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978-0-521-69773-6 - Master and Servant: Love and Labour in the English

Industrial Age

Carolyn Steedman

Excerpt

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## Prologue

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This is a book about one servant and one master and the changing shape of their relationship, lived out in the time and place of the ‘making of the English working class’, the industrial West Riding of Yorkshire. It covers the period from about 1785 when Phoebe Beatson first came to the service of the Reverend John Murgatroyd of Slaithwaite, just outside Huddersfield, to the first decade of the new century, after she had borne her illegitimate child, scandalously, in a clergyman’s house. The Anglican God whom Murgatroyd served and promoted throughout his very long life changed His shape and form during these years of war, dearth, revolution and counter-revolution; church and state, the law and its practice, redefined the service relationship, and the human and social relationship ‘service’ inscribed. Here, in what follows, we have one tiny birth pang of modern, industrial society, and some of the minute shifts and stratagems of feeling that countless individuals undertook, in making themselves subjects of modernity.

What I set out to do in this book was explain how its historical actors were able to buck so many of the trends that their historians have seen them – people like them – enacting. Above all I had wanted to understand, and thus be able to explain, why George Thorp refused to marry Phoebe Beatson. She carried Thorp’s bastard child through the spring and summer of 1802, and somehow, in some way, he was able to resist the pressures (well known to historians of the English working class) of clergy, poor law officials, employers, ratepayers, landowners and magistrates to make an honest woman of her, and thus relieve the parish of a potential claimant on its funds. These were unusual people, or at least unusual in the twentieth-century social histories we have of others like them, doing things and displaying attitudes that lie at the outer, faint-drawn ends of the bell-curve of ‘normally’ and ‘usually’. What is more, the God they believed in also bucked trends, allowing them all to think, feel and act in ways contrary to His reputation for underpinning strict social morality and obeisance to the laws of church and state.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> There are disagreements among historians over the influence and effects of eighteenth-century Anglicanism, but William Gibson’s argument that ‘the level of commitment to the Church was . . .

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When I started to write I had in place an almost-intact explanation for the behaviour of Phoebe Beatson's employer. The Reverend John Murgatroyd (1719–1806) had briefly been curate to the Almondbury incumbent during the middle years of the century and schoolmaster for almost fifty years at Slaithwaite (some five miles distant from Almondbury township). Now, for the part of his story that follows, he was in retirement, resident of the hamlet of Lingards (just above Slaithwaite on the other side of the River Colne) and peripatetic preacher in nearly all the churches and chapels within a twenty-mile radius of home. When his servant Phoebe became pregnant around Christmas-time 1801, he did not turn her out; he did not allow her to enter the familiar sentimental plot of seduction and betrayal. By rights (of late eighteenth-century literary convention and some modern social history) he should have dismissed her from his service (the law said he might), made a magdalen of her for the reform imagination, perhaps inadvertently sending her to flit through the greasy alleys of an industrial city (Leeds maybe, or Manchester, where more such descent-into-prostitution stories were actually set), selling herself on the way to salvation by an encounter with her humanitarian superiors.<sup>2</sup> But he did none of these things. He did not, as far as one can tell from the pages of his journal, ever blame her or condemn her. He let her have the baby in his house; he baptised, and loved, and gave house-room to the little bastard girl; he noted her development in his diary. At his death in 1806, he provided a happy ending for mother and child. Indeed, they both seem to have lived happily with him until past Eliza Beatson's fourth birthday.

New forms of feeling came into the world during these crisis years of war and revolution. Ways of perceiving, imagining and understanding self and others that had been prepared for during earlier and other kinds of revolution (proto-industrial, capitalist, commercial, cultural and philosophic) were consolidated. Societal and ideological developments, usually dated from the mid-seventeenth century, involved new versions of the human subject, of God and how He moved, of the kind of entity His creatures were, and of the ways in which it was

much greater than historians allow, and the eighteenth century is perhaps the last period in which popular faith can be taken for granted' has been persuasive. William Gibson, *Church, State and Society, 1760–1850* (London: Macmillan, 1994), p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> For 'the sentimental prostitution narratives purveyed by late eighteenth-century humanitarian reformers', see Barbara Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 242, discussing Vivien Jones, 'Scandalous Femininity: Prostitution and Eighteenth-century Narrative', in Dario Castiglione and Lesley Sharpe (eds.), *Shifting the Boundaries. Transformations of the Language of Public and Private in the Eighteenth Century* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1995), pp. 41–70. The *apogée* of the Manchester variety is probably Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* (1853). See also Carolyn Steedman, 'Enforced Narratives. Stories of Another Self', in Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury and Penny Summerfield (eds.), *Feminism and Autobiography. Texts, Theories, Methods* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 25–39. For what common law said about dismissing pregnant maidservants, see below, chapter 7.

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possible to love them. It became a central aim of this book to consider the ways in which these large-scale social and philosophic developments were experienced and thought about in the everyday life of three obscure inhabitants of the late eighteenth-century Yorkshire worsted field.<sup>3</sup> (The significance for such an enterprise of this location and its dominant mode of production will be discussed shortly.) John Murgatroyd's love for a baby (and for her mother, though that was love in a different register) was perhaps part of a relatively modern conception of an Anglican God, still playing a role in constitutional-philosophical thinking as He had done in the century after the English Revolution, but who was now also used as a way of conceiving men and women as social creatures, possessing histories (natural and cultural) that explained them as modern subjects. In all likelihood, the political-constitutional church had always operated in conjunction with the socio-cultural church, proffering social thought and theory to different audiences. Anglicanism as a form of social thought was certainly present in the writing of Eamon Duffy's sixteenth-century Morebath cleric, and the political-constitutional aspects of the Anglican Church were certainly much in evidence in the debates over repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts and Roman Catholic Emancipation in 1828–9.<sup>4</sup> Over the sixty years from which his records survive, John Murgatroyd's immense output of writing shows Anglicanism as a way of individual thinking, feeling and behaviour towards others in a specific local context.

The poor laws, which provided so much of the narrative framework to Phoebe Beatson and George Thorp's relationship (and which also demonstrate the interest of the state in the relationship), expressed social and religious thinking combined; they were perhaps the major institutional expression of the combination during the long eighteenth century. At the same time, an Anglican God was increasingly used to delineate human nature, and to think through social and human relations, past, present and potential. John Murgatroyd, Phoebe Beatson's employer, spent a lifetime in the Church of England and with his God. Literally so. Every day's entry in Murgatroyd's journals started with 'Awak'd with God' – before he went on to describe the weather, and on Sundays to thank Him for having brought his family safely to the end of another week. On New Year's Eve 1802 when he wrote that 'I and my small Family have/ the Lord be thanked/ been preserved to ye End of another month, & ye last Month in 1802 Some Rain and Darkish . . .' his unorthodox little household consisted of

<sup>3</sup> The area of worsted yarn and cloth manufacture bounded by Bradford and Halifax has long been called 'the worsted field'. Its outer reaches lay beyond Heptonstall (to the west) and Keighley (to the north). See maps I and II.

<sup>4</sup> Eamon Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath. Reformation and Rebellion in an English Village* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001). In the 1780s John Murgatroyd mused much on the Test and Corporation Acts in his writing. See below, chapter 5.

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himself (a man in his eighties), Phoebe Beatson (an unwed mother in her late thirties) and baby Eliza, who was now four months old.<sup>5</sup>

We must take seriously Murgatroyd's understanding that God was a constant presence. This is a hard task for modern social historians, many of us trained in the visceral revulsion from religion, its fettering of the mind and spirit of so many people in the past, that was inculcated in us by constant reference to the founding texts of modern social history, to Edward Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) in particular. God is indeed a palpable presence in Thompson's work, but appears for the main part in his Methodist aspect. By way of contrast *Master and Servant* deals with the living God of John Murgatroyd's Anglicanism. To take this God seriously – to examine seriously the effects of a theology on everyday life and thought – is not to advocate or promote it (or Him); nor is it to abandon scepticism and atheism (or whatever the personal position of the historian might be). These are obvious-seeming points, but they do have to be made, given that one of the contentions of this book is that our conventional view of the making of the English working class is at least partial, and probably misleading, because it fails to take into account the religious formation and the articulated thoughts and feelings derived from Anglicanism of men and women living through the society's transition to industrial capitalism, in the century after 1750. This point applies particularly to Thompson's *Making*, for it finds most of its evidence of class formation in the Yorkshire worsted field, in the very valleys, towns and hamlets that are the setting for this current book. How John Murgatroyd behaved and how he thought in the case of Phoebe and Elizabeth Beatson is to be understood through his own apprehension of a belief system, at work in the Halifax–Huddersfield district, in the closing years of the eighteenth century. Understanding *his* understanding marks out a project similar to that of Barbara Taylor in her recent account of Mary Wollstonecraft, which is not only to restore religious belief to its full status in an eighteenth-century life, but to make sense of Wollstonecraft's faith, and its emergence as thought, feeling and imagination in a personal, and thus a social context.<sup>6</sup>

Taylor's project is broadly shaped by the sociology of religion.<sup>7</sup> But the historian can fantasise about taking a different path from hers. The fantasy operates like this: historians are perforce interested in events and happenings in the past: what we do is describe and re-describe *what has happened*, whatever its shape or form. Perhaps an Anglican God *happened* in the West Riding between 1780–1810 (and in other places and periods, of course). He

<sup>5</sup> Reverend John Murgatroyd, Diaries, KC242/7, West Yorkshire Archive Service, Kirklees District, Huddersfield (31 December 1802). See Naomi Tadmor, *Family and Friends in Eighteenth-century England. Household, Kinship, and Patronage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 18–43 for the oddness and typicality of this 'family'.

<sup>6</sup> Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft*. <sup>7</sup> For further discussion of this point, see chapter 7.

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was certainly a happening in John Murgatroyd's mind, as well as constituting a form of language for describing all that Murgatroyd thought and believed about himself and the world. Perhaps this God – the idea of Him – had the power to make things happen; and happenings are what we are interested in. This, so far, is to follow Max Weber, whose endeavour in exploring the relationship between Protestantism and early capitalist development in the West was to understand 'the manner in which ideas become effective forces in history'.<sup>8</sup> But what would happen if the historian went beyond this, and behaved as if Murgatroyd's god – an Anglican God, in the West Riding – actually existed? (It would be a behaviour, a methodology, the use of a form of language, not a belief; I cannot *believe* this; but a historian might behave as if she does.) Doing this would be to concentrate on God as some kind of phenomenon, rather than on the presumed human wishes and desires that sociologists and anthropologists say give Him (whatever His particular and local form and aspect) shape and existence. It would be to do something like Mary Lefkowitz, in her *Greek Gods, Human Lives*, where, in the course of describing a pagan theology, its social purpose and the Greek gods' radical otherness (they are not like human beings; they are profoundly disinterested in human kind, and quite unlike the personal God of Christianity), she *thinks them*. She thanks the gods, 'without whose aid no human achievement is possible'. For the course of her book (and perhaps in real life) she believes in the gods: believes that they did and do exist, and are neglected sources for understanding the modern human condition, as well as past circumstances.<sup>9</sup> This, in fact, is a view entirely compatible with the sociology of religion: a shame culture developed out of agrarian subsistence economy and slave-holding social order, thinks through the process and meaning of life with figures, tropes and constructs that go by the names of Demeter and Phoebus. This sociology, however, is nowhere evoked by Lefkowitz; her method is, rather, to believe and believe in the gods, and in their powers.

This may be only an unnecessarily complicated – and quirky – approach to a historical belief system; or a highly effective method for uncovering one. In the early stages of writing this book, I wanted to do the same with an Anglican God, in this place, among these people. Not only might this allow me to see the shape, contours and attributes of this god, and thus understand better what John Murgatroyd believed, but it would allow me to fulfil the intention of the book, to find other, older gods here, among the Pennine Hills and to make a new (historical) mythology to add to all the other ones that have emanated from this place. But I am simply unable to do what Mary Lefkowitz did, for two reasons. First, I live in England under the same union of church and state as did

<sup>8</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, orig. pub. 1904–5 (London: Allen and Unwin, 1930), p. 90.

<sup>9</sup> Mary Lefkowitz, *Greek Gods, Human Lives. What We Can Learn from Myths* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), Acknowledgements.

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those who lived in the late eighteenth century; John Murgatroyd's social and ideological context shaped my own. I learned the Creed, and the formularies of the Church of England every Sunday afternoon between 1955 and 1958, and said the Lord's Prayer every day at school assembly, for a much longer time than that. Presumably Mary Lefkowitz did not learn to make sacrifice to Zeus (or any of the Olympian crew) in the back yard of her early years, and has not had to abandon a belief system inculcated in childhood. The gods you have not had to escape are the attractive ones, and much easier to believe in. And in the second place, I simply cannot make this God walk the Pennine Hills, and do things (arbitrary and strange, or familiar and providential), because He was not a god like that.<sup>10</sup> He was what you told the children He was: a Spirit, everywhere present (though *not* in the bread and wine of a Sunday), and deeply personal, and nowhere at all. Nevertheless, I propose this approach to a belief system: to ask questions about this God first, His shape and form, as He actually appears in Murgatroyd's writing and note-taking, as Barbara Taylor has done with the infinitely better organised and original thinker who was Mary Wollstonecraft.

As a reader of John Murgatroyd's writing, I found the cumulative effect of his incantatory and repeated evocations of his God very moving. Being moved by rhetoric (by the shape and sound of the words rather than their referents) was my own route to taking his beliefs seriously. It is, of course, easier to do this with Murgatroyd than with many an eighteenth-century clergyman, who scarcely mentions his Maker (whilst devoting much word-space to dinner).<sup>11</sup> Murgatroyd's simple benevolence moved me as well (that he *was* such a man is attested to in his diary, and in much commentary on him, contemporary and posthumous). In the burial records of Slaithwaite, his is the only one with an addendum: 'Oct 30th [1806] Revd John Murgatroyd, an amiable Man aged 87'.<sup>12</sup> This is an epigraph in a minor key to the most elegant and desirable of them all, penned nearly two centuries later by Sigmund Freud. He wrote of the British psycho-analyst and his former pupil David Eder that he belonged 'to the people one loves without having to trouble about them'. I know I feel for this long-dead Yorkshire clergyman the same response that Freud felt to Eder's 'toleration and great capacity for love' and that I recognise a similar 'simplicity,

<sup>10</sup> For the trenchant opinion of Henry Fielding on this very point, and its implications for the writing of 'history' in the eighteenth-century sense and narrative in general, see chapter 10.

<sup>11</sup> But the absence of God from the pages of a journal is no necessary indication that clerics did not have deep religious views. Parsons Woodforde's and Holland's have sometimes been read with an extreme literalness. James Woodforde, *The Diary of a Country Parson: the Reverend James Woodforde 1758–1781*, ed. John Beresford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924). Jack Ayres (ed.), *Paupers and Pig Killers. The Diary of William Holland, a Somerset Parson, 1799–1818*, orig. pub. 1984 (Stroud: Sutton, 1997). Francis Griffin Stokes (ed.), *The Blecheley Diary of the Reverend William Cole, MA, FSA, 1765–67* (London: Constable, 1931).

<sup>12</sup> Slaithwaite Parish Records, Slaithwaite Chapel, Baptism and Burials, 1755–1812, D120/2, West Yorkshire Archives, Wakefield District, Wakefield.



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integrity and goodness' in him.<sup>13</sup> At least, I tell myself, I know where I'm coming from in regard to my historical subjects, and some of the ways of my projection, displacement and transference. Transference is an occupational hazard for historians as far as I am concerned, but I do not see how we would ever get going on anything, were it not available as a device for disinterring our historical subjects.<sup>14</sup> What my response to Murgatroyd's writing has taught me, is how very much historical transference (and projection) depends on the knowledge and information the historian possesses. I can make other, overt identifications with Phoebe Beatson of a political kind (a woman, a working-class woman doing the job I would have done had I not had the great good fortune to be born two hundred or so years after she was) and they arise from her story and the account of what happened to her; but I simply do not have enough information about her as a person to be moved by her.

I started to write with the faint outlines of an explanatory structure for John Murgatroyd's behaviour in mind, and also with an over-excited and confident belief that I would be able to explain Phoebe Beatson and George Thorp. Thorp, in my view, is by far the most interesting character in this story, because of the refusals he was able to make, and because, unlike Murgatroyd, it is not possible to give an account of him by measuring what he did against an established and elaborate account of a belief system, that of eighteenth-century Anglicanism. A quick, final trip to Huddersfield (and Halifax and Wakefield, for West Yorkshire Archives are divided between many record offices), I thought; the poor law records, Phoebe Beatson's settlement and bastardy examinations by the magistrates, and with great good fortune, perhaps the examination of George Thorp and the affiliation order that named him the father and obliged him to pay for the child. Just that, I thought, and I would have these people taped, or at least have some inkling, from one tiny deviation in the formulaic lines recorded by the justices' clerk from their statements, of how and why it all fell out as it did. But they are not there; and because I cannot find these documents, I cannot find George Thorp. Even the Slaithwaite Militia Return for 1798 and the Militia List for 1800 seem not to have seen the light of day since a local historian of the Colne Valley had them in his hands in 1896.<sup>15</sup> These returns – what effectively amounted to a census *avant la lettre* – were required of local communities during the invasion scares of these war years. They listed all men over the age of sixteen years and not having more than one child, and thus liable to be called up.

<sup>13</sup> J. B. Hobman (ed.), *David Eder. Memoirs of a Modern Pioneer* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1945), p. 21 and Foreword. On the psycho-analytic front, Murgatroyd several times recorded that he counselled those who came to see him 'troubled in their spirit'. See below, chapter 4.

<sup>14</sup> See Carolyn Steedman, 'The Watercress Seller', in Tamsin Spargo (ed.), *Reading the Past* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), pp. 18–25.

<sup>15</sup> D. F. E. Sykes, *The History of the Colne Valley* (Slaithwaite: F. Walker, 1896), pp. 301–3. Clive Emsley, *British Society and the French Wars, 1793–1815* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1979), pp. 99–123.

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George Thorp, certainly a Slaithwaite man, is highly likely to have been listed. (He could have had a dozen bastard children and still have been returned, for they did not count as legitimate ones did.) But the returns are not to be found, though great assiduity and a lifetime of diligent searching might produce all the missing documentation, miscatalogued in a West Yorkshire Archive Service repository, or quietly waiting in some private attic, somewhere. I write these lines with some diffidence, for I am a professional, and want to be seen as such by my fellow historians. I ought to have known that it was a long and optimistic shot – the hope of finding George Thorp. Indeed, I am part of the chorus reiterating that poor law records were much less preserved in the north, compared with the south, that I would have been extraordinarily lucky to have found affiliation orders . . . The upshot is, that George Thorp, his obduracy and stubbornness (which I will never know was marvellous, or admirable, or not) are not there to be accounted for.

There was a crisis of documentation with John Murgatroyd too, though of a very different kind. It occurred at exactly the same time as the one to do with George Thorp, when the book had already been started. The Kirklees (Huddersfield) branch of the West Yorkshire Archive Service holds some of Murgatroyd's diaries written between 1781 and 1806 (one for roughly every other year), one of his commonplace books, and a long essay (folded and hand-stitched) on the 'Qualifications of a Minister of Christ'. It is known that he kept a diary in some shape or form, from at least 1739, and that there existed several other notebooks, in which he copied from works of divinity, sacred history, the classics and poetry. One of his nineteenth-century historians who had them available when he wrote also indicated that he intermittently used these volumes as letter-copy books.<sup>16</sup> I was happy to have so little: less is often more in the historical game, and some of us like nothing so much as writing within the strictures of absence. If there's *something* there, we can do something with it, finding a world in a grain of sand, and conjuring a social system from the purchase of a nutmeg grater recorded in a household account book.<sup>17</sup>

Too much documentation poses its own problems. In his postscript to *The General in His Labyrinth* (1991) Gabriel García Márquez's novel about Simón Bolívar's last and terrible journey to the Caribbean coast of Neuva Granada in 1830, he describes the historical overload he experienced in the course of his

<sup>16</sup> Henry James Morehouse, *Extracts from the Diary of the Rev. Robert Meeke . . . Also a Continuation of the History of Slaithwaite Free School and an Account of the Educational Establishments in Slaithwaite-cum-Lingards, by the Rev. Charles Augustus Hulbert* (Huddersfield: Daily Chronicle Steam Press; London: Bohn, 1874), pp. 105–16. This contains much information taken from Charles Augustus Hulbert, *Annals of the Church in Slaithwaite (near Huddersfield) West Riding of Yorkshire from 1793–1864, in Five Lectures* (London: Longman, 1864). Hulbert was actually Murgatroyd's first historian, and will be used throughout this book in that role.

<sup>17</sup> Carolyn Steedman, *Dust* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), pp. 18–19.



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research for the book.<sup>18</sup> You waded through a swamp of historical facts – mere items of information – that swarm and sting and itch, above and below the water-line. They itch and sting because they have no meaning yet assigned to them; they are blind and deaf in their assault on your person, and they make you numb in panic, too. García Márquez had the advantage of a ‘literary audacity’ that determined him to ‘recount a tyrannically documented life without renouncing the extravagant prerogatives of the novel’, and only the last few weeks of that life, to boot; he also had friendly historians at the end of a telephone line to give him ‘a first inkling of a method for investigating and ordering facts’ (the brilliantly simple stalwart of the file card system); I hope that some of his professional informants also told him how unlucky he was, to have *so very, very much*.

My crisis of too-much occurred when I was told that, far from being lost, some of John Murgatroyd’s other note- and commonplace books were in the Special Collections of the University of York Library (a circumstance and deposit quite unknown to the West Yorkshire Archive Service and to the National Register of Archives). They are voluminous.<sup>19</sup> After some days of elation and resentment mixed, I was able to issue myself with the reminder that I was not writing a biography of John Murgatroyd, but rather attempting to understand what happened in his Lingards-cum-Slaithwaite household between 1785 and 1806, and why the people involved in it were able to behave the way they did.<sup>20</sup> I needed to know what was in (but not to transcribe) ‘A Book of Records’ (900 pages long, consisting of bound loose sheets and separate paper-covered notebooks); ‘A Cornucopia; or collection of weighty transcripts transcrib’d out of the scarcest, most necessary, & best chosen books &c’ (what its compiler said it was, and near as long as the first); and ‘Authors Useful to be Read at School’ (smaller and indeed useful, but with only two pages actually devoted to its title). This book is written then, as most histories are, out of absence and silence, out of records missing and lost. And the tiny flotsam of the found has had different kinds of attention paid it: different documents have been read and transcribed in different kinds of ways. The story comes from these records certainly, but also from other places, in particular from my knowing that John

<sup>18</sup> Gabriel García Márquez, *The General in His Labyrinth*, orig. pub. 1990 (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991), pp. 271–4.

<sup>19</sup> And alarmingly so to one who, like Nelly Dean from *Wuthering Heights*, knows what Latin and Greek look like, but has not the advantage of knowing them (‘It is’, as Nelly remarks, ‘as much as you can expect of a poor man’s daughter’), for a fair proportion of these three thousand or so pages consists of Greek transcribed for teaching purposes. Nelly Dean’s role in this current book, as reader, narrator and historian, will be discussed in chapter 10, but readers may care to note that she is already a presence in it.

<sup>20</sup> Beyond elation and resentment a more proper response is gratitude to Professor Ted Royle of the History Department, University of York, for telling me about the Murgatroyd material in York University Library.

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Murgatroyd and George Thorp really were unusual men. I could only have that sense of their oddness from a reading of a great deal of modern history of the eighteenth century, and from other accounts of the period and place.

I do not know whether Phoebe Beatson was unusual or not. What *happened to her* was out of the run of the mill, and remarked upon as such by one Slaithwaite inhabitant at the time. But though she appears on a near-daily basis in Murgatroyd's journal from the time she joined his household in 1785 until his death in 1806, and though I have (also from the journals) an excellent account of her work as a worsted-spinning out-worker, the only thing I know about her as a person is that she was afraid of bulls, a fear which necessitated one of Murgatroyd's many journeys to accompany her to her spinning master's place along the old packhorse route from Slaithwaite to Forrest near Halifax. Richard Walker, her spinning master, had just moved there from Hollywell Green, and the last part of the route was new to her. Phoebe Beatson could not write, or at least, she made her mark in the Halifax St John's parish register rather than signing, when she finally married (*not* George Thorp) in 1807, so there is not even that trace of her. She is at once the cipher, the hidden-from-history that twentieth-century socialist-feminist scholarship gave us; and at the same time the most familiar of characters from the melodrama (of a poor woman seduced, then abandoned) that modern social historians learned from the nineteenth century.<sup>21</sup> But she did not actually play this part in real life, for Murgatroyd helped her avoid it. It is not possible, then, to write Phoebe Beatson according to the lines given her by social history, nor within its established conventions and plots. Hence sprang Nelly Dean. Ellen Dean from *Wuthering Heights* (1847) came – in some dream or day-dream I had – before the last journeys to the West Riding archives. Unless they end up before some kind of tribunal and are forced to tell their story to a justice or a judge, and unless the record of their narrative is preserved, eighteenth-century poor women are perforce as silent as the grave, unavailable to the historian except as a name on a list, or an entry in a register of church and state. Exactly the same condition of silence pertains as far as working-class men are concerned of course; but then, with labouring men, there is not the strange – uncanny, even – effect of this almost-perfect silence in conjunction with the clamorous voice of the female domestic servant as story-teller of the Western world. In English literature, at least two major

<sup>21</sup> For the relationship between modern social history and melodrama, see Carolyn Steedman, 'A Weekend with Elektra', *Literature and History*, 6:1 (1997), pp. 17–42; also Renato Rosaldo, 'Celebrating Thompson's Heroes. Social Analysis in History and Anthropology', in Harvey J. Kaye and Keith McClelland (eds.), *E. P. Thompson. Critical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990), pp. 103–24, especially p. 116, where one of the claims is that *The Making of the English Working Class* is a form of melodrama. See also Martha Vicinus, 'Helpless and Unbefriended. Nineteenth-century Domestic Melodrama', *New Literary History*, 13:1 (1981), pp. 127–43; Patrick Joyce, *Democratic Subjects. The Self and the Social in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994), pp. 176–92.