yorkshire Musical Museum*, collected by Mary and Nigel Hudleston, Scarborough, G.A. Pindar, 2001, 7)

### *'Father's Acre' non-dialect version*

1] My father had 'bout an acre of land

*Chorus:* Sing ay, sing oh, sing ivy,

And ploughed it with two tom cats,

*Chorus:* And a bunch of green holly and ivy-o

Sing aye for the bonny green ivy-o!

2] He harried it with his big toe nail,

*Chorus:*

And rolled it down with a treacle tin,

*Chorus:*

3] He sewed it down with carraway seeds,

*Chorus:*

And opened it out with a razor blade,

*Chorus:*

4] He mowed it with his pocket knife,

*Chorus:*

And led it home with a pissmire [ant] rig,

*Chorus:*

5] He threshed it with the leg of a louse,

*Chorus:*

And led it to the mill on a field mouse rig,

*Chorus:*

6] And the mouse came home with a broken rig,

*Chorus:*

If you want nay more you can sing it yourself,

*Chorus:*

'Jolly Fellows That Follow The Plough', is not as 'jolly' as the title and some of the lines would imply. It features a ploughboy standing up to the farmer's complaints that not enough work has been done.

I stepped up to him and I made this reply  
'We've all ploughed an acre you tell a damned lie.

We've all ploughed an acre, I'll swear and I'll vow,  
We're all jolly fellows that follow the plough.'

(*Songs of the Ridings*, p26).

Duck stages a similar confrontation on page 11 of *Poems* but his labourers remain mute. Possibly because it allows rural workers a voice of protest it was a popular song; like 'Father's Acre' this song was known all through England. Cecil Sharp, the late 19<sup>th</sup> century song collector, reckoned it was the most widespread traditional song in circulation; unlike 'Father's Acre' the words remain more or less the same in all parts of the country. The version collected from Fred Jordan in Cheshire is more or less the same as the version Hudleston collected from a Mr Blythe of Richmond, North Yorkshire. See

<http://www.informatik.uni-hamburg.de/~zierke/watersons/songs/theploughboy.html>

for lyrics and Sharp's comment.

A short collection of some of the more aggressive songs of rural life, accompanied by photographs and contemporary accounts is found in *The Painful Plough*, ed Roy Palmer, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1973). The second verse of 'The Painful Plough' sees work as part of god's curse on mankind, not a reflection of god's bounty:

For Adam was a ploughman when ploughing first begun,  
The next that did succeed him was Cain the eldest son;  
Some of the generation the calling now pursue,  
That bread may not be wanting remains the painful plough.

Some of this culture descended from the more privileged social classes, especially the social dances. The dance 'Black Joak' that was published in John Walsh's 1731 *The Compleat Country Dancing-Master* was collected in Goathland on the North York Moors in the 1950s (*Community Dance Manuel 6*, ed Jack Hamilton, London, English Folk Dance and Song society, 1964, Pat Shaw p 6 dance 6). It is a dance Austen might have done. The tune was played by Peter Beresford in Buckden in the Pennines in the 1960s attached to a different dance.

*Black Joke Dance instructions*

Tune: Black Joke

Form: Sicilian Circle, couple facing couple

Step: Skip

A1. Clap on first beat and circle of four to the left.

A2. Clap on first beat and circle of four to the right.

B.1. Bars 1-2: Partners clap: together, right, together left.

Bars 3-4: Opposites clap: together, right, together left. (Swiftly)

Bars 5-6: Ladies cross over then the men cross over.

Bars 7-8: Ladies cross back then the men cross back. (Swiftly)

Bars 9-10: Everyone walks forward, passing right shoulders with opposite to meet next couple in the circle.

**There is another category of dancing that did not come from the upper classes. This is ritual dancing, so called because it was generally done at a set time of the year during agricultural holidays. Women were not often involved because, as Mary Collier would have pointed out, holidays for the men often meant increased work for the women. In Yorkshire the peak time was the twelve days of Christmas, especially Boxing Day. The type of dancing found in a large curve moving from south Yorkshire through York to the North York Moors was long-sword dancing. East of the Wolds and just south of the Humber it was the so-called 'Yorkshire Morris'.**

**The Yorkshire Morris disappeared by the turn of the century, leaving behind vague description of men with blackened faces dancing heys (figure eights) and country dance figures and an enigmatic photograph of veiled performers walking out in Carlton, near Selby in 1910.**



**Yorkshire morris dancer. Music for the dance was provided by 6 hole whistle (flageolet) and drum.**

**The Yorkshire Longsword dance has survived through both revival and traditional sides. Teams of six or eight men hold wooden or metal blunt 'swords' about a metre long. They go through sets of weaving figures before they form**

and display the 'lock', a six or eight pointed star. Traditional teams still dancing include Flamborough, Goathland, Grenoside and Handsworth.



**The Clash: Goathland adult team dancing in the Goathland pub fictionalised as 'The Aidsfield Arms' in ITV's *Heartbeat* during a sword-dancing festival August Bank-Holiday, 2010, despite a low ceiling and lower light fitting... Their swords stay on the wall of the pub throughout the year**



**The Lock 1] Goathland adult team: 6 metal swords at Beck Hole just outside Goathland, August Bank-Holiday, 2010. Note in the background a] a Goathland children's team b] the car held up on the bridge behind.**



**The Lock 2: 8 Wooden Swords: A Flamborough Junior Team dancing at Beck Hole, August Bank Holiday 2010. In the background is the Flamborough adult team.**

There were mumming plays as well. These are simple dramas based round the combat between two protagonists, one of whom dies but is resurrected by a doctor. Eustacia takes part in a Mummers' Play in Hardy's *Return of the Native* (Chapters IV and V). There were two basic types in Yorkshire; the Pace-Egg play that comes out at Easter and survives in Midgely see [http://folkopedia.efdss.org/Midgley Pace Egg](http://folkopedia.efdss.org/Midgley_Pace_Egg) and the Blew Stot play performed in the Vale of York around Christmas, that has been revived. 'Blew Stot' is a corruption of 'Plough Stot' i.e. 'Plough boy'. The play was made illegal as a form of begging from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 1930s, so performers who took part, often blacked their faces to avoid being recognised. In later years some regarded their participation as a shameful sign of youthful poverty and refused to give any information to collectors.



**The Blew Stots of Yorkshire, derived from modern revivals by the Knaresborough Mummers. From left to right Beelzebub, Old Roger, King William.**

**John Clare was familiar with this type of play; confusingly he refers to it as ‘The Mor[r]is Dance’. The text he recorded from Helpston is included in Deacon (293-4).**

### **The York Assizes**

*Sanditon* is unusual amongst Jane Austen’s novels in that it refers directly to current events. Mr Parker has named his house ‘Trafalgar’ but regrets it: ‘which, by the bye, I almost wish I had not named Trafalgar – for Waterloo is more the thing now.’ (*Sandition* in *Northanger Abbey*, ed John Davie/Terry Castle, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990, 336.) One of the last pages of the book mentions ‘the family of the poor Man who was hung last assizes at York’ (*Sandition*, 376)

**If Jane Austen had been reading accounts of hangings in York up to 1815 she would have come across the executions of John James for killing a sheriff’s officer, Robert Turner, for killing Margaret Appleby (both March 31, 1814) and Joseph Blackburn for fraud (8 April 1815). Significantly *Sanditon* does not mention the mass executions in the previous year of men associated with Luddite attacks on factories and factory owners. On January 8<sup>th</sup> 1813 George Mellor, William Thorpe and Thomas Smith were hanged for assassinating the mill-owner William Horsfall; on January 16<sup>th</sup> 14 men were hanged from two beams for attacking Rawfold’s Mill. (*Hanged in York*, Stephen Wade, Stroud, The History Press, 2008, 59-63). Wade calls the mill ‘Cartwright’s Mill’ after the owner but most historians prefer ‘Rawfold’s Mill’. These executions were public.**





**Gallows Site, behind York County court: In 1801 the last execution was carried out on the Knavesmire (Wade, 43-4) and the site was moved to the back of York Crown Court, facing St George's Field. This would have allowed prisoners to be moved swiftly from the prison that occupied the grounds of York Castle without travelling a mile to Knavesmire through disorderly crowds.**

#### **The Bronte connection**

**The Luddites, who marched to attack Rawfold's Mill on the night of April 11<sup>th</sup> 1812, passed the church of Hartshead. The curate of that church was Patrick Bronte, as yet unmarried. He was so alarmed by this experience that he kept a loaded pistol by his bedside for the rest of his life, discharging it out of the window every morning. Emily was fascinated by this and she learned to shoot. (*The Brontes*, Brian Wilks, London, Hamlyn, 19-200)**

**Charlotte made the attack on Rawfold's Mill the central incident of her 1849 novel *Shirley* but *Jane Eyre* refers to the troubles of the north more obliquely. At the end of Chapter 31 Miss Oliver remarks: 'The -th regiment are stationed there since the riots;' (*Jane Eyre*, 390). In 1840 the government had deployed an army larger than that used in the Peninsular Campaigns of 1812 to suppress violent industrial protests in the north. Sir Charles Napier, in charge of the army, said the north contained 'every element of a ferocious civil war.'**