

A Supposition of Snark: Elizabeth Hands's Crafted Defiance

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This article works to establish Elizabeth Hands, an author who has been mostly ignored by her contemporaries and the academic world, as an author worthy of praise and introduction in the English literature canon to be more-thoroughly studied. Hands employs a snide tone throughout her poetic works in opposition of the upper-class population that dictated what she could write about, when and why. As a working-class woman, Elizabeth Hands was expected to tend to her work above all else, and the upper class tended to view working-class authors quite negatively, believing that they should not aspire to rise above their station in life. Hands's crafty use of many different poetical forms works against the biased idea that working-class people were uneducated and coarse, and this article aims to overturn that still-prevalent bias by showcasing Elizabeth Hands's works and the brilliance behind them.

“To earth it bows the knees, but lifts the soul
So high above all sublunary things,
That this low world shews like a fleeting dream
Already past away.”

— “Reflection on Meditation” By Elizabeth Hands

Elizabeth Hands stands out among the many less-fortunate writers of the Romantic era such as Mary Savage, Christian Milne, and Anne Finch. Known for her openness to most of the major poetic forms of the age including the friendship poem, the satire, odes, heroic epics (or mock epics, at least), and epistles, Hands craftily toes the line between what she “should” be writing as a laboring-class woman and cheekily ridiculing anyone who puts her into that box. As Paula Backscheider tells us in her book *Eighteenth Century Women Poets and Their Poetry*, “Literary movements are not made by single great poets, as the canon of Great Men implies; they are collective efforts that express a number of things—the taste of a time, the longings and aspirations of a people, the creative genius of a poet, and the feelings of individual writers” (Backscheider 14). With her creative look into the laboring class, her use of many different poetic forms, and her saucy commentary on the upper class, Elizabeth Hands should have several of her works displayed, proudly, within the English literary canon, and students should be studying her poetry to better view Romanticism as a whole.

Women writers in the Romantic era struggled to get their writing out into the world, particularly women within the laboring class. Their lower-class status coupled with their inability to receive a traditional education (which

I will refer to as *differently educated*) makes it challenging for an aspiring writer to become a published author, let alone a best-selling one. However, “Provincial subscription publishing, another revolution in the book trade, made access to print even easier ... the local gentry and circles of friends and supporters from Coventry and the Rugby School were the subscribers to Elizabeth Hands's *the Death of Amnon*” (Backscheider 4). Most of the lower-class authors relied on subscriptions or a patronage, so those without access to these had an even more difficult experience trying to make their way within the world of literature. Luckily, Elizabeth Hands was able to seize a subscription with a very long list of subscribers which, as Cynthia Dereli forces her readers to acknowledge, “perhaps the only thing this long list [of subscribers] tells us with any certainty is that there was a general agreement to support her and her poems ... she was a person for whom many of these people were prepared to go to some trouble” (Dereli 174). So why, then, has Elizabeth Hands been excluded from literary education when she clearly had a large following interested in her works?

Literary scholarship throughout history has been limited to the elitist authors who were in the upper class with formal educations and who were able to write without being taken from the work they “should” be doing. This

limited view wherein authors were considered valuable, and existed just as the laboring class has caused the “arbitrary” literary canon to be “rooted in rigid literary and gender assumptions,” which has “sealed women’s silence for more than a century” (Crisafulli and Pietropoli 2). Roger Lonsdale does some of the work for us with his Oxford anthologies of laboring class writers, but there is still work to be done regarding these women and their works that have been passed over for almost three centuries.

Many poems by laboring class authors are excerpted within literature anthologies like Lonsdale’s, but this small exposure is not enough to see what these authors can contribute to Romanticism and the literary canon. Donna Landry makes the claim that “to have poems or extracts of poems by Mary Collier, Mary Leapor, Elizabeth Hands, Janet Little, and Ann Yearsley suddenly so easily accessible to students as [Lonsdale’s] anthology renders them must challenge knee-jerk assumptions about elitist scholarship and should prove radically productive for the field” (Landry 187). While Landry is not incorrect in her argument, she makes a large oversight—students are not reading Lonsdale’s anthologies and many other anthologies are not inclusive of these authors. Unfortunately, making these authors accessible is only part of the battle as

well— people must actually read their works to see how amazing many of these lower-class women were, in their writing and their own lives. If we are to learn anything about the Romanticism movement, we need to read a large sampling of authors and poems. The Big Six (William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Blake, and Lord Byron) are not the only Romantic authors, and it is long past due that we begin including laboring class and non-traditional writers in the canon and then teach them within literature classes. Regretfully, “Only a few women poets, notably Aphra Behn, Anne Finch, and Charlotte Smith, have received any real sustained study by a number of critics or been included in anthologies often enough to be seen as poets whom students and scholars of literature should recognize” (Backscheider 395). Laboring class and/or differently educated authors have something additional to bring to the table and students deserve to see the variations in poetry written between the different social classes of the Romantic era. These lowly authors offer something that nobody else in this period can; “they were continually examining the sex-gender system and its implications for them and their nation, as Hands and [Anna] Seward did, and that they found many ways to use poetry to question and even desta-

bilize the status quo” (Backscheider 396). Giving these authors the time and recognition they deserve in academia allows students to get a more rounded look into Romanticism as a literary movement, and validates these authors’ works as something imperative to the literary era and effort that these authors put into their poetry collections, which has too long been overlooked. There is a “need not only to distinguish women’s poetry from the canonical male Romantic poetry with which some students are already familiar but also to be wary of grouping all female poets as an undifferentiated whole” (Mellor 63). By grouping all Romantic women poets into a single group, one makes the claim that all historical women authors write the same way, with the same content, and are not good enough to be read along with their male counterparts. Whether this claim is made inadvertently or not, does not matter. Reading a small sampling of these poets all together at once diminishes the work that they have done and perpetuates the assumption that women should not be writing poetry because they could never come close to their male contemporaries.

Within the poem “Critical Fragments, On Some of the English Poets,” Hands demonstrates to her audience that while she may not have the formal education that most of her contemporary authors received, she

has read the classics that everyone else has read. She mentions authors Milton, Shakespeare, Young, Swift, Pope, Prior, and Butler, and then comments on their writings in an effort to prove that she is as well-versed as the upper class in poetry. As Emma Mason points out, “Poetry, it was thought, sweetened the medicinal requirements of morality and virtue so that they could act on the individual without his or her assent, repairing and healing the damaged body and soul” (Mason 55). This ideal authenticates a woman’s ability to write poetry. They have feelings and longings and morals just like men do, which affirms their ability to write poetry that can heal a soul, or make another person feel what the author is feeling.

Hands writes within several different forms of poetry, sometimes in a single poem, which really establishes her competence in composing poetry. One example of this is the twenty-seventh poem in her volume:

Whilst I beneath this silent shade,
Contented sit and sing,
I envy not the great their joys,
That from their riches spring.
Let those who have in courts been
bred,
There still in splendor shine;
Their lot of bliss may not surpass,
Perhaps not equal mine.

(“Contentment” lines 1-8)

Hands mentions the upper class and how they will never be happier than she

in this moment of contentment within nature, where she can admire the trees and flowers around her. Where the happiness of the upper class only comes from what their money can get them “I envy not the great their joys / That from their riches spring,” they do not have what the speaker has: “These friendly trees on either side, / From heat a shelter stand” (“Contentment” lines 13-14). While Hands does not call this poem a pastoral, it has that simplistic life-in-nature ideal that a pastoral exemplifies. In addition to the meditative pastoral essence of the poem, Hands’s use of common meter—iambic tetrameter and trimeter alternating twice within each stanza with an intermittent rhyme scheme— make “Contentment” flow like a song that she is singing to her audience. As Bridget Keegan claims:

To varying degrees and with varying effects, laboring-class poets remind readers how their social position led them to produce poetry that resembles but revises the kind of poetry produced by their more refined contemporaries. (563)

Elizabeth Hands shows us exactly what the bigger (male) authors do not have—poetry from a lower-class woman who uses words as a weapon and is able to fit several different poetic forms into one small poem. This is a trait that most other poets do not utilize, or even have, so by including Hands in the literary canon, we get to see the inter-

esting discussions and layers within her poetry.

She also writes a couple of epistles, another long-discussed form of literature that an author may or may not have planned to be published. Hands’s “An Epistle” is addressed to her “long absent friend” Maria (“Epistle” line 1). It could also be described as a friendship poem addressed to someone that she misses dearly, or even a heroic couplet about a friend who makes everything better in life. Hands’s work in this poem is rarely talked about, yet she manages to fit three different poem types into a single poem in a manner similar to Wordsworth and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads*. As Paula Backscheider tells her audience,

Friendship poems reveal women’s longings for beautiful poetry, for the opportunity to characterize experiences, and for participation in the century’s public-sphere debates ... the friendship poem is the unique poetic kind in which women do not have to appropriate or accommodate to a space already claimed by men. They are places to contest or ignore the definitions of and expectations for themselves. (175)

Hands’s use of the friendship poem within the other forms exemplifies Backscheider’s statement—She longs to participate in beautiful poetry, and the friendship poem is her way into the

literature that the canon reserves for the male poets of the age.

Another poetical form used is the Ode—An ode to friendship. She describes friendship as “first of blessings here below, / The best gift Heaven can bestow!” (“Friendship” lines 17-18). This poem is an example of what Margaret Koehler describes as a shift that occurred around the time in the subject of odes:

the midcentury ode moved away from celebrating tangible, external phenomena (like King William or Anne Killigrew or a hurricane) and instead fixed its attention on allegorical personifications of intangible, abstract qualities or phenomena (like Simplicity or Evening or Cheerfulness). More and more, the ode took the form of direct and prolonged address of a personified abstraction. (396)

An ode to friendship is certainly within the abstract boundary, but it can still be relatable to the general audience reading the poem. Odes give a lot of room to be creative. While often noble and serious, odes remain relatable in a way that makes that abstract read more universal. An odes should be something that evokes feelings and makes one think, and Elizabeth Hands is no exception to this ideal:

Calm, humble bliss of friendship rise,
Superior to the splendid joys,
That glitter round the world;

Temptations so profusely spread,
With dazzling glares mislead
The feet that heedless tread,
And all those joys are in confusion
hurl’d.

(“Friendship, An Ode” lines 22-28)

The irregular meter and rhyme scheme make this poem feel like it could come from anybody. People can relate to this; everyone has had a friend at some point or another in their life and they know that having a good friend makes everything better or happier. The free verse structure makes the poem almost inspiring, which just helps its universality. “Tis friendship’s rite, / To give and take delight” (“Friendship, An Ode” 29-30). Her lofty view of friendship feels like a peaceful dream with someone you love, who would do anything for you—the kind of friendship that everybody wants in their life. Margaret Koehler describes how odes occupied a unique formal position:

Poetic genres like the ode did not simply dictate what a poet would produce but allocated places for a wide range of poetic expression and effect. In the terrain of the ode, a poet had license to undergo passionate transport and to move beyond the everyday to some extravagant exaltation of a powerful subject. It was this capacity of the ode that attracted eighteenth-century poets most strongly and that was best able

to absorb the new directions poetry took during the period. (388) The abstract idea of friendship is a powerful subject that can be talked about passionately. Hands talks about friendship with an intimate look into something that many people can only dream of having in their life. She makes her audience yearn for the friendship she is describing, which upholds the entire concept of a good ode.

Several of her poems show a very traditional aspect of the Romantic era—a short piece on nature that ties back to religion. While her poem is only eight lines whereas some authors span pages with their wonder-filled nature poems, “Observation on the Works of Nature” is sweet and to the point. Her first four lines set up the scene of dawn approaching and the beautiful spring-filled landscape that you can see, almost like the flora is giving the speaker and readers a morning greeting. The last four lines relate the picturesque backdrop to the “power of the Almighty’s hand; / They spring, they blow, they sate at his command” (“Observation” lines 5-6). She goes on to tell the audience that nature never lets the Almighty down, it does everything he tells it to, unlike Mankind because “Tis Man alone rejects his Maker’s will” (“Observation” line 8). She uses the same methods in this Observation that more canonical male authors such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and

Keats also employ. She describes nature meditatively and makes it seem infallible, as opposed to mankind who does not do what the Almighty instructs. She tells her audience that mankind can only let you down, but nature never will. This idealistic view of nature follows the same pattern as the nature poems written by the more popular male authors of the time. Elizabeth Hands making her way into the very male tradition of the meditative nature poem with “Observation” which proves that women during this time were thinking about some of the same things as men, and therefore are deserving of the same relevance within literature that we give those male poets. As Kathryn King observes,

It is often observed that women of the eighteenth century challenge constructions of the feminine simply by writing poems that give voice to their own wishes, feelings, desires. The very act of taking up the daring pen, that is to say, breaks up the traditional alignment between femininity, passivity, and silence. (441-42)

By ignoring a poem that directly correlates to the Big Six’s most discussed poems, because it was not written by those well-known men, we further sustain the illogical idea that women cannot write poetry as well as men. Hands’s wielding of the same structures and values that the Big Six use within their own poetry can only

serve to bolster her own poetry even higher than it has been thus far kept.

She continues “Observation” in the evening. While it does not tie back into the ‘Maker,’ it is a lovely natural setting and has almost meditative quality.

Sweet and refreshing are the dews,
That deck the ev’ning shade;
Sweet are the winds that sweep the
 plains,
And whisper through the glade
We faint beneath the sultry sun,
But when the day is o’er,
We gladly meet the ev’ning shade,
And think of toil no more.
 (“Evening” lines 1-8)

This is another poem that reads melodically due to the common meter. Song poems were common during the Romantic era, especially for women poets. As Paula Backscheider points out, “The popularity of musical entertainments in spaces from the most private to the most public and the rapid movement of songs from the theater into the music and drawing rooms are familiar. We know next to nothing, however, about the part that women poets played, but the number of their poems titled ‘Song’ ought to awaken our interest” (11). This Observation can only serve to further shorten the distance between her poetry and that of the Big Six’s. She is a rural maid, and her poetry stays close to her upbringing yet still aspires to be one of the greats:

“Hands’s personal view of rural life from a laboring-class perspective finds a happy accommodation with the poetic tradition: close enough to the tradition of the pastoral to be inoffensive to her betters, close enough to reality not to offend her peers. Hands’s rural idylls do not deny the harsh realities of life; they simply focus on the good” (179-80). Hands knows her place in society and keeps her poetry close to where a rural maid with little education would be writing, but with her constant utilization of the tactics that the upper-class authors use she gives herself credit as a somewhat-educated woman who knows how to write poetry that can be held up to those big author’s works.

Hands also largely puts to use the pastoral form—around 14 of the poems in her collection are pastoral poems. In “A Pastoral Song,” the speaker narrates a scene. Amintor waits for his love, Delia, to come impatiently, and begins to sing a song about Delia. While Amintor is not described as some sort of nymph-like creature such as a satyr or triton, Delia, on the other hand, takes the role of the innocent and fair shepherdess, who is “cheerful and sprightly, good humour’d and gay” (“A Pastoral Song” line 13). In his song, Amintor describes Delia as

... unskill’d in their wiles,
And all the coquetry of love:
She thoughtlessly meets me, with
 innocent smiles,

And trips with me into the grove
("A Pastoral Song" 21-24).
He loves Delia because he can manipulate her due to her innocence. This explains what he sings in the previous stanza as well—
Let prudes and coquets to their
artfulness trust,
They ne'er shall have place in my
arms;
Their wits and their arts do but give
me disgust,
Tis' virgin simplicity charms
("A Pastoral Song" lines 17-20).
He has no use for other people because they see through his artful game. This is what makes Hands's "Pastoral Song" so intriguing—it is an interesting take on the traditional pastoral poem that readers do not see elsewhere. Hands gets crafty with traditional forms and puts her own spin on them. By only reading the traditional, readers miss the diversity that writers like Hands put into their works. One important thing to acknowledge with Hands's pastoral poems is that "women attempted pastoral elegies, and many of their adaptations of it are good poetry and, perhaps more interesting for us today, insights into how genres are gendered and used by people in different situations from those of the canonical writers of such poems" (Backscheider 276). Hands uses a poetical form that has been widely utilized, but as a

laboring class woman author, she adds something to the form that the bigger authors of the time could not simply because she is not an upper-class male.

Another poem where she takes some creative liberties is the title poem "Death of Amnon," her longest published poem. "Death of Amnon" has five cantos of Miltonic blank verse narrative and is based on the biblical story found in the second book of Samuel where Amnon (David's son) rapes his half-sister. The poem begins with Amnon declaring his love for his sister Tamar. The first canto is filled with plots to unleash Amnon's passion on Tamar. Canto two introduces Tamar with flowery language. Cantos three and four are filled with speeches and evil schemes to destroy others' lives. Canto five gives Amnon the ending he sadly deserves and could have avoided. "Death of Amnon" is a great poem because even though it is lengthy, the language flows well and the plot is compelling enough to keep the reader engaged. In her article, Backscheider says, "The poem shows how subversive and relevant the form can be" and that "Hands reveals the way lust, which might have been conquered, is transformed by male bonding and rivalry" (160). Many women make their way into poetry with religious writings, and Elizabeth Hands is no exception. By taking a story from the Bible and

reworking it, she really shows how much skill she has. Emma Mason claims that, "biblical paraphrase was popular as a way of echoing God's word while avoiding any blasphemous attempt to replicate it" (62). Hands's choice to paraphrase, as Mason calls it, was smart because she chose a less popular story in the bible that her audience would not expect. Paraphrasing something like Psalms or Song of Solomon would have lessened the positive reception to this poem, because they were so popular. She also showed some creativity with the different characters and their point of views, and by altering the ending from the Bible. What started as a paraphrase ended with something that can only be claimed by Hands. This could have been a bad choice because they audience might have taken insult with Hands changing the original biblical story. Luckily for Hands, "Death of Amnon" was received well by her audience, as shown by a review in *Gentleman's Magazine* from 1790: "When I speak,' adds he, 'of Mrs. H's poetry, I speak of the Death of Amnon, which I consider as by far the best'" (*Gentleman's*). This review is a great historical example of Hands's general contemporary reception after the publication of her work. This review came out the year after the publication of *Death of Amnon*, so it shows that even a year later people were still reading her book and being surprised and delighted

with the poem "Death of Amnon." Interestingly, this poem is not her most talked about poem in modern times.

Within modern critical discussions, two poems from *Death of Amnon* are referred to the most—Hands's "A Poem, On the Supposition of an Advertisement appearing in a Morning Paper, of the Publication of a Volume of Poem, by a Servant Maid" and her "A Poem, On the Supposition of the Book having been published and read." These poems really show Hands's character and her ability to turn an insult into something comical, without calling someone out directly. Not naming her oppressors directly is essential, because she could make big problems for herself by offending the wrong person. As a laboring class writer, she had to toe a fine line to keep herself out of trouble with the upper class, who already had strict ideas about how laboring class authors should be writing and the subjects they should be writing about. This awareness makes her suppositions even more incredible, "It is Hands's knowingness and her control of it, for fashioning into a good joke, that astonishes. Modern critics have scarce got the measure of the insubordination—the barefaced cheek, the nerve of it—that the two 'Suppositions' imply" (Steedman II). She shows extreme skill through both poems, and her attention to detail is flawless while still staying within her expected boundaries.

1 Backscheider credits this idea to Carolyn Franklin with no citation

Her first mention of the mistresses who snub her comes within the “Advertisement” poem:

I suppose you all saw in the paper this morning,

A Volume of Poems advertis’d — ‘tis said

They’re produc’d by the pen of a poor
Servant Maid.

A servant write verses! says Madam
Du Bloom;

Pray what is the subject? — a Mop, or
a Broom?

He, he, he, — says Miss Flounce; I
suppose we shall see

An Ode on a Dishclout — what else
can it be?

(“Advertisement” lines 9-14)

Hands uses nicknames for the mistresses so her poem can have “all affected reserve, and formality scorning” them, without facing retribution or being accused of “reaching out of [her] sphere” (“Advertisement” lines 7, 34). The upper class believed that the laboring class should be attending to their work, not trying to move up to a higher social class with their writings. However, Hands’s use of satire against these women has a purpose—to show her audience how the upper class not only speaks of their servants, but also participates in the exploitation of those servants:

Hands, who often unexpectedly comments on employer-servant relationships within poems appar-

ently about something else, has Miss Prudella, Mrs. Candour, and Lady Marr-joy discuss the behavior of servants and how to manage them.

The former servant portrays the women as thinking of the servants without understanding or empathy...

Hands is a much underrated poet and thinker, as attested to by her multiple ways of satirizing the women and her ability to make the reader recognize how completely external and superficial their view is of servants, whether they write or not. (Backscheider 106)

It is not necessarily the writing that these women are taking offense with, it is the idea that their maids could possibly dare to have lives outside of their professions in these women’s houses. This accusation against the women is compounded by the difficulty Hands (and other laboring class writers) had to go through to get their works published. These workers had to jump through so many hoops to receive publication, and then are criticized once they achieve that publication because of their class status and their audacity to compose poems rather than work their lives away as servants.

This accusation is continued in her second “Supposition” poem. The ladies return after the publication of *Death of Amnon*, and ask: “have you seen the new book (that we talk’d of that day, / At your house you remember)

of Poems, ‘twas said / Produc’d by the pen of a poor Servant Maid?” (“Book” lines 19-21). They all agree and one of the mistresses has even purchased the book for her daughter but has had no time to read it herself. Then they discuss the title poem... “A rape! ... / A delicate theme for a female I swear” (“Book” lines 32-33). Their disbelief over a woman writing about a rape scene, biblical or not, is apparent. Hands counters their asinine displeasure with her poetry by giving them satirical names that covertly slight them. Miss Rhymer, Mrs. Routella, Captain Bonair, Mrs. Consequence, Miss Gaiety, Sir Timothy Turtle, Lady Jane Rational, Lady Pedigree, Miss Coquettilla, old lady Marr-Joy, all these names blatantly call the characters out for something in their personality or appearance, and as Backscheider points out, “Another group of women with satiric names ridicule the poet from a superior position... Suddenly the fact that the women are merely behaving like men is writ large, and their attitudes toward Hands, women’s poetry, and the class system are shown to be the effects of the sex-gender system” (105). She seems to be saying that it is bad enough for the upper-class men to be degrading towards a laboring class woman, but for the women who might employ this maid to be so derogatory towards a laboring woman is unnecessary and ridiculous. The importance of the class system

during this century was amplified and the participants who so strictly enforced it were almost melodramatic in their theatrical upholding of that system, particularly against the lower class and what was expected of them. Hands’s use of satire here, therefore, challenges not only the classist system employed by all of Britain at this time but also the expected boundary for women to stay within. It is no surprise that these are two of her most known poems due to her careful defiance against her entire reality.

As Paula Backscheider indicates: “Literature is a record of and a call to our humanity, and it has always provided humankind with beauty, intellectual stimulation, pleasure, and inspiration. It consoles and inspires us, makes us laugh and urges us to care for the victimized. We can never have enough good literature, and the exclusion of” laboring class women like Elizabeth Hands, among others, “leaves us all the poorer.” (27)

Considering Hands’s intricate work with the multiple popular contemporary forms of the era, added with her ability to sass the upper-class readers who attempt to ridicule her without completely calling them out and ruining what little credibility she has really demonstrated the skill she has in her composition. With the limitations that she is faced with in her life—stuck

in the laboring class and differently educated than her so-called superiors—Hands’s poetry speaks for itself. The collection situates Elizabeth Hands as a skillful poet who can defend herself against her critics and as a worthy author who can successfully write within many modes of poetry, proving Hands deserves all the attention that her more-privileged contemporaries receive within literary academia.

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