Sarah Pearson (1768-1833): A Sheffield Poet

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Late eighteenth-century Sheffield was a thriving intellectual centre. Apart from supporting the anti-slavery cause and parliamentary reform, the radical newspaper the Sheffield Register (June 9, 1787-June 27, 1794, after which date the poet James Montgomery edited the paper under the new title of Sheffield Iris) made possible the publication of poetry by some of the members of the town’s literary community. It featured a specially designated column, entitled “Repository of Genius,” and some of its contributors had close links with the Hull Advertiser—a newspaper edited by the Rev. Thomas Browne (1771-1798)—to which another Sheffield poet, Barbara Hoole, later Hofland (1770-1844) submitted poetry. The Sheffield Register printed a large number of sonnets, some of them as part of series such as “Sonnets to the River Wye” (November-December 1790) by “Juliana,” others on a host of different subjects including flowers, the countryside, love, and melancholy, as well as contributors’ complimentary responses to work published in the newspaper. Productions such as “Address’d to the lady whose poetry in the Sheffield Register is distinguished by the signature of Juliana” by “Philander” and William Newton’s “Sonnet to Miss Pearson. Written after reading her poems lately published” (September 17, 1790) generate the sense of a virtual community of writers that deploy the Sheffield Register as their platform for literary self-expression and generic experimentation.

William Newton (1750-1830), a machinery carpenter and Anna Seward’s so-called “Peak Minstrel,” contributed poems and short imaginative essays to the newspaper and engaged in
epistolary exchanges with other local poets. Newton commended the poetry of Sarah Pearson (1768-1833),¹ a domestic servant living in Sheffield, whose productions also appeared in the Sheffield Register; he also contributed an “Ode to Miss Pearson” (September 24, 1790) in which he encouraged her to pursue a career as a writer, assuring her that “Fair Fame awaits thee, haste, proceed, / And toil to gain the poet’s meed” (32-33). The editor of the newspaper, the printer, stationer, and bookseller, Joseph Gales (1761-1841), also issued a subscription edition of Pearson’s poems in 1790. In addition to contributing to such London-based periodicals as the Literary Magazine and British Review (which published an early version of her “Sonnet to the Setting Sun” on 3 August 1789; it would be republished in the New Annual Register for 1791), Pearson would go on to produce a little known novel, The Medallion (London, 1794), and a second collection of Poems on various subjects (London, 1800). Gales facilitated the publication of the works of a number of aspiring poets, including Newton, whose hitherto unattributed Lines, in Memory of the Reverend John Wesley, A.M. he published in 1791. On March 15, 1791, his newspaper also included an anonymous “Elegy on the Rev. John Wesley.” Four years earlier, Gales had printed The Russian Prophesy by the curate of Anna Seward’s father, the Rev. Peter Cunningham (d. 1805), who, in his turn, was an acquaintance of Newton’s and who had introduced the “Peak Minstrel” to Seward (see Jung, “William Newton” 114-15). From the start of his career in Sheffield in 1784, Gales appears to have had formal business links with G.G.J. and J. Robinson, a major London bookselling firm.² The Robinsons appear on the titlepages of his publications as his London distributors. Apart from publishing Pearson’s Poems, dedicated, by permission, to the Right Honorable the Countess Fitzwilliam (1790), he also issued another subscription project, Ashdale Village: a moral work of fancy (1794), by a Sheffield author, Jane...
Gosling (d. 1804), a teacher at a Sheffield dame school. This publication had been preceded, in 1789, by Gosling’s *Moral Essays and Reflections*.

The subscription list to Pearson’s *Poems*, which was headed by the Prince of Wales, reveals that her venture was supported, among others, by fellow writers such as Newton, Cunningham, and Mary Sterndale (née Stockdale), the author of *The Effusions of the Heart: Poems* (1798) and the popular *Vignettes of Derbyshire* (1824). In the prefatory dedication, Pearson expresses her gratitude to the Fitzwilliam family, noting in particular the countess’ “kindness” and “liberality of sentiment” (3). In her letters to her patron, she stresses the “numerous Acts of Goodness” (Sheffield Archives, WWM F66/49; April 27, 1817) that the countess and her husband have shown her. By the time *The Medallion* was published, Pearson was living in London, “Writing for Bread,” in ill health, and seeking an opportunity to “find something where the Intellect had less to do” (Sheffield Archives, WMM F 27/44; September 22, 1794). In the dedication to *The Medallion*, which she inscribed to the Prince of Wales, Pearson offers “the warmest prayer of an Englishwoman—an Englishwoman proud of the greatness of her Country” (5) to the prince. The address “To the Reviewers” indirectly provides information on the difficulties under which she must have been writing the novel, for, as she overtly states, she refrains from “mention[ing] the [specific] circumstances under which it has been written,” aware that she could “run the hazard of being suspected to awaken your [the reviewers’] feelings for the purpose of blunting your criticism” (8). The reception of the novel was largely positive, a reviewer for *Anthologia Hibernica* judging it “ingenious and beautiful” and “calculated to encourage the love of moral and political virtue” (3), but her struggle to make a living by her pen continued throughout her life: In 1810, she corresponded with James Montgomery who furnished her with letters of recommendation to his brother the Rev. Ignatius Montgomery and to
the Longman publishing business (Holland and Everett, 2: 256) and who, in due course, would also act as her executor (see Sheffield Archives, WWM/G/83/182; July 16, 1833). At the time she corresponded with Montgomery, she was working as a teacher, governess, and companion. The Fitzwilliam family supported her with a regular allowance from at least 1816, as Pearson’s ill health by then prevented her from continuing “the Education of Children” (Sheffield Archives, WWM F 66/48; April 21, 1817). In a letter of 1817, she states that she had been in receipt of material support from her patrons for twenty-seven years. On March 12, 1817, she writes to the Earl of Fitzwilliam, from nearby Wakefield, to solicit a suitable place to live but also explaining how she would put her skills to use to contribute to her upkeep:

One of the humblest Cottages in Wentworth or small Lodge in its Vicinity would bound my wishes united with a very trifling Sum yearly, and tho’ even with such an addition the interest of what I have saved wou’d be inadequate to support me on the most frugal scale; but I could make out the Remainder of my Subsistence by writing Elementary Books for children or such other employments as my health wou’d admit. (Sheffield Archives, WWM F 66/47; March 12, 1817).

None of these “Elementary Books,” if written at all, were ever published. Pearson’s Poems was her first major attempt at launching a career as a professional writer. It introduced her to the precarious market of authorship on which she struggled to make a living for the next twenty years. Even though she did not enjoy the financial successes of some of her female contemporaries and her more ephemeral works have all but disappeared from the print cultural archive, Pearson’s work testifies to her integration of new ideologies and trends in literature,
experimenting in particular with generic hybridity for which she deserves to be remembered. 

*Poems* sold at varying prices from 2s. 6d. to 4s. in both Sheffield and London, and Gales appears to have advertised the subscription proposals widely, as there are numerous subscribers who are not based in Yorkshire or the northern English counties but in Scotland. The volume was, on the whole, received well: While one reviewer, in the *English Review*, credited Pearson with “a lively imagination, great sensibility, and a happy talent for composition” (335), Mary Wollstonecraft in the *Analytical Review* commended the ballads but patronizingly termed the other productions—including the sonnets that other reviewers has singled out for praise and reprinted in their reviews—“silver streamlets” (459), a metaphor that encompasses their limited ability to convey ideational, generic, and metrical complexity.

Pearson’s first collection of poems introduced her to notice, and a number of periodicals, usually owned by Gales’s London agents, the Robinsons, reprinted poems from the collection or published new verse by the poet. Her 1800 volume of poetry recycled some of the material that Pearson had published in the periodical press since 1790. The subscription list to the later, 5s.-collection is far less extensive than the one accompanying her first collection of poems had been. The members of the Fitzwilliam family feature prominently, but none of those Sheffield writers that had subscribed to the earlier volume are found in the later list. Ebenezer Rhodes (1762-1839), another Sheffield writer whose *Alfred, an historical tragedy to which is added a collection of Miscellaneous poems by the same author* (1789) Gales had published, subscribed to Pearson’s second collection of poems, purchasing four copies. Like Pearson, Rhodes also submitted poetry to the *Literary Magazine and British Review* in the early 1790s. The periodical, like the *Sheffield Register*, fostered the sense of a virtual community of authors, and included
William Hamilton Reid’s complimentary sonnet “On Reading Sonnets, &c. by Miss Pearson, or Angelina” in 1790:

Enchanting Lyrist! could the list’ning ear
Imbibe such dulcet melodies again,
As grac’d the humblemest flow’rets of the plain*,
The spring of pleasure would once more appear;
The breezes bring the strains mellifluous near!
And now again untwin’d, they sweetly chime,
The velvet smoothness tempers the sublime,
Votive to her who deck’d the hero’s bier
With mournful glories † – Milder lights relieve
Th’ obstructed efforts of a weaker eye;
Such from thy sphere of radiance we receive,
Such the new lustre of the northern sky;
Which, if obscur’d, a kindred sense could trace,
Mark’d in each feature, ’bove the common race.

* The violet
† Miss Seward

Reid (1760-c. 1826), the son of servants in the employ of the Duke of Hamilton, and a translator, biographer, and miscellaneous writer, contributed numerous sonnets to the periodicals of the 1780s and 1790s. In his sonnet, he aligns Pearson with Seward as a model that the former explicitly followed in her own use of the form. Reid characterizes Seward in terms of the “mournful glories” she celebrated in her elegy on Captain James Cook, thereby establishing another intertextual link between Pearson and Seward that refers to the Sheffield poet’s
celebratory production on Seward’s elegy, “Sonnet to Miss Seward. On Reading her elegy on the
death of Captain Cook” (*Poems*, 35), and the elegiac mode with which she hybridized her own
sonnets. Reid’s reference to the “humblest flow’rets of the plain” and the note affixed to the line
evoke Pearson’s “Sonnet to the Violet” (*Poems*, 51). Similarly, Newton’s sonnet to Pearson is a
mesh of intertextual references to Pearson’s shorter poems.

While Gales’s volume of Pearson’s 1790 *Poems* had included a list of over 1000
subscribers, the later collection has fewer than 200. By the time she published her *Poems on Various Subjects*, Pearson no longer relied on the Robinsons to issue the work; rather, J.
Rivington marketed the book and also included, as the Robinsons had done, poems—at times
unpublished ones such as “Lines, Written in the Park of Wentworth-House, the seat of Earl
Fitzwilliam, on being told that the oaks on Temple Hill were sown by Lord Milton, when three
years old,” “War Song,” and “The Discovery”—in his miscellaneous publications. A reviewer
of the 1800 volume noted that Pearson “discovers a correct ear and a cultivated taste” but did not
highlight the poet’s fashioning of the Gothic verse tale.

Overall, Pearson’s sonnets demonstrate a revived interest in the form that is prominent in
the pages of the *Sheffield Register*, which included a variety of sonnets by local poets and those
of national reputation, including Anna Seward, Charlotte Smith, and Helen Maria Williams.
Gales’s “Repository of Genius” column established anthological reading patterns and facilitated
a reading of poets’ works in terms of the productions of a coterie. To publish Pearson’s sonnets
alongside Newton’s and Seward’s made them comparable to theirs. Their physical proximity
generated a proximity or contact zone of meaning on which the editors of periodicals capitalized
in their compilations. The anthological character of the material published in the “Repository of
Genius” is also confirmed by readers’ removing these columns from the newspaper in order to
collect them in albums of miscellaneous poetry. The poetic tributes that Pearson received in the pages of periodicals relate her to a genealogy of the sonnet in which she follows in the footsteps of such local poets as Henry Carey and Nathaniel Lister, close associates of Seward. While Pearson’s fifteen sonnets in Poems offer insights into a provincial poet’s appropriating use of the “elegiac lyric” in sonnet form (see Jung, “Pearson and the ‘Elegiac Lyric’,” 153-64), her ballads display the handling of genre and theme that her later, more complex Gothic verse tales, included in her second collection of poems, develop in strikingly novel ways (see Jung, “Pearson’s Gothic Verse Tales,” 392-407). The poems of particular interest are “Zara and Sebastian” and “Viola and Alonzo,” both written “In Imitation of the Old Spanish Ballad,” as well as “Lines found on the stairs of the Tour de La Chapelle of the Bastille” and “An African Tale.” Her prose imitation of Ossian, “Clessamor,” further explores the issues of love, loss, and the Gothic developed in Pearson’s later verse.

“Zara and Sebastian” introduces an intercultural encounter at the time of the crusades in which Sebastian, “the gallant Christian” (53) and captive in Moorish Spain, escapes from his sleeping prison guard and on his way out of his confinement confronts his captor’s daughter, “a pensive beauty” “rob’d in silver” (42, 41). She reveals her love to him, but the “vent’rous captive” (47) is steadfast and confesses that he cannot reciprocate her love, as he sought to escape only to return to his “wedded bride” (68), Elvira, and their “lovely infant” (20). Zara transcends egotistical desire and furnishes Sebastian with a “golden signet” (107) that will enable him to board a ship for his homeland. At the cost of securing his happiness, she sacrifices her own.

… I still will make thee happy,

“Though I ne’er must hope for peace,
The poem dramatizes Zara’s choice between filial obedience and fidelity and her love for Sebastian. Although of different religions, the two represent sentimental Christian lovers, whilst Zara characterizes her father—and by extension the Moorish religion—as “cruel” (50) and hateful. She represents a dignity, grace, and mildness of disposition that contrast with the “tyrant fetters” her religious practitioners impose. Sebastian’s determination to return to his wife, to liberate himself, and to overcome his enslavement is not realized by means of an act of violence; he does not harm his guard. He engaged in honorable action, killing his enemies, only during battle in defence of his faith but is now driven by his love for his wife and child to escape from his guard by whatever means. This motivation revalues the heroic characterization of the crusader from the beginning of the poem and casts Sebastian into the role of a sentimental figure whose resistance to Zara’s charms is based on principle and his fidelity to Elvira. Sebastian and Zara function in a narrative of cultural encounter that relativizes religious difference. In fact, the other (Zara) embodies the qualities identified in Elvira and Sebastian and would therefore, Pearson suggests, be a suitable wife for a young Christian. Although Pearson’s fashioning of Zara rewrites the character in sentimental terms and argues for a type of transcultural notion of feminine goodness, she does not invert the sense of superiority that the west has over the east. This inversion of the order of morality as predicated on western Christian values underpins “An African Tale,” a fairly outspoken critique of the slave trade.

Pearson’s short ballad “Viola and Alonzo” introduces the subject of slavery as part of Viola’s lament for her lover, the “brave Alonzo” (55). Pearson opens the poem by Viola’s anxiously seeking to share her lover’s “fatal doom.” She paints an idyllic vision of primitive
rural retirement, a setting in which, “Distant from the vulgar wretched, / We will weave our palmy shed.” As long as she can be with Alonzo, she prefers a life of slavery to an existence on her own that she characterizes as filled with loneliness and despair. She states confidently that their companionship would give them strength, but that their separation would be fatal.

“Ne’er shall sorrow pain, or danger
“Force Viola from thy sight,
“Woe shall strengthen our affection,
“Love shall make e’n slavery light. (25-28)

At the end of the ballad, however, she realizes that their separation is inevitable. On board a slave-ship, Alonzo is lost to her, as she has no possibility of following him or sharing his fate:

“Distant mists involve my lover!— / “Hope within my bosom dies” (59-60).

At 236 lines, “An African Tale” is the longest poem in Pearson’s collection. Whereas “Viola and Alonzo” dramatized the former’s despair and hopelessness, the longer work develops a more complex structure of modal variation. It opens with a depiction of an idyll presided over by “Zarad the gentle sovereign of the grove” (7) and his wife, Zilea. As early as the second stanza, the speaker insists that “avarice” had not yet “pierc’d the tranquil shade” (5). The emphasis on economic gain and the contrast that Pearson establishes between the greed of those western nations engaging in the slave trade and the inhabitants of Zarad’s primitive realm of innocence underscore the poet’s critique of slavery. Zarad and his people possess a “moral grace” that western nations lack. Pearson renders this realm of innocence as one replete with “Enchanting visions of the raptur’d soul” (21) but disenchants the scene of conjugal happiness by stating that this apparently harmonious vision of life is an illusion. Before disrupting the lover’s
bliss, however, Pearson introduces an extended passage that deals with the history of Zarad and Zilea, their meeting, and his marrying her despite her inferior social rank. She deploys the literary topos of two lovers of disparate social backgrounds finding true happiness through a love that does not depend on economic exchange but a reciprocation of affection. The equalizing stance is clear and is reminiscent of similar uses of the idea in Collins’s *Persian Eclogues* and Thomson’s Palemon and Lavinia tale. Pearson focuses on intrinsic worth, rather than on the materialism supporting capitalist society. The woods and groves where the lovers used to spend hours of happiness in each other’s company are invaded about half way through the poem:

’Tis past!—the dulcet voice of pleasure dies!
For lo! Resistless through the mazy wood,
The fierce insatiate foe like lightning flies,
And marks each rapid step with human blood. (149-52)

The poem’s pace accelerates and moves from the depiction of the grove and the lover’s affection for each other to a dramatic scene in which the invaders try to fetter Zarad and, eventually, as a result of his resistance, kill him. Mortally wounded, Zarad articulates an ominous and prophetic soliloquy:

“No more my love,” the gasping monarch cry’d,
“New lustre on my fluttering soul is shed—
“We soon shall meet beyond the misty tide,
“In meads of bliss which tyrants never tread.

“For them who cruel urge these horrid deeds,
“Yet boast of finer souls, and gods more pure,
“If, as their scene of youth and hope recedes,
“When even riches shall no more allure;

“If with their thoughts the dreadful past shall blend,
“Afric will rise in tenfold terrors drest,
“And with a wilder pang their bosoms rend,
“Than that I feel”—he said and sunk to rest. (165-76)

At end of this soliloquy, “Zilea breathless sunk beside his bier, / And her fair soul to milder regions fled” (179-80). Not only does Zilea’s death represent a direct response to the loss she has experienced but her death—read in tandem with Zarad’s farewell—serves as a reminder that these slaves have the same emotional responses attributed to their white masters. The poem closes with a vision of “the parting wretches [i.e. slaves]” (181), transported from their native land. Pearson’s poem gives voice to Zarad and rejects the “avarice” and brutality with which Britain pursued its slave trade agenda. Unlike other poems by Pearson, this poem was not reprinted in the periodical press. In productions such as “An African Tale” and “Viola and Alonzo” Pearson demonstrates that she deviates significantly from precedent in the way in which she enfranchises her speaking others. Pearson’s 1790s Poems address issues that were highly topical at the time she was writing and which were heatedly debated in her native Sheffield. Her poetry is still preoccupied with the culture of sensibility but she succeeds in fashioning in her poetry a concern with issues of class and status that she would herself have to negotiate throughout her career. The more ephemeral works, including “The Discovery,” centrally explore issues of otherness while her patronage poems are suffused with deep gratitude for the support that she received from the Fitzwilliam family. Recognizing the range of Pearson’s work will
contribute not only to the mapping of late eighteenth-century Sheffield writing culture, but it will also help readers to appreciate the ways in which she engaged with the literary tradition and sought to make a living by her pen.

APPENDIX: TWO PEARSON POEMS

“Lines, Written in the Park of Wentworth-House, the seat of Earl Fitzwilliam, on being told that the oaks on Temple Hill were sown by Lord Milton, when three years old” (The Poetical Register, and Repository of Fugitive Poetry (London: F. and C. Rivington, 1802), 25-26.

Here, rosy Light, with purest influence shine,
Here zephyrs bland with cheering dews combine,
And latent rills, and vernal rains, to swell
The silky leaf beyond its wintry cell:
And ye, who weave the woodlands summer-bowers,
Here bend your steps ye fair ethereal powers!
On this bright slope, with plastic fingers, guide
These youthful oaks to mount in sylvan pride;
Save them, sweet guardians, when mid polar snows
The Sire of Storms awakes from dread repose,
Yokes the fierce tempests to his howling car,
And calls, with thundering voice, the elements to war.
Shield their young boles, when o’er the snowy waste
In rapid triumph rides the arrowy blast;
Watch, when the swollen spring o’erleaps its bound
And robs their infant roots of fostering mound;
Guard their soft buds from mildrew’s baleful power,
And Jove’s red bolt in heaven’s indignant hour:
Nurse, and protect them, till revolving time
On this fair summit sees them rise sublime,
With grace superior this sweet scene adorn,
And yield their shade to Wentworths yet unborn.
And when in full perfection’s height they stand,
Waving their ample boughs, serenely grand,
O may they blossom true emblems of his worth
Who gave their embryos to the genial earth,
While yet his little feet uncertain trod
Timid and slow along the grassy sod.
Such be the beauty of his mind matur’d,
By taste embellish’d, and to toil inur’d,
Expanded by Religion’s sacred rays,
Enrich’d by classic lore of ancient days,
His bosom girt with Truth’s celestial zone,
His youthful lips her pure and living throne,
Where sterling sense shall charm in mild Persuasion’s tone!
Thus, deck’d with every precious gift of Health,

High on the pedestal of Rank and Wealth,

Long may he tower, unshaken in his place,

Like the Patrician-Oak, his country’s strength and grace!

“The Discovery” (Poetical Register, and Repository of Fugitive Poetry, 4 (1806): 117-18.)

’Tis said the witching power of Love

Can give deformity a grace,

Shed lustre o’er the dullest face,

And hide the vixen in the Dove.

While o’er the soul the Tyrant sways,

The beauteous object we select

Has elegance and intellect,

And eyes that dart celestial rays

On the poor Lover’s dazzled sight,

Altho’ those eyes no language speak,

Nor rose, nor dimple bless the cheek,

Nor common sense one phrase indite.
But when the magic medium fades,
Thro’ which the form so brightly shone,
And made each excellence its own,
O! what a change in Men and Maids!

This Edward to Maria prov’d—
Full of the little God he sail’d,
And many a foreign port he hail’d,
Far from the angel girl he lov’d.

At length he sought his native shore:
Six tedious years had seen him roam,
The seventh brought the Wanderer home
To fond, expecting Mary’s door.

But Absence, love’s inveterate foe,
Had wasted Edward’s ardent flame
To almost nothing but a name,
Tame’d it to Friendship’s sober glow.

The spell that bound him was no more!
He now with different optics saw,
And in her beauty found a flaw
He never had perceiv’d before.

How chang’d, he cry’d, in form and face!
“Ye Gods! is this Maria? Why
“Maria! You have lost an eye!
“When did this accident take place?”

The poor girl heaving piteous sighs,
Replied in accents of despair,
“Edward, I never had two eyes;
“But you, alas! have found a pair!”

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1 The year of Pearson’s birth is here given accurately for the first time in modern scholarship. See Henry Schroder ed., The Annals of Yorkshire from the earliest period to the present time, 2 vols. (Leeds: George Crosby, 1852), 352. There has been significant confusion as to Pearson’s life-dates and Christian name. Owing to the fact that Pearson usually published her works as by “S. Pearson,” she has repeatedly been confused with the Norfolk religious writer, Susanna Pearson (1779-1827), the author of Essays and letters, presented to the Church of Christ (Ipswich, 1827). COPAC incorrectly attributes Sarah Pearson’s literary work to the Baptist Susanna Pearson. Kevin Binfield’s “Ned Ludd and laboring-class autobiography” (163-64) briefly outlines the problems surrounding the attribution to Susanna Pearson.
2 “In the 1780s [George Robinson] had the largest whole-sale trade in London, and in the purchase of copyrights he became the rival of the most formidable of the old established houses” (Plomer, 215). His son George and brother John continued the business after his retirement.

3 A reviewer for the British Critic (6 [1795]) is less positive, noting that “our duty to the public will not allow us to compromise the laws of criticism, or recommend to the patronage of the public would not, after all, admire” (544).


6 Copies of the Sheffield Register in the special collections department at Sheffield University Library and the Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscript Library evidence the removal of the literary material.
WORKS CITED

*and British Review* 4 (1790): 220; Wollstonecraft, Mary. “review of Pearson’s *Poems*.”