**John Clare’s early experiments in dialect writing: the case of ‘Love Epistles between Richard and Kate’**

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In this article I want to describe the behaviour of a lesser-spotted John Clare. It is the John Clare responsible for only a handful of poems among the great many collected in the Oxford edition of his works (1989-2003). Yet even in the context of those nine volumes, which brought many new sides of the author to public attention for the first time, these few poems stand out, due to their startlingly unusual appearance. In poems such as ‘Lobin Clouts satirical sollilouquy on the times’, ‘John Bumkins Lucy’ and, most of all, ‘Love Epistles between Richard and Kate’ Clare experiments with punctuation and typography in a manner that is at once highly inventive, deeply suggestive and entirely uncharacteristic (when compared with his wider body of work). There is much that is not known about these poems: whether Clare considered them complete; what his hopes were for them; whether he submitted them to Taylor; why he didn’t write more poems in this vein. The precise dating of these poems is also uncertain: Clare’s Oxford editors draw them from the Northampton Manuscript, which includes texts published between 1808 and 1819. For all that they are anomalous, and for all we do not know about them, however, I want to suggest that one poem in particular – ‘Love Epistles between Richard and Kate – offers us a new perspective from which to consider the role of language and literacy in Clare’s wider body of work.

It is remarkable that these texts, like a handful of others from the same period and written in a similar style, stayed out of print for so long and that they have attracted comparatively little scholarly attention. An essay by Stephen Colclough, published in 2000, constitutes one exception to this tendency, observing of poems such as ‘Lobin Clouts satirical sollilouquy on the times’ that ‘in using dialect Clare is experimenting with the accepted ways of presenting a working-place voice’.[[1]](#endnote-1) Another can be found in John Barrell’s review of *The Early Poems of John Clare: 1804-1822*, in which he observes that the uncovering of ‘poems and songs written wholly in dialect’ give the impression of ‘quite a new poet’.[[2]](#endnote-2) Barrell singles out ‘Love Epistles between Richard and Kate’ for comment, and notes (perhaps prompted by Clare’s use of macrons) that it employs ‘material and verse-forms which seem to anticipate William Barnes’.[[3]](#endnote-3) ‘Love Epistles between Richard and Kate’ is also included by Simon Kövesi in a list of Clare’s early poems on women which give rise to ‘complex textual and interpretative issues’.[[4]](#endnote-4)

These poems offer a marked contrast to Clare’s wider body of work both in the density of their dialect representation and the orthographical inventiveness with which Clare renders local speech sounds. Because of this, they shed important light on Clare’s approach to dialect writing and constitutes rare and remarkable written evidence of historical pronunciations that would otherwise not exist. It is to poems such as these that Clare’s Oxford editors refer when they invite us to -

Consider the dialect-poetry represented here. In most of Clare’s poems already published he is not a dialect-poet and does not intend to be one. Odd words or phrases from his Helpston vocabulary are glossed in his early published volumes, rusticisms of grammar occasionally evade John Taylor’s eye, and later editors or biographers may have occasionally referred to a true dialect-poem, but, in general, Clare’s dialect-poetry is still unknown. The omission of it creates a very misleading picture of Clare […] [These poems] reveal Clare as hard-headed, reeking of the farm, well-acquainted with village morals or the lack of them, and capable of self-ridicule.[[5]](#endnote-5)

For Clare’s editors, these long-hidden texts are self-evidently instances of ‘dialect-poetry’. It is odd, therefore, that thy do not linger at all on what is most immediately and obviously different about them: namely, the dialect itself, and the remarkably idiosyncratic and inventive orthographical strategies Clare employs to represent pronunciations. As this article will suggest, behind the rustic persona that Clare’s editors conflate with the poet is an author and a sociolinguist carefully listening for nuanced differences of sound and imaginatively exploring the social meanings attached to them. Through a detailed linguistic analysis of Clare’s spellings in ‘Love Epistles between Richard and Kate’, cross-referenced against accounts of phonology in Northamptonshire, I aim to describe a poet who is not so much ‘hard-headed’ as sharp-eared. What is more, the poems reveals Clare to be a shrewd commentator on the ambivalent ways in which literacy was transforming social reality for the agricultural labouring class.

Clare’s editors describe poems such as the ‘Love Epistles’ as ‘dialect-poetry’ and distinguish them from other productions which make use of non-standard language. From a cursory glance at the ‘Love Epistles’, for instance, it is not difficult to see why:

For ere I ’rit this scraūling let’er

(I wish I coul’d ha’ ’rit a bet’er)

Fe’ēring sūm peeping chaps mi’’te ’no’

I ’new not ’ardly w’ere to go (ll.41-44)

In contrast with Clare’s tendency to avoid punctuation in his better-known manuscript poetry, the lines of this stanza are loaded with macrons and apostrophes, in one case two in immediate succession. Jane Hodson notes that ‘apostrophes are used by authors to indicate that letters have been omitted on purpose rather than as a typographical error’.[[6]](#endnote-6) Here, as in other, similar poems, the presence of apostrophes serves unmistakeably to frame Clare’s language as part of an attempt to invoke particular ways of talking and writing, and particular social identities associated with those ways of talking and writing. In a later study of dialect representation in the Romantic period, Hodson notes that ‘it is simply not possible to determine exactly which features of his non-standard language Clare intended to achieve a “deliberate effect”’.[[7]](#endnote-7) Hodson’s caution offers a balancing counterpoint to those readings which have tended to overstate the political significance of Clare’s language in his wider body of work. But, in this context at least, it is evident that non-standard language is being employed with purpose. This is dialect poetry in that it has explicit things to say about dialect, unlike the great majority of Clare’s more famous works.

And yet the ‘dialect poetry’ label requires some qualification. Graham Shorrocks offers the following, oft-cited definition of dialect literature:

works composed wholly (sometimes partly) in a non-standard dialect, and aimed essentially, though not exclusively, at a non-standard-dialect-speaking readership.[[8]](#endnote-8)

There are different ways in which a text might be targeted at a particular readership. As Honeybone has suggested, the orientation of dialect literature towards a specific (local, dialect-speaking) readership is often inferable from dialect writers’ spellings, which frequently call on the insider ‘knowledge of the reader to fill in the details’.[[9]](#endnote-9) Elsewhere, I have argued that dialect literature as a mode took several decades to develop into the form described by Shorrocks (as late as the mid-nineteenth century, in fact).[[10]](#endnote-10) Earlier works composed largely in non-standard dialect were, more often than not, mediated for general, non-speakers of the dialect through complex paratextual apparatuses, such as glossaries, footnotes and prefaces.[[11]](#endnote-11) Regardless, what seems to be crucial in any definition of dialect literature is the relationship between writer, text and reader. This relationship might arise from an author or publisher creating and distributing the texts for a specific geographically-defined audience. Alternatively, the relationship might be suggested by writers employing spellings which presuppose that readers will connect them with ideas about how local people talk. Likewise, a relationship might be established by a writer or editor framing the text with paratexts which mediate the local content for a specific audience (be it regional or national).

If these texts can be classed as dialect literature, then it is in spite of the fact that they are not ostensibly aimed at a ‘non-standard-dialect-speaking readership’. We do not know for whom or what they were written. And, perhaps more crucially, the problem with reading Clare as a dialect poet is that, for all of his oft-discussed acute sense of place, it is impossible to say precisely where his sense of the local, linguistically speaking, began and ended. One reason for this is that, as I have suggested elsewhere, the regional forms used by Clare had yet to coalesce into the idea of a single dialect. It was only in the wake of Clare’s writing that this happened: his use of geographically-limited forms were employed by later commentators in order to bring the idea of the Northamptonshire dialect into being – an idea that was not available to Clare at the time his early poems were written.[[12]](#endnote-12) The audience for Northamptonshire dialect poetry – the ‘dialect-speaking readership’ described by Shorrocks – did not exist at this time because there was no idea of Northamptonshire dialect with which the local reading public might identify itself, even if they recognised individual forms as broadly regional, in an uncircumscribed sort of way.

It may appear hair-splitting to debate the issue of whether or not these texts can be described as dialect literature. But I would like to suggest that recognising the ambivalent status of these texts as dialect writing is key to understanding what makes them unique. Unlike the forms of archetypal dialect literature described by Shorrocks, ‘Love Epistles’, along with other, similar poems of this period, is not a definitive attempt to represent a single, discrete dialect (be it of Northamptonshire, Helpston or the Midlands) but rather an experimental attempt to capture the speech sounds of Clare’s local environment, and to draw out the meanings that linguistic variation – both in speech and writing - was increasingly coming to carry in labouring-class communities.

In a later section of this article, I look in depth at the language used by Clare in ‘Love Epistles’, paying particular attention to spelling. There are of course difficulties attendant on any attempt to analyse orthography in Clare’s writing, in light of the generally inconsistent nature of his spellings (the reasons for which are discussed, for instance, by his Oxford editors[[13]](#endnote-13)). In principle, this should mean that it is not always possible to know whether specific spellings are intentionally non-standard or (which is a separate matter) whether they reflect specific regional pronunciations. However, by attending to Clare’s use of apostrophes and macrons, by looking for patterns and variation within the poems themselves (including instances of code-switching and reported speech), it possible to identify recurring, meaningful effects. And in order to uncover whether the spellings encode specific pronunciations, I have cross-referenced them against mid nineteenth-century accounts of Northamptonshire phonology: specifically, Thomas Sternberg’s *Dialect and Folklore of Northamptonshire* (1851) and Ann Baker’s *Glossary of Northamptonshire Words and Phrases* (1854). In some cases I have also made use of a more recent account of the dialect, in the form of Mia Butler and Colin Eaton’s *Learn Yersalf Northamptonshire* (1998), with the caveat that local pronunciations may have changed in the two centuries since Clare wrote these poems. To supplement these sources, I have drawn on more recent scholarship relating to linguistic variation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries more generally: namely, the work of Linda Mugglestone and Katie Wales. We will see, however, that while Clare’s spellings assiduously record the sounds that he very likely heard spoken around him, they do not serve to perform regional identity, but are rather bound up with education and even gender.

‘Love Epistles between Richard and Kate’ is a pastoral dialogue between a ‘Cuntry Clown’ and a ‘Milkmaid’, as a struck-through subtitle in the manuscript explains, consisting of two verse letters in iambic tetrameter. Richard’s letter, the first of the pair, expresses his love for Kate, complains about his own lack of skill as a writer and singer, and his reasons for keeping his feelings secret from his friends. Kate’s reply offers no direct answer to Richard’s protestation of love, but instead details her interactions with ‘Farmers servant “Hobbs”’, who delivered Richard’s message. She describes her initial fear that the letter brought news of a bereavement, and her relief upon discovering that the seal was red, not black (which would have signified death). Following this, Kate reveals how Hobbs’ attempts to reassure her fall flat after he reports that ‘“ther’s nothing but good lūving in’t”’ (l.104), which implies that he may already have broken the seal and read the letter. Kate’s letter concludes with the couplet: ‘Whats in’t I says is nought to you/ So I paid post and bid him go’ (ll.107-8). The abrupt ending of the poem, and the lack of any direct reply to Richard’s romantic overtures, raises two possibilities. One possibility is that Clare had intended to write more, but abandoned the poem before it was finished. Another is that Kate’s non-answer is the point of the poem: a bathetic, ironic but also fitting end to a poem that is consistently more interested in the anxieties and embarrassments of written communication than it is in love itself. Throughout the poem, it is not clear whether a relationship already exists between the two: Richard’s letter makes reference to an earlier encounter, when he writes ‘For ever since you jog’d from here/ The day to me do’s seem a year’ (ll.7-8), but the nature of the meeting is unclear.

The names of the characters hint at a source for Clare’s poem: namely, Robert Bloomfield’s ‘Richard and Kate; or, Fair-Day. A Suffolk Ballad’, which was first published in his 1802 collection, *Rural Tales*. Clare was a great admirer of Bloomfield’s poem, commenting in a letter to Allan Cunningham that ‘his “Broken Crutch,” “Richard and Kate,” &c. are inimitable and above praise’.[[14]](#endnote-14) Bloomfield’s ballad follows the titular Richard and Kate on their fortieth anniversary as they travel to meet their children and grandchildren on Fair Day, and share memories of their early courtship. Although the poem paints a picture of uncomplicated and idyllic domestic content, notwithstanding the ‘pains and crosses’ of agricultural labour (l.126), the final stanza points ambivalently towards the impending mortality of the elderly couple, as ‘the Sun sink[s] behind the grove’ and the pair ‘gain[…] once more their lowly rest’ (ll.151-2).[[15]](#endnote-15) Scattered throughout the speech of Richard and, to a lesser degree, Kate (although she speaks considerably less) are a number of Suffolk dialect words, including ‘mawther’, which Bloomfield’s editors gloss as ‘a girl’, and ‘kedge’, which they translate as ‘Brisk, lively, in good spirits’.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Clare’s poem differs in several, significant regards from that of Bloomfield. In the first instance, Clare swaps Bloomfield’s verse dialogue for an epistolary exchange and, in doing so, shifts the emphasis from the public and the spoken to the private and the written. David Fairer writes that the eighteenth-century verse epistle ‘entangles private and public’,[[17]](#endnote-17) by virtue of the fact its appeal rests on the exposure of a personal, often intimate exchange in the presence of an anonymous reading audience. As noted previously, Clare’s ‘Love Epistles’ were not published until nearly two centuries after they were written. Nevertheless, a theme of invaded privacy is central to the poem. Richard seeks out a hidden spot where he can write to Kate free from the prying eyes of ‘peeping chaps’, and Kate’s letter expresses her consternation that ‘Farmers servant “Hobbs”’ – the man who delivers Richard’s letter – comments on its contents. Here, as elsewhere in Clare’s poem, literacy confers power ambivalently: it increases the opportunities for private communication, but it also increases the risk of being surveilled. Similarly, the ability to write carries with it prestige: Hobbs describes Richard as ‘sūm’ fine chap or ūther’ (l.105), presumably on the basis of his writing rather than his background. At the same time, it exposes the writer to the judgement of others: a fact of which Richard is acutely aware, referring as he frequently and neurotically does to his own shortcomings as a writer of ‘baddy stuf’ (l.66). At one point Richard refers to one of the ‘boys’, ‘Jim’, who apparently lacks ‘sens̄e’ and ‘can reēd an’ never spel’/ (An’ ’rite a let’er mons’orous wel’)’ (l.30). The use of ‘an’’ is somewhat ambiguous here: consistency dictates that Richard probably means to say that Jim cannot write a letter well, since he has also revealed that he lacks sense and cannot spell, which raises the question of why he did not write ‘or’ instead of ‘an’’. Regardless, in these lines we find the ideology of linguistic correctness leading Richard to assign different levels of worth to his peers, as he does to himself, according to their skill at writing and reading.

Clare was no stranger to the double-edged nature of education in a labouring-class context; Kövesi, for instance, has described the poet’s belief that ‘many [in Helpston] thought Clare’s learning a “folly”, and his scholarly habits “crazd” or even “criminal”’.[[18]](#endnote-18) However, the ability to read and/or write was not especially unusual at this time. Martin Lyons, for instance, cites a study which estimates that, in England between 1760 and 1800, sixty percent of men and forty percent of women were literate, although he notes that ‘bald figures’ such as these ‘say nothing at all about the quality of the literacy they measure’.[[19]](#endnote-19) As might be expected, these figures were much lower among non-skilled labourers, especially in the countryside.[[20]](#endnote-20) Even so, village schools such as the one Clare attended intermittently between the ages of five and eleven[[21]](#endnote-21) increased the prevalence of literacy, such that ‘in Britain and France, mass literacy was achieved by about 1880, before either country had fully established a system of free and compulsory primary education’.[[22]](#endnote-22)

The ability to read and the somewhat rarer ability to write (the two were taught separately, as Lyons points out[[23]](#endnote-23)) was increasingly becoming a feature of the lives of ‘Cuntry Clowns’ and ‘Milkmaids’, such as Richard and Kate, although not evenly, depending as it did on whether parents were able and willing to send their children to school. Clare’s poem suggests that with that change came new, ambivalent configurations of power and status within labouring-class communities. The true artistry of ‘Love Epistles’ rests in its ability to convey this new reality not only through what characters say, but the subtle forms of linguistic variation that it sets in motion. Herein lies the final respect in which Clare’s poem differs from Bloomfield’s ballad: while Bloomfield employs dialect words selectively to evoke the overall Suffolk, labouring-class setting of the poem (as the subtitle makes clear), Clare uses dialect respellings to indicate not only differences in levels of literacy, but also nuances in the way that the characters perceive themselves and others.

Several cues in the poem indicate that the use of non-standard writing is not only intentional on Clare’s part, but also a crucial part of its overall effect. In the first instance, the language of Richard’s and Kate’s letters, respectively, contrasts markedly. The first, written by Richard, features dense dialect representation, including clear attempts to convey information about regional pronunciation through the use of macrons and apostrophes. The second letter, written by Kate, tends to eschew these forms. Consider the linguistic differences between following stanzas, written by Richard and Kate, respectively:

For ere I ’rit this scraūling let’er

(I wish I cou’d ha’ ’rit a bet’er)

Fe’ēring sūm peeping chaps mi’’te ‘no’

I ‘new not ’ardly w’ere to go

(ll.41-5)

For if the seal had not been red

I shou’d have thought some friend were dead

But soon the fancying terror fled,

When I look’d on’t and see it red

(ll.99-102)

Where Richard’s verse is startling in its dense concentration of non-standard spellings and punctuation marks, Kate employs them much more sparingly. Most notably, the same words are realised differently by the two characters: Richard’s <sūm’> and <ha’> form a marked contrast with Kate’s <some> and <have>. This is not a simple opposition between a character who has mastered the standard and one who has not; the difference is more nuanced than that. Kate, like Richard, spells some words in the non-standard fashion and, like Richard, makes use of non-standard grammar: Richard has ’rit’ (for *written*) while Kate, for instance, uses the uninflected form of *see* to mark the third-person past tense, as in ‘He soon see me tho getting late’ (ll.85). As I argue below, Kate’s letter features hyper-correction, which indicates that Clare is consciously using linguistic variation not to mark social difference so much as satirise different social attitudes and self-perceptions. This is especially conspicuous when, at various points in Kate’s letter, she reports the speech of Hobbs, a farmer’s servant:

His comeing thus supprisd me quite

And set my very hair upright

I’d like to faint; til he cry’d out

‘Hoi dont be frighted I’m no scout’

‘Ive sūmm̄ot here ya’l not refuse’

‘Fūr if Im right its goodēr̄ news’

Well more good news I says the better

(ll.87-94)

Hobbs’ language is, in some respects, more markedly non-standard than Richard’s. Richard’s letter features some isolated non-standard lexis, in the form of ‘gang’ for ‘go’ (l.15), and grammar, such as ‘befel’’ (l.19) and ‘rit’ (l.42) for the present perfect of ‘befall’ and ‘write’, respectively. But where Hobbs uses the second-person form ‘yah’ and ‘goodēr̄’(for the comparative form of ‘good’), Richard has ‘you’ and ‘thou’ (alternately) and ‘bet’er’ (l.42). ‘Yah’, it should be added, is recorded in Baker’s glossary.[[24]](#endnote-24) What is significant here, however, is that Kate is code-switching to mark the difference, we may infer, that she perceives between her own speech and that of Hobbs. This is most apparent in the use of the macron, which Kate reserves for Hobs, but also in the contrast between the two different realisations of the comparative of ‘good’: Hobbs’ ‘goodēr̄’ and, in the line immediately following, Kate’s ‘better’. In Kate’s decision to render Hobs’ speech as markedly different from her own, it may be seen that she, similar to Richard in his comments upon Jim’s spelling, has internalised the ideology surrounding linguistic correctness. This in turn raises the possibility that Kate has judged Richard’s writing efforts critically, as he had hoped she would not, and perhaps even that she has chosen not to reciprocate his romantic address for this very reason. The poem, of course, does not confirm Kate’s feelings either way, but the epistles leave the reader, nevertheless, with a sense of the alienating effects of literacy and the hierarchies of correctness it presupposes.

In fact, Kate’s greater proficiency at writing elides, to some extent, wider patterns of gender inequality where literacy was concerned. Lyons, as has already been noted, observes that, in the late eighteenth century, ‘sixty percent of men and forty percent of women were literate’. While the ‘Love Epistles’ might implicitly register the alienating effects of literacy on labouring-class men and women, in the historical background to Clare’s poem still more women were suffering the disempowering effects of total illiteracy.

‘Love Epistles between Richard and Kate’ reveals Clare employing non-standard forms in order to create complex effects around social identity and perception, that extend far beyond any simple questions about Clare’s own background. In contrast with Bloomfield’s ‘Suffolk ballad’, regional identity does not seem to be important here: at no point do either of the characters make reference to a specific village or town, and there is no sense of where they hail from. At one point Kate refers to ‘our Lee close’, which, according to Clare’s editors, refers to ‘Ley Close, a small plot of land [in Helpstone] adjacent to Rice Wood (Royce Wood)’.[[25]](#endnote-25) In a separate article, I draw on the arguments of the sociolinguist, Nikolas Coupland, who points out that ‘even within local spaces, a sense of the local needs to be achieved – to be made socially meaningful’.[[26]](#endnote-26) Put another way, the use of dialect need not in itself communicate anything about local or regional identity. Dialect must be framed as local, it needs to be actively connected to a particular regional identity, in order to signify place. When, throughout his wider body of work, Clare uses the non-standard expressions we now associate with Northamptonshire, it is overwhelmingly the case that he does not frame them in terms of local identity: when he frames them at all, it is in relation to class identity and social status.[[27]](#endnote-27) Notwithstanding a brief and obscure reference to a local cul-de-sac, ‘Love Epistles between Richard and Kate’ is no different in that respect.

Even so, closer analysis of Clare’s spelling choices suggests that, in some cases at least, he is attempting to render the speech sounds he is likely to have encountered in Helpston and the Northamptonshire area more generally. The remainder of this section focuses more closely on some of these spellings, before going on in the conclusion to explore their significance in relation to Clare’s wider oeuvre. As noted above, it is Richard’s letter and not Kate’s which features the densest concentration of non-standard spellings. There is an undeniable incongruity in the fact that Richard’s letter purports to represent the writing of a fictional character, and yet employs textual devices that are typically used to represent speech, as if Richard were both accidentally and yet very assiduously recording his own pronunciations. Richard’s letter offers no indication that he himself is trying to represent a specific accent. On the contrary, he comments that ‘I wish I cou’d ha’ ’rit a bet’er’ (l.42), yet his use of apostrophes indicate that he is aware of the very spelling conventions he is breaking, which jars rather with his self-presentation as an poorly-lettered rustic. As illogical as this, it is no more so than many other instances of dialect representation, predicated as they are on the specious idea that Standard English spelling uncomplicatedly reflects Received Pronunciation, while other accents require non-standard spelling to reflect them accurately. Conveying sociolinguistic reality in print requires conceits that don’t stand up to much logical scrutiny, even if they help to make powerful statements about linguistic variation and how it is experienced.

Leaving this apparent inconsistency to one side, there is much in Richard’s letter which is of dialectological significance, not least the profusive use of apostrophes and macrons, especially when considered in the context of Clare’s wider oeuvre. Clare, as has already been observed, tended to eschew the use of punctuation in his manuscript poems. Consider the opening lines of the poem:

Dear kate

Since I no longer can

Go on in such a mopeing plan

I send these lines with ham and hum

To let the[e] ‘no’ I mean to cūm’

Sūm’ time or ūther you to see

W’en things ar’ fitting to agree

(ll.1-6)

In this instance, the apostrophe serves the conventional function of marking an elided letter, for example the absence of <k> and <w> in ‘‘no’’. In some cases, the elision of a letter communicates information about the sound of the word: elsewhere in the poem, *hardly*, *hanged* and *heart* are spelt, respectively, ‘’ardly’ (l.44), ‘’ang’d’ (l.51) and ‘’art’ (l.75), corresponding to the general prevalence of <h> deletion that Baker observes at large in Northamptonshire speech.[[28]](#endnote-28) Clare makes use of <d> deletion in his spelling of *and*, which is attested to in Sternberg’s account of Northamptonshire phonology.[[29]](#endnote-29) Another example of respelling unambiguously reflecting phonological differences can be found in Clare’s omission of <a> from the beginnings of words, as in ‘’pologin’ (l.69) for *apologising* and ‘’bout’ (l.64) for *about* to reflect the deletion of /ə/ in pronunciation: a pattern which is, according to Baker, noticeable in Northamptonshire speech.[[30]](#endnote-30)

In other instances, it is not clear whether the elision of a letter communicates information about the sound of the word or, alternatively, if it is an example of eye dialect: that is, a non-standard respelling which ‘does not alter the pronunciation at all’.[[31]](#endnote-31) Respellings which fall into this category include ‘’no’’ (l.43) for *know* (l.43), ‘mi’’te’ (l.43) for *might* and ‘wil’’ (l.52) for *will*. In exploring the significations of eye dialect, Hodson cites Adamson[[32]](#endnote-32) who suggests that it always produces a stigmatising effect, insofar as it implies illiteracy.[[33]](#endnote-33) Certainly, this is consistent with Richard’s repeated references to his own limitations as a writer, although it should be added that the poem is more reflective about the nature and effects of that stigma than is typical when writers use eye dialect. Hodson also notes that eye dialect may ‘alert readers’ to a regional accent, even if the spelling itself does not seem to convey ‘phonological information’.[[34]](#endnote-34) This is echoed by Honeybone who – to revisit a statement quoted earlier in the article – points out that words which appear to be eye dialect in RP ‘can serve to direct attention to the word as different from their [RP] correspondents, relying on the knowledge of the reader to fill in the details’.[[35]](#endnote-35) In this case, caution must be taken when discussing readerly inferences, as this poem was never published in Clare’s lifetime. Nevertheless, Honeybone’s observation raises the possibility that apparent examples of eye dialect arising from Clare’s use of the apostrophe may in fact point to regional differences of pronunciation.

A strong case for reading some of Clare’s spellings in this way can be made in those instances where historical changes to Received Pronunciation might cause a modern reader to wrongly identify one of Clare’s respellings as eye dialect. Two such instances can be found in the line ‘W’en things ar’ fitting to agree’ (l.6): more specifically, ‘w’en’ and ‘ar’’. The substitution of ‘ar’’ for *are* may indicate that the word is to be sounded without post-vocalic /r/.: a pronunciation that, as Mugglestone notes, was stigmatised in the pronouncing dictionaries of this period,[[36]](#endnote-36) and thus was not considered a feature of the emerging prestige form of spoken English. Notably, Butler and Eaton suggest that post-vocalic /r/ was not spread evenly across Northamptonshire, in the late twentieth century at least. They write -

Northamptonshire people never roll an ‘R’, and as you will no doubt discover, deal with vowels in a very curious manner. The word ‘for’ is pronounced in the southern area in the style of the south-west dialect, the ‘R’ being produced with the tongue at the back of the mouth, which is called a “burr”. In the northern area, however, it is pronounced ‘fooer’.[[37]](#endnote-37)

Clare hailed from the northern part of Northamptonshire, and his repeated respelling of ‘for’ as ‘fo’ in other poems of this kind, such as ‘Lobin Clouts satirical sollilouquy on the times’, provides evidence that, if he did not pronounce the word as ‘fooer’, he nevertheless did not sound the post-vocalic /r/ like those in the southern part of the county. It may be inferred, therefore, that the same is true of spellings such as ‘ar’’, ‘pleasur’’ (l.38), ‘wher’’ (l.55) and ‘to’n’ (l.32) for *turn*.

Clare’s tendency to delete <h> in wh-pronouns, such as ‘w’en’ (l.4, l.13), ‘w’at’ (l.67) and ‘w’y’ (69,) can also be explained in historical terms. Mugglestone observes that -

throughout the nineteenth century […] ,variation between [hw] and [w] in relevant words is, at least in theory, imbued with marked social correlations, demarcating “well bred” and “vulgar”, “educated” and “ignorant” with seeming – if subjective – precision.[[38]](#endnote-38)

Accounts of the Northamptonshire dialect do not make reference to the dropping of /h/ in wh-words as a feature specific to that variety. It may be that Clare adopted the widely stigmatised feature to foreground Richard’s low social status is not clear, rather than modelling it on the speech of those around him. Either way, it is telling that Kate’s reply to Richard, which is comparatively free of dialect features, features a gratuitous use of <h> in the respelling ‘‘Whi’’ (l.94), for ‘with’. This redundant <h> is suggestive of hypercorrection: that is, ‘when speakers of a non-standard dialect attempt to use the standard dialect and “go too far”, producing a version which does not appear in the standard’, as David Crystal defines the term.[[39]](#endnote-39) Such behaviour is consistent with Kate’s characterisation in this letter: as noted above, the fact that she represents her own speech predominantly in Standard English but that of a farmer’s servant using heavy dialect representation reveals much about her consciousness of social and linguistic difference.

Alongside apostrophes, Clare also, uncharacteristically, makes use of the macron in ‘Love Epistles between Richard and Kate,’ in such words as ‘sūm’ and ‘ūther’. Esther K. Sheldon notes that, in a number of pronouncing dictionaries in the eighteenth century, this particular diacritic served the purpose of marking a long vowel, [[40]](#endnote-40) as it does in the present day. In those cases where it sits above <u>, as in ‘cūm’ (l.4), ‘sūm’ (l.5), ‘ūther’ (l.5) and ‘dūn’ (l.40), however, the macron seems to perform a different function: namely, the pronunciation of <u> as /ʊ/ rather than /ʌ/. The regional distribution of these phonemes is famously supposed to distinguish the speech of Northern English from that of the South, and the isogloss which divides the two is commonly known as the ‘FOOT-STRUT’ split. Katie Wales, in her history of Northern English suggests that it runs along the southern county border of Northamptonshire,[[41]](#endnote-41) which would suggest that Clare pronounced the vowel sound of ‘strut’ as /ʊ/, in the Northern fashion. It seems probable, therefore, that Clare’s use of the macron above <u> is intended to signal this regional pronunciation.

Clare’s use of the macron above <e> may indicate the lengthening of a long vowel into two separate syllables in the cases of *read* and *reason*, which are spelt ‘reēd’ (l.29) and ‘reēson’ (l.35), respectively. Sternberg observes of the Northamptonshire pronunciations of such words that –

We also still preserve the original sound of the *ea*, thus – break, meat, mean, are pronounced as if written *bre-ak*, *me-at*, *me-an*: the pronunciation is better represented by the insertion of *y*, thus – *breyak*, *meyat*, &c.[[42]](#endnote-42)

It may follow, therefore, that ‘reēd’ (l.29) and ‘reēson’ (l.35) should either be realised as /reɪjəd/ and /reɪjəzn̩/ or as /riːjəd/ and /riːjəzn̩/. The significance of other uses of the macron in the same poem, such as ‘e’rēy’ (l.15) for ‘every’, ‘ōny’ (l.38) for ‘any’ and ‘scraūling’ (l.41) for ‘scrawling’, is less certain. But given the relative paucity of material on Northamptonshire phonology at the start of the nineteenth century, it is possible that these reflect experimental attempts on Clare’s part to represent local pronunciations which were not attested in subsequent accounts of the Northamptonshire dialect.

In addition to the use of macrons and apostrophes, Clare in a few instances substitutes letters in a manner that corresponds to accounts of Northamptonshire phonology. The words *sort* is spelt ‘so’tes’ in line 58, which presumably follows the same rule observed by Sternberg dictating that ‘the broad sound of the *ou* in fought, brought, &c., becomes *o*, rendering them *fote*, *bote*, &c.’.[[43]](#endnote-43) Likewise, *hang* is spelt ‘hing’, which is also recorded in Sternberg’s glossary.[[44]](#endnote-44) Other spellings, such as ‘bōds’ for *birds* (l.58) and ‘to’n’ for *turn* (l.32), suggestive of the substitution of /ɜː/ for /ɒ/, do not seem to be reflected in Baker or Sternberg, although similar spellings in Clare’s other dialect writing, such as ‘fost’ (l.30) for *first* in ‘John Bumkins Lucy’ do suggest that he was attempting to capture a recurring feature of local speech.

The picture that emerges from the narrative ironies and experimental spellings of ‘Love Epistles’ is of a writer with an acute sensitivity to nuances of linguistic difference, especially in the area of pronunciation, and the complex ways in which they are bound up with speakers’ perceptions of others as well as themselves. Although there is not space to expand on this at length, an cursory analysis of other dialect poems, such as ‘Lobin Clouts Satirical Sollilouquy on the Times’ reveals yet another dimension of Clare’s linguistic practice, both in terms of form and meaning. Where in the ‘Love Epistles’ Clare favours apostrophes, macrons and letter deletions over letter substitutions, the opposite is true in ‘Lobin Clouts Satirical Sollilouquy on the Times’, and indeed, a number of them are consistent with accounts of Northamptonshire phonology. Respellings in ‘Lobin Clout’ which fall into this category include ‘sich’ (l.4) for *such* and ‘sarv’d’ (l.25) and ‘desarv’d’ (l.26) for *served* and *deserved* respectively. Of the latter pattern, Baker observes: ‘E is transmuted into a before r, and perhaps some other consonants, as “sarmon” for *sermon*, “parfect” for *perfect*’.[[45]](#endnote-45) Other semi-phonetic respellings suggestive of Northamptonshire pronunciations include ‘nothink’ (l.42),[[46]](#endnote-46) ‘chet’ for *cheat* (l.22),[[47]](#endnote-47) and ‘hod’ (l.5), ‘that’ (l.16), ‘os’ (l.28) and ‘ot’ (l.38), for *had*, *that*, *as* and *at* respectively. This last pattern of respelling corresponds to a pattern in Northamptonshire phonology described by Baker as follows: ‘the vowels *o* and *a* are often interchangeable, as *cotch*, catch, *starmy*, stormy, *ony*, any, *tromple*, trample, *crap*, crop, and many others’.[[48]](#endnote-48)

A further contrast lies in the role that dialect plays in ‘Lobin Clout’: all but two lines of the poem consist of a spoken tirade against the exploitation and mistreatment of workers by their masters, as overheard by the narrator. Colclough suggests that dialect in this poem ‘is used to focus the violent feelings of dissent felt by many labourers towards their employers’.[[49]](#endnote-49) Certainly, the sociolinguistic concept of divergence seems relevant here in a way it is not in ‘Love Epistles’. Divergence, according to Hodson, involves individuals switching ‘the variety they use[] in order to increase the social and cultural distance between themselves and their audience’.[[50]](#endnote-50) In this poem, it is as if Lobin Clout wants neither to be identified with nor understood by his Standard English-speaking superiors, and his dialect, combined with Clare’s partial obscuring of words in lines such as ‘D—n his old c-r-s (g-d forgive my s---)’ (l.9), helps to communicate that position. Correspondingly, issues of literacy, correctness and education are less important here than in ‘Love Epistles’ and this, at least in part, helps to explain the more sparing use of apostrophes in this poem as opposed to ‘Love Epistles’, bound up as they are with issues of stigma and incorrectness.

Notwithstanding their differences, the two poems hitherto discussed tell us much about Clare that is not apparent in his other, more famous writings. These poems represent provisional attempts to devise an orthography that adequately captures the linguistic differences to which Clare’s life had exposed him, and to which his tremendous abilities had made him receptive. And, simultaneously, they are attempts to explore the literary and dramatic potential of the social meanings that were increasingly bound up with those linguistic differences. These are not poems about a place, even if the forms they employ were consciously drawn from the immediate vicinity in which Clare lived. These are poems about social and educational differences and attitudes, rendered in voices made all the more powerful by the fact that they are modelled on the voices that Clare had grown up hearing, and which he took such care to imagine into print.

The contrasts between the two texts reveal a poet alive not only to phonological nuances, but to the different orthographical possibilities of representing them, and the ways that they can be made to mean on paper. They offer a powerful corrective to those readings of Clare which interpret his non-standard forms as a univocal symbol either of his background or his socio-political stance. Dialect in these, lesser-known poems, is a focus both for virtuosic formal experimentation and detailed social observation. And yet the fact that Clare did not, in general, write in this mode is also instructive, reminding us that while Clare could think and write with tremendous intensity about the social meanings of linguistic variation, in most cases he made the conscious decision not to do so.

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