

Ann Yearsley, *Earl Goodwin*, and the Politics of Romantic Discontent

Chris Foss

Number 71, Fall 2018

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1074531ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1074531ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Université de Montréal

ISSN

2563-2582 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Foss, C. (2018). Ann Yearsley, *Earl Goodwin*, and the Politics of Romantic Discontent. *Romanticism on the Net*, (71), 1–15.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1074531ar>

Article abstract

There is a dearth of more substantial critical studies on Ann Yearsley's tragic drama *Earl Goodwin* in general, and while the few out there have helpfully illuminated the play's representation of the historical plight of women and the poor during Anglo-Saxon times, as well as its application to their current predicaments in Romantic-era England and France, they have tended to leave unexplored the ways in which Yearsley simultaneously is clarifying and extending her anger at and frustration with the class- and gender-based discrimination she experienced firsthand in the fallout with her mentor Hannah More over the profits from her first book. This article aims to fill this gap by delineating the many ways in which *Earl Goodwin* represents, on one level, her ongoing response to the defamation she suffered in the wake of More's public campaign to ruin her reputation. Documenting the inextricability of the play's explicit social and political critiques with Yearsley's ongoing response to the More fiasco should in fact reinforce the extent to which her more familiar initial reactions are as fundamentally politically as they are personally motivated. *Earl Goodwin* offers readers a positive example of how to respond to abuses of power without resorting to revenge while still actively resisting, always refusing to airbrush the inequities she and others like her (women, the poor, and especially working-class women) continue to face day in and day out, enduring insult and injustice, but remaining undaunted in the commitment to the cause of beneficial social change.

© Chris Foss, 2018



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>



This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>



Romanticism on the Net

Ann Yearsley, *Earl Goodwin*, and the Politics of Romantic Discontent

Chris Foss
University of Mary Washington

Abstract

There is a dearth of more substantial critical studies on Ann Yearsley's tragic drama *Earl Goodwin* in general, and while the few out there have helpfully illuminated the play's representation of the historical plight of women and the poor during Anglo-Saxon times, as well as its application to their current predicaments in Romantic-era England and France, they have tended to leave unexplored the ways in which Yearsley simultaneously is clarifying and extending her anger at and frustration with the class- and gender-based discrimination she experienced firsthand in the fallout with her mentor Hannah More over the profits from her first book. This article aims to fill this gap by delineating the many ways in which *Earl Goodwin* represents, on one level, her ongoing response to the defamation she suffered in the wake of More's public campaign to ruin her reputation. Documenting the inextricability of the play's explicit social and political critiques with Yearsley's ongoing response to the More fiasco should in fact reinforce the extent to which her more familiar initial reactions are as fundamentally politically as they are personally motivated. *Earl Goodwin* offers readers a positive example of how to respond to abuses of power without resorting to revenge while still actively resisting, always refusing to airbrush the inequities she and others like her (women, the poor, and especially working-class women) continue to face day in and day out, enduring insult and injustice, but remaining undaunted in the commitment to the cause of beneficial social change.

Biographical Note

Chris Foss is Professor of English at the University of Mary Washington, where he specializes in nineteenth-century British literature, with a secondary emphasis on disability studies. He was lead editor of the 2016 essay collection *Disability in Comic Books and Graphic Narratives*, to which he contributed a chapter on autism and manga. His most recent publication is "‘For the future let those who come to play with me have no hearts’: The Affect of Pity in Oscar Wilde's ‘The Birthday of the Infanta’" (which appeared in the Fall 2017 number of *Journal of Narrative Theory* as part of a special issue on Dis/Enabling Narratives). Foss is now the author of over 20 scholarly publications and over 40 academic conference papers.

1. As leading critic Kerri Andrews and others have noted, the vast majority of scholarship on Ann Yearsley has focused almost exclusively on her first two volumes of poetry, *Poems on Several Occasions* (1786) and *Poems on Various Subjects* (1787), concerned primarily with the extent to which her poems are molded by and/or are pushing back against the patronage system upon which she was forced to rely in order to publish her writing. Such work productively has exposed the tension in these poems between the usual concomitant stances of (both class- and gender-based) deference and submissiveness entailed by such relationships, on the one hand, and her defiant expressions of protest and resistance through both her style and her content, on the other. At the heart of this tension, for many, is her relationship with her initial mentor Hannah More and their ensuing rivalry, perhaps most explicitly embodied in their competing anti-slavery long poems from 1788: More's *Slavery, A Poem* and Yearsley's *A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave-Trade*.
2. Andrews's wonderful 2013 monograph *Ann Yearsley and Hannah More, Patronage and Poetry* does a superb job extending our understanding of how Yearsley's relationship to patronage and her sense of competition with More play out across Yearsley's whole career, most crucially between 1789 and 1796. Disappointingly, however, the book offers only a brief 5-page section on *Earl Goodwin* that is focused on how the play came to be produced, not on its content. (Indeed, the only quotation Andrews cites from the manuscript actually is from the Epilogue, which was written by William Meyler instead of Yearsley.) There is a dearth of more substantial critical studies on *Earl Goodwin* in general, and while the few out there have helpfully illuminated the play's representation of the historical plight of women and the poor during Anglo-Saxon times, as well as its application to their current predicaments in Romantic-era England and France, they have tended to leave unexplored the ways in which Yearsley simultaneously is clarifying and extending her anger at and frustration with the class- and gender-based discrimination she experienced firsthand in the fallout with More over the profits from her first book. Interestingly, even as these studies do typically cast Yearsley's decision to try her hand at drama as a conscious attempt to upstage More in the arena where her former mentor had achieved her greatest success to date (with her own Anglo-Saxon tragedy, *Percy*, first staged over a decade previously but recently revived with Sarah Siddons at Drury Lane), they neglect to draw connections between Yearsley's plot and her personal experience as a writer who had strong reason to resent the patronage system's class- and gender-based discrimination. This article aims to fill this gap by delineating the many ways in which *Earl Goodwin* represents, on one level, her ongoing response to the defamation she suffered in the wake of More's public campaign to ruin her reputation.

3. This is not to ignore those scholars who have been calling for a move away from overtly biographical readings that can encourage primarily gossipy interest in Yearsley's life and work, giving too short shrift to her intellect and her skill. In fact, this article should encourage a re-visioning of the overtly personal early rejoinders to *More* in Yearsley's "Narrative" (which she had printed with the fourth edition of *Poems on Several Occasions* and reprinted with *Poems on Various Subjects*) and in her second book, revealing these rejoinders as already reflective of her broader discontent with economic, political, and social injustice. That is, documenting the inextricability of the play's explicit social and political critiques with Yearsley's ongoing response to the *More* fiasco should in fact reinforce the extent to which her more familiar initial reactions are as fundamentally politically as they are personally motivated.

4. Paula R. Feldman has suggested *Earl Goodwin* is "one of [Yearsley's] most explicitly feminist works" and one that more broadly "endorses violence as a means to achieve justice and individual rights" (835). While the few critics who have written articles or chapters on the play do not tend to go so far as to see it as an endorsement of rebellion or riot, they do all nevertheless stress its progressive sociopolitical agenda. According to Moira Ferguson, Yearsley advocates for "the cause of women and peasants" (262) while exposing how "religious, patriarchal, and economic tyranny . . . fuse and intersect" (264). Katherine Newey (in the words of Catherine Burroughs) argues that Yearsley's interest in the early stages of the French Revolution encourages her to explore "some of the ways in which women have historically challenged domestic tyranny" (4). For Cecilia Pietropoli, women playwrights like *More* and Yearsley undeniably allude to Romantic-era England with their Anglo-Saxon history plays (60), with *Earl Goodwin* in particular potentially growing out of a nostalgia for an earlier golden Age of English liberty brought on by the French Revolution (69).

5. Setting out as Yearsley does to rehabilitate the reputation of the historical Goodwin (typically seen as a power-hungry schemer), it is easy to agree with Jacqueline Pearson that Yearsley seems acutely "aware of how history could be distorted by groups with vested interests for propagandist purposes" (126). Indeed, for Pearson, the combination of Yearsley's critical view of George III and her "support of the first phase of the [French] Revolution" (128) generate an interest in "class restructuring and a new social justice" (132), even as in the end her main emphasis seems more upon the "primacy of family relationships" and the "politicization of domesticity" that entails for her (136). Along similar lines, Greg Kucich's important short piece on women's historiography posits a "doubled resistance to authority" (6) in *Earl Goodwin* that offers a "sympathetic

embodiment of female suffering” (3) under “the pernicious alliance of tyrannical masculine legal and ecclesiastical systems” (6). As Newey observes, Yearsley as a dramatist (like More before her with *Percy*) attempts to “manipulate[] the cultural capital of historical tragedy in order to claim the citizenship largely denied [women] through other political and social institutions,” intervening in the “masculine realm of national politics” (74) while trumpeting “female honor” and “filial respect” as not only Saxon but properly English values (81).

6. What all of this should suggest is that Yearsley’s vexed experience of the mentor/mentee relationship markedly informs her anger at the pervasive class- and gender-based discrimination of her day and motivates her historical representation of such injustice in *Earl Goodwin* as profoundly as it did her personal responses to More in her “Narrative” and *Poems on Various Subjects*. For, whether one sees Yearsley as a proletariat hero along with Ferguson or as writer with middle-class pretensions along with Mary Waldron, all seem to agree that More (along with her most famous confidantes concerning the controversy, Elizabeth Montagu and Horace Walpole) viewed her protégé as someone, owing to her class and gender, who was dangerously vulnerable to the idleness, luxury, pride, and vanity that success as a writer might encourage, to the detriment of her God-given maternal duties. Yearsley’s awareness of such bias is precisely why (as Julie Cairnie has argued) in her rejoinders to More she speaks from the position of a wronged mother rather than a wronged writer (358). Far from being merely a rhetorical ploy, however, as Andrews reminds us, Yearsley’s “staunch defense of herself” arises out of her “perception of a real threat to Yearsley’s role in her own family” (155). Indeed, as Ferguson points out, Yearsley’s mother’s death from starvation, and the rest of the family (Yearsley herself, and her children) being brought to the point of near death, not long before her “discovery” by More surely must have clarified in the most painful fashion what was at stake for those deprived of means and power in this society—“that resistance was literally a life-and-death affair” (247). And it would have been brought home again in the span between the performance of *Earl Goodwin* and its publication as Yearsley unsuccessfully sought legal redress for the severe beatings her children suffered at the home of the Mayor of Bristol (one of her sons even being beaten into unconsciousness).
7. In Yearsley’s “Narrative,” the only real opportunity she had to address subscribers and the broader reading public before her new volume would appear the next year, she begins by noting how “irksome” it is that she is tasked with “exculpat[ing] [her]self from the monstrous charge on ingratitude” (*PVS* xv). She immediately indicates she knows full well that, far from being a

reciprocal partnership, her relationship with her former patroness is one in which More holds all the power. She insists, “every return that powerless gratitude could make, I have offered” (xv), but her questioning of More’s decision to hold all of her profits in a trust she could not access on her own was seen as not merely “ungrateful” (xix) but unbefitting her station and unbecoming her sex. In explaining how she came to be “falsely represented” (xvi), she relates she requested access to the trust “for the future security of [her] children,” but More accused her of being drunk to even dare question her in that way (xvii). Condemning More’s “inconstant capricious affection” (xix), she catalogues her mentor’s “low scurrility” in charging her not only with “drunkenness,” but also “gambling” and “extravagance,” as well as calling her “wretched,” “base,” and a “spendthrift” (xix). In their final interview, her patroness told her she was a “savage” and that she had “a reprobate mind, and was a bad woman” (xx).

8. Yearsley explains, “I felt as a mother deemed unworthy the tuition or care of her family” (xvi), but it was precisely out of her commitment to her maternal duties—or, as she puts it, out of “motives the most powerful and natural that can possess the female breast” (xxi)—that she confronted More in the first place, and so she cannot “repent the requisition,” even though “it has been attended with so much calumny, and *so many false representations*” (xxi). It is More herself who Yearsley says forced her hand, “by injuring my character, after chaining me down by obligations” (xvi). Because More was in a privileged position to disseminate her version of events both to subscribers and to the public more generally, Yearsley’s character, owing to More’s “false charges,” has been “tinged with every vice that can disgrace the sex” (xxi). It is only in her “Narrative” that the mentee can respond. For Yearsley, “character is more precious than life,” and More holds the decided advantage of being “shielded by popular opinion” owing to her role as patron (xxiv). This makes More, in Yearsley’s eyes, all the more “ungenerous,” for not only are “her arrows of the most malignant kind,” but she “aims [them] at a defenceless breast” (xxiv). Such “malicious detraction” from one who can “boast of possessing” fame and virtue suggests to her she is the victim of “*a Proteus*” (xxiv), someone not only holding all the advantage but manipulating the outcome through injurious craft and deception.
9. Yearsley carries on her protest against More’s privileged exploitation of powerless gratitude in *Poems on Various Subjects*. Yearsley references More’s character assassination at multiple points across the volume, include the opening poem “Addressed to Sensibility,” which begins with an apostrophe to sensibility as the “busy nurse / Of *Inj’ries* once receiv’d” (1) and goes on to feature a speaker whose “bosom bleeds” from the “deadly arrow” of “haughty Insult” and its wreck of

Friendship (3). Another notable offering is “Addressed to Revenge,” the “dire tormentor of the injur’d soul,” “holding the brand / of Insult to [the speaker’s] sight” (101). Revenge urges “The wounded *Victim*” to “pluck[] the arrow forth” (101-102) and use it to strike back at “vile Calumny” in the name of “injur’d Innocence” (103), but Yearsley’s speaker knows that “base *Revenge*, shall never” “ease [the] lab’ring heart” (102-103). It is the explicit theme of “To Those Who Accuse the Author of Ingratitude.” During the course of the poem, she complains of the “boasts of incapacious souls” (58), of “noos’d opinion” and “creeping curse” (59), of the “love of base detraction” and the “charm” of “a flowing tongue” (60).

10. The most revelatory poem, though, regarding her frustration with her disadvantaged positioning within the patronage system is “On Being Presented with a Silver Pen,” a meditation on Friendship featuring a speaker whose soul has been “chill’d” by “Insult” (84), the victim of “Doubt, Suspicion, and Despair” and “Distrust” (85). Strikingly, the speaker foregrounds the ability of “Too pow’rful Wealth” to assuage or exacerbate the “Mis’ry” and “Pain” to which “pow’rless feelings” are exposed, even as she contrasts the external cures of “haughty Wealth” and its scorn with Friendship’s true “balm” for “the wounded soul” (87). The most intriguing part of the poem immediately follows these stanzas, featuring the speech of a “self-applauding” and “taunting” “cooly-wife” who is dismissed by the speaker after her harangue against Friendship, but who nonetheless unwittingly provides a biting critique of the invidious inequities of the class system (88). She sarcastically calls for “Prudence” when it comes to “reliev[ing] Distress,” for if one does not “Keep wretches humble” they will, “once reliev’d,” “oft-times prove our *Charity* deceiv’d” (88). She urges her audience not to “trust” the “merits” of those they might deign to aid, as if they are “poor” then “they *must*” by nature have “very few” merits (88). Above all, she insists, “Think not a savage virtuous,” for “He surely *must* be humble, grateful, true, / While *he*’s dependent—the superior you” (88). Instead, she exhorts all patrons of the poor, broadly speaking, to “confine, / His future acts by obligation’s line” (88).
11. Throughout Yearsley’s initial response to her fallout with More, it is clear that she is aware of the class- and gender-based nature of her mentor’s attack, but as her response is so personal, it is easy for those critics who might wish to write it off as merely self-serving to do so—critics such as Joyce Marjorie Sanxter Tompkins, who sees “all of Yearsley’s post-More texts [as] sullied by a bitter obsession with her former patron” (Cairnie 359) and dismisses Yearsley’s frustration with her unfair treatment to be nothing more than the “ill-mannered” “jeers of an angry peasant” (qtd. in Cairnie 359). *Earl Goodwin*, however, with its broader historical concern about how false

representation undergirds the perpetuation of the unfair privileges of wealth and sex, suggests her ongoing interest in the topic of injured reputation actually stems from her consistent public-spirited commitment to social justice, for women and for the poor in particular. Indeed, throughout *Earl Goodwin* Yearsley continually resorts to the same language and rhetoric as in her earlier rejoinders to More in order to convey the unfair personal hardships and the unacceptable social inequities facing women and the poor. She consistently showcases how the powerful may chain or wound those society has rendered most defenseless against their malice, how Protean craft and deception may employ suspicion and false representation to defame and defraud both particular individuals and whole classes of people.

12. Yearsley indicates her interest in this nexus of issues in the very first sentence of the Preface she wrote for the print version, immediately addressing the charge that she has “departed from verity of character” (*EG* v) with her play, since she sees part of her accomplishment as a rehabilitation of an unfairly maligned reputation instead. Blaming “the infernal spirit of Party,” “the chain of Superstition,” and “the cup of Calumny from the hand of the furious Bigot,” she insists the name of her play’s titular hero has been sullied by “the malignant shade of ancient Malice” (v). According to Yearsley, “the memory of the noble Earl [has] been branded, himself accused, and the rustic champion of his virtues illiberally attacked” (vi). She remains undaunted, however, concluding her Preface by insisting, “Such feeble efforts shall never arrest the generous current of my thought, when I would defend *an injured Reputation*” (vi).

13. Indeed, it is an injured reputation with which Goodwin’s opening speech is concerned, as he bemoans the “detraction” (2) of Emma’s “virtue” (1), worrying aloud what may protect other women—be they “dow’rless maids, / Unjoyful widows, or the faithful wife” (1)—from a similar fate when even the Queen Mother is condemned to walk through “burning ploughshares” (ix) after the Archbishop of Canterbury has accused her of sexual profligacy with Alwine, Bishop of Winchester. Encouraged by his sons to intervene, Goodwin initially seems to hesitate since his daughter, Editha, is Queen. Edward treats her poorly, virtually ignoring her, and Goodwin worries he must not allow “private woe” (4) to motivate a public discontent that could “plunge a guiltless nation deep in blood,” especially as “Already do the groans of lab’ring hinds / Make the winds heavy” (5). Yet even as he resents hot-headed Tostie’s suggestion he is a “passive dupe” (4) if he does not defend Editha’s “deep wrongs” (3), asking him, “Did’st thou e’er find me slumb’ring when the voice / Of injur’d justice pierc’d the ear of honour?” (4), eventually he begins to come round to the idea he must lead a rebellion against the King in the name of the people. “I freely

own,” he relates, “That when the poor Plebans late were tax’d, / And out of means, nearly too scant for nature, / . . . my fruitless tear / Dropp’d on the threshold of the wretched cot, / As their pale infants met me” (5).

14. Tostie “Eagerly waits revenge” (6), but Editha herself asks him to “Talk not of vengeance” (9) when she arrives, in part because she sees her husband as “a guiltless man, misled by information,” who has “arraign[ed] [her] fame” out of his “love of virtue” (8). Goodwin remains torn, acknowledging how all are “slaves” under Edward’s rule, yet worried that “liberty’s strong act / Would press out myriads of defenceless souls” (10). In the end, though, he decides he must act to end Edward’s “Extortion” of the people, which “leaves each subject half a meal, / . . . as the shiv’ring hand, / Pinch’d doubly by the winds and pallid want, / Reluctant feeds the lazy priest” (16). He insists the poor, whom he calls his “fellow-subjects,” must “be preserv’d, not made our victims” (17). He will not lead for “the plaudit of the croud,” as he refuses to bend his conscience to “Proteus-like opinion” (17), but only in order that “the wrongs / Of this much-injur’d land shall have redress” (19).

15. In this first act, Yearsley strongly condemns the abuses of power by court and church that threaten the poor with want and starvation, and she does this through language that evokes her response to More, through an emphasis on detraction and injury perpetrated by Proteus-like craft and misinformation. But, as a brief scene before the end of Act I reinforces, she intertwines this emphasis on class with a concern for the vulnerable place of women under patriarchal control. In a conversation between the real villain of the piece, Canterbury, and his right-hand monk Lodowicke, we learn how Edward was “deceive[d]” by “craft” (15) to allow his mother to be subject to her “fiery ordeal” (ix): “Thro’ every age it had been *our* chief care / To rule the thought of *Woman*: keep her chaste. To that sole end, gave her no other merit; / But held the threat of Heav’n, the flame of hell, / And world’s contempt, up to her frightened sense, / If once she dar’d *Man’s free example*” (14). Yearsley picks this theme up again at the start of Act II, as the king and archbishop justify the misogyny upon which their tyranny over women’s lives relies. Yearsley opens the act with Edward employing (to the opposite end) much of the same language of suspicion and taint she herself utilized in her “Narrative” and poems, including a note clarifying, in case it was not already obvious, that her approach to Edward’s “narrow” and “ignorant” view that “despotic rule over woman is infallible” is a “sarcastic” one (20). Edward announces, “O feeble woman! lost when unrestrain’d, / And virtuous but from terror, how may man / Believe you innocent? your ‘witching smile / We will suspect, your cheerfulness condemn,

/ your friendships taint with calumny, and plead / The friend you dare approve is meant for vice:
/ Thus shall you live suspected, ev'ry joy, / Tho' guiltless, be arraign'd by the hot fiend, / Inhuman
Jealousy! your sex's freedom / Be lost, and tyranny alone secure you" (20). Canterbury concurs:
"woman needs example. Woman falls / If she but *doubt* our rules are not divine; / Then where's
her basis, if we once permit / Her curious mind to stretch beyond our bound? / It must not be!
custom and *law* are ours; / And when frail woman errs, we must enforce them" (21).

16. Then, after a brief speech by Alwine, in which he attempts to "calm" his "injur'd soul" in the face of "the shame of public clamour," "loud reproach, / False wit, and laughing insult" by insisting he will not "blot / a life well spent, by nourishing revenge" (22), Emma miraculously passes her trial without pain or death, much to Canterbury's consternation. Her vindication lends extra heft to her speeches in the immediate aftermath, which begin with her claiming what all have witnessed, in spite of her success, is the "*parricide* of virtue" (24). For regardless of the proof of her innocence, the "Shame" of the spectacle has destroyed her honor and fame regardless. Still, since "Insult, well borne, / Affords a stubborn energy of soul" (26), she speaks out strongly against Canterbury's "malice" and "deceitful practices" (25), as well as against "undeserv'd disgrace" and "false opinion" (26) more generally. "*When woman dares perfection,*" she proclaims, "on her breast / She wears an aegis, which no poison'd dart / Of calumny can pierce" (26). Thus, though "defam'd" by "slander," she asserts she will "proudly dare opinion," and departs with a fiery dart of her own: "Now learn, / Thou good archbishop, and thou *pious* king, / To play your superstitious arts on those / Who dare not *think like Emma*" (27).
17. Edward shortly thereafter learns Canterbury's "malice" and "deceitful practices" toward the poor also may be about to backfire, as news about Goodwin's open rebellion leads him to ponder aloud if "discontent" has "grown busy" (28). Leofricke, the leader of Edward's army, immediately thereafter enters and declares Goodwin a "rebel" (29). For Edward, this is the last straw in his strained tolerance of Editha, and even though Leofricke argues strongly on her behalf, he calls his queen "vile" and insists that, because of her, "Vice / Poisons [his] private peace" (30). He suggests her "craft conceals / The deep designs of Goodwin" (30), and when she is ushered into his presence he accuses her of "dissimulation" in hiding her infidelity from him as well (31). Editha immediately calls herself a "much-injur'd wife" (31) and pleads with her husband to "shake suspicion from [his] soul" (32), reassuring him "Revenge / Chills not my bosom's tenderness—I look / with eyes of pity on thee," for it is only the "hypocrite" Canterbury, her accuser, whom she blames (32). Edward, however, is, according to the stage directions, "enraged"

(32). He calls her a “Presumptuous woman” and orders her under guard to an abbey (32), silencing her protests by telling her, “Thy craft, thy father’s treason, and my scorn, / Plead loud against thy pray’r” (33). As she is led away, the Queen calls Canterbury and his monks (who have been siphoning off wealth and other possessions from the people on England) the “scourges of the world” and, aligning herself, not them, with reason, “scorn[s] [their] pow’r” (34). Through Editha, Edward’s scorn of both women and the poor are married in an aggressive arrogance.

18. Act III returns to the focus on class-based injustice. As Goodwin proclaims, “STRIKE up the sounds of war,” he rehearses how his rebellion is in defense of the poor who suffer under Edward from Canterbury’s scheming (35). Disowning “rage, / Or private grief, malice, or cruel pride” as his incentives, he asserts, “Despair / Bends down our sons of industry, pale want / Robs the young cheek of ruddy hue; while craft, / In venerable trimming, chains our king / To tyrant superstition” (35). His soldiers shout, “Redress for England!” (36) as they prepare to march, and Goodwin urges them to “strike / For England’s wrongs—for Emma!” (36). When ambassadors from the King’s army appear, Tostie is furious, insisting upon “vengeance” (37), but Goodwin agrees to meet Edward. While they await his arrival, Canterbury continues to poison the king against the Saxon leader, reminding him “discontent is oft times reprobation” (39), a quality the king himself then extends to his subjects: “The body of my people is too proud, / Voluptuous to excess; nor e’er content / With necessary comfort” (40). Canterbury pushes it even further, in language that would resonate for Yearsley’s audience with the French Revolution: “they call / Loudly for liberty: their threats have reach’d / Our pious King; and monarchy now reels” (40).
19. Face to face, Edward commands Goodwin, “speak loud your injuries,” which the Saxon makes clear in his reply, again, stem from public discontent rather than private woe: “England speaks by me, / Pleading her public funds are deeply drain’d / To swell the priestly revenue. Her sons / Oppress’d, till they forsake the glebe untill’d, / And stand like statues stiffen’d by despair” (41). He continues, “Relieve thy people’s burthen.—Why affright / The simple mind from honest toil, or charge / The clown with ghostly cumbrance? If thy priests / Act for the Deity, ah, bid them spare, / Like him, a pow’rless race!” (42). In Goodwin, Yearsley clearly envisions a champion for the powerless, a voice for the voiceless. And, again, as throughout, she intertwines her twin concerns with class- and gender-based oppression. She has Goodwin follow up the above demands with a further complaint about Emma’s treatment, remarking, “Thy mother, by the influence of thy monks, / And wily Canterbury, was to shame / A public sacrifice,” and suggesting “black suspicion” yet muddies “the taint’d thought o’ the people” (42) even after her vindication

by fire because of the power and influence of her accusers and the institutions they represent: church and crown. As perhaps to be expected, the King remains unmoved, until, as luck would have it, a papal legate arrives to back Goodwin (“this man that pleads not for himself” [47]) and to present the king with a “list of many errors / Committed by weak Canterbury” (46), upon reading which Edward at last agrees to banish the Archbishop for his “extortions / From the poor peasantry” (48).

20. Intriguingly, Canterbury portrays himself as the victim in this, with recourse to the very vocabulary of insult we have seen Yearsley apply to herself, Emma and Editha, and the poor more generally. He refers to his “wounded soul” (48) as he must “stand the mark / Of laughing-insult” (47-48), yet what would seem to distinguish him from the true victims is his dedication to, rather than disavowal of, revenge, warning Goodwin, “Tempt not my vengeance!” (47). He shares this antagonistic orientation (and misogyny) with Tostie, who is so furious that war will not commence, after all, he instigates a swordfight with Harold after naming him a “coward” (49) and as “dastardly as woman!” (50). Though disarmed by his brother, he persists in his anger, yelling as he leaves, “Perish ye ties / Of nature: father! Brother! I renounce / All pleas but those of firm and lasting rage” (51). Similarly, in the next scene, Canterbury fumes, “Revenge, where art thou? Could my dagger’s point / But meet the throat of Goodwin ere I go, / My soul would still retain her pride” (51). With the Saxon out of his own reach, he must rely on Lodowicke, which he apparently has done before in a plot wherein he had his henchmonk murder a young prince in order to attempt to pin the blame on Goodwin. In a commentary on “mungrel villainy” (53), the Archbishop reveals yet again the inextricability of his class prejudice and misogyny: “What simple wretch / Would meekly bear pride’s wounding insult, if / He dar’d avenge himself? What lovely maid / Would virtue fix on self-denial, if / She dar’d be less severe? What hungry knave / Would thriveless spread the snare of cunning, if / He boldly dar’d to give a master-stroke, / And foil by craft, rogues richer than himself?” (53-54). The act ends with Canterbury extracting an oath from Lodowicke to murder Goodwin and gloating, “my revengeful soul / Shall feed on its contents: this oath will sooth / My unappeased spirit as I move / Insulted thro’ the world” (56-57).
21. Canterbury will not live to learn of Lodowicke’s success, however. Uneasy that, while “Gaudy pow’r / Secur’d [him] long from vengeance,” he now must “fear the fierce plebian throng” (64), he meets his end at the hands of Tostie, his Saxon foil when it comes to revenge, not long into Act IV. Tostie, like the Archbishop, sees himself as the injured party, swearing the land must

suffer war to “atone / For Tostie’s injuries” and that his “Revenge / For [his] insulted honour” will only be sated if he seize the crown for himself (65). Coming upon Canterbury by chance, Tostie mortally wounds him, leaving him for dead. By further chance, Alwine discovers his dying detractor, who repents of his assassination plan but cannot get all the details out in time before his last breath.

22. Though Goodwin’s cause has been vindicated, as her Preface already has suggested, Yearsley understands that reputations are not only contested in one’s present moment but potentially subject to historical revision as well. Thus, her Goodwin worries that Tostie’s “treachery” has not only “wounded [his] heart, chilling its strongest force,” but “soil’d” the father’s fame and virtue such as may outweigh his role in having “Pluck’d off the galling chain of proud oppression, / And bade the bending wretch look up to freedom” (69). Harold attempts to reassure him that, however history might rewrite their story, they must remain content in the knowledge they were in the right: “If future ages, / Thro’ narrow ignorance, zeal, or party rage, / Convert the glorious deed to shame, while truth / Scorns the black record, shall we tremble *now*, / And shrink from virtue’s standard? I confess / We do not hold th’ advantage. Our good swords / Were never meant, like monkish pens, to cut / Deep channels for a lie” (70). Ironically, Lodowicke’s evil deed deprives the Duke of the chance to solidify his legacy as a powerful voice for Liberty, perhaps paving the way for what the Preface has presented as the tarnishing of the Saxon’s reputation on down into the Romantic era.

23. In Act V, Goodwin, reunited with Editha, counsels her to remain undaunted by her husband’s treatment of her owing to Canterbury’s lies: “let not insult, scorn, / Slighted affection, or, what’s worse, the sting / Of black ingratitude from those thou lov’st, / Rob thee of self-applause” (78-79). Even in the entertaining interlude during a banquet at the palace Yearsley consistently plies her theme of the dangers of gossip and propaganda when employed by the powerful against the powerless. Siward, a level-headed but loyal noble, jests at wit as the antagonist of “true merit,” as Edward acknowledges “how keen, / How deeply poison’d, is the dart that wounds it!” (81). Picking up on that metaphor, Siward arraigns “ignorance,” “envy,” “contumely,” and “pride” for drawing “the hot arrow of insulting wit” (81), before teasing Lodowicke with a song about the “delusive craft” of a monk (84). Lodowicke would seem to have the last laugh when he poisons Goodwin, but he repents of the deed and begs for the Saxon’s forgiveness as he lays dying, which he receives. Alwine arrives too late with the oath he discovered on Canterbury’s person. Harold,

honoring his father's "final pray'r" (89), forgives Lodowicke as well, and the drama concludes with a paean to Truth spoken by the bishop.

24. In the 1791 print edition, Yearsley appends a fascinating note against capital punishment to the end of the play, the content of which reinforces her emphasis on rejecting revenge as the right response both to personal insult and social injustice, as well as her strident insistence nonetheless on exposing each as unfair and unacceptable, and resisting them as necessary until the injured parties can realize proper redress for their sufferings. She writes, "I know not whether I am right or wrong in saving the life of Lodowicke. I own that such are my feelings towards my fellow creatures, that I think *remorse* worse than *death*: it is to the criminal a torture all his own, while it leaves no blemish on society. Mankind depend on mercy:—were we emulous in gaining its first gradation, would 72,000 souls have been executed in the reign of Henry VIII.? or would twenty men be suspended of a morning, on a spot of some few yards wide, in London, and under the cognizance of our *Most Gracious Sovereign George III.?*" (90).
25. And, as if her note were not inflammatory enough, Yearsley also reinserts the six lines excised by the Lord Chamberlain from William Meyler's Epilogue that explicitly linked the play's topicality to the French Revolution: "*Lo! the poor Frenchman, long our nation's jest, / Feels a new passion throbbing in his breast; / From slavish, tyrant, priestly fetters free, / For VIVE LE ROI, cries VIVE LA LIBERTE! / And, daring now to ACT, as well as FEEL, / Crushes the convent and the dread Bastille!*" (91). Fittingly, though, and bringing this paper full circle, Meyler himself also seems to understand the extent to which Yearsley's own personal hardships as a poor woman writer are not unrelated to larger economic, political, and social inequities, for he closes the Epilogue with the focus squarely on Yearsley's accomplishment in the face of both very difficult circumstances and very daunting criticism. After referencing her disadvantage when it comes to learning, rule, and skill, he describes her particular challenge as finding herself "Doom'd, while she wrote, to rear an infant brood, / Attend their cries, and labour for their good; / Thro' toilsome day no leisure she possess, / The Muses snatch'd the moments stolen from rest" (92). Here again is Yearsley the Working-class Mother, rising above circumstance and criticism to present her audiences with a successful play: "She fear'd this aim had prov'd above her flight, / But your applause turns tremor to delight; / Secure of that, no frowns can now avail, / Nor wanton critic overturn her *pail*" (92).

26. In the end, Ann Yearsley's *Earl Goodwin* offers readers a positive example of how to respond to abuses of power without resorting to revenge while still actively resisting, always refusing to airbrush the inequities she and others like her (women, the poor, and especially working-class women) continue to face day in and day out, enduring insult and injustice, but remaining undaunted in the commitment to the cause of beneficial social change.

Works Cited

- Andrews, Kerri. *Ann Yearsley and Hannah More, Patronage and Poetry*. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2013.
- Burroughs, Catherine. "Introduction: Uncloseting Women in British Romantic Theatre." *Women in British Romantic Theatre: Drama, Performance, and Society, 1790-1840*. Ed. Catherine Burroughs. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000. 1-20.
- Cairnie, Julie. "The Ambivalence of Ann Yearsley: Laboring and Writing, Submission and Resistance." *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 27.4 (2005): 353-64.
- Feldman, Paula R., ed. *British Women Poets of the Romantic Era: An Anthology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997.
- Ferguson, Moira. "Resistance and Power in the Life and Writings of Ann Yearsley." *The Eighteenth Century* 27.3 (1986): 247-68.
- Kucich, Greg. "Women's Historiography and the (dis)Embodiment of Law: Ann Yearsley, Mary Hays, Elizabeth Benger." *Wordsworth Circle* 33.1 (2002): 3-7.
- Newey, Katherine. "Women and History on the Romantic Stage: More, Yearsley, Burney, and Mitford." *Women in British Romantic Theatre: Drama, Performance, and Society, 1790-1840*. Ed. Catherine Burroughs. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000. 79-101.
- Pearson, Jacqueline. "Crushing the Convent and the Dread Bastille: The Anglo-Saxons, Revolution and Gender in Women's Plays of the 1790s." *Literary Appropriations of the Anglo-Saxons from the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century*. Eds. Donald Scragg and Carole Weinberg. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000. 122-37.
- Pietropoli, Cecilia. "Hannah More's and Ann Yearsley's Anglo-Saxon History Plays." *Women's Romantic Theatre and Drama: History, Agency, and Performativity*. Eds. Lilla Maria Crisafulli and Keir Elam. Farnham: Ashgate, 2010. 59-70.
- Waldron, Mary. "A Different kind of Patronage: Ann Yearsley's Later Friends." *The Age of Johnson* 13 (2002): 283-335.
- Yearsley, Ann. *Earl Goodwin, an Historical Play*. London: Robinson, 1791.
- . *Poems on Several Occasions*. 4th ed. London: Robinson, 1786.
- . *Poems on Various Subjects*. London: Robinson, 1787.