Chapter 3

Mary Steele as West Country Woman-Poet

Figure 3.1  Broughton house and farm (c. 1820).
Mary Steele exhibited a lifelong commitment to her poetry and her coterie of female kindred spirits. She also relied heavily upon a particular pastoral persona, hinted at in her first poem, as well as in her choice of the nom de plume “Sylvia,” a name derived from the Latin word “Silvia” (a spelling also used by Steele), which means “woods” or “forest.” In “A Rural Meditation, 1766,” the poet seeks retirement in nature, what Margaret Doody calls the “trope of isolation” with its accompanying moods of melancholy, a “nearly universal” feature of British poetry after 1750 (229). In this instance, however, the isolated setting serves as a site from which to bask in the intimacy of female friendship and the pleasures of artistic freedom, merging the solitary and communal into a unified voice unlike the “unitary” voice.