

Mary Leapor

1722-1746

Critical re-assessment

- During the nineteenth century, her poems only occasionally appeared in anthologies
- She remained obscure until her rediscovery by feminist critics in the 1980s and 1990s
- Particular interest in her working-class origins and perspective
- Interest in her language, individual tone of voice, and poetic subtlety

A “natural poet”

- Female labouring-class writer – one of the few of the period, along with Ann Yearsley and Elizabeth Bentley
- Kitchen maid of Susanna Jennens, who encouraged her writing and allowed her the use of her library
- Mostly autodidact -- yet neoclassical
- Outside the traditional canon of eighteenth-century literature – new perspective on British life and ideas during the Augustan age

- Connections to Mary Astell and Mary Wortley Montagu
- Local celebrity – her plays and poems were circulated in manuscript around Brackely (Nottinghamshire)
- Turning point: Bridget Freemantle, the daughter of a former rector, became both her friend and mentor

- She encouraged Leapor to publish a volume of poetry by subscription, and attempted to have her blank verse tragedy, *The Unhappy Father*, produced in London at the Covent Garden Theatre – no success
- 1748: Bridget Freemantle arranged the posthumous publication of *Poems upon Several Occasions*

Work and ideas

- Models: Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift particularly his anti-blason poetry on woman
- Debunking of romantic myths vs importance of education for women
- She was seen as witty, poor, infirm, and unattractive (stereotype she battled)
- Pessimistic views on life
- Injustice is in the social order not in women themselves

- Central concerns:
 - injustices suffered by women and the poor
 - marriage and domestic life
 - friendship among women
 - standards of beauty
 - male violence and paternalism
- Her work consistently reflects her working-class background and the region of England where she was born and lived her entire life

An Essay on Woman (1751)

- Downfall women face when they get old
- Critique of women being judged solely on their appearance
- Like Alexander Pope: underlining contradictions in women
- Unlike Pope or Swift: protest vs injustices and not satire of women's conduct
- Satire of Pope's condescending attitude toward women