



UNIVERSITY OF
LEICESTER

Women's Writing in the Midlands, 1750-1850

Susanna Watts and Elizabeth Heyrick

A Poetry Collection

Indeed I have had many very painful self accusations for having given you any occasion to accuse me so thoughtless - I see your accusations less delicate and affectionate perhaps I should feel them less sensibly - But in order to justify myself to you I know it is not necessary to enter into particulars, it may be sufficient to say that scarcely one day has passed since the receipt of your truly affectionate sympathizing letter in which it has not been my serious purpose to write to you, but every day has presented me with so many necessary claims on my time that I find it impossible to attend to them all, and when the business and duties of the day are

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Women's Writing in the Midlands, 1750-1850

Susanna Watts and Elizabeth Heyrick

Poetry by Richard Byrt, Jo Dixon, Anna
Larner, Jayne Stanton, Deborah Tyler-
Bennett and Pamela Ward

Commissioned by the Centre for New Writing, University of
Leicester, as part of the AHRC 'Women's Writing in the
Midlands, 1750-1850' project.

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A Note on the Cover

The cover of this pamphlet is comprised of a page from item 15D57/51 at the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland. This letter, sent in 1808 by Elizabeth Heyrick to Susanna Watts, is the last remaining item of correspondence between the two women. Image used with kind permission of the Record Office.

Preface

Rebecca Shuttleworth

This collection of poetry is the second work organised by the Centre for New Writing at the University of Leicester in connection with the AHRC funded project, 'Women's Writing in the Midlands, 1750-1850'. This collaborative project is run in connection with the Records Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland, and the valuable collection of materials held there on the lives and work of two Leicester women born in the 18th century, Susanna Watts and Elizabeth Heyrick. Their lives are the focus of an ongoing doctoral research project and have been the subjects of biographies by local author and historian Shirley Aucott, entitled *Elizabeth Heyrick 1769 to 1831: The Leicester Quaker Who Demanded the Immediate Emancipation of Slaves in the British Colonies* (Leicester, 2007) and *Susanna Watts 1768 - 1842. Author Of Leicester's First Guide, Abolitionist And Bluestocking* (Leicester, 2004).

The writing found in this pamphlet arises from a series of workshops run by poet Deborah Tyler-Bennet, and organised by the Centre for New Writing at the University of Leicester in collaboration with the Record Office for Leicester. Deborah, along with Jayne Stanton, received a commission from the Centre for New Writing to form their own poetic response to the archive materials on Watts and Heyrick's lives, leading to the poetic pamphlet *Friendship's Scrapbook*, published by the University of Leicester in 2015.

As part of these workshops a group of creative writers, led by Deborah, were brought to the Record Office to view and interact with the original materials that formed the inspiration for *Friendship's Scrapbook*, and encouraged to formulate their own creative responses to these writings. These varied materials provide a fascinating and detailed insight into the world of Elizabeth Heyrick and Susanna Watts, and their lives in Leicester during the 18th and early 19th centuries. As prolific authors they left behind numerous texts that show the passionate views they held on the abolition of slavery and animal rights, causes they both campaigned for despite social disapproval of women's involvement in political matters. They were to organise a boycott of slave grown sugar in Leicester, a practise that was to spread across Britain through their involvement with women's anti-slavery societies, as well as publishing their own anti-slavery periodical, *The Hummingbird*. In addition to their political writings, the Record Office also holds items such as Heyrick's family letters and a handwritten manuscript of family history, written by her brother Samuel Coltman. Watt's guide book to Leicester (the first ever written), poetry, hymns and children's literature are also preserved, along with her beautiful scrapbook filled with clippings, poetry and pictures.

The poetic responses found in this pamphlet exhibit the wide range of inspiration the lives and works of these women still offer to a contemporary audience, frequently drawing on issues of shared ethical, social and political concern which

form binding connections between the societies of past and present. Deborah Tyler-Bennett's work 'A Walk With Susanna Watts' begins our journey into Leicester's history, accompanying Susanna as she pens her guide book 'for the curious', recalling the 'canals disgorging iron; lime; coal' in the industrial past that shaped so much of the city we know today. Whilst Watt's guide book gives us a window to an urban past, her poetry equally promotes contemporary poetic reflection on the natural world, its consumption and destruction as well as the sensation of wonder it can evoke. Jayne Stanton's 'Slave Bird Box' brings together the beautiful hummingbird that represented Watt's and Heyrick's anti-slavery periodical, and the rampant consumption of exotic and slave grown goods in 18th century Britain. In contrast, Richard Byrt draws upon Susanna's intention to 'Instil in children gratitude to god' through admiration of the diversity of insect life, from 'beetles' glistening violet' to 'slugs creating patterns in wild parsley leaves'.

Just as Watt's writings offer an imaginative connection to the past, so her grave acts as a physical link between Leicester past and present in Jo Dixon's 'To The Late Miss Watts'. Although the gravestone records 'no achievements no good works', the records of her life allow us to commemorate her legacy in fighting for 'EAST INDIA SUGAR not made by SLAVES'. Slavery, a public and pressing reality in 18th century Britain, is further considered alongside its more insidious, less visible but no less present forms in our modern world. As Pamela Ward's 'In Praise of Elizabeth Heyrick and Susanna Watts' notes, 'we're still passing laws on slavery', so that 'now your days and ours are entwined/ Cotton strands that link heart and mind'.

Beyond such immediate ethical and political issues, echoing from past to present and back again, it also seems that direct, unmediated contact with archival materials also prompts imaginative reflection upon the nature of archives themselves in our own time of digital change, and upon scenes of writing and reading. Jo Dixon remembers the 'translucent sheets of foolscap' from the 'typescript of grandma's journal'. The typewriter now superseded by digital word processing, Anna Lerner's epistolary poem, itself a common form of 18th century verse, envisages Elizabeth Heyrick's work now 'scanned, uploaded', and specifies the kind of loss that this archival change involves, 'The physical page, the tangible evidence gone'. Intimate material contact, between then and now, between past and present writers, is still possible, but nonetheless receding with the advance of the digital archive. These poems, like the writings Watts and Heyrick, traverse the realms of nature, ethics, politics and literary art itself, and do so in registers of loss and recovery, celebration and regret, memory and history, materiality and mind. Through this, they enlarge and enliven the spaces of imagination within which archives can thrive, inform and provoke us.

Deborah Tyler-Bennett

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Extract from

Friendship's Scrapbook

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A Walk with Susanna Watts

Being a Guide to Strangers

Come, take this tour with me,
ghosting Leicester, forge of industry.
Dissent runs packed as water-roads;
canals disgorging iron; lime; coal;
mills and factories that deflowered
aspirations of a poor devoured.

Come, roam invisible to see
our city matron taking tea
(*Hummingbird* abetting her discover
blood-glutted histories of SLAVE SUGAR).

Penning guide book, 'for the curious,'
I noted how, come every Michaelmas,
Trinity Hospital paupers 'graced' High Cross
got-up as threadbare knights with loss
of dignity in rusting helmets – Gross
as sweetness bought via slavery,
honeying our bitterest green tea.

Come, saunter past and present, linger ... look ...
compose a poem to place in my scrap-book,
sing of the orphan's tears, the migrant's plight,
fragile paper hosting words of light.

Turn to speak, realise I'm gone,
this woman's work? Well, it was never done.

Moths with wings brown-foxed as age
rest briefly on my guide-book's welcoming page.

Notes on 'A Walk with Susanna Watts, Being a Guide to Strangers

(This work is taken from 'Friendship's Scrapbook', a sequence of five poems by Deborah Tyler-Bennett which are based chiefly on the archives of Susanna Watts and Elizabeth Heyrick in the County Record Office of Leicestershire and Rutland, South Wigston.)

The poem's style reflects tropes and poetic imagery evident in the women's time, and also ways the popular presses had of visually setting-up poetry. Thus, it is composed of rhyming couplets, with important words and phrases placed in upper-case. It is written to replicate Watts's anonymously titled *A Walk Through Leicester: Being a Guide to Strangers* (London: T.Hurst, 1804, ref L.B.) where imagery of city poverty, canals, and an address to an imaginary traveller (in my case a time-traveller) were all inspired by the book.

The poem was also hugely influenced by Watts's wonderful scrap-book dated February 11, 1834, and added-to by Clare Parks in 1865 (ref DE8170). Not only were the abolitionist songs and hymns in this a revelation, but also penny-sheets by Catnach and others. The moth which appears in the poem was an image that stayed with me, as a beautiful hawk-moth is painted near the scrap-book's end. I also looked at Watts's two books on insects and animals, *The Insects in Council: Addressed to Entomologists* (London: Hatchard, 1828) and *The Animal's Friend* (Leics: Cockshaw, 1825 refs LB) to inform my insect imagery and consider Watts's views on compassion.

Jayne Stanton

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Singing Bird Box

Slave bird, your wings
lack memory of flight; bead eyes
are blind to the light, a brass heart
deadweight as the bones of branches
barren of nests.

Slave bird, you reek
of stolen goods – the topaz throats
and emerald breasts of humming birds –
tiny souls, all skin-and-feather
traded for gold.

Slave bird, trophy-
dressed, who bids you flaunt your colours
like a fallen flag? Mimicry
is a mockery of the ghosts
you understudy.

Slave bird, sing
to the skies still listening for
the song of wings, a hymn to life
a beat that stirs the nectar flowers
and makes the air hum.

Slave bird, sing
an elegy for them.

Notes on 'Singing Bird Box'

The poem's 'slave bird' is a miniature automaton, concealed inside a small ornate box, (a singing bird box or *boîte à oiseau chanteur*) manufactured in Europe and popular during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The poem laments the loss of hummingbirds as part of the thriving trade in feathers at that time.

The poem was largely inspired by Susanna Watts' poem, 'Apology to the Birds' (from her writing journal/scrapbook). Other research material includes various articles regarding the condition and treatment of slaves in transportation, and an observation of caged hummingbirds, recorded in *The Humming Bird; or Morsels of Information on the Subject of Slavery with Miscellaneous Articles* (1825).

Richard Byrt

-

Instil in Children Gratitude to God

Instil in children gratitude to God.

For Spider's perseverance as she spins
webs, now frost-etched, dew-dropped, on this hedge.
For slugs creating patterns in wild parsley leaves.
Five-spotted, seven-spotted ladybirds
winging home. Red admirals that bask
on purple spikes of buddleia in the sun.

Instil in children gratitude to God.

For scurrying ants, teeming underneath each stone
to teach us industry. For bees that toil
ceaselessly to yield us honey for our tea.
Moths' flutter to the flickering candlelight
on summer nights. Dull chrysalides which spring
Queen of Spain fritillaries soaring to the sun.

Instil in children gratitude to God.

For beetles' glistening violet as they search
for mates, fat larvae hatched in rotting logs.
For snails that crawl across your hand,
leaving trails of silver; hide away
between rain-splattered steps and sandstone walls.

Instil in children gratitude to God.

For every living being in Creation.
For every precious celebration
on this Earth that flies, creeps, crawls.

Instil in children gratitude to God.

What You Would Find Now

No mazarine blues. No frosted yellows.
No horned-dung beetles left
for you to cherish. No slaves
on plantations in Jamaica.

No slaves in global firms. Or so they say.
But workers near Jakarta kicked, slapped,
called dogs and pigs. Forced to stand for hours
in blazing sun.

No slaves in England. So they say.
But Imee's trapped in a Hampstead flat, her passport
taken by The Boss. And Tom's coerced to lay
concrete slabs sixteen hours a day to pay off debts.

But no slaves on plantations in Jamaica.
No mazarine blues. No frosted yellows.
No horned-dung beetles left
for us to cherish.

Notes on ‘Instil in Children Gratitude to God’

This draft of “Instil in Children Gratitude to God” was completed in May, 2015, before Deborah Tyler-Bennett’s Workshops. The poem is based on Aucott’s (2004, pp16-17) citation of, and quotations from, Susanna Watts’ books for children on animals and insects. “Instil gratitude to God” (in the title and lines 1, 8, 15, 21 and 25) is found text from Watts (circa 1830), quoted below:

“...Rather than teaching a child to fear and dislike animals and insects, [Susanna Watts] recommends they be encouraged to recognize their value, particularly when saying their prayers:

“...The child is taught to give thanks for its sleep, etc. and why not instil, also, gratitude to God for the sheep which furnish its clothing, the cow that gives its milk, etc....”

(Watts circa 1830)

“...The following little Fable is...presented...under a serious, anxious, and most sincere desire to inculcate respect and tenderness towards all the inferior creatures...”

(Watts 1828)

(Aucott 2004, pp16-17, citing and quoting Watts 1828 and Watts circa 1830)

Lines 16 and 17. “violet”, “search”, “mates”, “fat larvae hatched” and “rotting logs” are found text in Wild Essex (Undated).

Lines 18 to 20. “crawl”, “your hand”, “trail”, “step” and “stone wall” are found text in (apparently anonymous) contributions to Tumblr (Undated).

‘Notes on What You Would Find Now’

According to Wikipedia (2015a), “mazarine blue” butterflies are now “vagrant only”, whilst “frosted yellow” moths and “horned dung beetles” are now extinct.

Details of “workers near Jakarta” are from: Mail Online (unnamed reporter) (2011). “Jakarta”, “kicked, slapped”, “to stand in” and “blazing sun”, and “call[ed] dogs and pigs” are found text from this source.

Details in lines 10 to 12 are based on several sources, including: Anti-Slavery (undated), Home Office and NSPCC (Undated), Kalaayan (2014), Odone (2014) and Rowntree Foundation (2007)

Jo Dixon

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THE LATE MISS WATTS.¹ (FROM A CORRESPONDENT)

grey-haired men digging hands
in empty pockets strangers
walking the city without a map

deli owners stocking ethical
products students gripping
translations of Medici's verse

they might gather

at the church of St Mary de
Castro by Miss Watts'
headstone where lichen traps
moisture has little to obscure
her dates her name no
achievements no good works

where I scoop up
daisies and buttercups
arrange them
in a charity-shop
bowl on her grave

gold letters
on blue glass
that boast

EAST INDIA SUGAR *not made by* ***SLAVES***

¹ From *The Leicester Chronicle*, Saturday
19th February 1842

On Reading *Some Memorials for Three Generations of a Family*

Indigo letters have bled through
from below, interrupting the sentences
in this typescript of grandma's journal:

translucent sheets of foolscap
keyed on a metallic-blue Imperial
while I country danced at school.

Now each page-flick loosens skin flakes
from Mum's fingers and green treasury tags
hook in the punched holes.

A sallow sheet rips at the margin,
falls from the manila folder on her lap,
settles beside her plaid slippers

and we pause to eat sandwiches from a tray.
Ruptured blood vessels are fanning out from her wrist.

Notes on ‘The Late Miss Watts (From a Correspondent)’ and ‘On Reading *Some Memorials for Three Generations of a Family*’

I can’t suggest what my poems might mean to a reader; I can only describe the context that inspired them.

‘The Late Miss Watts’ reflects my astonishment at the variety of Susanna Watts’ achievements. The archive holds a wealth of documents which display her talents as translator, tour guide, carer for the poor and elderly and abolition campaigner. Yet, to me, and I suspect many others, she was invisible. The title of this poem is again drawn from an original source document: her obituary in *The Leicester Chronicle* (1842). Set at her graveside it imagines the people whose lives may have been unknowingly affected by the way she lived her life.

The title of ‘On Reading *Some Memorials for Three Generations of a Family*’ was adapted from the family memoir written by Elizabeth Heyrick’s brother: Samuel Coltman. The archives of The Record Office of Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland hold a typescript of Coltman’s journal, in which he preserves his family’s history. Immediately, I was struck by the fragility the typescript, particularly the thinness of the paper and the tears around the punched holes. I began to think about the number of times the original document has been transcribed and why it had been preserved by successive generations. These ideas, and others, are explored in a contemporary context in this poem about three female members of the same family.

Pamela Ward

-

In Praise of Elizabeth Heyrick and Susanna Watts

Amid great men your voice was heard
Clear and soft like humming-bird
Leicester's doors were opened wide
Your mission pressed on those inside
‘Cast out sugar’, Life's not sweet
Tyrants drive the slaves to beat
Rich grain for crystals clear
Whiter than enslaved men fear

This city where you raised your banner
Freedom from serfdom: Susanna,
Elizabeth, hear my plea
We're still passing laws on slavery
Striving to save this planet from destruction
Praying to gods for earthly solution
Weaving our prayers, causing commotion
Attempting safe passage for all creation

Even now your days and ours are entwined
Cotton strands that link heart and mind
Cords stronger than cobweb veil
Thread through time a concrete seal
Twist the fabric, turn the frame
Release the knots, let fly the skein
Work the pattern, sew the seam
Free the fettered, design your dream

O ladies, unseen, yet born and known
“Students of our sweet English tongue”
We hope you sit beside that throne
Of ‘Him’ who surely makes us one
Slaves and knaves, all human kind
All creatures that can spring to mind
I scribe your names on Leicester's chart
Elizabeth, Susanna, you touched our hearts

James Elroy Flecker, To A Poet A Thousand Years Hence
Reference - “Student of our sweet English tongue”

Anna Lerner

'I will not retreat'

A poem as letter in the epistolary poem form.

Dear Elizabeth,

It breaks my heart to write to you today
Knowing how my words may burden you at your time of rest.
Please forgive me. But not to write to you, not to attest,
To not inform you, speak with you, not to make a fuss...

Elizabeth, our museums, our libraries, these sage
And learned institutions, the very testament to us,¹
Are in grave peril. For there is no money,
We're told, and it seems there is no will to value, to rescue, to save.

I know that you would lie awake to think of a plan,²
A subtle, censoring strategy.³ Send forth
A crafted note, to every woman, a rousing petition,
Appealing to the heartless, shape-shifting politician.

Make no mistake, as I write, the insistent digital rhythm,
Beats against the breaking day and knows no nightly rest.
The rhetoric that sells to us the notion
That computerisation is our saviour, that it deserves our devotion.

I fear your words will soon be scanned, uploaded, digitised, recoded,
To a series of nought and one. The brush of my hand against parchment,
Where your hand rested also, where you paused to write, to think,
The physical page, the tangible evidence gone.

But know this, Elizabeth, that I will not retreat,⁴ but with gentle influence
And steady resolution exert all that I am, for all that you were.
And work within the hallowed museum, to herald the object as King,
Reveal its stories, illuminate for all to see the truth it holds within.

But, at least, for now, fragile, I have your words, the paper, foxed and true,
In every way the material link, to the immortal you.
But here is the problem, the nub of this pain,
This letter, my thoughts, unsent, in vain.

Notes on 'I will not retreat'

¹ In Elizabeth Heyrick's publication *The Hummingbird*, 1825, there is a treatise entitled 'On Theme Writing' (p249). Within this piece Heyrick makes the link between the value we gain from historical knowledge and the rules for life we draw from it. Given how much she valued historical information it would be highly likely that she would have campaigned against the closure of museums and libraries, our important repositories of learning. 'Of what avail is it to acquire historical or biographical knowledge, if we do not draw from it rules by which to judge the conduct of others – and for a purpose infinitely more important – to regulate our own?'

² In Elizabeth's Heyrick's pamphlet entitled 'A Christmas-Box &c', dated 1809, from her collection of 'Treatises by Elizabeth Heyrick', Heyrick reveals the great concern she has for the causes she cares about. 'I must begin by assuring you, that my concern for your welfare is so great, that I have lost many hours' sleep in thinking how my good intentions towards you can be best accomplished. '

³ In Elizabeth's Heyrick's pamphlet entitled 'Appeal, &c', dated 1828, 'Appeal to Hearts', from her collection of "Treatises by Elizabeth Heyrick", Heyrick describes her strategy for effective campaigning by women. 'No cruel institutions or ferocious practices could long withstand her avowed and persevering censure.'

⁴ In Elizabeth's Heyrick's pamphlet entitled 'Appeal, &c', dated 1828, 'Appeal to Hearts', from her collection of "Treatises by Elizabeth Heyrick", Heyrick refers to the leading belief of men 'that Woman's noblest station is retreat.' She counters this argument with the words 'there is no calculating the extent and importance of the moral reformations which might be effected through the combined exertion of her gentle influence and steady resolution.'

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