

UCLA
CSW Update Newsletter

Title

Reading from the Margins

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/27v8f8ht>

Author

McElduff, Siobhán

Publication Date

2007-04-01



READING FROM THE MARGINS

SIOBHÁN MCELDUFF

ONE DAY IN THE 1780s, an irate English poet sat down to write a scathing reply to one of her critics. This in itself is not particularly startling: the cantankerous relationships of writers and critics were neither novel nor newsworthy in the eighteenth century, which produced literary quarrels in almost exhausting abundance.

But this particular quarrel resonates for several reasons. One is the social status of the writer. Ann Yearsley was born not into the upper or middle classes but into a laboring family; at the time of her discovery by her first patron, Hannah More, she and her family were living in abject poverty in a barn—the two came into unlikely contact when Yearsley arrived at More’s house to collect pigswill. However, when questioned about her literary influences, Yearsley said that amongst her favorite writers was the Latin poet Virgil. This might not seem so shocking to us, but it was then an astonishingly bold claim: historically Classics has been the quintessential masculine, elite discipline. This was especially true in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, when classical education formed “a central re-

source for the self-recognition and social closure” (Stray 1998: 29) for the upper and middle classes.

Yearsley was forced to “learn” much of her classics by from looking at prints in shop windows, staring hungrily at the knowledge from which she was formally excluded. But in her 1786 reply to her critic —*To Ignorance, Occasioned by a Gentleman’s desiring the Author never to assume a Knowledge of the Ancients*—she exuded contempt for those who tried to wall off Classics as an elite subject by presenting the heroes and authors of the classical past reborn as broken-down English laborers now forced to work for their daily bread. In effect, she transferred them from the elite world into the one which she herself inhabited, erasing the distance between these writers and herself—and opening up a chasm between them and the very class that laid claim to them as their heritage. In *Homerides* (1716), Thomas Burnet and George Duckett warned that thanks to Pope’s translation, “every Country Milkmaid may understand the Iliad as well as you or I”; Yearsley proved that that might be true of other Latin and Greek classics

as well, something which no doubt would have equally horrified those gentlemen.

Reading the history of my own discipline is sometimes a frustrating experience, as it privileges certain traditions, often erasing or ignoring those outside the male elite—even aristocratic women who wrote in Latin remain “buried in oblivion” (Stevenson 2005: 1). Yet Yearsley shows the possibility of writing an alternative history, one that looks not at readings generated from the center, but from the margins of society—a project which I hope my research on her and authors like her will be a part of.

REFERENCES

- Stevenson, Jane (2005) *Women Latin Poets: Language, Gender & Authority from Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century*, Oxford.
- Stray, Christopher (1998) *Classics Transformed: Schools, Universities, and Society in England 1830–1960*, Oxford.

Siobhán McElduff received her Ph.D. in Classics from UCLA in 2004. In the fall, she will be an Assistant Professor in the Department of Classics at the University of British Columbia. She is currently a research scholar at the Center for the Study of Women.