Communal Lyricisms And The Lyricization Of English Poetry, 1650–1790

Christopher Chan
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Abstract
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To these ends, each chapter of the dissertation charts the production and reception of a popular yet relatively underrepresented eighteenth-century verse genre, as practiced by poets who wrote extensively on contemporary sociocultural matters. Chapter 1 reads the retreat poems of Abraham Cowley and Anne Finch as strategic negotiations of their “contemn’d retreats” from court life following the Restoration and the 1688 Revolution, respectively. Chapter 2 contends that retirement poetry, popularized by John Pomfret's The Choice (1700) and parodied by his successors, became a viable medium for sociopolitical critique amidst the financial and political crises of the early eighteenth century. Chapter 3 demonstrates how the burlesques of John Philips and Alexander Pope, and the verses of laborers like Stephen Duck and Mary Leapor, contemporaneously lyricized poetry by tying its professional fortunes to contrasting models of poverty. Chapter 4 revisits Anne Steele and Susannah Harrison's hymns of affliction as lyrical experiments in collectivizing personal suffering, particularly as they were handled by their posthumous editors. Chapter 5 contends that eighteenth-century literary reviewers lyricized the antislavery poems of William Roscoe, John Jamieson, and James Field Stanfield by eliding their graphic descriptions of the slave trade into concerns about their "poetic" value and technique.

Across these cases, Communal Lyricisms therefore stresses the importance of thinking "communally" between poetic and material practices. To historicize eighteenth-century lyric in this vein is to reaffirm its roots in poets' sustained engagements with sociopolitical, material, and literary concerns alike.

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COMMUNAL LYRICISMS AND THE LYRICIZATION OF ENGLISH POETRY, 1650–1790

Christopher Chan

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C. C.

South River, NJ

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COMMUNAL LYRICISMS AND THE LYRICIZATION OF ENGLISH POETRY,
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INTRODUCTION

Communal Lyricisms retraces the history of English lyric poetry, theory, and interpretation in the long eighteenth century (c. 1650–1790). At its core, the dissertation argues that what we now recognize as lyric emerged from the attitudes and practices that poets, readers, editors, and other institutions exerted on a wider range of verse genres than literary historians of the period have acknowledged. These practices amount to what scholars in the field of historical poetics have termed lyricization: the various processes by which virtually all poetry becomes interpretable as lyric. In this understanding, elements considered to be internal to a given poem—voice, rhythm, technique, feeling—are distinguished from, if not prioritized over, historical matters of circulation and reception. Most consequentially, lyricization has shaped the literary history and pedagogy of poetry itself, to the extent that particular notions of lyric—such as the presumption of an individuated lyric speaker, or the genre’s predilections for solitary, introspective meditation or natural retreat—have conditioned our comprehension of poetry writ large.

This dissertation is not the first scholarly work to historicize lyric, nor is it the first to claim that lyric assumed many of its modern contours over the course of the eighteenth century. Indeed, the project of defining lyric has occupied literary historians and critics for centuries, resulting in overlapping (and occasionally conflicting) models of the poetic mode and its interpretation. Significant critical attention, however, has been drawn to the long eighteenth century as the period during which lyric evolved into a discrete category of poetry. Until recently, literary historians had long argued that the “rise of lyric” during this period occasioned an uneven but decisive shift in poetic
production, from primarily public and socially oriented verse to predominantly private, introspective utterance. This shift in practice and perspective coincided with the rising fortunes of the *ode*: that poetic form whose qualities of consistent imagination and spontaneous utterance, its practitioners and critics argued, best achieved the poet’s aspirations to an idealized poetic spirit. Critical attention to the eighteenth-century ode, encouraged by contemporary commentators and later strengthened by the achievements of Romantic and post-Romantic poets, further cemented its status as the preeminent lyric form of the period. Consequently, literary histories of lyric came to adopt an “odic” perspective on lyric, one which comprehends eighteenth-century lyric poetry as anticipatory of the genre’s later associations with subjective or introspective feeling and, more generally, an interpretive indifference to the concerns of the world “surrounding” the poem.

Such an odic understanding of lyric has proved to be indispensable to lyric studies across historical periods, poetic traditions, and interpretive methodologies. Yet, as this dissertation also argues, this perspective is built upon a limited and conspicuously apolitical literary history which privileges almost exclusive critical attention to the ode over other verse genres (and, by extension, to “intrinsically lyrical” elements over contemporary historical developments). For these reasons, the dissertation departs from the history of the eighteenth-century ode to examine the ways that several important political and social issues—the imaginings of rural retirement and the realities of political

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1 My usage of “ode” here oversimplifies a more complex (and well-traced) history of generic evolution. As I shall note later in the introduction, eighteenth-century definitions of the ode increasingly distinguished between its “greater” and “lesser” forms, with “lyric” becoming closely associated with the ceremonious modulation and ambition of the greater ode. Nevertheless, what is clear is that the evolution of the ode remains the dominant literary-critical heuristic upon which histories of eighteenth-century lyric are written.
retreat; the class and labor politics of the literary marketplace; the gendered representation of individual suffering in hymnody and spiritual discourse; the violence of the transatlantic slave trade—shaped the fortunes of eighteenth-century lyric poetry and interpretation. In turn, it pays special attention to poetic genres whose composition and reception in the eighteenth century and beyond reveal diverse modes of lyric thinking: retirement and retreat poems; laboring-class and burlesque verses on professional poetry; women’s hymns of affliction; and antislavery poetry. As such genres are all but absent from modern lyric studies, the dissertation recovers their histories to theorize the lyric as a historically embedded poetic genre, and to foreground the overlapping conditions that inform poetic practices at any given time and space.

To these ends, Communal Lyricisms reassesses lyric as a key literary mode for poets who wrote at the relative margins of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literary culture, and it draws attention to the ways that various media and institutions participated in the lyricization of English poetry of the period. Its guiding principle is that lyric criticism—the evaluation of a poem’s verse technique, and of its subsequent ability to evoke strong feeling or to achieve an idealized imaginative spirit—is inseparable from the writing of lyric history (if not literary history more broadly). In other words, what counts as “lyric” determines how its history is written and vice versa, with discrete consequences upon the ways we choose to read, and of course historicize, lyric. Hence my contention that any understanding of lyric poetry and interpretation must account for the cultural and material flows between poems and the environments which have shaped their reception. Such exchanges likewise underpin the usage of “communal” in my dissertation title, as I seek not only to highlight the communities of poets, readers, and
interlocutors who produced the poems I examine, but also to open up the field of lyric studies onto a range of practices and genres which lie beyond modern accounts of the period. By examining these flows through the lens of eighteenth-century Britain, the dissertation stresses both the specific qualities of eighteenth-century lyric poetry and interpretation, and the continuities between the period’s practices and those of other eras.

All of this is to say once more that the history of eighteenth-century lyric, for all of its poetic predilections and consequent invitations toward immanent modes of reading and appreciation, demands our reassessment of its assumptions, terms, and source materials. To write a history of eighteenth-century lyric in this communal vein, then, is to write a capacious and ultimately uneven history of the eighteenth century itself. It is also a reminder that the modes of empathy which lyric poetry cultivates are tied as intimately to its conditions of production and reception, as they are to its literary qualities and aspirations.

I. Defining “Lyric”: Genre, Mode, Heuristic

Before considering the specific fortunes of lyric in eighteenth-century Britain, it is worth examining what “lyric” itself has meant to poets, readers, and theorists across English literary history. Indeed, lyric has always been a slippery yet productive term for its practitioners and critics alike. As Virginia Jackson astutely notes, “a persistent confusion” in terminology and methodology “may be the best way to define our current sense of the lyric,” with such confusion proving to be “enormously generative for both poets and critics.”² The term’s most direct etymological origins lie in the ancient Greek

lyre, the string instrument used to accompany song and musical performance. Yet this etymological link is inevitably complicated by the diverse modes of accompaniment in classical Greek performances, and by the distinctions (not always applied consistently) that Greek commentators made between poetic modes and performances. Moreover, it connotes an anachronistic usage: as Glenn Most has observed, such varied performances only became lyrics once they were transcribed and collected into print, a process which began in earnest during the Alexandrian Period. This latter association between lyric performance and its printed medium survives in modern usage of the term, as when we sing the lyrics to a song or hymn—and here, one might observe a shift in the term’s denotation from the strings of the lyre to the words as they are articulated by the singer’s (or reader’s) vocal cords. But the term has also come to connote qualities that are putatively emotional rather than strictly musical. For example, we might wax lyrical about subjects which excite us, or we might describe the brushstrokes of a painting as


3 Heather Dubrow notes that the choice of musical instrument, and by extension meter, served as one characteristic mode of division among classical Greek performances: “melic” poetry, for example, was often “associated with stringed instruments” (including, presumably, the lyre), while “iambic and elegiac poems…were accompanied by the flute and allied with distinctive meters.” Still, such distinctions did not prevent the Greeks from using “melic” as a descriptor of “any text other than drama or epic, including political poetry.” Heather Dubrow, The Challenges of Orpheus: Lyric Poetry and Early Modern England (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 40.

4 Glenn W. Most, “Greek Lyric Poets,” in Ancient Writers: Greece and Rome, ed. T. J. Luce, 2 vols (New York: Scribner, 1982), 78–79. W. R. Johnson likewise notes that this project of transcription conditioned Alexandrian scholars (particularly Aristophanes, who arranged Pindar’s corpus into seventeen books organized by verse genre) “to shape theoretical categories” which could properly accommodate an otherwise “bewildering profusion of similar, sometimes nearly identical subgenres.” Virginia Jackson, meanwhile, notes that such collection practices meant “lyric was from its inception a term used to describe a music that could no longer be heard, an idea of poetry characterized by a lost collective experience,” and concomitantly a concept that the earliest “lyric” poets (e.g., Sappho and Pindar) “would not have understood.” W. R. Johnson, The Idea of Lyric: Lyric Modes in Ancient and Modern Poetry (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 84–85; Jackson, “Lyric,” 826.
lyrical if they evoke strong emotions or beauty in our responses. These examples, to say nothing of countless other usages, capture something of lyric’s remarkably diverse connotations, and of the term’s value in describing the aesthetic qualities of objects and practices.

Similarly, “lyric” has long denoted a wide range of poetic concepts, not all of which bear direct connections to music or the lyre. One of the most influential assumptions about lyric is that the term names a recognizable literary genre. As I shall show later in this introduction, literary critics from the late sixteenth century forward gradually claimed the lyric as a literary category on par with other dominant literary modes—epic and drama—such that the term became accepted as one of the fundamental literary genres. This understanding, particularly as it was cultivated among influential twentieth-century critics like Mikhail Bakhtin and Northrop Frye, was attributed to Aristotle’s Poetics (c. 335 BCE), which proposed the division of poetic genres, specifically epic poetry and verse drama, on the basis of the subjects they imitated.\(^5\)

(Comedies, for example, were distinguished by their imitation of “lower” persons and actions; epics, by their imitation of “higher” entities; and tragedies, by their imitation of familiar yet serious subjects.\(^6\) While “lyric” poetry did not feature in Aristotle’s scheme, its absence did not prevent later theorists of the term from accepting it as a discrete

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literary genre and projecting its origins back into the Aristotelian system of genres. This peculiar literary-critical projection, Gérard Genette has argued, amounted to a powerfully “retrospective illusion by which modern (preromantic, romantic, and postromantic) literary theorists blindly project their own contributions onto Aristotle…and thus ‘bury’ their own difference—their own modernity.” To think of the lyric as a fundamental literary genre, in other words, is to transpose a set of modern presumptions about lyric, poetry, and literature more broadly onto a historical model whose concerns were far removed from those of later periods.

Tied into this line of thought is the presumption that lyric poetry conditions and demands a “speaker”: a fictive subject who “speaks” the words of the poem—and whom the reader impersonates in the moment of reading—with the additional presumption that the resulting utterance stems from the speaker’s perceptions or observations (if not those of the poet). Frye, for example, distinguished the lyric from other literary genres by stressing “the concealment of the poet’s audience from the poet” and by observing that “[t]he lyric poet normally pretends to be talking to himself or to someone else….The poet, so to speak, turns his back on his listeners, though he may speak for them, and though they may repeat some of his words after him.” Frye’s speaker-centric model of lyric, in turn, bears the direct influence of John Stuart Mill’s “Thoughts on Poetry and Its

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7 What occasioned this illusion, Genette further argues, was a subtle yet decisive shift in the understanding of Aristotelian mimesis (i.e., the principle of literary imitation) among modern critics. Although Aristotle did not discuss the nature of poems and genres—e.g., the performances of Sappho, Anacreon, Pindar, etc—which would become “lyric,” later theorists adapted his mimetic model with the intention to elevate lyric to the status of a fundamental genre (or what Genette terms an “archigenre”). Genette specifically cites Charles Batteux’s essay “Sur la poésie lyrique” (1755) as paradigmatic of this shift, with Batteux defining lyric poetry as that which chiefly imitates “feelings” rather than actions. Genette, The Architext, 33.

Varieties” (1831), which famously posited that poetry, in contrast to “eloquence,” elicits the private confession of the poet’s feelings:

Poetry and eloquence are both alike the expression of feeling. But if we may be excused the antithesis, we should say that eloquence is heard, poetry is overheard. Eloquence supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet’s utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude, and embodying itself in symbols which are the nearest possible representations of the feeling in the exact shape in which it exists in the poet’s mind.9

Both Frye and Mill’s writings place the greatest emphasis on speech: specifically, on poetry’s capacity to express feeling (whether that of the poet or of an imaginary speaker) in a “solitary” setting, to the extent that “no trace of consciousness that any eyes are upon us must be visible in the work itself.”10 In this understanding, the lyric poem operates according to the principles of the dramatic monologue: while its “solitary” confession is necessarily broken by the presence of an audience (whom the lyric poet can neither disclose nor anticipate), that illusory premise of privacy defines and enables the lyric utterance as spontaneous (since, Frye notes, the poem is presumed to “lie in the poet’s utter unconsciousness of a listener”).

Modern literary anthologies and glossaries have seized upon this dramatic-monologic model to define the lyric poem as a (relatively) short composition in verse, whose language is intended to represent and express the thoughts of the poem’s identifiable “speaker.” Indeed, the delineation of a speaker is most frequently claimed to be the defining characteristic of any “lyric” poem, such that identification of the speaker’s role behind the poetic utterance has become a useful, if not essential

10 Ibid., 1:71.
pedagogical task. To take two prominent examples: the *Norton Anthology of Poetry* perfunctorily observes lyric’s origins in ancient Greek song before noting that “[t]he term is now used for any fairly short poem in the voice of a single speaker, although that speaker may sometimes quote others.”11 M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham’s *Glossary of Literary Terms* also centers its definition of lyric—“any fairly short poem uttered by a single speaker, who expresses a state of mind or a process of perception, thought, and feeling”—on the positional identity of its speaking voice (i.e., how the speaker exists in relation to the utterance).12 What matters most to the lyric based on these definitions, then, is a speaker whose presence both “authorizes” the resulting poem and enables some degree of insight, however limited, into that speaker’s psychology or ideology.13

As various critics have observed, however, the presumption of a speaking presence in lyric is best understood as a modern critical invention.14 Yet I want to suggest that even this anachronism speaks usefully and powerfully to the *anachronizing*—or rather, *detemporalizing*—nature of much lyric criticism itself. This is to say that any

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13 That these latter definitions likewise appear in two of the most widely used texts in undergraduate-level literature courses further suggests the utility and limitations of this pedagogical model.
attempt to define lyric, whether as a discrete genre, an aesthetic quality, or a literary heuristic, rests upon assumptions or principles that universalize poetic practices more broadly. Moreover, as I shall argue later in this introduction, the relationship between narrowly literary definitions of lyric and detemporalized models of “poetry” poses discrete challenges to the study of lyric in any period. If “lyric” simultaneously names a conception of poetry and the “persistent confusion” (to rehearse Jackson’s formulation) of discourses and assumptions behind that conception, then this confusion likewise informs any attempt to historicize lyric, and hence to chart the local and global conditions which inform poetic practices.

II. Lyric Reading and the Limits of Literary History

In these senses, “lyric” has also come to name a heuristic for reading and interpreting poetry *tout court*, and it is this particular usage that I now wish to investigate at greater length. Since the late twentieth century, lyric theorists have questioned not only the utility of the term in modern literary-critical discourse, but also its durability as a term for characterizing poetic practices across literary traditions and periods. Central to this ongoing debate is the idea that “lyric” is (or has become) synonymous with “poetry,” such that concerns which might be peculiarly lyrical—for example, the presence of a speaker, or the presumptive relationship between poetic utterance and psychological-ideological intention—are instead universally “poetic.” In this understanding, “lyric”

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15 We might also go as far, as Mary Poovey does, to suggest that the “lyric” has become synonymous with the “literary,” in so far as the kinds of analysis that lyric reading cultivates—close attention to the poem’s form; the privileging of its organic whole via the study of its parts—amount to the practices and desires of virtually all modern (Anglo-American) literary criticism. Poovey traces a genealogy of literary-critical practice through the metaphor of the “model system,” a concept in biology which universalizes organic processes through the examination of
also names several heuristics to the study of poetry itself, with wide-ranging consequences on its interpretive, thematic, and pedagogical concerns. These heuristics comprise what Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins have termed “lyric reading,” or an interpretive ethos which assimilates virtually all poetry into the critical paradigm of lyric. Lyric reading in this vein therefore prioritizes, among other elements, the utility (and psychology) of a poetic “speaker”; the patterning of sound and stanzaic form; and the coherence of the poem as an aesthetic object, given its interplay of discursive registers.16

Although there are arguably many more modes of lyric reading than there are lyric poems, we can trace several important commonalities in perspective and methodology across modern theoretical models which argue for lyric’s “essential” or “universal” qualities across time and space. In her introduction to *The Art of Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (1997), for example, Helen Vendler insists that lyric poetry must be interpreted as the mimesis of an individuated, fictive mind; and that such interpretation must be centered upon the “language games in which words can participate.”17 Her insistence on language’s representational powers conditions her understanding of an exemplary, paradigmatic organism; and through the tropes of “romantic lyric,” with its own universalization of poetic experience and its aesthetic response. Poovey, “The Model System of Contemporary Literary Criticism,” *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 3 (Spring 2001): 408–38. Although Poovey’s inquiry usefully illuminates the reliance of literary criticism (and all forms of disciplinary inquiry) on organizing metaphors, it also calls into question the use and historicity of “romantic” lyric—which she borrows from Clifford Siskin’s study of Wordsworthian lyric—itself as an organizing term. See also Clifford Siskin, *The Historicity of Romantic Discourse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 3–63.

17 Helen Vendler, introduction to *The Art of Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 11. Also relevant to Vendler’s argument is the reader’s displacement of lyric’s “drama” from the realm of individual agency and into the workings of language: “The true ‘actors’ in lyric are words, not ‘dramatic persons’; and the drama of any lyric is constituted by the successive entrances of new sets of words, or new stylistic arrangements (grammatic, syntactical, phonetic) which are visibly in conflict with previous arrangements used with reference to the ‘same’ situation” (3).
Shakespeare’s distinctively poetic and psychological achievement: his “discover[y of] a newly complex system of expression, unprecedented in the Renaissance lyric, through which he could, accurately and convincingly, represent and enact” the passions of “arousal” and “self-loathing.”\(^\text{18}\) In this regard, Vendler’s argument amounts to a mode of lyric reading wherein the interplay between the poet’s “language games”—and only the workings of these “games” in verse—and the psychological coherence of the *Sonnets*’ speaker must constitute the object of interpretation.

Yet what is equally consequential about Vendler’s lyric reading is that she painstakingly distinguishes its assumptions, objectives, and terms from “the interests of the *sociopsychological critic*, whose aim is less to inquire into the successful carrying-out of a *literary* project than to investigate the representation of gender relations” (italics mine).\(^\text{19}\) Vendler specifically names Eve Sedgwick as her paradigmatic “sociopsychological critic” on the basis that, in Sedgwick’s words, “one most wishes the *Sonnets* were a novel, that readers have most treated it as a novel, and that we are, instead, going to bring the Sonnets’ preoccupation to bear on real novels.”\(^\text{20}\) Sedgwick’s generic distinction (and distribution of readerly desire) between novel and lyric enables Vendler, in turn, to recuperate her own lyric reading from the perceived hermeneutical pitfalls of sociopsychological, political, and material criticism. These pitfalls, Vendler contends, stem precisely from the excessive linguistic energy of the *Sonnets*:

A psychological view of the *Sonnets* (whether psychoanalytically oriented or not) stresses motivation, will, and other characterological features, and above all needs a story on which to hang motivation. The “story” of the *Sonnets* continues to fascinate readers, but lyric is both more and less than

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 11.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 2.

story….A coherent psychological account of the Sonnets is what the Sonnets exist to frustrate. They do not fully reward psychological criticism (or gender criticism, motivated by many of the same characterological aims) any more than they do political criticism. Too much of their activity escapes the large sieves of both psychology and politics, disciplines not much concerned to examine the basic means of lyric: subgenre, structure, syntax, and linguistic play.  

Perhaps the most striking feature of Vendler’s methodological critique is its persistently defensive and divisive rhetoric. On the one hand, she elides the “characterological” aims of psychological, political, and gender criticism into the domain of “story,” or narrative: that genre whose priorities presumably center more upon the hermeneutics than upon the poetics of a poem (or of any given text). On the other hand, Vendler suggests, to read the Sonnets as lyric poems is to recognize their sheer linguistic “activity” and “play”; but such activity is understood to be both immanent to the poems and gratuitous (if not irrelevant) to the “characterologically” oriented reader.

A similar critical perspective on lyric poetry and its interpretation informs Susan Stewart’s Poetry and the Fate of the Senses (2002). Invoking poetry’s lasting appeal to the human senses, Stewart appeals to “intersubjectivity” as the foundational criterion (and desire) of lyric across time and space. In this understanding, poetry both emerges from

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21 Vendler, Shakespeare’s Sonnets, 3.
22 Interestingly, Sedgwick appears to anticipate Vendler’s defensive stance on lyric reading when she observes that “[t]he tradition of the Sonnets is the tradition of reading them plucked from history and, indeed, from factual grounding….To most readers of the sequence, this decontextualization has seemed to provide a license for interpreting the Sonnets as a relatively continuous erotic narrative played out, economically, by the smallest number of characters.” Sedgwick, Between Men, 29. This is not to say, of course, that a reading like Vendler’s falls outside the realm of “factual grounding,” but rather to suggest that for both critics, the Sonnets enable (if not demand) an attention to poetic language which we might characterize as ahistorical (or more properly, transhistorical—in so far as the language, being the most important criterion for interpretation, persists over time). As I shall argue later in this section and throughout the dissertation, this transhistorical stance is critical to the notion and practice of “lyric reading”: it presumes and maintains a careful distinction between the language of the poem and the contexts—sociopolitical, cultural, material—in which it is embedded.
and enables our archive of sensory experience: “Only when poetic metaphors make available to others the experience of the corporeal senses can the corporeal senses truly appear as integral experiences.”23 The role of lyric, in turn, is to mediate the play of the senses in the discursive realms of “poetic metaphor” and first-person speech:

As first-person expression in measured language, lyric poetry lends significant—that is, shared and memorable—form to the inner consciousness that is time itself. The most obvious facts of lyric practice—lyric as first-person expression and lyric as the most musical of literary forms—are the most interesting here. In lyric synaesthesia figuration is accomplished by sound, and spatial interval makes sound intelligible and subject to measure.24

Here, Stewart’s naming of “first-person expression” as one of the “most interesting” criteria of lyric closely resembles Vendler’s emphasis on psychological mimesis. In both cases, lyric poetry works to cultivate intersubjective—and hence universalizing—empathy entirely within the bounds of “measured language” and poetic metaphor. At the same time, “lyric” names the “most obvious” and “most interesting” labor that only poetry can perform to communicate its distinctive truths (i.e., of shared, intersubjective feeling). What lies outside this system—that is, the contexts of the lyric poem—may account for the conditions of such labor, but it cannot explain or reproduce the “figuration” that “lyric synaesthesia” uniquely accomplishes.

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24 Stewart, Senses, 42.
It is for these reasons that Stewart, like Vendler, also cautions against the prioritization of context over poetics, and hence of cultural-materialist interpretation over “poetic” analysis:

I would argue that we do not have to know, nor indeed, could we know, cultural contexts in all of their particularity before we follow the movement of available lyric fragments—such a totality of contextualization is impossible. Nor must we root every detail of such works in specific historical and cultural precedents, for it is one of the cultural tasks of lyric to create the specificity of such contexts—to manifest individual experience in such a way that particulars are intelligible.\textsuperscript{25}

The “lyric fragments” she cites in this passage are the songs of indigenous Pacific Northwest tribes, and these songs’ transcriptions into English by nineteenth-century ethnographers frequently occasioned the loss of important intimate or cultural contexts.\textsuperscript{26} Yet once again, Stewart’s remarks emphasize the \textit{immediacy} of lyric utterance, “its expression of pain through sung means, and its ability to cross the threshold between subjects in the interest of the figuration of a human countenance,” as its most productive feature.\textsuperscript{27} Consequently, the crucial (if not definitive) context of lyric is the moment of one’s reading, and the work of lyric is consistently accomplished when poet and reader meet on the plane of wrought language.

I have tried to show that the distinctions which Vendler and Stewart build between linguistic play and contextual analysis amount to a mode of lyric reading which both resists and encourages resistance to the perceived pressures of historical or ideological criticism. This critical attitude to lyric, I now want to suggest, may best be

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 54.
\textsuperscript{26} Stewart likewise observes a parallel between the fates of these songs and the material fragmentation of Sappho’s lyrics; ibid., 53–54.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 54.
understood as transhistorical, a term with several key ramifications for modern lyric theory. First, transhistorical models of lyric presume that recognizable literary and linguistic conventions—such as first-person speech, introspective utterance, or other discursive play—are analytical objects which persist independently of factors considered to be extrinsic to the lyric poem, such as the medium of the printed surface or the moment of one’s reading. Second, this perspective conditions an understanding of lyric that is removed, and likewise encourages the reader’s removal, from the poem’s historical contexts or ideological investments. Such interpretive displacements are not only possible, but also made desirable once the reader attends to the lyric utterance “itself”: what Vendler describes vis-à-vis Shakespeare’s Sonnets as that “complex system of expression” behind the poem’s mimesis of a breathing, thinking speaker.

The transhistorical model of lyric interpretation that I have summarized above is most fully articulated by Jonathan Culler in his Theory of the Lyric (2015). Elaborating on his previous work on structuralist poetics and lyric address, Culler aims to correct two misleading presumptions in modern lyric theory: first, that all lyric poetry is the “representation of subjective experience”; and second, that lyric poems must be “subordinated to interpretation,” whereby poems are translated into the “target languages” demanded by different schools of literary theory.28 These tendencies, in his view, have posed significant obstacles to a comprehensive theory of lyric. Furthermore, he holds that the popularity of historicist criticism and novel studies since the late

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twentieth century has made that task especially difficult. What needs to be clarified and confirmed, Culler contends, is a conception of lyric utterance which is based on a set of key elements as they persist “across historical periods and radical changes in circumstances of production and transmission.”

To fulfill these ends, Culler proposes a capacious model built upon four working parameters: the poem’s “enunciative apparatus,” or fundamental dependence on sound effects and voicing; its use of deixis to “create the effects of presence”; its “ritualistic” function, in so far as lyric language invites and demands its re-performance across time and space; and its “hyperbolic character,” or that which makes the poem an event worth recording and performing. Though not exhaustive, these vectors nevertheless map a broad critical terrain that orients readers toward a given poem’s language and performance, rather than toward the poem’s circumstances of composition, circulation, and reception. Just as important to this model is that it neither presumes nor demands the “fiction” of an identifiable speaker. Instead, Culler suggests, the lyric poem makes its presence—the situation it enacts—felt through its arrangement of language and the effects of such language on its readers, whether in terms of rhythm, repetition, figuration, or address. When understood in these terms, the lyric poem becomes an immanent utterance whose signs are best registered in the very moment of reading, and which does not need any information other than that provided within the bounded space of the poem.

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31 Ibid., 35.
Culler’s model thus builds upon and responds to the efforts of earlier and contemporary critics who share his investments in both a transhistorical understanding of lyric and a coherent lyric “tradition,” even as their studies invoke different parameters. But while these models may provide convincing explanations of the lyric’s poetic effects on a hypothetical reader, I suggest that their transhistorical perspective—and by extension, their indifference toward or suspicion of historically specific conceptions of lyric—misleadingly endorses a distinction between a poem’s intrinsic elements of voice, address, and rhythm, and its extrinsic circumstances of production and reception. If, as such critics would claim, the lyric poem primes the reader to focus on its immanent structure, then that structure is likewise presumed to be contiguous with (if not separable from) the historical conditions that enabled the utterance. By this logic, any attempt to integrate those conditions into the structure would overwrite or violate the very nature of lyric expression itself: the poem would no longer exist as a temporally unfixed and hence universal utterance, but rather as a textual object circulating in real, non-lyrical time.

Such was Paul de Man’s conclusion, too, when he proposed that the lyric “depends entirely for its existence on the denial of phenomenality as the surest means to recover what it denies.” That is, the lyric poem maintains its status as lyric on the condition that the utterance is imagined and not real, materially circulating speech. Acknowledging that this assumption is always already impossible—“No lyric can be read lyrically nor can the object of a lyrical reading be itself a lyric,” since interpretation demands that the fictional utterance be reconfigured as speech act—de Man advocated a

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32 Of course, many of these efforts were also inspired in part by Culler’s earlier work on the poetics of lyric.
“defensive” hermeneutics intended to preserve the lyric from the narrativizing imperatives of history.  

34 To read the lyric poem as an object embedded in history is to deconstruct the poem’s very status as lyric.

Similarly, transhistorical lyric theory concludes that any attempt to historicize a lyric poem (that is, to sketch its system of intersubjective and sociocultural relations) must necessarily be performed as an act of recovery that, in turn, dislocates the poem’s apparent meaning from the sense of time that it crafts. “In effect,” Culler writes, “the relations between lyric and society are constructed retrospectively, by those who experience the history that these lyrical practices help create and who thus register the effects of these poems or explicitly reconstruct one of the histories to which they contribute.”  

35 A historical interpretation of the lyric poem, in other words, cannot by definition reconstitute or reproduce the poem’s lyrical act; rather, it can only instrumentalize the poem’s use of language, and its resulting effects, with reference to the realm of actual social performance.  

36 Stewart takes this point even further, arguing that historicist approaches to the study of lyric risk producing a falsely teleological consciousness of literary history itself: “the dioramas of context offered by a narrow historicism [of lyric poetry] are the projection of a history necessarily aestheticized in the

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34 Ibid., 254.
35 Culler, Theory, 301.
36 One partial exception that Culler identifies is the possibility of future address through historical gesture, as lyrics may “project a distinction between the immediate historical, communicative situation and the level at which the work operates in its generality of address and its openness to being articulated by readers who will be differently situated (situated in part by the history of these works themselves)….What becomes evident in any discussion of sociopolitical implications of concrete literary works is the unpredictability of their historical efficacy.” Culler, Theory of the Lyric, 301. See also John Michael, “Lyric History: Temporality, Rhetoric, and the Ethics of Poetry,” New Literary History 48, no. 2 (2017): 265–84.
first place by its drive toward closure of explanation."\(^{37}\) She further suggests that the best counter to these false promises is a “general” or dialectical literary history, wherein poetry is understood to articulate “a structure of thought mediating the particular and the general.” Such a history, Stewart argues, would effectively counter the limitations of genre—which, in her view, “implies fixed categories of the literary that…endure temporal change”—and history, which is otherwise constrained by its own “rhetorical convention[s]” and its commitment to “ideology as conditioning the possibility of historical perceptions.”\(^{38}\)

Culler and Stewart are right to suggest that any history of lyric must acknowledge its own temporal dissonance: the gap, in other words, between the “lived experience” of poetic practice and the ever-changing immediacy of literary reception. This dissonance also partially explains their respective anxieties over historicist criticism and contextually specific models of lyric. Nevertheless, what is also clear from their transhistorical theories is that, despite their various points of departure, they recognize the lyric’s persistence in the form of a coherent “tradition” across centuries of historical change. Moreover, this tradition assumes, among other qualities, the essential functions of lyric speech (if not the presence of a lyric speaker); the universality of poetic performance to the human experience; and the vitality of a critical-interpretive ethos that prioritizes the immediate context of one’s reading experience over previous contexts. Together, these elements amount to a brand of lyric reading whose emphasis on the poem’s intrinsically linguistic and discursive play consequently dissociates its extrinsic elements (of composition, circulation, and reception) from any notion of lyric or poetic practice.

\(^{37}\) Stewart, Poetry, 253.  
\(^{38}\) Ibid., 243, 244.
But perhaps the most consequential commonality among these theories of lyric is that they route the history of the literary mode through poems whose qualities affirm a transhistorical (or in Stewart’s terms, “general”) understanding of lyric itself. As I suggested previously, this transhistorical understanding implies and depends upon a markedly dematerialized—and by extension, depoliticized—history of lyric practice, in so far as critics like Vendler, Stewart, and Culler stress the importance of “literary” and linguistic elements over the changing environments in which poems circulate. For these reasons, other scholars have contested the imperatives of transhistorical lyric theory in favor of more historically specific models. Key to these latter approaches is the argument that all poetic practice is conditioned by material and cultural circumstance, meaning that considerations such as poems’ historical reception and their media of circulation are essential to the making of lyric meaning. In this vein, Heather Dubrow notes that in any historically delimited study of lyric (in her case, that of early modern England) “we need not only to round up the usual suspects—explicit statements on it by poets of the era, passages in texts, and so on—but also to examine evidence sometimes neglected, notably the witness of trope and myth.”39 Dubrow’s emphasis on extrinsic “evidence” resonates with Arthur Marotti’s earlier study of print culture and English Renaissance lyric, which stresses the roles that manuscript transmission and printed miscellanies played in institutionalizing lyric as a recognizable poetic mode.40 Attending to the interplay of

39 On the point of “trope and myth,” Dubrow further observes that early modern poets and theorists deployed recurring cultural metaphors—most notably the myth of Orpheus, as well as the tropes of turning (after the Latin *versus*), music, and poesy—to conceptualize lyric poetry and its functions. Dubrow, *The Challenges of Orpheus*, 13, 18–39.
these processes, Marotti suggests, enables a “socioliterary history” of lyric which, unlike the conventions of “traditional literary history,” underscores the material fluidity of early modern poetry (if not the poetry of other periods and traditions).

Similar attention to material culture also informs studies of lyric in later periods, most notably that of the transatlantic nineteenth century. Asking whether “the format of printed works [can] change how we think about…the history of poetic genres,” Meredith McGill turns to Frances Ellen Watkins Harper’s abolitionist poems to argue that their appearances across multiple venues—pamphlets, newspapers, collections, oral performances—complicate any understanding of her poetry as “lyric” (and any concomitant understanding of “poetry” as independent of its printed formats). In their respective studies of Sappho and Emily Dickinson’s verse as they circulated in the period, meanwhile, Yopie Prins and Virginia Jackson argue that what we recognize as modern “lyric”—including our methods of lyric interpretation—emerged from the loss of material context when these women poets’ verses were transcribed into print. Hence the perpetual loss and recovery of Sappho’s “original voice” as it was painstakingly re-articulated by poets and historians from extant physical fragments; or the loss of physical surface when Dickinson’s verses, written variously on napkins, paper scraps, and other media, were formally printed as “poems” in nineteenth- and twentieth-century newspapers and anthologies.

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Such cases, these scholars suggest, amount to the *lyricization* of poetry, assimilating poems which might not otherwise have been recognized as “lyric” into that very category by means of eliding their material conditions into an implicit but powerful interpretive frame. To put this argument differently, reading a poem printed in an anthology—as opposed to one inscribed on a now-fragmented sheet of papyrus or napkin—engenders and encourages the kinds of lyric reading I described earlier. In this case, the “radical of presentation,” the anthology, strips the poetic utterance of its original (or subsequent) formats and so conditions a reading process unfettered by these material contexts.43

While these historicist studies and others stress the material contingencies of lyric production and reception, they also paradoxically (though unintentionally) expose a critical gap in recent efforts to define and historicize the lyric: namely, the poetic mode’s development over the course of the long eighteenth century. Certainly, there has been a long tradition of scholarship on lyric’s evolution in this period—though as I note later in this introduction, such scholarship has been shaped variously by stereotypes of the period and poetic mode alike. Moreover, given that printed texts (and by extension, literate audiences) flourished at an unprecedented pace from the late seventeenth century forward, historians and critics have extensively retraced the relationships between print culture and poetry of the long eighteenth century.44 Yet despite such sustained critical

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521–30, in which both scholars conceptualize lyric reading via the construction and circulation of the female poet as “poetess” during the transatlantic nineteenth century.

43 Here I have adapted Frye’s term, which he uses to stress the immanent rhetorical situation of a literary text (and hence to distinguish between genres), to highlight the interpretive-material situation at hand. Interestingly, Frye himself notes that such material considerations “are not enough in themselves to alter the [terms of] genre.” Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 247.

44 Although he was not the first modern scholar to examine eighteenth-century print culture, Jürgen Habermas influentially argued that print technologies and related political developments—
interest in eighteenth-century poetry and print history, there remains a conspicuous absence of engagement, among scholars of lyric and eighteenth-century literature alike, with the problematics of *lyric* theory and history that I have delineated throughout this section. Indeed, across transhistorical and historicist scholarship on lyric since the late twentieth-century, the implied critical consensus is that eighteenth-century poetry variously departed from the practices of pre-Restoration lyric, anticipated the flourish and institutionalization of lyric in the transatlantic nineteenth century, or somehow fell outside of any modern theoretical models altogether.

Part of the reason for this gap, I want to suggest, is due to several lingering stereotypes of eighteenth-century poetry (as well as stereotypes of lyric, in the manner I described earlier). One of the more durable assumptions in this vein is that Restoration-era and eighteenth-century poetry, having departed from the forms and ideals of courtier and chevalier poets, embraced various genres which one might consider to be “unlyrical” because of their public orientation and deemphasis on personal feeling or love: political

including the lapsing of the 1695 Licensing Act—cultivated a newly “public sphere” wherein literate, bourgeois Britons could mutually recognize and orient themselves against the prevailing government (which could also, in turn, exploit these same technologies to appeal to this new class). Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995).

panegyric, occasional poetry, and satirical and comedic verse, among other categories. These genres fulfilled the “neoclassical” or “Augustan” ambitions of the period’s poetry, in so far as English poets—among whom John Dryden and Alexander Pope have been canonized as exemplars of this tradition—self-consciously and publicly modeled their works after the practices of their classical Greek and Roman forebears, then reinvented them to suit the aspirations and anxieties of their own age. Only by the mid-eighteenth century, when poets had retreated from such public concerns in favor of pursuing literary sensibility and psychological introspection in their verse, could “lyric” subsequently emerge (or rather, reemerge) as that poetic mode best suited to fulfilling poetry’s aesthetic, if not transcendent ideals of “imagination,” “feeling,” and “spirit.”

Unsurprisingly, this latter thesis on eighteenth-century poetry’s increasing disengagement from contemporary politics has been vigorously contested by literary historians who argue that poets of the period were consistently invested in imperial

45 The ostensible predominance of these poetic genres, combined with the comparatively uninspired light verse of the period, led Marshall Brown to quip that “there was no lyric poetry in the eighteenth century worth speaking of.” Brown, “Passion and Love: Anacreontic Song and the Roots of Romantic Lyric,” ELH 66, no. 2 (1999): 373.
46 The most comprehensive and nuanced study to pursue this argument remains Margaret Anne Doody’s The Daring Muse: Augustan Poetry Reconsidered (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985)—although as the title of her study suggests, Doody herself sought to correct earlier misconceptions of Augustan poetry’s stilted and strictured character. On the other hand, Howard Weinbrot debunked the notion that Restoration-era and eighteenth-century writers positively correlated their age to the reign of Augustus Caesar, arguing instead that English literary and philosophical invocations of the classical tradition often criticized its very ideals. Weinbrot, Augustus Caesar in “Augustan” England (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).
Britain’s fortunes and concomitant anxieties. So too have critics challenged, in Clifford Siskin’s terms, “that strange but powerful developmental tale in which, after decades of dry reason, late eighteenth-century Englishmen finally got in touch with their feelings.”

Even so, the question of lyric’s peculiar status in the same period remains entrenched in another stereotype about the poetic mode, with far-reaching consequences on the nature and history of lyric more broadly. Such an interpretive perspective, I shall now argue, may best be described as odic, because it bears the direct influence of a long critical tradition which gradually associated the terms of lyric with the features of the ode (and consequently dissociated these terms from the concerns of other, and often more publicly and politically charged, poems and verse genres). While this process took shape over the course of several centuries, it accelerated during the long eighteenth century, the period in which poets and critics increasingly defined the lyric in terms of the ode. Their definitions—combined with the achievements of romantic poets in the nineteenth century—not only confirmed the ode as the preeminent lyric form of the long eighteenth century, but also consolidated the terms on which lyric itself could be historicized, if not universalized.

To understand how these critical practices culminated in transhistorical lyric theory’s receding engagement with contemporary sociopolitical and material culture, I shall briefly survey the evolution of English lyric criticism from its late sixteenth-century

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origins to its nineteenth-century apogee. What emerges from this phase of literary history is a set of preoccupations that shapes not only the contours of modern lyric, but also the methodological aspirations, functions, and limitations of lyric interpretation itself.

III. The “Rise” of Lyric in English Literary History, c. 1580–1830

For early modern poets and theorists, lyric was closely tied to concerns about its mode of performance, as well as its historical origins and functions. Beginning in the late sixteenth century, English treatises on poetry sought to define the genre of lyric in relation to the practices of classical poets and commentators. Yet these treatises, as Heather Dubrow notes, “are typically inconsistent…notably disagreeing with each other on how narrowly they restrict [lyric] and how firmly they distinguish it from other forms. And they are profoundly ambivalent in their valuations of it, some treatises privileging it over other genres, others denigrating it, and still others sliding between those positions.”

50 William Webbe’s *Discourse of English Poetrie* (1586), for example, identified “Lyric” as one of four poetic meters alongside the “Heroic, Eelegiac, and Iambic,” and commented that “[s]ometime the lyric ryseth aloft, sometime the comicall.”

51 In his *Art of English Poesy* (1589), meanwhile, George Puttenham tied lyric less to the choice of a meter than to the poet’s mode of performance, writing that classical poets “who more delighted to write songs or ballads of pleasure, to be sung with the voice, and to the harp, lute, or cithern, and such other musical instruments…were called melodious poets (*melici*), or by a more common name lyric poets, of which sort was
Pindar, Anacreon, and Callimachus with others among the Greeks, Horace and Catullus among the Latins.” Sir Philip Sidney similarly invoked the lyre as an important basis for lyric in his *Apology for Poetry* (1595), but he also identified it as one of the “most notable” poetic modes—alongside the “heroic…tragic, comic, satiric, iambic, elegiac, [and] pastoral”—and foregrounded its characteristic qualities of virtuous exaltation and judgment:

Is it the lyric that most displeases, who with his tuned lyre and well-accorded voice gives praise, the reward of virtue, to virtuous acts, who gives moral precepts and natural problems, who sometimes raises up his voice to the height of the heavens in singing the lauds of the immortal God? Sidney’s emphasis on the epideictic functions of lyric poetry—namely, its capacity to dispense “praise” and “virtue”—further led him to characterize virtually any kind of poetry which achieved these heights as “lyrical”:  

Other sorts of poetry almost we have none but that lyrical kind of songs and sonnets which, Lord, if he gave us so good minds, how well it might be employed (and with how heavenly fruits both private and public) in singing the praises of the immortal beauty, the immortal goodness of that God who gives us hands to write and wits to conceive, of which we might well want words but never matter, of which we could turn our eyes to nothing but we should ever have new-budding occasions. Interestingly, Sidney presumed such “songs and sonnets” to be “lyrical” on the condition that poets choose to “employ” these forms responsibly: in “singing the praises of

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54 Ibid., 51.
immortal beauty” and, consequently, affirming God’s benevolent design. By invoking the conditional tense in this fashion, Sidney’s rhetorical construction therefore distinguishes between “lower” lyric poems—that is, those “songs and sonnets” which may bear the poet’s “well-tuned lyre and well-accorded voice,” but do not necessarily show evidence of God’s “immortal goodness”—and “higher” lyric modes which fulfill poetry’s most morally exalted ambitions.55

Such conceptions of lyric among sixteenth-century commentators point us toward the issues that would characterize later attempts to define the term’s contours, both during and beyond the long eighteenth century: the interrelated yet differing priorities of “song” and “praise”; the question of lyric poetry’s moral functions; and the (implicit) desire among theorists of poetry to accommodate many poems into a “lyric” mode, even as individual treatises sought to distinguish that mode from other poetic paradigms (e.g., the pastoral, the elegiac). These criteria converged during the eighteenth century into the consensus that the ode form could best capture the lyric’s qualities and, in turn, fulfill the highest possible ambitions for poetry. Part of this consensus, as modern literary historians have traditionally argued, can be attributed to the innovative poetics of Abraham Cowley’s Pindaric odes.56 Attesting that the “Music of [Pindar’s] Numbers…makes [him]...
an excellent Poet” and that “his way and manner of speaking” comprised “the noblest and highest kind of writing in Verse,” Cowley’s prefaces to his *Pindarique Odes* and *Poems* (1656) outline the qualities which distinguished the Pindaric ode as a uniquely lyrical form:

The digressions are many, and sudden, and sometimes long, according to the fashion of all *Lyriques*…The *Figures* are unusual and *bold*, even to *Temeritie*, and such as I durst not have to do withal in any other kinde of *Poetry*: The *Numbers* are various and irregular, and sometimes (especially some of the long ones) seem harsh and uncouth…So that almost all their *Sweetness* and *Numerosity* (which is to be found, if I mistake not, in the roughest, if rightly repeated) lies in a maner [*sic*] wholly at the *Mercy* of the *Reader*.57

Alongside his translations of Pindar’s second Olympic and first Nemean odes, Cowley’s own ode “In Praise of Pindar” rehearses these qualities of “digression,” “boldness,” and “irregularity” using a loosely organized stanzaic form:

So *Pindar* does new *Words* and *Figures* roul
Down his impetuous *Dithyrambique Tide*,
Which in no *Channel* deigns t’abide,
Which neither *Banks* nor *Dikes* control.
Whether th’*Immortal Gods* he sings
In a no less *Immortal strain*,
Or the great Acts of *God descended Kings*,
Who in his Numbers still survive and *Reign*.
Each rich embroidered *Line*,
Which their triumphant *Brows* around,
By his sacred Hand is bound,
Does all their *starry Diadems* outshine. (lines 12–23)

Through his use of uneven rhyme and meter, and his concatenation of relative clauses naming Pindar’s various subjects, Cowley not only celebrates his classical forbear but

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also argues for the value and power of similarly “new Words and Figures” in English verse. It is in the ostensibly uncontrollable yet ambitious and “immortal strain” of Pindar’s “Dithyrambique tide,” the poem argues, that contemporary English poets could achieve an equally exalted and appropriately “lyrical” spirit in their own poetry.

Over the course of the late seventeenth through eighteenth centuries, Cowley’s Pindaric odes spurred numerous imitations of varying quality, as well as critical evaluations of the form’s lyrical qualities. In his “Discourse on the Pindarique Ode,” which he affixed to his own celebratory Ode (1706) to Queen Anne, William Congreve criticized his contemporaries for abusing the genre’s irregular verse form—particularly as it stemmed from Cowley’s example—in their “Bundle of rambling incoherent Thoughts, express’d in a like parcel of irregular Stanza’s, which also consist of such another Complication of disproportion’d, uncertain and perplex’d Verses and Rhimes.”

While Congreve’s remarks on stanzaic form would be rehearsed and remembered by later critics such as William Mason and Samuel Johnson, they did not inaugurate a widespread change in poetic practice so much as they did a renewed interest in the potential and power of the Pindaric ode itself. Increasingly, poets used the form to reflect not only upon its inherent qualities of digression and (ostensible) disorder, but also upon the role of the poet in communicating these qualities to an audience. This shift in perspective, modern literary historians have noted, culminated in the enthusiastic reception during the mid-eighteenth century for the odes of Thomas Gray, William Collins, Joseph and

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58 Despite his criticisms of the “Irregularity of [Cowley’s] Stanza’s,” Congreve nevertheless celebrated his predecessor for “The Beauty of his Verses…the Force of his Figures, and Sublimity of his Stile and Sentiments.” William Congreve, A Pindarique Ode, Humbly Offer’d to the Queen, on the Victorious Progress of Her Majesty’s Arms, under the Conduct of the Duke of Marlborough. To which is prefix’d, A Discourse on the Pindarique Ode (London: J. Tonson, 1706), [i, iv].
Thomas Warton, and their contemporaries. As Ralph Cohen summarizes, these poets’ odes gained recognition as much for their departure from “neoclassical” or “Augustan” standards of poetry—including its didactic, satiric, and moralizing tendencies—as for their use of “Pindaric” verse in order to explore the bounds of the poetic “imagination.”

In the case of Mark Akenside’s ode “On Lyrick Poetry,” such imaginative spirit was to be found in the love songs of Anacreon, the “mournful airs” of Sappho, and most importantly, the English poet’s invocation of a power removed from “the maze where science toils” (line 92) and from his own control:

Nor Theban voice, nor Lesbian lyre
From thee, O muse, do I require,
While my prophetic mind,
Conscious of pow’rs she never knew,
Astonish’d grasps at things beyond her view,
Nor by another’s fate hath felt her own confin’d. (lines 115–20)

Whereas Akenside’s poem trades in the modern lyric poet’s simultaneous praise and departure from classical poetry, Collins’ “Ode on the Poetical Character” communicates his anxieties over the distinctive burdens of the English tradition. Invoking Spenser and Milton as the inheritors of poetry’s “Ecstatic Wonder” (line 43) and “high presuming Hopes” (line 52), Collins records his own pursuit of the ideal “poetic character” in the final stanza: “With many a Vow from Hope’s aspiring Tongue, / My trembling Feet his

60 Cohen, “The Return to the Ode,” 206.
guiding Steps pursue” (lines 70–71). But the poet promptly dashes this hope with the recognition that the seat has already been filled:

In vain—Such Bliss to One alone,
Of all the Sons of Soul was known,
And Heav’n and Fancy, kindred Pow’rs,
Have now o’erturned th’ inspiring Bow’rs,
Or curtain’d close such Scene from ev’ry future View. (lines 72–76)

With its poet’s ostensible consciousness of the “poetical character” as a failed state, Collins’ ode invokes Akenside’s “prophetic mind” to articulate the aspirational rather than realizable condition of lyric poetry. If the ode form demands that both poets invoke literary tradition (whether classically Greek or English) in order to depart from it, then the form likewise encodes the promise—not always realized—of an investment in poetry’s power: that the poet can recognize his own limitations (and likewise register his “astonishment” at this realization) in pursuit of an elevated, idealized imaginative state.

As poets like Akenside and Collins used the ode to elevate the possibilities of lyric poetry, so too did eighteenth-century literary critics cultivate widespread interest in defining lyric through the prism of the ode. Over the course of the eighteenth century, commentators turned regularly to the songs and odes of the classical poets—particularly Pindar, Horace, and Sappho—as exemplars of lyric’s most characteristic features: harmonious measures, modulated and ceremonious expression, evidence of an original poetic “genius,” and the ability of the lyric poet to “transport” its readers into an experience or state of mind. In his Lectures on Poetry (1711–19; trans. 1742), which he delivered in Latin during his tenure as the first Professor of Poetry at Oxford, Joseph Trapp equated the lyric with the classical ode and claimed it to be “the most ancient Kind

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"of Poem," given its origins in "those Festival Hymns which were sung at the Conclusion of Harvest, in Gratitude to the Deity."\(^{63}\) Robert Lowth (who, like Trapp, would also serve as Professor of Poetry from 1741 to 1751) likewise named the ode as the paradigmatic lyric form, noting further that the passionate, refined addresses of classical odes best captured its poetic powers and civic virtues:

The amazing power of Lyric Poetry in directing the passions, in forming the manners, in maintaining civil life, and particularly in exciting and cherishing that generous elevation of sentiment, on which the very existence of public virtue seems to depend, will be sufficiently apparent by only contemplating those monuments of Genius, which Greece has bequeathed to posterity.\(^{64}\)

Lowth then named Pindar and Stesichorus as the preeminent lyric poets of ancient Greece, as he considered their “vehement” and “animated” poetry to be especially suited “to cherish and support that vigour of soul, that generous temper and spirit, which is both the offspring and guardian of Liberty.”\(^{65}\)

Trapp and Lowth’s attentions to classical lyric, combined with the experimental odes of mid-century poets, point to what many modern historians have identified as two contemporaneous developments in the history of eighteenth-century lyric: the splitting of the ode into “greater” and “lesser” variants (with the latter becoming closely associated with popular public modes like ballads, love poems, and epigrams); and the increasing identification of the “greater” ode—as practiced by the likes of Gray, Collins, and others—as the highest available lyric form.\(^{66}\) This twofold argument was regularly

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\(^{65}\) Ibid., 1:23.

\(^{66}\) Here it must be noted that the distinction between “greater” and “lesser” odes—and by extension, between “greater” and “lesser” lyric—is itself a modern critical invention, and one
rehearsed during the second half of the eighteenth century, as essays on the nature and value of modern lyric poetry fixed upon the greater ode. Moreover, the qualities that these literary historians identified in the works of their predecessors would become celebrated as uniquely poetic, thus effectively triangulating poetry, lyric, and the ode into the highest possible literary accomplishment for aspiring English poets. An anonymous contributor to the *British Magazine* summarized these newly entrenched associations in an “Essay upon Lyric Poetry” (1761):

> Lyric poetry, tho’ the most antient, must be allowed to be the most noble and elevated species of poetical composition, as it contains more impassioned sallies, and rapturous enthusiasm, than the tragic, or even the epic itself….That the lyric contains more of the true spirit of poetry than any other species, appears evidently from this circumstance, that no critic has ever been able to lay down rules concerning it; for tho’ taste and judgment may be directed, true poetic fire comes from heaven…

By arguing for the embodiment of “the true spirit of poetry” in lyric, the *British Magazine* essay signals what Norman Maclean identified as an uneven but profound shift in lyric theory, “from a conception of lyric still shaped by the earliest expressions of classical poetry and literary criticism to a view of the lyric as an expression of the poet’s soul.” These generic criteria were confirmed in William Jones’ “Essay on the Arts, Commonly Called Imitative” (1772), which proposed a transhistorical model of poetry rooted in the arts of primitive civilizations—particularly those of classical Greece and the

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ancient Orient—and argued that poetry’s functions were not mimetic but rather naturally expressive. Similarly, William Preston’s “Thoughts on Lyric Poetry” (1788) argued for the literary superiority of lyric and, in turn, staged a spirited defense of the “irregular” odes of Cowley and John Milton as exemplars of the genre. Such arguments culminated in the consensus view, expressed in another anonymously composed “Essay on Lyric Poetry” (1791), that the ode comprised the lyric’s original and preeminent form:

In the Ode, therefore, Poetry retains its first and most antient form; that form, under which the original bards poured forth their enthusiastic strains, praised their Gods and their Heroes, celebrated their victories, and lamented their misfortunes….Hence, the enthusiasm that belongs to it, and the liberties it is allowed to take, beyond any other species of poetry. Hence, that neglect of regularity, those digressions, and that disorder which it is supposed to admit; and which, indeed, most Lyric Poets have not failed sufficiently to exemplify in their practice.

By equating the lyric with the classical ode, and by celebrating qualities as varied as “rapturous enthusiasm,” poetic “spirit,” and formal “digression” and “disorder,” these commentaries consolidated the concerns of earlier theorists like Sidney, Webbe, and Puttenham into a nearly universal model of poetry. In this capacious understanding,

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70 William Preston, “Thoughts on Lyric Poetry,” European Magazine 14 (Sep 1788): 172–75. Preston staged his defense of the irregular ode in response to William Mason’s criticism of the form. In his edition of Thomas Gray’s Poems (1775), Mason remarked that Gray’s seventh ode (“For Music”) suffered in quality because its irregular form—too easily copied, in Mason’s view, by contemporary English poets—“gives the reins to every kind of poetical licentiousness.” William Mason, The Poems of Mr. Gray. To which are Prefixed Memoirs of His Life and Writings, 2 vols. (Dublin: D. Chamberlaine, 1775), 2:235; also quoted in Preston, “Thoughts,” 173. Preston, on the other hand, questioned Mason’s defense of “regular” odes (i.e., those which adopted the classical choric structure of strophe-antistrophe-epode) by noting that “the number of [such] odes is but small, comparatively speaking, and of that number many are faint and weak” (173).
72 Still, the consolidation of such terms as “digression” and “enthusiasm” was not always amenable to historians and theorists of lyric. The Scottish minister John Ogilvie, like Trapp and Lowth before him, traced the origins of lyric to the classical ode; but he warned that in the
poets who sought to marshal the powers of their (and their readers’) imaginations in arresting, ambitious language could stake their claims to being lyric poets, in the tradition of their classical forebears and hence in the name and spirit of “poetry” more broadly. Across these writings, then, we can observe how specific critical attention to the ode defined many of the contours we now associate with the lyric today: its dramatization and cultivation of empathy, often (though not necessarily) through psychological introspection; and its ostensible abstraction from the more worldly concerns of social commerce and politics.

As I shall discuss at greater length in Chapter 5, these odic conceptions of lyric had discrete consequences on the institutional interpretation and reception of various eighteenth-century poems and genres—particularly in cases where poets treated subjects, such as the transatlantic slave trade, that demanded perspectives and approaches beyond the decorum of lyric poetry. Nevertheless, what became clear by the late eighteenth century was that lyric was virtually synonymous with the classical ode, and that poetry in its most imaginative, harmonious, and diverting strains was best poised to qualify as lyrical. Moreover, the elevation of lyric-as-ode to preeminence among poetic genres during the eighteenth century—an elevation which, Virginia Jackson observes, effectively made it “a genre that could transcend genre”—would profoundly shape not only later theories of poetry, but also later attempts to record the history of lyric’s own eighteenth-century rise.73 We can trace something of this logic, for example, in William

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Wordsworth’s 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), which staked the case for a newly “lyrical” language not only by turning to the subjects of “low and rustic life,” but also by mediating these subjects through the logic of introspective feeling and “contemplation.” Most famously, Wordsworth sought to assuage his anxieties over the use of “poetic diction”—that language “which is supposed by many persons [i.e., literary critics, but also sophisticated poets] to be the proper object of poetry,” and which might therefore be understood as the elevated language of the classical ode—by defining poetry as the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” a rhetorical construction suggesting the universalizing nature and power of lyric. If Wordsworth’s implied distinction between the language of lyric criticism and the lyrical language of “low and rustic life” therefore departed from the theoretical models that eighteenth-century critics had propagated, he nevertheless retained his faith in an odic sensibility of lyric: an understanding that poets could achieve their “lyrical” ideals by wedding the language of “repeated experience and regular feelings” with the spirited and introspective “enthusiasm” associated with the ode. Wordsworth explained this process as one that arose organically from his “habits of meditation,” which demanded sustained attention to the poet’s own thoughts in an effort to cultivate empathy between himself and his subjects:

> For our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts…and as by contemplating the relation of these general representatives to each other, we discover what is really important to men, so by the repetition and continuance of this act feelings connected with

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74 Such mediation, Wordsworth also admitted, demanded the purification of “low and rustic” language “from what appear to be its defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust.” William Wordsworth, Preface to *Lyrical Ballads, with Other Poems, in Two Volumes*, 2nd ed. (London: T. N. Longman and O. Rees, 1800), 1:xii.
75 Ibid., 1:xxi, xiv. One notable element of “poetic diction” with which Wordsworth dispenses is personification, on the grounds that his poetry seeks “to imitate, and, as far as possible, to adopt the very language of men, and I do not find that such personifications make any regular or natural part of that language” (1:xxi–xxii).
important subjects will be nourished…[and] the understanding of the
being to whom we address ourselves, if he be in a healthful state of
association, must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, his taste
exalted, and his affections ameliorated.\textsuperscript{76}

Though he does not name the “ode” outright as the literary product of his contemplative
process, Wordsworth nevertheless rehearses some of the features that earlier critics had
attached to the lyric form: an enthusiastic investment in the “spirit” and “feeling” of the
poet, and a movement toward aesthetic “exaltation” in the name of interpersonal (and
universal) understanding.

With its emphases on introspection and the democratization of poetic language
and feeling, Wordsworth’s theory of lyric became characterized by later critics and
historians as “romantic.” On the one hand, the term denotes both that phase of English
literary history which we now take for granted as the “Romantic” period, and the features
which Wordsworth and his contemporaries would invest in the lyric: an effusive, often
introspective subjectivity; and a sustained focus on the internal imagination of the poet at
the ostensible expense of external observation or overt social engagement. On the other
hand, the term “romantic lyric” also suggests that Wordsworth’s specific model
(combined with the critical legacy of the \textit{Lyrical Ballads} themselves) became accepted as
the paradigm for all poetry, or at least all poetry which sought to achieve a lyrical ideal
rooted in universalized feeling and private contemplation.\textsuperscript{77} Such were John Stuart Mill’s

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 1:xiv–xv.

\textsuperscript{77} My usage of “romantic lyric” therefore mirrors Mark Jeffreys’ suggestion that the term
functions primarily as a foil for more historically specific models of lyric. Jeffreys, “Introduction.
Lyric Poetry and the Resistance to History,” in \textit{New Definitions of Lyric: Theory, Technology,
have pressed for a careful reevaluation of the relationship between romantic-era studies and
historical poetics, with “lyric” reemerging as a hotly contested term; see especially the essays in
“Romanticizing Historical Poetics,” ed. Julia S. Carlson, Ewan J. Jones, and D. B. Ruderman,
conclusions when he distinguished “lyric poetry” as being “more eminently and peculiarly poetry than any other,” on the grounds that “it is the poetry most natural to a really poetic temperament, and least capable of being successfully imitated by one not so endowed by nature.”

Yet although Mill rehearsed many of Wordsworth’s tenets—particularly when defined the true poets as “[t]hose who are so constituted, that emotions are the links of association by which their ideas, both sensuous and spiritual, are connected together”—he ironically excluded Wordsworth from his model of lyric poetry. This exclusion, Mill explained, rests on the contrast between the “calm deliberateness” of Wordsworth’s poetry, and the spontaneous, emotional possessiveness which a truly lyrical poet could cultivate in his readers.

To underscore this contrast, Mill praised Percy Bysshe Shelley for achieving (albeit only occasionally) a poetic unity characterized by a relentless, all-consuming imagination:

> It is only when under the overruling influence of some one state of feeling...that he writes as a great poet; unity of feeling being to him the harmonizing principle which a central idea is to minds of another class, and supplying the coherency and consistency which would else have been wanting. Thus it is in many of his smaller, and especially his lyrical poems. They are obviously written to exhale, perhaps to relieve, a state of feeling, or of conception of feeling, almost oppressive from its vividness.

Deploying rhetoric not far removed from Wordsworth’s Preface to *Lyrical Ballads,* Mill’s evaluation of Shelley celebrates a lyric strain which articulates both the “coherency and consistency” of the poet’s vision and its “almost oppressive” nature. (We might also note that the latter quality produces a telling paradox: that Shelley’s lyricism is freest when he is possessed by his own feeling and imagination). Yet this evaluation

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79 Ibid., 1:80.  
80 Ibid., 1:84.  
81 Ibid., 1:86–87.
likewise serves to clarify Mill’s earlier claim that true poetry, and hence lyric poetry, is “overheard”: not because the poet writes in isolation, but rather because the practice of poetry is so possessive as to exclude all other modes of thought. If lyric is meant to be the origin and apotheosis of poetry, then it must absorb (or be seen to absorb) the poet’s full attention, such that the resulting “succession of ideas and images becomes the mere utterance of an emotion.”

Wordsworth and Mill’s writings on poetry thus complete an uneven yet profound transformation in the fortunes of lyric across English literary history. This process began with a concerted (albeit inconsistent) attempt among sixteenth-century critics to position the lyric vis-à-vis its classical origins and moralistic impulses. Then, after gradually evolving during the eighteenth century into a sustained fascination with the mode’s preeminent form (the ode), the critical project of defining lyric concretized in the early nineteenth century into a “romantic” model for poetry’s most exalted possibilities and qualities. Most consequentially, the acceptance of this romantic ideal—or as Virginia Jackson observes, the perceived failure, among transatlantic critics in the nineteenth century, of poets to achieve its terms—would shape later efforts to historicize lyric across historical periods and literary traditions. This tendency, as I argued earlier, had an especially profound effect on the (modern) literary history of eighteenth-century lyric: for if the “romantic” or “Wordsworthian” lyric named the highest literary standards for poetry, then its origins were presumed to lie in the “preromantic” or “protoromantic” strains of eighteenth-century poetry. Such are the underlying assumptions behind

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82 Ibid., 1:89.
83 Jackson cites both Mill’s criticism of Wordsworth and Shelley’s respective poetic deficiencies, and Ralph Waldo Emerson’s lament in “The Poet” (1844) that “I look in vain for the poet I describe.” Jackson, “Lyric,” 831.
Norman Maclean and M. H. Abrams’ conclusion that the lyric “rose” during the eighteenth century according the fortunes of the “greater ode”; behind John Sitter’s thesis that poets ostensibly “retreated from” contemporary society from the mid-century forward; and behind Anne Williams’ attention to the “prophetic strain” as it flourished in the “greater” (i.e., introspective) lyric poems of the eighteenth century.84

By making these observations, I am not by any means accusing these literary historians of willful anachronism; on the contrary, such accounts of eighteenth-century lyric remain useful precisely because they take pains to excavate the period’s own definitions and “strains” of lyric. What I am arguing, however, is that these odic histories have powerfully influenced the debates over lyric reading and lyricization that I have described throughout this introduction. This is to say that the odic historiography of lyric privileges a particular sensibility—one cultivated by the practice and exaltation of a poetic form—over other valuable interpretive perspectives and considerations; and that this mode of literary history likewise encourages a limited and conspicuously apolitical narrative of lyric’s evolution during the long eighteenth century.

For these reasons, this dissertation departs from the history of lyric-as-ode to examine the fortunes of other poetic genres which flourished in the period, and to consider how their fates within and beyond the eighteenth century can help us resolve our present debates over lyric’s history and interpretation. I argue that the production and reception of popular genres such as retirement and retreat poetry, burlesques and satires of poetic professionalism-in-poverty, women’s hymnody, and antislavery verse reveals the embeddedness of lyrical thinking in important sociocultural issues of the period.

84 Maclean, “From Action to Image,” 408; Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp, 85–98; Sitter, Literary Loneliness, 103; Williams, Prophetic Strain.
What did it mean, for example, for poets like Abraham Cowley and Anne Finch to poeticize their retreats from the world of court politics, and specifically during the upheavals of Charles II’s Restoration (1660) and the Revolution of 1688, respectively? How did laborers like Stephen Duck and Mary Leapor act upon their desires to become poets, in a literary culture which consistently satirized the “professional poet” as one trapped in a life of squalid poverty? What can Anne Steele and Susannah Harrison’s hymns of affliction, and the ways in which they modeled the spiritual resolution of doubt, guilt, and physical pain, tell us about the role that suffering played in fostering a personal (and even marketable) lyricism? And how might literary reviewers’ attitudes toward antislavery poems, and their graphic depictions of the slave trade’s atrocities, help us reassess the limits of lyric criticism both during and beyond the eighteenth century?

IV. Chapter Summaries

To address such questions, each chapter of the dissertation charts the making of a lyric genre through the lens of a specific sociopolitical issue or literary-material practice in the period. Chapter 1 reassesses the lyric topos of poetic retreat as performed in poems written by Cowley and Finch in the aftermaths of the Restoration and the 1688 Revolution, respectively. Specifically, I read two poems—Cowley’s “The Complaint” (printed 1663) and Finch’s “A Pindarick Poem. Upon the Hurricane in November 1703” (1704; printed 1713)—alongside selected contemporary responses, paying close attention to the political conditions that shaped these poets’ retreats and the ways in which the poets remembered the retreats themselves (and by later readers). Whether amidst the power politics of Charles II’s court or in the immediate aftermath of Britain’s costliest
natural disaster, Cowley and Finch ultimately rejected the conventions of personal lyric address to negotiate their respective conditions of retreat. In Cowley’s case, the denial of a royal pension from Charles II in 1662–63 compelled the poet to disown his lyric Muse, whom he accused of false temptations; yet this maneuver, as I show, was the product of a more complex self-reflection on his poetic practice dating to the 1650s. In Finch’s case, the disastrous upheavals of 1688, coupled with the Great Storm of 1703, motivated her to compose “A Pindaric Poem. Upon the Hurricane,” a long poem characterized by its forceful denunciations of a fractured political landscape and (most notably) its admission that the poet’s “contemn’d Retreat” into the countryside enabled her to dispense judgment at all. These strategies, I contend, are best understood as lyric practices: as modes of poetic address which engage directly with their own social and material conditions of production. To examine these matters in conjunction, I argue, is to revise our inherited portraits of these lyric poets, and to reassess several key assumptions about the “lyricization” of poetic retreat across the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Similarly, Chapter 2, entitled “The Lyric Conditions of Retirement Poetry, 1700–1725,” reads the popular genre of retirement poetry—which stages an idealistic rural retreat from contemporary society—against the period’s political and financial crises. It takes up John Pomfret’s The Choice (1700), arguably the most exemplary and widely reprinted retirement poem of the eighteenth century, as a case study for reexamining the poetics and politics of retirement in an age marked by persistent upheaval. Although criticized by later readers (particularly in the late twentieth century) for its solipsistic and materialistic leanings, The Choice nevertheless marks an important inflection point in the history of eighteenth-century lyric. Indeed, through its subjunctive modeling of suburban
desires—a well-furnished country estate and the company of sociable gentlemen—in composed, heroic couplets, the poem popularized a distinctive idiom of retirement, with far-reaching poetic and political consequences. This idiom became *lyrical*, and hence susceptible to materialist critique, in the hands of contemporary poets and modern critics who exposed its ideology a solipsistic, self-serving, and socio-politically detached. Yet I argue that such lyricism in *The Choice* must be understood in relation to its circumstances of production and reproduction, and especially in the first two decades of its existence (which saw Pomfret achieve posthumous success as a poet). Through close readings of various early eighteenth-century retirement poems, I draw attention to the ways in which *The Choice* encouraged a remarkably wide range of shrewd responses to its lyricism and argument: from the philosophical critique of Thomas Brown’s “Hobson’s Choice” (1700), to the spiritual yearnings of John Wren’s *The Country Life* (1717), to the South Sea Crisis-inspired satire of Nicholas Amhurst’s “The Wish” (1720). Reading these poems of retirement reveals that the genre, far from espousing a single ideology of lyrical retreat, became a viable lyric medium for political and material critique.

These opening chapters set the stage for subsequent evaluations of the lyric’s “rising” value among poets, editors, and commentators from the mid-eighteenth century forward. Chapter 3, “The Poverty of ‘Professional’ Poetry in Eighteenth-Century Burlesque and Laboring Verse,” traces competing representations of the “professional” poet in poverty through two contemporary poetic traditions—the burlesque poems of John Philips, Alexander Pope, and their imitators; and the poems of laborers such as Stephen Duck, Robert Dodsley, and Mary Leapor—to show that eighteenth-century notions of lyric respectability hinged upon class- and labor-based differences. On the one
hand, Philips’ *The Splendid Shilling* (1701) and Pope’s *The Dunciad* (1728) not only made poverty a fashionable subject for eighteenth-century satiric poetry, but also rendered professional poets’ works (i.e., poems by those who wrote or who were accused of writing solely for commercial profit) inseparable from the intolerable conditions in which they languished. On the other hand, impoverished but aspirational poets like Duck, Dodsley, and Leapor fashioned, with the help of their respective patrons and editors, a more acceptable poetics of lyric respectability: one which championed poetry as a lyrically and morally upright escape from the material trappings of poverty and the false pursuit of wealth.

Chapter 4, entitled “Affliction and the Lyricization of Eighteenth-Century Women’s Hymnody,” explores the intersecting relationships between private suffering, communal worship, and (male) editorship in women’s religious poetry of the period. It examines the hymns of Anne Steele (1717–78) and Susannah Harrison (1752–84) as literary-congregational spaces through which both women negotiated not only their personal difficulties with illness and grief, but also the terms of eighteenth-century discourse on “affliction” and its spiritual resolution. As they corroborated contemporary divines’ urgings toward patience and resignation in the wake of personal suffering, Steele and Harrison crafted an individualized, feminine idiom of affliction that accommodated various internal states—doubt, guilt, physical pain—which were infrequent subjects in congregational hymnody. This idiom spread, if reluctantly on the part of both poets, with the efforts of their respective editors Caleb Evans and John Conder, both of whom lyricized the women’s literary careers in the image of the afflicted yet devout poetess.
The final chapter, “Lyric Theory, Review Culture, and the ‘Enormous Crimes’ of Antislavery Verse,” reassesses the emergence of late-century lyric theory in relation to two contemporaneous developments: the rise of periodical review culture and the production of antislavery poetry. I track these movements in the reception of three antislavery poems—William Roscoe’s *The Wrongs of Africa* (1787–88), John Jamieson’s *The Sorrows of Slavery* (1789), and James Field Stanfield’s *The Guinea Voyage* (1789)—which were distinguished by their graphic representations of slave torture aboard the Middle Passage. Such scenes, however, were all but absent from contemporary reviews, which variously evaluated these poems’ more imaginatively lyrical scenes or criticized them for depicting subjects that were inappropriate for poetry. Thus, I demonstrate that professional reviewers effectively lyricized these antislavery poems for their readers: that is, they subjected them to aesthetic ideals that their authors refused.

By examining the fortunes of these verse genres at the hands of eighteenth-century (and later) poets, readers, and critics, *Communal Lyricisms* thus recovers an expanded history and genealogy of poetic practice at a crucial stage in the lyric’s development. This account seeks not only to augment our odic accounts of lyric’s “rise,” but also to contextualize the ongoing processes of lyricization in an eighteenth-century frame. In the process, the dissertation asserts that the history of eighteenth-century lyric—and indeed of lyric in any given time and space—demands as much attention to poetic engagements with the period’s sociopolitical and material conditions, as it does to those aesthetic and technical qualities which literary critics have long identified with the poetic mode. By stressing the “communal” exchanges between these elements, we can
therefore begin to reassess the terms and limitations of our own critical practices, and hence to realize new histories and futures for the practice and pedagogy of poetry.
This chapter takes up the topoi of poetic and political retreat as performed in the poems of Abraham Cowley and Anne Finch. In modern literary history, Cowley and Finch have been recognized as two of the most accomplished practitioners of *lyric* poetry in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, on the grounds that both poets innovated English poetry with their revival of the Pindaric ode and their introspective poetics of solitude. Yet their careers and fortunes also coincided with significant upheavals in the Stuart monarchy, forcing both poets to negotiate their newly changed circumstances in their poetry. These negotiations manifest in the ways that each poet rejected the conventions of personal lyric address (the invocation of a Muse, or the use of first-person speech) from their respective positions of exile, and in a national climate increasingly dominated by party politics and shifting alliances.

In Cowley’s case, his denial of a royal pension upon Charles II’s restoration—following a decade of political service to the exiled monarch during the Interregnum (1649–60)—compelled him to retire from court life altogether in 1662–63. While the royalist poet’s retirement has been attributed by literary historians (and the poet himself) to his weariness with civil service and court politics, I argue that it should also be understood in relation to his reckoning with the limited fortunes of his poetic profession. This latter sentiment becomes clear when we attend to the poet’s shifting strategies of self-presentation across his essays on retirement (“Of Obscurity,” “Of Myself”) and his poems on the perceived futility of writing poetry itself (“Destinie,” “The Complaint”). On the one hand, Cowley’s prose writings present his newfound solitude as both a welcome
retreat from political commerce and an invitation to intellectual pursuits (including the writing of poetry). On the other hand, his poems of complaint reveal a poet struggling to reconcile his poetic practice with his own personal and political fallout, a struggle which results in the poet forcefully accusing his Muse of false temptations into poetic fame. Reading these accounts of retreat together therefore demonstrates that Cowley strained to turn his “retreat” into an opportunity to revise his own lyric poetics, both in terms of the effacement of his Muse and in his efforts to celebrate the dissociation of poetic and political service.

Like Cowley, Anne Kingsmill also served the Stuart court before personal and political circumstances—most notably her marriage to Heneage Finch in 1684, and the upheavals of 1688—forced her retreat from London to the English countryside. As literary critics and biographers of Finch have traditionally argued, the poet flourished in her newfound solitude, writing various lyric poems which were preoccupied with fashioning natural states of retreat (“A Nocturnal Reverie,” “The Petition for an Absolute Retreat”) or turning inward into the poet’s own mental state (as in her most famous poem “The Spleen”). Such accounts of Finch’s poetry and poetics were convincingly challenged by feminist literary historians in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. But the legacy of this older critical narrative is that Finch’s lyricism—that is, her prowess and reputation as a lyric poet—itself became lyricized, in so far as readers were encouraged to approach her poetry with little to no knowledge of the difficulties which conditioned her “retreat” into country life. To reassess this dynamic, I turn to Finch’s “A Pindaric Poem. Upon the Hurricane,” which she wrote not only to mark the disastrous Great Storm of 1703 but also to dispense judgment upon Britain’s fractured
landscape in the wake of 1688. Between its Pindaric form, digressive movement, “occasional” framework, and strategically displaced “speaker,” the poem refuses easy categorization as it plays upon the lyrical conventions (e.g., of naturalistic retreat or introspection) that critics have identified in her less overtly political poetry. Yet by stating that her “contemn’d Retreat” (and hence her political precarity) is essential to her poem’s composition, Finch models a lyric practice whose salient features—the presence of a stable speaking subject, and the mutually constitutive relationship between caller and respondent—constitute strategies of political engagement. To understand Finch’s “retreat” as a “contemn’d” one, then, is to reverse the conclusion which historians and theorists of lyric would later draw from her poetry: namely, that the poet’s withdrawal to the English countryside conditioned a poetic practice far removed from her political circumstances.

Beyond reassessing these two poets’ careers and practices, this chapter likewise contends that Cowley and Finch’s retreat poems model anticipate the challenges of reading such poems *lyrically*: that is, by displacing the physical and poetic gestures of retreat from their immediate historical contexts, resulting in the elision of the spatio-temporal distance between the poems’ circumstances of composition and their subsequent moments of reception. My readings, meanwhile, seek to rethink these poets’ poetic and political retreats as two prongs of a unified *lyric* practice, one which forced them to rethink the terms of writing poetry yet also enabled them to reassert their agency under difficult political circumstances. In the process, I argue that the historical recovery of these poets’ careers-in-retreat not only augments our understanding of their retreat poetry’s political consequences in seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Britain, but
also reminds us that what might otherwise have passed as their retreats into “lyrical” solitude was instead mediated by pressing concerns and strategic redefinitions of poetic practice itself.

I. “Thine, thine is all the Barrenness”: Abraham Cowley’s Imperfect Retirement

In his biography of his close friend Abraham Cowley, appended to the lavish folio collection of the poet’s *Works* (1669), Thomas Sprat recounted his late subject’s retirement from public life shortly after the Restoration. The poet, his biographer noted, had successfully left the court with a wealth of experience and recognition:

He had been present in many great revolutions, which in that tumultuous time disturb’d the peace of all our Neighbour-States, as well as our own. He had neerly beheld all the splendour of the highest part of mankind. He had lived in the presence of Princes, and familiarly converst with greatness in all its degrees, which was necessary for one that would contemn it aright: for to scorn the pomp of the World before a man knows it, does commonly proceed rather from ill Manners, than a true Magnanimity.¹

Sprat had much material to draw upon when he described Cowley’s involvement in “that tumultuous time” of the mid-seventeenth century. The poet served as secretary to Henry Jermyn at the outbreak of the Civil Wars, and by 1646 he had fled England with Queen Henrietta Maria into France, where he served as a spy for the ousted Royalists. Although he spent most of his time performing menial duties such as encoding and decrypting letters between the Queen and her contacts (including her soon-to-be-executed husband Charles I), he became a prominent member of their retinue. Upon returning to England, however, Cowley was mistakenly arrested and imprisoned by the Protectorate, following

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several failed royalist uprisings at Yorkshire and Salisbury in March 1655. The arrest and general tumult nevertheless did little to stop his writing career, for it was during this eventful phase that he composed and published most of his major poetic works: *The Civil War* (unfinished and printed posthumously in 1679), *The Mistress*, four books of the unfinished epic *Davideis*, and the *Pindarique Odes*. These works, among others, were compiled into a folio collection of *Poems* (1656) that Cowley printed while he was still imprisoned.

Such a busy career, Sprat contended, was enough for the poet to turn away from “the vexations and formalities of an active condition” in the early 1660s in order “to follow the violent inclination of his own mind” and pursue “the true Delights of solitary Studies, of temperate Pleasures, and of a moderate Revenue, below the malice and flatteries of Fortune.” These “true Delights” also emerged in some of Cowley’s most extensive, personal meditations on the private life, particularly his prose essays “Of Solitude” and “Of Obscurity.” Both essays argued for a productive retirement detached “from all Contentions, from all Envying or being Envyed, from receiving and from paying all kind of Ceremonies.” In the process, the essayist modeled his ideal life in retirement after the *beatus ille* or “happy man” of Horace’s Epode II and Satire II.6, as evident in “Obscurity”:

> Upon the whole matter, I account a person who has a moderate Mind and Fortune, and lives in the conversation of two or three agreeable friends, with little commerce in the world besides, who is esteemed well enough by his few neighbours that know him, and is truly irreproachable by any body, and so after a healthful quiet life, before the great inconveniences of old age, goes more silently out of it than he came it, (for I would not have

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2 *Works*, [viii].

3 Cowley, *Several Discourses by way of Essays, in Verse and Prose*, in *Works*, 96. I shall discuss the *beatus vir* convention at greater length in Chapter 2.
him so much as Cry in the Exit.)

Sprat and Cowley’s independent biographies therefore offer a simple explanation for the poet’s retirement: he was weary of the world and so decided to live a modest life. I will show, however, that the reasons for this retirement played out in very different terms across Cowley’s poetic recollections. Indeed, examining the poet’s verse and prose meditations in tandem reveals his entangling of the ideal retirement with his own uncertain circumstances, and a lyric practice that calls into question the nature and uses of the idyllic retreat.

Like Sprat’s biography, most modern accounts of Cowley’s situation in the 1660s suggest that his retirement was timely and secure, and several emphasize the poet’s happiness at having left the demands of his worldly career. Yet they also occlude a key detail about the poet’s retirement: that despite his productivity and loyalty to the Stuart monarchy, Cowley received little substantial reward from the Restoration settlement for his efforts. Even as the poet continued to write in the first years of Charles II’s reign—notably composing an “Ode, upon the Blessed Restoration and Return of his Sacred Majesty” (1660); the political tract *A Discourse By way of Vision, Concerning the Government of Oliver Cromwell* (1661); and his Latin didactic poem *Plantarum* (1662)—he found himself overlooked for court positions that were readily granted to his peers.

The final blow came in 1662, when Cowley was ruled out of the running for the Mastership of the Savoy Hospital, a lucrative sinecure that he and others believed would

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4 Ibid., 97.
have been just reward for his years of service to the exiled king.\textsuperscript{5} (The position went instead to Gilbert Sheldon in 1661, and to Henry Killigrew two years later.) It was only with the generous assistance of Jermyn (now serving the Restoration court as Earl of St. Albans) and George Villiers, second duke of Birmingham that the poet was granted a secure estate at Barn Elms, Surrey in 1663; he would finally settle at Chertsey from 1665 to his death two years later.

Cowley and Sprat’s simplified explanations likewise do not account for the undesirability of retirement in Restoration England. While the poet’s argument for the “healthful quiet life” would later be enshrined in eighteenth-century poems and tracts on retirement, it would have been considered controversial in his own lifetime.\textsuperscript{7} As Brian Vickers and Alan De Gooyer have argued, the promises of classical \textit{otium} or retirement from public life were seen as incompatible with the demands of the newly restored court, not least one that now faced the burden of governing a still-fractured nation. Any expressed desire for private retirement could therefore be read as a sign of infidelity to the Stuart regime or evidence of a lingering association with the dissolved Protectorate.\textsuperscript{8}

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\textsuperscript{6} Unsurprisingly, Sprat does not detail these developments, writing only that the poet was initially “slenderly provided for such a retirement, by reason of his Travels, and the Afflictions of the Party to which he adhered, which had put him quite out of all the rodes of gain” ([viii]). Anthony Wood, on the other hand, observes that Cowley retired to Surrey “discontented,” not having found “that preferment confer’d on him which he expected, while others for their money carried away most places.” Wood, \textit{Athenae Oxonienses}, 2 vols. (London, 1691–92), 2:798. Samuel Johnson quotes both biographers but reserves judgment, opining that “[s]o differently are things seen, and so differently are they shown; but actions are visible, though motives are secret.” Johnson, “Cowley,” in \textit{The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets: With Critical Observations on Their Works}, 4 vols., ed. Roger Lonsdale (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1:198.


These interpretations were hardly unreasonable in Cowley’s case: a conciliatory paragraph to the republicans in his Preface to the 1656 Poems attracted suspicion from his fellow royalists, and it was likely the most significant reason why he was excluded from the Savoy mastership.9

Whatever the circumstances of his withdrawal from public life may have been, Cowley’s successive retreats appear to register the poet’s steady detachment from what Sprat called his “steady and sober experience of Humane things.”10 Critical studies of the poet have since revised this judgment to demonstrate his anxious engagements with royalist politics, language, and servitude throughout the 1650s. Scholarly attention has been paid especially to his Pindarique Odes, not only because they were composed and published in the thick of the Interregnum, but also because they reveal the poet’s deepening investment in what Margaret Koehler has called his “poetics of absorption”: an intermediate state between an external calling to the world and an internal calling to the poet’s self, and in effect a fundamental quality of the lyric in modern discourse.11 Across

9 The infamous passage opined that Cromwell’s victory, having been secured by the “unaccountable Will of God,” was reason enough for Cowley and his Royalist peers “to lay down our Pens as well as arms, we must march out of our Cause it self, and dismantle that, as well as our Towns and Castles, of all the Works and Fortifications of Wit and Reason by which we defended it” [vii]. Sprat defended Cowley by arguing that the political climate forced his hand toward reconciliation, but he excised the poet’s offending paragraph in the 1669 Works. Arthur Nethercot, meanwhile, contends that it was the heavily politically charged poems in the Pindarique Odes, more so than the offending Preface, which ruled Cowley out of the running for any meaningful court position. Nethercot, Abraham Cowley: The Muse’s Hannibal (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), 199–200.
such critical accounts, “absorption” figures politically as a measure of Cowley’s
displacement from the English court, whether in Stella Revard’s questioning of the Odes’
superficial apoliticism given their composition during the poet’s retreat into France,\textsuperscript{12} in
Christopher D’Addario’s account of the poet’s fixation on the instability of language
during his exile,\textsuperscript{13} or in Nathaniel Stogdill’s argument that the Odes marked his attempt
“to redefine, not simply reconstitute, the social order” that earlier Pindaric adaptations
had “customarily maintained.”\textsuperscript{14} Hence for these studies, Cowley’s Odes offer direct
evidence of an experimental poetics that, while removed from the immediate
circumstances of the English Interregnum, nevertheless confronted this tumult.

Here, I extend these ongoing reassessments of Cowley’s poetry and poetics by
turning primarily to a lesser-discussed collection of poems, most of which deal with the
topoi of retirement in light of the poet’s 1663 departure from Charles’ court. That same
year, a pirated miscellany of Poems; by Several Persons, printed by the royal printer John
Crooke for Samuel Dancer, appeared on the streets of Dublin. The collection comprised
twenty poems authored by five closely connected royalist writers: Katherine Philips,
writing under the pseudonym Orinda; Roger Boyle, 1st Earl of Orrery, who was patron to
both Philips and Cowley; Sir Peter Pett, Irish MP for Askeaton; Clement Paman, the
English poet who served as Dean of Elphin Cathedral in Ireland between 1662 and 1664;
and most prominently, Cowley himself. Despite its title, the Dublin miscellany places the

\begin{footnotes}
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greatest emphasis on Cowley and his works: twelve of the collection’s poems are attributed to the English poet (many of which did not appear in his 1656 Poems and were likely printed without his knowledge) and compass a wide range of poetic forms, from occasional odes to paraphrases and translations of Horace, Martial, and Virgil. And of the eight remaining poems, two works—Boyle’s “To Mr. Cowley on His Davideis” and Katherine Philips’ “Ode. On Retirement,” reprinted in her posthumous 1667 collection of Poems—directly address the male poet’s circumstances.

But the miscellany’s most significant features are its presentation of what Elizabeth Hageman has called “a coterie conversation among those five poets,” and its primary thematic preoccupations with retirement. This latter theme motivates Cowley’s engagement with the classical poets—translations of Virgil’s “O fortunati nimium…” (from Book II of Virgil’s Georgics) and Claudian’s “Old Man of Verona”; and paraphrases of Horace’s Satire II.6 and Epistle I.10—and several original compositions which address his own conditions. I will focus here on three such poems: Cowley’s “The Complaint” and “Upon occasion of a Copy of Verses of my Lord Broghills, upon Mr. Cowley’s Davideis”; and Philips’ “Ode. On Retirement.” Although written on ostensibly different occasions, these poems, I argue, all attempt to resolve Cowley’s unfortunate retirement in 1663, and they each re-evaluate the male poet’s previous conceptions of

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15 Alexander Lindsay speculates that Orrery, who was one of Cowley’s former patrons, may have leaked a number of these poems to Crooke. Lindsay, “Cowley, Abraham (1618–1667),” Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford University Press, 2004 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/6499, accessed 15 May 2017].

16 Hageman also speculates that “if Cowley’s The Guardian was performed in Dublin in late 1662 or early 1663, it may be that he himself was in Ireland then, in which case Poems, by Several Persons may image an Anglo-Irish literary circle of which Philips was a part during the winter of 1662–63—a circle whose volume would be a most respectable venue for Philips’s poetry.” Elizabeth Hageman, “Making a Good Impression: Early Texts of Poems and Letters by Katherine Philips, ‘The Matchless Orinda,’” South Central Review 11, no. 2 (1994): 48, 49.
poetic purpose. Their differences in tone, self-presentation, and address suggest that his retirement from the political sphere required more than a “moderate” retreat: rather, these poems demanded a precise overhaul of his own lyric practices during the transition.

The most lively of the three poems, and the one that I shall discuss at length, is “The Complaint.” Attributed to the poet by Crooke, and republished later that year with minor emendations in the poet’s *Verses, Written Upon Several Occasions*, “The Complaint” transparently addresses the poet’s fallout from the Restoration settlement. It begins, fittingly, with the “melancholy” poet in complete isolation, until his Muse arrives to rouse him from his torpor:

In a deep Visions intellectual scene,
Beneath a Bowr for sorrow made,

The Melancholy Cowley lay.
And Lo! a muse appear’d to his clos’d sight,

Art thou return’d at last, says she,
To this forsaken place and me?

Thou Prodigal, who didst so loosely waste
Of all thy Youthfull years, the good Estate;
Art thou return’d here, to repent too late? (lines 1–2, 7–8, 23–27)

The Muse’s arrival soon precipitates a heated argument between the two parties: in the ensuing lines, she chastises him for committing to royal business rather than attending to her needs, and mocks him for being discarded by the newly crowned Charles II. This charged dialogue is arguably the defining feature of “The Complaint,” and it registers the

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17 To add insult to injury, the poet’s play, *Cutter of Coleman-Street* (a revised version of his earlier play *The Guardian*, which was performed as early as 1642) had opened in London on December 16, 1661 to general opprobrium because it was perceived as an attack on the Royalists. However, it ran successfully for an entire week and continued to be staged until 1723; Cowley, Preface to *Cutter of Coleman-Street. A Comedy* (London: H. Herringman, 1663), [1]. In his *Life of Cowley*, Johnson suggests that the play’s negative debut inspired the poet to write “The Complaint” so as to express “his pretensions and his discontent” with the public response; Johnson, *Lives*, 1:197.
poet-persona’s frustrations (or something like Koehler’s “absorption”) more strongly than does any other account of his political situation. In one particularly evocative attack, the Muse analogizes Cowley’s plight with that of Jacob in Genesis 29, whose fourteen years of service to Rachel have proved to be nothing but a cruel deception “[i]nto the Courts deceitfull Lottery” (line 93):

The Rachell, for which twice seven years and more,  
Thou didst with Faith, and labour serve,  
And didst (if Faith and labour can) deserve,  
Though she contracted was to thee,  
Giv’n to another thou didst see,  
Giv’n to another who had store  
Of fairer, and of Richer Wives before,  
And not a Leah left, thy recompense to be.

But think how likely, ’tis that thou  
With the dull work of thy unweildy Plough,  
Shouldst in a hard and Barren season thrive,  
Shouldst even be able to live,  
Thou to whose share so little bread did fall,  
In the miraculous year, when Manna rain’d on all. (lines 82–89, 94–99)

Through such exchanges with the poet, the Muse functions as the perceived general condition of the exiled royalists who, like Cowley, were forced to weather the “public storm” (line 55) and “hard and Barren season” of the 1650s. But the poet makes her single him out as the king’s discarded subject to advance her misleading point that Cowley is entirely to blame for his neglect by an otherwise merciful Charles, precisely because the poet abandoned her for the exiled king’s worldly “business”:

Business! the frivolous pretence  
Of humane Lusts to shake off Innocence,  
Business! the grave impertinence:  
Business! the thing, which I of all things hate,  
Business! the contradiction of thy Fate. (lines 43–47)

To emphasize this “contradiction” of her subject’s “Fate,” Cowley’s Muse repeats her
accusation in stanza four by invoking and inverting the parable of Gideon’s reward in Judges 6–8. The analogy figures Charles’ return as a “glorious Entry” whose “Enriching moysture drop’d on every thing” (lines 65, 66) except the poet’s own fleece:

For, every Tree, and every Hearb around;
With Pearly due was crown’d.

And nothing, but the Muses Fleece was dry. (lines 69–70, 73)

If the poet intended for his Muse’s caricature to serve in part as biting self-parody in another’s voice, his gesture also reveals the unfortunate entanglement of personal, poetic, and political circumstances in 1662–63. That the dry fleece belongs to “melancholy Cowley” and his Muse alike, combined with the fact that she speaks in her own person throughout “The Complaint,” suggest that her perceptions are not so different from the poet’s. For she too has witnessed the “Melancholy” poet’s neglect:

But whilst thy fellow Voyagers, I see
All mark’d up to possess the promised Land
Thou still alone (alas) dost gaping stand,
Upon the naked beach, upon the Barren Strand. (lines 59–62)

The Muse’s witnessing, as I shall later discuss, changes throughout the poet’s other writings. For now, and in response to his Muse’s charges, Cowley claims that she tainted his mind with the belief that his poetry and service would secure him royal favors:

Thou gav’st so deep a tincture of thy own,
That ever since I vainly try,
To wash away th’ inherent dye. (lines 123–25)

The poet’s accusation against her conception of poetry is that it has directed his attentions away from the true “Freedom” of royal servitude and toward the illusory realm of material reward, a variant of the “Business” which the Muse claims to hate: “Into thy new
found World, I know not where, / Thy Gold Indies in the Ayr (lines 109–110).\textsuperscript{18}

In other words, the poet-persona associates his Muse with a false notion of poetry as a wholly material practice, whose sole power and purpose is to realize the poet’s desires. The complainant, now realizing that his lyric poetry must serve more noble and public ends, concludes by disavowing his Muse; simultaneously, he reaffirms his commitment to Charles,\textsuperscript{19} whom the poet believes may yet reward him if he chooses to “plough” the newly “fertile soil” rather than “sit still and sing”:

\begin{verbatim}
Teach me not then, O thou fallacious Muse,
   The Court, and better King t’accuse;
The Heaven under which I live is fair;
The fertile soil will a full Harvest bear;
Thine, thine is all the Barrenness; if thou
Mak’st me sit still and sing, when I should plough.

I ought to be accursed, if I refuse
To wait on him, O thou fallacious Muse! (lines 144–49, 155–56)
\end{verbatim}

This final return from courtship to court, complicated by the strong but chiastic rhymes between “Muse,” “accuse,” and “refuse,” has drawn varying opinions on its tone and outlook. Whereas Arthur Nethercot accuses the poet-persona of being “still willing to

\textsuperscript{18} A similar argument is made by a very different ‘persona’ in one of the collection’s other odes, “Mr. Cowley’s Book Presenting Itself to the University Library of Oxford”:

\begin{verbatim}
Ah, that my Author had been ty’d like me
   To such a place, and such a Company!
Instead of sev’ral Companies, sev’ral Men,
   And Business which the Muses hate,
He might have then improved that small Estate,
Which Nature sparingly did to him give,
   He might perhaps have thriven then,
And setled, upon me his Child, some what to live.
’T had happer been for him, as well as me… (lines 58–66)
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{19} Andrew Shifflett suggests that Cowley’s poetic gestures of forgiving and forgetfulness throughout his career, but especially in his 1656 Poems, were products of his “native Royalism.” Shifflett, “Kings, Poets, and the Power of Forgiveness, 1642–1660,” \textit{English Literary Renaissance} 33, no. 1 (2003): 88–109.
palter, conciliate, and falter” rather than “standing up manfully and accepting his fortune,” Robert Hinman interprets the passage as the poet’s winking admission that the fault lies with the “disjointed time” rather than the act of writing poetry. What is clear in any case is that Cowley’s turn from poetic solitude back to royalist values (even from a distance) reverses the conditions which drove him to retreat into his melancholy bower. That is, he turns his political exile into an opportunity to rewrite the terms of his own poetry, such that its new royally oriented purposiveness may, Heaven willing, “a full Harvest bear” where his faith in the Muse-as-mistress or Muse-as-midwife will not.

I have suggested that the power of “The Complaint” lies in its form as a structured lyric dialogue between the poet and the Muse, whose charged exchanges culminate in an affirmation of the restored order. But why did Cowley here present his Muse, the preeminent figure of lyric poetry and panegyric alike, as the chief obstacle to his expression of continued royalist loyalty? And what consequences would his rejection of the Muse have on other remembrances of his political fallout? We can begin to address these questions by comparing Cowley’s poem with several of his other meditations on the ends of poetry, service, and retreat. In the poet’s later retrospective essay “Of Myself,” for example, the securely retired essayist recalls his career at court as one that offered him few lasting pleasures. The recollection, conducted with diplomatic modesty and nostalgic distance, bears none of “The Complaint’s” animus, largely because the essayist makes no mention of an intrusive Muse:

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21 The Virgilian turn to the plough likewise resonates with the English poet’s translation of *O Fortunati nimium*: “Some with bold Labour plough the faithless main, / Some rougher storms in Princes Courts sustain…. / Mean while, the prudent Husbandman is found, / In mutual duties striving with his ground” (lines 69–70, 81–82).
I met with several great Persons, whom I liked very well, but could not perceive that any part of their Greatness was to be liked or desired, no more than I would be glad, or content to be in a Storm, though I saw many Ships which rid safely and bravely in it...I could not abstain from renewing my old School-boys Wish in a Copy of Verses to the same effect.

Well then; I now doe plainly see
This busie World and I shall ne’re agree, &c.²²

This self-reflexive account quietly reworks the Muse’s analogy between neglected poet and barren island into a different seafaring metaphor, wherein his competitors are now seen as “Ships” who successfully sailed through the “Storm” of the previous two decades. In a further sign of his acceptance (or perhaps of his intent to maintain authorial composure), Cowley repeats his diplomatic tone and nostalgic gaze as he writes on his state of mind following Charles’ return:

And I never then proposed to my self any other advantage from His Majesties Happy restoration, but the getting into some moderately convenient Retreat in the Country, which I thought in that case I might easily have compassed, as well as some others, who with no greater probabilities or pretences have arrived to extraordinary fortunes: But I had before written a shrewd Prophesie against my self, and I think Apollo inspired me in the truth, though not in the Elegance of it.

Thou, neither great at Court nor in the Warr,
Nor at th’ Exchange sha’t be, nor at the wrangling Barr;
Content thy self with the small barren praise
Which neglected Verse does raise, &c.²³

The “fertile soil” that “melancholy Cowley” promised to “plough” after being rejected by the court has since been reworked into a comfortable country estate (one of the rewards for which his Muse would likely have advocated on his behalf!). But although Cowley insinuates that those who received royal preference were less deserving than he was, he

²² Cowley, Several Discourses, 145. The verse quotation is from “The Wish,” lines 1–2.
²³ Ibid., 145. The verse quotation is from “Destinie,” lines 41–44.
chooses not to cite “The Complaint”—which he wrote in response to the Savoy mastership debacle—as his self-damaging “shrewed Prophesie.” Instead, he cites “Destinie,” one of his *Pindarique Odes* (1656), as evidence for his eventual neglect. In doing so, Cowley effectively rehearses his king’s neglect of one of his poetic selves (namely, the “melancholy” persona in “The Complaint”) by expunging that same portrait from his autobiographical essay. That erasure, in turn, would lead later readers to conclude that neither poet nor Muse had complained at all in the wake of the Restoration.

We could read Cowley’s erasure of his “melancholy” self, then, as confirmation that the poet had comfortably discarded the Muse’s temptations of fame and material reward in favor of continued allegiance to the Stuart court. But even if he intended to reaffirm his loyalty through this moderated (albeit self-serving) prose account, his textual practice—specifically, his particular quotation of “Destinie”—raises further suspicions about his intent. Whereas “Of Myself” ascribes the blame almost entirely on Cowley himself, “Destinie” makes it clear that his “Midwife Muse” (line 33), whose speaking presence cannot be gleaned in the essay’s excerpt, was responsible for his diminished fate.24 That Cowley paints his four lines as self-incriminating (and not in the Muse’s

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24 Cf. “The Resurrection,” which begins with a similar argument for the pseudo-maternal relationship between “Verse” and “Virtue”:

Not *Winds* to *Voyagers* at sea,
Nor *Showers* to *Earth* more necessary be,

Then *Verse* to *Virtue*, which does do
The *Midwifes* Office, and the *Nurses* too;
It *feeds* it strongly, and it *cloathes* it gay,
And when it dyes, with comely pride
*Embalms* it, and erects a *Pyramide*
That never will decay
Till *Heaven* it self shall melt away,
And nought behinde it stay. (lines 1–2, 5–11)
voice) consequently suggests a second deliberate erasure, one which revives the central concerns of “The Complaint.” Closer inspection of the lines surrounding the verse quotation reveals that the Muse, taking on the double role of midwife and mistress, prophesied her newly delivered poet’s fate:

She cut my Navel, washt me, and mine head
With her own Hands she Fashioned;
She did a Covenant with me make,
And circumcis’ed my tender Soul, and thus she spake,
Thou of my Church shalt be,
Hate and renounce (said she)
Wealth, Honour, Pleasures, all the World for Me.

She spake, and all my years to come
Took their unlucky Doom.
Their several ways of Life let others chuse,
Their several Pleasures let them use,
But I was born for Love, and for a Muse. (lines 34–40, 45–49)

These lines, absent from Cowley’s recollections in prose, effectively flesh out the very Muse who would taunt the “melancholy” poet seven years later in “The Complaint.” And much like that later self, the poet in “Destinie” describes his Muse’s “Covenant” as a device of poetic entrapment: his commitment to his poetic mistress comes at the total expense not only of public recognition and reward, but also of any personal agency that could direct him toward these other desires. Such prophetic constraints motivate the poet’s concluding lament—“With Fate what boots it to contend? / Such I began, such am, and so must end” (lines 50–51)—and the scant consolation that his Muse’s destiny, comprising the destructive rewards

Of Folly, Lust and Flatterie,
Fraud, Extortion, Calumnie,
Murder, Infidelitie,
Rebellion and Hypocrisie (lines 59–62),

need not be his.
These multiple self-representations across Cowley’s late career thus show the poet invoking, manipulating, and discarding his apostrophized Muse to justify his retirement from the Restoration court. In each case, the context of the apostrophe makes a critical difference to one’s interpretation of his attitude toward retirement. The Muse’s absence from the quatrain of “Destinie” printed in “Of Myself” effectively overwrites both her prophecy in the Interregnum poem and her vehement frustrations in “The Complaint,” as if to suggest that the now-retired poet had never felt compelled to vocalize his political circumstances. Once we read these poems alongside the mature Cowley’s recollections of the Restoration, however, we can see that the poet strained to turn his political fallout into an opportunity for lyric revision, and vice-versa. To write the lyric complaint from the position of retirement and the cultivation of a rural estate (even when it is a species of exile) is to defend such labor as public service, and thus to reaffirm the poet’s role and trust in the new political structure. In the process, Cowley ironizes the claim had once made of himself in “The Motto” (1640), which not coincidentally opens both the 1656 Poems and 1669 Works:

Unpassed Alps stop me, but I’ll cut through all,
And march, the Muse’s Hannibal. (lines 17–18)

Twenty-three years later, this possessive construction would reverse direction: having initially vowed to “cut through all” on behalf of his Muse, the poet would effectively vanquish that same Muse as the culprit of his political punishment.

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25 My argument for the “context” of Cowley’s apostrophes to the Muse challenges Jonathan Culler’s observation that “[a]postrophes foreground the act of address, lift it out of ordinary empirical contexts, and thus at some level identify the poetic act as ritualistic, hortatory, a special sort of linguistic event.” Culler, “Lyric, History, and Genre,” New Literary History 40, no. 4 (2009): 887, emphasis mine. The inclusion and exclusion of the Muse from Cowley’s multiple accounts should therefore invite us to trace the conditions under which poets animate and discard such lyric figures.
Whereas “The Complaint” exemplifies its poet’s blend of self-pity and defiant resolve, Cowley’s ode “Upon occasion of a Copy of Verses of my Lord Broghills, upon Mr. Cowley’s Davideis” reveals a different take on the relationship between poetic retirement and court service. The ode is framed as a gesture of gratitude for Boyle’s own tribute “To Mr. Cowley on His Davideis,” which opens the pirated Dublin miscellany. But like “The Complaint,” “Upon occasion” also stages an argument between the poet and his Muse, before diverging into a rather different tone and outcome. The poem opens with the poet-persona having chastised his “Ingratefull Mistress” for not reciprocating his professional sacrifices:

Be gone (said I) Ingrateful Muse, and see
What others thou canst fool as well as me.
Since I grew Man, and wiser ought to be,
My business and my hopes I left for thee:
For thee (which was more hardly given away)
I left, even when a Boy, my Play. (lines 1–6)

The poet then recalls his ultimately wasted efforts:

I wrote and wrote, but still I wrote in vain,
For after all m’expense of Wit and Pain,
A Rich, unwitting Hand, carry’d the Prize away. (lines 18–20)

Although this opening stanza directly recalls the lyric frustrations of the poet-persona in “Destinie,” it also invites renewed speculation into the circumstances of the poet’s 1663 retirement, given the poem’s first appearance in the Poems that year. Whereas the Muse argues that “she had given [him] Fame, / Bounty Immense” (lines 22–23), the poet-persona recounts how he angrily destroyed his many poetic inspirations:

Then in a rage I took
And out o’the Window threw
Ovid, and Horace all the chiming Crew,
Homer himself went with them too,
Hardly escaped the sacred Mantuan Book:
I my own Off-spring, like Agave tore,
And I resolved, nay I think I swore,
That I no more the Ground would Till and Sowe,
Where only flowry Weeds instead of Corn did grow. (lines 33–41)

Here, Cowley’s destructive recollection resonates with the poet’s disavowal of his Muse in “The Complaint”: the poet’s ejection of both his model poets and his poetic “Off-spring”—figured here as analogous to the mythical Agave’s murder of her son Pentheus—sets up precisely those conditions of melancholy, forced retirement under which “The Complaint” begins. Or at least it does so until the Muse, acting upon “the subtile wayes” of Fate (line 42), consoles him with the fact that Broghill has already paid tribute to the poet’s Davideis in the same Dublin miscellany. This consolation precipitates both the dejected poet’s change of heart and his renewed vow of service: not to king or court, but rather to the Muse:

Well satisfied and proud,
I straight resolved, and solemnly I vow’d:
That from her Service, now, I ne’re would part.
So strangely, large Rewards work on a gratefull Heart. (lines 58–61)

Given that “Upon occasion” directly precedes “The Complaint” in the 1663 Poems (but not in the authorized Verses, which moved the latter poem to the very end of the collection), we can and should read these poems as two meditations on the consequences of patronage. Whereas the former poem successfully reconciles the once-angered Cowley and his Muse because Broghill has rewarded the poet with his own printed tribute, the

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26 We could also compare this invocation of Agave to another ode “On Orinda’s Poems,” in which Cowley analogizes Philips’ productivity to “Mother Cybele’s contented breast: / With no less pleasure thou methinks shouldst see, / This thy no less Immortal Progeny” (lines 32–34). Carol Barash argues that Cybele “represents Philips’ sexual and poetic hubris; she is punished by having her womb emptied, her literary offspring reborn from the body of a male rather than a female god.” Barash, *English Women’s Poetry 1649–1714: Politics, Community, Linguistic Authority* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 85. That Cowley nearly inflicts the same punishment on his recollected self suggests the poet viewed his career as paradoxically heroic and fruitless.
latter poem brings that anger to fruition in the absence of any comparable reward from Charles at arguably the most critical moment in the poet’s career. In both cases, the Muse indexes Cowley’s attempts to measure his lyric production against his public reputation: when one force proves insufficient to achieve the desired outcome, she too becomes an insufficient lyric figure.

Cowley’s shifting perspectives on patronage and retirement in these two poems may likewise be usefully compared to Katherine Philips’ “Ode. On Retirement,” one of the 1663 miscellany poems which would later be included in her 1664 Poems under the expanded title “Upon Mr. Abraham Cowley’s Retirement.”27 As presented in the earlier miscellany, the ode offers no immediate association with Cowley’s retreat from the London court. Instead, its unnamed subject-speaker announces to the world his desire for a “cool Retreat,” without any of the heated exchange present in Cowley’s retirement odes. Writing in this detached first-person mode, Philips presents a poet who, having been “betray’d” by an “unfaithful World” (lines 2, 1), vows to seek refuge in “Nature” and the self:

From all thy Tumult, and from all thy heat,
I’le find a quiet, and a cool Retreat.
And on the Fetters I have worn,
Look with experienc’d, and revengeful scorn,
In this my Soveraign Privacy.
’Tis true I cannot govern thee,

27 Several scholars have recently highlighted the close yet complex relationship between Cowley and Philips. Focusing on the two odes which frame Philips’ 1664 Poems, Carol Barash suggests that Cowley’s ode “To the most excellently accomplished Mrs. K.P. upon her Poems” refashions Philips “as an English rather than as a woman poet,” whereas Philips uses her dedicatory ode “to address larger conflicts around gender and poetic authority.” Elizabeth Scott-Baumann, meanwhile, extends Barash’s claims to conclude that Cowley and Philips’ “poetry of retreat represents close engagement with the literary world, and that the most startling poetry of solitude is written in dialogue with one another.” Barash, English Women’s Poetry, 86–87; Scott-Baumann, Forms of Engagement: Women, Poetry, and Culture, 1640–1680 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, 84.
But yet my self I can subdue,
And that’s the nobler Empire of the two. (lines 21–28)

Here the female poet conceives her subject’s condition as a direct and decisive break from all public relations into “my Soveraign Privacy,” construed as the “nobler” and more governable “Empire.” Such a view, Elizabeth Scott-Baumann contends, was strongly influenced by Philips’ engagement with Cowley’s poetry, and indeed the latter’s eventual views on his retirement throughout the Essays bear traces of this influence.28

One of Philips’ representative retirement poems, “Content: To My Dearest Lucasia,” imagines a retreat to be shared by “Orinda” and her addressee:

These far remov’d from all bold Noise,
And (what is worse) all hollow Joys,
Who never had a mean design,
Whose Flame is serious and divine,
And calm, and even, must contented be,
For they’ve both Union and Society.29 (lines 55–60)

Yet the call for “Soveraign Privacy” in the “Ode. On Retirement” differs strikingly from the social vision of “Content.” When transacted into the specific circumstances of Cowley’s retirement, Philips’ social, voluntary sentiment becomes a decisively individual statement of intent. The “cool Retreat” does not precipitate an engagement between poet and Muse as it does in “The Complaint,” but rather leads Philips’ speaker to refuse any and all intervention beyond the confines of the self:

At length this secret I have learn’d,
Who will be happy must be unconcern’d,
Must all their comfort in their Bosom wear,
And seek their Power, and their Treasure there. (lines 43–46)

28 Scott-Baumann, Forms of Engagement, 88–89.
29 Katherine Philips, “Content: To My Dearest Lucasia,” Poems. By the Incomparable, Mrs. K. P. (London: R. Marriott, 1664), 49. The poem also features in several manuscripts that Philips sent to selected friends throughout the 1650s and early 1660s.
The poem then pivots in stanza five toward what Philips believes to be the true end of retirement, full converse with one’s heart and, by association, with God:

A Heart, which is too great a thing
To be a present for a Persian King,
Which God himself, would have to be his Court,
And where bright Angels gladly would resort,
From its own height would much decline,
If this converse it should resign
Ill nature’d World, for Thine.
Thy unwise rigor hath thy Empire lost,
It has not only set me free,
But it has let me see
They only, can of thy possession boast,
Who do enjoy thee least, and understand thee most. (lines 61–72)

Interestingly, the “unwise rigor” exerted by an “Ill nature’d World” corroborates the Muse’s account of Cowley’s fruitless service in “The Complaint,” as does Philips’ suggestion of Stuart tyranny under the sign of “a Persian King.” It is only in the poem’s final eight lines, however, that the female poet discloses who precisely has achieved full “possession” of the World. That liberated subject is Cowley, whom the poet claims “[i]s now Trimuphantly retir’d” (line 75) and has

over thee a Parthian Conquest won,
Which future Ages shall adore,
And which, in this subjects thee more,
Than either Greek, or Roman ever could before. (lines 77–80)

By turning unexpectedly from first-person utterance to third-person description, Philips likewise claims community with Cowley even as she refuses to address him directly (in the second-person “you”). But even beyond that grammatical turn, her ode rewrites the male poet’s complaints against the Stuart court (which, as I have argued, were predicated on his Muse’s deceptions of material reward and poetic selfishness) into an opportunity to affirm his absolute service to God. And whereas the male poet’s imagined dialogue
with his Muse suggests a lingering commitment to the virtues of royalist labor, the female poet repurposes the lyric retreat into a spiritual liberation and ascension—for both Cowley and the ode’s unnamed lyrical “I”—toward the truth.

These several odes on and adjacent to Cowley’s 1663 retirement thus demonstrate how his political failings could be revised into new poetic practices. Their debates over the Muse’s influence, the role of the poet as a public servant, and the problem of solitude under politically unfavorable conditions, show that his withdrawal from Charles’ court encompassed motives beyond the desire for a restful retirement. In effect, Cowley’s effective exile from the restored monarch’s council turns in these poems into a direct engagement with the concerns of the poetic profession. That such concerns played out differently across his writings—from the charged lines of “The Complaint” and “Upon occasion,” to the diplomacy and nostalgia of “On Myself,” to the partial citation of “Destinie”—reveal an entanglement of lyrical practice and political circumstance. Most important, such poems should invite us to attend carefully to the historical conditions of poetic retreat, as well as the poetic strategies that poets like Cowley deployed to assess their affiliations and ambitions.

II. Lyric Engagement, Political Exile, and Anne Finch’s “Contemn’d Retreat”

Although his fallout with Charles’ court yielded some poetic and political displeasure, Cowley managed to pursue his interests in retirement and to produce new works. But the decades which followed his death in 1667 changed the political

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30 This is not to suggest, however, that his retired life was an easy one. Cowley enthusiastically pursued gardening and occasionally entertained guests (including Philips and John Evelyn) at Barn Elms, but a fever caught in late 1663 forced him to relocate again to Chertsey. The relocation itself took nearly two years and led to further problems: in a letter dated May 21, 1665
landscape once more, and consequently forced a new generation of Stuart supporters into retreat. The national turmoil of the 1680s alone—including the mass hysteria and public executions of the Popish Plot and Exclusion Crisis; the ultimately failed Monmouth Rebellion (1685) and concomitant succession debacle; and persistent anxieties over James II’s Catholic sympathies—culminated in the Revolution of 1688 and, for the second time in nearly fifty years, the escape of a Stuart monarch into France. Much as during the Civil Wars, these political ruptures forced supporters of the old regime into hiding, where they viewed from a distance the coronation of William III and Mary less enthusiastically than contemporary print propaganda would suggest.

Among the most prominent of these pro-Stuart spectators was Anne Kingsmill Finch, who like Cowley had forged close connections to the court amidst major political upheaval. Anne had served as a maid of honor to Mary of Modena between 1682 and 1684, and she left upon marrying Heneage Finch, gentleman of the bedchamber to the duke of York and future James II. It was at court, however, that she wrote her first poems in secret. As the poet recounted in her Preface to her privately circulated manuscript poems, she was all too aware of the ridicule that public female expression, especially any claim to being or desiring to become an active poet, would bring to her reputation:

...every one wou’d have made their remarks upon a Versifying Maid of Honour…And indeed, the apprehension of this, had so much wean’d me from the practice and inclination to itt; that had nott an utter change in my Condition, and Circumstances, remov’d me into the solitude, & security of the Country, and the generous kindnesse of one that possest the most delightful seat in itt; envited him, from whom I was inseparable, to partake in the pleasures of itt, I think I might have stopp’d ere it was too late, and

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to Sprat, he complained that he had caught “so great a cold,” “had such a bruise on my ribs with a fall,” and witnessed his “meadows eaten up every night by cattle put in by my neighbours”—hence Johnson’s decision to cite the letter as a cautionary tale to “all that may hereafter pant for solitude.” Johnson, Lives, 1:198–99. Cowley died two years later, presumably from pneumonia and diabetes complications, on July 28, 1667.
suffer’d those few compositions I had then by me, to have sunk into that oblivion, which I ought to wish might be the lott of all that have succeeded them.\textsuperscript{31}

Finch’s anxiety strongly echoes Katherine Philips’ avowed fears over the unauthorized printing of her 1664 \textit{Poems}. In her letter to Charles Cotterell (“Poliarchus”) that would later preface the posthumous 1667 edition of her works, Philips lamented that she could not “so much as think in private” for fear of her “imaginations [being] rifled and exposed…to undergo all the \textit{raillery} of the Wits, and all the severity of the Wise, and to be the sport of some that can, and some that cannot read a Verse.\textsuperscript{32} Dorothy Mermin observes that Philips’ sentiments were not uncommon among her peers, and that they likely stemmed from the male poetic tradition of what Richard Helgerson calls “gentlemanly amateurism,” whereby the aspiring poet presented himself as one betrayed and “exposed” to the public against his wishes. In this light, Philips and Finch’s prefaces register their anxieties over print publication as “a kind of sexual self-display” (with Aphra Behn notoriously serving as model and warning).\textsuperscript{33}

Equally notable about Finch’s nostalgic self-reflection, meanwhile, is her mention of the unexpected “change” which precipitated both her retreat to the “solitude, &


\textsuperscript{32} Katherine Philips, preface to \textit{Poems by the most deservedly Admired Mrs. Katherine Philips The Matchless ORINDA} (London: H. Herringman 1667), [ii].

security of the Country” and her career as poet. Quoting lines 109–110 of Cowley’s “The Complaint,” she observes that in her retirement she could now

engage my self in the service of the Muses, as eagerly as if

From their new Worlds, I know not where
Their golden Indies in the air –

they cou’d have supply’d the material losses, which I had lately sustain’d in this [transition].

But whereas the “golden Indies” figure in Cowley’s ode as the airy and improper temptations of his deceiving Muse, their presence in Finch’s autobiographical Preface foregrounds her commitment to poetry as a mode of proper royalist service. This commitment also functions as a partial, yet effective response to the “utter change[s]” in Finch’s life, which turned out to be multiply layered and protracted. While her marriage to Heneage compelled her to retire from the court, it was the 1688 Revolution that forced the couple to retreat to Eastwell Park in central Kent, where they spent the next two decades of their life in politically and materially uncertain circumstances.

If Finch therefore attributed her poetic production to her retirement, she did so knowing that this retreat was predicated on the Stuarts’ dissolution and the Williamites’ arrival. These were the same political conditions under which she wrote her now well-preserved poems of retreat and melancholy meditation, in addition to numerous poems

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35 Matters grew worse when Heneage attempted to make contact with the exiled James in France in 1690; he was promptly arrested and imprisoned in London until the case was dismissed one year later.
36 It is also worth noting that Heneage’s financial, literary, and moral support were arguably as essential to Anne’s poetic output, as were their lack of children and their elevated social position following Heneage’s assumption of the fifth earl of Winchilsea in 1712. Indeed, as Wright reminds us, Heneage transcribed, edited, and compiled many of her manuscript poems, particularly the Northamptonshire, Folger, and Wellesley manuscripts. Wright, *Producing Women’s Poetry*, 154.
spanning the full range of verse forms and thematic preoccupations. Eighty-six of these poems were compiled into her *Miscellany Poems, on Several Occasions* (1713), the only print publication of her poetry to appear in her lifetime; at least one hundred others were written or transcribed across several manuscripts. Yet subsequent accounts came to naturalize the “utter change” in the poet’s condition—namely, her newfound solitude in a secure country estate—into the characteristic trait of her poetry more generally. In turn, these accounts circumvented the political ruptures that forced the Finches to leave London for Kent. This transformation, I argue, is best understood as a process of *lyricization*: what began as a politically motivated retreat became accepted as a lyrically productive retirement, such that critics read and praised her poetry independently of the circumstances of her lived retreat. And this independence of text from context, so to speak, transformed Finch into a notably “lyrical” poet.

The lyricization of Finch occurred in large part because her poetry virtually disappeared from the print market after her death in 1720, leaving successive critics to restore her work for their own aesthetic ends. If Finch was once remembered by her peers as “a countess,” as author of *The Spleen*, and as one of Alexander Pope’s most renowned interlocutors, such accomplishments did little to keep her poetry in circulation for the remainder of the eighteenth century. But her posthumous fortunes changed in 1815, when William Wordsworth offered a brief remark on Finch in his “Essay, Supplementary to the Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads*. In a now frequently cited passage on “genuine imagination” and the lack thereof among her contemporaries, Wordsworth celebrated

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Finch as a poet (and certainly the only woman poet of note) whose poetry displays an original vision detached from the dominant poetic conventions of her time:

Now it is remarkable that, excepting a passage or two in the Windsor Forest of Pope, and some delightful pictures in the Poems of Lady Winchelsea [sic], the Poetry of the period intervening between the publication of the Paradise Lost and the Seasons does not contain a single new image of external nature; and scarcely presents a familiar one from which it can be inferred that the eye of the Poet had been steadily fixed upon his object, much less that his feelings had urged him to work upon it in the spirit of genuine imagination.\textsuperscript{38}

Although critics panned his Preface and poems alike, Wordsworth’s remarks on Finch, as several feminist literary historians have commented, proved influential enough for later critics to canonize—and lyricize—her as a pre-romantic poet of nature and solitude.\textsuperscript{39}

Edmund Gosse, who unknowingly purchased a folio collection of her manuscript poems in 1884, perpetuated this notion by proclaiming himself her first “champion” since Wordsworth and praising her for her anachronistic talents:

She was entirely out of sympathy with her age, and her talent was hampered and suppressed by her conditions. She was the solitary writer of actively developed romantic tastes between Marvell and Gray, and she was not strong enough to create an atmosphere for herself within the vacuum in which she languished.\textsuperscript{40}

Such nineteenth-century portraits of Finch, Barbara McGovern concludes, set the stage


\textsuperscript{40} Edmund Gosse, “Lady Winchelsea’s Poems,” in Gossip in a Library (London: W. Heinemann, 1891), 123.
for the eighteenth-century poet “to be analyzed, anthologized, and categorized almost exclusively as a nature poet and precursor of Wordworthian Romanticism.” And in the process, she became the preeminent woman poet, and female lyric poet, of the early eighteenth century: a poet detached from her world, writing on the otherworldly spheres of natural imagination and psychological melancholy.

This construction of Finch survived into the twentieth century, as those collections which featured her poems carefully selected pieces that accorded with her nineteenth-century reputation. Carol Barash and Margaret Ezell, for example, have observed that editions like John Middleton Murry’s 1928 Poems followed Wordsworth’s remarks closely, compiling only those poems which exemplified her domestic “female poetic” or pensive melancholy. More recent anthologies, meanwhile, continue to privilege Finch’s “melancholy” and “lyrical” works over her other overtly political (or even occasional) poems, which despairingly addressed the circumstances of her lived retreat. Charles Hinnant speculates that such tendencies have perpetuated the stereotypical view that “the classic subject of Finch’s verse is retirement—but a

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41 Hinnant, Anne Finch and Her Poetry, 79.
42 Barash, English Women’s Poetry, 260.
43 “The Political Origins of Anne Finch’s Poetry,” 328; Writing Women’s Literary History, 127–129. Both critics also note that Virginia Woolf, in A Room of One’s Own (1929), “perpetuates this image of the pensive countess by quoting Murry; [and] she goes one step further by assigning the cause of Finch’s melancholy to her thwarted literary ambitions” (Writing Women’s Literary History, 129).
retirement that has very little to do with politics, culture, or even religion; it is all a matter of withdrawal and quiet reflection.”

As readers remain exposed to her lyrical, less (explicitly) political poetry, so too does Finch remain cast as a retired poet who, like the “Reverie’s” first-person speaker, “Joys in th’inferiour World, and thinks it like her Own” (line 46), or whose vision of an “Absolute Retreat” depends almost entirely on a natural setting conducive to solitary meditation.

Inspired by the recovery efforts of feminist literary scholars in the 1980s and 1990s, critical studies of Finch have since substantially overturned this restrained view, with many benefiting from a deeper engagement with her manuscript poems (including the discovery and scholarly publication of her Wellesley manuscript) and the “non-Pindaric” forms—fables, songs, pastoral dialogues, epistles, and plays—in which she wrote. Just as telling about these modern representations of Finch, however, is their presumption that her poetic retreats meet their limits against the boundaries of lived reality. Hinnant, for example, broadly observes of Finch’s Miscellany Poems that the collection’s contents reveal a “divided audience” split between the poet’s intimate circle of friends and acquaintances and a broader reading public, suggesting that the friction

45 Hinnant, The Poetry of Anne Finch, 37.
46 Unless otherwise noted, all quotations of Finch’s poetry are taken from [Anne Finch,] Miscellany Poems, on Several Occasions. Written by a Lady (London: J. Barber, 1713).
between these circles generates productive, though occasionally irresolvable tensions.\textsuperscript{49} Such tensions, in his view, call into question the capacity of her lyric poems to achieve their intended results, as in the “Petition for an Absolute Retreat” and its switch from “Ardelia’s” first-person utterance to third-person address in her summons to “Arminda” (the poet’s representation of Catherine Cavendish, Countess of Thanet):

Back reflecting let me say,
So the sad Ardelia lay;
Blasted by a Storm of Fate,
Felt, thro’ all the British State;
Fall’n, neglected, lost, forgot,
Dark Oblivion all her Lot;
Faded till Arminda’s Love,
(Guided by the Pow’rs above)
Warm’d anew her drooping Heart,
And Life diffus’d thro’ every Part… (lines 158–67)

Arminda’s entrance into the “Petition” immediately follows Ardelia’s recognition that, in Hinnant’s words, “achieving the ‘Absolute Retreat’ is not easy inasmuch as it involves a total renunciation of the world,” not least when the speaker’s desire for timeless and stasis inevitably falls prey to the passage of time.\textsuperscript{50}

Whereas Hinnant sees Arminda’s arrival as evidence of the “Petition’s” gap between desire for and fulfillment of solitude, Barash contends that she “imaginatively rescues Ardelia from [the poem’s] storms of political upheaval” and registers an authority built on “fusing [both women] with nature and the community of other women.”\textsuperscript{51} Yet she also reads the “Petition” as a symptom of theMiscellany Poems’ general

\textsuperscript{49} Hinnant, The Poetry of Anne Finch, 19, 21. See also 110–13, in which Hinnant reads, via “To the Nightingale,” an “opposition between the lyric and didactic, or between song and speech” as registered in “the impossibility of the retention of speech in song” (110–11). I will return at length to Hinnant’s distinction between these modes in my reading of “Upon the Hurricane.”

\textsuperscript{50} Hinnant, The Poetry of Anne Finch, 147.

\textsuperscript{51} Such poetic community, Barash argues, replaces both the court culture and the London circles from which Finch was forced to retreat; English Women’s Poetry, 279, 280, 282.
transformation of the poet’s political engagements into lyrical ones. This transformation certainly resulted from Finch’s scrupulous revision of her more overtly charged manuscript poems, but the larger point to be made here is that such changes should be interpreted as evidence of a lyrical sublimation at all. Barash herself names Finch as the eighteenth-century lyric poet par excellence, while simultaneously noting the detachment that this role entails: “We might say that Finch invented the poetic psyche, a figure at once of desire and absence, spiritual fulfillment and the tragic distance that separates it from life and even the most powerful dreams of the material world.” And this “poetic psyche,” once released to the public in 1713, confirmed “Finch’s construction of herself as a poet of emotional rather than political and religious extremity,” no less at a time when the political winds appeared to be shifting in the Finches’ favor.

My reading of Finch’s poetry, however, aims to put pressure on the “rather than” logic that Barash and Hinnant deploy in their judgments of the poet’s lyric capabilities. Instead of grounding her lyric qualities in intimate, introspective, or simply less-than-public expression, I ask: How did Finch engage lyrically with the wider world even as she wrote in her own forced retreat? More generally, what would such an engagement look like, especially for a poet who could no longer write from the center of national affairs and so had to assess her newfound circumstances?

Finch best raises and addresses these questions herself in “A Pindarick Poem.

52 Ibid., 261.
53 Ibid., 282. As Barash points out, several circumstances in 1712–13 appeared to work to the Finches’ advantage: the couple had been elevated to the peerage in 1712, which somewhat restored their public standing and brought them much-needed income; Queen Anne was struggling to cope with her illness and would die in the following year; and the Treaty of Utrecht, despite ending the War of the Spanish Succession and rewarding Britain with a virtual monopoly over the Atlantic slave trade, nevertheless proved controversial with its other concessions.
Upon the Hurricane in November 1703, referring to this Text in Psalm 148. Ver. 8.

Winds and Storms fulfilling his Word. With a HYMN compos’d of the 148th PSALM Paraphras’d.” The poem was likely completed on February 9, 1704, but had undergone substantial revisions across several manuscripts before being printed in the 1713 Miscellany.54 The storm in question, meanwhile, barreled into Britain from the Atlantic on November 26, and tracked northeast overnight before departing for Scandinavia the following day. It had been preceded, moreover, by exceptionally powerful winds developing in the English Channel and the greater Atlantic throughout the month.55

Although the hurricane remains the most destructive storm to have impacted the British Isles, it is also notable for having inspired first-hand reports, fast-day sermons, and other printed responses from Britons of every region. The most comprehensive of these accounts was Defoe’s prose tract on The Storm: or, a Collection of the most Remarkable Casualties and Disasters which happened in the late Dreadful Tempest, both by Sea and Land (1704), whose persistent claims to truthful reportage rested on authorial observation and written testimonies submitted by residents from all over the country.56

Several such accounts from Kent testified to the destruction wrought upon the county

54 McGovern, Anne Finch and Her Poetry, 119, 121; Wright, “Manuscript, Print, and Politics in Anne Finch’s ‘Upon the Hurricane,’” Studies in Philology 111, no. 3 (2014): 571–90; see especially 573–77 for a detailed account of “Upon the Hurricane’s” manuscript and print versions. Wright notes that “The Hymn” featured as an unattributed, stand-alone piece in Delarivier Manley’s The New Atalantis (1709), along with other Finch poems such as “Life’s Progress” (574–75). My discussion of the full poem, meanwhile, is less invested in the variations between these versions than it is in its strategies of self-presentation in political retreat.


56 For discussion of The Storm and its place in the contemporary meteorological and political climate, see Richard Hamblyn, introduction to The Storm (New York: Penguin Classics, 2005), xxii–xxxiv; and Robert Markley, “‘Casualties and Disasters’: Defoe and the Interpretation of Climatic Instability,” Early Modern Cultural Studies 8, no. 2 (2008): 102–24. In addition to his prose report and his Pindaric poem An Essay on the Late Storm (the latter of which I discuss later), Defoe also wrote the satirical prose tract The Lay-man’s Sermon upon the Late Storm, which preceded the publication of his other two pieces.
alone, as the storm tore off boats, barns, and churches from their foundations and tossed them at random into the air.⁵⁷

The Finches most likely witnessed the storm’s destructive impact first-hand from Eastwell Park. But by this time, they had already begun to pursue some semblance of public life, especially since the Stuart monarch Anne succeeded William III upon his death in 1702.⁵⁸ Anne’s ascension did not change the Finches’ immediate fortunes, however, and political tensions over the queen’s fate would likewise transform the national landscape between “Upon the Hurricane’s” 1704 composition and its 1713 release in print. Prevailing fears over a likely Catholic successor to the throne—whose possible heirs had not been accounted for in the 1689 Bill of Rights—motivated the English Parliament to pass the Act of Settlement 1701 and name Sophia of Hanover as Anne’s Protestant successor. The decision, however, drove Scotland to issue its own Act of Security in 1704 (which stipulated that the nation was to choose its own successor to Anne independently of England), and its passage set the wheels in motion for tense, protracted debates over the mutual fate of both nations. Three years later, the Finches would observe the official formation of the Kingdom of Great Britain while still residing at Eastwell; around the same time, the “Pretender” James Francis Edward Stuart began planning his failed 1708 invasion of the newly united kingdom.

Amidst these prevailing political and meteorological climates, Finch’s poem stands out less as an attempt to recount the events of the storm, and more as an

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⁵⁷ Defoe himself traveled to the region in December 1703, where he counted at least 1100 “dwelling-houses, out-houses, and barns blown quite down” by the hurricane (The Storm, 96).
⁵⁸ Heneage in particular had unsuccessfully attempted to stand as MP, losing the elections of 1701, 1705, and 1710. By 1708, however, they had likely moved back to London. McGovern, Anne Finch and Her Poetry, 89–91.
engagement with its biblical and political resonances, as well as its poetic and existential ramifications. Although Pindaric in its movement and “occasional” in its setup, Finch’s poem, I argue, should also be read as a poem of retreat—neither in the vein of popular pieces such as John Pomfret’s The Choice (1700), nor in the vein of her self-consciously ‘melancholy’ poems, but rather as a poem which depends fundamentally on its composition-in-exile. This dependence emerges through the exiled poet’s strategic mode of lyric address, calling into question the utility of an individual ‘speaking’ presence against the backdrop of political and existential calamity. And as I will show, Finch’s lyricism matches the storm’s destructive force not only to represent and reproduce its effects, but also to reclaim her own right as woman writer, devout Anglican, and political exile to summon her nation—the largest available collective to both hurricane and poem—in a period of crisis.

The poem begins with an apostrophe to the hurricane’s winds:

YOU have obey’d, you WINDS, that must fulfill
The Great Disposer’s righteous Will;
Throughout the Land, unlimited you flew,
Nor sought, as heretofore, with Friendly Aid
Only, new Motion to bestow
Upon the sluggish Vapours, bred below,
Condensing into Mists, and melancholy Shade.
No more such gentle Methods you pursue,
But marching now in terrible Array,
Undistinguish’d was your Prey… (lines 1–10)

These lines’ forceful address inscribes the winds under the “righteous Will” of God, but their former pleasantness rapidly gives way to a more “terrible Array” of forces which prey upon the land. (So decisive is the obedience of these winds to the divine order that

59 That these factors are inextricable from each other may likewise explain “Upon the Hurricane’s” uncertain generic status, as I shall discuss later.
the opening couplet functions as the poem’s refrain, recurring twice more at lines 187–88 and 243–44.) As Courtney Weiss Smith notes, this transition accompanies a shift in the poet’s attribution of agency from divine inspiration to natural force, and one which the poet also performs grammatically as she moves the winds from passive voice (“You have obey’d”) to active voice (“you flew…you pursue”).60 The new-found “unlimited” volition of the winds enables them to tear apart Britain’s many shrubs and trees, the most prominent and symbolic being the mighty oak:

In vain the Oak (so often storm’d)  
Rely’d upon that native Force,  
By which already was perform’d  
So much of his appointed Course,  
As made him, fearless of Decay,  
   Wait but the accomplish’d Time  
Of his long-wish’d and useful Prime,  
To be remov’d, with Honour, to the Sea. (lines 15–22)

Finch’s description of the oak is embedded as much in contemporary accounts of the storm as it is in contemporary Jacobite iconography (as Charles II was reported to have hid himself in an oak tree following the royalists’ defeat at the siege of Worcester in 1651) and in the recent 1688 Revolution.61 The poem strengthens these connections in the quoted lines as despite its “vain” efforts to resist the winds, the oak retains some of its sturdiness through the poem’s syntactic padding of appositives (“By which already was

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perform’d…As made him, fearless of Decay”) and strong alternating end-rhymes. As such, the poet tempers the storm’s destructive force as much through her suggestive political allusions as through her “Pindaric” poetics, evoking its terror while carefully managing its language and effects. Nevertheless, her emphasis on the trees’ “native Force” cannot ultimately forestall their fate, with even “Mother Earth” surrendering them “[t]o this destructive, this imperious Wind, / That check’d your nobler Aims, and gives you to the Fire” (lines 41, 49–50). By foregrounding the oak at this moment in the poem, Finch argues that its destruction signals the collapse of Jacobite orthodoxy as much as it symbolizes the ravaged land.

Most important for my purposes, however, is the fact that these opening passages lack an identifiable subject, or one who claims the poetic authority to recount and accuse the storm’s agents. This absence of a lyric-I is not unique, given that several of Finch’s other poems share this feature; but unlike these others, “Upon the Hurricane’s” conspicuous lack of the pronoun has put pressure on readers who have evaluated its formal qualities. Reading her Pindaric poem alongside “A Preparation to Prayer” (not included in the 1713 Miscellany) and “All is Vanity,” Hinnant observes that “Finch avoids the first-person pronoun of lyric poetry and prefers instead the convention of second-person address—the characteristic pronoun of the didactic mode.”62 Thus categorizing “Upon the Hurricane” as didactic rather than lyric, he concludes that these poems “converge on the same dilemma—namely, the mind’s difficulty in coming to terms with a force that defies human understanding.”63 These remarks are significant because they function as claims on poetic genre and reading practice: If Finch’s poem

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62 Hinnant, The Poetry of Anne Finch, 245.
63 Ibid., 246.
lacks the “I” that has become one of the foundational elements of the lyric, this lack has also prevented readers like Hinnant from interpreting the poem as a lyric—or rather, as a lyric whose status depends on its impossible engagement with (rather than retreat from) historical event, political allegory, and linguistic play.

Hinnant’s distinction between the lyric-I and the didactic-you thus translates into the lyric’s (and the lyricist’s) inability to confront the overwhelming dilemmas of faith and politics. Such comments tell us, in turn, that “Upon the Hurricane” lacks the features that critics from Wordsworth forward have identified in her other poems of retreat (which consequently make them lyrical): intimate address, regulated rhythm, and transparent expression of the poet-persona’s internal emotions. I want to argue, however, that such non-lyrical features should instead be read as lyrical, and as crucial components of a specifically impersonal lyricism which enabled her to speak in self-exile without marking herself as an identifiable speaker and political subject. In the absence of a lyric-I, Finch deliberately reenacts her political condition: she evacuates herself from the poem she constructs, and adopts instead the collective our, whose antecedent alternately ranges from the exiled Jacobites to Britain at large. This pronoun usage likewise enables the

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64 This generic distinction also shapes, to varying degrees, more recent descriptions of “Upon the Hurricane’s” poetic framework. David Fairer, for example, observes that the poem evokes the musical connotations of the “lyric,” only to demonstrate the term’s discordant limits as the poet summons image after image of civil anarchy. Fairer, “Modulation and Expression in the Lyric Ode, 1660–1750,” in The Lyric Poem: Formations and Transformations, ed. Marion Thain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 104–06. Agency likewise proves difficult to specify in the absence of a lyric-I: Wright notes simply that Finch constructs a narrator of “magisterial authority” by excluding any specific first-person references, whereas Weiss Smith (in a reading motivated by Bruno Latour’s “descriptive turn”) contends that the poet dissolves any easy ontological distinction between subject and object, offering instead a series of “multiple, overlapping and dispersed agencies.” Wright, “Manuscript, Print, and Politics,” 580; Weiss Smith, “Anne Finch’s Descriptive Turn,” 256.
poem to function as its titular event and not merely its historical record. And as I will demonstrate later in this section, it is this equation of utterance with event that distinguishes Finch’s poem from contemporary responses to the Great Storm.

If the lyric-I does not properly surface in the event of the storm, then what characterizes the “impersonal lyricism” that takes its place? Finch offers (and immediately problematizes) one possible answer when her poem turns directly to Britain’s stranded citizens, whose voices literally “falter” in the aftermath of the disaster:

What alas, is to be done!
Those, who in Cities wou’d from Dangers run,
Do but increasing Dangers meet,
And Death, in various shapes, attending in the Street;

One half’s interr’d, the other yet survives,
And for Release with fainting Vigour strives;
Implores the Aid of absent Friends in vain;
With fault’ring Speech, and dying Wishes calls
Those, whom perhaps, their own Domestic Walls
By parallel Distress, or swifter Death retains. (lines 82–95)

In destroying the extant social and physical fabric of Britain’s cities, the storm is shown to disable the human utterance, turning the nation’s citizens into voices in a vacuum. The poem likewise enacts the hurricane’s immediate aftermath in highly emotive declaratives, and even the lines’ end-rhymes (survives / strives, calls / Walls, vain / retains) register the contradictions of remembering and re-performing the stranded Britons’ disordered movements. But the passage also dramatizes Finch’s fundamental condition: she too

These features pose difficult questions to poet and audience alike: is Finch proposing that her poem, with its power to recreate the violence of the hurricane, must sacrifice any individual voice (including her own) to the titular storm in order for the poem to achieve

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65 This is to say that if Finch had inserted herself-as-I into the poem, the result would be a lyric that could be read conventionally as a lyric, under the modern paradigm I have traced above.
its enunciative force? Indeed, does the poet’s description of the victims’ voices as “fault’ring” and echoic—because they can only reverberate within “their own Domestic Walls”—signal the vulnerability of personal voice and address in a moment of great public turmoil? If such is the case, then what happens to the lyric utterance itself under the impact of such a force?

These questions also persist through the poem’s later Pindaric passages, particularly as they recall the winds into the poetic frame. Soon after the poem meditates on the stranded Britons, it offers a token lament for the death of Richard Kidder, Bishop of Bath and Wells, who controversially replaced the nonjuring Thomas Ken in 1691:

> O Wells! thy Bishop’s Mansion we lament,  
> So tragical the Fall, so dire th’Event!  
> But let no daring Thought presume  
> To point a Cause for that oppressive Doom.  
> Yet strictly pious KEN! had’st Thou been there,  
> This Fate, we think, had not become thy share…

Finch’s verse then turns to name the winds as culprits behind the ensuing chaos:

> Whilst you, bold Winds and Storms! his Word obey’d,  
> Whilst you his Scourge the Great Jehovah made,  
> And into ruin’d Heaps our Edifices laid.  
> You South and West the Tragedy began,  
> As, with disorder’d haste, you o’er the Surface ran;  
> Forgetting, that you were design’d  
> (Chiefly thou Zephyrus, thou softest Wind!)  
> Only our Heats, when sultry, to allay,  
> And chase the od’rous Gums by your dispersing Play. (lines 96–101)

Although addressed as culpable subjects of “the Tragedy,” the personified “Winds and Storms” prevent any straightforward identification between the storm’s “disorder’d haste” and the surrounding political climate.

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66 For a specific account of the bishops’ careers, see Brayne, The Great Storm, 11–15.  
67 Despite their confusing movement, this passage and the preceding lament for Kidder have been used to position the poem politically. Hinnant acknowledges the controversy surrounding the
winds throw any sense of political or grammatical identification into jeopardy, as Finch’s “you” rapidly changes its antecedent from “Winds and Storms” to the “South and West” winds, with the more formal “thou” reserved for “Zephyrus, thou softest Wind.” Although the referent for the west wind remains ambiguous, its additional weight as the deity of pastoral poetry further confuses the destructive effects of the hurricane. Is Finch merely blaming the southern and western winds for overstepping their metaphysical bounds (in “forgetting” to “allay” “our heats”)? Or is the Pindaric poem, having persistently summoned the winds in its restaging of the Great Storm, now seeking to retract its performative energies and to temper its own retroactive violence?

Finch chooses not to answer these questions directly, but rather carries her expansive and meandering Pindaric to the secure conclusion of renewed faith in God. Prior to its final paraphrase of Psalm 148 in “The Hymn,” the poem closes by triangulating God, the first-person plural “our,” and “the Poet” into a plea for public faith:

Then let to Heaven our general Praise be sent,  
Which did our farther loss, our total Wreck prevent.  
And as our Aspirations do ascend,  
Let every Thing be summon’d to attend;  
And let the Poet after God’s own Heart  
Direct our Skill in that sublimer part,  
And our weak Numbers mend! (lines 297–303)

appointment of Kidder’s appointment, but is nevertheless reluctant to read into “Upon the Hurricane” any decisive “judgment upon the events of the previous fifteen years”; Hinnant, The Poetry of Anne Finch, 247. On the other hand, David Fairer and Christine Gerrard speculate that Finch’s invocation of the four winds may recall the political maneuvers which followed Queen Anne’s ascension in 1702, namely the high Tories’ failed attempt to purge all Whigs from political office. Fairer and Gerrard, Eighteenth-Century Poetry: An Annotated Anthology, 3rd ed. (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 29, footnote. Wright characterizes the passage as fatalistic and concludes: “In short, it is not so much that ‘Upon the Hurricane’ questions the adequacy of Jacobite interpretations of recent history, as that the ills diagnosed by Finch’s Jacobitism now exceed any realistic means of political redemption”; Wright, “Manuscript, Print, and Politics,” 584.
It is in these final lines that Finch properly summons a “Poet” who, as choirmaster, can direct the nation’s “general Praise”—a trope intended to restore voice to those formerly “fault’ring” citizens—to God and Britain alike, not least in the absence of any recognizable “Titles” or “Forms” following the “deluding Splendors” of the storm (lines 289, 288). Moreover, this summons arrives not as the source of the poetic utterance (the ode as a whole) but rather as its end product: the final call to a living Poet “after God’s own Heart” gives voice to Finch’s ensuing “Hymn,” and enables her to claim it as her own in the poem’s only explicit acknowledgement of her authorial presence:

> From my contemn’d Retreat, obscure and low,  
> As Grots from whence the Winds dispense,  
> May this His Praise as far extended flow;  
> And if that future Times shall read my Verse,  
> Tho’ worthless in it self, let them his Praise rehearse. (lines 369–73)

Besides indicating toward the poet’s “obscure and low” status, the passage also foregrounds what Finch believes to be the centerpiece of the “Hurricane.” It is not the “Pindarick Poem” which she contends will endure, but rather this concluding paraphrase of Psalm 148 (“Praise ye the Lord…”) that will secure both her future reputation and her present “Retreat,” in that it will have justified her claims to safety among those “whom He alone defends.” Still, the “Hymn’s” positioning suggests that its all-encompassing address depends on the Pindaric poem’s initial evacuation and eventual return of Finch’s presence: the lyric-I cannot speak as such until it properly recognizes God’s supreme authority. Writing from her “contemn’d Retreat,” Finch fashions a lyric meditation which authorizes her (in all senses of the verb) to address and ameliorate her nation in the wake

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68 Wright identifies this moment as the poem’s only religiously “optimistic” moment in the wake of Finch’s political pessimism and despair (589).
of disaster. The poem’s completion therefore functions as both a reminder of the poet’s craft, voice, and (political) position, and of the need for a collective voice to restore the nation from its disasters. Neither a public interlocutor nor a private witness to the storm within her poem, the poet deftly uses her “Retreat” to negotiate a new role for herself in a post-Jacobite and post-catastrophe Britain.

As it is poised uneasily between personal and impersonal addresses, “Upon the Hurricane” differs importantly from contemporary responses to the Great Storm. Although Finch’s meditation-turned-hymn is of a piece with contemporary works, both formally and in its view of the hurricane as Britain’s divine punishment for its accumulated sins, few of them stage the disaster as an opportunity to reclaim personal and public authority in the way that she does. The most notable exception, however, is Defoe’s *An Essay on the Late Storm* (1704), published with his *Elegy on the Author of the True-Born Englishman* during arguably the most tumultuous phase of his career. Written just after his exit from Newgate where he had been imprisoned for libel, Defoe’s “Preface to the Elegy” presents himself as “effectually…metaphorically dead”

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69 This self-authorization thus offers a provocative rejoinder to Paula Backscheider’s observation that Finch, along with contemporary women poets, “made the retirement poem about the self and about the recognition of an autonomous identity” (*Eighteenth-Century Women Poets and Their Poetry*, 240). Given that “Upon the Hurricane” discloses the poet’s presence in its final lines, Finch enacts something like the reverse of Backscheider’s claim: only after the poet withholds “the self” can she reclaim it by insisting on collective praise rather than solitary meditation.

70 S. W.’s *Poem on the late Violent Storm* (London: B. Bragg, 1703), for example, is a fairly conventional meditation in heroic couplets that begins by attributing the disaster to God’s rightful wrath and that concludes by paraphrasing Psalm 148 into a call for repentance. John Crabb’s *A Poem upon the late Storm and Hurricane; with an Hymn. Dedicated to the Que* (London: J. Wyat, 1704) also adopts heroic couplets followed by a hymn, though it differs in its first-person utterance, its survey of particular sites which the storm had ravaged, and its praise of Queen Anne and her survival as acts of Providence.

71 Defoe was imprisoned on charges surrounding his controversial pamphlet *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters* (1702); coincidentally, his release occurred just one week before the storm made landfall.
following his imprisonment. But this conceit disappears in the *Elegy*’s attacks on the “Mob of wretched Writers” who have slandered him in his lifetime before reemerging in the *Essay*’s claims of witnessing the storm—framed as a pronouncement from Heaven—firsthand, albeit from an undisclosed location:

I heard the Voice, and knew the Language too,  
Think not strange I heard it here,  
DECLARErorsdel. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .  
Tho’ I have lost Poetick breath,  
I’m not in perfect State of Death. (lines 6–7, 11–12)

This perspective enables Defoe in his legally deceased state to “hear” the storm as prophecy: “Since Storms are then the Nation’s Choice, / Be Storms their Portion, said the *Heavenly Voice*” (lines 41–42).

It soon becomes clear that the “storm” serves as pretext for Defoe to launch several attacks on English domestic and foreign policy, with a more overt emphasis than Finch’s poem on other contemporary events. His lament for the destroyed naval fleet, for example, acknowledges that the ships are easier to replace than the sailors who commanded them, but it also insinuates that these docked vessels would have been better served fighting Spain’s united forces:

There the Mighty Wrecks appear,  
*Hic Jacent*, Useless Things of War.  
Graves of Men, and Tools of State,  
There you lye too soon, there you lye too late. (lines 152–55)

And while Finch half-heartedly laments Bishop Kidder’s death, Defoe goes further when he calls out the non-juring bishop John Blackbourne (1683–1741) and a rightful victim of the storm who, “After he had Burlesqu’d a God so long, / He should at last be in the
wrong” (lines 181–82). But most strikingly (and unsurprisingly for a committed Williamite), the poet claims that the “horrid Blast” of the storm brought to his mind the image of the deceased William III, who appears

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Just in the same Concern he us’d to show,} \\
\text{When private Tempests us’d to blow,} \\
\text{Storms which the Monarch more than Death or Battel fear’d. (lines 67–69)}
\end{align*}
\]

The late king’s appearance is in fact timely, for his arrival enables the equally ‘deceased’ Defoe to serve as fabricator of the king’s deathbed prophecies. The poet invokes his monarch to justify the storm’s rightful punishment of Anne’s Tory supporters for their power struggles upon her accession to the throne:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{He pity’d Her to whom he left the Crown:} \\
\text{Foreseeing long and vig’rous Wars,} \\
\text{Foreseeing endless, private, Party Jarrs,} \\
\text{Would always interrupt Her Rest,} \\
\text{And fill with Anxious Cares Her Royal Breast.} \\
\text{For Storms of Court Ambition rage as high} \\
\text{Almost as Tempests in the Sky. (lines 86–92)}
\end{align*}
\]

The passage’s mixture of narrative, prophecy, and epideixis may call into question Defoe’s location (whence could he have discerned William’s foresight?), but it nevertheless authorizes the poet-as-deceased-subject to claim continuity between William’s clairvoyance and the real “Tempests” which unleashed their destruction on Anne’s England. Even so, the poet deliberately checks his speaking self from gaining full, vocal personhood by interrupting the poem with his desires to return to life and to claim the role of public satirist. In one such interruption, he condemns the London-based “Sons of Splendour” who wrongfully survived the storm at the expense of the navy:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Could I my hasty Doom retrieve,} \\
\text{And once more in the Land of Poets live,}
\end{align*}
\]

\footnote{In addition to his reputation as a vocal non-juror, Blackbourne may also have been attacked for his refusal to recognize the 1701 Act of Settlement and to swear allegiance to William and Mary.}
I’d now the Men of Flags and Fortune greet, 
And write an Elegy upon the Fleet.

They who rid out the Storm, and liv’d,
But saw not whence it was deriv’d,
Senseless of Danger, or the mighty Hand,
That could to cease, as well as blow, command,
Let such unthinking Creatures have a Care,
For some worse End prepare.
Let them look out for some such Day,
When what the Sea would not, the Gallows may. (lines 93–96, 101–08)

His figurative silence is finally broken, however, when he hears news of Scotland’s relative escape from the storm, a sign which he interprets as a potential Jacobite plot against the Queen and the nation:

The dangerous Sound has rais’d me from my Sleep, 
I can no longer Silence keep, 
Here Satyr’s thy Deliverance, 
A Plot in Scotland, Hatch’d in France, 
And Liberty the Old Pretence. 
Prelatick Power with Popish join, 
The Queens Just Government to undermine; 
This is enough to wake the Dead, 
The Call’s too loud, it never shall be said 
The lazy Satyr slept too long, 
When all the Nations Danger Claim’d his Song. (lines 262–72)

Defoe had long been concerned that the Jacobite presence in England would strengthen France’s ability to disturb the national peace from afar, and here the threat of political insurrection proves to be the poet-persona’s catalyst both for a reawakening of the satiric muse (“Wake and inform Mankind / Of Storms that still remain behind”; lines 281–82) and for the empowerment of communal poetic address to the nation (“If Living Poets

73 Defoe’s writings on Scotland are voluminous—especially in the buildup to the 1707 Union—and beyond the scope of my interest in his poetics vis-à-vis Finch’s “Hurricane.” In his anonymous pamphlet The Present State of Jacobitism Considered, In Two Querys (London, 1701), composed and published shortly after James II’s death in September, Defoe reasoned that France would be content to remain silent and to leave the late king’s supporters to their own devices, including any potential claims to succession by James’ son.
Dare not speak, / We that are Dead must Silence break”; lines 326–27). In a move that could be considered antiparallel to Finch’s “Upon the Hurricane,” Defoe also draws upon the evacuation of a poetic self to justify his return to a position of public judgment, but under reversed circumstances. Whereas Finch finds her voice after chorally summoning Britain back into line under the divine authority of God, Defoe regains his individual authority by raising the specter of Jacobite insurrection:

> They that *in such a Reign as this* Rebel  
> Must needs be in Confederacy with Hell.  
> ..................................................
> May Heaven the growing Mischief soon prevent,  
> And Traytors meet Reward in Punishment (lines 338–39, 344–45).

This hinge between Finch’s choral and Defoe’s individual addresses, forged as they were from separate locations amidst overlapping national crises, returns us then to the complexities of poetic-political retirement in the early eighteenth century. Although Finch and Defoe found themselves in very different modes of forced retreat, both saw in the Great Storm an opportunity not only to condemn (albeit from opposing perspectives) the political and religious causes of Britain’s destruction, but also to create complex poetic models that could adequately speak to the nation in a period of collective and personal crisis. At the same time, the turbulent climate surrounding Queen Anne’s ascension pushed these poets’ lyric retreats toward personal constraint, public address, and political awareness—in other words, all of those features which we have presumed to fall outside the conventions of the lyric retreat. These new conditions likewise play out in two differently disembodied lyric voices marked by apostrophe, summoning, and subjunctive lament. Such rhetorical features, when stripped of personal identification, complicate the lyric’s traditional claim to an identifiable speaking presence, and
transform what seems a solitary utterance into a communal, national appeal for recovery and redemption.
CHAPTER 2: The Lyric Conditions of Early Eighteenth-Century Retirement Poetry

This chapter evaluates the early eighteenth-century retirement poem in relation to modern critical attitudes toward the lyrical retreat. I focus especially on John Pomfret’s *The Choice* (1700)—arguably the most popular, if not exemplary poem of the genre—in relation to several of its lesser-known derivatives, including contemporary anonymous satires; John Wren’s *The Country Life* (1717) and *Retirement: A Divine Soliloquy* (1722); and Nicholas Amhurst’s “The Wish” (1720). Beyond recognizing these poems as important entries in the history of retirement poetry, I argue that the genre itself must be read with careful attention to its flexible poetics and historical conditions, not least because such poems have attracted accusations of a lyrical retreat from social commerce. These judgments, I contend, are intertwined with literary-critical attitudes toward the lyric which, until recently, have foregrounded its apolitical functions at the general expense of historical, political, or material consciousness.

I attempt to remedy such misleading conclusions on the eighteenth-century retirement by examining how several poems deployed the topoi of retirement during two decades of near-constant political and financial upheaval. My general claim throughout this chapter is that the retirement poem, a verse form anchored in the subjunctive logic of wish-fulfillment, became lyrical in the hands of poets and critics who exposed its ideology as solipsistic, self-serving, and sociopolitically detached. It is in this spirit, therefore, that my readings of retirement poetry confront the twinned tendencies of lyrical disengagement from the world (performed by the persona of the retiree in the poem) and lyric reading (by which the poem is also made, in the act of critical analysis or readerly
response, to disengage itself from historical circumstance). I attempt to overcome these interpretive limitations, particularly the desire to read the poem as disengaged from the world, by widening the scope of lyric reading to include where possible the poem’s circulation, its immediate contexts, and its variations at different moments (as was the case for Wren’s two retirement poems). I do this in order to show that the lyrical retirement did much more than transport its readers to a secure and desirable retreat: it also served as a viable medium for political and material critique, even to the extent that parodies of the genre seized upon its conventions to promote alternative desires.

I. Lyric Retirements, Lyric Histories

Ah quiet dell! dear cot! and mount sublime!
I was constrain’d to quit you. Was it right,
While my unnumber’d brethren toil’d and bled,
That I should dream away the trusted Hours
On rose-leaf beds, pamp’ring the coward Heart
With feelings all too delicate for use?

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
I therefore go—and join head, heart, and hand,
Active and firm, to fight the bloodless fight

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Reflections on Entering into an Active Life. A Poem, which affects not to be POETRY” (1796)

Coleridge’s “Reflections” arrived at the end of a long century during which the idea of retirement proved attractive to generations of readers. Its wistful take on the “quiet dell” of Clevedon, where he and Sara Fricker had honeymooned in late 1795, poses a contrast that earlier and contemporary readers would have found familiar: the secluded country retreat positioned against the busy realm of toiling men, public commerce, and social responsibility. Its audience would likely have recognized the figure
of “Bristowa’s citizen,” the stereotypically ambitious merchant whose “thirst of idle gold” (lines 12–13) fueled precisely the wishful thinking behind numerous reflections on retirement. But perhaps the “Reflections’” most salient feature is its use of the indicative past tense, which declares that Coleridge had credibly lived the ideal retired life at Clevedon. Between the poem’s composition in November 1795 and its first print appearance in the October 1796 issue of the *Monthly Magazine*, this past tense had expanded considerably to encompass several major events in Coleridge’s early career: his fallout and reconciliation with Robert Southey over their plans for Pantisocracy in North America; his editorship of the short-lived periodical *The Watchman* from March to May; and his first published collection of *Poems on Various Subjects* in April. Amidst these events, the poet had also moved back to Bristol (where he and Southey had begun their lecture circuits in 1794), making good on his promise to re-enter the active life.

Biographically speaking, Coleridge’s use of the past tense in the “Reflections” clearly signals a crossroads in his career and outlook. Critics have frequently cited the poem as evidence of these multiple transitions: geographically, between city and country; generically, between poetry and prose (whether journalistic or “conversational”); and philosophically, between the pleasures of retirement and the responsibilities of public activism.¹ Yet beyond these local circumstances, so to speak, lies the more expansive past tense of the genre from which Coleridge’s poem claims to depart: the eighteenth-century retirement poem. This generic departure would become clearer to readers of the 1797

Poems, where the poem was reprinted with the new title “Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement.” In place of its claim to being a non-poetic poem, meanwhile, was the Horatian epigraph Sermoni propriiora (“More suitable for prose”) from the Satires I, conveying the sense that the genre of retirement poetry was insufficient for his renewed ambitions for political reform.

If Coleridge’s “Reflections” therefore contrast the lyrical pleasures of retirement with the social responsibilities of an “active life,” we might read the poem as the moment in which the eighteenth-century genre itself stepped out of retirement and back into political activism. But such nostalgia, I will argue in this chapter, produces a misleading contrast between the lyric retirement and the political world, and by extension a false distinction between lyrical and political concerns. For Coleridge, in his expressed longing for ease at Clevedon, *lyricizes* the genre from which his poem departs, extolling its qualities as *lyrical* in order to justify his own ‘return’ to public life. These illusory distinctions, I suggest, have led modern critics to treat the poetic retirement as detached (and detachable) from almost any sense of activity, responsibility, or political and social awareness. In the specific case of the “Reflections,” this awareness only emerges when the poet breaks *from* the retreat in order to “fight the bloodless fight.”

What is at stake, then, is a portrait of retirement poetry that accurately accounts for its strategies for responding to the world from which it stages retreat. Scholars of eighteenth-century retirement poems have done much to elucidate their thematic

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2 We might also consider “Fears in Solitude,” penned and printed two years later, as a related instance in which Coleridge’s retreat opens out onto a nightmare of Britain (under threat of French invasion) and a wide-ranging attack on its corrupted desires. The key difference between these poems, Peter Larkin notes, is that in “Fears” the political world invades the dell and turns the secure retirement into a “recessively secondary” discourse. Larkin, “‘Fears in Solitude:’ Reading (from) the Dell,” *Wordsworth Circle* 22, no. 1 (1991): 13.
conventions and literary influences, with many studies tracing the genre’s origins to the
satires, epodes, and pastoral verse of Horace and Virgil. But because the retirement
almost always demands detachment from political and social commerce, its conventions
have limited the range of critical responses, from foregrounding the genre’s literary
elements to accusing it for its utopian and ahistorical ambitions. As a result, the
retirement poem has become lyricized in the same vein that Coleridge narrowly
interpreted the genre as lyrical: it becomes detached from its material context and subject
to epideictic critique (in that the poet and reader who wish to retire are to be praised or
blamed for their ambitions).

Just as the retirement poem has fallen under a particular paradigm of lyric, so too
have our most influential definitions of the lyric drawn upon the vocabulary of voluntary
withdrawal from the world at large. John Stuart Mill’s pronouncement that “Poetry is
feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude” has become arguably the
definitive statement in this vein, but his observations on lyric poetry’s relation to truth are
just as important for his portrait of the “natural” poet:

Great poets are often proverbially ignorant of life. What they know has
come by observation of themselves…Other knowledge of mankind, such
as comes to men of the world by outward experience, is not indispensable
to them as poets: but, to the novelist, such knowledge is all in all; he has to
describe outward things, not the inward man; actions and events, not
feelings…

3 The most comprehensive (if dated) study of eighteenth-century retirement poetry is still Maren-
(Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1954; 1958). Røstvig’s study does position the genre against historical
conditions, but only in so far as such information illuminates her selected poems’ aesthetic
qualities and philosophical borrowings. As I discuss later in my section on *The Choice*, scattered
critical remarks on the genre have since emphasized its political and social irresponsibility,
precisely because the staged retirement is presumed to be timeless and desirable.
4 John Stuart Mill, “Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties,” in *Dissertations and Discussions:*
Although Mill concedes that the poet’s ignorance of the world is illusory at best, his main and lasting point is that the lyric poem demands a boundary between “the inward man” and “outward experience.” Equally striking is the concomitant division of labor between genres: whereas the novelist must be responsible for description, the lyricist must be committed to feeling and emotion, and by implication must be immersed in conditions that best enable self-observation. This implication survives in Northrop Frye’s influential paraphrase of Mill—that “[t]he lyric is the genre in which the poet, like the ironic writer, turns his back on his audience”——which presents the poet in virtual retirement, even as it admits the audience’s constant presence.

I will have more to say about such critical dispositions later in this chapter, particularly as they apply to studies of eighteenth-century retirement poetry. For now, my main point is that the solipsism attributed (consciously or otherwise) to the retirement poem is intertwined with the solipsism attached to the lyric as genre. We can counter these tendencies by historicizing the poem of retirement, integrating the gesture of retreat with the political and material factors that would have motivated the wish for retirement. But equally important, I would add, is the fact that retirement poems addressed not only their immediate circumstances, but also each other. And the full range of responses (sympathetic to satiric, derivative to digressive) shows that poets staged the ideal retreat as a vehicle for social engagement, even when such engagement would have seemed sheltered from the pressures of an “active life.”

Keeping these ideas in mind, I turn to several retirement poems written and published nearly a full century before Coleridge published his own “Reflections.”

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Beginning with John Pomfret’s *The Choice*, I analyze the poem’s impact on contemporary and modern responses to the genre, and I consider how the poem itself implicitly questions (or reminds its readers of) its logic of wish-fulfillment. I then discuss three lesser-known retirement poems—two written by the Anglican minister John Wren (1674–1724), and one by the satirist and political writer Nicholas Amhurst (1697–1742)—that elucidate several different responses to retirement during a period of political and financial instability. Across my readings, I demonstrate that the poem of retirement, much more than staging a unilateral break from the world, also demanded (and continues to demand) close attention to its central gesture, and to the conditions under which poets and readers alike viewed retirement as a desirable, or even disastrous outcome.

II. Pomfret’s Lyric “Choices” and the Early Eighteenth-Century Retirement Poem

*The Choice* was the most popular retirement poem written at the turn of the eighteenth century, and it became Pomfret’s most famous work long after he died of smallpox in November 1702. Its popularity propelled ten editions (not to mention numerous pirated copies) of his poetic works between 1700 and 1740, almost all of which were marketed as being written by “the Author of the Choice.” This string of print appearances culminated in Samuel Johnson’s inclusion of Pomfret in his *Lives*, albeit with a patronizing comment on his achievement: “His *Choice* exhibits a system of life adapted to common notions, and equal to common expectations; such a state as affords plenty and tranquility, without exclusion of intellectual pleasures. Perhaps no composition in our language has been oftener perused than Pomfret’s *Choice.*”6

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Johnson’s remarks summarize the consensus among eighteenth-century critics of *The Choice*, who either praised the poem for its “common” appeal or dismissed it for the same reason. Giles Jacob celebrated its “very easy familiar Style, adapted to all Capacities,” but admitted that it was neither “the best of this Author’s Writings” nor the most original. Robert Shiells, commenting more generally on Pomfret’s works, opined that they owed their “very great esteem by the common readers of poetry” to the poet’s interest in intellectually undemanding subjects, as well as to his poems’ tolerable versification. Perhaps the poem’s most dismissive eighteenth-century critic was Jonathan Swift, who not only claimed his unwillingness to read beyond its first few lines, but also mistakenly attributed it to the Dissenting minister Samuel Pomfret (with whom the poet had no familial or religious connection).

Michael Edson has noted that *The Choice*’s perceived appeal to a “common” readership registered a divide between its commercial success and critical reception: even though the poem circulated widely across the eighteenth century, it merited little more than a patronizing footnote or dismissive comment from cultivated readers. Just as

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9 Bernard Bernatovich, “A Study of John Pomfret’s “The Choice”: The Sources, the Appreciation, the Art, and the Influence of One of the Most Popular Poems During the Eighteenth Century” (Ph.D. dissertation, 1971), 2; see 1–12 for a longer reception history of *The Choice* from the eighteenth century onward.

As I shall suggest later in this section, similar patterns persist in *The Choice*’s present-day circulation and reception. Although the poem retains its place in modern anthologies of eighteenth-century poetry, it has been criticized extensively for its advocacy of a solipsistic retirement. Notable anthologies which feature *The Choice* include *English Augustan Poetry*, ed.
importantly, these critical responses suggest that the poem has not only been canonized, but also *lyricized* as a piece itself retired from social commerce. Its preservation depends on particular impressions of what retirement poetry entails, whether in recognition of its longevity, praise of its technique, or scorn of its concerns and of its ideology. But to adopt these impressions, I contend, is to presume that *The Choice*’s staging of retirement constitutes the retired life itself, an equation that does not hold if we attend closely to the poem’s lyric performance. Against such presumptions, I argue that Pomfret’s performance, when read on its own terms, contradicts the lyrical notion that wishing for retreat will secure it. Close attention to *The Choice* and its contemporary poetic responses reveals that poets who wrote on retirement were more attuned to the limits of their rhetorical performances than contemporary or modern criticism would suggest.

*The Choice* adapts the beginning of Horace’s Satire II.6, in which the speaker requests no more than “a piece of land, not of great size, / With a garden, and a

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11 The same could be said about the poem in relation to its author’s circumstances. As an Anglican minister who had served as curate of Malden since 1695, Pomfret himself could not have afforded the retirement he staged. His closest pathway would have been the lucrative preferment that Bishop Henry Compton later offered him in June 1702, but Compton reportedly delayed the appointment because he disagreed with *The Choice*’s advocacy of a companionate mistress instead of a wife. The delay stranded Pomfret in London for nearly five months, during which he contracted smallpox before dying in late November. Philatetes [pseud.], “Some Account of Mr. POMFRET, and his Writings,” *Remains of the Reverend Mr. Pomfret*, 2nd ed. (London: E. Curll, 1724), v.
permanent spring near the house, / And above them a stretch of woodland.”

Important English models include Abraham Cowley’s “The Wish” (1647) and Nahum Tate’s “The Choice” (1677), both of which move linearly from house and garden to intellectual pursuits and select companions, and finally from life to death:

Ah, yet, ere I descend to th’grave
May I a small House, and large Garden have!
And a few Friends, and many Books, both true,
    Both wise, and both delightful too!
And since Love ne’r will from mee flee,
A Mistress moderately fair,
And good as Guardian-Angels are,
    Onely belov’d, and loving mee! (The Wish,” lines 9–16)

I wou’d have Business, but exempt from Strife;
    A Private, but an Active Life.
A Conscience bold and punctuall to his Charge;
    My Stock of Health or Patience Large.
Some Books I’d have, and some Acquaintance too,
    But very Good, and very Few.
Then (if one Mortall Two such Grants may Crave)
From Silent Life I’d Steal into my Grave. (“The Choice,” lines 5–12)

But Pomfret’s poem also differs from its predecessors in several formal and thematic aspects. Its flexible, conversational heroic couplets stand out against the alternating tetrameters and pentameters of “The Wish” and “The Choice,” which present their desired retirements in more poetically wrought fashion. The couplet structure likewise enables Pomfret to expand Cowley and Tate’s terse statements into a full-fledged catalogue of genteel goals: a “Private Seat” (line 5); a “silent Study” stocked with “the

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Noblest Authors” (lines 17–18); a “Clear and Competent Estate” (line 33); and the regular company of “two Friends” and a mistress (line 76), among other desirables.\(^{15}\) When thus itemized, these desires comprise what Maren-Sofie Røstvig has identified as the *beatus vir* or “Happy Man” motif of classical retirement poetry, and more particularly of its seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English translations and adaptations.\(^{16}\)

The most important technical feature of *The Choice*, however, is its almost uniform usage of the conditional tense. Although all three English poets state their desires in the subjunctive, Pomfret explicitly folds his conditional constructions into his poetic “Method,” as evident in the poem’s opening lines:

\[
\text{IF Heav’n the grateful Liberty wou’d give,}
\text{That I might chuse my Method how to live:}
\text{And all those Hours propitious Fate shou’d lend,}
\text{In blissful Ease and Satisfaction spend. (lines 1–4)}
\]

The subjunctive mood is crucial to *The Choice*’s movement because it lets the poem operate *between* the speaker’s lived experience and his hypothetical retreat, consciously marking these states without fully inhabiting either of them. Hence his place of retirement belies his actual condition, which remains unstated but is nevertheless more modest than the estate he desires:

\[
\text{I’d have a Clear and Competent Estate,}
\text{That I might live Genteelly, but not Great.}
\text{As much as I cou’d moderately spend,}
\text{A little more sometimes t’oblige a Friend.}
\text{Nor shou’d the Sons of Poverty Repine}
\]


\(^{16}\) Closely related to this motif is the tradition of the *beatus ille* or “Happy Husbandman,” with its roots in Horace’s Epode II, and it is the category to which Røstvig assigns *The Choice* in particular. Røstvig, *The Happy Man*, 1:71–80; see also 1:15–68 for a general discussion of the philosophical, political, and religious factors which fueled the popularity of both traditions among “neoclassical” poets in England.
Too much at Fortune, they shou’d taste of Mine… (lines 33–38)

By this logic, Pomfret would seem to enact what Raymond Williams has called “the conversion of conventional pastoral into a localised dream…and thence an idealisation of actual English country life and its social and economic relations.”

But given its conditional tense, *The Choice* does not fall neatly into Williams’ proposed genres. Although descriptive of an ideal country lifestyle, the poem is not written in the indicative mood: it does not pretend to actualize the life it describes, and its speaker does not already possess what he craves. Nor is Pomfret’s poem strictly “pastoral” in the sense that it gazes nostalgically upon a golden age “anterior in time and distant in space from the most advanced form of civilization.”

In simplest terms, *The Choice* is a wish-poem. But while it idealizes social relations into a desirable retirement, it does so, as I will show, under poetic conditions that call these relations into question.

Before I proceed to read *The Choice* and its contemporary responses, then, I argue that we should take seriously the retirement poem’s subjunctive frame in order to understand how this feature is closely related to the notion of a solipsistic, lyrical retreat. As I have suggested, one of the central interpretive assumptions on retirement poetry is its shared thematic retreat with the pastoral from the city into the country. While Williams’ general observation on the evolution of turn-of-the-century pastoral is insufficient to account for *The Choice*, his comments on the grammatical conditions of country and city pose an alternative starting point for cultural analysis:

> It is significant…that the common image of the country is now an image of the past, and the common image of the city an image of the future. That leaves, if we isolate them, an undefined present. The pull of the idea of the

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country is towards old ways, human ways, natural ways. The pull of the idea of the city is towards progress, modernisation, development. In what is then a tension, a present experienced as tension, we use the contrast of country and city to ratify an unresolved division and conflict of impulses, which it might be better to face on its own terms.\textsuperscript{19}

In arguing that the present remains unresolved beneath our ready associations of country and city with past and future, Williams also suggests that we must understand this “undefined present” by a different grammar. One such grammar could be The Choice’s subjunctive framework: its wish for retirement is rooted neither in the golden age of pastoral nor in the linear promise of modernity, but instead on a conditional structure of seeing and feeling that is perpetually activated (and indirectly fulfilled) in the very act of wishing.\textsuperscript{20} That structure closely resembles what Jonathan Culler has described as the “timeless present” of the lyric vis-à-vis its signature apostrophe, but with a crucial interpretive difference for Pomfret’s poem:

\begin{quote}
A poem can recount a sequence of events, which acquires the significance lyric requires when read synecdochically or allegorically….Alternatively, a poem may invoke objects, people, a detemporalized space with forms and forces which have pasts and futures but which are addressed as potential presences. Nothing need happen in an apostrophic poem, as the great Romantic odes aptly demonstrate. Nothing need happen because the poem itself is to be the happening.\textsuperscript{21}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{19} Williams, The Country and the City, 297. See also Williams’ Marxism and Literature (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), wherein he develops these remarks into a broader methodological imperative “to find other [i.e., non-social] terms for the undeniable experience of the present: not only the temporal present…but the specificity of present being, the inalienably physical, within which we may indeed discern and acknowledge institutions, formations, positions, but not always as fixed products, defined products” (128).

\textsuperscript{20} Here I am departing slightly from Williams’ objective to observe and affirm “the [lived] experiences which in many millions of lives are discovered and rediscovered” in order to counter the “real social processes of alienation, separation, externality, abstraction”; Williams, The Country and the City, 298. My contention is that Pomfret’s poem does not so much affirm the real experience of retirement, but rather legitimates the possibility of imagining it into textual being, and among a “common” readership. Put simply, The Choice’s conditional grammar is also a lyrical one: it poses an important gap between reading and fulfilling a specific social desire.

\textsuperscript{21} Jonathan Culler, The Pursuit of Signs (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 149; the italics are mine.
Although Culler does not share Williams’ materialist motivations, his structuralist account of the lyric also holds important consequences for retirement poetry. Here he distinguishes between narrative poems which position events and objects (that exist before or outside the moment of calling) in sequence, and “apostrophic” or vocative poems that become lyrics in the creative act of calling. But while The Choice invokes “a detemporalized space” where stated desires become “potential presences,” the poem falls outside of Culler’s lyric scheme because it is entirely subjunctive rather than vocative: its addresses are not realized apostrophes (O competent estate!) but rather conditional statements (if I had a competent estate...). Consequently, the poem is a lyric whose wishes cannot “happen” because its initial condition—“If Heav’n the grateful Liberty wou’d give, / That I might chuse my Method how to live”—remains unfulfilled in the space of the poem. That fulfillment may come with each reading, to be sure, but not exactly on the poet-persona’s own terms, given that he concludes the poem conventionally by wishing for his own peaceful death:

And when committed to the Dust, I’d have
Few Tears, but Friendly, dropt into my Grave.
Then wou’d my Exit so propitious be,
All Men wou’d wish to live and dye like me. (lines 164–67)

Such a peaceful exit, he argues, will encourage “all Men” (if not all readers) to wish for a similar lifestyle, and thus to perform a comparable poetic, lyrical act.

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22 Culler makes this distinction in a test case: “If one brings together in a poem a boy, some birds, [and] a few blessed creatures...one tends to place them in a narrative where one thing leads to another; the events which form ask to be temporally located...But if one puts into a poem thou shepherd boy, ye blessed creatures, ye birds, they are immediately associated with what might be called a timeless present but is better seen as a temporality of writing.” Culler, The Pursuit of Signs, 149, italics in original.

23 We might properly categorize the poem as a monologue, although its conspicuous lack of apostrophe would still exclude it from Culler’s conception of the lyric.
We need not, of course, presume Culler’s theory of apostrophe and the lyric to be normative, not least because *The Choice* precedes his mostly post-Enlightenment focus.\(^{24}\) The important point, rather, is that the contrast he poses between verbal moods (indicative vs. subjunctive) becomes a contrast between genres (narrative vs. lyric), and therefore between interpretive priorities: “Nothing need happen” for the purposes of interpretation “because the poem itself is to be the happening.”\(^{25}\) But this interpretive conclusion becomes problematic when one attempts to position a retirement poem like *The Choice* into a history of the eighteenth-century lyric. In his influential survey of “literary loneliness” across the eighteenth century, John Sitter characterizes the mid-century aesthetic retreat as a gradual but decisive break from social consciousness:

> By the mid-century, retirement has hardened into retreat. The poet characteristically longs to be not only far from the madding crowd…but far from everybody….Moreover, the melancholy poems seem merely to be part of a larger turning away from the social-historical world to which poetry traditionally belonged, and the deliberate break with and from the past is sometimes just as evident in many of the more cheerful poems of the period.\(^{26}\)

While *The Choice* falls on the side of social “retirement” rather than solipsistic “retreat,” its position in Sitter’s scheme anticipates what (he argues) would happen to lyric poetry

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\(^{24}\) Paul Alpers, for example, has argued that Renaissance lyrics are persistently social in their modes of address, and “characteristically addressed to what Culler calls ‘empirical listeners’—or, alternatively, to beings (like God) who are conceived as real.” Alpers, “Apostrophe and the Rhetoric of Renaissance Lyric,” *Representations* 122, no. 1 (2013): 8.

\(^{25}\) See also Helen Vendler’s criticism of readers whom she claims have not “pa[id] enough attention to [Shakespeare’s] sonnets as poems” in their quest to emphasize the Sonnets’ ideological and narrative implications. Vendler, introduction to *The Art of Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 4, italics added. Heather Dubrow observes that such attempts to distinguish between narrative and lyric frequently succumb to a “winner-take-all paradigm,” in which the interpretation of one genre turns into a struggle to establish its superiority over the other. Dubrow, “The Interplay of Narrative and Lyric: Competition, Cooperation, and the Case of the Anticipatory Amalgam,” *Narrative* 14, no. 3 (2006): 254–71.

after 1740: the poet’s subjunctive retreat from the world would break from the indicative course of history and commerce, such that “the poem itself” came to assume interpretive priority over its socio-historical context. This breakaway also turns the specific present into a “timeless” one, in that each reading of the poem reproduces the lyrical wish for retreat as a perpetual retreat from the conditions of that reading. And when thus presumed to be detached from social responsibility, the retirement poem becomes a viable target for critics who deplore its elusive stance and illusive rewards.

This perpetual disengagement from history and context may explain why literary scholars, especially in the late twentieth century, criticized both *The Choice* and the broader genre of retirement poetry for advancing a dubiously conservative, solipsistic ideology. In her history of the eighteenth-century literature of retirement, Marie Røstvig notes that Pomfret’s poem breaks from the predominantly Royalist and Anglican ideology of retirement, but she also decries its “perversion of the Horatian wish for health, peace, and competence” and its “infernally smug” posturing. Isabel Rivers likewise attacks the poem’s encouragement of what she calls “poetic toryism,” or “total disengagement from social commerce.” Although Laura Brown does not offer a reading of *The Choice*, she argues that contemporary and successive retirement poems cultivated the myth of the “good life”: a “notion of happiness [which] specifically and entirely sets


aside collectivity, community, history, and process, in favor of a constrained, proprietary space and an individualist identity that elides labor, denies commodification, and highlights individual gratification.”

While none of these critics directs her arguments against the lyric per se, their readings model an interpretive methodology through which the retirement poem comes to articulate a sociopolitically (and perhaps even poetically) undesirable ideology, in so far as that ideology is characterized by individual propriety and self-interest. Moreover, these literary scholars’ attention to the hermeneutics of retirement poetry, more so than its poetics, suggests a conscientious resistance to reproducing the genre’s solipsism in their respective acts of reading. What emerges from such critiques, then, is an interpretive methodology that, in its drive to diagnose the ills of British conservatism and unchecked accumulation in historical context, presumes a direct correspondence between the poetics and ideology of retirement poetry. Put differently, poems like The Choice become transparent, and transparently undesirable, statements of a retreat from pressing cultural-material concerns. And as critics like Rivers and Brown imply, it becomes the work of responsible literary criticism not only to trace the articulation of retreat across poems, but also to resist repeating that sense of cultural-material retreat in the act of reading.

Still, if this resistance to an interpretive retreat rests upon responsible (and commendable) politics, it also rests upon a critique of lyric reading: a refusal, in other words, to reproduce the retirement poem’s solipsistic gestures both by exposing them as narrowly self-serving and by dissociating the content of such gestures from the poetic

“method” of their articulation. I want to demonstrate, however, that *The Choice* implicitly but self-consciously subverts its ideal retirement precisely via its conditional quality and its absence of any path of labor toward the ideal retreat. These doubts are built into the structure of Pomfret’s poem, and they emerge most strongly when the speaker speculates on his possible companions in retirement. Consider, for example, his introduction of “two Friends” at line 76, whom he imagines to be

Well born, of Humours suited to my own,  
Discreet, and Men as well as books have known;  
Brave, Gen’rous, Witty, and exactly free  
From loose Behaviour, or Formality;  
Airy, and Prudent, Merry, but not Light;  
Quick in discerning, and in Judging Right… (lines 78–83)

The paratactic constructions indicate that the ideal male associates are less embodied persons than they are the linguistic accumulation of stock phrases, conventional habits, and moderated structures. But the passage also valorizes them as “Well born” men, a criterion that anchors the list of idealizations in genteel birth, and consequently presumes an established relationship between the modest poet and his prosperous companions. This material difference therefore calls into question both the efficacy of Pomfret’s desire and its intended audience: those who already fulfill the speaker’s criteria would have no need to wish for Pomfret’s retirement (and therefore no need to read *The Choice*), whereas a “common” reader like the poet himself could only hope to cultivate such traits (while lacking the requirement of genteel birth).

A similar dynamic applies to Pomfret’s imagined mistress, who enters the poem as a series of expectations that she must meet:

I’d have her Reason, and her Passions sway;  
Easy in Company, in private Gay:  
Coy to a Fop, to the Deserving free,
Still constant to her self, and just to me.

I’d have th’ Expressions of her Thoughts be such,
She might not seem Reserv’d, nor talk too much;
That shows a want of Judgment, and of Sense:
More than enough, is but Impertinence.
Her Concern Regular, her Mirth refin’d,
Civil to Strangers, to her Neighbours kind.
Averse to Vanity, Revenge, and Pride,
In all the Methods of Deceit untry’d.
So faithful to her Friend, and good to all,
No Censure might upon her Actions fall.
Then wou’d ev’n Envy be compell’d to say,
She goes the least of Womankind astay. (lines 107–10, 117–28)

As with his imaginary male friends, Pomfret deploys parataxis to moderate his ideal mistress’ features: she must be decorous in public and expressive (but not overly so) in private, “civil” and resistant to the vices of society, and “faithful” to the retired poet who would keep her for company. These idealized qualities likewise depend upon the banal, misogynistic trope of “Womankind” tending to go “astray,” a quality which the speaker expects his partner to overcome. But the mistress also accomplishes what the wishful poet himself cannot do alone: she mediates between his desire for personal intimacy with her and his desire for a social world in retreat. As the speaker explains following his extensive catalogue, she would serve to satisfy his regular need for romantic intimacy and privacy from the world:

To this fair Creature I’d sometimes retire,
Her Conversation wou’d new Joys inspire,
Give Life an Edge so keen, no surly Care
Wou’d venture to assault my Soul, or dare
Near my Retreat to hide one secret Snare. (lines 129–33)

In the process, the mistress embodies a poetic fantasy of retirement that any pressing sense of the world beyond her immediate company would necessarily fracture or inhibit.

I have suggested, then, that The Choice proposes its ideal retirement under
rhetorical and temporal conditions that foreground their lyrical, rather than materially attainable qualities. Contemporary poetic rejoinders to Pomfret variously seized on these qualities to correct his vision, to expose his poem’s limits, and to demonstrate the disastrous consequences of living the ideal retirement. The anonymously authored *The Virtuous Wife* (1700), for example, challenges Pomfret’s claim that “[he]’d have no Wife” (line 130), and rewrites *The Choice* in the form of a seven-part poem cataloguing the righteous wife’s “Character,” “Person,” “Parts,” “Religion,” “Temper,” “Conduct,” and “Conversation.”

Despite retaining the style and metrics of its original, *The Virtuous Wife* circumscribes *The Choice*’s companionate mistress into the codes of Christian patriarchy, as when the speaker outlines his ideal wife’s religious habits:

I’d have her often in her Closet *Pray,*  
And go to *Church* with *Christians* ev’ry Day;  
Devout, Sincere and Pious in her Way.  
But whether *Protestant,* or *Papist,* Good  
In all the *Offices* of *Flesh* and *Blood.*  
No *Bigot* in *Devotion;* not *Confin’d*  
Against the *Laws* and *Liberties* of Mind;  
To *this* or *that* *Religion* a-la-mode:  
Not sham’d, nor scar’d out of the good old Road,  
For fear of being out of *Fashion* with her *God.*  
*Different Perswasions* should not make us *Foes;*  
For *Love* that’s *Real* no *Religion* knows. (lines 40–51)

Such indirect imperatives also extend into the other realms of her life, from domestic pursuits to general conduct and even internal thoughts:

Not *Flaunting,* *Foppish,* *Gadding,* or *Unkind*  
To *Sober Virtue,* and her *Spouses Mind:*  
Not *Hypocritical,* *Corrupt,* nor *Base;*

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31 Anon, *The Virtuous Wife. A POEM. In Answer to the CHOICE, That would have No WIFE* (London: J. Nutt, 1700). This seven-part structure likely inspired publisher John Nutt to impose a similar outline on later reprints of *The Choice,* beginning with the third and fourth editions in 1701. Nutt also appended an advertisement for *The Virtuous Wife* to *The Choice*’s fourth edition but did not print these two poems together.
And only Good for want of Time and Place.” (lines 56–59)

In his final invocation of Pomfret’s original poem, the speaker hopes that this series of circumscriptions upon his imagined wife will add up to “A Noble Pattern to Posterity; / And few so Fortunate, so Blest as me!” (lines 95–96), indicating not only a defense of his virtuous subject’s righteousness but also the correction of Pomfret’s lyrical retirement into a didactic project. 32

A more radical response, titled Hobson’s Choice (1700) and subsequently attributed to the satirist Thomas Brown (1663-1704), criticizes The Choice’s entire enterprise. Both the title and opening lines satirize their target’s religious pretensions and academic frivolity: “Since Heaven denies us liberty of Choice, / Why should a Man (for God-sake) make a noise” (lines 1–2) 33 The remainder of the poem, meanwhile, dispenses with the conditional tense as Hobson lambasts Pomfret for presuming that men can choose their preferred lifestyles, particularly when such “choices” serve to “curse [one’s] backward Fate” (line 5). Nor does the speaker apologize for his use of the present tense, claiming it instead as a point of personal pride and self-worth:

By Heaven, I’d rather be just what I am,
Plain Hobson, than be painted with the Sham
Appearance of the Gaudy Fortunate,
Who have less Happiness, and more Crevat. (lines 59–62)

32 Rose A. Zimbardo has also argued that The Virtuous Wife serves as both a corrective to the perceived libertinism of the “Rampant Age” (line 74) and an assimilation of the contemporary discourses of capitalism and heterosexuality into one agreeable figure. Zimbardo, At Zero Point: Discourse, Culture, and Satire in Restoration England (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 110.
33 Thomas Brown, Hobson’s Choice. A Poem, in Answer to the Choice, Written by a Person of Quality (London: J. Nutt, 1700), 3. The title refers to the legend of the Cambridge carrier Tobias Hobson (1544–1631), who reportedly offered his customers the “choice” of taking either the horse in his stall or no horse at all. The OED records the phrase’s first usage in the tract Rusticus ad academicos (1660) by Quaker preacher Samuel Fisher: “If in this case there be no other (as the Proverb is) then Hobson’s choice…which is whether you will have this or none.”
But Hobson’s strongest attack arrives as he contrasts *The Choice*’s recursively imaginary wishes with its poet’s real modesty:

> So *Wishes* still vain *Wishes* must succeed,
> And *those* again beget an *Endless Breed*,
> And *all* at last must stray without a *Head*;
> For who that has that *Engine* on his *Neck*,
> Whose hest do’s not the weak *Supporter* break,
> Would ever Ramble from *himself* so far,
> And what he has not *here*, to hunt for *there*?
> As if when he his *Wench* and *Stream* had found,
> His *Happiness* would not in *both* be drown’d:
> For who can bound the *Cravings* of his *Thought*,
> When it exceeds the brims of what he’s got? (lines 76–86)

That Pomfret’s wishes “beget an *Endless Breed*” of headless subjects suggests not only their diminishing returns, but also their real print circulation over the next century. In effect, Brown’s judgment of Pomfret’s poetic retirement is that it is too obviously wish-fulfilling to be read as realistic or even desirable. As a poem preoccupied with conjuring unfulfilled wishes, *The Choice* can only reproduce *itself* as a self-delusional lyric, whose imaginative excess ultimately threatens to corrupt the poet’s (and reader’s) material and moral propriety. It is for these reasons that Hobson returns “home [to] recall thy *Wandring Thoughts* agen” (line 90), whereupon he celebrates his own frugal lifestyle:

> For I’m the happy Man, when all is said,
> Who live at *Home*, my House upon my Head;
> Who never lengthen to a *foreign Wish*,
> But size my Porrage always to my Dish;
> And unaffected both with *Time* and *Place*,
> Behold th’ uneven *World* with even Face.

> . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

> When *Supper*’s done, I never Dream of *want*
> For times to come, *Times* which I also ha’n’t;
> But in the *Corner* when I’ve sat a while,
> Pleas’d with my self, I give the *World* a smile,
> Then my own Pace away I go to Bed,
> Stretch my self out, and Sleep as I were *Dead*. (lines 95–100, 111–16)
This final vernacular passage, articulated in direct contrast to Pomfret’s more studied language, grounds Hobson in a quotidian present. Most crucially, the passage’s declaratives testify to material security rather than the emptiness of wishful thinking. In having Hobson return “home” to an embedded present, Brown therefore re-presents the persona behind The Choice as a lyric poet who cannot make peace with his modest circumstances.

Although The Virtuous Wife and Hobson’s Choice were not nearly as popular as the poem they parodied, such rejoinders to Pomfret demonstrate that not all of his readers were comfortable with The Choice’s idealistic retirement, its conditional nature, or even its disengagement from the concerns of “real” men like Brown’s Hobson. At the same time, these poems take Pomfret’s lyrical retirement seriously, because they presume that his readers would be able to achieve such results by following his wishes. The most notable and popular poem to pursue this possibility—but only to demonstrate its potentially disastrous consequences—was an anonymously authored poem on The Pleasures of a Single Life, or, the Miseries of Matrimony, Occasionally Writ upon the many Divorces Granted by Parliament.34 First published as a stand-alone piece in 1701, The Pleasures was later reprinted with The Choice from 1708 forward with subtitle “Dedicated to the Beaus against the next Vacation”; both poems were reprinted together over the course of the century.35 Under this pairing, what was originally a moderate

34 The poem has traditionally been attributed to Edward “Ned” Ward or Sir John Dillon, but its authorship remains disputed. For a summary of its publication history, as well as modern debates over the poem’s attribution, see James Rosenheim, “The Pleasures of a Single Life: Envisioning Bachelorhood in Early Eighteenth-Century England,” Gender & History 27, no. 2 (2015): 307, n2. Rosenheim also speculates that The Pleasures’ claim to the occasion of recent parliamentary divorces “may also have been a strategy to market the poem as particularly topical” (311).
35 London publisher Henry Hills also pirated Pomfret’s poem in 1708 under the modified title The Choice, or, the Pleasures of a Country-Life. Both poems appeared side-by-side in the two-volume
argument for the pleasures of male retirement is now presented alongside a more scathing view of marriage as that "Curs’d uncomfortable State, / Cause of my Woes, and Object of my hate" (lines 1–2). Indeed, the first-person speaker presents himself as if he was once Pomfret’s idealized subject: a retired bachelor who was free to pursue his wide-ranging interests. These pleasures, the anonymous poet reveals, were chiefly enabled by the companionship of his books:

Books my Companions were, wherein I found
Needful Advice, without a noisy Sound,
But was with friendly pleasing Silence taught,
Wisdom’s best Rules, to fructify my Thought,
Rais’d up our Sage Fore-fathers from the dead,
And when I pleas’d, invok’d ‘em to my Aid,
Who at my Study-Bar without a Fee would plead:
Whilst I Chief Justice sat, heard all their Sutes,
And gave My Judgment ont [sic] their learn’d Disputes;
Strove to determine ev’ry Cause aright,
And for my Pains found Profit and Delight,
Free from Partiality; I fear’d no Blame,
Desir’d no Brib’ry, and deserv’d no Shame. (lines 16–28)

Just as Pomfret’s “companions” are rhetorical assemblages of ideal character traits, so too do the bachelor’s books serve as his ideal friends: they even enable him to adopt the professional norms of a “Chief Justice” without fear of their real consequences and, presumably, of the “noisy Sound” of female companionship. The subject emphasizes these imaginary and inconsequential pursuits in a subsequent chain of negative

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36 Anon, *The Pleasures of a Single Life, or, the Miseries of Matrimony. Occasionally Write Upon the many DIVORCES lately Granted by Parliament. With The CHOICE, or, the Pleasures of a Country-LIFE* (London: H. Hills, 1708), 2. All in-line citations of the *Pleasures* will refer to line numbers in this edition.
constructions, all of which are enabled by his sustained engagement with his “Paper-
World” (line 33) of maps and histories:

Thus would I range the World from Pole to Pole,
To increase my Knowledge, and delight my Soul;
Travel all Nations, and inform my Sense;
With ease and safety, at a small Expense:
No Storms to plough, no passengers-Sums to pay,
No Horse to hire, or Guide to show the way,
No Alps to clime [sic], no Deserts here to pass,
No Ambuscades, no Thieve [sic] to give me chase;

All these Fatigues and Mischiefs could I shun;
Rest when I pleas’d, and when I pleas’d Jog on,
And Travel through both Indies in an Afternoon. (lines 60–67, 74–76)

This catalogue of risk evasion notably shifts in verb tense from the subjunctive to the
imperfect, imparting both a sense of completion (in that the poet-persona had once
fulfilled and enjoyed The Choice’s hypothetical pleasures) and a foreshadowing of their
end. The bachelor’s happiness duly dissolves when he recounts, now in a steady past
tense, how his marriage precipitated their mutual downfall. Drawing upon a pseudo-
Miltonic analogy to set the scene (“the Curs’d fiend from Hell’s dire Regions sent… / Resolv’d his own Eternal wretched State, / Should be in part revenged by my sad Fate”; lines 168–69, 172–73), the former husband attributes the ensuing disaster of married life
to his wife’s cruelty, deception, and lust, going so far as to claim that her desire for him
was “in one Man to have, / A Husband, Lover, Cuckold and a Slave” (lines 256–57). The
bachelor reciprocates her infidelity with a deeply misogynistic adieu:

Woman, thou worst of all Church-plagues, farewel;
Bad at the Best, but at the worst a Hell;

Farewel Church-juggle that enslav’d my Life,
But bless that Pow’r that ride [sic] me of my Wife.
And now the Laws once more have set me free,
If Woman can again prevail with me,
My Flesh and Bones shall make my Wedding-Feast,
And none shall be Invited as my Guest,
T’ attend my Bride, but th’ Devil and a Priest. (lines 397–98, 405–11)

When read alongside Pomfret’s poem (which directly follows The Pleasures in the 1708 printing of both poems), this final passage turns the two poems into a kind of lyric circle. The divorcee’s steadfast condemnation of womanhood figures both as the conclusion of his narrative and as a return to the subjunctive potential of male freedom and retirement. This movement is then ‘fulfilled’ by The Choice, which now becomes the once-realized, rather than unrealized enjoyments of male retirement. And of course, these are same enjoyments which the subject of The Pleasures experienced himself before his fatal attraction to his wife.

That The Choice attracted such pointed responses to its wishful thinking registers both the popularity and the precariousness of retirement poetry at the turn of the eighteenth century. Amidst political uncertainty over William III’s fading health and an impending decade of protracted continental warfare, Pomfret’s poem and other similar poems secured their place in the print market. If its desire for and presentation of a leisurely retreat helped cement The Choice’s fortunes in such an environment, its performance also showed that the retreat was precisely lyrical—a point that contemporary and later critics would seize upon to censure similar poems. But perhaps the most important point to be made is that Pomfret, in legitimating the fantasy of a genteel retirement to a wide reading audience, also crafted a poetic vocabulary that poets would soon revise to stage retirements under different (and rapidly) changing conditions.

III. “Haste, O My Soul”: John Wren’s Choices
Pomfret’s fantasy of retirement arrived at a critical phase in Britain’s political and commercial fortunes. For one, *The Choice*’s first readers had already witnessed several theaters of conflict at home and abroad, from the protracted Nine Years’ War (1688–97) to Scotland’s failed Darien Scheme and barren harvests of 1696–98. An uneasy five years of peace followed, during which Anne succeeded William III; by the time Pomfret died in November 1702, however, she had sent England to war once more against France and Spain for control of the continent. Over the ensuing decade, England and Scotland merged after protracted negotiations and disputes on both sides into one United Kingdom, while the ongoing War of the Spanish Succession precipitated numerous campaigns, rapidly changing alliances, and political infighting between the Tories and the Whigs. But Britain undoubtedly strengthened its hand with the Peace of Utrecht (1713): in addition to several territorial acquisitions at France and Spain’s expense, it secured the lucrative *Asiento* contract, which granted a virtual monopoly over the Atlantic slave trade and its associated profits.

The two decades that surrounded *The Choice*’s first printings also witnessed key changes in the print market. The lapsing of the 1643 Licensing Acts in 1695 brought forth a flood of new materials from writers and publishers of all affiliations, from court propaganda and Dissenting texts to news reports on domestic and continental affairs. Concomitant with this burgeoning of the print market was the creation of Societies for the

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37 A significant proportion of these readers would have been single adult males, many of whom—up to 150,000 total ground and naval troops, or roughly ten percent of England’s entire adult male population—would likely have fought for the king in several military campaigns across the continent. Frank O’Gorman, *The Long Eighteenth Century: British Political and Social History 1688–1832*, 2nd ed. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 58.

Reformation of Manners, which established local branches across England and published tracts aimed at reshaping spiritual and moral values.\textsuperscript{39} Such developments helped propel retirement poetry’s increasing popularity over the course of the eighteenth century.

Between 1700 and 1725, at least fifty such original poems appeared in print by writers of all social backgrounds, from Sarah Egerton and Mary, Lady Chudleigh to Allan Ramsay and Alexander Pope.\textsuperscript{40} Their generally overlapping titles—most frequently containing some variant on “Choice,” “Wish,” “Retirement,” “Happy Man,” or “Solitude”—register as much the ongoing popularity of poetic retreat as they do its potential profits.

Although Pomfret himself did not live to see his own poems’ recirculation after 1700, his enduring presence and the genre’s popularity on the print market suggests that his fantasy of retirement proved appealing to poets (and readers) who could afford the time and pleasures of wishful thinking, even if many remained materially unable to fulfill these desires. At the same time, poets who followed in the vein of \textit{The Choice} also began to revise its vision, tone, and rhetorical strategies to suit their changing social and political conditions. Indeed, these conditions, I will show, increasingly led poets to question the utility of staging (or desiring one’s retirement), not least during the crises of the 1710s and 1720s.

Despite its strengthened position after the Peace of Utrecht, Britain faced new


\textsuperscript{40} This approximate number is derived from Michael Edson’s demonstrative “checklist” of over 300 retirement poems printed between 1690 and 1830. Edson, Appendix, “‘A Closet or a Secret Field’: Horace, Protestant Devotion, and British Retirement Poetry,” \textit{Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies} 35, no. 1 (2012): 30–38. As Edson himself admits, the list covers only original published poems, and does not take translations, manuscript verse, or periodical poetry into account.
political problems over the following two decades. Queen Anne’s failing health led to preparations for the arrival of the Hanoverian monarch George I, whose succession was not secure until his mother Sophia (who was Anne’s designated heir via the 1701 Act of Settlement) passed away just two months before the queen’s death in August 1714. Soon after, the Whigs rode to a landslide victory in the 1715 general election, just five years after the Tories had secured their own decisive majority; meanwhile, the suppression of Jacobite uprisings that same year in England and Scotland dealt further blows to the prospect of a Stuart return. Yet the Whigs themselves were soon torn apart by political infighting. Squabbles over party leadership and proximity to the king were only temporarily resolved in 1720, when Whig opposition leaders Charles Townshend and Robert Walpole, who respectively had been dismissed and resigned from their offices, resumed their seats.

Concurrent with these power struggles, and arguably more pronounced and widespread in its effects, was the infamous South Sea Bubble of 1720–21. The brainchild of Lord High Treasurer Robert Harley and financier John Blunt, the Company was partly founded as a Tory check on the more Whiggish Bank of England and East India Company, and its funds initially depended upon promised revenues from South American investment (vis-à-vis the Asiento contract) before it sought to convert Britain’s national debt into stock holdings.41 But as its stock price dropped from over 1,000 to under 200 during the summer of 1720, the Company collapsed and virtually bankrupted its several thousands of investors. It was Walpole, now serving as Paymaster General, who emerged from the crisis with the greatest political credit, as he negotiated with the Bank of

England and the East India Company to manage most of the stock and compensated those who had invested in the national debt up to 80 percent of their original sums. His even-handed management of the financial debacle earned him an appointment to the First Lord of the Treasury and Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1721, which marked the beginning of the Whigs’ (and more specifically his) two decades of political dominance.42

Almost by definition, contemporary retirement poetry largely strayed away from these successive struggles over power and capital. Yet the genre’s popularity in this same period should also invite us to consider how retirement poems could (and occasionally did) register such struggles—not only in their gestures of retreat, but also in the timing of these gestures in historical context. If literary histories of early eighteenth-century England typically stress the centrality of prose and print cultures to mediating public opinion on the credit economy amidst the period’s financial crises, then it is also worth examining the ways in which retirement poems figured into such discourses.43 At the same time, as Paula Backscheider and Michael Edson have summarized, eighteenth-century retirement poetry transitioned from staging total social detachment to advancing various functions: a personal defense of one’s right to write; a sustained interest in nature and self-education as vehicles toward transcendent, godly virtue; and a positioning of

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42 The summary I have presented in these two paragraphs is modeled after O’Gorman, *The Long Eighteenth Century*, 75–80.
oneself amidst communities of fellow poets.⁴⁴

These various functions therefore suggest that a lyrical and interiorized vision of retreat was not the only feature of eighteenth-century retirement poetry, nor was it necessarily “defining” for several poets who explicitly correlated the gesture of retreat with their contemporary cultural-material conditions. To pursue these ideas further, I shall focus for the remainder of this chapter on several retirement poems written by two relatively ‘minor’ poets: John Wren’s The Country Life; or, an Invitation of the Soul to Retirement (1717) and The Retirement: A Divine Soliloquy (1722); and Nicholas Amhurst’s “The Wish,” which was first published in his Poems on Several Occasions (1720). Although none of these poems have received significant critical attention, they are important for revealing how Pomfret’s subjunctive imagining of an ideal country retirement diverged into spiritual retreat and satiric scorn. Most importantly, these poems attend closely to The Choice’s poetics and to contemporary worldly pressures, and they reveal interdependences that more lyrical reflections on the genre commonly neglect.

Of the three poems, Wren’s The Country Life is representative of the general poetic shift toward the pious, contemplative retreat. As the Anglican minister notes in his Preface, he modeled his “Poetical Soliloquy” after Edmund Arwaker’s 1686 English translation of the Jesuit priest Herman Hugo’s Pia Desideria (1624; 1636); and specifically canticle VII (“Come, my beloved…”), a pastoral paraphrase of Song of

Solomon 7:11.\textsuperscript{45} But whereas Hugo and Arwaker frame their pieces as a swain’s request to his beloved for her company in the countryside, Wren converts their pastoral address into the speaker’s soliloquy to his feminized “Soul” (which is stuck in the trappings of city life). This monologic address is the most salient feature of The Country Life, and it comprises what I call an \textit{intermediary lyricism} that moves between speaker-as-poet and speaker-as-addressee.

As Edson notes, such apostrophes to one’s Soul were not uncommon in retirement poetry after 1690, and they resonated with the self-directed exhortations of devotional guidebooks such as Theophilus Dorrington’s \textit{Reform’d Devotions} (1687):

\begin{quote}
Retire, O my Soul, into thine own bosom, and search what thou aim’st at in all thy thoughts…Go to the Great and Prudent of the World, and learn of them to choose thy Interests: Do they not there encrease their Estates, where they mean to spend the most of their life? Do they project their Mansion Seat in a country through which they only pass as Travellers? No more, my Soul, should we build our best hopes on the sandy Foundation of this perishable Earth; where, sure we are, that we cannot stay long, and are not sure we may have leave to stay but a very little while.\textsuperscript{46}
\end{quote}

Dorrington’s inward and anti-materialist apostrophes are an important element of his devotional repertoire: they are meant not only to distinguish between the finite offerings of “this perishable Earth” and the timeless rewards of Christian contemplation, but also to cultivate a habit of private, systematic introspection in the reader-as-devotee. These elements find their way into the opening lines of The Country Life, where Wren integrates his divided self into Arwaker’s pastoral imagination:

\begin{quote}
HASTE, O my Soul, and wing thy Course away
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{46} Theophilus Dorrington, “For Saturday Evening. Meditation I.” in \textit{Reform’d Devotions, in Meditations, Hymns, and Petitions, for Every Day in the Week, and Every Holiday in the Year} (London: J. Watts, 1686), 313; also quoted in Edson, “‘A Closet or a Secret Field,’” 25–26.
From Brutish Men, to Brutes more mild than they.

Fly then, my Soul, (where Birds and Beasts reside)
To those blest Shades, where Truth and Peace abide:
Where Nature smiles, and kindly gives a Birth
To all the charming Beauties of the Earth.

Come then, my Love, my Life, let’s take our Fill
Of Nature’s Charms in some sweet Country Vill.47 (lines 1–2, 9–14)

Moving between introspective and externalized address, the poet presents his argument for pious solitude in the terms of pastoral intimacy. This mixture of genre conventions is intended to make the inward turn as attractive as the real “Country Vill,” without presenting that turn as intellectually undemanding or religiously suspect. To further emphasize this point, Wren presents the desired retreat as an opportunity for poet and Soul to investigate nature’s mysteries:

How the same Matter diff’rent Forms assumes,
And how those Forms are wove in diff’rent Looms;
How Earth to Earth, and Clods to Clods combin’d,
And Particles of Stone to Stones are join’d;
And the same Wood such various Textures bind. (lines 50–54)

Wren’s parallelisms here resonate with Dorrington’s criticisms of the “perishable Earth.” The lines’ bridging of particles with wholes demonstrates that private contemplation can resolve existential problems of causation; in contrast, the “Great and Prudent” man will never achieve anything comparable as he merely improves his country estate. The poet’s argument extends vertically from the earth’s surface to encompass both the heavens and the subsurface, where “Shells as old as NOAH’s Flood” and “subterraneous Seas / Of

47 John Wren, The Country Life; or an Invitation of the SOUL to RETIREMENT. Being a Poetical SOLILOQUIY on CANT. vii. 11 (London: W. Taylor, 1717). The poem was first printed anonymously, but a reprint that same year was attributed to “John Wren, A. M.” A second edition, published by J. Bateman, appeared in 1721. All citations of the poem from this point forward will refer to the 1717 edition.
Fire and Water strangely mixt shall please” (lines 83–84). These potential discoveries notably return Wren’s speaker to his soul—now addressed as his “dearest Muse” at line 112—combining the roles of poet, scientist, beloved, and spirit into a single utterance.

Such catalogues and turns toward pious introspection, in contrast, are absent from Arwaker’s “Come, my Beloved…,” which foregrounds instead the flow of desire and excess capital from city business to country life:

Come then, my Love, and let’s retire from hence,
And leave this busie fond impertinence.
See! ev’n the Cities eldest Son and Heir,
Who gets his Gold, his dear-lov’d Idol, there;
Yet in the Country spends his City-gains,
And makes its pleasure recompence his pains:
And tho’ the City has his publick voice,
The Country ever is his private choice.
Here still the Rich, the Noble, and the Great,
Unbend their minds in a secure retreat;
And Heaven’s free Canopy yields more delight
Than gilded Roofs and Fret-work to the sight.
Nor can fenc’d Cities keep the mind in peace,
So well as open guardless Villages.
Come then, my Love, let’s from the City hast,
Each minute we spend there, is so much waste.

For all his efforts to convince his beloved to retreat into the country, Arwaker’s swain shows no interest in divorcing the “sweet Country Vill” from the busy city. Nor does he delineate the possibility of a mutual, contemplative life for the two lovers: the end goal of their retreat, he announces, will be time and leisure to reveal their “secret passions” and “flame” to each other (lines 50, 52). Instead, the passage paints the ideal escape as the

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48 Additionally, Wren draws upon John Wilkins’ controversial tract on *The Discovery of a World in the Moone* (1638) to justify his “flight” to the moon: “The Wonders of that unknown World explore, / And see with him Things in the dark before” (lines 100–101).
reward of a city life—the “secure retreat” of “the Rich, the Noble, and the Great”—rather than its obverse. Wren’s soliloquy, on the other hand, turns that underlying economic logic into the very reason for his introspective retreat, and into the reason for writing a soliloquy rather than an externalized address to his beloved. The urban-rural trajectory of Arwaker’s 1686 translation, I would suggest, becomes the self-in-crisis of Wren’s 1717 poem: a poet urging his soul, immersed in the rhythms of “Brutish Men,” to retire into the expansive and liberating pursuits of rural contentment.

For all the poem’s dissatisfaction with the busy world, however, it cannot entirely perform the solipsism that its speaker so frequently demands. This becomes evident even when the poet re-presents contemporary Britain to his soul as the world-turned-upside down, where “all Things thus, like Images which pass / Within the Verges of a concave Glass, / Are set upon their Heads” (lines 170–72). Society has splintered from “Musick sweet” into the “Discord” of the “greater Crowd” and its destructive tendencies (lines 148–149, 150); similarly, religion “[i]s now a Weather-cock, an empty Name” (line 164), and “wise Discourse, and solid massy Sense, / Is turn’d to Froth, and bold Impertinence” (lines 165–66). But these inversions, occurring halfway through Wren’s poem, do not precipitate immediately into a complete retreat. Instead, they direct the poem toward moral models of sociability, as when the poet urges his displaced soul to “[v]isit the Poor Man in his humble Cell,” to associate with those who “can see / The Beauty of the Soul in low Degree,” and to shun those “wealthy Boors, and Rake-hells” whom “Lies, Nonsense, Oaths, much Drink, and Slander please” (lines 199, 209–10, 204).50 Indeed,

50 Wren could draw upon his own first-hand experience as an Anglican minister to justify such charity: he wrote The Clergyman’s Companion (1709), which doubled as a guidebook and a collection of set prayers from the Common Book for administering to the sick, and in 1717 he released a sermon on The Necessity of a Divine Call or Mission in Those Who Take upon Them to
Wren’s subsequent argument for a well-stocked library over personal companionship is grounded as much in the abundance of good writing—vis-à-vis those “immortal Heroes” of Roman philosophy and the “immortal verse” of Dryden and Cowley (lines 222, 230)—as it is in the scarcity of good people in the lyric present.

Perhaps because so few virtuous companions are to be found neither in the “noisy Town” (line 183) nor in “the poorest Cottages” (line 204), The Country Life concludes not with the speaker’s address to his soul, but with apostrophes to several abstractions: the figures of “Solitude” and “blest Retirement” (line 241), their companionate “Muse,” and God, to whom Wren dedicates the final passage:

Great God! whose Image stampt on ev’ry Tree
Or smaller Leaf, as in a Glass, we see;
Grant the few Hours I have to spend below,
May all in some such sweet Retirement flow.
I ask not to be Rich, Long-liv’d, or Great;
But give me only some small Country Seat:
Thy Goodness loud I’ll sing, and all my Days,
With holy David, meditate thy Praise:
Till like a Turtle from its Cage let fly,
My long imprison’d Soul shall mount the Sky;
And from beholding of Thee darkly here,
Shall thy glorious burning Light appear:
Thy Face unveil’d shall see, in heavenly Bliss;
Of which, my Choice, my Rural Paradise,
Like Glass to Gems a feint Resemblance is. (lines 247–61)

In its imitation of Pomfret’s Choice and its movement from earthly images to “heavenly Bliss,” The Country Life concludes with the desire for communion with God. And even as this stated wish also reunites the speaker with his soul, it also transforms into a selfless vow of divine service, whereby the lyric-I may move from the darkness of worldly life

Preach the Gospel of Christ. The Companion was Wren’s most frequently republished text, reaching its ninth edition in 1783; the Necessity was likewise advertised as being “By the Author of the Clergyman’s Companion in Visiting the Sick.”
into the light of God’s presence.

If such were the conditions of Wren’s retirement in 1717, what then of another, remarkably similar poem that the London publisher J. Bateman released in 1722?

Although *The Country Life* sold well enough to merit a reprint by Bateman in 1721, it underwent more drastic revisions in its anonymously printed version as *Retirement: A Divine Soliloquy* the following year.\(^{51}\) The new title, having excised any indication of the speaker’s retreat as voluntary or pastoral, hints at a generic transformation from pastoral adaptation into an explicitly pious and arguably more solipsistic retirement. The consequent changes in tone and urgency are apparent from the new poem’s opening lines, which bear only a token resemblance to the beginning of Wren’s original poem:

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HASTE, O my Soul, and let thy winged Speed,
The flight of Halcyon’s from a Storm exceed,
For lo! the Skies are black with Winds and Rain,
The World is all as one tempestuous Main;
A gen’ral Storm of Party Rage and Strife,
Sits brooding o’er the Land, and blackens Life.

Where, Lord, on Earth, shall I direct my Feet,
Thy Peace, in this unpeaceful World to meet?
Where but to Fields and Groves and lonely Seats,
The best below, and only sure Retreats?
The Towns are fill’d with desp’rate Feuds and Noise,
Good Will to Men, the kind angelick Voice,
Is almost ceas’d, and all the blessed Fruits
Of the blest Spirit blasted from the Roots. (lines 1–6, 10–17)
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For readers of *The Country Life* and *The Retirement* alike, this revised opening would readily have called to mind a rash of “desp’rate Feuds” between 1717 and 1722—the rise and collapse of the South Sea Company; the Whig party’s internal disension and partial

\(^{51}\) There is also the possibility that Wren himself did not “rewrite” *The Country Life* as the *Retirement*, though Foxon concludes from their shared publisher in Bateman that they must have been written by the same poet. Foxon, *English Verse 1701–1750*, 1:906.
reconciliation between Walpole and Townshend on one side, and the Earls of Sunderland and Stanhope on the other; and Francis Atterbury’s thwarted Jacobite plot between 1720 and 1722. Whether or not these events affected Wren directly remains unclear, but the poem’s explication of what was once merely a “brutish” world indicates that the intervening years provided enough ballast for the poet to turn the rural retreat into a political and divine necessity.

But the prevailing circumstances also appear to have inflected the Retirement’s more cynical take on sociability. Even as the newer poem retains both its speaker’s feminized address to the Soul and his exhortation to “[v]isit the Poor Man in his humble Cell” (line 268), it also eliminates the possibility of choosing moral companions as substitutes for literary models. In place of “Good Will to Men,” the Retirement suggests, comes a Bunyan-esque pilgrimage, which in turn demands almost complete solitude:

Call ev’ry Passenger, and bid them stay,
To take this Light, to light them in their Way.
But oh! how few will here attend your Voice?
How many rather will explode your Choice?
If then but few in this thy Pilgrimage;
To walk by this bright Lamp, thou can’st engage.
Be not dismay’d, but cheerfully press on,
To tread the gloomy Path, tho’ all alone.
God will befriend thee, Good Men will supply,
By their rich Works, the loss of Company:
And who can then complain when God’s his Friend,
And all the World of Books his Choice attend? (lines 280–91)

By foregrounding the superiority of textual over personal companionship, Wren also revises the suspect passivity of lyric reading that The Pleasures of a Single Life first raised two decades earlier. Whereas the earlier poem presents the benefits of literacy as safe but nonproductive pleasures for the bachelor, the later Retirement rewrites this solipsism as a morally righteous initiative, and one whose necessity is made apparent by
its antisocial risk rather than imagined reward: “how few will here attend your Voice? / How many rather will explode your Choice?” That this “Voice” is now heard only among the “few” further suggests the revised lyric’s own predicament: in a literary and political world marked by the collapse of any recognizable coherence, how could one’s utterance—already drawn toward its “Soul” and no longer to its “company”—effect meaningful respite except by retreating?

Neither of Wren’s two poems offer any direct response to this predicament. But one anonymous companion piece to The Retirement, a twelve-line “Epigram. On Whig and Tory” that was appended to the poem, cuts across the Divine Soliloquy’s doom and gloom to expose the folly of political affiliation:

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WHEN I behold the World in Parties torn,
And Whig and Tory all the Fashion grown,
What is this Whig and Tory think I then,
That causeth so much Party-Strife in Men?
    I stand aloof, as on some Hilly Height,
And view them both contending to be right;
But what if both are wrong? Since neither Side
The Test of Truth can, thoroughly search’d, abide;
And why? because not Truth, but Int’rest most,
On either Side, we see, ’tis rules the Roast.
    For Falshood then nor Whig nor Tory be,
For Truth be both, and you’re the Man for me.52 (lines 1–12)
```

The epigrammatist’s “aloof” stance enables the philosophical clarity which Wren’s speaker implores his Soul to seek in retirement: both know that moneyed interests have deflected Britain’s political discourse away from “Truth” and toward the “desp’rate Feuds and Noise” of commercial lobbying. Under this new dispensation of political faction, however, the epigram’s moral center dissolves into its couplet’s final

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contradiction: to be “false” is to retreat entirely from the prevailing parties, whereas to be “true” is to adopt both sides and their respective interests—with the rhetorical likelihood that both sides are indeed wrong. If read together with Wren’s Retirement, then, these lyric meditations register the individual retreat from the world not as an apolitical gesture, but rather as a political move which must rewrite the terms on which contemporary politics has operated. That is, the factional logic which compels Wren’s speaker to retire is subsequently rewritten into a rightful political directive: the poetic search for truth divorced from the contingencies and clamor of commercial life. That this search is conducted through the poems’ apostrophized first-person address ultimately dramatizes the lyric speaker’s predicament as a communal, spiritual need to reconcile the schisms of Whig and Tory factionalism.

IV. “On Future Blessings I Securely Trust”: Amhurst’s Wishes

While Wren was raising the stakes of retirement by dramatizing the political climate in soliloquy form, Nicholas Amhurst and his contemporaries were seizing upon the mass hysteria of the South Sea affair to satirize the financial madness. Although remembered primarily for his editorship of the prominent anti-Walpole newspaper The Craftsman from 1726 onward, Amhurst first cut his teeth as a satirist with his Poems on Several Occasions, which were published amidst the South Sea crisis. Many of the collection’s thirty-six poems gesture toward the poet’s personal circumstances—he was expelled from St. John’s College at Oxford in 1719 for his dissent toward the high-church Tories—and betray his Whig sympathies. But “The Wish” deserves special attention for its timely satire on the fallacies of retirement poetry amidst the investment craze. Beyond
criticizing Pomfret’s genteel fantasy and its imagined pleasures, Amhurst’s poem correlates the genre with the farcical hysteria of speculation and investment, as made evident in the opening lines:

When real blessings are to men deny’d,
With airy hopes they gratify their pride;
To every wretch this privilege extends,
However void of acres or of friends:

Like fellow-mortals thus I live on air,
Nor will self-love permit me to despair,
Tho’ fortune sinks me to my native dust,
On future blessings I securely trust.53 (lines 1–4, 17–20)

Like the miser of Brown’s Hobson’s Choice, the speaker reveals both the lived and grammatical failures of wishful thinking. Trapped in the self-destructive cycle of “airy hopes” and unfulfilled desires, the only outlet for the poem’s speaker is that trust in the future which has sunken him to his “native dust.” The outcome of this paradox is precisely the middle-class estate that Amhurst’s forbears and contemporaries would have wished for: an estate of “five hundred pounds a year, / From mortgages, and tythes, and taxes clear” (lines 21–22); “a pretty wife, / a fond, young, toying girl, and full of flame” (lines 34–35); and “[a]n honest, peaceful, unshaken breast… / That, while I live, no terrors I may know” (lines 52, 55). Unsurprisingly, these are the passages during which Amhurst’s impoverished speaker reverts from the indicative to the imperative and, as a result, to the conditional logic that precipitated his situation at the outset.

The immediate contradiction between present poverty and future security likewise inflects his final wish for the “painful Great” to be granted the “Titles, Garters, and the

posts of State” (lines 57, 58). Such rewards are extended in the final couplet, for very different reasons, to the Scottish financier and gambler John Law, whose central involvement in the Mississippi Bubble sank France’s finances in 1720; and to Whig foreign minister James, Viscount Stanhope, whom Amhurst separately praised in *The Protestant Session* (1719) for his toleration of the Dissenters:

Let LAW in *Mississippi* bubbles shine,  
And STANHOPE by new Treaties grow divine. (lines 59–60)

The heroic couplet’s strongly rhymed contrast between Law’s “shine” and Stanhope’s “divine” registers the perilous hinge between poetic and financial investment: the “airy” sheen of one man’s disastrous “bubbles” is made to appear just as secure as the brilliance of the other man’s skilled negotiations.

In addition to “The Wish’s” generic and economic satire, its speaker’s Epicurean demands on “kind Heav’n” (line 21) parody contemporary advice on a properly Christian retirement, as the poet would have found for example in Sir Richard Bulstrode’s remarks on the futility of hedonistic wishes:

That man therefore forgets his Origin and his Dignity, that puts his Soul out of Possession of her self, by running perpetually after Hopes that fly from him; whereas he should abandon the Pleasures of this Life, and bid adieu to all manner of Vanities, shunning all Passions that may any way impeach the Tranquility either of Mind or Body, making God the only Object of his Contemplation: He that thus retires, draws no Man’s Envy upon him, he reigns by himself, and all the Pomp which Greatness draws after it, is not comparable to that which he enjoys in Secret…

54 Contemporaneous with the financial crisis in England, the French bubble stemmed from Law’s founding of the Mississippi Company (operating under the formal name *La Compagnie d’Occident*) in 1717, and its establishment of a “system” whereby the Company would control nearly every aspect of France’s finances, from debt collection to colonial oversight in Louisiana. Within two years, the Company became solely responsible for collecting the central government’s revenue and paying off the national debt. But by 1720 the “system” proved too burdensome and overinflated for a French economy that produced only modest gains, leading the Company’s complete collapse in July of that year.

Under these conditions, “The Wish’s” speaker adopts the *form* of Bulstrode’s Christian retirement—a direct invocation of “kind Heav’n” as the “only Object of his Contemplation,” albeit in the knowing presence of his reader—in order to pursue its opposite *content*, those “Pleasures” and “Vanities” whose unfulfilled states have forced him to invest in Heaven’s “future blessings.” Much like Thomas Brown’s target in *Hobson’s Choice* two decades earlier, Amhurst’s satirical wishes (both as un-materialized thoughts *and* as printed material) are set to drive his speaker to physical ruin. Much more than what Røstvig simply calls an “ambitious” and brazen revision of the Horatian retreat, “The Wish” reveals itself to be both symptom and satire of its own poetic and financial logic.  

A similar line of thought underwrites another of Amhurst’s satirical poems, *An Epistle (With a Petition in it) to Sir John Blount*, which mockingly courts and praises the South Sea Company’s founder in the hope of receiving a generous number of stock shares. This future largesse, the poet believes, will enable him and his muse to “leave this servile Garret, / Good Wild-fowl eat, and drink good Claret” (lines 232–33).  

Because such slavish calls for patronage are the norm of “these busy, golden Times” (line 3), the speaker cuts through all pretense of flattery and bluntly states his demand:

*I want just Fifty Pounds, my Lord;  
Which Sum, if you refuse to give,  
I shall eternally believe,  
For all, what I have said before,  
That you’re a sneaking Son of a Wh-re.* (lines 176–80, italics in original)  

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Browne, 1715), 94.


This demand is, in fact, a substantial reduction from the speaker’s earlier claim—similar to the demand in “The Wish”—that a gift of “Five Hundred, or a Thousand Pound / In your next List, would make me sound, / Drown all my Sorrows, if I nick it, / And make me merry as a Cricket” (lines 151–54). Within a year, Blunt would be arrested and tried for his role in the national crisis, leading Amhurst’s printer Richard Francklin to compose his own mock Epistle to the poet, criticizing him for his futile attempt to secure the baronet’s patronage: “But you, high-flown in airy Dreams, / And building upon South-Sea schemes, / Despis’d all Rule, and headlong run / The way to have us both undone” (lines 59–62).  

What became clear to Wren and Amhurst, in conclusion, was the need for the lyric retirement to either adapt to declining political circumstances or to expose the gesture’s own frailties under these changed conditions. While Pomfret’s vocabulary and constructions remained influential to both poets for staging such retirements—his Poems continued to appear in print well after 1720, reaching its eleventh edition by 1751—they also pursued divergent courses: between the solitary, divine, and interior meditation with which critics have defined (and castigated) the poetic retirement, and the satiric lament that later poems such as Goldsmith’s Deserted Village and Crabbe’s Village would take up to expose the follies of a safe lyrical retreat. Such strategic uses of retreat therefore enabled the genre of retirement poetry to become a viable medium of cultural, political, and material critique. Yet as I shall discuss in the next chapter, another discourse of poetic retreat flourished contemporaneously, but with very different ends—and, I shall

also argue, with further discrete consequences on public perceptions of poetry as it was produced in spaces marginal to the centers of eighteenth-century British literary culture.
CHAPTER 3: Lyric, Labor, and the Poverty of “Professional” Poetry from John Philips to Mary Leapor

This chapter investigates the relationships between lyric production, material poverty, and the idea of “professional” poetry in the first half of the eighteenth century. It charts two competing perspectives on poverty that circulated through the figure of the professional poet: that is, one who wrote (or aspired to write) poetry to escape penury or menial labor. Successful professional poets and relatively privileged writers staked their claims to authority on the literary market by attacking less talented or otherwise marginalized writers as impoverished hacks. These satiric attacks crystallized in images of the professional poet writing and living in squalid conditions, and they spread widely through the success of John Philips’ *The Splendid Shilling. An Imitation of Milton* (1701) and Alexander Pope’s *The Dunciad* (1728). These works, I argue, were the key catalysts behind an extensive burlesque tradition which lambasted aspiring but impoverished poets as delusional in their ambitions, prolific without substance, and commercially unsuccessful. Through readings of *The Splendid Shilling*, *The Dunciad*, and other minor poems in this vein, I argue that this poetic tradition not only made poverty a fashionable subject for eighteenth-century satiric poetry, but also served to defend a lyrical conception of poetry: the pursuit of poetry as a higher calling, and one abstracted from (or adept at concealing) the commercial concerns and limitations of “professional” writing. Indeed, such satires made the sheer writing of bad (i.e., commercially or aesthetically unsuccessful) poetry inseparable from the intolerable conditions in which these imaginary poets languished. Yet these poems were also concerned that those who
were dirtied by poverty could nevertheless mimic the “lyrical” elements of their more esteemed peers’ poems—and that such mimicry posed a credible threat to an already crowded literary market.

Competing with this satiric discourse, meanwhile, were the efforts of laboring poets who actively wrote and published poetry in the hopes of achieving financial security, aesthetic recognition, or a welcome reprieve from the regular demands of their labor. Here I turn to the poems of several widely studied laborers—the “thresher poet” Stephen Duck (c. 1705–56), the footman-turned-bookseller Robert Dodsley (1704–64), and the domestic servant-poet Mary Leapor (1722–46)—to consider how these rural and domestic poets legitimated their new calling in an environment dominated by (and hostile to) urban “hack” writers. As regular laborers who aspired to write poetry for a living (and who were presented as such by their wealthier patrons), Duck, Dodsley, and Leapor were forced to negotiate their talents and limited material circumstances with the demands and doubts of a more privileged readership. Each of these poets fashioned what I call an “authorized” poetics of professionalism: one which forged a careful balance between testifying to the material struggles of writing in poverty, and championing poetry as a profession that could help them transcend their penury in socially acceptable terms (i.e., as a morally sanctioned practice, rather than as a means toward purely commercial gain).

By examining these two traditions in tandem, this chapter intends to extend and clarify recent work on poverty, poetry, and labor in eighteenth-century studies, and in doing so, to reconstruct a literary-historical perspective that is largely absent from lyric studies today. Understanding the roles that penury and professionalism played in
eighteenth-century English poetics can help us reassess larger debates about the preconditions, uses, and reception of lyric poetry.

I. “This Thankless Trade”

Of all the various lots around the ball,
Which Fate to man distributes, absolute:
Avert, ye gods! that of the Muse’s son,
Curs’d with dire poverty! poor hungry wretch!
What shall he do for me? he cannot work
With manual labour…

.................................

...Oh! he scorns
Th’ ignoble thought; with generous disdain,
More eligible deeming it to starve,
Like his fam’d ancestors renown’d in verse,
Than poorly blend to be another’s slave,—
Than feed and fatten in obscurity.
—These are his firm resolves, which neither fate nor time,
Nor poverty can shake.

—Mark Akenside, “The Poet; a Rhapsody” (1737)

Mark Akenside’s “The Poet; a Rhapsody,” one of his earliest published poems, sketches a scene that would have been familiar to its first readers.¹ Written in elevated blank verse, it meditates on a decidedly low subject: an impoverished poet who faces the seemingly inescapable pressures of his professional calling, his undesirable living conditions, and his disdain for his lowly social position. Unable and unwilling to perform

¹ Akenside published “The Poet” under the pseudonym “Marcus” in The Gentleman’s Magazine 7 (July 1737): 441–42; the Magazine also published two of his other poems, “The Virtuoso: In Imitation of Spencer’s Style and Stanza” and “Ambition and Content; A Fable” in April and May of that year, respectively. “The Poet” remained unattributed to him, however, until it was reprinted in the six-volume New Foundling Hospital for Wit (London: J. Debrett, 1784–86), which claimed that the poem was “originally published before he had arrived at the age of sixteen years” (5:230, headnote). All quotations of the poem are from The Poetical Works of Mark Akenside, ed. Robin Dix (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996), 395–99, which follows the text of the 1737 original.
any “manual labour” beyond his scribbling, Akenside’s poet believes instead that he can, quite literally, imagine his way out of poverty. This scheme, in Akenside’s view, involves the poet bitterly complaining about his condition—“it stabs his heart, that niggard fate / To him in such shall measure should dispense / Her better gifts” (lines 53–55)—and dressing himself in his “shadowy perruque” and “his best robe,” stained as they are with the “tincture… / Of age’s rev’rend russet, scant and bare” (lines 90, 87–88), before walking into the streets. But the routine backfires when the poet encounters an intimidating “dun” (line 114), whereupon he retreats to the solitude of his garret and thus to the familiar struggles of scribbling heroic and lyric poems, elegies, pastorals, satires, and plays for “th’ ignoble, vulgar herd” (line 65). Akenside then chastises his subject for his poetic inclinations and urges him instead to become a street peddler, believing that the sale of “trinkets” would be a more honest trade:

…break, wretch, break thy quill,  
Blot out the study’d image; to the flames  
Commit the Stag’rite; leave this thankless trade;  
Erect some pedling stall, with trinkets stock’d,  
There earn thy daily half-pence, nor again  
Trust the false Muse: So shall the cleanly meal  
Repel intruding hunger. (lines 157–63)

But as the poet’s Muse laughingly admits, neither this “friendly admonition” (line 164) nor Akenside’s concluding call to “Retreat, / Rash youth!” (lines 172–73) can cure the impoverished poet of his “scribbling itch” (line 165).

“The Poet” is just one noteworthy instance in an extensive tradition of poems which satirize the figure of the aspiring poet as variously deluded, overly prolific, and impoverished. As Robin Dix notes, Akenside’s poem has many precedents: Juvenal, Edmund Spenser, Abraham Cowley, and John Oldham all wrote poems that warned
against the disappointments of writing poetry for a living.\(^2\) Similarly, poems like Jonathan Swift’s “A Description of a City Shower” could readily portray the poet as a hapless and unfortunate London resident, struggling to navigate his path toward survival:

\[
\text{Ah! where must needy poet seek for aid,} \\
\text{When dust and rain at once his coat invade;} \\
\text{His only coat, where dust confus’d with rain,} \\
\text{Roughen the nap, and leave a mingled stain. (lines 27–30)}
\]

But what distinguishes Akenside’s mock-rhapsody from earlier poems in this tradition is its foregrounding of the material poverty that underwrites the deluded, arrogant poet’s sheaves of poems and plays. The suggestion here, in other words, is that the quality of his poetry, however imaginative or derivative, lyrical or satiric, rhapsodic or bawdy, is limited by his social and material circumstances, which are precisely the same factors that drive him toward the exercise of his “fancy” in the first place. To this extent, Akenside’s final exhortation to the poet to “Retreat!” registers not as a flight from his social surroundings—and thus as a commitment to the isolating ranks of poetry—but rather as a flight from the delusions of poetry itself. In fact, this command calls for the poet to enter the world of commerce and business, in so far as the “pedling stall” would offer a more immediate payout (and an escape from the garret) than his current “thankless trade.”

This satiric retreat, motivated as it is by the interlocking hardships of poverty and poetic production, is a far cry from those visions of retreat which modern historians of eighteenth-century poetry have chronicled at length. John Sitter and Frederic Bogel have both argued that the mid-eighteenth century marked a gradual but decisive shift from

\(^2\) Robin Dix, *The Literary Career of Mark Akenside* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2006), 36, footnote. Several poems which Dix identifies include Juvenal’s *Satire VII*; Spenser’s *Teares of the Muses* (1591); and Oldham’s “A Satyr: The Person of Spencer Is Brought In, Dissuading the Author From the Study of Poetry, and Shewing How Little It Is Esteem’d and Encourag’d in This Present Age” (1683).
socially oriented to inwardly contemplative poetry: that which projected a recognizable speaking self far removed from the poem’s contemporary context. For Sitter, such “literary loneliness” was precipitated by a deepening mistrust among mid-century poets in the operations of history and commerce. For Bogel, meanwhile, the same period witnessed philosophical and literary attempts to counter the perceived “insubstantiality” of lived experience, wherein writers increasingly recognized the “impoverishment” and insecurity of their contemporary world. As I argued in Chapters 1 and 2, these conclusions became closely connected with a tradition of lyric—both as poetic genre and as interpretive mode—that diminished, obfuscated, or disengaged from concerns that were deemed extraneous to the poet’s pursuit of interiority and imagination.

What distinguishes Akenside’s poem from these prevailing senses of retreat, then, is that it locates this mistrust of poetry’s imaginative power precisely in its inability to change one’s material circumstances. That is, the penurious poet, well-aware that the “pedling stall” would be far more profitable than his “quill” and “study’d images,” casts doubt on the financial success of writing poetry at all. What he decries as his “niggard fate” and unbreakable destiny registers the paradox of his professional writing career: the more he imagines himself freed from the shackles of his penury, the more unsellable poems he produces, thus plunging him into an unbreakable cycle of poverty and desire. If becoming a poet thus requires the refusal of any alternative mode of labor in service to the Muse (as we have seen in the case of Cowley’s “The Complaint” in Chapter 1), then

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that choice explains both the poet’s crowded garret and the endless stream of writing that he believes will lift him out of poverty.

With these observations in mind, this chapter investigates the ways in which the threat of poverty inflected a wide range of poems written in the first half of the eighteenth century: from satires like Akenside’s “The Poet,” to poems by laborers who sought to distinguish themselves as deserving poets. I understand poverty not only as material deprivation, but also as a discourse crafted by other, more successful (or well-born) poets to denigrate the “professional” poet: one who aspired to write poems for a living but was socially marginalized from the literary marketplace, or one whose prolific writings failed to bring prosperity. My interest in the poetic representation of the professional poet centers on its simultaneous circulation in two contemporary traditions: eighteenth-century burlesque poetry and laboring poetry. On the one hand, numerous burlesque poems conceived the professional poet as an object of ridicule, and invariably marked by the trappings of urban poverty and delusions of financial success. On the other hand, rural laborers who sought to become professional writers drew directly upon their material struggles to justify their desires, arguing that writing poetry allowed them to resist (if not transcend) their penury without recourse to the urban hack-poet’s false aspirations. By reading these two contemporary forms of representation in tandem, I seek to illuminate several underexplored relationships between poverty and poetry in the eighteenth century, and to reassess the conditions that compelled poets of different backgrounds to draw on the language of poverty in opposition to, or defense of, their craft.

Beginning with a survey of modern scholarship on eighteenth-century poverty and poetry—which has yet to assess fully the conditions of “professionalism” that I have
considered above—I then turn to John Philips’ *The Splendid Shilling. An Imitation of Milton* (1701; authorized 1705), the first and by far the most popular poem of the eighteenth century to envision a professional poet living in squalid filth and material poverty. As its title suggests, *The Splendid Shilling* constructs this portrait both by parodying Milton’s style *and* by fixing upon the shilling, a coin which drives the poor poet’s fantasies of revelry and abundance but remains out of reach. Philips’ burlesque spawned numerous imitations which deployed a wide range of objects (from corkscrews and shoes, to wine glasses and snuff-pipes) for similarly humorous purposes. Like the coin, such objects foreground the relative poverty of poets who aspired but struggled to write for their living. These imitations circulated alongside the works of laboring poets such as (and especially) Stephen Duck and Robert Dodsley, both of whom claimed cultural legitimacy by subsuming such satirical depictions of the impoverished poet under more acceptable models of professionalism. Both traditions also found a powerful and unique response in the poetry of Mary Leapor, who ventriloquized these critiques of ambition-in-poverty in a series of “object poems” on various items: pens, nails, writing desks, and pocketbooks. Leapor’s ventriloquisms, I argue, call renewed attention to the *material* conditions that underwrite the lyrics of underprivileged poets like herself, and they imagine her lifelong desire to be a professional poet in the very terms which her contemporaries satirized.

II. “Those Unhappy Objects”: Poverty and the Making of the Professional Poet

Although “The Poet” is now considered one of Akenside’s minor works, its distinction between “poetic” and “manual” labor anticipates modern critical discussions
of eighteenth-century poetry by and about the materially underprivileged. Most of these discussions have focused on the works of manual laborers who managed to write (let alone publish) their poems despite the physical and mental demands of their daily tasks. Early approaches to the study of their poetry were primarily evaluative and written to examine the elevation of the eighteenth-century laborer to the deserving title of a poet. Hence Robert Southey, in his *Lives and Works of Our Uneducated Poets* (1831), sought to position the “uneducated” laborer—in his particular case, the servant John Jones, for whom Southey ostensibly wrote the essay as an introduction to Jones’ works—within a tradition of cultivated writing that emerged during the eighteenth century. Upon attending to the life stories of Jones, the “Water-Poet” John Taylor, and the “milk-woman” Ann Yearsley, however, Southey could not envision these laborers writing beyond the more powerful conditions of patronage and the literary market, nor did he seek to accommodate them into the mold of a professional poet (wherein the regular writing of poetry would replace the physical tasks and demands of manual labor). Part of the reason, he suggested, was that poetry and manual labor were mutually exclusive practices, to the extent that self-taught laboring poets were nevertheless inferior to their literate and educated contemporaries, even if such advantages did not always produce talented writers. In Jones’ case, Southey argued, the problem lay in the limited resources available to him as a rural laborer:

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5 Bridget Keegan is the latest scholar to remind us that literate laborers were far more likely to write poetry (rather than novels and other works), because writing demanded time and space away from their regular tasks. Keegan, “The Poet as Laborer,” in *The Oxford Handbook of British Poetry, 1660–1800*, ed. Jack Lynch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 162–66.

Had it been his fortune to have enjoyed those advantages, of which the great majority of educated persons make no use whatever after they become their own masters, he might in all probability have held more than a respectable place among the poets of his age; and the whole tenor of his conduct shows that he would have done his duty in any station of life to which he might have been called. But...he seems to have read little other poetry than what is occasionally to be found in provincial newspapers. From them he has sometimes copied a pattern, or a tune,—nothing more...the art is wanting, and it is now too late for him to acquire it.⁷

Southey’s claims were supported in no small part by Jones’ own account of his difficult circumstances. Living in a household with fourteen children, Jones wrote to the eminent poet in 1827, left him “little time” to correct the modest verses he managed to write in his rare moments of leisure. Equally telling was the servant-poet’s conditional refusal of financial support from Southey if the latter found Jones’ verse to be undeserving of publication. By entreating Southey to “not let your kindness get the better of your judgment,” Jones carefully dismissed any suggestion that he needed money, or that he was writing poetry to overcome his material limitations: “for though I have had the bringing up of a family under circumstances which have subjected me to great difficulties, the struggle I trust is over, and if it has left me poor, Sir, my anxiety in respect to worldly prosperity is greatly diminished.”⁸ Such modesty, of course, was hardly uncommon among eighteenth-century laboring poets, who—often at the demand of their wealthy patrons—also refused to entertain the idea that their poetry or profits would launch them into new careers as practicing poets.⁹ The point to be made, rather, is

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⁸ Ibid., 1, 10.
that by Jones and Southey’s time, this refusal was accepted as a direct consequence of one’s profession, class background, and material circumstances.

Whereas Southey saw the laboring poet as a futile case, later critics like Rayner Unwin sought to clarify the conditions by which such writers could be recognized as poets. In *The Rural Muse* (1954), Unwin proposed a loose but discernible tradition of “peasant poetry” centered on figures who possessed and conveyed romantic sensibilities in their work. On these grounds, the “peasant poet” was to be understood as a laborer who aspired to an idealized “pursuit of poetry” so as to overcome his material and financial limitations. Under this model, Unwin effectively focused more of his attention on the ideal of becoming a poet than he did on the realities of writing as a peasant, with his study focusing on both poets (from Thomas Tusser in the sixteenth century, to Alfred Williams in the early twentieth) who relied on the “mechanic muse,” and canonical poets like James Thomson who were not peasants themselves but nevertheless strongly influenced later peasant poets.

Subsequent scholarship radically shifted the terms of analysis from Southey and Unwin’s aesthetic ideals of an “uneducated” or “peasant poet” to a more systematic emphasis on the laboring poet’s social and political position. Raymond Williams and Stuart Curran, for example, drew renewed attention to late eighteenth-century antipastoral poems—especially Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Deserted Village* (1778) and George Crabbe’s *The Village* (1783)—as much for their dialectical engagement with the pastoral tradition as for their stated commitment to depicting the struggles of rural laborers over

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two centuries of enclosure, depopulation, and increasing industrialization. Further studies published in the 1990s, combined with Roger Lonsdale’s *The New Oxford Book of Eighteenth-Century Verse* (1987) and *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets* (1990), expanded the field to accommodate the works of laboring poets into the literary history of the eighteenth century. Influenced by broader methodological turns to feminist-materialist, new historicist, and Marxist criticism, these studies championed laboring-class poetry as an important site of ideology critique, and thus as a challenge to long-standing notions of aesthetics, class and gender politics, and the eighteenth-century literary canon. Donna Landry was among the first critics in this vein to call for the recovery of “a poetic discourse…developed both by and about women of the laboring classes,” one that was otherwise submerged under more familiar paradigms of male Augustan “satire and pathos.” For Landry, this recovery effort demanded that “a new literary history be written from below,” and that such a “materialist feminist literary history” be sensitive to intersections (and differences) between class, race, sexuality, and gender. Eleven years later, William Christmas similarly understood eighteenth-century

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laboring poets as actively resistant to contemporary class-based ideologies of labor, poetry, and professionalism. Arguing that “many plebeian poets…were not simply duped” by these exclusionary ideologies, Christmas foregrounded a political and material sensitivity that was all absent from Unwin’s earlier account.\footnote{William J. Christmas, introduction to The Lab’ring Muses: Work, Writing, and the Social Order in English Plebeian Poetry (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2001), 24.}

In all of these cases, modern critics of eighteenth-century laboring poets and their poetry have rightly called on readers to evaluate their accomplishments, shortcomings, and influence as poets: as writers and artists with the imaginative capacity to overcome (or at the very least, make legible) their otherwise undesirable lives and challenges as menial laborers. I will return to such poetic negotiations toward the end of the chapter, but for now I want to note that the modern critical imperative to reevaluate these poets’ careers and works “as poets” also presumes that becoming a practicing poet in the eighteenth century was desirable in contrast to the life of manual labor. Such desirability was certainly understandable, given the potential (not always realized) for public recognition, financial support, and physical relief from the regular demands of domestic and agrarian work. But the ideal of a career in poetry also existed alongside an established literary discourse which argued against that very profession, and one which marked a conscious effort at policing the quality and the social standards of the English literary market. That discourse, I shall now argue, took shape in early eighteenth-century burlesques and satires, which flourished concurrently with the expansion of the printing press and literary market. If laborers who wrote and published poetry were conditioned by their patrons, subscribers, and readers to present themselves as diligent workers who wrote in their spare time, it was also the case that many poems satirized the notion of
professional poetry as an ineffective, even irrational distraction from the more pressing struggles of poverty and labor. These satires, I argue, must be examined if we are to understand how and why different “classes” of poets—cultivated professionals, professional hacks, or manual laborers—conceived the work of poetry in such contrasting terms. Such contrasts become clear once we turn to the conditions of professional writing in eighteenth-century England, and to the discourses that mediate the figure of the professional poet.

The eighteenth century, as it is recreated by literary historians today, gave birth to a culture of professional writing. As Brean Hammond notes in his account of early eighteenth-century literary culture, several economic changes enabled the emergence of professional writing in the period. Following the lapsing of the Licensing Acts in 1695, the print market became flooded not only with an extraordinarily wide range of texts, but also with an explosion of pirated and plagiarized books. Unable to stem the tide of these freely circulating works, booksellers petitioned Parliament in 1709 to protect them from the “Poverty and Want” occasioned by the redirection of profits from publishers to anonymous pirates and professional hack-writers. Parliament responded by passing the Copyright Act 1710, which legally recognized the authorship of a text based on its “original genius.” Questions of literary property soon became questions of literary propriety, as authors and social commentators expressed reservations about the newly-expanded print market’s propensity for illicit, scurrilous, or unpalatable texts (not to mention these same qualities in their writers). Hence the propagation of “polite

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“discourse” in conduct manuals, literary periodicals, and other forms targeted to a growing reading public. These conditions, Hammond argues, closely tied the professional writer to the formation of a marketable “polite discourse,” and thus of a literate middle class (or, in Jürgen Habermas’ influential terminology, the “bourgeois public sphere”) in the eighteenth century.18

As one might expect following the rapid rise of the popular press, the idea of writing purely for financial survival drew scorn from writers who sought themselves to assert and defend their own authority in the literary marketplace. Suvir Kaul has demonstrated, through readings of Edward Young’s “Two Epistles to Mr. Pope” (1730) and Alexander Pope’s Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot (1734), that poets sought to legitimate their reputations by eliding the financial and material conditions behind the production of their poems. Such claims to authorship hinged not only upon one’s aesthetic or financial motives, but also upon persistent anxieties over belonging to, or being excluded from, a proper community of writers, readers, and tastemakers who tasked themselves with regulating the literary market.19 These are the same anxieties which Pope turned on his rivals’ heads in Book I of The Dunciad (1728), which famously opens with the scene of the literary market turned into a “cave of poverty and poetry”:

Close to those walls where Folly holds her throne,

One cell there is, concealed from vulgar eye,
The cave of poverty and poetry.

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19 As Kaul writes of the Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot, “[i]t is precisely the professionalisation of the vocation of author that Pope must distance himself from, and his way of doing so is to claim the approbation of an aristocratic cultural and social circle as the guarantor of his authority.” Suvir Kaul, Thomas Gray and Literary Authority: A Study in Ideology and Poetics (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 22.
Keen, hollow winds howl through the bleak recess,
Emblem of music caused by emptiness.²⁰

Although singled out as the “bleak recess” at the heart of Dulness’ realm, the “cave” is nevertheless “concealed from vulgar eye,” such concealment simultaneously marking a more visibly cultivated space in contrast. It is this latter space into which Pope inscribes himself as poet, and from which he observes the multitudinous “bards” who “Escape in monsters, and amaze the town” (I.37–38). These “monstrous” escapees unleash all of the popular forms associated with the ranks of contemporary professional writers:

Hence miscellanies spring, the weekly boast
Of Currll’s chaste press, and Lintot’s rubric post:
Hence hymning Tyburn’s elegiac lines,
Hence Journals, Medleys, Merc’ries, Magazines:
Sepulchral lies, our holy walls to grace,
And New Year odes, and all the Grub Street race. (I.39–44)

“Springing,” “boasting,” and generally overcrowding the space of the literary market, these various collective and collected forms, Pope argues, are the manifest symptoms of poetry contaminated by the demands of professional writing: demands which issue from the “hollow winds” and “bleak recess” of a life lived in material poverty.

_The Dunciad_’s “cave of poverty and poetry,” as is now well known, thus forms the basis of contemporary and modern representations of the “Grub Street race.”²¹ Just as

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importantly, it participates in what Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have identified as a larger and longer process of class-based acculturation, whereby eighteenth-century writers increasingly satirized, exploited, or otherwise distanced themselves from “low” cultural practices so as to carve out a space for “high,” civilized culture and discourse. For Stallybrass and White, Pope’s investments in the grotesqueness of the “Smithfield Muse”—a fascination shared by contemporaries Jonathan Swift and John Gay in their satires of London life—evinced a new class consciousness about one’s writing and about one’s life and work as a writer:

Swift and Pope perpetually identify the scene of writing with the fairground and the carnival and in both writers the festive repertoire is satirically deformed by the vicious competitive circumstances of the literary market. The ‘marketplace’ has become ‘the market’ and the individual aspiring poets denigrate each other by trying to associate *everyone else* with the vulgarity of the fair whilst repudiating any connection which they themselves might have with such a world.22

Such “carnivalesque” scenes play out most famously through the “heroic games” in Book II of *The Dunciad*, during which booksellers, authors, hack-poets, and critics compete in the name of Dulness. These games likewise constitute what Stallybrass and White term a strategy of “negation,” whereby Pope exploits “the very domains [i.e., professional poets flooding the literary market with their verses] which surround and threaten” his cultivated ideal of poetry so as to deny his own associations with such lowly pursuits.23 By putting these figures into scenes of spectacular and grotesque excess, Pope buttresses the idea that the *real* professional poet must not write according to “the vicious competitive circumstances of the literary market”; on the contrary, he or she must work actively to

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23 Ibid., 89.
project these circumstances and impulses onto all other poets, so as to protect his or her own cultivated sense of “professionalism.”

Yet it is less in *The Dunciad*’s verse than in its pseudo-scholarly apparatus, written in the persona of the learned “Martinus Scriblerus,” that the figure of the professional writer emerges as a living, embodied being. As Scriblerus explains in his lengthy footnote to line 33, “there cannot be a plainer indication of madness than in men’s persisting to starve themselves and offend the public by scribbling…when they might have benefited themselves and others in profitable and honest employments.”

Among the *Dunciad*’s infamously verbose footnotes, Pope’s remarks on the “madness” of professional writing are unusually blunt, even faintly sympathetic, in advising these writers to pursue more “profitable and honest” lines of work. Such sympathy reverts to irony, however, once Scriblerus, in his footnote to the next line, praises the poet for observ[ing] that humanity and candour, which everywhere appears in him towards those unhappy objects of the ridicule of all mankind, the bad poets. He here imputes all scandalous rhymes, scurrilous weekly papers, base flatteries, wretched elegies, songs, and verses…not so much to malice or servility as to Dulness; and not so much to Dulness as to necessity. And thus, at the very commencement of his satire, makes an apology for all that are to be satirized.

Whatever “apology” is directed by the poet at hack writers quickly unravels in Pope’s succeeding 300 lines of verse. But the imputation of these poets’ writing to “necessity,” even if satiric in intent, nevertheless encodes the startling condition that powers both *The Dunciad* and its targets: it is poverty, both imaginative and material, that forces aspiring poets to write bad poetry, and not the other way around. Pope acknowledges, in other words, that material poverty exerts two competing pressures on the aspiring poet. Just as necessity motivates him to write professionally, so too does it limit his imagination,
leading the impoverished writer to produce those “scandalous,” “base,” and “wretched” poems which invite “the ridicule of all mankind.” These are, as we have seen, the very conclusions that Akenside drew nearly a decade later in his own mock-rhapsody of an aspiring but starving poet. That Akenside’s “Rhapsody” articulates this conclusion as a divide between two modes of labor (one “poetic,” the other “manual”) likewise reaffirms Pope’s belief in a narrow conception of professional writing: one which treats the production of poetry as aesthetically rather than financially or “manually” motivated, such that only those who did not need to write for a living—those who could afford to write at their leisure and thus to pursue poetry for the sake of the craft—should write poetry. Such class-based arguments also came to inform late eighteenth-century theories of lyric which, as I shall show in Chapter 5, traced the literary mode’s origins to classical, vatic modes of inspiration while renouncing any suggestion of financial need or commercial greed.

I have dwelt at length on Akenside and Pope’s poems because their representations of the professional poet living and writing in poverty crucially supplement several long-standing assumptions about the relationship between poverty and poetry in eighteenth-century England. Modern literary historians have generally agreed that for most of the period, few writers showed sustained interest in addressing or reforming the structures which divided “the poor”—whether industrious or idle, rural or urban—from their social superiors, even though many nevertheless turned to the poor as objects of charity, contempt, or literary experimentation. As Gary Lee Harrison

24 Such conclusions are most frequently drawn in studies of the eighteenth-century novel, which emphasize the centrality of the poor to the novel form’s popularity and investments in character, style, and class representation. See for example Gertrude Himmelfarb, The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 403–534; and Judith
observes, substantial reform efforts did not arrive until the 1780s, when charitable organizations such as the Sunday School Society (1785) were founded to provide moral education to the poor. The following decade, however, witnessed several overlapping crises—from the French Revolution and its conservative backlash in England, to high grain prices and severe food shortages—that unleashed a flood of debates and artworks about the poor and poor relief. It was in this climate, Harrison argues, that William Wordsworth became the most notable poet to fashion a newly sympathetic discourse on poverty, one which simultaneously “invested [the poor] with affective and moral power” and “confronted [his middle-class readers] with a disturbing sign of their own economic precariousness and possible pauperization.” This liminality emerges in poems such as “The Leech Gatherer” (1802; later published as “Resolution and Independence” in 1807), whose eponymous figure Harrison interprets as a moralizing counterpoint to the speaker-poet’s worldly anxieties over survival. These anxieties surface both in the poet’s private meditations over his own future—“But there may come another day to me—/ Solitude, pain of heart, distress, and poverty” (lines 34–35)—and in his interaction with the leech-gatherer, whose haggard body and incoherent speech defy the poet’s attempts to comprehend the old man’s labor: “‘What occupation do you there pursue? / This is a lonesome place for one like you’” (lines 88–89).

26 Ibid., 18.
27 Ibid., 126. Harrison further observes that the final version of the poem “silences” an important fact about the real leech gatherer whom William and Dorothy met in 1800: the old man had “abandoned his meager occupation of gathering leeches and had turned to peddling books and begging for survival.” The erasure of this historical knowledge from Wordsworth’s earlier drafts, Harrison argues, turns the leech gatherer into “a mythic sign of affective power in the face of
Harrison is right to read Wordsworth as a poet who experimented in sympathetic identifications with the plight of the poor, and his study usefully demonstrates how Wordsworth’s poetry reworked late eighteenth-century discourses of the picturesque, the sublime, and minstrelsy to radical political ends. But Harrison’s historical trajectory also suggests that poetic sympathy for the poor, whether positive or negative, evolved concurrently with the “rise” of a particular model of poetic sensibility: a rise, indeed, of the very brand of “romantic” lyric that readers now associate with Wordsworth and his contemporaries. This is the same literary history encoded in Irvin Ehrenpreis’ earlier notable study of representations of poverty in Augustan literature. Surveying a range of works by Swift, Fielding, Goldsmith, and their respective contemporaries, Ehrenpreis concluded that the poor were at best participants in the period’s most “agreeable fictions,” in so far as they provided middle-class and wealthy audiences with ample opportunities for charity; at worst, they were the objects of satire, scorn, or savagery in the period’s moralizing texts. For Ehrenpreis, poverty simply did not invite the kind of psychologizing sympathy among eighteenth-century readers that Wordsworth would eventually realize in his poetry. When such sympathy did manifest in eighteenth-century poetry, he argued, it did so through the poet’s substitution of “pathos” for material reality, and through the poem’s displacement of attention from the “sufferer” to the “observer.” Ehrenpreis cited Thomas Gray’s *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751) as the paradigmatic example of this substitution:

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Here the poet eliminates meanness from his landscape but infuses that landscape with pathos. The proper source of this sadness—i.e., the misery of a peasant’s life—he ignores, transferring the mood to more decorous motifs. If his version of Arcadia is melancholy, it is at least uncluttered by the misshapen bodies of poor villagers; for to avoid any clash with truth, Gray simply keeps the living people out of his scene; and the reader can only feel that the poor (dead or alive) are fortunate to enjoy such charming prospects.  

Although one could question Ehrenpreis’ conclusion on the part of “the reader” that “the poor…are fortunate to enjoy such charming prospects,” what is important here is that Ehrenpreis rationalizes the *Elegy*’s aesthetic success on the basis of Gray’s decision to “keep the living [poor] out of his scene.” The “truth” of the resulting landscape, the critic suggests, lies not in those “misshapen bodies of poor villagers,” but in the *pathos* that the emptied landscape generates—and neither poet nor critic is interested in resuscitating these bodies for the purposes of sympathizing with “the misery of a peasant’s life.” If such elisions occurred frequently in the writings of eighteenth-century poets and social commentators, Ehrenpreis further argued, they were hardly controversial for their time: 

[Such writers] might deny that the poor were really human, and describe them as unfeeling beasts. They might dress the poor in pastoral disguise and endow them with perfect health. But they performed such operations to support their readers’ sanity or their religious faith. If the effort drove them to create the agreeable fictions I have scrutinized, it is hardly our place to cavil. We face the same questions; we use the same fictions; we still must be screened from reality.  

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29 Ibid., 15.  
30 In a more nuanced reading of the *Elegy*, Kaul agrees with Ehrenpreis that the poem invokes the “country…more as a structure of feeling, a utopian fiction strategically deployed, rather than as a portrait of a way of life” with which the poet would have identified. But Kaul also argues that Gray positions the poor as double victims of “Knowledge” (line 49): the force that could potentially lift the poor out of poverty and into greatness, but only in the “precise terms [of conquest, plunder, and corruption] that make the Great suspect.” Kaul, *Thomas Gray and Literary Authority*, 137, 136.  
31 “Poetry and Poverty,” 26, my italics.
There are two key implications to Ehrenpreis’ argument: first, that the poor were little more than objects in and of the period’s “agreeable fictions”; and second, that a moralizing (or occasionally scornful) representation of poverty, rather than a description of its real conditions, was crucial to making these fictions “agreeable” to eighteenth-century readers. In this light, Ehrenpreis’ study suggests not only a history of lyrical attitudes toward poverty, but also a lyricized history of poverty itself. That is, the evolution of literary representations of poverty becomes an evolution in lyric address, with Wordsworth’s imaginary (though marginally coherent) conversation with the leech-gatherer addressing Gray’s mournful regret that the “short and simple Annals of the poor” (line 32) must be consigned to the monologic realms of epitaph and elegy.

Where Ehrenpreis was reluctant to criticize such fictions for their misrepresentations of the poor, let alone turn to texts which were less “agreeable” by his (or eighteenth-century readers’) standards, later studies undertook the recovery of the voices, records, and self-representations of the eighteenth-century’s largely indigent population. Moving well beyond the confines of “Augustan literature,” E. P. Thompson’s highly influential Customs in Common (1991) presented a far more heterogeneous portrait of the eighteenth-century laboring poor, as it argued for the flourishing of “customary” culture against the increasing dominance of capitalist practices and bourgeois ideology. Thompson’s wide-ranging examinations of folklore, ritual, and the rhythms of labor rebranded the poor as agents, rather than objects, of eighteenth-century cultural representation, and other scholars followed suit in their investigations of the period’s material culture and textual records.32

32 See for example the essays in Chronicling Poverty: The Voices and Strategies of the English Poor, 1640–1840, ed. Tim Hitchcock, Peter King, and Pamela Sharpe (New York: St. Martin’s
What place in these histories of eighteenth-century poetry and poverty, then, for the figure of the impoverished professional poet, scribbling away in his garret while struggling to escape his squalid living conditions? As I argued earlier through the examples of *The Dunciad* and Akenside’s “The Poet,” the professional hack-poet emerged as the most visible target of a literary culture and market which sought to “protect” its writers and readers from the social, political, and financial threats posed by equally (if not more) prolific hack-writers or otherwise untalented and marginalized figures. This strategy of depicting the professional writer as lonely and impoverished, I now want to suggest, also operated under the guise of preserving a lyrical ideal of poetry—that is, an understanding that poetry was grounded in the pursuit of imaginative spirit—from any imputation to “necessity.” To write for one’s material survival, then, was to write in a “spirit” that contravened poetry’s lyric inclinations, and the figure of the professional poet thus became a chief object of parody and ridicule by his or her more cultivated, well-connected peers. This generic association between parody and professionalism, I would likewise suggest, continues to consign the “professional poet” to the margins of modern literary (and especially lyric) history. Such consignment becomes clear even in studies of eighteenth-century laboring poets, where careful distinctions are made between physical laborers who wrote poetry in poverty, and poets who wrote professionally under comparable (albeit urban) conditions.33

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33 To take one example, Richard Greene deemphasizes the importance of material poverty to his definition of “laboring poets,” noting simply that the “figure of the impoverished poet is a commonplace in literature” and, by extension, an overburdened rhetorical construct as opposed to a historical (even sympathetic) subject to be recovered. Greene, *Mary Leapor: A Study in Eighteenth-Century Women’s Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 99.
Scholars may well have Akenside’s caricature of an impoverished poet and similar figures in mind when they exclude them from the category of eighteenth-century laboring poets. But the more important observation to be made is that this distinction rests not only on the biography or economic status of individual poets, but also on their roles in the satiric tradition of anti-professionalism as most notably exemplified in *The Dunciad* and “The Poet.” In what follows, I trace the consolidation of this tradition in a series of eighteenth-century burlesque poems which consistently ridicule the aspiring poet as an embarrassing figure. Such humorous depictions, I suggest, also served to warn readers away from the profession of poetry itself. While these burlesques have been remembered simply as humorous poems written on lowly subjects, I argue for their significance in shaping a discourse which actively excluded poets who were impoverished (whether as urban hacks, or as domestic or agrarian laborers) from claiming cultural and poetic authority. By reading with and beyond their satirical representations of the so-called “professional” poet, we can discern a cyclical relationship between poetic production and poverty that haunted underprivileged writers’ own entrances into an otherwise hostile literary market.

III. “I, whom griping Penury surrounds”: Philips’ *Splendid Shilling* and Its Imitators

Given that Akenside published “The Poet” in *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, one could argue that he intended to entertain a literate, middle- and upper-class audience who would have had little reason to sympathize with its target. But “The Poet” also clearly invokes the most popular burlesque poem of its time, and indeed of the remainder of the eighteenth century: John Phillips’ *The Splendid Shilling. An Imitation of Milton* (1701;
authorized 1705). Philips’ poem centers on an impoverished Oxford student who exaggeratedly sketches, and proves unable to escape, his cycle of poverty and despair.

Philips had studied at Christ Church, Oxford since 1697 and cultivated a circle of royalist friends over the following decade, though no biographical account suggests that he himself was impoverished at this time. Even so, the poem became wildly popular, despite his initial protestations against its unauthorized 1701 release; it spawned numerous parodies and adaptations of its own “Imitation of Milton,” and attracted praise for its humorous degradation of its predecessor’s elevated style.

The poem opens with the neoclassical topos of the beatus vir:

Happy the Man, who void of Cares and Strife,
In Silken, or in Leathern Purse retains
A Splendid Shilling: He nor hears with Pain
New Oysters cry’d, nor sighs for cheerful Ale;
But with his Friends, when nightly Mists arise,
To Juniper’s, Magpye, or Town-Hall repairs:34

These opening lines establish the poem’s burlesque framework. The lofty epideixis of the very first line, for example, is immediately undercut by what the speaker imagines to be the shilling’s greatest potential: its power to grant the happy man the privilege to drink and eat wherever he pleases. Several lines later, the absent shilling emphasizes an even greater contrast between the conventional beatus vir and the poet’s impoverished self:

But I, whom griping Penury surrounds,
And Hunger, sure Attendant upon Want,
With scanty Offals, and small acid Tiff
(Wretched Repast!) my meagre Corps sustain:
Then Solitary walk, or doze at home
In Garret vile, and with a warming puff
Regale chill’d Fingers… (lines 13–19)

In this poem, it is the absent coin that animates the figure and behavior of the impecunious poet: his “meagre Corps” (to speak about his “griping Penury”), his “Wretched Repast,” his alienated loneliness, and his fear of duns and tax payments. Suspended as it is in the poem’s neoclassical apostrophe, the “splendid shilling” perpetually indexes its would-be owner’s material and poetic inability to escape his impoverishment. In this sense, we can and should read Philips’ poem not only as a satire of a struggling poet, but also as a lyric poem in which the speaker cannot be construed without calling our attention to the desired shilling’s absence. This is to say that the poem names material deprivation as the essential precondition behind both the poet’s livelihood and his very existence as a speaking, breathing figure.

I will have more to say about The Splendid Shilling’s lyrical qualities later in this section, but for now it is worth examining how the absent coin governs all of the relationships between the impoverished professional poet and his world. As the speaker invests the splendid shilling with boundless prospects, his language and emotions center increasingly on the terror of being punished for living in poverty. His regular encounters with the “Dunn” (line 36) and his “Catchpole” (line 58), for example, provoke the speaker’s “chilly Sweat” and “shud’ring Limbs” (lines 45–46) precisely because their “Long Scrolls of Paper” bear the “Characters, and Figures dire inscrib’d / Grievous to mortal Eyes” (lines 53–54). A second meditation on the catchpole in particular compels another extravagant simile to Grimalkin and Arachne, both of whom entrap and devour their prey by striking at night. And perhaps most absurdly, the speaker’s torn “Galligaskins,” long breeches which “have long withstood / The Winter’s Fury” (lines
121–22), provoke his final hyperbolic turn to a ship sinking in the Aegean under the perpetual force of “battering Waves” (line 141).

The most important revelation of the absent shilling’s dominance, however, occurs in the poem’s most sober passage, wherein the speaker catalogues the verses he writes in his poverty. In the dark and cold solitude of his garret, he claims, he produces poetry in various forms: from “dismal Thoughts” and “mournful Verse” (lines 101–02), to solitary and meditative lyrics, and to pastoral scenes. Yet these poems exist precisely because he lives and works in abject poverty:

Mean while I Labour with eternal Drought,
And restless Wish, and Rave; my parched Throat
Finds no Relief, nor heavy Eyes Repose:
But if a Slumber haply does Invade
My weary Limbs, my Fancy’s still awake,
Thoughtful of Drink, and Eager in a Dream,
Tipples Imaginary Pots of Ale;
In Vain; awake, I find the settled Thirst
Still gnawing, and the pleasant Phantom curse. (lines 106–14)

If these lines amount to an ars poetica for the impoverished poet, they indicate that no imaginative work—not even the lines of verse enabled by his desire for coin—can displace him from his “restless” cycle of “Drought” and wishful thinking. Also noteworthy in this passage is the speaker’s mention of his “Fancy” and his “Dream,” as these two forces perpetually re-enact his struggles as a professional poet: his ever-alert fancy forces him to acknowledge the “settled Thirst” that his dreams of “Imaginary Pots of Ale” can never quench, in much the same way that his sheaves of poems cannot earn him the shilling he desperately desires. To these ends, both the poems he writes and The Splendid Shilling itself are the ineffectual products of the poet’s poverty.
These humorous scenes of fear and terror gave The Splendid Shilling its reputation as a masterful burlesque of Milton’s elevated style. Joseph Addison, writing in the voice of his own imaginary shilling, praised Philips’ work as “the finest Burlesque Poem in the British Language.” Edmund Smith, one of Philips’ closest friends who wrote an elegy to the poet upon his death in 1709, agreed with Addison’s judgment and recognized that “[e]very body is pleased with that work.” Oliver Goldsmith included Philips’ poem in his Beauties of English Poesy (1767) and observed that “[t]his is reckoned the best parody of Milton in our language: it has been an hundred times imitated, without success.” Samuel Johnson emphasized its “uncommon merit of an original design” as having “gratifie[d] the mind with a momentary triumph over” Milton’s intimidating “grandeur,” though like Goldsmith he too stressed that all of Philips’ imitators could “only hope to be considered as the repeater of a jest.” Modern readers of The Splendid Shilling have not strayed far from this critical consensus, either: both Richmond P. Bond and Raymond Dexter Havens have reaffirmed the importance of the poem to the burlesque tradition, while more recent readings have highlighted its centrality to the period’s evolving uses of pastoral, blank verse, and “national” poetics.

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35 Joseph Addison, Tatler no. 249 (11 November 1710).
36 Quoted in Richmond P. Bond, English Burlesque Poetry, 1700–1750 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932), 39. Smith had originally intended for his remarks to be published in the “Preface Dedicatory” to his elegy to Philips, but he himself died in 1710. Johnson reprinted the entirety of Smith’s unfinished manuscript in the Lives.
40 Ann Baynes Coiro’s claim that The Splendid Shilling secured both Philips’ and Milton’s reputations in the eighteenth century informs virtually all modern commentaries of the poem. Along similar lines, David Fairer observes that Philips’ poem legitimated “the language of
Such judgments point toward what Margaret Anne Doody has usefully termed the poem’s “answerable style,” or its consolidation of an existing style and form into a distinctive, marketable brand for later poets to imitate or distort.\footnote{Margaret Anne Doody, \textit{The Daring Muse: Augustan Poetry Reconsidered} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 47–56.} But I want to call attention to another key consequence of \textit{The Splendid Shilling}’s poetics, and one which should compel us to reassess the interpretive tradition that surrounds Philips’ burlesque and its many imitations. For all Philips’ mastery of Milton’s style, \textit{The Splendid Shilling} also confirms the \textit{hack-poet}’s ability to achieve the very same effect: that is, to ape the poetic conventions of epic simile, blank verse, and inverted syntax almost seamlessly. At the same time, the poem displays an awareness that the professional poet’s literary ability—the ability to parody a distinguished style perfectly—is no guarantee of his material survival or financial success. In this light, we could then read Philips’ poem through the same prism of class-based respectability that Pope would later exploit in \textit{The Dunciad}. By animatedly parodying the struggles of hack-writers and foregrounding their material poverty, both \textit{The Splendid Shilling} and \textit{The Dunciad} are attempts to preempt the threat that an underprivileged but otherwise competent and prolific poet could pose to his or her status in the market of public opinion.

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\footnote{Margaret Anne Doody, \textit{The Daring Muse: Augustan Poetry Reconsidered} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 47–56.}
I now return to the question of *The Splendid Shilling*’s lyrical qualities. What might it mean, as I suggested earlier, to read this poem as *lyric*, despite its ostensibly closer ties to satire, burlesque, and Miltonic epic? Indeed, what would it mean to treat Philips’ poem as the modeling of personal utterance: not necessarily of Philips himself, but rather of any aspiring writer in urban London at the turn of the eighteenth century, however self-consciously comedic his descriptions of his living conditions are? These qualities would seem to exclude Philips’ poem from the domain of lyric utterance, in so far as they construct a speaker and speech mode that readers would have discerned as unbelievable. This is the key conclusion that Doody draws in her reading of *The Splendid Shilling*, in which she argues that its power lies in the “embarrassing” incoherence between its lowly speaker and his elevated style:

…we know the speaker is a “dummy” because he doesn’t question or notice the tension between subject matter and style…We feel sure that there is a “real” poet, a ventriloquist, casting his voice over into the pretended speaker, and we have this certainty because we can imagine that the poet who can carry on the Miltonic lines so well must understand their original use…We should be embarrassed if a real “I” were to speak solemnly and almost obsessively of his dreams of “Pots of Ale.”

Doody then develops these ideas into several hypotheses about the speaker’s “situation”:

The picture created is vivid, the speaker sympathetic, and we can see that the puppet-character is a joke-self, perhaps of the “real” poet who could find relief from his own situation in laughing at it. The situation might, for an individual truly involved in it, seem serious enough from his point of view almost to merit Miltonic grand treatment. (The Daring Muse 49)

As an exemplar of Milton’s “answerable style,” *The Splendid Shilling* therefore sketches an impoverished poet who could not actually write such a poem of his own accord, precisely because of the obvious clash between lifestyle and poetic voice. Yet despite

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42 Ibid., 48–49.
43 Ibid., 49.
these contradictions, Doody nevertheless recognizes that they produce a believable
speaker: a realistic “I” who would cause “embarrassment” if he “were to speak solemnly
and almost obsessively” of his unrealizable dreams. In this sense, she produces what I
would call a lyric reading of Philips’ poem: one which accepts the immanent coherence
of its speaker, but nevertheless dismisses his credibility as a living poet who would have
spoken “solemnly and almost obsessively” about his outlandish dreams in blank verse.
This mode of reading, I also want to suggest, relegates the poem’s actual content—the
speaker’s “griping Penury,” cramped garret, and perpetually failed dreams—to the realm
of humorous embarrassment, if not outright fiction. With Philips as his “ventriloquist,”
the impoverished poet becomes both liar and lyre, an instrument paradoxically stripped
away from the very conditions that he himself cannot escape through his endless writing.

But the poem itself poses a motive force that Doody does not address in her
reading, and that is the very “splendid shilling” against which the speaker defines himself
and his lifestyle. Without the physical coin in his grip, the impoverished poet emerges as
a coherent, competent, and imaginative lyric figure who can speak animatedly (if
humorously and facetiously) to his struggles. But removing that absent coin from the
frame of interpretation, I would argue, further propels the poem into the “embarrassing”
domain of burlesque and satire, and thus leads its readers to approach Philips’
composition with a very different set of concerns. As we have seen from the poem’s
eighteenth-century reception, these concerns center much more on questions of style,
parody, and voice—all of which have compelled readers from Philips’ day to the present
to characterize the impoverished poet as a convenient literary device—than they do on
the material deprivation that enables the poem’s very existence. Such a critical
disposition, in effect, turns *The Splendid Shilling* into a humorous exercise in Miltonic style at the expense of dismissing the speaker-poet’s fixation on his inescapable poverty.

Of course, one could just as easily argue that Philips himself had little reason to sympathize with his own satiric subject or to make him the focal point for anything but a humorous exercise in “imitating” Milton’s style. But our critical focus on matters of literary influence, I argue, risks effacing *The Splendid Shilling*’s other, less-acknowledged legacy: that its depiction of the struggling professional poet made poverty a fashionable subject for satiric lyric verse. And the poet’s decision to present that subject through parody, I suggest, conditioned the interpretive conditions that I have been describing: an inability or refusal to sympathize with the material plight of writing in poverty, or to recognize the would-be (and probably failing) professional poet as anyone but a deluded, impoverished figure.

Because it was the first poem to “degrade” Milton’s elevated style to the domains of poverty and popular pleasure, *The Splendid Shilling* had no shortage of eighteenth-century imitators. By 1800, over 100 parodies of Philips’ own “Imitation of Milton” had been published, most of which were built upon the poem’s central image of the penurious poet.\(^4^4\) The vast majority of these parodies were published anonymously in miscellanies, although some poets, most notably William Woty (1731–1791), achieved modest success and recognition with their own object poems. Woty’s “The Corkscrew,” for example, characteristically celebrates its titular object’s bacchanalian affordances, before concluding with a toast to the corkscrew’s inventor (and by poetic extension, Philips):

But here can I forget the happy man,  
Whose thought first gave this engine to the world!  
Hail to thy memory! and tho’ old Time  
In his recording tablet for thy name  
Has left a blank, yet shall the social soul  
With mirthful gratitude the gift admire  
And drink one bumper in their donor’s praise.45

Some parodies of The Splendid Shilling, like “An Epistle from Oxon” (1731), placed greater emphasis on the dismal, solitary conditions which struggling young writers faced,46 while others presented even bawdier depictions of London life. One such anonymous parody, “The Oyster Woman” (1733), reimagines Philips’ impoverished student-poet as having been tempted by the woman’s cries of “Wainfleet-Oysters” to enter a brothel, whereupon a proctor barges in to arrest him.47 Still other poems, such as “The Last Guinea” (1750), capitalized on the contemporary vogue for it-narratives as they construed the loss or absence of coin as an occasion for self-reflection or even self-definition.48

But there were also adaptations which, like Akenside’s “The Poet,” tightened the connection between poetic production and material poverty. One of the more notable poems in this vein, the anonymously written “The Poet: or, a Muse in Distress,” opens a 1737 miscellany of previously unpublished poems by poets who claimed to “have no Reputation as Authors, either to get or lose.”49 In a marked reimagining of Philips’ original subject, this parody places greater emphasis on the poverty of the working poet as he struggles to write in the dirty “Vermin-Warren” of his room.50 And whereas the prototypical Oxford student obsesses about the objects he cannot afford, the distressed professional poet fixates on the people and things that he cannot escape. He reserves special disgust for the barber shop below his garret:

The lower Part (the Shop) a Barber fills,
Who Cuts, or Shaves, or (for a Penny) Bleeds—
With Hands begrim’d, the Lather o’er the Face
He spreads, and scratches with his Beast-like Claws:
Then strait the Razor in his Fist is lodg’d,
And while he, scraping, hovers o’er your Chin,
Of Wit, Religion, Politics, or Laws,
Even from good Queen Bess’s Days to these,
He breaths out all he ever saw or heard
And sends the gross Effluvia in your Teeth;
While from his Nose, unwip’d, the Snuff distills,
Which on his Sleeve with decent Care he wipes,
And whets his Razor on the slimy Cuff— (“The Poet” 3)

The poet’s bodily sense of horror at his immediate surroundings also refracts back onto his own despairing hunger, as he observes the tormenting “Prospect” of food vendors outside his window. Unable to purchase any of their wares, he stirs himself into a frenzied dream of his Muse Minerva as “a Loin, or Fillet, Leg, or Breast; / Or clouded in

50 Anon, “The Poet: or, a Muse in Distress,” Collection, 2. All subsequent parenthetical citations of the poem will refer to page numbers in this edition.
a Venison-Pasty” (5). And when the poet does manage to satiate his hunger—at the
termination of “some Poetic Friend, / Whom Fortune favours” (7)—his aggressive and
slovenly eating habits scare off his hosts from inviting him to dine with them again. But
the most damning realization arrives when he turns to face the mass of objects that he
does possess, namely his own writing:

Oft, with dejected Eyes, I turn and view
The Poems, Essays, Opera’s [sic] I have wrote;
Stupendous Pile! By Booksellers despis’d;
The last by Actors, cruelly refus’d:
O barbarous Actors! Children of the Muse!
Knew ye but what expence of Books they cost,
How many Bards I’ve pillaged for a Farce,
You cou’d not, sure, unheard, contemn my Works! (“The Poet” 5)

The sheer volume of writing that the poet has produced is revealed to be, in fact, a stream
of imitations of existing works. In short, the poet has made his miserable living by
plagiarizing his predecessors and contemporaries, a move that likewise tropes on the
poem’s own existence as one of the numerous ‘copies’ of Philips’ original imitation.

Across these and many other parodies of The Splendid Shilling, then, we can
clearly discern a poetic tradition that traded heavily in the comic image of the struggling
professional poet, and thus trained a genteel reading public to show little or no sympathy
toward that poet’s plight. By correlating the poet’s squalid living conditions with his
prolific output and his delusions of financial success, Philips made his figure both a
fashionable subject for satiric lyric poetry and a powerful image with which
‘accomplished’ poets like Pope could deploy to claim their authority in the literary and
cultural market in the name of aesthetic rather than financial success. While it would be
inaccurate to claim these poems as documentary evidence of all professional poets’
struggles across the eighteenth century, I have drawn attention to them because they
position poverty and material necessity at the heart of “professional” poetic production. It is this positioning, I have argued, that continues to power our modern understanding of the lyric as a genre whose practitioners and poetic effects are removed from, or transcend, the pressures of historical or financial circumstance.

IV. Professionalisms Out of Poverty: Duck, Dodsley, Leapor

If the burlesque tradition of Philips’ *Splendid Shilling* and its imitations thus rendered the professional poet as a figure for ridicule, what models were considered acceptable to those whose class profiles or cultural affiliations were such that they were discouraged from writing poetry professionally? As we have seen, eighteenth-century poets’ literary authority and social acceptability hinged upon their ability to separate matters of professionalism from matters of poetry, or to project these details onto other poets as a means of attacking their interests and protecting one’s own. These strategies coalesced around the hack-poet’s daily struggle to write for his survival in urban London, and his or her failure to write his way out of the very conditions or immoral decisions that (as such poems claimed) forced him to write poetry for a living. Under these conditions, underprivileged and laboring poets who aspired to write professionally presented—or rather, were conditioned by their patrons to present—themselves as humble, virtuous, and indebted to the poetic traditions and forms set forth by their more eminent predecessors and contemporaries.

By far the most popular of these aspiring poets was Stephen Duck, now invariably remembered as the eighteenth century’s “thresher poet.” The discovery by Joseph Spence of Duck’s “natural genius” for poetry, as well as his meteoric rise to the status of court
poet and librarian under Queen Caroline’s patronage, have been extensively documented by scholars of eighteenth-century laboring-class poetry.\textsuperscript{51} His poems—especially \emph{The Thresher’s Labour} (1730), which remains his most frequently studied and anthologized work—likewise spawned what John Goodridge, borrowing from William Warner’s terminology, describes as a “media event” for eighteenth-century laboring-class poetry.\textsuperscript{52} Perhaps most importantly, Duck’s remarkable (if short-lived) success encouraged contemporary and later laborers to try their hand at poetry, and to testify in part to their experiences as menial laborers—all for the commercial and aesthetic benefit of a more affluent, privileged audience.

That Duck became the eighteenth century’s most eminent laboring poet has led modern scholars to claim his career and poetry as paradigmatic not only for those of his successors, but also for the study of laboring-class poetry more generally. As Goodridge observes in his survey of \emph{The Thresher’s Labour}’s modern critical reception, readers have tended to champion the poem’s detailed descriptions as “authentic” or “historical” evidence of the male agrarian laborer’s life, often at the expense of treating the poem as a poem.\textsuperscript{53} More recent studies of Duck have begun to correct these tendencies by attending


\textsuperscript{53} Goodridge, \textit{Rural Life in Eighteenth-Century English Poetry}, 16–22. Comparing \emph{The Thresher’s Labour} to James Thomson’s \emph{The Seasons} (1730) and especially Mary Collier’s \emph{The Woman’s Labour} (1736), Goodridge concludes that the \emph{poeticization} of rural labor, and not a commitment to historical truth, should be the basis of our evaluation of these and other laboring poems. Conversely (and perhaps most famously), Raymond Williams criticized Duck for turning away from his early meditations on threshing to write, “with the worst of them...imitations of the classics, elevated and hollowed to the shapes of that fashionable culture which was not only a literary stance—the ‘high’ tradition—but, as always, a social ratification” (\textit{The Country and the City}, 90).
to his experiments with genre, convention, and voice, thereby seeking to recover (and legitimate) his status as a poet who, like his more eminent peers, was invested in the traditions and currents that powered their craft.\textsuperscript{54} Such studies reflect what we might call a formalist turn in studies of laboring-class poetry, which seeks to privilege the modes of formal analysis and aesthetic evaluation that have long been applied to the eighteenth century’s “professional” poets. As Donna Landry and William Christmas wrote in their introduction to the Fall 2005 special issue of \textit{Criticism}:

\begin{quote}
...when the stories of these poets’ struggles to become poets, and to be recognized as such, come to dominate reading and discussion of their work, there is a danger that what they actually achieved in terms of craft, sublimity, and technical prowess may be lost in a biographical prison house of images and image making….It is now surely time to attempt the properly aesthetic critical work that these new poems and new poets require in order to recapture something of their dynamic history as distinctive and often innovative artistic voices.\textsuperscript{55}
\end{quote}

Although neither Landry and Christmas’ introduction nor the essays in their volume label them as such, the poetic features they specify as central to “properly aesthetic critical work”—“craft, sublimity, and technical prowess”—are also features of a \textit{lyrical} understanding of the poet’s craft. Here I use “lyrical” in the sense that such features are, for the purposes of interpretation, potentially separable from these poets’ personal circumstances. These are also, we might observe, the same features of poetic composition


that eighteenth-century satirists like Philips and his imitators honed through their own carefully crafted and technically proficient poems of denial and ridicule toward their less-cultivated competitors.

This is not to accuse modern readers of laboring-class poetry of replacing these important historical matters with purely “aesthetic” concerns. Rather, I am suggesting that Landry and Christmas’ call for an interpretive turn encodes the literary-historical narrative that poets like Pope and Philips exploited to marginalize their impoverished peers from literary recognition. That is, Pope and Philips’ portraits of the professional poet as an impoverished hack conditioned “[laboring] poets’ struggles to become poets, and to be recognized as such,” that is, their own self-understanding. Further, and perhaps even more consequentially, they have determined those modern “stories” we have been told (and continue to tell) about the desirability of becoming a professional poet in the eighteenth century. If Landry and Christmas’ call for “properly aesthetic critical work” is therefore predicated on a tradition of recovering and restoring the “laboring” poet to the status of “practicing,” upper-class, cultivated and educated, poet, then that critical work has yet to account for the discourse of poetic labor and poverty that Philips, Pope, and Akenside contemporaneously propagated through their comic poems. Given the weight of this poetic convention of ridiculing and discouraging non-elites from writing poetry, in what ways, then, did laboring poets claim authority alongside contemporary portraits intended to discourage them from writing in the literary market? And how did their poems contest or circumvent popular caricatures of the prolific, yet ultimately deluded and penniless professional lyric poet?
Perhaps the most moving reminder of these caricatures’ impact on eighteenth-century laboring poets and their readers came from Robert Dodsley, the footman-turned-bookseller who made his entrance on the literary market with his poetical miscellany *A Muse in Livery* (1732). Throughout the collection, Dodsley cannily presented himself as an impoverished laborer who wished to become a cultivated, practicing poet. Such desires are discussed at length in the miscellany’s concluding prose essay, “A Sketch of the Miseries of Poverty” (first published 1731). Its chief concerns are the everyday hardships of those who are impoverished, yet “desirous of learning and knowledge” and “capable of tasting happiness, and enjoying the rational pleasures of life.”

These hardships precipitate into a coherent figure through the “Sketch’s” epigraph, taken from the first three lines of *The Splendid Shilling*, and through Dodsley’s immersive description of the “poor man’s” dilemma:

…there are a thousand unspeakable calamities unknown to any but the wretch who feels them, which more nearly affect him. Hunger gnaws upon his stomach, and pinching cold benums [sic] his senses; continual care preys upon his spirits, and continual sorrow sinks his soul: He is like a man shut up in a vessel full of spikes; which way soever he turns, he finds something that pricks him….In all his actions he feels himself cramp’d with wretched indigence…At home, he is surrounded with misery and want; abroad, insulted with contempt and insolence.

Such corporeal descriptions rework *The Splendid Shilling*’s satire of the poor poet’s miserable conditions into personal testimony, and hence mark a sharp contrast between the two works’ perspectives on the professional poet’s plight. Yet Dodsley tempers his testimony in his poems, which trade less in the language of “wretched indigence” than

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57 Ibid., 91–92.
they do in his self-confidence as an aspiring poet. The opening poem “Effigis Authoris: or, the Mind of the Frontispiece,” for example, rehearses the speaker-poet’s struggles to escape his “Chain” (line 1) of poverty in generic terms, before ending with his desire for “some gen’rous Mind” (line 21) to free him and thus begin a lifelong commitment to “Virtue” and “Gratitude” (line 28). In “An Epistle to Stephen Duck,” meanwhile, Dodsley openly celebrates the former thresher’s rise from “slavish toil” and “low distress” to the security of a court position (line 18), then cannily claims identity and community with Duck in the poem’s very final lines:

So you and I, just naked from the shell,
In chirping notes our future singing tell;
Unfeather’d yet, in judgment, thought, or skill,
Hop round the basis of Parnassus’ hill:
Our flights are low, and want of art and strength,
Forbids to carry us to the wish’d-for length.
But fledg’d, and cherish’d with a kindly spring,
We’ll mount the summit, and melodious sing. (lines 112–19)

Dodsley’s poetic optimism matches the stance that Duck adopted in “On Poverty,” one of his earliest composed poems. Whereas The Thresher’s Labour famously testifies in its angry first-person plural declamations to the daily toils of threshing and haymaking, “On Poverty” adopts a more universalizing stance as it discusses poverty’s general afflictions and, most crucially, distinguishes between “contented poverty” and “unwieldy riches.”58 This last point underwrites not only Duck’s moralizing argument, but also his implicit claim to legitimacy as a practicing poet: an especially important move given that pirated versions of this poem and others appeared in print in the same

year (1730) that Caroline granted him royal patronage. The final lines of “On Poverty” stake these claims by addressing God directly in the first-person singular:

THEN why should Phantoms discompose the Mind;  
Or Woes, so far from real, fright Mankind?  
Since Wealth can never make the Vicious blest,  
Nor Poverty subdue the virtuous Breast;  
Since both from Heav’n’s unerring Hand are sent,  
LORD, give me either; give me but CONTENT. (lines 66–71)

Having withheld his use of the first-person pronoun until the final line, Duck manages to confirm both his “contentment” in a Christian, non-materialistic state of poverty (later to become a “safe subject” for other laboring poets) and his authority to draw such conclusions as an aspiring poet. The poem therefore posits a morally acceptable relationship between poverty and poetry—one may escape from poverty’s “Woes” and “Phantoms” if one’s poetry testifies to a “virtuous Breast”—a definition that stands in direct contrast to the caricature of the prolific lyricist wasting away under similar conditions of material deprivation.

Both Duck and Dodsley’s poems thus trace what I call an “authorized” logic of poverty and poetry among eighteenth-century laborers: that is, these poems attested to the miseries of poverty, but were careful to defend their poetry as a morally acceptable means of overcoming their struggles. The morality of their defense lay in these poets’ refusal to escape poverty, as contemporary satirists had suggested of Grub Street hacks, by writing poetry purely for financial gain or material survival. By casting themselves as diligent, devout, and disciplined despite their material conditions, these poets conceived the profession of poetry as a higher calling which could help them transcend the miseries

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of poverty. Such transcendence was therefore conceived in the recognition that the laborers’ poetic “genius” would shine through the false “phantoms” of material desire and the “slavish toil” of daily labor, and that their poetry would consequently serve a higher ideal: one which we ourselves might recognize as a precondition of the modern lyric. This is not to say, of course, that Duck and Dodsley’s patrons and readers did not help them rise to some level of financial and material self-sufficiency; rather, the point here is that these poets consciously manipulated their depiction of, and response to, the challenges of poverty so as to make them acceptable and marketable to their readers. The result was an authorized discourse that substituted these laborers’ virtue and diligence for their physical suffering while writing in penury.

As a third case study into the poetics of professional poetry among laboring poets, we can also consider the example of the servant-poet Mary Leapor, who claimed poetical legitimacy both in the “authorizing” model of Duck and Dodsley’s virtue and in the very idiom with which her contemporaries would have satirized her and her peers. Born on February 26, 1722 in the small but impoverished village of Marston St. Lawrence in Northamptonshire, Leapor lived and worked in circumstances that directly shaped her short-lived writing career. Her father’s service as gardener to the local Purefoy family would have ensured financial stability for the family, but the Leapors were by no means prosperous. Their tolerable income did, however, grant Mary the rare opportunity among children of rural laborers to learn to read and write. In her biography of the poet affixed to the second volume of her *Poems on Several Occasions* (1748), Leapor’s

patroness Bridget Freemantle describes how the poet’s constant “scribbling, and sometimes in Rhyme” drew concern from her parents, who “endeavour’d to break her of it” in their attempt to secure her “more profitable Employment.”

In any event, Leapor and her parents relented to each other’s wishes: she eventually secured employment at Weston Hall under Susanna Jennens, for whom she worked as a kitchen maid and cook, and Jennens encouraged Leapor to continue writing poetry.

As modern studies of eighteenth-century kitchen servants have noted, Leapor’s duties as a cook were menial at best, and her daily tasks would have demanded functional rather than creative literacy: the ability to follow and copy recipes, rather than to write poems. But Jennens, herself an amateur poet with an extensive library and a circle of friends who shared verses with one another, almost certainly expanded Leapor’s literary horizons during the latter’s employment at Weston Hall. Freemantle’s support was even more influential: once the two met in the 1740s (by which time Leapor had been dismissed from her second and final job at Edgcote House), she struck up a lasting friendship with Leapor and arranged for a subscription volume of the latter’s poetry. Leapor was eager to return her patroness’ favor, as many of her poems address

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62 Greene points out that Jennens, who earned £300 a year, could not pay Leapor anything like the £10 salary that (as Bridget Hill notes) a more affluent family would have been able to provide for its kitchen servants. Carolyn Steedman likewise observes that literate kitchen-maids, while “fashionable” among employers, could also be perceived as threatening if they were embedded too deeply in local social and cultural life. Greene, Mary Leapor, 17; Hill, Servants: English Domestic in the Eighteenth Century (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 133; Steedman, “Poetical Maids and Cooks Who Wrote,” Eighteenth-Century Studies 39, no. 1 (2005): 9.

63 Greene, Mary Leapor, 77. For an extensive (though by Greene’s admission, not comprehensive) inventory of Jennens’ library, see “Appendix: The Weston Hall Library” in Mary Leapor, 210–13.
“Artemisia” as the poet’s Muse, implied reader, or simply closest friend. A typical example is “The Linnet and the Goldfinch,” in which the two conversing birds observe “Mira” (Leapor’s persona) in melancholy isolation. At Mira’s command, the birds sing to draw Artemisia back to the grove, and her impending return precipitates the poem’s happy ending:

When She, of whom our Mira daily sings,
Whose Name she whispers to the list’ning Springs,
Shall bless these Shades—then, ye melodious Trhong,
Let each prepare ‘em for the sprightly Song.

Here ends the Goldfinch, and exulting springs;
Her pleas’d Companions clap their joyful Wings. 64

Other poems, such as “To Artemisia,” address Freemantle in order to imagine social relationships beyond that between patroness and poet. Here Leapor calls her companion to tea, in light tetrameters whose easy rhythms suggest an ease of reference and a shared conviviality. Just as importantly, these rhythms also offer the poet a reprieve from her daily labors while jesting at such a scenario:

Our Tommy in a Jug shall bring
Clear Nectar from the bubbling Spring:
The Cups shall on the Table stand,
The Sugar and the Spoons at hand:
A skilful Hand shall likewise spread
Soft Butter on the yielding Bread;

With you and your Amanda blest,
Care flies away from Mira’s Breast;
O’er stubborn Flax no more I grieve,
But stick the Needle on my Sleeve:
For let them work on Holiday,
Who won’t be idle when they may… (lines 5–10, 15–20)

Putting aside her needlework for the opportunity to ‘summon’ Artemisia and her servants, Leapor reimagines herself as peer to her patroness, and the writing of the poem-invitation legitimates her own claim to “command” others to do the work she herself would have been expected to perform. In such occasional poems as these, Leapor therefore uses female friendship as an important tool for “working” herself out of her daily labors and into the regular writing of (and community provided by) poetry.

But perhaps the most imaginative and least discussed strategy that Leapor deployed to reconcile her labor with her poetry can be found in her “object poems,” in which the poet turned directly to items she used or encountered regularly in order to meditate on the work—and social risk—of writing poetry. In “The Inspir’d Quill. Occasion’d by a Present of Crow-Pens,” for example, Leapor ventriloquizes her pen to reflect upon its “lives” in the hands of various people, as well as its incarnations as other animals and objects. Addressing its remarks in tetrameter couplets to a respectable lady (most likely Freemantle), the pen narrates its past lives as a “wealthy Squire” (line 29), beau, lapdog, lawyer, and crow before finally becoming Leapor’s quill. As it moves from one life to the next, it also traces its own decline in social and economic status. These transformations, Leapor makes clear, are ultimately precipitated by the pen’s unvirtuous behavior in its previous guises. As a squire, for example, it enjoyed “A fine Estate of mellow Ground, / In Cash full Thirty thousand Pound” (lines 31–32), but only because it lived as a “wretched Usurer” (line 41) who in fact could not control his desire

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Greene observes that Leapor was likely inspired by Spectator no. 343 (3 April 1712), in which Jack Freelove pulls a prank on his mistress by writing to her in the voice of her monkey and describing its own previous lives. Leapor may also have been familiar with Henry Fielding’s A Journey from this World to the Next (1743), which opens with the author receiving a gift of pens wrapped up in the illegible manuscript of an unknown hand. Greene, Mary Leapor, 180.
for ever more riches. Similarly, in its former life as a lawyer, the pen describes how it cheated its clients in pursuit of wealth at all costs:

I spar’d no Widow for her Tears,  
No Orphan for his tender Years:  
My Maxim was—‘Get Money, Man,  
Get Money, where and how you can.’  
Thus through the Stage of Life I run,  
(For Ah! my Race was quickly Done)  
And still preserv’d my Ears and Nose,  
In spite of venial Sins like those. (lines 84–91)

Such “venial Sins,” the pen writes, forced Pluto to confine its spirit within “the compass of a Quill” (line 107). In its present state, the quill complains that it now serves a lowly female poet for whom it must “scrawl unprofitable Rhyme” (line 119): an unfortunate fate which consequently motivates the pen’s final appeal to the lady to find it a more respectable position with the help of a “Recommandatory Letter” (line 137). By concluding the poem with her pen’s ignoble request, however, Leapor deftly anticipates and reworks any potential criticism of her own status as an untutored poet into a more effective critique of the pen’s avaricious behavior. As such, the pen doubly materializes the dangers of material ambition and the indecorousness of seeking financial (rather than moral) salvation from poverty. In so doing, the poem likewise acknowledges—and cannily subverts—the pressures that contemporary satirists exerted through their denigration of underprivileged and untalented hack-poets.

Similar poems in Leapor’s oeuvre follow “The Inspir’d Quill” as they ventriloquize objects which, in turn, illuminate the difficulties of squaring her poetry with her regular domestic labor. In one of her most imaginative poems, “The Genius in Disguise,” Leapor’s persona Mira meets her “genius” neither in “Cherub’s Form enshrin’d, / Nor in the shape of human kind” (lines 15–16), but rather in the form of an
animate writing desk whose “Locks and Hinges round him glow, / In Figure like a neat Buroe” (lines 17–18). The ghastly desk urges her to fill its “hollow Spaces… / With all your Verses good and ill” (lines 57–58), and even provides her with a plan for its usage:

“One small [space] for your Wit may do,
But then your Faults will take up two.
And from the rest I pray exclude
One sacred Place for Gratitude:
And what our Patron yours and mine
Shall to my trusty Care consign,
For those lov’d Strangers I’ll secure
The Closest with its tiny Door.” (lines 59–66)

In offering its spaces to Mira for her poems, the desk-as-genius also reinforces social and generic expectations toward the female laboring poet. It recommends, in effect, that she write more poems about her “Faults” than poems which would display her “Wit,” while promising to keep her poems of “Gratitude” safe from intruding hands. But neither desk nor poet can overcome the realities of Mira’s social and material status, as it tells her that “Without Divining, I can see / You’ll ne’er deserve the Gift of me” (lines 73–74). Having thus confessed the near impossibility of being used as a storehouse for her poetry, the desk commands Mira to “Go seek your Pillow and be still, / And dream of me or what you will” (lines 85–86).

Like “The Genius in Disguise,” “The Ten-Penny Nail” begins with Mira’s dream vision of its titular object. Here, the dream arises in response to a riddle posed to Mira by Amanda (most likely another persona for Freemantle): “Where was the first Nail struck?” (line 8, footnote). The nail consequently presents itself to Mira as the rightful object for her domestic and poetic labors alike:

…As I am told,
You Poets seldom deal in Gold;
That’s not the Price of empty Songs,
But to Sir *Thrifty Gripe* belongs; 
Bright Silver is Sir *Wary’s Claim*, 
And Copper for the lab’ring Dame; 
If so (that each may have their due) 
We rusty Nails belong to you; 
I therefore ask as my Desert 
(I hope you bear a grateful Heart) 
You write my Life—and be it shown 
What strange Adventures I have known. (lines 23–34)

Calling conspicuous attention to its rust, and in direct contrast to the metallic gleam of Philips’ splendid shilling, the nail justifies its presence in Mira’s dream as the tool most suitable to her double role as “Poet” and “lab’ring Dame.” Consequently, it relates its misfortunes as it moves from one user to the next. In its first ‘occupation’ at Gloomy-Hall, for example, it helps one laboring Simon fasten the estate’s “spacious Door” (line 42) before being removed unceremoniously to fix his own broken plough. A later violent episode sees the nail being driven into its mistress’ eye by “some ill Genius” (line 62). Eventually the nail ends up in Mira’s possession, upon which it issues her a warning to “fasten up your Rhymes” and “To nail up Pens and Paper too,” so that she may “get thee gone to spinning, / Or wisely dearn your Father’s Linen” (lines 118–21).

Across these poems, each ordinary object—whether the pen, writing desk, or nail—ostensibly narrates its life of servitude in order to argue *against* Mira’s own desires to write poetry. The speaking object, in other words, articulates the discursive and material conditions that work against the domestic woman laborer’s ambitions: from the general impoverishment of professional poets (who, the nail claims, “seldom deal in Gold”), to the apparent deficiencies of Leapor’s scrawled rhymes, to her perceived unwillingness to perform her regular tasks. Yet Leapor circumscribes and even resolves these criticisms precisely by voicing them through her objects. Even as her
ventriloquisms read as direct denunciations of her poetic aspirations, her displacement of these criticisms into the form of the “object poem”—a form that few of her contemporaries practiced—allows her to satirize these denunciations as dreamlike, hypothetical, and paradoxically immaterial. As Christmas observes of “The Ten-Penny Nail,” the titular object’s advice goes unheeded “because the actual writing of the poem itself takes place after the vision has ended.”66 Hence Leapor’s decision to write these objects into being overpowers their own arguments against her poetic endeavors. The talking object, wishing to escape Mira’s hands or to distract her from writing, becomes instead the material substance of, and justification for, Leapor’s poetry.

This dynamic is most fully realized in Leapor’s series of three “pocket-book poems” in her second volume of Poems on Several Occasions (1751). As Jessica Cook observes, the poems were inspired by a real, gilded pocketbook that Susanna Jennens, Leapor’s first benefactor, gifted her, and the two women likely wrote and shared each other’s poems in the pocketbook.67 Like the objects which voice Leapor’s other poems, the pocketbook openly complains about its servitude to its new and lowly owner. The first poem in the series, “The Pocket-Book’s Soliloquy,” sees the titular object explaining its unfortunate fall in ballad stanzas. Having happily served a “gentle Dame” (line 8), only to be cast aside, the pocket-book now finds itself in Mira’s possession, and thus in the hands of a poet whose unstudied rhymes have “degraded” its former “Charms” (line 16). The narrative continues in the second poem, “The Pocket-Book’s Petition to Parthenissa,” where the scorned object, identifying itself as Mira’s slave, appeals directly

66 The Lab’ring Muses, 168.
to Freemantle to rescue it from the “Darkness, Dirt, and Mira” herself (line 22). In the third and final poem by “Parthenissa,” Jennens responds to the pocket-book’s unseemly request by attacking its own lowly state:

Didst thou not insolently dare
   To spurn at Mira’s Lays?
So may each mean Despiser fare;
   That envies her the Bays!

To mortify the foolish Pride,
   That stands so plain confess’d,
Take a Friend’s Word: thy gay Outside
   Is Tinsel, at the best.

Then boast no more thy gaudy Cloaths,
   Nor once presume to think,
Thou can’t deserve, in Verse or Prose,
   A Drop of Mira’s Ink. (lines 21–32)

Having thus criticized the pocket-book for its arrogance, Jennens concludes her poem by identifying Mira as a renowned and worthy poet:

What better could thy Fate decree,
   What more Ambition hope?
Know’st thou who ‘twas accepted thee?
   The Successor of Pope. (lines 37–40)

As these three poems return from Leapor’s anthropomorphized object back to herself, they likewise enact her ongoing struggle to establish her own authority as poet. In his reading of the pocket-book poems, William J. Christmas identifies in the object’s voice the poet “struggling with the related issues of identity and upward social mobility achieved through writing.”68 To the extent that Jennens-as-Parthenissa recognizes

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68 William J. Christmas, “Lyric Modes: The Soliloquy Poems of Mary Leapor and Ann Yearsley,” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 34, no. 1 (2015): 39–40. Christmas further observes that Leapor was the only poet to have written soliloquy poems in the voices of material objects, and thus to have found in these objects “a ventriloquizing vehicle for her own” lyric voice (46).
Leapor’s talents, he suggests, she does so by reading the pocket-book poems as their author’s reworking of her lyric voice through the object(s) she animates.

What these object poems clearly articulate, then, is that Leapor possessed both the capacity and desire to imagine herself as a practicing poet, and thus “professional” in the sense that her “scribbling” could itself constitute a kind of “profitable Employment.” At the same time, her verse practices, both in terms of subject matter and technique, rarely transcended her milieu or labor in the ways that her parents, patrons, or readers might have feared. Instead, the stuff of her poetry, so to speak, is precisely what she knew: whether her experiences as a kitchen-maid or her friendships with Jennens, Freemantle, and their respective circles. If this point is self-evident to modern scholars of eighteenth-century poetry and laboring-class writing, it nevertheless contrasts with the images that Leapor’s contemporaries, as we have seen, deployed in their burlesques to criticize the aspirations of underprivileged, “domestic” writers like herself.

Once we attend to these contrasts in historical context, this chapter has argued, we can begin to reassess carefully the struggles that marginalized poets like Leapor faced in their efforts to claim literary authority. These struggles have long been tied to broader histories of eighteenth-century labor and its ideology. But they should also compel us to rethink our familiar critical narratives about poverty, professionalism, and the production of lyric poetry, and to recover those moments where all three forces converged and exerted pressures on poets who were excluded from literary participation.

69 Arguably the most famous expression of such fears occurred well after Leapor’s death in 1746, as Hannah More reassured Elizabeth Montagu and others that Ann Yearsley, for all her poetic talents, would not “devote her time to the idleness of Poetry” but rather to her regular duties “as a wife and a mother.” More, “A Prefatory Letter to Mrs. Montagu, by a Friend,” Poems on Several Occasions. By Ann Yearsley, a Milkwoman of Bristol (London: T. Cadell, 1785), xi.
CHAPTER 4: Affliction and the Lyricization of Eighteenth-Century Women’s Hymnody

This chapter explores the intersections between personal affliction, communal worship, and male editorship in eighteenth-century women’s hymnody. Literary-critical studies of English hymnody have long suggested that its development diverged from the evolution of lyric poetry more broadly. This claim arises from the understanding that the hymn’s unique demands—its doctrinal conformity, congregational performativity, consolatory gestures, and metrical strictures—distinguish the form from those poetic qualities that came to be recognized as lyrical (e.g., the modeling of an emotive, introspective “voice” or “persona” in verse). Surveying the conditions that have traditionally divided liturgical and lyrical interpretations of “sacred” poetry, I proceed to argue that eighteenth-century hymnody began to dissolve such generic distinctions (between the singing “I” of personal lyric and the doctrinal “I” of corporate worship) through hymns that reflected upon suffering and its spiritual resolution. Specifically, I contend that such hymns of affliction model a two-pronged lyric practice: one which comprehended suffering as a vital phase in the process of Christian reconciliation, and which accordingly accommodated the language of personal, spiritual introspection within an otherwise congregational verse form.

As a way of contextualizing this poetic practice, the chapter then surveys a range of discourses on, and representations of, affliction across the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Broadly conceived as both the condition of suffering and its physical, psychic, and spiritual causes, affliction became a central topic of discussion among religious commentators, who were keen to stress the dangers of complaining or wallowing in one’s
misery. As their commentaries located the root causes of suffering in the sufferer’s self-perceptions of sinfulness, they urged the afflicted to resign themselves to God, to mitigate any modes of self-expression (such as religious doubt or anger) that would cultivate further punishment from God, and to accept affliction as a necessary precondition for salvation.

Yet whereas religious commentators narrowly conceived affliction as a condition to be resolved through self-resignation—that is, through the elision of one’s will into the selflessness of corporate worship and the Christian afterlife—poets and hymnodists expanded this understanding to encompass a greater range of responses. Without directly contravening contemporary doctrines on affliction and its spiritual resolution, poets nevertheless adopted a wide variety of strategies to imagine the spiritual and psychic experiences of sufferers (whether real or imagined), and to model the reasoning by which these sufferers might achieve consolation or contentment. From biblical paraphrase and occasional poetry to didactic verse and congregational hymns, such poems conceived affliction not only as a cause for spiritual concern, but also as a valuable opportunity to model self-expression in ways that contemporary divines neglected or discouraged. In turn, these resulting modes of self-expression mark the emergence of a distinctive lyricism, or of a brand of devotional lyric poetry that could accommodate personal suffering within the demands of selfless worship.

Such lyricism, I contend, became essential to the poetic practices of Anne Steele (1717–78) and Susannah Harrison (1752–84), two of the period’s most prolific female hymnodists. Through close readings of their works, I argue that Steele and Harrison’s hymns of affliction fashion literary-congregational spaces through which both women
negotiated not only their personal difficulties with illness and grief, but also the terms of eighteenth-century theological discourse on “affliction” and its spiritual resolution. As they corroborated contemporary divines’ urgings toward patience and resignation in the wake of personal suffering, Steele and Harrison crafted an individualized idiom of affliction that accommodated various states (doubt, guilt, complaint, pain) unfamiliar to congregational hymnody.

At the same time, this idiom depended as much upon their experience as it did upon their status as women poets, and especially as pious women whose responses to their suffering made their hymns and lives worthy of comment, whether in biography or in choral song. I trace these dynamics through the efforts of Steele and Harrison’s editors—Caleb Evans and John Conder, respectively—both of whom sought to preserve their subjects in the image of the afflicted yet devout poetess. Their editorial decisions, I argue, further lyricized both women poets’ hymns, such that their poetic and pious accomplishments became mediated and delimited through biographical knowledge of their afflictions.

I. “The Words She Wrote in Tedious Years of Pain”: Hymnody, Personal Lyric, and the Poetess

In his prefatory memoir to Daniel Sedgwick’s 1863 edition of Anne Steele’s hymns, the Baptist writer John Sheppard argued for the recovery and preservation of Steele’s writings for a new generation of readers. Lamenting the lost names of sacred writers whose “various charm[s]” have since faded from collective memory, Sheppard reconstructed her career as “sacred lyrist” by drawing liberally from her correspondence
and praising her forefathers’ influence on her pious upbringing.¹ At the same time, he celebrated her as a poet whose personal afflictions—her “very delicate and somewhat enfeebled youth”; the apocryphal drowning of her fiancée; and the death of her father in 1769—engendered a lasting, “deeply pensive turn to her feelings and performances….The words which she wrote in tedious years of pain, are [now] sung or read in a thousand closets” (“Memoir,” ix, xvi). Such pain, Sheppard inferred, conditioned the best qualities of her hymns: their “simplicity of thought and phrase, with devout and tender emotion,” and their lack of “affectation,” “sentimentalism,” or “pedantic diction” (“Memoir,” xi).

As if to underscore this relationship between the hymnodist’s personal struggles and the resulting power of her lyrics, Sheppard recounted two of his own engagements with Steele’s life and work. The first, a verse fragment he wrote to her niece Anne Steele Tomkins during one of their walks around the Steele family residence, was his attempt to comprehend the “loneliness” that the accomplished poet might have felt as she walked the grounds of the family estate:

…I see,
In fancy’s telescopic mirror, forms
Of some that were—that are—that would be there.

I mark the forms that were there: those who walk’d
With God, and spake to artless minds of Him;
And, with them, one who pour’d a sylvan strain
Of meek devotion in those quiet shades—
Bequeathing thence her Christian heart and hope
To other generations. (“Memoir,” viii–ix)

¹ John Sheppard, “Memoir of ‘Theodosia,’” in *Hymns, Psalms, and Poems, by Anne Steele* (London: D. Sedgwick, 1863), iii, vii; all subsequent in-line citations of the memoir will refer to page numbers in this edition. Sheppard also received much of his information on Steele from regular conversations with her niece, Anne Steele Tomkins; “Memoir,” viii.
Whereas Sheppard could only claim intimacy with Steele in this lyric fragment via the recovery of her real and imagined “forms,” his second engagement with the hymnodist revealed more directly the impact that her work had on his own family. Specifically, Sheppard cited a manuscript note that his mother left in her copy of Steele’s verses, next to the concluding stanza of “Desiring a Cheerful Resignation to the Divine Will”:

> Be earth’s quick changing scenes or dark, or fair,  
> On thy kind arm O bid my soul recline:  
> Be heaven-born hope (kind antidote of care)  
> And humble cheerful resignation mine.²

The note, Sheppard recalls, references a minor injury that his mother sustained from a fall: “May I ever remember the morning of May 4, 1822, when I fell in my room, and for a minute lost the use of my limbs, but was soon able to rise and walk” (“Memoir,” xv). In the biographer’s view, such consolation not only demonstrated the interpersonal intimacy that Steele’s hymns of affliction imparted “even [to] many…whom she had been personally unknown,” but also testified to her peculiar power “to uplift our thoughts towards regions beyond earth and time” (“Memoir,” xv, xvi).

For all of Sheppard’s lamentations that she had “faded” in the memory of nineteenth-century readers and worshippers, Steele’s writings nevertheless proved to be remarkably popular in the years following her death in 1778. By 1863, her hymns had circulated widely across England and North America, appearing regularly in Baptist services, cross-denominational anthologies, and other verse venues. Moreover, as Sheppard suggests in his “Memoir,” her popularity was grounded as much in her piety as in her personal suffering, such that the lyrical qualities he praised in her works (that is,

² *Hymns, Psalms, and Poems*, 256.
direct and honest expression of her “thought and praise” to God) were inextricable from the poet’s life and circumstances. That Sheppard understood these qualities to be mutually determining and deeply personal, however, raises several important questions about Steele’s poetic practice and, more broadly, about her reception as a poet and hymnodist. To what extent could Steele’s hymns, written in a verse form which demands the minimization or erasure of individual identity (the personal “I,” in the voice of the poet or any individual at the moment of singing or reading) in service to corporate worship (the congregational “I,” in the voice of a community of believers), be understood as personal, lyric utterance? In what ways, and for what reasons, did the reception of these hymns depend on knowledge of the hymnodist’s biography?

This chapter seeks to address these questions and, in the process, to intervene in methodological debates concerning the interpretation of English hymns. The question of the hymn’s status as lyric poetry—both as verse which is motivated by an effusive poetic impulse and as verse which invites attention to its structures of address, feeling, and rhythm—has long been a vexed one for hymnologists and literary critics alike. This question hinges as much upon formal considerations as it does upon distinctions between public worship, private devotion, and personal voice. For hymnologists, the hymn may well have certain lyrical qualities, most notably its conformity to a pattern of meter and rhyme; its invocation to a community of believers, often in the voice of a corporate “I”; and its incantatory language of praise to God. But such qualities, hymnologists argue, must serve above all to inculcate worship in God, an incontrovertible demand which both authorizes the hymn for congregational usage and dissociates it from the wider realm of poetry (including religious lyric poems which, for all their investments in spiritual
feeling, may nevertheless fail to meet doctrinal expectations). Or, as Louis F. Benson bluntly declared in his landmark study of English hymnody, the hymn’s “fundamental relations are not literary but liturgical.”

Literary critics and historians of English hymnody have by and large accepted Benson’s claim, but their attention to the hymn’s “literary” relations has likewise led to careful distinctions between hymns and poems, as well as between hymnic and poetic interpretation. As J. R. Watson has observed, critics from the early twentieth century forward remain largely predisposed to treat hymns as inferior to lyric poetry, with commentaries frequently lamenting the hymnwriter’s limitations of poetic form and doctrinal correctness when compared to the Romantic and post-Romantic ideal of the poet. David Morris similarly argues that the formal demands of the hymn, its “regular quatrain structure and a chastity of style…permit only infrequent opportunities for the sublime,” with the latter quality often claimed as central to romantic-lyric utterance. This distinction between the hymnwriter’s conformity and the lyric poet’s spontaneity, in turn, has helped produce a notable interpretive divide between literary-critical and liturgical approaches to the hymn. Whereas literary critics have (until recently) maintained that hymns are too doctrinaire to be evaluated as lyrical poems, hymnologists remain

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predisposed to comprehend hymns through their liturgical functions, and so hold less interest in the formal or poetic elements of the hymns they examine.6

More recent studies of hymns and religious lyric poems have continued to distinguish between the two verse genres on similar grounds. Madeleine Forell Marshall and Janet Todd have maintained that institutional, liturgical verse forms like the eighteenth-century English hymn are incompatible with “[r]eligious verse that proceeds spontaneously, from the soul, as the private expression of the individual,” or what William Wordsworth and other poets might otherwise have characterized as lyric poetry.7 Marshall and Todd’s delimitation of the hymn as a congregational verse form, in turn, leads them to assess the works of the eighteenth century’s most prominent English hymnodists—Isaac Watts, Charles Wesley, John Newton, and William Cowper—through specific literary and liturgical heuristics. These heuristics emphasize that hymns were composed for public performance, that they subscribed to the “metrical limits...required of congregational song,” and that they materialized as “book-bound literature composed by a literary elite and published under the watchful eyes of sectarian leaders”: all factors which, in short, disrupt any notion that the hymn might be considered a more personal or idiosyncratic mode of expression.8 Kimberly Johnson, meanwhile, observes the common origins of the hymnic and lyric traditions in ritual devotional practice, before claiming their eventual divergence with respect to performative scope (corporate worship versus individual devotion), narrative inclination, and interpretive flexibility (“processual

6 Watson, The English Hymn, 11.
engagement” in lyric poems versus “conclusive summaries” in hymns). Under these considerations, the development of the congregational hymn parallels, but does not belong to, the history of lyric poetry in the eighteenth century, on the basis that both verse genres invoke contrasting performative modes. So long as such clear distinctions between publicly and privately oriented verse are maintained, the literary histories of these poetic modes likewise proceed along parallel tracks.

Literary historians have thus claimed that one of the hymn’s defining characteristics is its studied “impersonality”: its refusal to incorporate any individual worshipper’s concerns, let alone those of the hymnodist, into the communal and congregational drive toward spiritual edification. In the eighteenth century, however, the indices of such impersonality were less clear-cut than modern studies would suggest, as hymnodists exploited both the individual and the communal functions of the hymnic “I” to comprehend religious doctrine or spiritual experience. Indeed, Paula Backscheider argues that hymns, and especially women’s hymns, rank among the eighteenth century’s most lyrical forms, given that “many hymns were deeply personal, individual, subjective, even eccentric lyrics that…explored a wide range of experiences, incorporated short personal narratives, and even reflected on the life of a writer.” Backscheider’s conception of the hymn as the one of the period’s preeminent poetic genres further stems from her rightful observation that “the twenty-first-century practice, use, and opinion about a

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9 Kimberly Johnson, “‘A Heauenly Poesie’: The Devotional Lyric,” introduction to Before the Door of God: An Anthology of Devotional Poetry (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), xxix–xxx. Johnson’s account of this generic divergence rehearses (but does not name outright) the gradual distinction between the hymn and the ode, with the latter being increasingly accepted as the most “lyrical” form of the eighteenth century.

10 Marshall and Todd, English Congregational Hymns, 1.
poetic form complicate assessment and understanding.” To conceive the hymn purely as a congregational form, or to interpret the hymnic “I” as narrowly “individual” or “universal,” is thus to elide the multiple, overlapping concerns (including personal and poetic anxieties) that hymnodists sought to communicate in verse.

This chapter seeks to extend Backscheider’s understanding of the eighteenth-century hymn as personal lyric by examining the writings of two of the period’s most popular and prolific women hymnodists: the Particular Baptist poet Anne Steele (1717–78) and the Congregationalist poet Susannah Harrison (1752–84). Like their predecessors and contemporaries, Steele and Harrison wrote hymns which fulfilled a wide variety of liturgical functions: from heartfelt praise and thanks to God, to doctrinal exposition and biblical paraphrase, to invitations to congregational worship (whether among fellow churchgoers or intimate relations). But what distinguishes these women’s hymns is their consistent engagement with afflictions of all forms—illness, debility, family bereavements, and self-perceptions of guilt and shame—in directly personal language. Through these engagements, Steele and Harrison modeled a distinctive “liturgical poetics” that enabled the suffering “I” to speak and sing powerfully of her afflictions, before urging herself to cast aside her earthly concerns and to embrace the promise of consolation in God. Such an idiom, in turn, straddled the boundaries of what literary


critics now recognize separately as “lyric” and “hymnic” expression: rather than dissociate the sufferer’s physical or psychic condition from the demands of corporate worship, these women integrated both modes into their hymns. In the process, both poets reworked the verse form into a markedly personal medium, one that could accommodate a wider range of spiritual states and introspective reasoning than hymnodists or divines had previously explored.

At the same time, such generic integration could not have been understood and celebrated by readers without the intervention of Steele and Harrison’s male editors: the Particular Baptist minister Caleb Evans (1737–91) and the Congregationalist minister John Conder (1714–81), respectively. Beyond assisting both women in publishing their works (and by their accounts, helping them overcome their reluctance to do so), Evans and Conder also conditioned the terms by which Steele and Harrison were to be read: as devout poetesses whose lyrical prowess and piety were forged primarily by their confrontations with personal suffering.13 This understanding, I argue, arises as much from 

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13 My understanding of the “poetess” closely follows that of Anne K. Mellor, who has argued that this figure embodies a characteristically feminine aesthetic: one defined by its opposition to the values of a male-dominated public sphere, and one which consequently upholds what Mellor terms “the acceptance of the hegemonic doctrine of the separate sphere.” Mellor, “The Female Poet and the Poetess: Two Traditions of British Women’s Poetry, 1780–1830,” Studies in Romanticism 36, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 261. Both earlier and more recent studies of the poetess have consistently traced its origins in nineteenth-century poetic and critical practice: see for example Isobel Armstrong, Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics (New York: Routledge, 1993); Margaret J. M. Ezell, Writing Women’s Literary History (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Yopie Prins, Victorian Sappho (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); and Tricia Lootens, “Poetess,” Victorian Literature and Culture 46, no. 3–4 (2018): 799–801.
the two male editors’ accoutrements to their editions—memoir and critical evaluation—as from the women’s hymns themselves. Indeed, through their commemorations of Steele and Harrison as women whose poetics were forged in the crucible of affliction, Evans and Conder helped advance the kind of biographical, lyrical reading of Steele’s hymnody that Sheppard emphasized in his memoir.

By examining the overlapping conditions which mediated Steele and Harrison’s hymnody, this chapter therefore recovers a broader history of poetic and editorial practices which, in turn, can help us bridge the interpretive divide between literary-critical and liturgical approaches to hymnody. My readings of these women poets’ works, and the conditions that mediated their reception, call to our attention the ways in which such hymns walked (if not blurred) the fine line between individualized expression and congregational expectation. In this light, my evaluation of these hymns as lyric poems—as verse compositions structured not only by their liturgical and metrical demands, but also by their modeling of spiritual introspection and by the interventions of literary biographers—repositions women’s hymnody to the front and center of the lyric’s “rise” in mid-eighteenth-century England.

To place the liturgical poetics of Steele and Harrison’s hymns in context, however, I shall first survey the ways in which religious commentators (including poets) conceived affliction. In their attempts to diagnose and remedy afflictions of all varieties, commentators broadly argued that personal suffering was both the manifestation of one’s sinfulness and a precondition for attaining salvation. Along these lines, such commentaries emphasized self-resignation, to the extent that one’s afflictions were necessary yet insignificant in the larger scheme of salvation. They also warned against
modes of expression or confession which would interrogate, or worse, betray God’s consolatory love. It was within this doctrinal framework that Steele and Harrison crafted their hymns on affliction. Yet by incorporating precisely those discursive modes of confession and complaint into their verse, they also managed to extend the tenets of their religious contemporaries into a more wide-ranging exploration of affliction’s consequences, and to model a poetics whereby readers and believers could begin to resolve their own suffering.

II. Eighteenth-Century Religious Discourses on Affliction

Samuel Johnson’s Dictionary (1755) broadly defined “affliction” as both the “cause of pain or sorrow” and the “state of sorrowfulness” itself. These definitions tapped not only into a generalizable notion of suffering, but also into an increasingly coherent and widely circulated discourse on affliction that took shape in the writings of religious commentators. In the wake of the English Reformation, Protestant tracts on the nature and resolution of affliction drew heavily upon scripture—particularly the Books of Job, the Psalms, and the New Testament—to comprehend suffering as a necessary conduit to salvation. Such writings effectively promoted what Alexandra Walsham has called a “distinctive culture of suffering,” one which replaced earlier Catholic doctrines on earthly penance with an understanding that personal affliction (and one’s perseverance under distress) would ultimately secure eternal salvation. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century

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commentators expanded upon this culture in their own writings by reflecting upon and prescribing spiritual measures to overcome a wide range of various afflictions: from the loss of loved ones, to physical and psychic ailments, to willful or unwitting breaches of moral conduct or conscience. These writings proved to be popular in the print market, contributing to an identifiable discourse on affliction and the experience of suffering.

Central to this discourse was the notion that one’s personal sufferings were the result of one’s sinfulness, and that affliction was a necessary state on the path to receiving God’s benevolence. In his posthumously published sermons on *The Life of Faith in Times of Trial and Affliction* (1679), the Scottish minister John Brown reiterated the importance of faith and perseverance in suffering, especially insofar as one’s faith (or lack thereof) reinforced the beneficence of Christ to his believers. “How unpleasant soever Suffering be unto the Flesh,” Brown wrote, it was nevertheless essential that the afflicted maintain their commitment to Christ “with a cheerful Submission, and hearty Acquiescence.”15 This was especially the case since

The Faith of [Christ’s sympathy] would give the Believer full ground of Perswasion, That Christ hath a tender Affection for him. It is a troubling Temptation to the Child of God, in a Day of outward Affliction and Calamity, to have these Thoughts rolling in his Mind, *Can it be, that I can be beloved of God, who am so dealt with? Have I a room in his Affection, all this time? do not these Dispensations of his speak out Anger against me?* But the Faith of this, that Christ is sympathizing with the poor Man…would calm the Soul, as to this, and…remove this Doubt. (*Life of Faith* 272)

commentaries on affliction, which Walsham groups under the rubric of “experimental providentialism” (52), include John Calvin, *A Commentarie of M. John Caluine upon the Epistle to the Philippians* (London: N. Lyng, 1584); William Chub, *A Fruitfull Sermon Preached in a Right Honorable Audience, Treating Wholy of Affliction* (London: J. Jackson, 1587); and John Downame, *Consolations for the Afflicted: or, the Third Part of the Christian Warfare* (London: W. Welby, 1613).

15 John Brown, *The Life of Faith in Time of Trial and Affliction* (Edinburgh, 1679), [iii–iv]. All subsequent in-line citations will refer to this original edition of the text.
Brown’s interpretation of affliction as a secure sign of Christ’s “tender Affection” rehearses the conclusions of earlier commentators such as John Calvin and William Chub. At the same time, his vocalization of three self-reflective questions, which would otherwise remain “rolling” in the sufferer’s mind, demonstrates *The Life of Faith’s* broader rhetorical strategy of raising such questions before resolving them with doctrinal explication and familiar analogy. Recounting Jesus’ tears upon the death of Lazarus (John 11:35), Brown then seeks to resolve the three questions he poses by analogizing, in somewhat torturous fashion, Christ’s love for the afflicted with that of a mother weeping over her suffering child:

> If we saw a Woman making an heavy lamentation, and bitterly crying out for her Child, sick or in paine, would not every one, that saw it, say, O how dearly doth she love that Child? And may not the beleever [sic] say the same of himself? O! how doth Christ love me? Yea, he could not but do it, if he saw and beleived this truth. Is it not manifest then, how faith could suck life out of this Consideration, in the saddest of outward troubles? (*The Life of Faith* 273)

Here, Brown appears to place the suffering “believer” into the positions of all three persons invoked in this scene: the mother who grieves for her afflicted child; the child who is “sick or in paine”; and the universal observer who, in recognizing the woman’s “heavy lamentation” as a sign of her love for her child, would likewise be moved to seek reassurance in Christ’s paternal affection. By this logic, the sufferer must learn to accept her/his pain as universal, and to trust that such troubles will invite Christ’s sympathy (in much the same way that the publicly weeping mother would invite universal recognition of her grief and love for her child).

Brown’s understanding of affliction as a necessary precondition for salvation encouraged further discourse on its nature and value. Such tracts drew greater emphasis
toward the afflicted believer’s response to their suffering, in an attempt to correct behavioral tendencies that would lead one astray from God. In particular, these tracts urged believers to refrain from “murmuring” their complaints, whether vocally or silently. Thomas Brooks’ *The Mute Christian* (1659), which ran through at least sixteen editions by 1786, preached silence and resignation in the face of affliction, while arguing that “[s]uch as can see the ordering hand of God in all their afflictions, will with David lay their hands upon their mouths, when the rod of God is upon their backs…If Gods hand be not seen in the affliction, the heart will do nothing but fret and rage.”\(^{16}\) Later writers such as Birmingham-based minister Edward Broadhurst admitted “our natural Inclination to grumble, murmur and be uneasy when Afflictions are long and heavy,” but nevertheless warned that “we have much ado to keep down [our murmurings] when we have none or but small Prospect of Relief.”\(^{17}\) Scottish minister John Willison expanded on murmuring even further in *The Afflicted Man’s Companion* (1743), arguably the most comprehensive and bestselling spiritual directory for distressed individuals and families in the eighteenth century. Beyond his distinctions between “humble complaints” (modest appeals to God to learn the cause behind one’s suffering) and “murmurings” (which constitute “the froth of impatience, and scum of discontent”), Willison also urged his readers to accept that the degree of the sufferer’s affliction correlated with the extent of his or her sinfulness, and to redirect his or her energies toward prayer and praise.\(^{18}\)


\(^{18}\) John Willison, *The Afflicted Man’s Companion: or, a Directory for FAMILIES and PERSONS Afflicted with Sickness or Any Other Distress* (Edinburgh: E. and J. Robertson, 1743), 37, 43–45.
As most commentaries agreed on the importance of resigning body and soul to God, few prose writers on the subject appealed directly to personal experience or narrative, treating their subject almost entirely through the prism of scriptural interpretation instead. Poets, too, were frequent commentators on affliction, and in most cases their poems were equally quick to encourage prayer or moral self-correction, to emphasize the finitude of personal suffering (and hence the vanity of life), and to reiterate the promise of salvation. But compared to contemporary prose writers, poets had more license to imagine the spiritual and psychic experiences of sufferers (whether real or fictional, living or scriptural) in ways that implicitly foregrounded an individual sufferer’s pains while explicitly affirming the greater importance of Christian reconciliation in the afterlife.

As such, poems on affliction ranged from doctrinal paraphrase or moral philosophy in verse, to more spontaneous, reflective, and consolatory works modeled on the experiences of recognizable sufferers. Poems which were more doctrinal or philosophical in nature closely mirrored the teachings of prose sermons, conveying their conclusions on affliction in verse forms which lent a sense of security to the sufferer. John Pomfret’s “To His Friend under Affliction,” for example, stressed that “[t]o be from all things that disquiet, free, / Is not consistent with Humanity” and philosophized on the affordances of personal loss:

But as we are allow’d, to chear our sight,
In blackest Days, some Glimmerings of Light:
So in the most dejected Hours we may,
The secret Pleasure have, to weep and pray.
And those Requests, the speediest passage find
To Heaven, which flow from an afflicted Mind:
And while to him we open our Distress,
Our Pains grow lighter, and our Sorrows less.\(^{19}\)

Although addressed to his friend, Pomfret’s meditation on suffering is notably measured and impersonal, with its regular heroic couplets and universal first-person pronouns suggestively performing the greater virtues of “Heaven” over and against the “Sorrows” of our “most dejected Hours.” Embedded in the poem’s message and form, then, is the understanding that affliction, though painful, nevertheless affords spiritual relief and security. Similar optimism can also be found in Anne Finch’s “On Aff[li]ction,” in which the poet, writing in the first person, celebrates affliction as an enabling force for godly fulfillment:

\[
\text{Wellcome, what e’re my tender flesh may say,}
\text{Welcome affliction, to my reason, still;}
\text{Though hard, and ruged [sic] on that rock I lay}
\text{A sure foundation, which if rais’d with skill,}
\text{Shall compasse Babel’s aim, and reach th’ Almighty’s hill.}\(^{20}\)
\]

Even as this poem praises affliction’s spiritual benefits, however, Finch also refused to resolve it neatly into the pieties of belief and hope, a refusal she expressed most powerfully and famously in “The Spleen”:

\[
\text{By Thee \textit{Religion}, all we know,}
\text{That shou’d enlighten here below,}
\text{Is veil’d in Darkness, and perplex}
\text{With anxious Doubts, with endless Scruples vext,}
\text{And some Restraint imply’d from each perverted Text.}\(^{21}\)
\]

Criticizing her apostrophized affliction for “vexing” and “perplexing” what should otherwise be God’s transparent truth, Finch argues that the spleen inculcates false,  


puritanical worship, in so far as any religion that falls prey to its “pow’rful Charms” (line 115) risks interpreting such suffering as essential.

Verse paraphrases of the Bible proved to be another popular genre within which eighteenth-century poets could meditate on the causes and consequences of affliction. Paraphrases of the Book of Job, in particular, allowed poets both to elaborate on a familiar biblical text and to exercise creative license in their representations of Job’s suffering, anguish, and redemption. These representations, in turn, feature some of the eighteenth century’s notable and inspired poems of personal suffering: of poetry that either drew upon or modeled circumstances of individual affliction (in this case, that of Job) from the first-person perspective of the sufferer. Elizabeth Singer Rowe’s paraphrase of Job 19:26, for example, reworks its source material into a consolatory hymn, as the sufferer resigns himself to the promise of salvation in death:

Tho in the Gloomy Regions of the Grave,  
Forgotten, and insensible I lye;  
That tedious night shall a bright morning have,  
That welcome dawning of Eternity.  
My Soul shall then resume her old abode,  
And cloath’d in flesh, I shall behold my God.22

Whereas Rowe’s hymn draws out the consolatory potential in Job’s monologue, Mary Leapor’s paraphrase, titled “Job’s Curse, and His Appeal” and based upon chapters 1 and 31, underscores the sufferer’s sense of guilt in affliction. Cursing both his birth and his inability to perish under his suffering—“As others have, alas! why could not I / Yield my short Being, and an Infant die?” (lines 23–24)—Leapor’s biblical speaker wavers wildly between anger, self-doubt, and desperation in his appeals to God:

O! sacred Judge, when will thy Wrath be done?
Why do I live to scare the wond’ring Sun?
Let not thy Mercy spare my wounded Clay,
But strike and sweep me from offensive Day.
My Heart is vexed with consuming Fears,
And nourish’d only with continual Tears;
Close at my Heels pursue a meagre Train
Of pining Sickness and distorting Pain,
Pale-ey’d Confusion with dishivel’d Hair,
And wild Impatience leading on Despair.\(^{23}\)

Leapor’s paraphrase draws attention to what Rowe’s speaker laments as “forgotten” and “insensible”: namely, the body of the sufferer, “vexed” both externally and internally by the confluence of “consuming Fears,” “pining Sickness and distorting Pain.” And unlike her predecessor, whose Job insists that “cloath’d in flesh, I shall behold my God,” Leapor opts not to depict the promise of consolation. Rather, her verses conclude with the afflicted man chiding himself for his charged rhetoric and shameful self-exposure:

Yet stay, presumptuous Wretch, nor urge too far
Thy doubtful Sentence at the dreadful Bar:
What melting Rhet’rick, or what potent Friend,
At Heav’n’s Tribunal shall thy Cause defend?
Where smother’d Evils, hid from mortal Eye,
Mature and open to Omniscience lie. (“Job’s Curse,” lines 98–103)

The paraphrase ends not with Job’s sequence of conditional self-punishments—which culminate in his plea to “Let thistles grow instead of wheat, and cockle instead of barley” if he has neglected to care for his land (31:40)—but rather with the self-shame that his “doubtful Sentence” has been recorded at all and thus subject to God’s judgment.

The most ambitious and extensive paraphrases, meanwhile, took considerable poetic license in their representations of Job’s suffering, in part to redeem modern poetry

itself from the “afflictions” of a fallen verse culture. In his lengthy and controversial preface to his *Paraphrase on the Book of Job* (1705), for example, Richard Blackmore echoed Jeremy Collier’s *Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage* (1698) to argue that the “flagitious and prophane Writings of our Poets”—having been influenced in no small part by their adherence to classical models, and to “the Pagan System of Divinity”—had corrupted English manners and religion beyond recognition.\(^{24}\)

The preface then claimed that the poetic qualities of Job’s verses—“a sublime Stile, elevated Thoughts and splendid Expression”—were superior to those of classical Greek and Latin epic poetry, and that the biblical sufferer “gives an admirable Example of passive Fortitude, a Character not inferior to that of the active Hero [of epic poetry].”\(^ {25}\)

These claims, in turn, responded to the challenge set forth by the Scottish advocate William Clark who, in his *Poetical Execrations on the Book of Job* (1685), argued that no poet before him had “endeavoured to connect the several Texts [of Job] in continued Discourses, notwithstanding of the abrupt transitions from one Subject to another.”\(^ {26}\) By rehearsing contemporary popular debates over the values of “ancient” and “modern”

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\(^{25}\) Ibid., xviii, xxxiii. Blackmore further stresses that “it should hereafter happen that Homer or Virgil should be well translated into the English Language, yet I believe that if this Book were translated or paraphras’d with equal Skill, it would outshine them in those Instances of Perfection abovemention’d” (xxxv–xxxvi). Cp. Daniel Baker, who proffered his *History of Job* (1706) “[t]o redeem this Divine and Heaven-born Art [of Poetry] from the vile Servitude of Lewdness and Vanity, and to restore it to its proper Use and first Institution, which is to serve Religion, and to promote true Wisdom, Virtue, and Honour in the World.” Baker, Preface to *The History of Job: A Sacred Poem. In Five Books* (London: R. Clavel, 1706), [ii].

\(^{26}\) William Clark, Preface to *The Grand Tryal: or, Poetical Execrations upon the Book of Job* (Edinburgh: A. Anderson, 1685), [ii]. Unlike Blackmore and Baker, Clark was seemingly content to “let the florid Wits of our Age enjoy their Trade intire, for me, a great part of my design in this Composure being only to make attonement for my former wanton excursions in this Art; and if I meet with censure, or applause, I am indifferent” ([ii–iii]).
poetry, these poets suggested that their adaptations of Job would serve not only to model the various states of affliction in poetically engaging terms, but also to rescue their literary craft from the faults of contemporary English society.

Although ostensibly written for the same ends, Clark and Blackmore’s paraphrases of Job exhibit varying degrees of creative license in their representations of Job’s suffering. Between them, Blackmore hews most closely to his scriptural source, retaining its narrative sequence and much of the original language. But the poet nevertheless intensifies the depths of Job’s afflictions with regular heroic couplets and hyperbolic diction and imagery. Blackmore’s revision of Job 10:1 (“My soul is weary of life…I will speak in the bitterness of my soul”), for example, trades in heavily despondent language as the speaker expresses his soul’s desire for liberation:

My constant Woes such endless Groans create,
That Life’s a black, uncomfortable State.
My Soul abhors this loathsome Lump of Clay,
Longs to be free, and wing to Heav’n her Way.
I make my Moan to give my Sorrow vent,
Else would my Breast be with the Tempest rent.
I cannot stifle such gigantick Woe,
Nor on my raging Grief a Muzzle throw. (Paraphrase 41)

What begins as Job’s weariness turns, in Blackmore’s hands, into the restlessness of his soul. This displacement of scriptural emphasis onto the “bitterness of my soul” plays out in language that the poet either repurposes from surrounding passages or devises himself to intensify Job’s plight (“I cannot stifle such gigantick Woe, / Nor on my raging Grief a Muzzle throw”). Clark’s paraphrase of this same passage, meanwhile, is even more verbose: here, Job is not merely distressed, but also philosophical about his suffering, in

27 Cp. for example 10:9: “Remember, I beseech thee, that thou hast made me as the clay”; and 9:17: “For he breaketh me with a tempest, and multiplieth my wounds without cause.”
visibly corporeal language that gestures more toward the poet’s didactic ambitions than toward his sufferer’s “voice”:

    MY Soul’s cut off, and though I seem to breath;
    Yet am I coop’d up in the jaws of death.
    My Soul is fled, my days of life are gone,
    And this poor widow’d Body left alone,
    To be the subject of some country fable,
    As in its ruines only memorable.

    So this frail Body, which in health, and strength,
    Look’d like a tall Ship, in its Course, at length,
    Standing upon the Shelves of foul diseases,
    In its proportion every hour deceases.
    And that it may be ruin’d with dispatch,
    Each ulcerous Billow doth large Gobbets snatch
    Out of that vigorous Body, which alace,
    Is not in a most despicable case. (Poetical Execrations 61–62)

Much less a literal paraphrase than a complete reinterpretation of the source text, this passage foregoes textual accuracy in favor of creative, though convoluted exegesis. From his idiosyncratic descriptions (“Each ulcerous Billow doth large Gobbets snatch…”) to his epic simile (“So this frail Body… / Look’d like a tall Ship”), Clark produces an account of biblical suffering that captures something of the Bible’s figural didacticism while replacing its terse language with extended expression. At the same time, such expression, with its intensive focus on Job’s physical afflictions, is of an order that resists any easy assimilation of his suffering into the mode of piety demanded by God.

Two other demonstrative examples in this regard are the poets’ revisions of Job’s monologue in 30:16–18—“And now my soul is poured out upon me…By the great force of my disease is my garment changed: it bindeth me about as the collar of my coat”—both of which exceed the original text’s depiction of the sufferer’s “pierced” bones and
restless “sinews.” Blackmore’s paraphrase converts the biblical verses into a *blazon* of Job’s afflicted body, drawing out his misery in the language of physical deformation:

And now my Soul is griev’d, my Flesh diseas’d,
And dismal Woes have me their Prisoner seiz’d.
All Night I lie extended on the Rack,
My Bones are tortur’d, and my Sinews crack,
The Putrefaction from my running Boils
With loathsome Stains my stiff’ning Vest defiles.
Close to my Sores it sticks, as to my Throat
The narrow Collar of my Seamless Coat:
God in the Dust has me his Servant spurn’d,
Ev’n while alive, I seem to Ashes turn’d. (*Paraphrase* 137)

On the other hand, Clark reimagines Job’s frustrations using more emotionally charged and introspective language:

What am I then, my friends, pray let me know
Whether I breath, whether I live, or no?

I only breath, I live to feel the *pain*,
Which in my bones, and sinews I sustain:—
Such *horrid pain*, as cannot be exprest,
Such *pain*, as does allow my soul no rest
For in the nighttime, in the hour, when all
Submit themselves to sleep, at Nature’s call;
Then,—then,—O then, my Bones so shrewdly ake,
As I’m compell’d by force of pain t’awake. (*Poetical Excrations* 255–56)

Both texts detail the torture that Job experiences in his affliction, but they choose to emphasize complementary dimensions of that torture. For Blackmore, the image of Job “extended on the Rack” and his clothes stained with “[t]he Putrefaction from my running Boils” stresses the lengths to which the sufferer’s plight has distorted both his body and his language. For Clark, meanwhile, Job’s pain is paradoxically inexpressible, as the “horrid pain” he sustains overpowers his own self-knowledge and forces him to question his existence: “Am I a *Creature rational?* or can / Such, as now see me, call me yet a *man?*” (*Poetical Excrations* 255). In both cases, the experience of extreme suffering
demands from both poets an intensely charged language, mediated through first-person voice, to communicate first the degree of, and then the ultimate value of, affliction.

Taken together, these various texts demonstrate the emergence of a coherent discourse on affliction and suffering across the long eighteenth century. This discourse, in turn, was inflected by rhetorical strategies that writers deployed to discuss and cure the suffering self. As sermons and other doctrinal writings encouraged resignation of the self to God’s will in demonstrably “impersonal” language, poems and verse paraphrases of the Bible exercised greater creative license in imagining the physical, psychic, and moral circumstances of afflictions from the perspective of the sufferer. In this sense, eighteenth-century discourses on affliction helped set the terms for a lyric practice that not only foregrounded lived experiences of suffering (whether real or imagined), but also creatively engaged with doctrinal teachings that otherwise downplayed such experiences in favor of the greater promises of spiritual salvation.

III. Lyricizing Anne Steele: Affliction, Resignation, and the Hymnic “I”

Having traced the liturgical and discursive strategies that eighteenth-century commentators deployed to discuss and resolve the problem of affliction, I shall now turn to the writings of Anne Steele, the first and most renowned female hymnodist to write prolifically on the subject. Born in Broughton, Hampshire in 1717, Steele was raised in a relatively affluent Particular Baptist household. Thanks to her father William’s thriving timber business and the family’s close connections with the local Dissenting church, she cultivated deep interests in poetry and religious writings (despite receiving little formal
education herself). Although she enjoyed close relationships with her family throughout her life, she was also forced to confront illness, death, and grief for much of her life. Her mother, Anne Froude Steele, and her brother Thomas both died in 1720, likely from complications during the latter’s birth that year. More controversial among Steele’s biographers, meanwhile, was the accidental drowning of James Elcomb in 1737; Steele was reportedly engaged to Elcomb, but as Cynthia Aalders has noted, the two were most likely acquaintances rather than lovers. Four decades later, Steele grieved the losses of her stepmother Anne Cator Steele (d. 1760) and William (d. 1769); their deaths, in turn, coincided with her confinement in bed due to successive physical and psychic maladies.

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29 As Aalders observes, however, accounts of the hymnodist’s life were often prone to exaggerate or overemphasize these elements, relying more upon apocryphal stories than written records to comprehend her written works. Such accounts, she observes, “appear to be based primarily on an emotional reading of the events just noted—events which evoke an affecting image of Steele that intensifies the experience of singing her hymns by inducing particular emotions in the singer.” Aalders, *To Express the Ineffable*, 9. Regardless of how literary and spiritual biographers choose to interpret Steele’s life and writings, what is clear is that she outlived many of her closest relatives, and that their losses, coupled with her irregular physical health, conditioned her understanding of affliction and suffering throughout her life.
By the time she herself died from chronic illness in 1778, Anne was thus well acquainted with the emotional and spiritual consequences of personal suffering.

Despite (or because of) these various setbacks, Steele also became one of the most prolific hymnodists of the eighteenth century, as well as one of the period’s most widely reprinted poets. Her two-volume collection of Poems on Subjects Chiefly Devotional, first published in 1760 under the pseudonym “Theodosia,” was generally well received, and it was later reprinted posthumously in 1780 with an additional volume of poems and prose writings.32 But perhaps more impressive was the recirculation of her hymns in hymnals and other verse collections, both during and after her lifetime. By 1769, John Ash and Caleb Evans included sixty-two of Steele’s hymns in their Collection of Hymns Adapted to Public Worship.33 Forty-two of her compositions were likewise reprinted in John Rippon’s Selection of Hymns (1787), and a significant number of her hymns also appeared in Jeremy Belknap’s anthology of Sacred Poetry (1795), the latter of which brought Steele’s work to an American audience.34 Steele’s hymns and poems continued to circulate throughout the nineteenth century on both sides of the Atlantic, featuring not

34 Aalders, To Express the Ineffable, 62–63, footnote.
only in print anthologies but also in regular Baptist (and occasionally Methodist) church services.\textsuperscript{35}

While Steele was certainly not the first female hymnodist, she was arguably the first to meditate on the problem of suffering in markedly first-person terms, anticipating the introspective and doubtful hymns of William Cowper in the late eighteenth century. Like the hymns of her contemporaries, Steele’s compositions encompass a wide range of subjects and functions, from biblical paraphrase to exultations of praise and wonder. But her literary and spiritual achievements arguably rest upon the large body of hymns which address the subject of affliction and its necessary, if painful role in the path to salvation. Collectively, these hymns model an appropriate spiritual response to individual suffering: namely, the resignation of the self to God’s will, and the recognition that personal ailments are insignificant in the broader “journey” of the Christian life. And whereas her predecessors and contemporaries were generally predisposed to expound upon affliction in impersonal terms or through biblical personae, Steele chose to write most of her works in the language of first-person introspection. Moreover, she incorporated such introspection within verse forms—that is, metrical hymns—designed for corporate worship, and hence within forms that nominally demanded the erasure or minimization of the sufferer’s immediate concerns.\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{35} Arnold, “A ‘Veil of Interposing Night,’” 373. Steele’s \textit{Poems} were reprinted, albeit with significant abridgements, in 1863 and 1967 by Sedgwick and J. R. Broome, respectively. Ruth Bottoms, meanwhile, notes that only one of Steele’s hymns, on “The Excellency of Holy Scriptures,” has survived into the most recent Baptist denominational hymnbook. Bottoms, “Contemporary Baptist Congregational Singing and the Hymnody of Anne Steele (1717–1778),” \textit{Baptist Quarterly} 48, no. 4 (2017): 152.

\textsuperscript{36} It was for these reasons that Benson lauded Steele for “[c]hanging the common ground for the feminine standpoint” and contributing “the Hymn of Introspection” to the English hymnodic tradition, though he primarily attributed these innovations to her demands of “[c]omposing under the shadow of affliction and ill-health.” Benson, \textit{The English Hymn}, 214.
That Steele wrote many hymns in this vein reflects, on the one hand, the capacity for women (especially Dissenting women) to practice hymnody to circumvent the male-dominated spaces of the pulpit and the print market, and thus to achieve a limited yet powerful degree of literary and spiritual autonomy in the public sphere.\textsuperscript{37} On the other hand, Steele managed to refashion the hymn of affliction as a literary-congregational space which could incorporate a wider range of psychic states than previous hymnodists had explored. As she drew inspiration from the doctrinal confidence, formal experimentation, and emotional intensity of Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley’s hymns, Steele introduced and foregrounded the believer’s confrontations with doubt, guilt, sinfulfulness, and inexpressibility of praise to God.\textsuperscript{38} In this sense, her hymns deserve attention in the history of lyric not only for their aesthetic qualities and technical features, but also for their introspective modeling of suffering and its spiritual resolution through the lens of the poet-hymnodist’s personal difficulties.

Equally important to Steele’s reputation as hymnodist and lyricist, meanwhile, was the decision of her literary executor, the Particular Baptist minister Caleb Evans, to reprint her \textit{Poems} posthumously in 1780. This edition, I shall argue, redirected attention from the universal doctrine of self-resignation that Steele’s hymns had espoused, to the gripping circumstances of the poet’s life. Through his revelation of “Theodosia’s” authorial identity and his inclusion of the poet’s private prose reflections and additional poems, Evans not only announced Steele’s posthumous entrance into the world, but also


\textsuperscript{38} On Watts and Wesley’s impact on eighteenth-century hymnody, see Marshall and Todd, \textit{English Congregational Hymns}, 28–59, 60–88; Aalders, \textit{To Express the Ineffable}, 37–47.
conditioned readers to comprehend her life, craft, and spirituality primarily in terms of
her personal afflictions. Such comprehension, I contend, amounts to a mode of
lyricization: an interpretive mode which reconfigures Steele’s hymns as expressions of
personal feeling or emotional spontaneity, beyond her explicit desire for self-resignation.

To understand the interplay of these various factors on Steele’s religious poetry, it
is worth examining how her hymns on affliction modulate her spirituality in personalized
terms. Across these hymns, Steele consistently stages the speaker’s eventual acceptance
of God’s grace, whether in her own voice or that of an imagined believer. This staging
incorporates several thematic elements, from allusions to personal illness and grief, to the
reasoning that leads both poet and singer to accept the Almighty’s supreme power. In
“Submission to God under Affliction,” for example, the speaker implores her
“complaining, doubting heart” to “be still” and, more importantly, to refrain from
“murmur[ing] at God’s will.”39 The monologue then reflects on the value of punishment
in terms that reinforce God’s omnipotence while demanding the speaker’s resignation:

    Unerring wisdom guides his hand;
    Nor dares my guilty fear,
    Amid the sharpest pains I feel,
    Pronounce his hand severe.
    
    Let me reflect with humble awe
    Whene’er my heart complains,
    Compar’d with what my sins deserve,
    How easy are my pains! (Poems 1:149, lines 5–8, 13–16)

Over the course of her measured observations, Steele—or rather, her imagined singer—
resigns herself to God’s “sovereign hand” (line 17) and pleads for Him to “[a]ssure my

39 Anne Steele, Poems on Subjects Chiefly Devotional. In Two Volumes. A New Edition. To which
is added, A Third Volume, consisting of Miscellaneous Pieces. By Theodosia (Bristol: W. Pine,
1780), 1:48, lines 1, 2, 4. All subsequent in-line citations of Steele’s poetry and prose will refer
by title, page, and line number to this edition.
soul, that thou art mine” (line 23). These introspective gestures are doctrinally consistent with contemporary divines’ advice on the resolution of affliction. But rather than state this gesture from the outset, the hymn opens instead with self-reflection, in confessional and inescapably painful present-tense language that stresses the singer’s “doubting heart,” “guilty fear,” “sharpest pains,” and most consequentially, her inner sense of sinfulness. Tellingly, despite the hymn’s consolatory conclusion, these bodily states do not disappear; instead, they are alleviated only once God will accept the poet-singer’s final demand to be “mine,” a demand that remains unresolved in the space of the hymn itself.

The movement between immediate spiritual equivocation and future-oriented resignation that Steele stages in “Submission to God under Affliction” recurs in several of her other hymns on the subject. “Resigning the Heart to God,” which draws inspiration from Psalms 119:94 (“I am thine, save me; for I have sought thy precepts”), also opens and concludes with the poet-singer’s adoration of God and her desire to “be thine, and only thine” (Poems 1:117, line 2). The hymn’s intervening stanzas, however, portray a believer whose “weak inconstant mind” (Poems 1:118, line 5) succumbs to “Trifles, as empty as the wind” (line 7) and thus finds it difficult to accept the premise of godly love:

Sure I am thine—or why this load
When earthly vanities beguile?
Why do I mourn my absent God,
And languish for thy cheering smile?

If thou return, how sweet the joy,
Though mix’d with penitential smart!
Then I despise each tempting toy,
And long to give thee all my heart. (Poems 1:118, lines 9–16)
These stanzas, in which the poet-singer expresses momentary confusion at her grief and “languishing” for God’s presence, appear to flesh out the “murmuring, doubting heart” that forms the subject of “Submission to God.” Here, Steele intermingles the singer’s confidence in her possession by God (“Sure I am thine”) and her capacity to “despise each tempting toy” with the fact of His absence and her “penitential smart.” A similar sense of doubt and fear pervades “Death and Heaven,” which commences with the singer’s decisive dismissal of earthly temptations—“Earth’s fairest scenes but cheat my eyes, / Her pleasure is but painted woe” (Poems 1:127, lines 3–4)—before painting a rather different picture of her current spiritual state:

Then why, my soul, so loath to leave
These seats of vanity and care?
Why do I thus to trifles cleave,
And feed on chaff, and grasp the air? (lines 5–8)

The answer, the author indicates, lies both in the gloom of death’s “frown” and in the singer’s sense of sinfulness:

Whene’er I look with frightened eyes
On death’s impenetrable shade,
Alas! what gloomy horrors rise,
And all my trembling frame invade!

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‘Tis sin which arms his dreadful frown,

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40 Cp. “Desiring a Taste of Real Joy,” whose opening stanzas articulates the poet-singer’s murmurings on her mortal torment:

WHY should my spirit cleave to earth,
This nest of worms, this vile abode?
Why thus forget her nobler birth,
Nor wish to trace the heavenly road?

How barren of sincere delight,
Are all the fairest scenes below!
Though beauteous colours charm the sight,
They only varnish real woe. (Poems 1:112, lines 1–8)
This only points his deadly sting;  
My sins which throw this gloom around,  
And all these shocking terrors bring. (Poems 1:128, lines 13–16, 21–24)

Given Steele’s use of highly personalized, emotive, and introspective language—and, it should be noted, her use of long meter (rhymed quatrains written entirely in iambic tetrameter) as opposed to common meter—this poem would appear to be more “lyrical” in quality than “hymnic” or “devotional.” Yet it is precisely through the poet-singer’s reasoning, or her introspective movement from self-doubt to consolation, that Steele articulates the poem’s central doctrinal claim: namely, that one must leave “all terrestrial things” behind and “upward rise to joys unknown” (lines 53, 50). In this sense, what might otherwise be a lyrically introspective poem, one centered entirely upon the psychic travails of a single speaker, becomes equally hymnic once its poet-singer learns to articulate both the depths of her mortal suffering and her greater desire for spiritual reconciliation in the Christian afterlife.41

Beyond such emphases on introspection, other hymns decenter the experience of affliction by magnifying instead the pain of Christ’s crucifixion. Across the final few hymns in the first volume of her Poems, Steele reflects on the crucifixion in markedly graphic and sentimental language. Her evocation of Christ’s wounds serves to remind herself (and her readers and singers) of the insignificance of their personal afflictions. Hence in “Faith in a Redeemer’s Sufferings,” the poet-singer “hear[s] thy groans with deep surprize, / And view[s] thy wounds with weeping eyes” (Poems 1:178, lines 9–10, 12). In “Meditating on the Redeemer’s Sufferings,” she muses upon the “agonies

41 For two notable variations of this spiritual trajectory, see “Cold Affections” (Poems 1:120–22), which stages a similar desire for death despite one’s sinfulness; and “Bidding Adieu to Earthly Pleasures” (Poems 1:103–04), which presents a more uniformly optimistic view of salvation in death.
unknown, / His soul sustain’d beneath the load / Of mortal crimes!” (Poems 1:182, lines 17–19). “A Dying Saviour” likewise uses the tableau of Christ’s bleeding body to articulate the evolution of the poet-singer’s “stupid heart” into one moved by “melting grief and ardent love”:

   Can I survey this scene of woe,
   Where mingling grief and wonder flow;
   And yet my heart unmov’d remain,
   Insensible to love or pain!

   Come, dearest Lord, thy pow’r impart,
   To warm this cold, this stupid heart;
   Till all its pow’rs and passions move,
   In melting grief and ardent love. (Poems 1:180, lines 17–24)

Yet another striking hymn in this vein is “Sin the Cause of Christ’s Death,” in which Steele moves fluidly from the spectacle of crucifixion to her singer’s sense of sinfulness and guilt. The image prompts the same introspective reasoning on sin, affliction, and the desire for salvation that Steele stages in many of her other hymns:

   And shall I harbor in my breast
   (Tremble my soul at such a deed)
   This dreadful foe, this fatal guest?
   ‘Twas sin that made my Saviour bleed.

   ‘Tis sin that would my ruin prove,
   And sink me down to endless woe;
   But O forbid it, heav’nly love,
   And save me from the cursed foe. (Poems 1:183, lines 9–16)

In each of these passages, Steele fashions the hymnic persona of a guilty sinner by apostrophizing Christ’s sufferings. That is, she draws upon the intensity of crucifixion as a pretext for minimizing the speaker-singer’s personal circumstances (though certainly these circumstances likewise serve as the pretext for the composition of these hymns).42

42 Steele’s imagery of the crucifixion resembles the fascination that contemporary Methodists (including Charles Wesley) held for the same event. As Misty Anderson argues, Methodist hymns
Moving from the personal to the universal through her fixation on Christ, Steele locates in His “agonies unknown” a resolution to her speaker-singer’s “endless woe.”

As Steele honed her model of self-resignation within the literary-congregational space of the hymn, she also meditated upon affliction’s virtues and vicissitudes in more creative verse forms. One of her occasional poems, “A Simile,” playfully compares the phenomenon of personal suffering to a violent rainstorm that forces flowers to “[r]ecline their languid heads, and seem to mourn” (Poems 1:216, line 7) before it makes way for the returning sunshine.43 Notably, the extended simile concludes with the poet reflecting upon her own imperfect condition and accepting its benefits: “Prest with affliction, let me then conclude, / That storms and sunshine, (kind vicissitude:) / Are mingled blessings, meant to work my good” (Poems 1:217, lines 17–19). Less playful, on the other hand, is Steele’s poem “On the Sickness of a Friend,” which negotiates the emotional consequences of her friend’s impending death via an appeal to God, in language as emotional (and rigidly metrical) as that of her hymns on affliction:

Why will this wretched, this deluded heart
So fast to earth’s uncertain comforts cleave?
‘Tis but to cherish pain, to treasure smart,
And teach the unavailing sigh to heave.

Great source of good, attend my plaintive cries


43 Steele repeats this imagery in “The Friend,” which reflects upon friendship’s capacity to overcome momentary afflictions:

But ah, how short the bright untroubled hour!
Soon clouds arise, and storms impending lower;
Then friendship shews her noblest, kindest art,
Sustains the drooping powers, and helps to bear
The well-divided load of mutual care. (Poems 1:238, lines 17–22)
My weakness with indulgent pity see,
And teach this restless, anxious heart to rise,
And center all its hopes and joys in thee. (Poems 1:225, lines 5–12)

Darkness, disease, and delusion likewise characterize Steele’s vision of mortality in “The Path of Life,” which presents to its readers “a labyrinth of woe” choked by “malignant ills,” “stubborn disease,” and “adversity’s cold, wintry blast” (Poems 1:242, lines 16, 24–26). Unlike her other poems, however, Steele chooses not to extol the virtues of mortal suffering, but rather presents a more optimistic path in the form of “Mercy’s” saving grace. Unsurprisingly, the poet concludes her vision by turning away from “erring folly” and resigning herself to Mercy’s “unerring conduct” (Poems 1:244, lines 61, 69).

Across her poems and hymns, we can therefore observe that Steele placed significant importance not only on the experience of affliction and the value of self-resignation, but also on the capacity for her hymnic-poetic “I” to model these conditions to a wider audience. These factors depended, in turn, on Steele’s relative anonymity as a poet when her two-volume collection of Poems was first published in 1760. Although she was certainly well-connected among Baptist leaders and had made active efforts to publish her verse as early as 1755, Steele’s identity as poet remained couched under her pseudonym “Theodosia.” If, as Sarah Prescott observes of eighteenth-century women writers more generally, this pseudonym generated necessary distance between Steele’s poetic craft and “the dangers of being associated with the literary marketplace,” it also played into the hymnodist’s belief in meeting personal affliction with pious self-

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resignation. In this vein, Steele’s use of an expressive “I,” a poetic persona whose language of self-doubt, guilt, and pain ultimately lead the singer to spiritual closure, signaled the poet’s investment in resolving individual suffering through the submission of the hymnic-poetic self to God’s grace.

Even as Steele’s works continued to circulate in hymnals, however, her death in 1778 precipitated a notable change in the way that readers and singers could comprehend her works. When Caleb Evans reprinted her Poems in 1780, he amended a third volume of her previously unpublished poems, hymns, and prose writings, and a seven-page Advertisement which revealed for the first time the identity of the hymnodist. Similar to the two-volume Poems of 1760, this third volume demonstrates Steele’s versatility as an occasional and spiritually inspired poet. But in light of the Advertisement’s disclosure of the poet’s identity (which I shall discuss below), what distinguishes the posthumous addition to Poems is its preoccupation with her physical and psychic responses to her afflictions. Whereas “Theodosia” wrote across a wide range of poetic forms (Pindaric odes, hymns, occasional poems) in a congregational “I” which sought to model self-resignation and Christian consolation in the face of affliction, her hymnic persona became inextricably attached to Steele herself in Evans’ curated volume. This attachment of the poet’s biographical self to her congregational “I,” in turn, lyricized her fortunes to the extent that she became recognized and praised by later readers as a deeply personal, introspective hymnodist.

In his Advertisement, Evans justified this authorial revelation as “possibly [offering] some gratification to those who have hitherto been ignorant of the real name

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45 Prescott, Women, Authorship and Literary Culture, 54.
and character of the pious Theodosia, whose writings have so often cheered their hours of solitude…and animated their devotions in the closet and congregation” (*Poems* 3:vi). The Advertisement consequently included a brief biography and evaluation of her career, and presented Steele as the prolific yet reluctant poet by claiming that “it was not without extreme reluctance she was prevailed on to submit any of [her ‘truly poetical and pious productions’] to the public eye” (*Poems* 3:vii). Such claims to the hymnodist’s modesty, as I discussed in Chapter 1 in the cases of Katherine Philips and Anne Finch, were typical among male editors who wished to protect their female authors’ reputations from public slander or scorn.\(^46\) But what also makes Evans’ Advertisement notable is its implicit contravention of Steele’s hymnic desire for self-resignation. His revelation of Theodosia’s identity, while certainly well-intentioned, conditioned Steele’s re-entry into print as a poet whose life and afflictions, once known, could readily be grafted onto the “I” of her hymns and poems. This “conditioning” of the poet’s voice and piety through the prism of her suffering becomes clear when Evans discusses the personal obstacles that prevented Steele from publishing her (now posthumous) writings sooner:

> But it was her infelicity, as it has been of many of her kindred spirits, to have a capacious soaring mind inclosed in a very weak and languid body. Her health was never firm, but the death of her honoured father, to whom she was united by the strongest ties of affectionate duty and gratitude, gave such a shock to her feeble frame, that she never entirely recovered it, though she survived him some years. (*Poems* 3:vii)

Although Evans does not disclose the nature of Steele’s illness, he nevertheless suggests that her poetic practice, the output of her “capacious soaring mind,” was inextricably linked to her “weak and languid body” and her father’s death. This understanding

\(^{46}\) Sarah Prescott notes that such tropes of female modesty and morality were especially common (and marketable) among posthumous editions of eighteenth-century women’s poetry. Prescott, *Women, Authorship and Literary Culture*, 87–102.
likewise motivates his praise for Steele’s “exquisite sensibility” and “native cheerfulness of disposition, which not even the uncommon and agonizing pains she endured in the latter part of her life could deprive her of” (*Poems* 3:i). The overriding impression of the poet, in other words, was that of a woman who derived her poetic power almost entirely from her personal experience: whether in the actual form of her “very weak and languid body,” or in the resilience and optimism she mustered to combat her various afflictions.

Perhaps the most demonstrative writings in this regard, and the ones that became especially “attached” to Evans’ biographical framing of Steele, are the “Miscellaneous Pieces in Prose” that the editor included in her posthumous *Poems*. Much like Elizabeth Singer Rowe’s extremely popular *Devout Exercises of the Heart* (1737), which was posthumously edited and published by Isaac Watts, Steele’s prose writings ruminate on a variety of topics in equally diverse modes: from personal observation and confession, to philosophical exposition and divine paraphrase. Yet whereas Rowe’s “exercises” read as intimate confessions to God at every stage of her thought process, Steele strove to express her ruminations and revelations in monologues that worked actively through the intermediate stages of affliction, doubt, and distress before appealing to the comfort of her lord and savior. In this understanding, Steele’s essays place the greatest emphasis on her “I” as the *self* who must navigate the travails of her suffering. Her essay on “Motives to Divine Meditation,” for example, models the same movement between her perceived sinfulness and her yearning for consolation that we observed earlier in her verses on affliction:

Can I reflect unmoved, on the state of never-ending misery my sins deserve, on the dreadful pains thou hast suffered to redeem lost perishing sinners who come to thee as their only refuge...? can I meditate on these animating subjects which I hope have sometimes warmed my heart, and
not wonder at my frequent coldness!—Alas how frail is my heart! how foolish and ungrateful! frail and foolish indeed, to be tempted away from my true interest, my only happiness, by empty vanities! (Poems 3:215)

While Steele does affirm her confidence in God’s ability to “inspire the sacred flame” and “teach me the celestial song” (Poems 3:216), the central focus of her meditation is on the emotional introspection she must perform to achieve that desired state. Other essays stage this process in equally tumultuous and exclamatory language, with Steele’s use of contrastive conjunctions (“but,” “yet”) exacerbating this inner turmoil at the level of sentence structure. Hence her complaint, in an essay entitled “Humility,” that her “service” to God has fallen far short of his expectations (Poems 3:164); or her regret in “Human Frailty” that she is a “rational being” who has nevertheless been “thoughtless and negligent” in her “mean pursuit of vanities and trifles” (Poems 3:159). Steele’s essay on “Self-Contradiction” similarly laments that her mortal attachments—including her love of family and friends—distract her from professing her greater love for God:

I love my friends, and esteem their affection as one of the chief blessings of life, which I ought to do every thing in my power to preserve; but what is this to the favour of God? No more than momentary life to an endless eternity!…How often do I find my heart melting at the present pains and sorrows of my fellow creatures, and wishing to relieve them, and yet how seldom do I view with mournful pity the deplorable condition of wretched souls in the road to everlasting misery? (Poems 3:200)

These anxieties over the poet’s self-contradiction, mortality, and distance from God reach their conclusion in the volume’s final essay, which Evans titled as Steele’s “Thoughts in Sickness, and on Recovery.” Addressed as much to an occasion (an unspecified fever) as to a devotional state, Steele’s meditation rehearses her condition under intense physical and psychic affliction. She observes how “[t]he first attacks of a fever have weakened my nerves and spirits” to the point of “listless inattention” and utter
indolence—even “conversation is tasteless, and reading and thinking almost impracticable” (Poems 3:217)—before attempting to remedy her ailment through introspective devotion. But even though Steele eventually “recovers” from this desperate state, she nevertheless remarks several times on the contrast between her soul’s murmurings and her faith, and she also expresses her fear that she “may relapse again into cold indifference and vile ingratitude” without God’s abiding presence (Poems 3:223). The most dramatic statement of these fears arrives as the poet berates her “utter unworthiness” before God’s “Almighty grace”:

Contemplate O my soul with delightful wonder the astonishing contrast! and sink lower still in thy own eyes, while the glories of divine mercy are exalted above all thy wonder and thy praise!...And am I (so vile, so wretched) permitted to hope an interest in it? O the heights, the depths, the unsearchable wonders of almighty grace! Forgive O gracious God, forgive these guilty unbelieving thoughts which would embitter my comforts, and rob thee of the humble tribute which my grateful heart would bring to the footstool of thy throne! (Poems 3:221)

This remarkable passage splinters not only into a contrast between God’s supremacy and Steele’s “utter” insignificance, but also into a fundamental divide between her self (the “I” behind her imperatives) and her soul, and consequently between her devotion and her self-disdain. That the poet seeks forgiveness after disclosing “these guilty unbelieving thoughts” on her “wretchedness” likewise signals her desire for restoration under God’s “chastening hand” (Poems 3:222), rather than for the passive resignation that her soul falsely demands. Such persistent tension leads Steele to conclude that her momentary illness, being “a state of probation,” is best understood as one in a series of God’s “many trials before I leave this mortal stage” (Poems 3:224).

Steele’s prose effusions thus stage precisely the same tensions as presented in “Theodosia’s” congregational hymns. Yet within Evans’ editorial framework, these
effusions become directly attached to the poet-as-sufferer, rather than to the sufferer-as-universal-persona. The difference between her meditations and hymns, in other words, lies as much in Steele’s choice of genre as it does in the biographical framing of her posthumous Poems. If her hymns (published and publicized, anonymously, in “Theodosia’s” name) enabled Steele to fashion her resilience to affliction in the mode of self-resigning congregational worship, her prose writings (published and publicized, posthumously, in her name) rehearsed that resilience as personal confession: a mode we might now recognize as lyric introspection.

IV. “Beneath his rod I raise my cries”: Susannah Harrison’s Poetics of Affliction

As a way of putting Steele’s conflicting modes of self-presentation across her writings into perspective, I shall conclude this chapter by turning to the career and writings of Susannah Harrison. Like Steele, Harrison was a nonconformist whose life was marked and marred by overlapping afflictions, and she fashioned her poetic identity in both an idiom of personal suffering and the form of the congregational hymn. The two hymnodists also experienced very similar levels of success: Harrison’s poems proved to be very popular on both sides of the Atlantic (though they did not enjoy quite the same levels of liturgical popularity as Steele’s did), and with the help of her male editor, they established her reputation as a female hymnodist who honed her craft through the experiences of loss and physical debility. Yet even more so than Steele’s writings, Harrison’s poems trade deeply in the language of personal pain, as both an affirmation of her desire for consolation in God and a conduit for the kind of lyrical expression that her chosen form, the congregational hymn, would have disavowed.
Born in Ipswich in 1752 to a destitute family, Harrison received no formal education but nevertheless managed to teach herself to read and write. Her fortunes changed drastically, however, when her father died in 1768 (one year before William Steele’s death), forcing her to take up work as a domestic servant to support her family. This stint likewise proved to be short-lived, for within four years she contracted an unknown illness that permanently invalided her.\textsuperscript{47} It was during this period, while Harrison remained bedridden and uncertain of her recovery, that she composed songs and verses in an attempt to seek consolation for her suffering. These verses would eventually be published anonymously, though initially against Harrison’s consent, as *Songs in the Night* (1780) under the direction and editorship of the Independent minister John Conder.

Much like “Theodosia’s” *Poems*, the anonymous *Songs in the Night* quickly became a transatlantic success, and indeed Conder likely drew inspiration from the *Poems*’ print history to augment Harrison’s burgeoning reputation. Most notably, the second edition of 1781 not only added twelve new poems and sixteen “Meditations in Blank Verse,” but also dispensed with any pretense to anonymity by printing an acrostic (penned by Harrison herself) which revealed the “Young Lady’s” name for the first time.\textsuperscript{48} Subsequent printings continued to incorporate more of her verses: a third edition appeared shortly before Harrison’s death in 1784, while the posthumous fourth edition (1788) included a “Supplement” comprising eighteen previously unpublished poems and

\textsuperscript{47} Although the specific nature of Harrison’s illness remains unknown, its arrival effectively interrupted her years of domestic service, and doubly hindered her efforts to compose verse and to make a living. Bridget Keegan, “Mysticisms and Mystifications: The Demands of Laboring-Class Religious Poetry,” in “Learning to Read in the Long Revolution: New Work on Laboring-Class Poets, Aesthetics, and Politics,” special issue of *Criticism* 47, no. 4 (2005): 471.

“A Remarkable Scene in the Author’s Life,” which recounted Conder’s meeting and conversation with Harrison at the Ipswich family home on January 12, 1773. By 1823, the *Songs* had run through as many as fifteen editions in Britain and six in America, with a number of her hymns reprinted in various nineteenth-century hymnals.49

Like contemporary and popular collections such as John Newton and William Cowper’s *Olney Hymns* (1779), Harrison’s *Songs* attracted particular attention not only to the pleasures and promises of Christian worship, but also, as Jamie Kinsley observes, to the poet’s overlapping “afflictions,” to her attendant isolation from public society, and even to her initial reluctance to see her poems released in print.50 In her struggles to cope with her changed circumstances, Harrison wrote frequently about the desirability of death, both as a release from the “prison” of her ailing body and as a secure means to everlasting happiness with God.51 These were the primary concerns which Conder foregrounded for Harrison’s readers in his Preface to the *Songs*, observing that the poet did not want to see her works “in the World in her Life-time, if it had not been that some Months ago, she thought she was actually in dying Circumstances.”52 Yet when Harrison began to show signs of recovery, the editor admitted that “he could not be easy to let [her poems] lay by him any longer…thinking, that the Talent was given her to profit withal, and that they might, under the Blessing of the Most High, be of some Use to others, more

51 The title of Harrison’s collection likewise expresses these desires, with its overt citation of Job 35:10: “But none saith, Where is God my maker, who giveth songs in the night?”
especially to the Sons and Daughters of Affliction.”  

Thus appearing to contravene the poet’s personal desires on the verge of her death, Conder justified his editorial intervention in the interest of fashioning a community of readers who could learn as much from Harrison’s experience as from the fruits of her divinely granted “Talent.”

Much like Steele’s hymns, Harrison’s compositions encompass multiple functions, concerns, and tones: from biblical paraphrase and doctrinal explication, to morning and evening prayer, to the ultimate joy of salvation. The most notable and experimental hymns in Harrison’s collection, however, refract her desire for spiritual fulfillment as much through her self-perception as a guilty sinner as through the frame of her ailing body. Such refraction often takes the form of plaintive questions, directed towards both herself and God. Hymn CXXVII, for example, sees the poet-singer appealing for her transition into the afterlife:

WHY does this room so often prove 
A dungeon, Lord, to me? 
When will these bars of sickness move, 
To set Thy prisoner free?

Jesus, I long to hear Thy word,  
I long to feel its pow’r,  
Be Thou my Healer, dearest Lord,  
And bring the happy hour.

53 Conder, “Preface” to Songs, iv. In his “Recommendation” to the second edition, Conder reiterated these concerns but also printed Harrison’s self-identifying acrostic as “an indulgence to the curiosity of some Readers [who wish] to know who is the Writer.”
54 As Kinsley points out, however, Conder’s enthusiastic connection of Harrison to the divine “weakens” any awareness of her lived conditions and, correspondingly, negates the agency of her disabled body to present her experience sui generis: “The disabled body is now forgotten as anything other than a chosen vessel for divine interaction….The understanding of her body remains one that attaches words such as suffering and affliction, while also perceiving of [sic] the disabled body as the only means by which to receive instruction from the divine to share with others who suffer.” Kinsley, “Images of Disability,” 176.
55 Susannah Harrison, “CXXVII. Lord’s Day [Written under Confinement],” Songs in the Night; By a Young Woman under Heavy Afflictions, 4th ed. (Ipswich: Punchard & Jermyn, 1788), 130,
This movement between confinement within the “dungeon” of “sickness” and an earnest desire for the “happy hour” of salvation, mediated through the poet’s first-person voice, models the kind of introspective engagement with personal afflictions that contemporary religious commentators had advocated in their works. Harrison repeats this rhetorical pattern several times across her hymns on affliction, as in Hymn CXVI, in which she contrasts the happiness of the “unnumber’d throng” of Jesus’ followers to her own misery in suffering, before accepting solace in her “faith on God”:

But I am in a world of woe,  
    Acquainted still with grief;  
Affliction I’m ordain’d to know,  
    When shall I get relief?

They once were sore distress’d, like me,  
    Till Heaven subdued their fear;  
They sail’d o’er tribulation’s sea  
    Before they landed there.

Then may I live by faith on God,  
    On every promise given;  
And still confide in Jesu’s blood,  
    And wait resign’d for Heaven. (Songs 119, lines 13–24)

Framing her hymn with an epigraph from Revelation 7:14, Harrison interprets her personal plight as being akin to that of the white-robed multitude who survived the “great tribulation.” This analogy between the biblical tribulation and the poet’s “world of woe,” in turn, enables the hymn to move beyond its momentary expression of self-doubt into the language of selfless resignation.

Equally notable among Harrison’s Songs are those compositions which comprehend her affliction in the framework of her perceived sinfulness and shame.
Whereas the hymns previously discussed move optimistically from the poet-speaker’s personal pain to her desire for self-resignation to God, others center upon the poet’s self-image as a sinner deserving God’s strictest punishment in the form of her afflictions. Hymn XXIX expresses this sentiment positively, with Harrison comprehending affliction as a conduit to faith and salvation:

OFT has my soul in secret bless’d  
Affliction’s chast’ning rod,  
It weans me from the creature’s breast,  
And brings me near to God.

When I can take believing views  
Of His mysterious ways,  
I can each murmuring thought refuse,  
And celebrate His praise.

Contented then I can resign  
To trouble, loss, or shame,  
Convinc’d all things for good combine,  
To those that love His name. (Songs 29, lines 1–12)

What makes this particular hymn noteworthy is not merely its doctrinal optimism in “Affliction’s chast’ning rod,” but also Harrison’s admission that such optimism flourishes “in secret”: in the realm of her soul and most certainly not her body. This subtle distinction between moral acceptance of, and physical discomfort with, her pain extends into the second stanza, in which the poet notes her “refusal” of “each murmuring thought” in less active language than one might expect from a congregational hymn (compare “I can each murmuring thought refuse” with “I do each murmuring thought refuse”). Hymn CXXVIII, which the poet wrote in preparation for “going to the House of God after long confinement through illness,” also raises these concerns in more visceral and faintly erotic language and imagery:

Beneath His rod I raise my cries,
And plead His faithfulness and care;  
He hears my groans, He bids me rise  
And tell how kind His dealings are.

I taste His goodness every hour;  
O for a heart to love his name!  
A heart t’ adore His matchless power,  
Which has reviv’d my dying frame. (Songs 131, lines 5–12)

Like Hymn XXIX, this composition expresses Harrison’s pain and praise in the habitual present, such that “every hour” is occupied by her simultaneous adoration for God and the “cries” and “groans” which issue from her “dying frame.”

In contrast to these hymns of praise for affliction, Hymn XXVI, which is framed by an epigraph from Job 10:2 (“I will say unto God, Do not condemn me, shew me wherefore Thou contendest with me”), presents the speaker pleading dramatically to God for her release from His punishment:

CONDEMN me not, most gracious God,  
Let not Thy sore displeasure burn:  
Do not destroy me with Thy rod,  
Nor at my feeble offerings spurn.

Give me the knowledge of my heart,  
Release me from this heavy yoke;  
Shew me the cause of all my smart,  
Why must I bear this cutting stroke?

What is it that provokes Thine ire?  
Is there some idol I must yield?  
Sure in my heart some base desire,  
Some dreadful evil lies conceal’d. (Songs 26, lines 1–12)

The opening three stanzas of this hymn strike a precarious balance between exasperated complaint, dignified request, and doctrinal submission as the poet-speaker reacts painfully to her plight. The fourth and pivotal stanza, meanwhile, sees the poet-speaker
identify her sinfulness as the root cause of her affliction at the hands of God, though her vocabulary complicates matters:

> There’s surely some beloved sin,  
>   Could I but find the deadly foe,  
>   Has crept and lurks securely in,  
>     Fain would I mourn and hate it too. (Songs 26, lines 13–16)

Significantly, while this stanza locates the poet-speaker’s sin within herself, it attributes its cause to something external: the sin is a “deadly foe” which “has crept” into her being. That the sin is “beloved,” however, implies its incorporation into the poet-speaker’s nature and desires, thus precipitating her appeal to God in the final stanzas to “Search me and shew me all my heart” (line 20).

Between these expressions of pleasure and pain in affliction stands Hymn XXVIII, which sees the poet-speaker deploy similarly strong confessional language to describe her plight. The first two stanzas open in a present-tense address to God, conditioned by her subjection to His chastening rod:

> Well may I groan beneath Thy stroke,  
>   From whose commands my heart has stray’d;  
> Lord, I have all Thy statutes broke,  
>     Nor have I strictly one obey’d.  
> Although enlighten’d from above,  
>   I’ve caus’d Thy Spirit to depart;  
> Have sinn’d against both light and love,  
>     Made Jesus’ wounds afresh to smart. (Songs 28, lines 1–8)

Harrison never details her transgressions, neither within the space of this hymn nor in the Songs more generally, but her language and poetic voice nevertheless derive their force from her sense of guilt and pain. The poet’s acceptance of this pain carries over into the fourth stanza wherein, “Chasten’d, but not destroy’d,” she remains “Convinc’d my God
doth all things well” (lines 13, 14). Her conviction then leads her to accept her plight as “secure,” because God’s words and deeds are far more secure than her own:

Mercy is mix’d with all my woes,
    My heart, rebellious, to subdue:
God no injustice can impose,
    View’d with my crimes His stripes are few.

Though He afflicts His love is sure,
    His covenant He’ll ne’er revoke;
His faithfulness is too secure,
    To alter what His lips have spoke.

While He corrects I’ll plead His grace,
    His oath confirm’d and seal’d with blood:
Herein my confidence I’ll place,
    He cannot cease to be my God. (Songs 28, lines 17–28)

As Harrison makes her decisive compact with God in these concluding stanzas, she models the uncertain terms which her spiritual and poetic persona must negotiate. That her heart remains “rebellious” in her state of woe, for one, implies that Harrison has deemed it necessary to resign herself completely to God. Thus displaced from her “woes” and “crimes,” the poet can then praise God as her final confidant, and the momentary shift from first-person speech to third-person doctrine in lines 21–24 would seem to perform that resignation in poetic practice. But the force of this penultimate stanza comes as much from God’s supremacy as it does from the poet’s lingering inability to absolve herself of her perceived sinfulness in affliction. On the one hand, God’s “love” and “faithfulness” are secure despite his tendency to trouble Harrison, suggesting that she cannot quite reconcile these opposing aspects of His nature other than by simply resigning herself to His will. On the other hand, while her superlatives—that God will “ne’er revoke” “His covenant,” and that “His faithfulness is too secure, / To alter what His lips have spoke”—certainly signal her spiritual confidence, their intensity also
reflects upon the insecurity of the poet’s own language.\textsuperscript{56} God’s covenant, in other words, is desirable precisely because it is permanent, whereas Harrison’s conduct and expression (as one who has “stray’d” from God’s commands and “sinn’d against both light and love”) have led her astray.

Across these various hymns, then, we can observe Harrison’s precarious yet powerful negotiation of several discursive modes: personal testimony and doctrinal exposition, complaint and resignation, pain and pleasure. That these modes coexist in the form of the congregational hymn, meanwhile, underscores her capacity, and that of Anne Steele before her, to accommodate personal suffering in a uniquely lyrical idiom, within an otherwise “selfless” verse structure. At the same time, these achievements, as I have tried to show, depended equally upon the editorial interventions of Evans and Conder, whose biographical framing of their respective subjects’ hymns grounded their poetics in the experience of affliction. To examine these elements in unison, this chapter has argued, is to comprehend the role that eighteenth-century women’s hymnody played in the evolution of \textit{lyric}: of both that poetic mode which would become invested in introspective address, and a mode of reading which would claim such address to be distinct from the public and congregational demands of hymns.

There is another final observation worth making about Steele and Harrison’s hymns: namely, that their composition and reception hinged upon particular notions of lyric respectability (albeit in a slightly different sense from the cases I discussed in Chapter 3). On the one hand, the two women poets’ congregational-liturgical \textit{I} made personal suffering in its various guises an acceptable, if not popular, subject for

\textsuperscript{56} The hymn’s final declaration of “confidence,” too, is notably expressed as a negative statement: “He \textit{cannot} cease to be my God.”
hymnody. Yet that acceptability, on the other hand, was equally the product of Evans and Conder’s own efforts to biographize the I and, in the process, to make Steele and Harrison respectable poets. That such respectability emerges from the interplay between poetic choices and editorial arrangements underscores the gendered, liturgical, and spiritual dimensions which conditioned (and continue to condition) readers’ interpretation of eighteenth-century hymnody. If this interplay was largely benign to Steele and Harrison’s fortunes, however, it was not always so for other eighteenth-century poets, and especially for poets who sought to incite political change. In the next chapter, I shall examine how late eighteenth-century “review culture,” as influenced by contemporary literary theorists and practiced by review journals, perpetuated specific assumptions about lyric respectability—a concept which several antislavery poets notably refused in their own efforts to denounce the transatlantic slave trade.
CHAPTER 5: Lyric Theory, Review Culture, and the “Enormous Crimes” of Antislavery Verse

This chapter reassesses the limitations of eighteenth-century lyric theory against the reception of three notable antislavery poems in the period: William Roscoe’s *The Wrongs of Africa* (1787–88), John Jamieson’s *The Sorrows of Slavery* (1789), and James Field Stanfield’s *The Guinea Voyage* (1789). I read these poems in relation to several contemporaneous developments in the late eighteenth century: the emergence and growth of the periodical review; the “rise” of modern lyric to predominance among poetic genres; and the abolitionist drive toward factual descriptions of the slave trade’s atrocities, especially those of the Middle Passage. Beginning with an account of the literary review’s growth in late eighteenth-century Britain, I proceed to argue that it became a key site of *lyric reading*, in so far as professional reviewers evaluated the poems’ success against contemporary theories of the lyric. At the same time, I contend that as reviewers applied this interpretive paradigm to abolitionists’ poems, they clashed directly with the poets’ stated intents to describe and expose the cruelties of the slave trade. The poets’ compromises between artistic ambition and faithful description produced mixed responses from literary reviewers, who largely condemned the trade but refrained from praising the poems’ most provocative (and arguably most effective) passages in favor of their more ‘imaginative’ scenes. My readings thus demonstrate that lyric reading, as practiced by professional reviewers, effectively lyricized *The Wrongs*, *The Sorrows*, and *The Guinea Voyage*: that is, they subjected these antislavery poems to an aesthetic standard which their authors had circumvented or refused.
I. The “Enormous Crimes” of Antislavery Verse

In its evaluation of William Roscoe’s *The Wrongs of Africa. Part the First* (1787), the *English Review* praised the Liverpool poet and attorney for his humane and sensible condemnation of the British slave trade. “The writer of this poem,” the anonymous reviewer opined, “appears to be animated by the best of motives,” and “[t]he subject he has chosen is of great magnitude, and is in its own nature highly pathetic.”1 Toward the poem itself, however, the *Review* was far less magnanimous:

In spite of these recommendations his poem will never force itself upon the general attention, and is not likely to survive the period in which it was produced. The subject is, in our opinion, unhappily chosen….The enormous crimes that attend upon the prosecution of the slave trade, ought, in our opinion, always to be stated in the stern language of unimpassioned justice….He that seeks by the artifice of rhetoric to rouse our feelings upon a subject like this, is immediately despised for the palpable imbecility of his judgment.2

For all his praise of Roscoe’s sensibility, the reviewer found *The Wrongs*’ very status as poetry, with its associated “artifice of rhetoric,” an incompatible and ultimately misleading medium for depicting and “prosecuting” the slave trade. (The latter verb choice was an especially apt reminder of Roscoe’s precarious position as an antislavery attorney in Britain’s most profitable slaving port.) Such accusations were not uncommon in an age when anti-slave trade and abolitionist poets came under fire for advancing their political arguments in the emotive and potentially diverting language of poetry.3 And Roscoe himself knew the consequences of attacking the trade in verse: the Preface to *The Wrongs*, written anonymously by his close friend James Currie, preempted the *Review*’s

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2 Ibid., 261.
critique by claiming that Roscoe “has not used the license of a poet to deal in fiction” (that is, the poem is realist). Furthermore, Currie contended, with slavery, “the truth defies the exaggeration of passion, or the embellishments of imagination.” The poem, Currie and Roscoe thus implied, was written to serve “truth” rather than to fulfill poetry’s tendencies toward generating readerly “passion” by catering to the “imagination.” If such truth ended up “rousing” the feelings of its readers, it was to be understood purely as a function of the slave trade’s “enormous crimes”; the supposed “artifice” of antislavery verse could play no role in facilitating such a response.

This chapter positions these vexed and much debated distinctions between poetic and “unimpassioned” descriptions of the trade at the nexus of several contemporaneous developments in late eighteenth-century Britain. First, it surveys the rise of literary review culture via the review journal, a popular medium which attempted to set standards for the evaluation of poems, prose pamphlets, and other works. The essay then argues that these reviews relied increasingly on, and thus helped consolidate, an emergent theory of lyric poetry to evaluate poems on the literary market. As I discussed in the introduction, this model took shape as critics defined and wrote histories of lyric as the most poetic of literary genres, drawing particular attention to the poet’s uses of rhythm, address and appeals to the imagination and naming them as the poem’s distinctively “lyrical” qualities. Professional reviewers then put these tenets into practice by quoting selective, and putatively intensely lyrical, excerpts to illustrate a poem’s aesthetic merit.

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Such features had crucial consequences on potential readers’ own judgments, for the review’s very format helped shape a particular notion of what could and should count as “poetry.” And given formal constraints of space and coverage, the need to excerpt especially “poetic” passages inevitably reduced longer poems’ arguments into affectively appealing (and marketable) works. Toward antislavery poems, however, reviewers expressed mixed reactions, from enthusiastic praise to scathing criticism. Most notably, reviews of *The Wrongs* and similar poems responded to these poems in ways that de-emphasized, or dismissed altogether, their depictions of slave suffering. The most characteristic response to these poems, I argue, was a tacit refusal to reprint their most pointed and graphic passages in favor of highlighting their more reflective or moralizing moments. When reviewers did call attention to such scenes in the poems, they defused their ethical and political charge by deflecting readers’ attention away from the poems’ violent content to assess their technical achievement and aesthetic intention.

To assess the ramifications of lyric reading as it was practiced by literary maneuvers, I trace the poetics and reception of three antislavery poems: Roscoe’s *Wrongs*, John Jamieson’s *The Sorrows of Slavery* (1789), and James Field Stanfield’s *The Guinea Voyage* (1789). All three poems were distinguished from others written at the time by their commitment to exposing the conditions of the slave trade in graphic terms. Moreover, these three antislavery poets disclaimed poetic excess or embellishment in favor of a more descriptively and affectively appropriate idiom, albeit one that still had to rely upon diverting rhetorical codes such as exaggeration, eloquence, and imaginative imagery. Yet as I shall argue, this commitment meant that, for reviewers, *The Wrongs*,

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5 As Robert Mitchell observes, such codes posed (to antislavery poets and their readers alike) a fundamental conflict between abolitionist commitments to expose the harsh truths of the slave
The Sorrows, and The Guinea Voyage exemplified the difficulty, if not impossibility, of
squaring the poetic elements that came to define the lyric in this period—ceremonious
address, appeal to readers’ emotions and an investment in the “spirit” of poetry—with the
inevitable aestheticization of the horrors and brutalities that these poems featured. In
other words, literary reviewers were deeply ambivalent about the political and ethical
demands made by such poetry, and some (as in the case of The English Review’s
evaluation of The Wrongs) masked their ambivalence behind critiques of the
“imaginative” elements of these poems.

By focusing on these matters of poetic reception, I aim to build upon the large
body of extant critical scholarship on antislavery poetry, and to illuminate the historical
conditions which shaped the reception of these poems. Studies of eighteenth-century
antislavery poetry by Alan Richardson, Suvir Kaul, Brycchan Carey and other scholars
have thoroughly traced its classical and contemporary influences. Few studies, however,
have examined its reception among professional reviewers. This gap in literary
scholarship makes it difficult to comprehend the discursive conditions of eighteenth-

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6 Notable works include Alan Richardson, “Darkness Visible? Race and Representation in Bristol
Abolitionist Poetry, 1770–1810,” in Romanticism and Colonialism: Writing and Empire, 1780–
1830, ed. Tim Fulford and Peter J. Kitson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 129–
47; Suvir Kaul, Poems of Nation, Anthems of Empire: English Verse in the Long Eighteenth
Century (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 230–68; Tim Burke, “‘Humanity is
Now the Pop’lar Cry’: Laboring-Class Writers and the Liverpool Slave Trade, 1787–1789,” The
Influences on Eighteenth-Century Abolitionist Poetry,” in Ancient Slavery and Abolition: from

7 For brief remarks on the political and gendered pretensions behind reviewers’ attitudes toward
antislavery poetry, see Moira Ferguson, Subject to Others: British Women Writers and Colonial
Slavery, 1670–1834 (New York: Routledge, 1992), 172; and Carey, British Abolitionism, 92.
century antislavery literature, let alone the aesthetic standards by which critics evaluated these poems. Understanding how reviewers confronted the poetics of *The Wrongs*, *The Sorrows*, and *The Guinea Voyage* can therefore help us reassess the history of lyric theory and literary criticism as they was shaped by these poems’ efforts to delineate and denounce the inhumanities of transatlantic slavery.

II. Eighteenth-Century Review Culture and the Rise of Lyric Theory

Beginning with the first issue of Ralph Griffiths’ *Monthly Review* in May 1749, the review journal became a valuable resource for an increasingly literate and intellectually curious audience (and, it should be said, an easy guide to cultural capital). Such publications as the *Monthly* and its rival *Critical Review* (founded by Tobias Smollett in 1756) gained prestige for their comprehensive coverage and concise evaluations of publications on a wide variety of subjects. Their success spurred the formation of numerous competitors such as the *European Magazine and London Review* (1782–1826), the *English Review* (1783–96), the *Analytical Review* (1788–99), and the

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9 Despite its initial promise to provide only summaries of published works and to withhold judgment, the *Monthly* included evaluations in its reviews beginning in the early 1750s; the *Critical* did the same from its very first issue. Antonia Forster, “Reviews,” in *The Oxford Handbook of British Poetry, 1660–1800*, ed. Jack Lynch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 716–17.
British Critic (1793–1824). Contributors to these journals established key practices which later journals, especially the Edinburgh Review (1802–29) and Quarterly Review (1809–67), would adopt: explanation of the work’s purpose and argument, selective and often extensive quotations and a concluding judgment. These elements lent the eighteenth-century review journal an air of objectivity and homogeneity that distinguished it from the “eccentric” opinions of a typical magazine. At the same time, as Antonia Forster reminds us, such reviews were hardly immune from inconsistent standards or petty disputes between authors and critics. Nevertheless, the sheer number of review journals on the market indicates that they were reaching audiences, including in various public spaces, from lending libraries to coffeehouses and literary societies. As a result, the review became a powerful medium for cultivating upper- and middle-class conversation and tastes.

This rise of review culture coincided with, and contributed to, the emergence of a modern theory of lyric in the second half of the eighteenth century. As I summarized in the introduction, critical efforts to historicize and define the lyric accelerated from the 1740s forward, following the popularity of published ode collections by the likes of William Collins and Mark Akenside and works such as Joseph Trapp’s Lectures on Poetry. By refracting the idea of “lyric” through the progress of the (classical) ode, mid-

and late-eighteenth century critics consolidated the notion that lyric embodied poetry’s most powerful, and hence ideal features: harmonious measures; ceremonial function; modulated expression; evidence of an “original genius”; and an ability to “transport” its readers into an experience or state of mind which was implicitly private, self-directed, or otherwise abstracted from contemporary public concerns.

Still, poems and periodical essays were not the only venues for discussion of the nature and history of lyric. Reviewers, too, adapted this emergent model in their evaluations of newly published poetry, with the aim of recommending works which would best suit the tastes of an English readership. Many of these judgments hinged on whether a successful poem accorded with classical precedent or privileged new “objects” and sensations. Judgments of success, however, could be inconsistent, regardless of a poet’s ambition or choice of subject matter. The Monthly Review’s evaluation of John Hall-Stevenson’s light-hearted Two Lyric Epistles (1760), for example, lamented the prevailing vogue for that “species of composition in which the author sits down and delivers whatever comes uppermost…who leads his reader through all the train of a fantastic imagination, without scarce one striking object in view.”13 Seven years later, Hall-Stevenson’s Lyric Consolations (1769), a collection of Horatian imitations which announced the poet’s greater ambitions, drew equal censure from the Critical Review for their author’s “most potent and strenuous inertness.”14 Such observations stood in contrast to those on Thomas Gray’s Odes (1757), which attracted praise (and debate) for their loftier ambitions. Whereas the Critical enthusiastically celebrated the poet’s ability

14 Unsigned review of Lyric Consolations. With the Speech of Alderman W—, delivered in a Dream, at the King’s-Bench Prison, the Evening of his Inauguration, Critical Review 27 (May 1769): 397.
to achieve “the fire, the wildness and enthusiasm of Pindar,” the *Monthly* criticized him for following the Greek bard too closely, at the expense of modern intelligibility and refinement: “How unsuited then to our national character is that species of poetry which rises upon us with unexpected flights!”

Such commentaries on lyric poetry therefore set the ode form, with its public ambition and ceremonious legacy, as the highest standard for poetry during the second half of the eighteenth century. In this sense, the ideal poem was to be evaluated by the extent to which modern poets’ “manner of execution” matched their forbears’ capacity to dispense epideictic judgment, and to speak or sing ceremoniously (without excessive and “unexpected flights”). This was of course a fine line to walk, as reviewers often disagreed when distinguishing between ceremonious enhancement and poetic excess. However, reviewers generally acknowledged that the most aesthetically and ethically elevating poems were those that addressed serious subjects, revealed the operations of the poet’s imagination (rather than his or her capacity for routine observation), and featured the musicality and craft of the lyric. These practices, in turn, effectively naturalized the ode as the form which aspiring poets had to master in the name of true genius and “spirit.”

III. Describing the Unimaginable: Strategic Reticence and the Antislavery Pamphlet

Of course, lyric poems were not the only materials that review journals evaluated, nor were the history and theory of lyric the only subjects of debate among commentators. By the early 1780s, the slave trade became a topic of regular discussion in all of the major British review journals, not least because the number of published materials on the

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16 Unsigned review of *Odes by Mr. Gray*, *Monthly Review* 17 (Sep 1757): 239.
subject rose rapidly during the preceding decade. As with their evaluations of poems and literary texts, review journals could be inconsistent in their judgments of political tracts, largely because they employed ever-changing cadres of reviewers, and often without accounting for individual political affiliations. But in the case of slave-trade materials, few reviewers shied away from expressing their opinions on behalf of the journal and its readership. And because their reviews were designed to offer informed summaries and decisive judgments, these responses frequently ventriloquized the works they reviewed, and the variety of anonymous contributors generated an equally wide range of opinions.

In his enthusiastic approval of James Ramsay’s *Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves* (1784), for example, the *Monthly Review*’s contributor quoted extensively from Ramsay’s description of British plantation life before admonishing the trade’s complicit parties to

> [r]ead this, and blush, ye Creoles, who live at ease in our land; who spend in riot and dissipation the profits of your plantations, thus earned by extreme labour, oppression, blood! Read this, ye African traders, who tear from their native country, to be thus inhumanly treated, poor, quiet, harmless beings…

Reviewers with proslavery or even moderate views, meanwhile, were quick to praise tracts which either defended the trade’s economic benefits or simply adopted a more measured stance in contrast to the excessively sentimental rhetoric deployed in antislavery tracts. Hence Gordon Trumbull received the *Monthly*’s praise for being “a

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17 Some of the more politically consistent journals of the period include the *Analytical Review*, which supported reformist and radical texts; and the *British Critic* which, by contrast, maintained its conservative High Church and Tory stance throughout its existence. For concise summaries of review journals’ political stances, see *The Romantics Reviewed: Contemporary Reviews of British Romantic Writers*, ed. Donald H. Reiman, 10 vols (New York: Garland, 1972).

sensible defender of the West-India planters” via his *Apology for Negro Slavery* (1787), even as the reviewer admitted that “the slave trade is a most unbenevolent business.” Another contributor defended the proslavery arguments of a West Indian planter’s 1788 pamphlet, applauding the author for his “respective stand” against his opponents and expressing grave misgivings over the push to abolish the trade entirely. Such political and rhetorical moves for and against the trade helped shape not only the success of particular texts on the market, but also the expectations of potential first-time readers.

How, then, did British periodicals approach antislavery poems, which entered the market as politically charged and aesthetically composed texts? Designed both to move readers and to educate them on the horrors of the slave trade, these poems sought to capture the attention of a nation divided on the issue of slavery (or, as David Dabydeen has observed, to exploit these divisions in search of quick profits and self-serving recognition). As the *English Review*’s evaluation of Roscoe’s *Wrongs of Africa* suggests, antislavery poetry tested the limits of a critical paradigm that increasingly accepted the greater lyric as its highest standard. Combined with the practical limitations of reviewing, these factors posed significant challenges to literary reviewers, who had to negotiate their aesthetic standards with the poems’ political and moral sentiments, and all for the benefit of an increasingly literate and conscientious public.

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19 “Gr—e,” review of *An Apology for Negro Slavery; or, the West-India Planters vindicated from the Charge of Inhumanity. By the Author of Letters to a young Planter*, *The Monthly Review* 74 (June 1786): 474.
Contemporary reviews of these poems were unsurprisingly as varied as the verses themselves, but I want to suggest that these published responses exhibited two important tendencies. On the one hand, the politics of the slave trade debate compelled reviewers to take a side, such that their resulting reviews of poems also became condemnations or defenses of the trade. On the other hand, the periodical review’s commitment to a lyrical standard compelled its practitioners to read antislavery poems as lyrics, even when such poems disclaimed themselves from aspiring to the status of greater lyric (if not any identifiable genre at all), and especially when reviewers themselves had to offer their final judgment. These conflicts are most evident in textual descriptions of the Middle Passage, which proved more generally to be a powerful focal point for antislavery activism and anger.

Public awareness of the Middle Passage, and especially of the torture of slaves aboard British trading vessels, increased in the 1780s following two major events. The first was the notorious Zong massacre in late November 1781, when British captain Luke Collingwood forcibly jettisoned 132 African slaves from their slave ship into the Atlantic. Alarmed that their “property” was rapidly expiring under excessively cramped conditions and severe shortages of food and water, the crew threw their slaves overboard in a desperate attempt to claim reimbursement for the resulting damages. The incident itself raised few eyebrows among the British public, until the Zong’s owners—members of the Liverpool-based Gregson slave-trading syndicate—sued their insurers for compensation for their lost property in early 1783. In the subsequent trial, Gregson v.
Gilbert (1783), Lord Mansfield ruled against the ship’s owners, but did not sentence any of the crew members for murder.\footnote{22}

Despite limited coverage in the British press, both the Zong massacre and the Mansfield ruling catalyzed a slow but steady wave of rising support for abolitionism.\footnote{23} Within five years of Mansfield’s decision, numerous printed pamphlets and essays testified to the horrors of the British slave trade, and of the Middle Passage in particular. Many used the Zong massacre as a touchstone to expose the inhumane conditions that African slaves endured aboard a typical slave ship.\footnote{24} But when these essayists discussed the atrocities themselves, they openly acknowledged the impossibility of their task, even as their actual descriptions claimed otherwise. Thomas Clarkson’s Essay on the Slavery

\footnote{22} Modern historians of the Zong massacre and Gregson v. Gilbert have extensively examined their consequences on British maritime law, finance capitalism, and black Atlantic cultural history. The most theoretically informed and critically self-reflexive study remains Ian Baucom’s Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005). For other scholarly interpretations of the Zong massacre’s legal implications, see the contributing essays to Symposium—The Zong: Legal, Social and Historical Dimensions, special issue of Journal of Legal History 28, no. 3 (2007), and especially Anita Rupprecht, “‘A Very Uncommon Case’: Representations of the Zong and the British Campaign to Abolish the Slave Trade,” 329–46. Notable literary engagements, meanwhile, include Barry Unsworth’s historical novel Sacred Hunger (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), which earned the Booker Prize; and M. NourbeSe Philip’s Zong! (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), which deforms the text of Mansfield’s decision into disfigured poetry to demonstrate the massacre’s legacies of silencing, distorting, and dehumanizing its victims.

\footnote{23} Seymour Drescher, “The Shocking Birth of British Abolitionism,” Slavery & Abolition 33, no. 4 (2012): 575–76. On the other hand, Anita Rupprecht observes that modern literary-historical accounts been far quicker to emphasize the “narrative fact” of the Zong massacre, rather than the subsequent legal trial, as the primary catalyst of the abolitionist movement. Ruprecht, “‘A Very Uncommon Case,’” 332.

and Commerce of the Human Species (1786) most clearly reveals the paradoxical grammar between his unintelligible subject and intelligible summary:

Their situation on board is beyond all description: for here they are crouded, hundreds of them together, into such a small compass, as would scarcely be thought sufficient to accommodate twenty, if considered as free men. This confinement soon produces an effect, that may be easily imagined. It generates a pestilential air, which, co-operating with bad provisions, occasions such a sickness and mortality among them, that not less than twenty thousand are generally taken off in every yearly transportation.25

Clarkson’s self-contradictory sentence structures (“beyond all description: for here they are crouded…”; “scarcely be thought sufficient…an effect, that may be easily imagined”) comprise what I call strategic reticence: a rhetorical refusal to describe empirical horrors so as to intensify the impact of the ensuing testimonial. Contemporary essayists deployed similar techniques in their own descriptions of the Middle Passage. In his first-hand Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa (1788), British surgeon Alexander Falconbridge detailed how slaves lost their flesh and blood under appallingly inhumane conditions, before concluding that “[t]he excruciating pain which the poor sufferers feel from being obliged to continue in such a dreadful situation…is not to be conceived or described.”26 Similarly, James Field Stanfield prefaced his extended testimonial with the disclaimer that “no pen, no abilities, can give more than a very faint resemblance of the horrid situation. One real view—one MINUTE, absolutely spent in the slave rooms on the middle passage, would do more for the cause of humanity, than…the whole collective eloquence of the British senate.”27 Clearly, then, the essayists’ apologies for their

immodest descriptions only served to heighten the real horrors of the slave ship, and thus
to elicit the strongest possible responses from an otherwise indifferent British public.\(^\text{28}\)

Clarkson himself modified his strategic reticence by expanding his discussion of
the Middle Passage for the second edition of the *Essay* (1788). The revised version
inserted anecdotal accounts of slave insurrections and of the spatial dimensions for a
typical ship.\(^\text{29}\) Yet despite these changes, the antislavery activist still left the critical
imaginative work to his reader-as-spectator:

Imagine only for a moment the gratings to be opened, but particularly
after a rain, which has occasioned them to be covered for some time.
The first scene that presents itself, is a cluster of unhappy people, who,
overcome by excessive heat and stench, have fainted away.
The next that occurs, is that one of them endeavouring to press
forward to the light, to catch a mouthful of wholesome air, but hindered by
the partner of his chains, who is lying dead at his feet, and whom he has
not sufficient strength to drag after him.
The third is conspicuous in the instance of those, who are just on the
point of fainting, and who are wallowing in the blood and mucus of the
intestines, with which the floor is covered.
Such are the scenes, that universally present themselves in the case
supposed; and how agonizing and insufferable their situation must have
been during this period of their confinement, none, I believe, can possibly
conceive, unless they had been the partners of their chains.\(^\text{30}\)

Having drawn his readers into a present-tense moment of grotesquely imagined intimacy
with the chained slaves, Clarkson passes emotional judgment on his audience’s behalf

\(^\text{28}\) The strategic reticence that I am describing here may also be contrasted to contemporary
proslavery rhetoric, which often emphasized that captains and traders treated their slaves well
*despite* the voyage’s harsh conditions. As Stephanie Smallwood rightly contends, such rhetoric
must be read as “a language of concealment that allowed European slaving concerns to portray
themselves as passive and powerless before the array of forces (including the agency of the
captives themselves) outside their control.” Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage

Revised and Considerably Enlarged* (London: J. Phillips, 1788), 94–98. Falconbridge also
quantified the dimensions of one Liverpool slave ship and calculated the proportion of space
reserved for slave bodies; cp. *Account of the Slave Trade*, 26–27.

\(^\text{30}\) Clarkson, *Essay* (1788), 93.
(“how agonizing and insufferable their situation must have been”) before immediately disclaiming that same move as hopelessly subjunctive (“none…can possibly conceive, unless they had been the partners of their chains”). Such rhetorical immediacy, combined with proslavery activists’ unconvincing defenses of their practices, likely helped secure the passage of William Dolben’s Slave Trade Act (1788), which reduced the number of slaves that trading vessels could carry.

If the structure and nature of the Middle Passage thus invited antislavery activists to expose its dehumanizing conditions in unflinching prose, these very qualities also compelled the same authors to disclaim their own powers of description. The end result was a strategically paradoxical compromise between authorial exposition and readerly imagination, and one which left the truth of African captivity between an inconceivable historical reality and an imaginable (even desirable) literary realism. These discursive conditions likewise raise important questions for reassessing antislavery poetry, and especially those few poems which meditated on the Middle Passage. How did these poems depict conditions aboard the typical slave ship? To what extent did they negotiate the prosaic demands of truth with the poetic mechanisms of “fancy?” And in a period when critics had also elevated the lyric to aesthetic dominance, how did professional reviewers evaluate these poems against a critical paradigm that exalted well-chosen subjects, smooth versification, and a spirited and “flowing” imagination?

These rhetorical contradictions led the *Monthly Review* to lament that the revised *Essay*, for all the usefulness of its author’s additions, would “at the same time…greatly hurt the feelings of every humane and benevolent reader.” Unsigned review of *Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species [...] By Mr. Clarkson*, *The Monthly Review* 78 (April 1788): 343.

IV. “Thine eyes avert not… / From this harsh picture”: Roscoe and Jamieson’s Middle Passages

As a way of addressing these questions, I shall now return to *The Wrongs of Africa* and its complex negotiation of realistic description with imaginative poetry. Roscoe’s poem was distinguished from its contemporaries by its length, its use of blank verse, and its conviction that poetry could intervene to right the wrongs of British slavery. It also featured mixed modes of argumentation, and moved from sociological description and philosophical reasoning to direct, sentimental appeals to readers to acknowledge the shared humanity of Britons and Africans. The poet’s opening plea to his readers best exemplifies the poem’s political and rhetorical convictions. Observing that even minor infractions such as “the slight puncture of an insect’s sting” and “an hour’s delay / Of needful nutriment” can provoke great pain, Roscoe asks:

How shall the sufferer man, his fellow doom
To ills he mourns, or spurns at? [sic] tear with stripes
His quivering flesh; with hunger and with thirst
Waste his emaciate frame? in ceaseless toils
Exhaust his vital powers; and bind his limbs
In galling chains? Shall he whose fragile form
Demands continual blessings…

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
\[sic\]
To ask those mercies, whilst his [master’s] selfish aim
Arrests the general freedom of their course? (*The Wrongs* I.3)

In his use of enjambment, inverted syntax, and Miltonic diction, Roscoe re-enacts the constriction of the enslaved body. He goes on to provoke his readers into identification with the sufferer’s plight, and thus to triangulate the bodies of the slave trader, the slave, and a wider English audience into one scene of “ceaseless toils.” Despite such depictions
of the slave body in unbearable pain, the *English Review* remained unimpressed; indeed, its primary concern was that the poem did not fit any acceptable genre:

> It cannot be heroic poetry; for this must conduct a single story to a regular conclusion: it cannot be didactic; for he who would wholly abolish the slave trade cannot be supposed to deliver rules for the proper conduct of it: it cannot be satire, for the subject is too serious: it might be made the topic of the higher species of ode; but this method of conveying his sentiments our author has rejected.\(^{33}\)

Given its generic ambiguity, the reviewer opined, *The Wrongs of Africa* would prove to be little more than an occasional poem, and hardly a worthy candidate for the laurels of heroic, didactic, satiric, or lyric poetry (“the higher species of ode”).

The only evidence to the contrary was the poem’s diatribe against the Guinea traders’ hypocritical charity, a passage which the reviewer cited as having “more of the poetic spirit than any other passage of the work”:

> Most fitly then ye throw aside the veil,
> That not conceals, but more deforms your crimes,
> Tinging their features with the loathsome hue
> Of foul hypocrisy: . . .
> . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
> —But why with foolish fondness wou’d you strive
> To dress a devil in an angel’s garb,
> And bid mankind adore him?\(^{34}\)

The commentator’s citation suggests that any “poetic spirit” to which Roscoe could aspire was to be found in the poem’s Miltonic stylings, blank verse structure, moral certitude, and philosophical argument (but not, clearly, in its most graphic passages). Nevertheless, these features could not completely redeem Roscoe’s poetic failure in the eyes of his reviewer: “Truth obliges us to refuse him the appellation of a poet; but it is

\(^{33}\) *English Review* 10 (1787): 262.

\(^{34}\) *The Wrongs*, I.27; also quoted in *English Review* 10 (1787): 262.
with pleasure we add that…he may advance a well-founded pretension to a clear and manly understanding, and to the best qualities of the heart.”

In contrast to the *English Review*’s judgment of *The Wrongs*, meanwhile, contemporary reviews of the poem in other journals praised its political sentiments without concluding that it was somehow not poetic. However, just as significantly, none chose to reproduce its graphic scenes as testimony to its poet’s achievements. The *General Magazine* characterized the poem as “a production replete with argument, sentiment, and imagery” and shared its desire to “see this trade abolished,” while the *Critical Review* “eagerly expected” a sequel. The *Monthly Review* likewise defended Roscoe’s choice of subject matter and quoted extensively from both the preface and the poem to show that “the poet…has only to follow the track of the historian, and clothe plain facts in the dress of simple and easy verse.” Such positive testimonials likely inspired Roscoe to build upon “the first part of his plan,” and *Part the Second* duly arrived in early 1788. Like its predecessor, the second part reenacts the conditions aboard the Middle Passage in lines that feature enjambment, inverted syntax and a directness of observation:

\[
\ldots\text{Amongst the slaves}
\]
\[
\ldots\text{A swift contagion spread; from scanty food,}
\]
\[
\ldots\text{From putrid water, and imprison’d air,}
\]
\[
\ldots\text{Engender’d—Shuddering now with selfish fear,}
\]
\[
\ldots\text{Resentment dropt her rod; and Avarice flew}
\]
\[
\ldots\text{To shield his treasure; once again were op’d}
\]

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The doors, and on the breezy deck were led
Th’ emaciate crowd of slaves; but not in throngs
Promiscuous, for suspicion, yet alarm’d
By former dangers, into number’d ranks
Had class’d them; and with chains, together bound
Thrice five reluctant wretches: for an hour
Allow’d to breathe the gale; then seek again
Their loathsome dungeon, whilst successive ranks
Of equal number, occupied the place. (*The Wrongs* II.31)

Such poeticized but inescapably rendered depictions of contagion, emaciation and excessive crowding strongly register the influence of Clarkson and Falconbridge’s tracts. But the *Second Part* of Roscoe’s poem nevertheless failed to draw the attention of any reviewers, with only the *Monthly Review* offering token praise: “it may be sufficient to say, that this second part breathes, no less ardently than the former, the true spirit both of poetry and of humanity.”

Similar tensions over the slave trade’s “enormous crimes” inform John Jamieson’s *The Sorrows of Slavery* (1789). Although best known for his pioneering *Etymological Dictionary of the Scots Language* (1808), Jamieson’s first published work was *The Sorrows*, which earned praise from William Wilberforce and contemporary abolitionists. Much as Roscoe did with his *Wrongs* and (to a lesser extent) William Cowper with Book II of *The Task*, Jamieson composed *The Sorrows* in blank verse and shaped the poem’s argument, structure, tone, and set pieces after those of his English predecessors. Much like Roscoe’s *Wrongs*—and, to a lesser extent, Book II of William Cowper’s *The Task* (1785)—*The Sorrows* is written in blank verse, and its argument, structure, tone and set pieces closely follow those of its predecessors. Equally

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importantly, the Scottish poet’s Advertisement likewise announced his intentions “to represent simple historical facts in the language of poetry; as this might attract the attention of some who would not otherwise give themselves the trouble of looking into the subject.” Such claims to transparency not only recall Currie’s preemptive defense of *The Wrongs*’ literary and political merit, but also suggest that the ideal reader of *The Sorrows* would not already be inured to the slave trade or its debates. Notably, this presumption becomes explicitly gendered as the poem opens with a direct address to women readers:

YE British fair, whose gentle bosoms heave  
The sigh of pity at the tale of woe;  
............................................  
Why purchase sorrow in the tragic scene,  
Or court it in the fancy-labour’d tale,  
Why like a mother, in her frenzy sad  
Who hugs the pillow for her clay-cold babe,  
............................................  
A real tragedy, unmatch’d in song,  
While Afric forces on your sight averse;  
Where every village opes a dismal scene,  
Where acts of death unnumber’d chill the soul,  
And freeborn Britons act the bloodiest parts? (The Sorrows 9–10)

From his direct apostrophe to the “British fair,” to his dismissal of fictional tragedies and romances (“the fancy-labour’d tale”), Jamieson presents his poem as an attempt to raise female political consciousness of the horrors of the slave trade. Ironically, this poetic project promises to offer the same level of pathos (a “real tragedy”) as other literary genres like theater (“the tragic scene”) and narrative would, because his verse will show freeborn Britons’ their complicity in the “real tragedy” of African

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slavery. In practice, however, the poet filters his arguments against the trade through the stereotypical female reader’s experiences with motherhood, romance, and feeling. As Debbie Lee has shown, reports of enslaved mothers’ suffering haunted the imaginations of poets and readers alike, with many poems consequently emphasizing these women’s helplessness in captivity. Such elements inform *The Sorrows*’ persistent appeals and culminate in its final call for Britons to recognize African slaves as their own suffering children:

```
Oh! for one moment of compassion, deem
These as your sons, from your embraces torn,

And often murder’d with impunity!
What poignancy of anguish would ye feel!
What would ye not for their deliverance dare?
Your sons they are, while of this empire wide
Ye are the common parents, bound to reach
To every suffering child your equal arm. (*The Sorrows* 75)
```

Such sentimental rhetoric was familiar to readers of antislavery poetry, and certainly to women activists who organized campaigns for British ladies to sign abolitionist pamphlets and boycott sugar from the West Indies. But another important consequence of the poet’s opening move is that his very embodiment of the “British fair” as weeping, pitying subjects justifies his decision to “represent simple historical facts in the language of poetry.” Indeed, *The Sorrows*’ strengths reside in its appeals to moral anxiety and imaginative sentiment: two qualities that contemporary readers, and

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especially critics, would have identified as lyrical in ambition, if not necessarily in practice. Still, the poet’s descriptions of slave suffering produce subtle and difficult contradictions, as when he depicts the typical village being ransacked by British and European slavers on the African coast:

Here mothers, frantic, fearless of the flames,
Burst thro’ their volumes, searching for their babes,
For ever to their fond endearments lost;

There, children trembling with an orphan heart,
Their parents dear, infirm, decrept with age,
Strive to discover; by their piercing cries
In pity melted, or to madness rous’d.
Heard so distinctly are their shrieks of woe
Amid the ruins wide, as to provoke
To mournful fellowship in death the sons,
But not to save the fires. (The Sorrows 16)

Here, Jamieson’s passage closely echoes Hannah More’s Slavery. A Poem (1788), which envisions the African village’s destruction from the perspective of its disintegrated families:

I see, by more than Fancy’s mirror shewn,
The burning village, and the blazing town:
See the dire victim torn from social life,
The shrieking babe, the agonizing wife!
She, wretch forlorn! is dragg’d by hostile hands,
To distant tyrants sold, in distant lands!

By felon hands, by one relentless stroke,
See the fond links of feeling Nature broke!
The fibres twisting round a parent’s heart,
Torn from their grasp, and bleeding as they part.44

What characterizes both poets’ depictions of familial and maternal horror is their poeticization of shocking scenes that exceed anything that the poet (and reader) might

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expect from “Fancy’s mirror.” Specifically, the violence on display in these passages is mediated by the poems’ deployment of regular verse structures—blank verse for Jamieson; heroic couplets for More—in ways that make such violence comprehensible to readers (but not, crucially, to the terrorized Africans themselves). As these passages provoke their readers’ discomfort through the imagery of maternal horror, they therefore highlight a fundamental paradox in the poems’ very composition. In Jamieson’s case, the terrified African children’s “piercing cries” can be deciphered only after they have been transcribed into blank verse, and only then “heard so distinctly” by an audience far removed from Africa’s shores. Similarly, More’s poem recasts the “agonizing wife” and her “shrieking babe,” two bodies whose voices would otherwise be untranslatable, as sufferers who are properly “seen,” felt and heard once their suffering is represented in heroic couplets. Translating “simple historical facts” into “the language of poetry” consequently demands that the African slaves’ cries and shrieks be made audible through the deployment of familiar diction and verse structures.45

I am arguing, then, that The Sorrows enacts its own problem of versifying a grief that cannot otherwise be made intelligible to the poem’s audiences (both the “British fair” and their male counterparts). This versification is effectively another version of contemporary pamphleteers’ problematic moves between hesitant and forthright description. Although Jamieson partially resolves this problem by turning repeatedly to scenes of maternal horror as touchstones for his readers’ sympathy with the enslaved, the fact remains that what the poet aims to describe (namely, the “historical fact” of an

45 This strategy operates in much the same way that, as Saidiya Hartman has shown, antebellum American narratives provoked white readers to identify with black slaves in their representation of scenes of physical and psychological torture. Hartman, Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 22.
African child’s woeful “shriek”) is always already filtered and made apprehensible through the metrical and rhetorical concerns of his verse. These passages therefore show that for Jamieson, poeticizing scenes of cruelty and suffering demanded not only an ethical and emotional appeal to his readers, but also the difficult mediation of the brutalization of enslaved Africans into the rhetorical and metrical constraints of his verse.

Such tension between slave experience and its versification most forcefully reemerges in Part II, where the poem meditates at length on conditions aboard the Middle Passage. Drawing largely from Clarkson and Falconbridge’s graphic accounts, Jamieson describes the slaves’ dehumanization from the moment they see the African continent fading from their view. Their response, in the poet’s description, is a chorus of disturbing, wordless cries for home:

There, rang’d in mournful ranks, they faintly spy
Their much-lov’d country flying from their view,
As if asham’d to own them as her sons.
What shrieks of grief unbridled, of despair
Deep groans and hideous yells the welkin rend!
Heav’n’s tempests rude in madness they invoke
To bless with shipwreck, that their mangled limbs
At last may once more kiss the darling strand. (The Sorrows 33)

As in his previous depiction of the ransacked village, Jamieson poeticizes the Africans’ visceral cries into a sentimental tableau that would be readily intelligible to the “British fair.” Yet as if to acknowledge and resolve the impossibility of such translation, the poet reverts to the narrative to Ephraim, a former African royal whose bearing among the slaves compels “his chain mate [to] urge him to reveal, / By what vicissitude of Fortune he / This destiny had found” (34).46 The poet has Ephraim tell the story of his idyllic,

46 In a footnote to his “Argument,” the poet suggests that he felt vindicated by his portrait of Ephraim after reading the depositions of one Bristol-based mariner William Floyd and his two
native Calabar being overrun by traitorous Englishmen and complicit rival tribes. The climax of the tale arrives when the prince describes the beheading of his brother, Amboe, by a “faithless Christian” who deceives him into an unfair exchange of slaves (38).

Even so, the prince’s tale cannot mitigate his fellow slaves’ “deep-fetch’d groan” (39); rather, the sound compels Jamieson to reemphasize the “scene of misery [that] lies hid / From British eyes, below the hatches close” (40). As he apostrophizes and castigates the “British Merchants” for their mercilessness, the poet demands that they confront their slaves’ deaths from malnutrition, “merciless” treatment and disease spread by piled-up excrement. The conditions of the slave ship convert the enslaved Africans to “wounded beasts” sweltering in their own “gore”:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{The heat insufferable, putrid air,} \\
\text{Unwholesome viands, treatment merciless,} \\
\text{With never-ceasing anguish, quickly prove} \\
\text{The certain harbingers of fell Disease,} \\
\text{Which, in its hasty strides, to many deigns} \\
\text{Emancipation from the hated yoke.} \\
\text{Those who survive them, envious of their fate,} \\
\text{‘Mid excremental filth and mucous blood} \\
\text{In dire pollution roll, like wounded beasts} \\
\text{Weltering amidst the noisome shambles gore. (The Sorrows 41)}
\end{align*}
\]

What Clarkson described as “beyond all description” turns here into Jamieson’s most distressingly graphic provocation to his readers, as the slave bodies forcefully wrest the reader away from Ephraim’s exemplary tale toward their unceasing, deathly misery.

Above all, the poet’s multisensory description forces his addressees—both the “British Fair” and slave traders—to recognize their mutual complicity in the slaves’ suffering:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Thine eye avert not, Briton delicate,} \\
\text{From this harsh picture. From the life ‘tis drawn,} \\
\text{And drawn for thee, that in it thou may’st trace}
\end{align*}
\]

slaves, Little Ephraim Robin John and Ancona Robin Robin John: “With these the account [of Ephraim] in the Poem agrees in all the leading circumstances” (The Sorrows 7).
Those grisly features and distorted limbs
That call thee parent, and those gaping wounds
Giv’n in the birth by thy unnatural hand;
Or if not giv’n, yet canker’d, widen’d, own’d
By thee, while to th’ extreme of skill and pow’r
Thy hand of mercy is not stretch’d to heal. (The Sorrows 41)

If the British merchant is most directly and most physically responsible for “this harsh picture,” the poet suggests, then so too is the “Briton delicate” who, for all her expressions of pity, fails to mitigate the slaves’ spectacular suffering. The two parties may differ in their degrees of culpability and agency, but both become witnesses to a shared national crime.

One might thus conclude that The Sorrows of Slavery, while ostensibly refusing any poetical pretensions (in so far as the slave trade cannot be an “agreeable” or “natural” subject for poetry), is nevertheless forced to poeticize its subject. In this understanding, the poetic idiom of sentimentality is necessary to make comprehensible (and reprehensible) the slaves’ otherwise unintelligible suffering. This idiom aestheticizes the battered bodies of the enslaved and thus demands a readerly understanding of, and limited sympathy with, horrific human suffering. If the realities of the trade, and especially of the Middle Passage, thus led Jamieson to adopt what James Basker aptly terms an “almost anti-romantic” aesthetic, they likewise compel The Sorrows’ readers to rethink the uses and limits of lyrical-odic verse in the face of inconceivable torture.47 Put differently, the poem’s “harsh pictures” grant an epistemological authority to its aestheticizing language: to make comprehensible the morally and politically unfathomable practices of the slave trade.

Reviewers’ responses to *The Sorrows*, meanwhile, were divided between explicit praise for Jamieson’s poetic abilities and a tacit refusal to reproduce the poem’s grotesque sequences for their readership. The *European Magazine*’s review was arguably the most supportive and comprehensive among its peers. It praised the poet for upholding his promise to “state faithfully facts respecting the Trade,” and agreed with *The Sorrows*’ representation of the Middle Passage in equally righteous (and metaphoric) language: “An African slave ship is a sort of floating Hell, over which the master and crew preside as so many Devils.” Yet while the review excerpted Jamieson’s address to “The British Fair” and commended it as “a very proper introduction to a subject which rouses sensibility and tenderness,” it did not reprint any of the poem’s depictions of slave suffering.48

Two other positive reviews, however, refrained from printing verse excerpts. The *English Review* only quoted Jamieson’s “Advertisement” in full before opining that “the reader who takes the trouble to peruse this little performance, will find both poetry and pathos; and, for the sake of these, be disposed to overlook all trifling blemishes.”49 A similar divide between the poem’s lyrical effects and the slave trade’s “pathos” informs the *General Magazine*’s judgment, which bypassed the poem altogether and focused instead on the contemporary incident of an “unhappy young female slave, who, for some fault had been severely scourged…until the lacerated frame of the devoted victim sunk beneath the severity of its sufferings.”50 Such sensational suffering, the reviewer concluded, was reason enough for readers to condemn the trade, and thus to agree with

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48 Unsigned review of *The Sorrows of Slavery*, in *European Magazine* 17 (March 1790): 199.
50 Unsigned review of *The Sorrows of Slavery*, in *The General Magazine and Impartial Review* 4 (March 1790): 115. I have not been able to find contemporary reportage of this event.
his brief (but otherwise unsubstantiated) judgment that “[i]n this pathetic poem, Mr. Jamieson has shewn himself a bard of respectable abilities, a man of unaffected humanity, and a Christian worthy of the sacred character.”

The single exception to these judgments was the Critical Review’s June 1789 evaluation of The Sorrows. In an ambivalent review, the anonymous contributor observed the poem’s occasional usage of “low and awkward expressions” and found little that had not “been before expressed with greater strength and elegance.” But most significantly, the reviewer expressed skepticism over the poet’s fidelity to “historical facts,” and raised such doubts in light of similar claims made by contemporary activists:

But is he sure that these gentlemen have not sometimes exaggerated? Professed advocates on any subject are apt to be led away by the warmth of their feelings; and, in a case like the present, where they must be peculiarly interested, may we not suppose, without impeaching those gentlemen’s veracity…that fancy and prepossession has sometimes varied, and deepened the colour of the objects they so earnestly contemplated?

To challenge the poet’s claim, the reviewer excerpted Jamieson’s depiction of “trembling slaves” in the ship’s cargo hold, just prior to their arrival in the American colonies:

The wish’d-for haven gain’d, its shelly bed
The massive anchors press. The trembling slaves
Are hid below, lest sharp-ey’d Merchandise
Should thro’ their sable covering, threadbare worn,
The whiteness of their tell-tale bones espy.
Nor hard were the discovery; for of some,
Thro’ constant friction on the naked boards,
Their only bed, and galling of the filth
Worse than Augean, the presumptuous bones
Their feeble boundaries scorn, and gaze abroad;
As weary captives thro’ their prison-grate.

51 Ibid., 116.
“In this and many other similar passages,” the reviewer wrote, “we must surely at least make some allowance for poetical exaggeration,” even if the scene is “no unfavourable specimen of the [overall] performance” (470). Certainly the passage’s grotesque diction, blank-verse rhythm, and inverted syntax register deliberate “fancy” and “colour”—but not, I want to suggest, for the sake of “poetical exaggeration” alone. Rather, what is at stake behind the Critical Review’s antipathy to The Sorrows’ “fancy” and “colour” is a politics of poetic interpretation that hinges upon the reception of the “trembling” enslaved bodies. Here, the reviewer deflects the political and ethical demands made by Jamieson’s description of the suffering of those enslaved by claiming that Jamieson’s poetic method is fanciful and exaggerated. If, the reviewer suggests, Jamieson’s poem is committed to “factual” description, then its execution signals a breach of that commitment, and the poem is to be read instead as the product of a misguided, hyperbolic fancy. In this sense, the Critical Review suggests, any verse description of the Middle Passage’s conditions risks leading well-intentioned detractors of the slave trade away from the truth and into the realm of incredible, irresponsible imagination.

Yet what should we make of the fact that the anonymous reviewer defends this claim by turning to The Sorrow’s most tortured passage? Here I propose that the reviewer’s unease with Jamieson’s inappropriate “warmth” introduces another pressing interpretive problem. For as he discounts The Sorrows’ claims to factual accuracy, he
also defuses the moral outrage behind the poet’s exposure of the “trembling slaves” (who would otherwise be considered mere “Merchandise”). Instead, the reviewer’s literalist reading of the passage, driven by his supposed antipathy to “poetical exaggeration,” leads him to dismiss the slaves’ real torture as misrepresented, even false. By refusing to comment upon the horribly deformed bodies of the slaves which *The Sorrows* calls to its readers’ attention, the *Critical Review* denies them the subjectivity, however partial, that the poem seeks to ensure. This review also seeks to undercut any sympathy the poem wishes to generate in its readers. In fact, the reviewer argues, what makes these lines worth quoting, and these bodies worth considering, is that they are examples of poetic overstatement. That is, the bodies of tortured slaves have been overexposed to the public: “though many observations [as these] are sensible and interesting, yet they are in general such as have been before expressed with greater strength and elegance.”54 Thus the reviewer reads these tortured bodies as exemplars of Jamieson’s rhetorical excess. More disturbingly, and in contrast to the poet’s intent to provoke righteous anger at their plight, the enslaved Africans surface in this review as elements of a case study in questionable poetic license.

As I have suggested, *The Sorrows* is clearly a poem that, for all its stated intent to minimize the “artifice of rhetoric,” cannot help but appeal to the demands of lyric precisely because it makes an emotional, feminized plea to readers to support the abolition of the slave trade. But the equally crucial point to be drawn from reviews of Jamieson’s poem is that they sanitize *The Sorrows* by refusing to print its most graphic, horrifying, and arguably most politically effective (if not poetically distinctive) passages.

And when the *Critical Review* did comment on these moments, it deliberately dismissed them as rhetorically and aesthetically excessive. In short, the eighteenth-century periodical review distorted *The Sorrows*’ ambitions by holding it to the standards set forth by contemporary lyric theory: standards which defused the poem’s political thrust by drawing attention instead to its perceived poetical excesses.

V. “The free or fetter’d band / Fall undistinguished”: Stanfield’s Middle Passage

Contemporary reviewers’ varied responses to Jamieson’s poetic descriptions suggest that they practiced their own modes of strategic reticence. By refusing to reproduce those passages which testified most graphically to the horrors of the slave voyage, reviewers preserved a model of lyric which was not expected to confront (let alone describe) such distressing subjects. This was especially the case for the *Critical Review*’s evaluation of *The Sorrows of Slavery*, which spoke less to the content of Jamieson’s depiction of the Middle Passage than it did to the poet’s immodest posturing between “earnest contemplation” and politicized “exaggeration.” Regardless of their political stances toward the slave trade (or approval of poems like *The Sorrows*), Jamieson’s reviewers seemed to argue that the aesthetic ideals of lyric were fundamentally incompatible with the political demands of antislavery poetry.

We can observe similar dynamics at work between James Field Stanfield’s *The Guinea Voyage* (1789) and the responses it provoked from its reviewers. What distinguished Stanfield from Jamieson and other late-eighteenth century antislavery poets was that he had sailed on several slave voyages, and thus had witnessed first-hand the
conditions aboard the Middle Passage.\textsuperscript{55} Between 1774 and 1776, he served as a common mariner on two voyages—one aboard the \textit{Eagle} from Liverpool to Benin (where he stayed for eight months), the second on the \textit{True Blue} from Benin to Jamaica—before returning to Britain with a hardened outlook against the slave trade. During his voyages, Stanfield witnessed the losses not only of African slaves, but also of British and European seamen; indeed, a greater proportion of his fellow crew members died on the voyage to Jamaica than did the slaves.\textsuperscript{56} After spending a decade in London as an actor and songwriter, he eventually befriended members of the London Abolition Committee and received commissions to write about his experiences as a former slave trader.

Stanfield responded with his \textit{Observations on a Guinea Voyage. In a Series of Letters Addressed to the Rev. Thomas Clarkson} (1788), and his subsequent long poem \textit{The Guinea Voyage}. Both works were reprinted together in Edinburgh in 1807 shortly after the passage of the Slave Trade Act.\textsuperscript{57}

As he explains in the Preface to his 1807 collection, Stanfield’s letters and poems took different paths from their composition to subsequent printings. He writes that the two pieces were originally intended to be published together, until the Committee

\textsuperscript{55} Marcus Rediker emphasizes that Stanfield was “the first to write about the slave trade from the perspective of the common sailor.” Rediker, \textit{The Slave Ship: A Human History} (New York: Viking Press, 2007), 133; see especially 135–144 for an account of Stanfield’s experiences on the slave voyages.


\textsuperscript{57} Stanfield edited his works after their first publication, and largely on the advice of the Committee. I have chosen to analyze his original texts, however, because to the best of my knowledge, no literary journal or magazine published any reviews of the 1807 editions.
recommended that “the prose account, substantiated by an affidavit, should precede the verses.” This decision, the author suggests, was made for two reasons. First, the Committee believed that Stanfield’s first-hand experience in the trade would far outweigh any poem “that could be produced by any work of imagination,” even though the poet himself had penned *The Guinea Voyage* before working on the *Observations*. Second and more importantly, the Committee ultimately recommended that the poet revise *The Guinea Voyage* “to bring the work down, in some measure to the level of plain, prosaic comprehension.” The suggestion here is that Stanfield’s original version was too fanciful, or even too lyrical, to be printed without fear of readers questioning his legitimacy as a poet, let alone as a direct participant in the slave trade. Stanfield later confirms this view when, commenting on his reprinted *Observations*, he notes that the Committee “suggested [that it was] best to leave them in their original state, as a faithful picture of what was once the practice of the Trade.”

These tensions between poetic and prosaic descriptions of the trade surface in the opening lines of *The Guinea Voyage*, which frame the remainder of the poem as a reluctantly lyrical venture:

> THE direful voyage to Guinea’s sultry shore,  
> And Afric’s wrongs indignant Muse! deplore.  
> The Muse, alas! th’ opprobrious theme disdains,  
> And starts abhorrent from th’ unhallow’d strains.  
> How blest the bard whom happier themes inspire,  
> Who wakes with kindred lays his melting lyre;  
> .........................................................  
> O far from me the notes which pleasure sings!  
> With trembling rage I sweep the harsher strings.

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59 Ibid., v–vi.
60 Ibid., vi.
My grating shell shou’d wound the tortur’d ear,
For discord only can be music here. (*Guinea Voyage* 1)

Here Stanfield preempts the attack that the *English Review* had levied against Roscoe’s *Wrongs of Africa*: that antislavery poetry fundamentally clashed with the imperative to condemn the slave trade’s “enormous crimes…in the stern language of unimpassioned justice.” Yet the poet defends his use of verse, not least *rhymed* verse, as an ethical imperative for his audience and “indignant Muse” alike; indeed, “Afric’s wrongs” serve as his pretext to inflict his “discord” on those “tortur’d ears” which would expect lyric poetry to dwell on “happier themes.” This “discord,” however, paradoxically takes the form of the heroic couplet, whose metrical demands and strong rhymes call into question the poet’s stated difference between the blessed lyric bard’s “kindred lays” and his own “harsher strings.” If *The Guinea Voyage* was to distinguish itself from other poems (not least in terms of its verse structure), the poet suggests, then it would do so on markedly lyrical terms, while forcefully directing its power toward the “opprobrious theme” which the lyric muse otherwise disdains.

For these reasons, Stanfield’s poem has been criticized for straying too far into the territory of lyric and hence away from the “unimpassioned” arguments that eighteenth-century reviewers recommended. Before turning to specific reviews of *The Guinea Voyage*, however, I shall first examine the major element which distinguished Stanfield’s accounts from those of his contemporaries: his emphasis on the *shared* torture of black African slaves and white British sailors aboard a typical slave ship. And by comparing his verse depictions with his prose descriptions (and their responses from the periodical press), we can further discern the factual and rhetorical difficulties that he and his fellow abolitionist writers faced.
Stanfield’s *Observations* detail the notoriously inhumane conditions aboard the Middle Passage. Like his contemporaries, he walks a fine line between rhetorical modesty and graphical fidelity, deploying strategic reticence to shield his “delicate” readers from “those numerous and hidden and unrevealed enormities” which were not fit to print. But for all of these maneuvers, his most distinctive contribution to eighteenth-century antislavery literature lies in his exposure of the mistreatment of his fellow white sailors, which he characterizes as yet another form of British slavery. In his first two letters to Clarkson, Stanfield describes at length how captains, merchants, and tavern owners schemed to conscript young men into the slave trade. By tapping into an extensive network of gambling houses and taverns across Liverpool, Bristol, and the West Indies, all three parties trapped unwitting Englishmen into soaring debts which could only be paid off with a slaving voyage to Guinea. These reluctant sailors quickly encountered conditions that would have shocked many British readers, not least because Stanfield presents their plight in language more common to descriptions of enslaved black Africans:

Till the vessel gets clear of the channel...the conduct of the Captain and officers appears like that which is the continual practice in every other employ. But as soon as they are fairly out at sea, and there is no moral

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61 Stanfield, *Observations*, 8. Most notably, Stanfield relates (without describing) “[o]ne instance more of brutality...as practiced by the captain on an unfortunate female slave, of the age of eight or nine.” It is clear that Stanfield means some combination of child rape and torture; however, the incident leaves him “obliged to withhold it; for though my heart bleeds at the recollection, though the act is too atrocious and bloody to be passed over in silence, yet...I cannot express it in any words, that would not severely wound the feelings of the delicate reader.” Stanfield, *Observations*, 33.

62 Compare to Robert Southey’s later poem “The Sailor, Who Had Served in the Slave Trade,” in which a repentant sailor confesses that he and his crew “were forced by threats / And blows to make [the slaves] eat”; *Poems, by Robert Southey*, 2 vols. (Bristol: Biggs and Cottle, 1799), 110. I would like to thank Jeff Strabone for inviting the comparison between Stanfield and Southey’s poems in this regard.

possibility of desertion, or application for justice, then the scene is shifted. [The crew’s] ratio of provisions is shortened to the very verge of famine; their allowance of water lessened to the extreme of existence; nothing but incessant labour, a burning climate, unremitting cruelty, and every species of oppression is before them.\(^{64}\)

Anticipating the surprise of his readers, Stanfield proceeds to defend his claims as having been drawn from first-hand experience, without any use of “exaggerated language.”\(^{65}\) His fifth letter details at length the various punishments that he and his fellow crew suffered at the hands of their captain. Stewards and surgeons were often flogged without warning; seamen wasted away from “horror and disease” while their commanders carried out “the business of purchasing [and] messing the slaves…with as little interruption, and as much unconcern, as if no such people had ever been on board”; and perhaps most strikingly, the weakened sailors were forced to free their fellow black slaves since there were “so few survivors” left to perform regular duties.\(^{66}\) By the time readers reached Stanfield’s sixth letter on the particular treatment of the slaves, few would likely have been able to discern the differences in condition between Britons and Africans alike.

These sensational testimonies to the dehumanization of British seamen unsurprisingly drew the attention of periodical reviewers. But reviewers’ responses also varied with their trust in Stanfield’s reporting—and just as significantly, no publication chose to reprint any of his letters, with many commenting on their extreme depictions. The *Monthly Review* commended Stanfield’s upstanding character (which was “much superior to the station of a common mariner”) to justify its own moral outrage against

\(^{64}\) Ibid., 10.

\(^{65}\) Ibid., 11.

\(^{66}\) Ibid., 23, 25, 29. Stanfield later writes that he was forced to take up the role of physician, following the deaths of the ship doctor and his mate; ibid., 34.
Britain’s sea commanders, though even the reviewer admitted that the author’s account “is really too horrid to read, and would appear too monstrous to be believed, had he not informed us...that he hath substantiated the principal facts by an AFFIDAVIT.”

Similarly, the *English Review* tempered its praise with reservations that the commanders could have subjected their fellow slave traders to “such a degree of severity.”

The *Critical Review*, on the other hand, attacked Stanfield precisely for bringing these “facts” to light and distorting what was otherwise an honorable trade:

> We are obliged to believe these facts, because Mr. Stanfield has sworn to them....This may have been a faithful picture, on some particular occasion, but it is impossible to be an accurate representation in general; and we think the committee display very little judgment, in permitting these highly coloured narratives to be published. Nothing has so great a tendency to injure, nothing has injured their cause so much.

The problem with the *Observations*, the reviewer suggested, was not its specific truths (however “coloured” their expressions were), but rather its argument that these truths exceeded the specificity of Stanfield’s own experience. What was personal testimony risked becoming generalized condemnation of a permissible “cause.”

If Stanfield’s prose thus claimed—convincingly for some, and misleadingly for others—that the cruelty of the slave trade cut both ways, then how did his arguments play out in the “unhallow’d strains” of *The Guinea Voyage*? As we have seen, the former slave trader’s turn to heroic verse required him to paint his experiences in terms that contravened the expectations of lyric, while nevertheless harnessing its devices of...

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rhymed pentameter, inverted syntax, and emotional provocation. The first book of the poem manifests these tensions as Stanfield depicts “harden’d merchants” and their “tribe confed’rate” of “[p]olluted dens of infamy” colluding to assemble “a dauntless crew to gain, / To steer their vessel through the boist’rous main” (3). The poet then shifts his attention to one luckless British man named Russel, who harbors no innate desire to become a slaver:

Thy harmless spirit—gentlest of thy kind,  
Was ne’er to savage cruelty inclin’d.  
Long happy Africa would have seen her sons  
Crowd freedom’s plains, beneath protecting thrones;  
E’re thy meek hand—in virtue only brave,  
Had put one fetter on the prostrate slave! (Guinea Voyage 4)

On the one hand, Stanfield’s portrait of a reluctantly conscripted Briton creates a sympathetic focal point for the Observations’ more systematic account of impressment. But Russel’s presence also buttresses the poet’s careful distinction between the tyranny of the ship captain and the (shared) suffering of the regular sailors and their African captives. Equally important is the fact that at this early stage in the poem, the ship holds only Russel and his fellow Britons, creating a momentary professionalism that quickly unravels into “savage cruelty” once the ship has left European waters:

Now restless tyranny triumphant reigns,  
For now no prospect of retreat remains.  
Far from fair freedom’s blissful regions thrown,  
The mournful seamen heave th’ unheeded groan.  
At ev’ry movement of th’ imperious brow,  
Beneath rude hands, the hapless victims bow.  
Should discontent be seen, or angry eye,  
Struck to the deck the prostrate suff’rers lie:  
Or to the shrouds ingloriously bound,  
They feel the lash in many a smarting wound.  

The vital current flags—th’ sinews faint,  
Th’ exhausted voice scarce breathes the weak complaint:
A torpid languor seizes ev’ry vein,
And the soul sinks beneath th’ oppressive chain. (Guinea Voyage 10–11)

What Stanfield described in the Observations as “every species of oppression” unfolds in The Guinea Voyage into scenes of regimented bodily suffering. “Rude hands” strike and lash the “mournful seamen” just as cruelly as they would do to their soon-to-be-purchased Africans. The sailors, in turn, can utter no more than “unheeded groans” or panting “complaints” akin to the those of their black counterparts in Jamieson’s Sorrows of Slavery, Clarkson’s Essay, and other contemporary print sources.

As we might expect, the trope of the “groan” resurfaces when the poet turns to account for the enslaved Africans aboard the “floating dungeon” of the slave ship. In a movement similar to Jamieson’s poem, Stanfield turns from a generalized but gruesome portrait of suffering bodies to the exemplary figure of Abyeda, a female slave who once served as lover of the heroic Quam’no and “[t]he theme and mistress of each rural song” (29). The poem romanticizes the two lovers’ meeting and eventual separation, before returning to the insufferable, discordant present of the slave quarters:

Sad strains of feeble melancholy flow;
Half-meaning fragments of recorded woe,
In wild succession break the pensive lay,
Through the drear night and lamentable day.
Her sad associates list the melting tones,
And join each cadence with according groans. (Guinea Voyage 31)

Here The Guinea Voyage follows The Sorrows’ tactic of shifting from one specific slave’s narrative to a more generalized chorus of suffering, and with the intent to contextualize these poetic provocations to sympathy. But the poet momentarily diverges from his predecessor when he dwells on another individual aboard the ship: a “lab’ring fair one” whose “feeble groan” nevertheless provokes her fellow captives to “still the
tumult of th’ expected cry” (31–32). And in another unprecedented move, the poem voices the laboring mother’s lament on the fate of her enslaved newborn:

“Ill-fated innocent (she wailing cries)
Thou joy and anguish of these aching eyes,
Of parent misery the hapless heir,
Thy mother gives the welcome of despair;

No father hails thee with a conscious pride;
Thy future worth no flatt’ring friends decide:
A wretched mother press’d by tyrant fate,
Can yield no succor to thy helpless state:
The spoiler’s chains, that load her languid frame,
By spoiler’s right thy fetter’d service claim.” (Guinea Voyage 32–33)

Depictions of childbirth on the Middle Passage were extremely rare, and Stanfield’s decision to poeticize such an act was exceptional among his contemporaries. But the slave mother’s speech nevertheless repeats the problems of translation and inarticulacy which haunt Jamieson’s Sorrows. What would otherwise be another “half-meaning fragment of recorded woe” enters the poem as a series of polished heroic couplets, and the resulting regularity likewise reenacts the reproductive burdens of slavery itself.

Similarly, the poet’s subsequent appeal to “ye British fair” for immediate political action quickly disappears when his own “dejected muse” faints under the burden of “such a course of loathsome views / And length of horrors” (34). Most troublingly of all, the mother’s polished speech eventually devolves into a “dreadful shriek” (35) when the slave traders tear her child away after the ship makes landfall.

Yet for all his emphasis on the torturous conditions of the Middle Passage, Stanfield nevertheless suggests that these punishments stem not from the captain’s native cruelty, but rather from metaphysical and poeticized forces. The second book of The Guinea Voyage depicts “ghastly” Death summoning the “scorpion scourge” of Cruelty to
strike at the shipmaster’s heart, an attack which inflicts a fresh wave of punishments on
the crew members and their newly purchased African captives:

Inspired thus, and thus his heart possest,
New tumults kindle in his flaming breast.
Pallid or black—the free or fetter’d band,
Fall undistinguish’d by his ruffian hand.
Nor age’s awe, nor sex’s softness charm;
Nor law, nor feeling, stop his blood-steep’d arm.
While, skill’d in ev’ry torture that can rend,
O’er gasping heaps exults th’ associate fiend. (Guinea Voyage 19)

This passage, and the scenes of torture that follow, strike a very different chord with the
poet’s testimonials in the Observations, even as the two texts describe the same
occurrences. In his letters to Clarkson, Stanfield offers no source for his ship captains’
cruelty, apart from the commercial and economic demands of the slave trade. In The
Guinea Voyage, however, his introduction of Death and Cruelty as figurative agents
complicates matters significantly, because it leaves open the affective possibility of the
captain’s redemption, especially by a public that would have been horrified to read about
such extreme transgressions. The poem’s “parodic epic machinery,” as Marcus Wood
describes it, thus threatens to explain away the captain’s agency as “inspired” by forces
beyond his immediate control.70

If Stanfield’s Guinea Voyage thus offered its readers a political argument against
the slave trade, it did so by exposing the trade’s atrocities in stark terms—but not without
mediating their impact in lyric form. For these reasons, professional reviewers took issue
with the poet’s verse technique, in ways that undermined the poem’s more distinctive
qualities. Echoing its earlier judgment of Jamieson’s Sorrows of Slavery, The Critical

70 The Poetry of Slavery: An Anglo-American Anthology, 1764–1865, ed. Marcus Wood (New
Review assessed Stanfield’s poem as having “[m]ore feeling than genius or judgment,” and once more expressed its frustration that “we have…in general, had the principal part of the subject and the most interesting circumstances over and over again, both in prose and poetry.”71 The Town and Country Magazine similarly attacked the poet for being “very deficient in genius, and weak in judgment.”72 Even positive reviews of the poem called out or mimicked Stanfield’s elevated lyricism as one of its most lasting features. In its one-line evaluation, The Gentleman’s Magazine observed that the poem was “as piteous” as its prose predecessor, before designating it as “[a]n addition to the stage machinery of the abolition of the slave trade.”73 The Monthly Review’s contributor lavished effusive praise onto the poet for intensifying the terror of his earlier Observations through verse: “[i]f the bare recital was before terrible, what must the description be when our author embellishes the shocking story, when he dwells on every minute circumstance in this tale of cruelty, and obliges us to witness every pang of complicated misery!”74 At the same time, the reviewer excerpted the poem’s biographical portrait of Abyeda as a moment of readerly “satisfaction,” albeit one which momentarily enabled readers “to turn from objects of horror, to contemplate plaintive distress, however excessive.”75

74 Unsigned review of The Guinea Voyage. A Poem, in Three Books, in The Monthly Review (September 1789): 277. There is a strong possibility that the anonymous contributor was also a member of the London Committee, as he ends his review by noting that “we have seen two copies of this poem; one of which is improved by several additions and alterations” (279).
75 Ibid., 277.
Nevertheless, professional reviewers’ dismissal of *The Guinea Voyage* effectively doomed it to obscurity for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Keeping in line with his eighteenth-century predecessors, Wylie Sypher criticized the poem’s heavy reliance on “poetic convention” and “pseudo-African pastoralism,” but reserved qualified praise for Stanfield’s lines on the Middle Passage, which “read like evidence submitted to a parliamentary committee...This little scene would do credit to the unflinching eye of Smollett.”76 Wood is similarly ambivalent toward the poem’s intention and execution, observing that it “draws into hideously sharp focus the aesthetic contradictions inherent in the act of trying to turn the inheritance of the slave trade into fashionable art.”77

Sypher and Wood’s evaluations of *The Guinea Voyage* are thus the latest instances in a critical tradition that, as we have seen, has variously praised and criticized antislavery poetry for its contradictions between historical fidelity and poetical artifice. And like their predecessors, both critics suggest that the trappings of lyric sullied, rather than aided, the ethical imperative to present “evidence” over “fashionable art.” If such judgments point toward a politics of lyric reading, then I argue that it lies not only in the poems themselves, but also in the professional critic’s conscription of these poems into a lyric standard. That poetry became aligned with lyric, and lyric itself with poetry in its most “imaginative” and “spirited” strains, certainly presented ongoing dilemmas for

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76 Sypher, *Guinea’s Captive Kings*, 201, 203.
Roscoe, Jamieson, Stanfield, and fellow contemporaries who wished to argue artfully for the antislavery cause.

Just as importantly, these dilemmas did not prevent antislavery poets from completing and publishing their works, nor did they hinder their intentions to present the slave trade’s worst atrocities in the most graphic terms. Rather, it was in the *reception* of their poems, as caught between the imperatives of imagination and description, and between the genres of lyric and testimony, that such atrocities became (and largely remain) secondary to the demands of aesthetic merit. We can therefore observe that these poets’ graphic depictions of the slave trade—of slaves’ persistent groans and shrieks, their “grisly features and distorted limbs,” and the pestilential conditions in which they languished—laid the groundwork for a critical practice which, whether out of extreme discomfiture or aesthetic decorum, compelled reviewers to deflect readers’ attention from such matters. Literary reviewers chose not to excerpt relevant lines or instead emphasized aesthetic criteria that would defuse, if not delegitimate their grisly content. Revisiting the reception of antislavery poems in historical context, this essay has argued, reveals a pattern of literary interpretation made deeply uncomfortable by the poeticization of extreme slave suffering. To these ends, our own attempts to recover and reassess the aesthetic and political worth of these poems can be sharpened by our recognition of the challenges these poems posed for their contemporary reviewers.
CONCLUSION

Why historicize lyric at all? And why, especially, revisit its history in the context of late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England?

I return to these questions because they have connoted, and continue to connote, specific assumptions about lyric’s nature and expectations. If “lyric” remains arguably the most efficient and interchangeable term for “poetry” at large in modern literary criticism, then that interchangeability indexes and seeks to fulfill a particular set of desires about poetry: that its operations of language, lineation, and rhythm be immanent (that is, fixed to the form and movement of “the poem itself”); and that its concomitant functions of subject-formation, psychological introspection, and emotional provocation be universal. Put more plainly, lyric names an abstract notion of poetry which, in turn, engenders equally abstracted reading practices: practices which connect the local means of poetic-linguistic “play” or “technique” with the global ends of “universal” empathy (if not identification), but at the potential expense of sociocultural and material considerations. As I discussed in the introduction, these notions of lyric remain desirable for transhistorically oriented critics and readers, because they variously uphold a coherent lyric “tradition”; privilege the moment of reading a poem over and against its historically accreted contexts; and cultivate a markedly literary consciousness centered upon identifying the poem’s fulfillment of poetry’s aesthetic and technical ideals.

As this dissertation has argued, however, such conceptions of lyric have inflected its literary history, to the extent that accounts of lyric’s “rise” and development have narrowly privileged select verse genres and practices over others. In the context of the
long eighteenth century, this selectivity culminates in a predominantly *odic* historiography of lyric: a mode of literary history which conceives the rise of the eighteenth-century ode—and its concomitant invitation to readers to trace the odic poet’s engagement with poetic “fancy” or classical technique—as the rise of modern lyric itself. Even as seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English poets wrote across the full range of verse genres, and even as their interlocutors (including printers, booksellers, patrons, and reviewers) cultivated and participated in diverse poetic practices, it was the ode which became most closely tied to a new paradigm of “lyric,” and one which came to be identified with an ideal conception of poetry *tout court*.

Yet as I have contended throughout the dissertation, this odic trajectory risks occluding numerous other poets, genres, and practices whose fortunes not only contributed to the “rise of lyric,” but also evinced alternative modes of lyric thinking. To reexamine the case of John Philips’ *The Splendid Shilling*, as I discussed in Chapter 3, is to recall that the success of this poem activated a satiric tradition—the pseudo-Miltonic burlesque—defined by its consistently comedic portraits of “professional” poets as deluded, impoverished, and ultimately failed figures. Furthermore, the sheer number of these burlesques helped consolidate class-based notions of poetic practice and ambition—what I termed the discourse of *lyric respectability*—through the figure of the penurious hack-writer. This discourse, I also argued, shaped market conceptions of how successful poetry should be produced: not in the confines of a London garret, but rather in conditions abstracted from the demands of professional writing altogether. Attention to these connections between poetic production and material poverty can consequently help us recontextualize the poetry of relatively impoverished laboring-poets such as Stephen
Duck and Mary Leapor, both of whom carefully testified to the material struggles of writing in poverty while championing poetry as a morally and aesthetically transcendent “escape” from these conditions.

Such conditions of lyric respectability, as I also discussed in other chapters, were tied to the ways in which print-cultural institutions recognized, marketed, and received poetic genres and their practitioners. As I argued in Chapter 2, John Pomfret’s immensely successful poem *The Choice* not only consolidated the genre of retirement poetry for the remainder of the eighteenth century, but also popularized a poetics of wishful, suburban thinking that modern critics would characterize as evidence of Pomfret’s irresponsibly apolitical lyricism. This critique, the chapter claimed, is part and parcel of the longer process of lyricization; and in the specific case of retirement poems like *The Choice*, it stems from the transformation of the genre’s subjunctive gestures (“If heaven the grateful liberty would give...”) into indicative statements, and hence into claims which could reasonably be subjected to ideological criticism. Yet a closer reading of *The Choice*, as well as consideration of its eighteenth-century reprints and parodies, suggests that both Pomfret and his contemporaries were already aware of the retirement poem’s inherently grammatical and material ironies. Moreover, early eighteenth-century poets themselves actively marshaled these ironies into broader critiques of the poetic genre and the social conditions from which it claimed its retreat. In this regard, eighteenth-century retirement poetry may have propagated a lyricism characterized by its questionable withdrawal from society, but the genre’s subjunctivity—its articulation of retirement as always already conditional—also turned it into a viable verse medium for contemporary political and material critique.
The senses of private retreat and poetic respectability that I have summarized above similarly conditioned other eighteenth-century practices of lyricization. The figure of the poetess, in particular, emerged from contemporary and later literary historians’ efforts to praise the poetic practices of women poets like Anne Finch, Anne Steele, and Susannah Harrison. At the same time, this figure embodied and encouraged either an apolitical or intensively personal understanding of these women’s poems, in ways that the poets themselves contravened through their experimentations with the lyric-I on different occasions. In the case of Finch, her poetry was lyricized by biographers, anthologists, and critics who variously praised her poems of solitary retreat or, more tellingly, abstracted that retreat from the uncertain political conditions into which she was thrust after the 1688 Revolution. Yet in “Upon the Hurricane,” arguably Finch’s most radical poem of retreat, the poet reminds us that her “contemn’d Retreat” in the Kentish countryside—a double consequence of the Great Storm’s immediate damages and the Revolution’s lasting fallout—was essential to her own attempts to claim authority as a poet, not least one who could both dispense harsh moral judgment on her nation and proffer her choric voice to heal it.

Under radically different circumstances, meanwhile, Steele and Harrison experimented with the communal possibilities of the lyric-I in their hymns of affliction. While both hymnodists drew upon a longer theological tradition which encouraged the resolution of personal suffering via selfless resignation to God’s will, they expanded this understanding to encompass a greater range of responses, including physical and spiritual states (doubt, guilt, debility) which were otherwise discouraged by contemporary religious commentators. In their efforts to accommodate these states into their own
hymns, Steele and Harrison consequently modeled a congregational lyricism which still comprehended suffering as a vital phase in the process of Christian reconciliation, yet also enabled congregants (through the device of the quasi-personal “I”) to articulate such suffering in markedly personal terms. If such experimentation accounted in part for these women hymnodists’ successes, however, it also shaped the efforts of posthumous biographers and editors to refract the congregational “I” back onto the lives of the women poets themselves. As these later biographies and evaluations contended, Steele and Harrison’s lyrical achievements were best understood as direct consequences of the women poets’ own suffering—and, just as importantly, as characteristic evidence of their unwavering piety and moral fortitude.

The phenomenon that I have been calling “lyric respectability” therefore entailed complex negotiations between poets’ individual practices and the choices of their respective biographers, editors, and patrons. Such negotiations produced the interpretive conditions which contemporary and later critics would take up as “lyrical” in their efforts to define and historicize poetry. Yet the uptake of lyric theory by literary reviewers had discretely political, and occasionally damning, consequences on certain verse genres. In Chapter 5, I examined William Roscoe’s *The Wrongs of Africa*, John Jamieson’s *The Sorrows of Slavery*, and James Field Stanfield’s *The Guinea Voyage* as antislavery poems distinguished by their ostensible goals to disrupt conventionally lyrical notions of poetry—notions which emerged contemporaneously with the British anti-slave trade movement—and by their spectacularly unsettling versification of the slave trade’s worst atrocities. Whereas these poets inferred that such depictions in verse would sufficiently attract the ire, horror, and activism of their British readers, contemporary reviewers
responded with varying degrees of praise and blame. Their responses and editorial practices, I argued, *lyricized* these poems either by deflecting readers’ attentions away from their most graphically provocative scenes, or by criticizing such scenes as the politically and ethically irresponsible errors of a misguided poetic imagination. That eighteenth-century reviewers re-presented Roscoe, Jamieson, and Stanfield’s poems as morally upright but poetically questionable works anticipates, in part, our modern debates on the value of contextual history to lyric studies. At the same time, this glimpse into eighteenth-century “review culture” reminds us that any critical history of lyric’s rise in the period should account for the standards that review journals and comparable institutions exercised toward less obviously lyrical (and more obviously political) poems like *The Wrongs of Africa*, *The Sorrows of Slavery*, and *The Guinea Voyage*.

If these various case studies may seem counterintuitive to the historiography of eighteenth-century lyric—not least because countless scholars have already (and correctly) recovered the period’s preoccupations with the ode—then I hope this dissertation has demonstrated that this perspectival shift is neither an impossible nor unwelcome one to make. Nor does it demand that we discard the history of the ode or dismantle the eighteenth-century lyric canon wholesale. Rather, what this dissertation has strenuously asserted is that the study of lyric can and should be augmented by considering the lives and fates of as many poems, poets, and practices as possible. It has also sought to remind us that what we recognize (or think we recognize) as “lyric” need not stem from a single genre, mode, or heuristic—even if a term like “lyricization” may risk homogenizing multiple features into one monolithic process. On the contrary, I have suggested that lyric is best understood as the product of diverse practices and pressures,
and that the history of lyric benefits from the careful examination of unfamiliar narratives, not to mention the reexamination of more familiar ones. (On these points—none of which I consider to be radically new—I would hope that my literary history finds common ground with scholars of lyric poetry and theory across methodologies and specializations.)

Of course, no literary history, and certainly not mine alone, can claim to chart the fortunes of what will remain a slippery and, to paraphrase Virginia Jackson, “persistently confused” poetic mode. Yet it is precisely this state of perpetual “confusion” which should keep motivating us to continue charting lyric’s history, and to adopt new methodological perspectives and objects of analysis which can fill in the gaps of our extant accounts. It is in this spirit that Communal Lyricisms has attempted to recover the various practices by which eighteenth-century poetry became lyricized in its time and after, and to remind us that the slipperiness of lyric—and that of eighteenth-century literary studies—remains immensely generative for the history, theory, and pedagogy of poetry across time and space.
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