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Property and Oppression: Voices from the Margins

Literature is produced by individuals with sufficient time and inclination to write. By comparison, huge numbers of early modern English men and women living and working in the countryside simply never had the opportunity to turn their experience of rural life into literary form. They lived rather on the margins of English society, all but excluded from the nation’s dominant cultural traditions. Apart from the obvious constraints on the time and energy of a rural labourer, most people at this level of society achieved at best a crudely functional form of literacy, and only very few gained the sort of cultural literacy that underpinned the work of writers such as Ben Jonson or Alexander Pope. Yet some men and women of low social degree managed nevertheless to thrust their voices into the public domain, and research in recent decades by literary and social historians has done much to bring such work to our attention. While it would be overly simplistic to claim such texts as direct and unmediated expressions of those on the margins of society, they provide startling and rewarding instances of writers confronting elite perceptions of rural life and struggling to articulate visions for change.

Since the socially powerless did not enjoy the luxury of an established literary tradition, the types of text gathered in this section vary greatly in form and style. Such writers, we might say, found voice on occasions when opportunity presented itself, or when the costs of silence seemed too great to bear. Some individuals and groups spoke out in the course of legal struggles, and consequently we reproduce here examples of petitions complaining about perceived oppression and pointed satires aimed at those in positions of economic power. Others gained access to the press in the turbulent decades in the middle of the seventeenth century, and worked their way through discourses of religious radicalism towards remarkable visions of social revolution. Arguably the most compelling of such writers is Gerrard Winstanley, whose work is also represented below. And still others gained an uneasy status within mainstream literary circles, as eighteenth-century patrons and publishers promoted a cult of the labouring poet. Men and women such as
Stephen Duck and Ann Yearsley employed poetry to express the hardships of rural life; however, their poems are notable not only for their vivid images of labour, but equally for their struggle to fashion a genuine voice from below out of the poetic resources and traditions of the age.

The politics of these texts are equally varied. In many cases the hard-pressed farmers and labourers simply replicate the arguments of social conservatism that we have already encountered in Chapter 1. Indeed the vast majority of rural protests and riots in the early modern period were motivated by a profound resistance to change, and sought to reaffirm traditional structures of social and economic life. Enclosure, in particular, was feared for the way that it elevated individual rights over those of a community, and for its eradication of a bundle of land-usage customs which were vital for those at the bottom of the social scale. Yet other writers, such as Winstanley, combined these traditional complaints with perceptions of systemic corruption. In Winstanley’s view, the only way to eradicate oppression was to eradicate property itself. The labouring poets of the subsequent decade were less forthright, yet persistently challenged elitist preconceptions of the countryside as a site of pastoral retreat. Duck, pointedly situating himself outside the parameters of the pastoral tradition, writes: ‘Can we, like shepherds, tell a merry tale? / The voice is lost, drowned by the noisy flail. / But we may think –’. That final verb, boldly claiming for labourers the privilege of critical reflection, harbours a distinctly radical potential.

Suggested secondary reading
H. Gustav Klaus, *The Literature of Labour: Two Hundred Years of Working-Class Writing* (Brighton, 1985).

‘The Diggers of Warwickshire to all other Diggers’ (1607)

This document was written to justify the Midlands Revolt of 1607. This revolt was caused by a combination of severe regional economic hardship and a quickening pace of enclosure, and consisted of a series of riots, mainly in Northamptonshire, Warwickshire and Leicestershire. The rioters were