

Janet Little

Ashley Bains, Simon Fraser University

Janet Little, later known as Janet Richmond, was a Scottish poet born in Ecclefechan, Dumfriesshire. Due to her unprivileged background, she did not have much education; however, she did possess a passion for reading. Little was also known as the Scotch Milkmaid due to her work as a dairy maid for a clergyman's family. Her employment under Mrs. Frances Dunlop proved to be beneficial for her, as her employer provided her with a job along with connections that helped her publish her poetry. Little mentions Robert Burns, Scotland's national poet, in her only published collection, *The Poetical Works of Janet Little, the Scotch Milkmaid* (1792). Dunlop wrote to Burns regarding Little's promising poetry and he eventually subscribed to a volume of her work. She was aware of her status as a working-class poet and dedicated much of her work to Dunlop and Burns. Little's work also avoided commentary on the social and political world.

It was difficult for women poets to gain recognition in the eighteenth century, making the situation even tougher for Little as a milkmaid. Despite the disadvantages Little faced, her work was able to attract subscribers from professional, merchant, and aristocratic backgrounds. These widespread subscribers allowed Little's work to reach readers in Edinburgh, Glasgow, the Lowlands of Scotland, England, and Ulster. However, a milkmaid's work was not considered worthy by the elite. George Christian argues Little's lack of "literary opinion leaders that helped canonize Burns...contributed to Little's failure to achieve national status" (p. 43). Little continued to write until she suffered from a cramp in her stomach, in 1813, leading to her death.

Little's poem "To a Lady, a Patroness of the Muses, on Her Recovery from Sickness" is a Horatian ode written in iambic pentameter and maintains a consistent rhyme scheme of ABAB. The first twelve lines of the poem are set up as an elegy; however, the title of the poem suggests that the patroness will recover. Many of her poems are dedicated to those who were involved in her success as a poet, including Mrs. Dunlop, whom Little is addressing in this poem. In 1785, Dunlop fell severely ill and was suffering from depression; she managed to recover, and did not pass away until 1815. During the time of illness, Little was employed by the Dunlop family and Mrs. Dunlop was in touch with Robert Burns, which is why he is also grieving in this poem. The poem ends in triumph, as Dunlop was able to escape being confined by sickness.

Further Reading

Kathleen Keown, "Eighteenth-Century Women's Poetry and the Feminine Accomplishment," *The Review of English Studies*, Volume 73, Issue 308, February 2022, pp. 78–99.

References

Christian, George S. "Burns and the Women 'Peasant' Poets: Janet Little and Isobel Pagan." *Beside the Bard*, University of California Press, 2020, pp. 43–70.

To a Lady, a Patroness of the Muses, on Her Recovery from Sickness²⁷⁹

WHILE sickness, madam,²⁸⁰ on your vitals²⁸¹ prey'd,
The sympathetic sisters²⁸² shar'd your pain:
I mark'd them then in sable weeds²⁸³ array'd,
In concert sad assume the plaintive²⁸⁴ strain.²⁸⁵

From Elly's²⁸⁶ Land was heard the harp of wo;²⁸⁷ 5
A shepherd, once the blithest²⁸⁸ of the throng,²⁸⁹
Did mirth²⁹⁰ inspiring, sportive²⁹¹ notes forego,
And steep'd in tears the melancholy song.

From *Irvine's*²⁹² verdant banks, a doleful²⁹³ lay
Re-echo'd through the groves²⁹⁴ and distant dale;²⁹⁵ 10
Each vocal throat was fill'd with dire dismay,
And heart-felt sighs proclaim'd th' unwelcome tale.
Quick and unstable are the turns of Fate;

²⁷⁹ First published by Janet Little in *The Poetical Works of Janet Little, the Scotch Milkmaid*. 1792 edition printed by John & Peter Wilson, pp. 42–44; *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*.

²⁸⁰ *madam* is likely addressing Little's patroness, Mrs. Frances Dunlop, who suffered from prolonged illness

²⁸¹ *vitals* organs that the human body is dependent on for life

²⁸² *sympathetic sisters* is likely referring to Mrs. Dunlop's daughters

²⁸³ *sable weeds* black clothes, worn when mourning

²⁸⁴ *plaintive* sorrowful

²⁸⁵ *strain* piece of music

²⁸⁶ *Elly's land* reference to the home of Scottish poet Robert Burns

²⁸⁷ *wo* alternative spelling of woe; great distress

²⁸⁸ *blithest* happiest

²⁸⁹ *throng* a crowd

²⁹⁰ *mirth* pleasurable feeling

²⁹¹ *sportive* playful

²⁹² *Irvine's* a river located in Scotland

²⁹³ *doleful* gloomy

²⁹⁴ *groves* groups of trees

²⁹⁵ *dale* a valley

"Twixt²⁹⁶ well and wo are thin partitions rear'd:
 I mark'd the drooping choir with hearts elate,
 Exulting²⁹⁷ o'er the ills so lately fear'd.

15

When brooding²⁹⁸ on the verge of deep despair,
 A gladd'ning voice did through the groves resound;
 Loud acclamations fill'd the ambient air,
 And joy and pleasure triumph'd all around.

20

Health, blooming goddess, re-assum'd her sway,
 And did the tender, captive frame release;
 All seem'd intent the tidings to convey,
 In notes more grateful than the whisp'ring breeze.

Some greet a patroness, all hail a friend,
 Whose bosom feels seraphic²⁹⁹ virtues glow;
 Nor further, madam, do your smiles extend;
 Vice dreads your frown, and shuns you as a foe.

25

Long may you live admir'd by all, and lov'd,
 The honour of a long illustrious³⁰⁰ race;
 Your worth innate, by Envy's³⁰¹ self approv'd,
 Which time or sickness never can efface.³⁰²

30



[This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)

© Ashley Bains, 2024

²⁹⁶ *'Twixt* between

²⁹⁷ *Exulting* triumphantly joyful

²⁹⁸ *brooding* to think deeply in unhappiness

²⁹⁹ *seraphic* relating to the characteristics of light and purity found in a Christian angel

³⁰⁰ *illustrious* noble

³⁰¹ *Envy's* personification of envy

³⁰² *efface* erase