"POOR FOLKS' WIT": CHRISTIAN MILNE'S AUTHORIAL CLAIM

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> Right well thou know'st how Poverty's despis'd,
> And poor folks wit by few is fairly priz'd
>
> —Christian Milne, "Address to the Shade of Burns"

Scottish women writers have not fared well in academic conversations. Christian Milne, author of "Address to the Shade of Burns," is one writer whose work is worthy of canonicity, yet she has remained relatively unknown. As the lines above make plain, while she is aware of and conversant with the literary movements of her day, her literary peers did not return her attention-- and neither have contemporary literary critics. Only four people have discussed Milne and her work: Elizabeth Isabella Spence in 1816, William Walker in 1887, Paula R. Feldman in 1997, and Susanne Kord in 2003. Each of these authors describes Milne's background and a few of the poems from her book *Simple Poems on Simple Subjects,* but there is nothing of importance in any of their works on Milne. In this essay I do necessary recovery work focusing on Christian Milne, in hopes of starting a conversation about how important Milne's writing is.

The lack of contextualizing information that critics normally rely on when working with canonical writers presents an immediate challenge to those dealing with working-class writers. Letters, diaries, mementos, portraits- all the typical stuff of situating writers from the 18th- and 19th- centuries in their place and space are simply not available for writers like Milne. While we can turn to what Milne wrote about herself and her life in *Simple Poems on Simple Subjects*, we can also find some information about her and her writings by looking at other authors–who knew her. Elizabeth Isabella Spence visited Milne in 1816 and included two poems that are not included in Milne's book. Spence calls Milne a "woman in very humble and obscure condition of life" whose poems are an "effusion of genius, so full of tenderness and beauty, when viewed as the production of an uneducated woman" (Spence 55). Clearly, Milne is special even to people of her time period, even though she has not been formally recognized in the canon. Spence visited with Milne in Milne's home and notes that she was impressed by how homely and ordered the house was for someone so poor in Scotland. Spence's surprise at finding a writer of Milne's station living in a clean place rather than in disarray tells us much about middle-class expectations of and prejudices surrounding the poor of the period.

In her poem, “Written at Fourteen Years of Age, on an Elderly Lady Whom I Then Served,” Milne writes that this elderly woman who was her boss was constantly belittling her. The lady claims that Milne is “inexperienced, vain, and young” (Milne 13). Milne makes a parallel with how others talk about her and her writing to how this woman that she worked as a domestic servant for also belittled and ridiculed her. The woman tells her that she “is great, and you are mean!” meaning that Milne is not good enough to be compared to this “great lady” for whom she works. Milne takes care of this lady as she dies (“She cannot move without my aid / Nor turn without her little maid” [25-6]), yet she is still openly mocked by her so-called superior. Milne feels trapped:

> For months I have not tasted air!
> I sleepless watch her every night!
> I oft extinguish too the light;
> That she may sleep I sit in gloom
> Nor sees the sun the darkened room. (Milne 33-37)

Confined, getting no fresh air and sunlight, watching over her mistress and caring for her as she dies, Milne establishes her own sense of class obligations. Milne resents the fact that she must sit by the lady’s side and help her even though she has treated her so badly. Nonetheless, she feels that “Conscience and a feeling heart / Still rule me with respect to her” (48-9). She feels bound to take care of this her employer despite her mistreatment. She ends the poem with “For her I’d mourn with outward show, / Equipped in black from top to toe” (55-6). When her mistress dies, Milne will appear to grieve, because that is what is expected of her. She will look and act the part, making it clear to that her behavior is all show, not “influenc’d by love nor fear” (50).

Milne makes plain her self-awareness of class status and social station, deploying a self-reflexive rhetorical modesty to show how she feels about being a poor woman. In the second stanza of her clearly autobiographical lyric poem, “To a Gentleman, Desirous of Seeing My Manuscripts,” Milne references her “mean estate, and birth obscure, / the ignorant will scorn” (Milne 5-6). She recognizes her class status is low-- she is not part of the upper or gentry class, she doesn’t have a family fortune backing her up, and she doesn’t have anything except for the life that she has made for herself and her children, along with her husband. She knows that many people will disregard her work because she is not of a more privileged birth. They will never see her value, because her class status dictates her value, not only as a person but also as a writer.

Milne further states that “the proud would cry, ‘Such paltry works / “We will not deign to read; / “The Author’s but a Shipwright’s Wife, / “And was a serving maid’” (Milne 13-6). These proud people will dismiss her writings because they do not believe that a maid or a shipwright’s wife could ever write poetically. She tells the man who wants to read her work, that she does not expect lovely praise or generous accolades, but that she hopes that he will think they are “well

enough from her," a shipwright's wife, a previous domestic servant, and an "uneducated" lower class person who just writes simply on simple subjects. This is an instance of a strategy that Milne uses constantly through her writings. Through performing modesty again and again, Milne suggests an awareness of her class status, her authorial status, and the complicated relationship between the two.

Not only did Milne include signaling in her writing as an apologia to her audience, she seems to have internalized this future criticism. Milne is her own harshest critic when she addresses others in her poems. She clearly situates her work by acknowledging her lack of a formal education and her position in life as a poor working-class woman. As Patricia Pender states in her book *Early Modern Women's Writing and the Rhetoric of Modesty*, "Reading women's expressions of modesty as faithful representations of their author's sentiments ignores early modern anxieties about women's innate duplicity, anxieties that find their strongest articulation in fears about women's rhetorical and literary facility" (Pender 34). Pender demands her audience to see the modesty tropes used by women in their writings as less truth and more topoi. Reading self-modesty in women's writings is complicated, for such self-presentations often call attention to the ironic difference between a literal claim of talentlessness and the skill she demonstrated within a poem.

Milne's "Introductory Verses" describe how, at age five, she was reading and at age six she began falling in love with poetry. She claims that she "sought the Muses to relieve her breast," and she felt that she had to write because it gave her relief from her circumstances (Milne 28). She knows that what she has is a gift that "only Nature can bestow" (Milne 46). So why does Milne go from knowing her abilities to do to worrying that others will "think but little of [her] Songs, when you have read them o'er; but say, 'they're well enough from her'— And I expect no more" (Milne 55-6) in her poem "To a Gentleman, Desirous of Seeing My Manuscripts." Milne acknowledges her place in society, her social class status, but she also shows readers that she knows exactly what she is doing. Women are using these methods for a reason, and Milne uses modesty here to establish her own class obligations and also her resentment toward those obligations.

Not only has working class women's' exclusion from the canon affected their own sense of self in internalized oppression but it also reflects those we feel most comfortable labeling "poet." Manu Samriti Chander claims that when Percy Bysshe Shelley said that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world," Shelley was bringing "the Poet down to earth, out of the realm of ideas and into the world, where he, where *they* function and operate among other men-not just world-legislators, but legislators *of the world,* born of it, living in it, and, crucially, spread across it" (Chander 2). Chander reads Shelley in a way that makes marginalized, or "brown" authors meaningful by looking at these Brown

Romantics' works and putting them with traditional Romantic writers rather than adjacent to them, and I am asserting that his argument also applies to Christian Milne, a ~~Scottish~~ poet largely ignored due to her lack of education and her class status.

Milne writes of her lack of education and her fear of being discovered as an author throughout her life. She started writing as an elementary age child, and hid or destroyed all of her writings in order to avoid being detected because she was not educated to be a writer, and she was afraid of being discovered and being punished or mocked for her writings. In *The Lab'ring Muses: Work, Writing, and the Social Order in English Plebian Poetry*, William Christmas recalls Thomas Carlyle, who questions whether plebian poets whose voices have been ignored because they are uneducated can even be called uneducated. Christmas writes that the voices heard by Carlyle were "rather 'differently educated' than 'uneducated'" (Christmas 40). Looking at Milne as "differently educated," rather than uneducated, changes the dynamic of her writing. She attended school for as long as she was able and then she found people to continue her learning- people she worked for, more-privileged people in her life, and even on her own. Milne was not uneducated; she just had a different education than the popular writers of her time.

Susanne Kord describes her as the "Aberdeen carpenter's wife" (Kord 3). Even Kord reduces Milne from an author to a carpenter's wife. Milne would equate Kord's descriptions of her with the Pert Miss Prue who belittles Milne's authorship when she says,

> A Shipwright's Wife,
> In humble life,
> Writes RHYME by nightly tapers!!
> That folks of taste
> Their time should waste
> To read them, makes me wonder!
> A low-born fool,
> Ne'er bred at school,
> What can she do but blunder? (Milne 4-12)

Kord labels Milne just as Miss Prue does, and in doing so, they both discredit Milne from authorship.

The world looks at women as the home makers, not as authors or artists. As Stuart Curran quotes the Duchess of Newcastle, "the image of women conveyed to the modern reader is overwhelmingly made by men" (Curran 178). Women have to make a place for themselves within the world, and that place is not usually dictated by how well they carry out their art- it is by how well they manage their home and raise their children. Milne worked hard for everything in her life- she started work as a servant at age 14 and she wrote secretly when she

had free time. She never shirked her duties for writing, but rather found a way to accomplish both. Curran also points out that "poetry had been sealed off as a male, upper-class fiefdom, requiring for its license not simply birth and breeding, but a common education and exclusive standards of shared taste" (Curran 182). Milne never had a chance at garnering the acclaim that some of her contemporaries such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, or Lord Byron achieved because of her rank in society as a poor working-class woman in Scotland. How can she compare to the canonical "Big Six" when we "still don't expect female texts to have universal things to say, we don't expect them to be experimental, we don't expect them to be great, and we still have not quite learned to see female storytellers as either masterful or intentional" (Loofbourow). We still have not learned to accept that women can have a place within art, within the public, and what they do or not sacrifice for that place is not up for debate or deliberation by anyone outside of those women themselves. We do not want to miss what Milne is telling us in her poetry because we are analyzing her only by her status or her education rather than her works.

Scholars have attempted to explain Milne's obvious absence within the sphere of the literary canon. On one end of the spectrum, Mary Jacobus and Elaine Showalter rally for the inclusion of female authors and delve into the obstacles they must overcome as inferiors in their own lives. On the opposite end, Ellen Moers claims that a few women have paved the way for women everywhere to have their works acknowledged by the world. She names Emily Dickinson, Virginia Woolf, Jane Austen, and Mary Shelley as a few of the women who have brought female-written literature to the forefront of the intellectual fields. Jacobus is interested in identifying why women's writings are mainly disregarded within literary criticism and whether women should write using the language of their oppressors in order to fight the oppressors themselves, or rather should they forge their own language in an attempt to distance themselves from the language that the oppressors use on women. She tells readers,

> The prison of sensibility is created by the patriarchy to contain women; thus they experience desire without Law, language without power. Marginalized, the language of feeling can only ally itself with insanity- an insanity which, displaced into writing, produces a moment of imaginative and linguistic excess over-brimming the container of fiction, and swamping the distinction between author and character… This is what it means for women to be on the side of madness as well as silence. (Jacobus 15)

Jacobus wants her readers to understand that women are commonly belittled and called crazy when they write meaningful works of literature. The patriarchy has created this idea of sensibility, or delicate sensitivity, to enclose women within a box, and because of this, women are reduced to the sum of only their emotions.

Jacobus also states that, “the female mouth can’t utter, only receive and confirm the male” (Jacobus 14). For a long time, women were only to “speak when spoken” and to uplift their husbands above everything else. Jacobus urges her reader to be aware of how hard these female authors have had to work to make their names and their work known. As females, they must prove repeatedly prove themselves, in ways that their male counterparts never had to, just to be accepted as someone who is ‘good enough for what they are’, whether that be a woman, a person of color, or a person in the lower class. Loofbourow claims that:

> We don’t have a robust tradition of pointing [the female artists] out- or recognizing their outlines, or even knowing they’re there. So we miss them, and they drop out of the canon. Meanwhile we persist in misreading the female-driven test as either an artless, unstructured collection of dots, or as an overdetermined and plastered-on false and foolish face. (Loofbourow)

Milne is not artless or unstructured, and she deserves recognition for her clever ability to disarm her opposition while situating herself within the expectations that come with her social class. The canon does not make enough room for a woman writing on the emotional experiences of being a working-class woman and a writer at the same time. She writes about some of the same things that canonical writers talk about- love, emotions, religion- but the canon does not easily make room for authors that are lower class women. The canon lets authors like Aemilia Lanyer, Marjorie Kempe, Ellen Johnston, and Christian Milne slip through the cracks because they are not the traditional author that has been valued throughout history.

Throughout her life and the time following, Christian Milne has been largely ignored within academic circles because she was a lower-class and lesser-educated woman writing poetry in a time that prized the authorship of male poets such as Byron and Coleridge. The minimal criticism of Milne’s poetry creates a space for the conversation around class, gender, and canon that the literary community needs. Milne’s poetry illustrates an acute understanding of her circumstance and the views those around her held of her poetic endeavors. The importance of her self-awareness cannot be understated in the argument for a wider canon, as she felt shame about her writing and attempted to hide it throughout her life, even as her poems are threaded with a seemingly confident voice. The conversation surrounding Milne is a discussion about women writers and working-class writers whose works have been overlooked, and those who may want to write for the public but feel as though their work will not be accepted as legitimate.

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