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Reversing the Tide: Professor Gives Due to Self-Taught Poets

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — It has been called poetry of the uneducated, the peasant class or the laboring class. Yet these terms demean what a group of poets from the 1700s produced, said Julie Prandi, a professor at Illinois Wesleyan University. “Their work has meaning and life that we can see even today, but it has often been dismissed as lower class or second rate,” she said.

In Prandi’s latest book, *The Poetry of the Self-Taught: An Eighteenth-Century Phenomenon* (Peter Lang Publishing, May 2008), she adopts the term “self-taught poets” for those who did not have formal educations through universities. The book is one of the first real attempts to compare the works of self-taught poets in Germany and the United Kingdom during the eighteenth century. “Many people have studied these poets individually, and found what they thought were idiosyncrasies, or just charming elements of their writing,” said Prandi, “when in fact they were characteristics these poets shared with other self-taught poets.”

Prandi, a professor of German who has written a book and several articles on the poet Goethe, discovered the self-taught poet Anna Louise Karsch in the 1990s when working with Women in German, a scholarly organization devoted to research on female, German authors. “I found her work exciting, and I had never seen it in any anthology,” said Prandi. “I thought, ‘this has to be a mistake that she was left out.’” Through her research, Prandi uncovered that few self-taught poets were included in anthologies or textbooks. “Many of them enjoyed fame in their lifetimes, but scholars dismissed them because their work did not follow the standards of what was being taught at universities at the time,” said Prandi.

Because of this bias, much of the work of the self-taught poets vanished as centuries passed. “We assume that poetry disappears from literary history because it was bad, and did not stand the test of time,” said Prandi. “But sometimes scholars make mistakes.”

More and more people are discovering the work of self-taught poets, said Prandi. While poets such as the Scottish Robert Burns have always been celebrated, people are uncovering

works by authors such as Mary Leapor and Friedrich Müller. "The poetry can be more easily appreciated by the modern reader than other eighteenth century poetry because it is often more accessible than what was considered mainstream poetry," said Prandi. While the works of poets such as Alexander Pope are still beloved by modern readers, she noted the mainstream style of the period often featured a language that seems ponderous or out of reach for today's audience. "A lot of those works seem stilted and filled with allusions that are no longer understood," she said.

Self-taught poets, on the other hand, were speaking of everyday experiences and feelings that can still be appreciated today. "Much of self-taught poetry was meant for a different audience," said Prandi. She looks to poetry in the form of letters, or epistles, as an example. "Many mainstream poets wrote epistles, but who the addressees were was not important to the poems. It was more of a forum for writing to a greater audience," said Prandi. "Self-taught poets would give advice and talk about people they knew and places they lived. It was easy for people to relate to them." Prandi noted this ability to invoke real places also lent to a regional fame for self-taught poets. "These poets sometimes viewed themselves as representing their local folk culture, and wrote about their own towns and provinces specifically," she said.

Regional fame for self-poets also evolved because people could see the poets perform their work, according to Prandi. "You have to remember that poetry was fun and social, especially for the self-taught poet," said Prandi, noting poetry readings were part of parties and public performances in the eighteenth century. "We have this image of poetry as being severe. Let's all put on a sad face and read. But Robert Burns was singing his poems at pubs, and Karsch was invited to parties to read her poems as entertainment." The poets tended to use a variety of poetic modes or diction, making them difficult to classify: another quality that tied self-taught poets together, but kept them from being considered mainstream. "These were a different kind of poetry, often close to the oral tradition," she said.

Scholars of the eighteenth century did not dismiss self-taught poets as untalented, just undisciplined, said Prandi. In fact, they celebrated self-taught poets for possessing a "natural genius," or untrained talent. This label became a two-sided coin for self-taught poets, however. "There was a feeling that 'This is fine, but as spontaneous effusion that the poet refuses to revise and polish, so it won't ever be first-class poetry,'" said Prandi, who noted scholars assumed self-taught poets wrote most of their work at the spur of the moment. "They thought it was

impromptu poetry, and not crafted poetry, which could not be further from the truth. Their work is filled with sophisticated and elaborate meter and rhyme schemes.”

A small smile crosses Prandi’s face when asked why she focused on self-taught poets. “It’s not so much about the poets as the poetry,” said Prandi, who believes an obsession with how authors lived often overshadows their work. “People would rather read a book about Virginia Woolf than read anything she wrote, or read a biography of Proust and try to identify people in *Swann’s Way*, rather than read the book,” she said, comparing the phenomenon to more people reading about the life of actress Angelina Jolie than seeing her movies. “We focus too much on their lives and not enough on what they gave us in the form of their work. I’d like people to remember the work of these poets.”

Prandi is pleased with what she sees as a revival of the work of self-taught poets. “When I started my basic research for the book 10 years ago, not a lot of the poetry was available. I had to go to libraries and request these rare books to read it,” said Prandi. “Now the situation has improved. People are realizing how wonderful this poetry was, and what it can mean to them.”

Julie Prandi earned her Ph.D. in German literature at the University of California at Berkeley. She has contributed chapters on Anna Louisa Karsch to the anthologies, *Bitter Healing: German Women Writers from 1700 to 1830*, and to *Women Writing in German Speaking Countries*. She co-edited a volume of essays, *The Mendelssohns: Their Music in History*, and published one book on the poet Goethe’s philosophy of life, *Dare To Be Happy! A Study of Goethe’s Ethics* (1993), and a second book analyzing women protagonists in classical German drama, *Spirited Women Heroes: Major Female Characters in the Dramas of Goethe, Schiller, and Kleist* (1983). She has been with Illinois Wesleyan University since 1984.