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Ann Yearsley and the London Newspapers in 1787

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*ABSTRACT: In 1787, after the bitter, public break with her patron Hannah More, Ann Yearsley not only published her second volume of verse, *Poems, on Various Subjects*, but also published four poems in newspapers. This article argues that Yearsley's choice to simultaneously publish in two mediums, as well as her decisions regarding the subjects of the poems she published in the newspapers, was calculated to answer claims that her literary success was due to More's editing, rather than Yearsley's own talents.. To recover her poetic reputation, Yearsley turned to the periodical press, whose rapid publication and ephemeral existence precluded editorial interference. The article also argues that newspapers provided Yearsley with the opportunity to display her talents to a larger audience than she would with her published volume. The subjects of her newspaper poems were also designed to prove that she was a poet of national relevance, that she had made new literary connections, and that her argument with More was partly precipitated by her maternal concern for her children's financial future. The poems demonstrated her versatility, as well as maintained continuity with her previous work, as part of a well-managed effort to restore her reputation as a poet of genuine and substantial talent.*

In the summer of 1787, Ann Yearsley was preparing to publish her second volume of verse, *Poems, on Various Subjects*. It was to be her first new publication since the very public—and extremely bitter—breakdown of her patronage relationship with Hannah More. In this new volume, Yearsley would include her defence against the charges of ingratitude and poor behavior levelled at her, as well as a copy of the deed of trust over which Yearsley and More had quarrelled in 1785 with such unfortunate consequences. *Poems, on Various Subjects* would prove

to be a modest success, at least as far as the length of the subscribers' list was concerned. Over four hundred people agreed in advance to purchase Yearsley's second volume, a little under half the number who had bought *Poems, on Several Occasions* (1785). Although many of the illustrious names who had appeared on the subscribers' list for that first volume were absent from the second (including all of the Bluestocking circle), the second list featured many new but well-known readers, including Yearsley's new patron, the Earl of Bristol. The volume did much to recover Yearsley's reputation as a poet of merit; the following year she published a poem condemning the slave trade, using her position as a famous local poet to criticize the practices of her fellow Bristolians, and in 1789, she ventured onto the stages of Bristol and Bath with her first play, *Earl Goodwin*.

So runs (with only a little glossing) the known literary history of Yearsley's career between 1787 and 1789. I will demonstrate in this essay, however, that this is only a partial history: from June to September 1787, even as *Poems, on Various Subjects* was being prepared for the press and in the months immediately following its publication, Yearsley had begun to publish poetry in the London newspapers. These poems were republished for the first time since the 1780s in *The Collected Works of Ann Yearsley* (2014); this essay will therefore offer the first sustained analysis of these poems since their original publication.¹

It is important to place these poems in their literary and historical context, so I will examine these newly discovered poems in relation to Yearsley's attempts in 1787 to rebuild her poetic reputation. In particular, I will consider how their placement in the newspapers might have helped Yearsley banish the lingering legacies of her patronage by More. The larger contexts at work will be the focus of the final section of this essay, which explores the similarities—and differences—between Yearsley's career in the periodicals and newspapers with those of her

contemporaries, especially Mary Robinson and Robert Southey. These authors' engagement with newspaper publishing may help develop an understanding of the relationship at this time between poets and newspapers, especially of the ways in which newspaper publishing was utilized by writers seeking to establish themselves in London's—and therefore the nation's—literary life.

I: Poems, on Various Subjects and the Importance of Spontaneity

Why did Yearsley start publishing poetry in newspapers? Examination of her biography, the presentation of her work, and the circumstances of late eighteenth-century poetry publication together suggest several motivations, the most important of which was an effort at recuperating from the loss of readers and sponsors after her patronage relationship with More failed. I suggest this for two related reasons. The first is that More had undertaken the editing of Yearsley's poetry, as she made clear in the prefatory letter addressed to Elizabeth Montagu that had been published at the beginning of Yearsley's first volume of poetry:

You will find her, like all unlettered Poets, abounding in imagery, metaphor, and personification; her faults, in this respect, being rather those of superfluity than of want. If her epithets are now and then bold and vehement, they are striking and original; and I should be sorry to see the wild vigour of her rustic muse polished into elegance, or laboured into correctness. Her ear is perfect; there is sometimes great felicity in the structure of her blank verse, and she often varies the pause with a happiness which looks like skill. She abounds in false concords, and inaccuracies of various kinds; the grossest of which have been corrected.²

Whilst More acknowledges here that there is a “wild vigour” to Yearsley’s poetry that should not be “polished into elegance,” she has nonetheless made “corrections” to that poetry to remove the “grossest” of Yearsley’s errors. These actions in “correcting” Yearsley’s poetry for publication were in keeping with the duties of a diligent patron (More’s own patron David Garrick expended considerable energy in correcting the many faults of her dramatic works in the 1770s), but her suggestion that there was “sometimes great felicity” in Yearsley’s poetry “which *looks* like skill” (my emphasis) caused difficulties for Yearsley after her falling out with More; questions lingered for some readers over the extent of More’s editorial interference in Yearsley’s first volume. These questions could not be answered because More had burnt Yearsley’s manuscripts. Although this was a common practice in the late eighteenth century, it had rather unfortunate consequences in this case. With no manuscripts with which to substantiate her claims that More had done little to improve her poetry, there was a need for Yearsley to demonstrate her abilities publicly.

The non-elite, even unpolished, reputation of newspaper poems paradoxically offered an excellent setting for this endeavor. Poetry published in the newspapers was supposed to be light and fleeting and, with the rapid turnaround required in daily publishing (unlike the months available to writers for the preparation of a book), there would not be time for labored corrections. As Daniel Robinson has argued,

In the newspapers, poetry served a purpose much in the way the comics section does in today’s papers; it filled space when needed and provided diversion for readers. Because, in the paper, the poems are ephemeral and literally disposable, they ought to be playful, sensational, and, frankly, easy to read. Every feature of the publication of these poems is

meant to contribute to the facility of appreciation, which also suggests a corresponding facility of composition.³

As Robinson makes clear, the poetry published in newspapers was not supposed to be of the highest quality. This may have been part of the appeal for Yearsley—the “ephemeral” nature of the poetry expected by newspaper readers and the demands of newspaper publishing offered her an important opportunity to demonstrate, in an arena where heavy corrections by editors were not possible, that she was a poet of genuine talent.

Yearsley’s move into the newspapers was part of a two-pronged approach to the reshaping of her literary reputation, one which involved the near-simultaneous publication of ephemeral verse in the periodicals and the production of a substantial new volume of poetry; as well as demonstrating her nimbleness as a poet in the papers, she could also demonstrate her aesthetic gifts in the more respected medium of the poetry collection. Yet even in that collection we can see Yearsley working hard to create the impression that she is writing spontaneously, as demonstrated by the advertisement placed in *Felix Farley’s Bristol Journal* to solicit for subscribers to *Poems, on Various Subjects* in November 1786. The verses for inclusion were to be “the produce of [Yearsley’s] own uncultivated genius, without any alterations or corrections.”⁴ Furthermore, it was hoped that these poems would “prove an amusing novelty to those who may prefer Nature’s unclipt wing of poetic fancy.” Thus, her poetry is represented as unstudied, “unclipt,” unshaped, and therefore natural and genuine. By the time the volume was announced as ready for publication eight months later, this language had been further refined:

This Day was published

A Collection of Spontaneous Poetry in Blank Verse, etc. by

The Bristol Milkwoman

Her Friends and Subscribers having particularly requested to see this new production (no part of which was ever before publish'd) without the least correction or alteration; she has in compliance with their desire, attended the press herself, solely to prevent any variation from her own manuscripts; and now relying on the candor of her generous patrons, and an impartial public; she humbly presents them with the gift of nature only.⁵

We can see Yearsley making it fairly explicit here that this volume of poetry is to stand in contrast to her first; unlike last time, Yearsley herself, not her patron, will supervise the passage of “her own manuscripts” through the press “to prevent any variation,” guaranteeing that the finished product will be a truthful representation of her poetic talents. The advertisement also claims that Yearsley’s supervision will guarantee that there will not be “the least correction or alteration” to impair the spontaneity of the verses. It is this last quality, with its connotations of naturalness, facility, freeness, and a lack of premeditation,⁶ which is, as the advertisements and the move into newspapers demonstrate, at the heart of Yearsley’s attempts to forge a new literary reputation for herself as a poet with a natural, unstudied, but authentic genius.

II: The Bristol Milkwoman and the London Newspapers

It was not just Yearsley’s poetic reputation that needed to be recovered in 1787. When *Poems, on Several Occasions* was published in 1785, it carried over a thousand names in its subscribers’ list, many of whom were friends of Hannah More’s and many of whom were based in, or had a close connections with, London; those connected to London included the Bluestockings, many of the nobles, most of the high-ranking clergy, and all of the politicians on the list. Unsurprisingly, given their connections with More, many of these people did not

subscribe to *Poems, on Various Subjects*. Whilst there were no great difficulties in recruiting new subscribers, there were rather fewer of them—459 in total. The number was respectable, and some earlier subscribers did reappear, but the demographic had shifted significantly, leaving the names of only one bishop and one nobleman. Instead of a strong representation from London's literary and political circles, many of the subscribers to *Poems, on Various Subjects* hailed from Ireland, where they had been recruited by Yearsley's second patron the Earl of Bristol, who was Bishop of Derry. Publishing in the London newspapers would therefore offer Yearsley the added benefit of broadening her readership beyond the mostly provincial bounds of her new patron's influence. It would also have served to broaden Yearsley's readership in purely quantitative terms. With a subscription list of 459 names, the print run for *Poems, on Various Subjects* would have been in the order of 500-750 copies. This contrasts starkly with the 2,500 who regularly read the *European Magazine* to which Yearsley contributed two poems in 1787, or the 1,750 in this period who read the *Universal Magazine*, which is where the first of her poems for the newspapers appeared in June.⁷ By publishing in the London newspapers, Yearsley would have obtained a more numerous and more diverse readership than that offered through the patronage of the Earl of Bristol, as well as reconnected with a metropolitan readership perhaps put off by the break with More.

The subject matter and form of the first poem published by Yearsley in the papers suggest that she was aiming for more than a reconnection with readers recently lost, however. Her first volume of poetry had largely been comprised of intimate and domestic occasional poems: dedicatory verses to More, Montagu, and their friends; playful Valentines; and more personal pieces. The poem which appeared in the *Universal Magazine* in June 1787, however, was of national importance—the healing of the bitter and public divisions in the Royal Family—

and highly topical—the recovery from illness of the heir apparent just a month previously. Neither the subject nor promptness would have been possible in Yearsley’s first volume of poetry: the subject because her deliberately cultivated image was of an unlettered, rural poet; the promptness because the length of time required to gather together, print, and publish over a hundred pages of poetry would most likely have prohibited such a speedy response to an unforeseen event.

Yearsley’s first newspaper poem, then, represented a significant change in direction in her literary career. Few things could be of greater consequence to a nation’s self-image than the health (both literal and emotional) of its monarch and heir to the throne, and nothing could be further from the quiet contemplation of her poem “Clifton Hill” (1785) than a public poem about George III and the Prince of Wales. Similarly, Yearsley’s preferred verse forms in *Poems, on Several Occasions* were iambic pentameter quatrains and blank verse, but her first newspaper poem proudly proclaimed itself an “Ode on the late happy Reconciliation between his Majesty and the Prince of Wales.” Writing on a topic of national importance, in a newspaper which widely circulated around that nation’s capital city, in one of the most revered and technically challenging verse forms available to a poet in English, suggests a dramatic shift in the scale of Yearsley’s ambitions.

That ambition is also apparent in the complexity of the ode; it features several aspects of the progress poem, contained in a complex stanza form which moves from a stately iambic pentameter quatrain at the beginning of each stanza, to a much more urgent octet of catalectic (or metrically incomplete) trochaic tetrameters. Marking the change between the two meters is a shift in rhyme scheme from ABAB for the iambic pentameter quatrain to four rhymed couplets in the octet:

Ye Guardian Angels of this favour'd Isle,
Who long with drooping pinions silent stood,
While from Britannia's shore to Egypt's Nile
Your tears were borne upon the troubled flood—
Strike your harps, nor more complain;
Albion bids you raise the strain;
Touch the chords with heav'nly fire:
Filial love supports the lyre.
Hark! The trembling numbers move,
Echoed from the wildest grove!
Silver Thames serenely plays,
While his Tritons list'ning gaze.⁸

The changes in rhyme and meter enable and reinforce the complex thematic and formal modulations that occur throughout the poem's seven stanzas. As a result, this poem seems to sit somewhere between the Pindaric and Horatian forms of the ode, with elements of both present. From the Pindaric, Yearsley has taken the grand topic and the metrical shift, whilst from the Horatian she has borrowed the consistent stanza form. Her ability to retain control of these varied and competing formal, literary, and metrical features demonstrates a level of poetic accomplishment—and confidence—not on display in *Poems, on Several Occasions*.

The transition in the first stanza from the iambs of the opening quatrain to the trochees of the octet sets up one of the most compelling recurring motifs in the poem: the presence of a commanding poetic speaker who seems to have the power not only to describe the progress of the deities and mythological figures present but also to direct that progress. The double stressed

syllables (the last syllable of the final iamb of the quatrain, and the first syllable of the initial trochee in the octet) combine to create a forceful impression of change. The “Guardian Angels of this favour’d Isle,” who have until now stood uselessly and quietly by with their “drooping pinions,” as described in the quatrain, are now commanded to “Strike your harps, nor more complain” as news of the reconciliation between king and prince becomes known in Britannia. More imperatives follow, and neither Angel nor reader are able to resist the progress either of the narrative (as the nation moves from despondency to joyous celebration) or the meter. The motif is perhaps at its most powerful in the third stanza:

Ah! fly his pillow, soul-distracting thought,
And thou, dear Mem’ry, paint the past no more;
No more hold high the cup by Faction wrought,
Whose potion’s poison, to each distant shore.
Come blest Concord! shed thy dews,
O’er his mind thy sweets infuse;
Lull emotion, sooth his soul,
Curb the passions as they roll;
Clasp him to thy genial breast,
Give him Slumber’s lenient rest,
And as loathing Discord flies,
Bid his softest feelings rise. (lines 25-36)

The trochees of the octet are paired with a series of six imperatives in which “blest Concord!” is instructed to “Come,” “Lull,” “Curb,” “Clasp,” “Give,” and “Bid” the Prince of Wales warm to his father. Success is immediate: the opening of the fourth stanza proclaims “’Tis done!” in a

joyous rising iamb, as the “Furies” are compelled (by the poetic speaker, more than “blest Concord!” perhaps) to “fly the blissful scene” of new-found domestic and public harmony (line 37).

In this its handling of these elements Yearsley’s poem can be seen as a revision of the progress poem.⁹ Whilst poems in this genre—including Thomas Gray’s “The Progress of Poesy: A Pindaric Ode” (1757) and William Collins’s “Ode on the Poetical Character”(1746)—seek to “create a continuity between a golden, mythical, age and the present,” Yearsley’s describes a return to a golden age of prosperity after a hiatus caused by the “Faction” that had worked to disrupt the former harmony of the Royal Family.¹⁰ The poem’s main aim is not so much to connect the reign of George III with an illustrious classical past but to show that his reign has now been restored to its own earlier glory as a result of the reconciliation between father and son. Yearsley’s description of the consequences of that reconciliation, most fully delineated in stanza four, blends the mythical, the mercantile, and the practical. Alongside the standard tropes of Britannia once again being “Rouz’d” to oversee the nation and Ceres filling “her fav’rite vales,” Yearsley shows “Commerce” and “Wisdom” blossoming under the renewed concord in the Royal Family (lines 41, 44, 43, 45). The benignity of George III’s reign, flourishing once again, enables “patriot[s]” to fill the seats of parliament and encourages “ev’ry” miscellaneous “pow’r” in the land to hail “with joy this white-wing’d hour” (lines 46, 47, 48). As Yearsley describes it, *now* is the golden age for Britain.

In a further revision of the progress poem’s standard plot, Britain’s movement towards a renewed era of prosperity is shockingly interrupted in stanza six by the sudden appearance of “Disease” “O’er the Prince” of Wales (lines 65, 68). Her approach “o’er yon blasted heath” bears more than a passing resemblance to the appearance of the three witches in William

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606), but where the witches disappear into the air after delivering their news to Banquo and Macbeth, disease cannot be so easily banished (line 62). Instead "her flames appear" over the Prince's bosom until "he health resigns" (lines 68, 72); only divine intervention prevents the seemingly inevitable tragedy of the nation losing its heir so soon after reclaiming him. Interestingly, Yearsley represents this experience of illness as central to the Prince's personal progress towards wisdom:

Health returns, the noble youth
Led by her to radiant truth
Exclaims, "Now time retard thy ceaseless course;
Slow, yet more slow, pass o'er this happy day;
Prolong my rapture, nor abate its force,
And bid my filial transports ne'er decay." (lines 83-88)

In the poem's narrative arc, the recovery of health after being so close to death leads the Prince to be more alert to familial, and particularly filial, ties. His serious illness and the personal wisdom it bestows are here blended with the nation's broader progress towards commercial, governmental, and social health, hinting at a productive proximity between nation and future king as both enjoy the benefits of their closely related kinds of progress.

Such a conclusion is quite extraordinary for a poet who had up until this point confined herself (or perhaps been confined?) to topics of a much more local nature. It suggests that Yearsley, like Anna Seward, had an "ambition to be recognized not as a retired lady but as a British muse, speaking for, and to, her country."¹¹ Seward was also seeking to garner national attention in June 1787. Seward, like Yearsley, had chosen the ode as the form for a poem on a topic of national importance, though whereas Yearsley wrote about the improved state of the

royal family, Seward took for her topic the recent return of a war hero from abroad in her “Ode on General Elliot’s Return from Gibraltar” (1787). It is of interest that two poets associated with the provinces—Yearsley with Bristol, Seward with Lichfield—and generally considered to be outside London’s literary life, should make such similar choices in order to alter the trajectories of their respective careers from local to national fame. Their decisions are also suggestive of the complexities of late eighteenth-century literary culture. Yearsley had established herself with a substantial poetry collection published by a respected and well-known London bookseller but sought the wider circulation and immediacy of newspaper publishing; Seward had served something of a poetic apprenticeship by submitting verses to Lady Miller’s competitive literary salons in Bath before entering “the public marketplace as a polished poet, ready to please her anticipated readers”(Kairoff, p. 32). For both women, lasting and substantial poetic fame seemed to be achievable through careful navigation of what Kairoff calls “the continuum spanning from manuscript circulation to print,” something both writers would continue to do throughout their careers (p. 40).

Yearsley’s “Ode on the Late Happy Reconciliation Between His Majesty and the Prince of Wales” appeared in more than one London newspaper, and it is not insignificant that one of them, the *Public Advertiser*, should choose to include a letter from Yearsley’s long-time friend (and London resident) James Shiells in which he gave an account of the poem’s composition: “Sir, On Mrs. Yearsley’s arrival in town, she was agreeably informed that an happy reconciliation had taken place between his Majesty and his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales; the pleasing circumstance produced the following lines from her unimproved pen.”¹² The poem, then, is a product of the city not of the provinces, and Yearsley shows herself to be capable of responding to issues of concern in London. This aptitude makes it especially interesting that the

subsequent three poems published in the London papers should differ so completely from this first extraordinary national ode.

Having made a strong claim that she is a poet capable of speaking to the nation in June, Yearsley published a poem in the newspapers in July that is quite surprising in its simplicity and intimacy. Indeed, in comparison to the ambition and scope of her ode, “Lines, on Entering Lady Wallace’s Study, her Ladyship being Absent” (1787) feels almost disappointingly quotidian:

HERE Meditation sits with pensive look,
Mourning her votary’s absence with a sigh,
Now views the lazy pen, and useless book,
While Emma wand’ring strikes the wishing eye.

“Return,” the studious Power with anguish cries;
“My charms are solemn, fit for souls like thine;
Th’ungenial bosom I can never prize,
But O, thou’rt form’d for rapture all divine!

“Here will I aid thy spirit-soothing strain,
When on thy numbers all thy soul shall float;
And when soft Love shall teach thee to complain,
My viewless shadows shall prolong the note.

“They to fond thought shall bring the pleasing past,
Bidding thee ne’er regret the long-fled hour,

But seize the present that fleets on as fast,
Nor trust the future's bright delusive pow'r.

“Return my Emma, Yearsley mourns with me,
She longs to hear thy sentiment refin'd:
Ah! let her breathe congenial sighs with thee,
And share the richest treasures of thy mind.”¹³

In place of the dramatic apostrophe to “Ye Guardian Angels of this favour'd Isle” with which her ode began, Yearsley's second poem starts with what feels like an intrusion into a private space. This impression is created from the beginning, with the title itself contributing to the feeling that the poetic speaker, and perhaps the reader, are about to trespass.

In some ways this is a familiar tableau from Yearsley's earlier work, with strong similarities to the grateful descriptions of More and Montagu where Yearsley figured herself as a lowly “beetle” yearning for instruction and enlightenment¹⁴; here she waits patiently to “hear” Wallace's “sentiment refin'd.” This time, though, there is a tension between the intimacy of the scene and the publicity of the poem, creating the uncomfortable impression that a private space has been opened up to unauthorized public view; “Emma” is absent and is perhaps unaware of the poetry being composed about her, let alone the public venue in which it is destined to be published. Though the poem might sit on the borderline of what is decorous and proper, it is a shrewd choice of topic for Yearsley's second newspaper poem. Where the “Ode on the Late Happy Reconciliation Between His Majesty and the Prince of Wales” evidenced, in dramatic style, her capacity to write in a different and important poetic mode, “Lines, on Entering Lady Wallace's Study, her Ladyship being Absent” demonstrates that Yearsley has made new literary

connections in London independent (and perhaps instead) of More. It also stands as proof that the poetry which appeared in *Poems, on Several Occasions* in 1785 was written by her without significant patronal assistance: the reader can readily make a comparison because “Lines, on Entering Lady Wallace’s Study, her Ladyship being Absent” is written in the same iambic pentameter quatrains of many of Yearsley’s early poems.

Comparisons with earlier poetry and events also seem to be invited by the third poem to appear in the newspapers, “Stanzas, Written by Mrs. Yearsley, on her Leaving London.” Published on 1 August 1787, this was the first newspaper poem to appear *after* the publication of *Poems, on Various Subjects*, in which Yearsley had included several documents in defence of her conduct towards her former patron. One of these documents was Yearsley’s controversial narrative (originally published the year before at the front of the fourth edition of *Poems, on Several Occasions*), which identifies More’s inappropriate patronal behaviour as the source of the disagreement. Recounting her reaction to the news that her earnings from *Poems, on Several Occasions* were to be placed in trust, Yearsley wrote:

I felt as a mother deemed unworthy the tuition or care of her family; and imagined my conduct and principles must of necessity be falsely represented to a generous public, in order to justify the present measure.—Even the interest was not allowed me, but on the capricious terms, that she [More] should lay it out as she thought proper; without any condition in the deed whereby my children might have an undeniable claim in future.¹⁵

As I have argued elsewhere, More’s behaviour here is understood by Yearsley as an usurpation of her maternal role and her maternal rights¹⁶; in an earlier, private letter to More, Yearsley had forcefully argued, “the right was mine to Educate and set them in life as their dispositions may in future determine . . . you have led me to sign a settlement which defrauds me and my family of

our right.”¹⁷ In the prefatory narrative, the centrality of Yearsley’s anxiety for her children’s future good is reinforced by her response to the accusation of being drunk when she asked More for a copy of the restrictive “Deed of Trust”: “*Madam*, you are very wrong to think I have drank. I am only anxious on my children’s account. Circumstances may change, ten or twenty years hence, when perhaps I am no more; and I only wish for a copy of the deed, as a little memorandum for my children” (p. 304).

Representations of herself as a concerned and anxious mother clearly were key to Yearsley’s defence of her behavior towards More, a defence that was still required two years after the original falling-out. That Yearsley should choose “Stanzas, Written by Mrs. Yearsley, on her Leaving London” (a poem in which maternal anxiety and longing are again prominent) to follow hard on the heels of the publication of *Poems, on Various Subjects* is both fascinating and logical. The urgency of the opening stanzas from the poem is compelling, with the poetic speaker’s imagination, which “paints each dear expecting child,” fuelling her impatience:

OH cruel distance! When my eager eye
Strains o’er the hill, or solitary wild;
Impatience swells my heart’s reluctant sigh,
As fancy paints each dear expecting child.

Fly! fly! ye hours with an unusual speed,
Till I shall clasp them to my panting breast!
Fate! hold one moment *all* that would impede
My tender rapture ere it is possest.

Let it once more be mine, ye gentle pow'rs!
To gaze with transport on their infant smiles;
While speechless joy and sympathy devours
The tongue's best effort, and its force beguiles.¹⁸

The appeals to time, "Fate!," and the more broadly-conceived "gentle pow'rs!" further enhance the sense of barely-contained desperation—every supernatural force is being invoked here. An abrupt apostrophe to the sympathetic reader, however, suddenly changes the poem from the individuated or personal to the universal:

Ye, whose imaginations fondly rove
O'er future pleasure in its richest dress,
Ye who avow that soft parental love,
Whose pleasing cares were ever meant to bless,

Ye sure will own it nature's truest joy,
When absence long hath your fond bosoms torn,
Ardent to hold the infant girl, or boy,
Whose flutt'ring heart shall hail your wish'd return. (lines 13-20)

This apostrophe invites readers to sympathize with the speaker, to feel as she does in thinking of their own children as being at the cause of "nature's truest joy." This invitation serves to do (at least) two things, I would suggest. First, Yearsley's anxiety for her children—which, according to her own testimony, lies at the heart of her conduct towards More—is shown to be a feeling comprehensible to all parents. Second, it allows Yearsley to claim once again to speak to and for

a large, sophisticated, and metropolitan readership, even if it is in a quieter, less obtrusive way than in “Ode on the Late Happy Reconciliation Between His Majesty and the Prince of Wales.”

Yet “Stanzas, Written by Mrs. Yearsley, on her Leaving London” also indicates there is a vexed relationship between Yearsley’s identities as an anxious, loving mother and as a professional writer of a sort perhaps recognizable in our own time. While the poem makes it clear how much the speaker longs to return to her children and how little she cares for London (the home of loathed “Fashion! thou idol” of the capital’s inhabitants, line 29), the timing of the poem’s composition, 1 August 1787, indicates that the reason for Yearsley’s absence from home was the publication of *Poems, on Various Subjects*, which occurred on 21 July, just ten days previously. The poet’s time away from her children is therefore both deliberate and necessary; as a professional writer she needs to be on hand to see her volume through the press, and she might indeed have been glad to have to be there, having had little involvement in the publication of *Poems, on Several Occasions* two years previously. In this way “Stanzas, Written by Mrs. Yearsley, on her Leaving London” articulates the dilemma of balancing the demands of, and desire for, a professional identity and care-giving responsibilities at home:

“What matter where, if I be still the same?”

Where is the scene that shuts out mental pain?

Is it in Courts, or on the heights of fame?

The ancient villa, or extended plain?

No! pain and joy alternately are felt,

And both pass on, leaving no trace behind,

Unless dear *mem’ry* bids her shadow melt

The stubborn pow'rs of the too-yielding mind.

And oh! too sure, she lingers in my soul,

Dissolving all my fortitude and boast;

Philosophy gives up his weak controul,

And I am all in fond impatience lost. (lines 65-76)

The quotation in line 65 comes from book 1 of *Paradise Lost* (1667), a line which is preceded by Satan's remark that he brings

A mind not to be chang'd by Place or Time.

The mind is its own place, and in it self

Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n.¹⁹

The speaker of Yearsley's poem has in the previous stanza argued herself into a similar position regarding the power of the mind to render one happy:

Believe thou'rt blest—thou wilt be ever so,

Think thou art wretched, and thy woes augment;

Miseries too oft from mere idea flow,

And the same source revers'd may give content. (lines 61-64)

However, none of the poem's attributes—the cleverness of the literary allusion, the skill in aligning this poem with Milton's, the intellectual value of the philosophical debate about the proximity of pleasure and pain, even the understanding that the mind is able to shape its own reality—are worth anything in the face of the speaker's longing for her children. As she writes, "Philosophy gives up his weak controul, / And I am all in fond impatience lost." It seems entirely appropriate, then, that a poem seeking to make further use of Yearsley's well-publicized personal

difficulties in an attempt to recover her professional reputation, should at its heart be concerned with the relationship between public and private responsibilities.

The decisions made by Yearsley in terms of the topic, timing, and placement of “Stanzas, Written by Mrs. Yearsley, on her Leaving London” were shrewd. The poem serves to reinforce the impression, cultivated so carefully through the advertisements to *Poems, on Various Subjects* to which I referred above, that Yearsley’s work is the production of a natural, uncultivated genius. Published only ten days after the appearance of her second volume, and written, according to the title “*on*” Yearsley leaving London (my emphasis), the poem was apparently composed (so the title hints) in the carriage on the road to Bristol in a fit of spontaneous creativity originating in a rush of maternal feeling. In addition, Yearsley ensured that her work would be circulated widely throughout London, neatly extending its reach beyond the somewhat circumscribed bounds of the subscribers’ list to *Poems, on Various Subjects*. “Stanzas, Written by Mrs. Yearsley, on her Leaving London,” then, acts as a useful counterpoint to the volume.

In some ways, the final poem published in the newspapers in 1787 also functions as a counterpoint. Where the three previous poems were set in, or about, the capital, the final poem, published in the *St. James’s Chronicle* at the end of September, is located firmly in Yearsley’s home region. Even here, though, the poem seems carefully designed to demonstrate its author’s social and cultural status. “Elegy, on Visiting the Hermitage, near Bath, by Mrs. Yearsley, the Bristol Milk-Woman” takes for its subject a visit to the home of Philip Thicknesse in Batheaston, just outside the city of Bath. Thicknesse, one of the most controversial and eccentric figures of the late eighteenth century, was also a successful writer of travel memoirs and gossip sections for the London papers; it is perhaps not coincidental that the *St James’s Chronicle* was one of the newspapers to which Thicknesse contributed. In 1787 his home at the Hermitage had become a

fashionable tourist attraction, with the well-to-do of Bath touring the grounds to look at the picturesque skeletons dug up from the grounds and a bust of Thomas Chatterton—the first monument to the poet. Yearsley’s poem, on her own visit to the Hermitage, is therefore replete with significance: as well as the intersection with Thicknesse’s literary career, Chatterton appears in Yearsley’s work, further helping to locate this poem in a Bristol context. The poem also hints at Yearsley’s social advancement; like “Lines, on Entering Lady Wallace’s Study, her Ladyship being Absent,” it indicates that she is associating with the wealthy and well-born, though the inclusion in the title of a description of the poet as “the Bristol Milk-Woman” perhaps undercuts this somewhat. Yet the poem’s real power, I would suggest, comes from neither of these sources, but from Yearsley’s ability to sympathize as a mother about the loss of a child. *Poems, on Various Subjects* had included the very moving poem “On the Death of Frederick Yearsley” about the death of Yearsley’s infant son shortly after his baptism the previous year. In “Elegy, on Visiting the Hermitage, near Bath,” Yearsley imagines herself into the position of the parents of Anna Thicknesse, whose body was buried at the Hermitage and whose grave was adorned with the bust of Chatterton:

“Away, grim Shade!”—Thus, whispering from the Tomb,
The Voice of Innocence chides plaintive Woe;
A Father, list’ning, milder feels his Doom,
And checks the Tear that would but vainly flow.

A Mother’s Sigh dies on the distant Gale,
Resign’d she bows, and silently adores;
While her sad Eye darts thro’ this gloomy Vale,

To where blest Spirits rove on happier Shores.²⁰

Through this imaginative sympathy she is able to transform her experience of visiting the Hermitage from an eccentric, fashionable, and somewhat ghoulish day out, into an emotionally charged meditation on death and grief, perhaps lending new dignity to the place itself in the process.

III: Ann Yearsley in Context

The four poems published by Yearsley in the newspapers in 1787 demonstrate her versatility, as well as her claims (at least in the case of the “Ode on the Late Happy Reconciliation Between His Majesty and the Prince of Wales,” and perhaps in quieter way “Stanzas, Written by Mrs. Yearsley, on her Leaving London”) to be able to speak for the nation. Publishing in the London papers also undoubtedly helped boost Yearsley’s profile, showcasing her talents to a wider range of readers than that which was available to her through the subscription list to *Poems, on Various Subjects*. Of course, publicly demonstrating her talents in high-profile papers with occasional, apparently spontaneous poetry, would go far to challenge the claims made by More and her supporters that Yearsley owed much of her success to More’s editing.

However, her decision to turn to the newspapers in 1787, and the way in which she presented her poetry in those journals, was unusual. Daniel Robinson describes Mary Robinson’s debut in the papers as more typical: “As a working poet who contributed to several newspapers and who sought professional recognition, Robinson follows a long tradition of pseudonymous periodical publication by which many emerging writers establish themselves.”²¹ Mary Robinson played elaborate games with her literary identity in the papers in order to “exchange her celebrity

for poetic fame,” and so too did Robert Southey and Samuel Taylor Coleridge²²; all three used various “avatars” during their career in the papers. William Wordsworth preferred to use the pseudonym “Axiologus” for his debut publication, “Sonnet on seeing Miss Helen Maria Williams Weep at a Tale of Distress” (1787), which appeared in the *European Magazine* just four months before Yearsley placed “Lines, on Entering Lady Wallace’s Study, her Ladyship being Absent” there. Robinson, Southey, and Coleridge were all at the beginning of their poetical careers when they began publishing poetry in the newspapers; once they became successful, all would republish some (or in Robinson’s case, nearly all) of these early, usually anonymous or pseudonymous poems, under their own names in full collections of their poetry.

Yearsley’s trajectory in the papers was quite different: from the first poem to the last, her name is present, usually in the title; there is absolutely no attempt to hide her identity. Also contrasting with Robinson, Southey, and Coleridge was Yearsley’s decision not to reprint any of the poems published in the newspapers in any volume of her poetry. It might be argued that Yearsley’s position as someone who was trying to refashion or recover her poetic reputation bore similarities to Robinson, Coleridge, and Southey, who were trying to make a name for themselves as poets. However, the contrasting approaches to the poetry they published in the newspapers indicate that the ultimate aims of this group fundamentally differed from Yearsley’s. Where Robinson, Coleridge, and Southey contributed to specific papers on a regular basis (all three were closely involved with Daniel Stuart’s *Morning Post* in particular, and both Southey and Robinson served successively as poetry correspondent), Yearsley published in the papers infrequently and erratically. After the four poems published in 1787, two appeared in 1789 (one in the *Morning Star*, the other in the *Oracle*), but then there was nothing until 1794 when two poems were published in the *Whitehall Evening Post* and five in the *Universal Magazine*. This

irregularity is despite an apparent approach from Daniel Stuart, when he was proprietor of the *Star, and Evening Advertiser*, to Yearsley to be the paper's resident poet in 1789. Lucyle Werkmeister claims that Stuart was looking to deal with a "lack . . . in the field of 'entertainment,' and what it needed more than anything else was a brace of poets, comparable in popularity with 'Della Crusca' and 'Anna Matilda.'"²³ According to Werkmeister, Yearsley was offered a salary to work for Stuart but declined, despite the *Star* being "much read in Bristol," and despite Yearsley's suffering considerable financial difficulties at the time.²⁴

Yearsley, it would seem, had several chances to publish more regularly in the newspapers than she ultimately did. She also seems to have been offered, and rejected, the same sort of opportunities that were presented to, and snapped up by, Robinson, Coleridge, and Southey. That she declined all these offers, and declined to republish what poetry did appear in the papers in her volumes, suggests a different attitude towards the value of that poetry than that held by Robinson, Coleridge, or Southey, who would later write of the money earned from his newspaper poetry:

The guinea a week, while I held it, came every quarter very seasonable in aid of slender means; and a very considerable part of those Minor Poems which I have thought worth preserving, and upon which much careful correction has recently been bestowed, were written in your employ, and otherwise would not have been written.²⁵

Southey's comments suggest that newspaper poetry was well-paid, and it is certainly possible that Yearsley's decision to publish poetry in the papers was in part financially motivated, though it has not been possible to determine exactly what Yearsley might have earned from her newspaper poetry; as a much less frequent contributor than Southey, she certainly would not have earned so much so regularly.

The poems discussed here have only recently been brought back into Yearsley's *oeuvre*; their rediscovery raises a series of new questions about Yearsley's poetry, its aesthetic trajectory, and the contexts within which Yearsley was working throughout her career. Amongst them might be: how far was Yearsley involved in the literary and cultural contexts that are now associated with the emergence of Romanticism? To what extent should we consider Yearsley's literary career as deliberately constructed, and how much owing to luck or patronage? Older questions about female laboring-class poetry might also be reinvigorated with the discovery of such new material, including how we assess such poets' attitudes towards aesthetic value (and indeed how their poetry has itself been valued aesthetically); how, and to what extent, they were able to access and make use of cultural capital; and how we might best integrate what we now know of these writers into our broader pictures of the period. This essay gestures at some partial answers to a few of these questions; it is to be hoped that future studies on Yearsley will fill in some of the many gaps that have been left.

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NOTES

¹ Kerri Andrews, ed. *The Collected Works of Ann Yearsley*, 3 vols. The Pickering Masters (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2014).

² Hannah More, “A Prefatory Letter to Mrs. Montagu,” in *The Collected Works of Ann Yearsley*, 1:279.

³ Daniel Robinson, *The Poetry of Mary Robinson: Form and Fame* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 18.

⁴ Advertisement for *Poems, on Various Subjects*, *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 25 November 1786.

⁵ Advertisement for *Poems, on Various Subjects*, *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 21 July 1787.

⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. “spontaneous, *adj.*,” accessed 27 June 2012, <http://www.oed.com>.

⁷ Figures taken from William St. Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 572-73.

⁸ Yearsley, “Ode on the Late Happy Reconciliation Between his Majesty and the Prince of Wales,” in *The Collected Works of Ann Yearsley*, 1:48, lines 1-12. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

⁹ My thinking on the role of the progress poem genre in Yearsley’s ode was significantly shaped by discussions with Diego Saglia after conferences in Southampton and Keswick in July and August 2013. I am grateful for his generosity and his many helpful insights.

¹⁰ William Fitzgerald, *Agonistic Poetry: The Pindaric Mode in Pindar, Horace, Holderlin, and the English Ode* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 74.

¹¹ Claudia Thomas Kairoff, *Anna Seward and the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 97. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

¹² James Shiells, *Public Advertiser*, 15 June 1787.

¹³ Yearsley, "Lines, on Entering Lady Wallace's Study, her Ladyship being Absent," in *The Collected Works of Ann Yearsley*, 1:50-51, lines 1-20. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

¹⁴ Yearsley, "Night. to Stella," in *The Collected Works of Ann Yearsley*, 1:4-9, line 81.

¹⁵ Yearsley, "To the Noble and Generous Subscribers, who so liberally patronized a book of poems, published under the auspices of Miss H. More, of Park-Street, Bristol, the following narrative is most humbly addressed," in *The Collected Works of Ann Yearsley*, 1:303. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

¹⁶ Andrews, "Patronal Care and Maternal Feeling: New Correspondence Between Ann Yearsley and Hannah More," in *Romanticism*, 16 (2010), 43-59.

¹⁷ Yearsley to More, 13 September 1785, in *The Collected Works of Ann Yearsley*, 1:244.

¹⁸ Yearsley, "Stanzas, Written by Mrs. Yearsley, on her Leaving London," in *The Collected Works of Ann Yearsley*, 1:102-05, lines 1-12. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

¹⁹ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Penguin, 1989), 12, bk. 1, lines 253-56.

²⁰ Yearsley, "Elegy, on Visiting the Hermitage, near Bath," in *The Collected Works of Ann Yearsley*, 1:105-07, lines 53-60.

²¹ Robinson, *The Poetry of Mary Robinson*, 19.

²² Robinson, *The Poetry of Mary Robinson*, 34.

²³ Lucyle Werkmeister, *The London Daily Press, 1772-1792* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), 271.

²⁴ Werkmeister, *The London Daily Press*, 274. For information regarding Yearsley's financial situation, see Andrews, introduction to *The Collected Works of Ann Yearsley*, 2:xi-xii.

²⁵ Robert Southey to Daniel Stuart, 3 May 1838, in *Robert Southey: Poetical Works 1793–1810*, vol. 5, *Selected Shorter Poems, c. 1793–1810*, ed. Lynda Pratt (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2004), xxii.