

Working along the Body's Border; or, Eve's Version of the Curse of Couplets

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In *Labours Lost* (2009), Carolyn Steedman proposes that the domestic servant's contract raised many of the problems of social contracts more broadly in the period¹: What freedoms can be given up? What can be purchased? The servant's time? Could the employer purchase the body if only for a limited time? What parts of the body? The hands? The arms? The sweat and blood? This paper examines an equally pervasive literary form in the period—the couplet—as another written object that enacted the social contract specifically between women and others' bodies in their public and private employments. It asks more generally: how can a literary form shape conceptions and expressions of the bodily autonomies of working women?

The paper will take up John Milton's highly influential suggestion in the prefacing note to *Paradise Lost* (1667) that rhyme and its "like endings" are a "modern bondage" as an opportunity to understand other kinds of gendered and classed "bondage" in the period. Using Milton as his illustrative example, Gerard Cohen-Vrignaud argues, that "bourgeois-liberal ideals of autonomy and free expression led to rhyme's increasing identification with femininity and childhood."² That bourgeois-liberal autonomy is firstly formal; it represents blank verse that unencumbered authorial expression from either matching endings or the hegemonic convention to rhyme. More subtly, asserting this creative expression asserted control over the body and a gendered body susceptible to the pleasures and manipulations of sound. Intriguingly, Milton's articulation of this double bondage of mind and body occurs at the scene of Adam and Eve's creation, transgression, and punishment.

There were other ways of telling and interpreting the story of Adam and Eve, and so there may be other ways of configuring a relationship between form and bodily dependencies. Lucy Hutchinson's *Order and Disorder* (1679) has been posited as an "Eve's version" of *Paradise Lost* as her poem depicts parts of Genesis and because Hutchinson shared many of Milton's political and religious commitments. Distinctly unlike Milton, she deploys couplets. And, she does so during her other striking intervention: dilating Eve's curse of reproductive labor to linger on the many painful activities of caring for a child. Repetition, in the lines themselves and sonically through the couplets, makes clear the increasing of women's labor in the afterward of care—that the curse extends to parts of childcare that could be done by someone other than the mother and were often paid for. Further, the verse and the couplets dramatize a physical bodily dependency between mother and child, caretaker and cared for as she depicts fluids circulating and recycling within and beyond the boundaries of the body after birth.

As this paper will ultimately argue, the couplet was then redeployed by servants to imagine alternative social contracts for women's work. It situates Hutchinson's origin story as just that—a potential model to understand other representations of women's work, its bodily dependencies, and the limits of care across the period. In the eighteenth century, a small canon of "natural genius" and working-class women authors (Mary Collier, Mary Leapor, Elizabeth Hands, and Anne Yearsley) appeared in print, in verse, and in couplets. Based on the model I'm suggesting,

¹ See Carolyn Steedman, *Labours Lost* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 45, 22.

² Gerard Cohen-Vrignaud, "Rhymes Crimes," *ELH*, 82. 3 (Fall 2015): 990.

we can now see the appeal for these poets for how couplets could dramatize the pains and pleasure of maintaining homes, washing clothes, and tending to others' bodies. Couplets are not only metaphorically a kind of bondage but themselves are bound to what is available in mind and body; they rely on found matter—the sound before, rhyming words, and the “field of suggestibility” in J. Paul Hunter’s terms—just as these women dealt with the returning and recycling matter of their and others’ bodies.³

³ J. Paul Hunter, “Sleeping Beauties: Are Historical Aesthetics Worth Recovering?” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 34.1 (Fall 2000), 13.