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*'Lactilla Tends her Fav'rite Cow': Ecocritical Readings of
Animals and Women in Eighteenth-Century British
Labouring-Class Women's Poetry* by Anne Milne

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Keywords

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Reviewed by Dometa Wiegand, Iowa State University

Anne Milne's first monograph, *“Lactilla Tends her Fav'rite Cow,”* explores a nascent field of research in a collection of readings of five poems by laboring class women poets of the eighteenth-century. While many scholars working in the field of eighteenth-century literature will be familiar with most of the poets as well as the tropes focusing on animals found in this study, few scholars will have examined these particular poems in depth. Certainly few would have considered these poems within the complicated theoretical frameworks of “deep” ecology and ecofeminism that Milne employs here. The purpose of her study, Milne notes, is to “suggest that ecocriticism and ecological feminism cannot thrive without historical projects” (32). The attention to under-represented poets and poems, as well as her desire to marry the theoretical and the historical, raises issues that should be important to all specialists in the field.

The complexity of the theoretical framework of “interlocking oppressions” guides the structure of the book. The strength of her argument is certainly in her theoretical approach, which, she claims, demonstrates that “issues of oppression” cut across “class, species, and gender boundaries”(129). Her extensive introduction (longer in length than any of the chapters devoted to explication of the poems) works to situate her project within the critical discourse of ecofeminism. The non-chronological structure linking the laboring class women poets with domesticated animals starts with discussions of eighteenth-century conceptions of “natural genius” and moves from the domestication of utilitarian animals to pets. Milne argues that the “natural genius” of the poet helps to shape the text of a poem and contributes to its “natural” construct, tying the working-class poet to the rural landscape *and* utilitarian labor. These poets write immersed in the cultural understanding of the “natural” in eighteenth-century society, which on the one hand romanticizes rural poetry, while on the other denigrates both animals and women.

Chapter one begins with an intertextual approach to defining types of domestication for women, animals, and poets. Here Mary Leapor's “Man the Monarch,” in concert with the writings of Mary Astell, John Locke, and the Comte de Buffon, is used to establish the predominant views of domestication operating in the early modern world. Her reading of Leapor's poem sets the stage for the rest of the book's association with and “subversive” readings of the “domesticated,” including animals, women, and poets. Chapter two explores Mary Collier's “The Woman's Labour” as it examines the beehive in the culture of the period. Milne gives an extended reading of Collier's poetic response to Stephen Duck's “The Thresher's Labour.” She sees Collier as addressing the negative linkage of women and animals in Duck's poem that denigrate both species. Milne argues that Collier's imagery of women as industrious bees effectively mitigates Duck's stance. In part, this counter reading of women as industrious “animals” emerges largely from Milne's exploration of the poem as a “nature” poem rather than strictly as a “labor”

poem. Her argument is that in focusing on both poems as “labor” poems, critics have failed to acknowledge Duck’s twin oppression of women and animals. Furthermore, shifting the focus to “nature” allows criticism to reveal the “broader implications” of Collier’s more positive linkage of women and bees. The problematizing of the readings continues in chapter three in the analysis of Elizabeth Hands’ “Written, Originally Extempore, on Seeing a Mad Heifer Run through the Village Where the Author Lives.” Through the extempore mode, Milne illuminates the poem’s subversive nature. Her point is to explore the time period’s complicit view of domestication by addressing the unstable boundaries of the temporal. Of great impact here is the focus on the poet writing as the event occurs. The spontaneity of the poetic act becomes associated with the spontaneous frenzy of the mad cow. Accordingly, both laboring-class woman poet and animal break with the surrounding constraints of eighteenth-century village life.

From the domestication of utilitarian (or useful) animals in the early chapters, Milne moves in chapters four and five to docile (or useless) animals. She explores Ann Yearsley’s “Written on a Visit” and Janet Little’s “From Snipe a Favourite Dog, To His Master” in terms of the structures of the domestication of animals, women, and poets. This domestication begs the question: what use within these cultural structures is the laboring-class woman poet? Milne opens up the unusual and striking possibility of the poet as patron’s pet. Implicit in her readings, then, is the poet’s self-awareness in identifying with the domesticated animal in the context of the “anxiety of authorship” (125).

The theoretical framework of interlocking oppressions is, as noted previously, one of the strengths of the text as it blurs the boundaries between women, animals, and poets and complicates our understanding of “natural,” “wildness,” and “domestication” through the lens of ecofeminism; the intent to view this complex theory alongside and integrated with “historical projects” is a noble effort to expand narrow theorizing. However, as with any complex project, maintaining all of these threads of thought satisfactorily is bound to create as many difficulties in execution as it solves in approach. Two main difficulties are evident in this ambitious task: the problem with the integration of historical texts and the analysis of the poems as *poems*. First, in an attempt to prevent history from complicating her theoretical exegesis, Milne’s choice and use of historical texts often seems strange. While the author attempts to ground these poems in early modern thought, especially the scientific, she misses many real opportunities. For example, her text often refers to taxonomies but only in a rather vague way—failing utterly to incorporate Linnaean studies, which would surely yield interesting assessments of animals (and humans). Further, in a book that strives to apply “deep ecology,” there are, amazingly, no texts by the most famous of eighteenth-century ecologists, Alexander von Humboldt, often recognized as the “father of ecology.” Given the fact that the field of ecology (as we have come to know it) was born in the eighteenth century, surely interfacing the theory of ecology within a historical context would contribute to a more nuanced discussion of these poems. Secondly, while Milne’s approach does yield some rather illuminating aspects to the poems themselves, the reader cannot help but experience at times a concern that Milne has forgotten that these poems are, in fact, poems.

Milne has chosen the poems in this study in part because they are not only part of an excluded genre (laboring-class women's poetry), but also because even within that narrow subfield, they are poems that have been critically neglected. Yet, although Milne asserts that the poems here are understudied, the text of her project assumes a deep reader familiarity. An example of this occurs in chapter three, where Milne offers only six full lines of a poem—a poem rarely studied—that purports to be the main focus of her discussion. Milne does acknowledge in her conclusion that there is much work to be done and that the boundaries of her study were tightly circumscribed. Certainly the call to historicize ecofeminist readings is an important one. Given that specialists in the field of laboring-class women poets are striving to expand historically sensitive analyses of such poetry, we should view Milne's book as an essential step in this arduous process.