

Introduction

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This short anthology of poems in English from the long eighteenth century (1660-1830) is the product of a third-year undergraduate literature course in the Fall of 2024 at Simon Fraser University on the traditional, sacred, and unceded lands and waters of the Coast Salish peoples of the Səḥilwətaʔl (Tseil-Waututh), Sk̓wxwú7mesh (Squamish), and xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) Nations.

For this major term project, each student in the thirteen-week course chose a short poem appearing in the *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive* or another available database, which fit the theme the class chose and had not (often) appeared in previous anthologies. They then researched their chosen poet and poem, prepared a headnote, edited the poem, and wrote footnotes for a modern edition of it.

Many of the decisions that underlie this anthology emerged from class discussion: we devoted significant class time to determining its theme, editorial principles, title, cover, and structural organization. Students also did numerous peer reviews, substantive editing, copyediting, and proofreading sessions for each other, both in class and outside of class. My goals in designing this term project were 1) to give undergraduates hands-on training in academic writing and editing practices and 2) to give them the chance to take an academic assignment to a publishable state and actually publish it.

The theme the class chose is confinement, and the poems they selected show an amazing variety: from the confinements of the sickbed and the human body, to emotional fetters, to those of education, gender, and social systems. We were surprised at how many confinement poems from this period involve caged birds, both literal and symbolic, and several of those feature here. The long eighteenth century in Europe is more famous for the development of concepts of human rights and liberties, but we have found it interesting to examine liberty through its corollary of confinement. The theme also allowed me, as the course instructor, to provide historical contexts on subjects ranging from the legal system to the restrictions of etiquette, encompassing various ways in which ideology confines our beliefs and behaviours.

The poets in this anthology are largely English, with a few Scots and Irish plus one Mohegan (Mohican) poet represented. They identified as male and female, came from a range of social classes, and followed a number of different professions, including not only professional writers but also clerics, housewives, diplomats, a milkmaid, a Philosophy professor, an actress, and a garden designer.

The phrase that opens the title of our anthology, “Restraints on the Impassive Soul” comes from “The Emulation” by Sarah Fyge Egerton, chosen by Riley Sommerville. In this poem, Egerton’s female speaker condemns men for oppressing women:

We yield like vanquish’d Kings whom Fetters bind,
 When chance of War is to Usurpers kind;
 Submit in Form; but they’d our Thoughts controul,
 And lay restraints on the impassive Soul. (ll. 15-18)

Here, the “impassive soul” is not apathetic or incapable of feeling, but invulnerable, not subject to suffering, and Egerton’s lines offer praise for the resilience of those whom society has deemed subaltern. We have found that authors writing in English in this period generally side with the prisoner and celebrate freedom, even while the British economy depended on the enslavement of many people.

The cover art of our anthology is by Jillian Jarin. Its frames represent not only confinement but also individuality within collectiveness, while the feathers represent communication and creativity, in their connection to quill pens.

We have chosen to organize the poems in this anthology by their year of publication. Of course, years of composition often predate publication, especially in cases of posthumous publishing; nevertheless, the chronological organization will assist readers in seeing differences between poems written at different points in the long eighteenth century. The early poems more often reflect Humanist belief in the necessity that moral thinking should balance with expressions of feeling, and the later ones are more likely to demonstrate Sentimental and Romantic beliefs in the power of emotion to create embodied compassion.

Our editorial practices centre in honouring the authentic voices of our poets. We therefore have reproduced original spelling, capitalization, and punctuation wherever doing so would not create undue confusion for a twenty-first century reader (as, for example, would be created by the medial or long “s”). Readers will therefore find that poems from earlier in the long eighteenth century have many nouns capitalized, as was the convention through the early 1700s, but that those from the later 1700s and early 1800s will only capitalize proper names and allegorized figures.

We thank you for your time and interest in reading this work!



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