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**Gendering the Enlightenment: Conflicting Images of Progress in the Poetry  
of Anna Lætitia Barbauld**

**ABSTRACT** Anna Lætitia Barbauld spent her formative years at the celebrated dissenting Academy at Warrington, from where she assimilated her earliest perceptions of Enlightenment thinking. It was here that she met many of the important intellectual figures of the Enlightenment with whom she would remain lifelong friends, and she inherited the Academy's tenets of toleration, liberal progressive thinking and the defence of liberty. In her poetry, however, images of the Enlightenment are problematic and demonstrate an inner conflict between an ideal set of Enlightenment values which reflect those at Warrington, which she feminises, and an opposing set of Enlightenment values, which involve control, exploitation, and repression, and which she masculinises. This paper examines this conflict in Barbauld's poetry and looks at why the feminine agenda of freedom, although strongly valorised by the poems, is finally doomed and overcome by the darker masculine project of control.

In a recent work on the European Enlightenment, Dorinda Outram suggests that '[c]olonialism, the exotic, and the exploitation of nature were inextricably linked in the eighteenth century, and provide verification of the contention that Enlightenment and the control of nature were parts of the same project.'<sup>[1]</sup> I want to use this as a starting point for examining the poetry of Anna Barbauld, who, while closely involved with the dissenting project of rational Enlightenment, presents us with problematic images of the progress associated with that movement in her poetry. While overtly seeking to validate the Enlightenment project, a number of poems make the connection which Outram identifies - between progress and the exploitation or control of nature - through the use of increasingly riven or contradictory imagery. A clue to the significance of this complex representation of progress is in the gendering of these tropes, in which an Enlightenment which allows access to women and which suggests freedom, is gendered feminine, while a darker,

oppressive version which excludes women is gendered masculine. This subtle gendering, achieved through a clever and often unconventional use of abstractions and personifications, may point to an awareness that women were themselves victims of the darker, exploitative agenda within the European Enlightenment. Although evidence of such an awareness would not in itself fundamentally challenge constructions of Barbauld as anti-feminist it does allow us to perhaps think beyond her apparent refusal of Wollstonecraftian feminism and to perceive elements of a gender politics in her writing which places her less firmly in opposition to the cause of women's rights.[2]

In what follows I will look at the particular investment which Barbauld had in the Enlightenment as a woman writer and as the daughter of a liberal dissenting minister, but also at the ways in which her perceptions of the Enlightenment change, as she becomes increasingly aware of a discrepancy between what that movement promised and what it increasingly came to mean in the eighteenth century, the way in which it was used to deny her human rights and control her freedom. A number of her poems depict a conflict between what the Enlightenment promised: freedom from ignorance and superstition, including myths about femininity; emancipation granted to women, slaves, and the poor; human affairs being governed by reason as opposed to tyranny and prejudice; and science used to heal and to understand the natural world, and the people in it. This is set against what she witnessed the Enlightenment coming to mean in practice - technological innovation used to control and exploit the natural world; increased wealth deployed to colonise other countries and enslave other peoples; science used as a tool to control nature and to consolidate the positions of Western middle-class men, by excluding from the Enlightenment definition of the human, and consequently from human rights, marginalised groups including women and African slaves.

For Barbauld, in her formative years, the Enlightenment must have seemed to represent all that was progressive in the eighteenth century. A movement away from irrational prejudice and tyranny, with developments used for the benefit of all man and womankind. This ideal was born out by her earliest experiences of Enlightenment thinking. When she was fifteen her father, John Aikin D.D, a

Unitarian dissenting clergyman, took up the post of classical tutor at the famous Warrington Academy in Lancashire. This institution constituted one of the most liberal and forward looking intellectual communities of the period. Of all the academies of its kind, established to provide an education for clergymen excluded from Oxford and Cambridge for their dissenting beliefs, Warrington was the most celebrated and attracted important Enlightenment figures. As Barbauld's niece, Lucy Aikin, notes in her memoir of the poet, "Warrington academy included among its tutors names eminent in science and in literature: with several of these, and especially with Dr. Priestley and Dr. Enfield and their families, she formed sincere and lasting friendships." [3] Traces of the close and formative influence of key Enlightenment figures like Joseph Priestley, the chemist who discovered oxygen, are to be found within Barbauld's poetry and belong to those aspects of the Enlightenment agenda which she celebrates.

The academy was, in the 1770s, ahead of its time in granting subjects like science and mathematics an important place in the curriculum, as another biographer notes, "[s]ubjects were taught at the Academy which would be disclaimed by Oxford and Cambridge for another century." [4] Warrington Academy is also significant in the centrality of place it gives to the upholding of key Enlightenment values, values which Barbauld imbibed and associated early on with that movement. In a sermon delivered at the academy by a Dr. Taylor, some of the institution's guidelines towards toleration and rational thought are presented: "keep your mind always open to evidence; that you labour to banish from your breast all prejudices, prepossession, and party zeal;...and that you steadily assert for yourself and freely allow to others, the inalienable rights of judgement and conscience." [5] One of the central tenets of the Academy's teaching, and that which Barbauld took on board more than any other, is laid down in the stated aims of the Academy when the institution was first proposed in 1754, that its students should acquire "early Acquaintance with, and just Concern for, the true Principles of...Liberty." [6]

These ideals, while preaching toleration, liberal progressive thinking and the support of liberty, do beg the question of where in practice women were to be positioned within this agenda. This being the eighteenth century, the answer is that by and large

they do not figure within its terms at all. However, of all dissenting religious groups, the Unitarian branch, which ran Academies like that at Warrington, was by far the most liberal and progressive, described by one commentator on the religious context of the period as constituting “a kind of intellectual elite amongst Nonconformity.”[7] It is this progressiveness which led a number of key scientists and intellectuals of the period to identify themselves with this religious body, since its theological beliefs were open to the revelations of science and the laws of change, and evolution. The same historian also claims that the Unitarians were, at this time, “about the only religious body” to support and “give education to women.”[8] While I have found no evidence to suggest that the Academy ever formally taught female students, a number of women raised to Unitarianism would become eminent in the fields of literature. Alongside Barbauld the body could boast of Elizabeth Haldane, Harriet Martineau and Elizabeth Gaskell. Barbauld’s own “entirely domestic”[9] education was significantly added to by her father teaching her Greek and Latin, a fact which Martineau would later allude to in her *Autobiography*, describing Barbauld as “the best example we have of the benefits of a sound classical education to a woman”.[10] Indeed Barbauld’s education became something of a landmark in women’s circles and was held up as enlightened and progressive: writing in 1798 the *Lady’s Monthly Museum* suggested that “[f]ew have more conspicuously displayed the fine effects of a liberal and correct education; enjoyed more fully, or more honourably exemplified, the blessing of virtuous and enlightened parentage, than Mrs. Barbauld”.[11] This classical education, which granted her access to the dominant mode of poetry writing at this time, along with other evidence in her poetry of a rudimentary knowledge of astronomy and current political affairs, would seem to confirm Prickett’s view that, in a private context at least, Unitarianism fostered fairly liberal views towards the education of women.[12]

In a number of Barbauld’s early poems, published in her 1773 volume, she begins to construct a version of Enlightenment thinking which she wholly supports and which retains traces of the early influence of Warrington Academy. In “A Summer Evening’s Meditation”, we are shown how science may be used in a positive way, not to penetrate or control nature, but to acquire a greater understanding of the natural world. In a transgressive outward optical movement, Barbauld sees into space with

the aid of a telescope, an instrument which allows the “eye/Restless and dazzled” to wander “unconfined” (28-9).[13] This moment is a significant one in terms of Barbauld’s understanding of what the Enlightenment could offer her. Technological advancement and new scientific theories bring here not only enhanced awareness, but also imaginative freedom. While her body remains constrained by eighteenth century mores, her mind is released from domestic confines and able to expand with an exhilarating sense of movement; she describes “This dead of midnight” as “the noon of thought” when “wisdom mounts her zenith with the stars” (51-2). In an essay on Barbauld’s early poetry, William McCarthy comments that the freedom hinted at in this poem functions only on an imaginary level, and that “[w]hat in life she is denied or discouraged from doing Barbauld asserts in imagination.”[14] I would suggest however, that while this poem does describe an imaginary flight, the freedom envisaged is grounded in real possibility. The flight into space is a symbolic one which stands for an actual intellectual flight. Barbauld is permitted to use the tools and discourses of astronomy and thus function at some level within the Enlightenment project. Ultimately she may have believed that these intellectual and scientific advancements would lead to a change in the way that eighteenth century women were ideologically constructed, perhaps even social and political change. Indeed, radical social change is hinted at in the poem since, with the intervention of a female astronomer, the galaxy transforms itself from a patriarchal regime, ruled by the “sultry tyrant of the south”(1), into a matriarchy dominated by female planets and the moon, who “seems to push/Her brother down the sky” (9-10).[15]

While it is women’s access to the developments associated with the Enlightenment in this poem which validates the scientific endeavour depicted, elsewhere it is their exclusion which seems to render it problematic. Although permitted to dabble in astronomy, Barbauld is denied access to the serious scientific, medical, and philosophical discourses of the Enlightenment. While the poem indicates that many of Barbauld’s formative experiences of Enlightenment values and practices were such as to inspire confidence and expectancy in the young poet, it cannot have escaped the attention of an intelligent young woman even at this early stage, that the Enlightenment project was by and large a masculine one, and that even a limited education is bestowed upon women as a result of progressive thinking rather than as

an inalienable right. While Unitarian dissent fostered fairly liberal views on women's education, women were never formally taught at Warrington Academy, and although Barbauld's own domestic schooling was significantly added to by her father teaching her Greek and Latin, after the onset of puberty, Barbauld's education veered sharply away from that of her brother. In a private poem written to him while he was absent studying medicine at Manchester, entitled "To Dr. Aikin on his Complaining that she neglected him, October 20<sup>th</sup> 1768", Barbauld is reminded of their shared childhood education, when 'like two scions on one stem we grew,/And...from the same lips one precept drew' (27- 8). She tries to suppress her "angry thoughts" and "envy" (35) at the later division of their education along gender lines:

Our path divides - to thee fair fate assign'd  
The nobler labours of a manly mind:  
While mine, more humble works, and lower cares,  
Less shining toils, and meaner praises shares.  
Yet sure in different moulds they were not cast  
Nor stamp't with separate sentiments and taste.  
But hush my heart! nor strive to soar too high,  
Nor for the tree of knowledge vainly sigh;  
Check the fond love of science and of fame,  
A bright, but ah! a too devouring flame. (50-9)

The bitterness Barbauld feels about her exclusion as a woman from fields of learning emerges in another early poem, "The Invitation", in which she describes the opportunities laid at the feet of the male students of the academy:

How rich a field is to your hopes display'd!  
Knowledge to you unlocks the classic page;  
And virtue blossoms for a better age.  
Oh golden days! oh bright unvalued hours!  
What bliss (did ye but know that bliss) were yours?  
What richest stores your glowing bosoms fraught,  
Perception quick, and luxury of thought[.] (112-8)

The language Barbauld uses here, her description of the hours as “unvalued”, thought as “luxury” and the “bliss” of education, all remind the reader of the value of that from which she is excluded and which the male students unquestioningly accept as their birthright. This poem also points to the first hint of a contradiction within the Enlightenment, suggesting a possible link between women’s exclusion from learning and a darker, exploitative agenda within that project. Here we find more problematic configurations of Enlightenment progress, and science and other signifiers of the Enlightenment, are shown to be ambiguous and unstable in their meaning. Images in this poem are double-sided, standing both for freedom and for a more troublesome inclination to control nature. Barbauld uses two symbols of eighteenth century progress: science and canal building, and both are riven in their meaning by conflicting imagery.

The description of the building of the Duke of Bridgewater’s canal from Worsley to Manchester is a complex metaphor for the progress associated with the industrial changes taking place during the Enlightenment. This sixty-seven kilometre long canal symbolically marked the beginning of the canal era in Britain and, by providing cheap transportation of coal, was to significantly enhance the speed and progress of the Industrial Revolution. As such it is a potent image of the changes associated with the Enlightenment and this is suggested by the fluidity, and freedom described in the canal’s movement:

‘Cross the lone waste the silver urn they pour,  
And cheer the barren heath or sullen moor:  
The traveller with pleasing wonder sees  
The white sail gleaming thro’ the dusky trees;  
And views the alter’d landscape with surprise[.]  
....  
Now meeting streams in artful mazes glide,  
While each unmingled pours a separate tide;  
Now through the hidden veins of earth they flow,  
And visit sulphurous mines and caves below;



The ductile streams obey the guiding hand,  
And social plenty circles round the land. (65-6; 73-8)

Barbauld seems to represent this aspect of eighteenth century industrial development in straightforwardly progressive terms, viewing the changes as a means of bringing greater economic prosperity to Britain. However, there is also in Barbauld's description of the canal building, a hint of what Outram sees to be the other side of the Enlightenment project, the controlling of nature, which is disclosed by a set of conflicting images. Alongside the positive description of the canal moving and flowing freely, there is the hint of force and of a violation of nature, in its construction. The labouring-classes who dig the canals, the "sons of toil" (59), "Scoop the hard bosom of the solid rock" (60) and burrow "thro' the stiff opposing clay" (61). Nature is not figured as assisting but resisting the transformation, and a tension is suggested within the description between "ductile streams" (77) flowing freely, and an "unwilling flood" (63), which must be "Compel[led].../Thro' the brown horrors of the aged wood" (63-4).

What Barbauld seems to be presenting us with in this poem is a vision of a divided Enlightenment, divided between what it should have meant, an ideal version, and what it really meant for many living in the eighteenth century. These two versions of the Enlightenment, one theoretical and imaginary - though not unconnected to her earliest experiences of Enlightenment thinking at Warrington - and the version as it was translated and put into practice by eighteenth century Europe, appear to be gendered respectively feminine and masculine through the symbolism surrounding the concept of science. Science represents another configuration of the Enlightenment and Barbauld presents two versions which have very different approaches to the natural world: one which she obviously validates, which is feminised, and another which seems to have a masculine agenda, and which is problematised. The first version of science we encounter is science the abstraction, which is unconventionally gendered female, unconventionally because - as Ludmilla Jordanova notes in her work on the gendering of scientific discourse in the eighteenth century - science was usually figured as male, but also because the feminised abstraction is depicted as "the bird of Jove"(102), an eagle.[16] This image

of feminised Science taking the form of an eagle connects the figure and what it represents to freedom. What is most significant however, about this version of science, which Barbauld clearly valorises by describing it as “heav’n born” (98) and symbolising “ardent progress” (101), is that it does not control and manipulate nature. Instead Nature, also feminised, actually connives with Science, sharing her secrets, as she “opens all her secret springs” (97).

This representation of a feminised science represents all that Barbauld most desires of the Enlightenment, freedom, progress and knowledge. Later in the poem however, another more problematic version of science appears, with a very different agenda towards nature, and which in this respect is set in opposition to the earlier version. The later representation of science utilises the discourse and methodology of eighteenth century scientific journals. As such, it is represented not as an abstraction but by the scientist’s themselves who, “creep along the shelly shore” (155) with far more insidious intent, and since Nature does not open up to them, sharing her secrets, these have to be prised out of her. The scientists

Unfold the silky texture of a flower;  
With sharpen’d eyes inspect an hornet’s sting,  
....  
Some trace with curious search the hidden cause  
Of nature’s changes, and her various laws;  
Untwist her beauteous web, disrobe her charms,  
And hunt her to her elemental forms. (156-7; 159-162)

This science, although not explicitly masculinised, would appear to be implicitly so, since it is set in contrast to the earlier feminised version, and the actions of disrobing, hunting and inspecting would seem to hint at a masculine agenda.[17] In her essay on the scientific discourse of the period and its relation to gender, Jordanova observes that, “science and medicine as activities were associated with sexual metaphors which were clearly expressed in designating nature as a woman to be unveiled, unclothed and penetrated by masculine science”, and points to numerous instances of this metaphor in eighteenth century scientific journals.[18] The imagery

of the poem suggests that in what is represented as the masculine version of science, that which excludes women, progress and the control of nature are closely entwined. Aligned with the natural world, women also become the focus of the scientist's attempts to penetrate and control, and indeed much eighteenth century scientific enquiry worked against women, attempting to prove them incapable of rational thought.[19] The presentation of two oppositional versions of science in the poem suggests that the Enlightenment engenders conflicting responses in Barbauld, and that she occupies a split position in relation to this project.

The complex positioning which women inhabit in eighteenth century Enlightenment discourse is figured more clearly in a later poem, "Inscription for an Ice-House", in which women appear at first to be nominally included within that project, and yet are shown in practice to be aligned with the exploited and controlled natural world. The tensions inherent in Barbauld's gendering in the poem, hint at the ambiguity of her feelings towards the Enlightenment, and her sense of being positioned both inside and outside that project. She depicts eighteenth century technological advancement through the image of the ice-house, which is figured as an act of mankind controlling nature. It is

....man, the great magician, who controuls  
Fire, earth and air, and genii of the storm,  
And bends the most remote and opposite things  
To do him service and perform his will[.] (4-7)

On an initial reading of the poem, it may appear as if women are positioned on the side of those controlling nature and thus within the Enlightenment project, not only because in eighteenth century discourse "man" stands for "human" not the male sex, but also because Winter is described as a "fettered Sampson" (15) forced to submit to "laughing girls" (18). However, the power held by women is illusory and the power struggle which the poem enacts, turns against the female figures. As Isobel Armstrong argues, "Women, locked in the ice-house with Winter, live unequally with him, forced into ruses to control him".[20] Another configuration of nature in the poem, this time a feminised one, is in its turn controlled, as Winter "Congeals the

melting peach” (22), and in an act which Armstrong reads as the repression of women’s sexuality and fertility, “Darts sudden frost into the crimson veins/Of the moist berry” (24-5).

What this complex poem seems to suggest is that while women appear to belong within the eighteenth century configuration of mankind and thus within the Enlightenment project, they have in fact no real power, since ultimately, man exerts through his control of both science and nature, a powerful and insidious control of woman as well. While man remains in control of developments in science and technology, he is also able to police women’s access to these fields. In this poem Barbauld again confirms that the Enlightenment, as symbolised by the technological development of the ice-house, is not only a masculine project to which women are permitted only limited access, but through the logic of which they themselves are subject to further control. While Barbauld may want to associate herself with an ideal Enlightenment project, one which offers freedom, toleration and understanding, the project as it manifested itself in the eighteenth century, is defined and controlled by acts of control and exclusion. As a result of this growing awareness she becomes drawn in her poetry to images which depict the darker side of the Enlightenment, to images of slavery, colonialism and the exploitation of nature. In formulating a critique of these aspects of the Enlightenment, she is also implicitly making claims for herself as a woman, since she shares with slaves, the colonised, and the natural world, a positioning outside the universals of Enlightenment thought, a connection which Barbauld herself seems to draw attention to through a careful use of gendered imagery.

In “Corsica” Barbauld aligns the female more straightforwardly with a colonised and exploited natural world. In matters of colonialism, unlike scientific development, there is shown to be no conflict of desire and women are presented only in opposition, or as victims of, such agendas. Here, for the first time in her poetry, Barbauld addresses a contemporary political issue through her writing, thus connecting her views on the Enlightenment with the economic and social agendas of Europe. The poem is an address to the island of Corsica on its much publicised colonisation by the French. The island becomes the first of many displacements to

be found in her poetry, of a site of freedom, a freedom which she could less and less readily find in her own country. Corsica is here depicted as a “fort of freedom” (2) where the exotic, the colonised, and the exploited natural world converge. The natural world is feminised in the poem in a way which is developed beyond the conventional gendering of the abstraction ‘Nature’ as female, with the landscape itself taking on the attributes of the female body, as is suggested by its “tangled thickets” (64), “deep indented shores”(35), and “wildly spread[ing]/ ....scarlet fruit” (60-1). Within this feminised landscape the female abstraction of freedom, Liberty, finds her true home. She is a “mountain goddess” who “loves to range at large/Amid such scenes” (75-6) and who marks Corsica “for her own”(84). As the natural world is so closely linked with the female body and with freedom, acts of colonisation henceforth have a double meaning, they are on one level the masculine project of imperialistically controlling other countries in an international sphere, but function also on another level as a metaphor for the control of women in a private realm. Eighteenth century women, like colonised landscapes, are victims of the same masculine Enlightenment project of control. Both also belong to the category of ‘other’ against which the European, middle-class, educated male figure defines himself as ‘human’.

In the 1790s, after a literary silence of nearly twenty years, which was a direct result of her marriage in 1774, Barbauld began writing again for publication. In 1792 she published an abolitionist poem on the slave-trade, *Epistle to William Wilberforce, Esq. On the Rejection of the Bill for Abolishing the Slave Trade*, through which she further aligns herself with those ‘others’ that enable the eighteenth century category of human to define itself. Although as a political movement the call for the abolition of slavery was by necessity headed by men, many women writers took a significant interest in the cause. Barbauld was not the only women at this time to publish poems on the slave-trade; poems were also written by Hannah More, Helen Maria Williams, and Ann Yearsley. Nor were only women poets writing on the subject, Barbauld’s close contemporary William Cowper also wrote several anti-slavery songs and poems. I would suggest however, that women shared a similar investment in the issues arising from the debate on the slave-trade, which drew them to respond to the subject in a much more personal way than their male contemporaries. Marlon Ross suggests that

women poets, as “guardians of the sociomoral culture”, can “write this kind of poetic propaganda without too much censure”[21], but this does not explain women’s actual interest in the subject, it only helps to account for a lack of condemnation from male critics, nor does it take into account the fact that More and Barbauld produce very different kinds of poetic propaganda. More, a Tory writer, speaking from the vantage point of Christian humanitarianism, may be fairly accurately represented as a guardian “of the sociomoral culture”, but Barbauld’s agenda is much more complex, and she uses the opportunity of writing the poem to offer a fairly radical critique of British parliament and Britain’s economic policy. Women’s interest in this area also represents something more than a deluge of pity from the female breast as a cultural consequence of the influential eighteenth century movement of sensibility. There is in fact a female tradition here, which More reminds us of in her poem on slavery, by referring to Aphra Behn’s novel on the subject, *Oroonoko*, written more than a century earlier.[22]

These women writers of the eighteenth century, express an ‘interest’ in the question of slavery which distinguishes it from the attention granted the subject by their male contemporaries. Barbauld writes in a letter dated May 1789, that of all the activities occurring in London, “the trial, the parliamentary business, and fetes and illuminations....none is surely so *interesting* as the noble effort making for the abolition of the slave-trade”. [23] Hannah More is similarly moved by the subject of slavery itself, and writes in 1787 that the question of abolition was the “most *interesting* subject which was ever discussed in the annals of humanity”[24]. She also wrote a letter to Barbauld expressing her enthusiasm for Barbauld’s poem on slavery, in which the two women’s political and religious differences are momentarily suspended and replaced by a sense of shared desire. More says she writes to express “my delight, my gratitude, my admiration....I thank you for writing so well, for writing on a *subject so near my heart*”. [25] The question of slavery does not ‘interest’ the male poet Cowper in this deeply personal and emotionally involved way. It was in fact a female friend who encouraged him to write some songs on the slave trade in 1788. He obliged, but wrote back to her after penning a number of verses, saying cursorily that “I shall now probably cease to sing of tortured negroes - a theme which never pleased me, but which, in the hope of doing them some little service, I was not

unwilling to handle.”[26] Wordsworth too was dispassionate on the subject, writing of the ‘traffickers of Negro blood’ (249) in Book Ten of *The Prelude*, that “this particular strife had wanted power/To rivet my affections” (254).[27]

While the question of slavery brings eighteenth century women writers together, enabling them to transcend other differences, be they of class, religion, or politics, it further alienates establishment males, who react either with indifference like Cowper and Wordsworth, or with hostility like Walpole. The latter wrote angrily to fellow-Conservative Hannah More, who had presumably been praising Barbauld’s anti-slavery poem, “[n]ot a jot on Deborah [Barbauld] whom you admire: I have neither read her verses, nor will....I have not your aspen conscience, I cannot forgive the heart of a woman....that curses our clergy and feels for negroes....she is a hypocrite.”[28] While some eighteenth century men react in this way it should not surprise us that women were drawn to support the cause of slaves in their poetry, since the parallels with their own condition, both ideological and social, were all too apparent and were drawn attention to by feminists of the period. By the end of the eighteenth century, the use of slavery as a metaphor for women’s condition in contemporary society was widespread. In her *Letters on Education*, published in 1790, Catherine Macaulay refers to the destruction of all the “natural rights of the female species” and their reduction to “a state of abject slavery”; the French feminist Olympe de Gouges in her 1791 *Declaration of the Rights of Woman*, writes of “the woman whom a man buys, like the slave on the African coasts”; and Mary Wollstonecraft uses the metaphor repeatedly as a defining measure of women’s legal and social status in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), asking “[i]s one half of the human species, like the poor African slaves, to be subjected to prejudices that brutalize them....?”[29] The use of this metaphor filtered down to private contexts, and the poet and novelist Charlotte Smith, refers in a personal letter to her enforced and miserable marriage as, “worse than African bondage”, illustrating the extent to which the parallels between the two states were inevitably drawn in the minds of many eighteenth century women.[30]

In the official abolitionist rhetoric of the period, that deployed by male politicians in parliament, the slave’s condition is represented through the figure of a male slave and

women are again silently excluded from the configuration of ‘mankind’, as slaves themselves were from the category of the human; it is “Afric’s sons” who represent the slave’s cause, symbolised most famously in Josiah Wedgwood’s cameo of 1787 with its epitaph “Am I Not a Man and a Brother”.[31] The abolitionist rhetoric sees the condition of slavery as “an affront to Enlightenment ideas that there was some essential equality between human beings by virtue of, precisely, their common humanity”[32], but in claiming rights of liberty for the human and yet persistently referring to the slaves as masculine, rights are claimed only for Negro men. Women, both black and white, are still excluded from that category and denied, therefore, equal rights.

While the black woman is rendered invisible by official abolitionist rhetoric, women’s poetic interventions in the debate are filled with images of African woman, and Barbauld imports that figure into her text through a clever use of personification and gendered abstraction. Firstly, “Afric”, we are told “bleeds” (15) as the landscape itself, once again, takes on the characteristics of the female body, functioning as a further reminder of the correlation between colonised territories and eighteenth century women. Thus Africa functions as both the exploited geographical territory and as a displacement of eighteenth century women’s enslaved and silenced body. This personification is linked to a reference in the poem to an incident in parliament in which some members of the house laughed at the story of an African woman who was forced to throw her baby overboard after it had been murdered:

From scoffing fiends bursts forth the laugh of hell;  
In Britain’s senate, Misery’s pangs give birth  
To jests unseemly, and to horrid mirth[.] (38-40)

A female abstraction is again used carefully here by Barbauld, and along with the earlier personification of Africa, is stretched beyond convention to cover the absence of both the female Negro and the female body, in eighteenth century discourse. ‘Misery’ takes on the actual persona of the slave mother, as Africa takes on the attributes of the female body, her “pangs” giving “birth” to the silenced, disruptive female body into the text. While several critics have drawn attention to the



problematic constructions of a colonial other in British women's anti-slavery writings, Barbauld manages to import that figure into her text in a way that threatens to close the gap between the European woman abolitionist and the colonial other, with women merging in a biological image of female suffering. In making claims for the slaves as 'human' and therefore fit to share in those universal rights which the Enlightenment agenda proposed, Barbauld also makes claims for women, another group who problematise that claim to universality, and challenges her own exclusion from the eighteenth century's definition of the reasoning, human being with inalienable rights.

In this poem the natural world is shown to be diseased and corrupted by eighteenth century projects of exploitation and colonialism. Images of rural retreats contaminated in this way, pervade Barbauld's later poetry and indicate her growing unease with what she saw to be a product of Enlightenment progress and logic. On African shores there are no "heart-expanding" (79) rural scenes of "cheerful labour" (76) and "milk-maid's song" (73), instead the natural world functions as a further reminder of exploitation:

...shrieks and yells disturb the balmy air,  
Dumb sullen looks of woe announce despair,  
And angry eyes thro' dusky features glare. (81-3)

Barbauld moves from the exploitation of African peoples to the colonisation of India and thus connects the two projects, suggesting that the same corruption is responsible for both. In India, the "gay East" (86), the "soft luxurious plague" (88) of European colonialism "springs" (87). The "Contagion" (87) in India and Africa has spread outwards from Britain where the disease has already overtaken all parts, including the natural world:

The spreading leprosy taints ev'ry part,  
Infects each limb, and sickens at the heart.  
Simplicity! most dear of rural maids,  
Weeping resigns her violated shades[.] (98-101)

Britain, like Corsica and Africa, is figured here as a body and the natural world feminised, thus the act of violation by exploiting forces reads all the more like a masculine enterprise analogous to rape.

In another poem written during the same year, “Lines to Samuel Rogers in Wales on the Eve of Bastille Day, 1791”, in which Barbauld criticises a male friend for eschewing the political in favour of an idealised natural sphere, she suggests again that the natural world is already corrupted and as such functions as an emblem of a divided Enlightenment:

Think, when woods of brownest shades  
Open bright to sunny glades;  
Such the gloom, and such the light,  
Of Freedom’s noon, and Slavery’s night. (13-16)

Barbauld uses the binarism of Freedom and Slavery in correlation with that key Enlightenment opposition of noon and night, to suggest that both light and dark are to be found within the Enlightenment project itself, for while darkness was seen oppositionally to the light of reason, that which Barbauld symbolises as dark here, slavery, is a part of the Enlightenment project. She suggests that the true darkness is not that of irrationality and superstition against which the Enlightenment defines itself, but rather the tyranny, enslavement, and exploitation which occur within that project.

In Barbauld’s later poems, the ambiguity registered in her earlier writings towards the Enlightenment has become more concrete, and she increasingly connects that project with the political crisis in Europe. A symbolic moment for Barbauld in the Enlightenment’s fall from its ideal, is the burning down of the home of her friend Joseph Priestley in 1791, on the second anniversary of Bastille day. As not only an important Enlightenment figure but also a prominent dissenting spokesperson, Priestley became a target for the reactionary forces in Britain to the threat of the French Revolution. For many dissenters that Revolution did indeed symbolise the

cause of freedom against tyranny and Barbauld herself wrote a hymn to France in 1792 expressing her support for the Revolution. After the burning of his home, Priestley continued to be bombarded with pamphlets and threats, as Barbauld notes in a letter of January 1793: “[a]s to Dr Priestley, scarce a day passes but he meets with some open threat, or some anonymous abuse”.<sup>[33]</sup> Soon afterwards he escaped his persecutors by moving to America where he remained until his death in 1804. The moment seems to symbolise for Barbauld the beginning of the end for the European Enlightenment, and her poem to Priestley on the subject of his persecution, is filled with bitterness towards those forces which crushed that early promise of freedom:

Burns not thy cheek indignant, when thy name,  
On which delighted science, lov'd to dwell,  
Becomes the bandied theme of hooting crowds? (5-7)

The “hooting crowds” may seem to function here as an image of the unenlightened, but those who burned down Priestley’s home, destroying his laboratory and library, were representatives of the establishment, a ‘Church and King’ mob, who acted “with the connivance of local magistrates”.<sup>[34]</sup> This would confirm the implication present in many of Barbauld’s later poems, that the strongest force of repression in the eighteenth century was not the backward-looking superstition of the uneducated, but the darker forces of control and bigotry within the Enlightenment project itself. Barbauld sees in this crucial moment the end of the present flawed ‘enlightened’ epoch in Europe’s history; she terms the moment this “passing age”<sup>(13)</sup> and consigns to the future, “that distant day”<sup>(19)</sup>, her hopes for an ideally realised Enlightenment, when Priestley’s name, “to freedom’s join’d,/ Shall meet the thanks of a regenerate land” <sup>(20-1)</sup>.

Barbauld’s most impressive poem and the last major work she would publish in her lifetime, *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*, is a measure of the despair and weariness she felt when contemplating an ‘Enlightened Europe’ which had been engaged in bloody revolution or avaricious wars for the greater part of the previous two decades. The poem was received harshly by critics, who described it as a “desponding poem”, a “melancholy picture”, and a “gloomy prediction”.<sup>[35]</sup> Her vision is a damning and

sweeping one, of the failure of the European Enlightenment, expressed through an image of light moving away from the shores of Europe, as it once moved away from the ancient civilisations, to the New World, where she projects her hope for the future, leaving Britain literally in ruins. Her vision of the enlightening ‘Genius’ however, problematises that hope for the future, since this figure retains the ambiguous significance of earlier representations of this project. This ambiguity seems to suggest an uncertainty, as to whether the failure of the Enlightenment in Europe is a mark of corruption within the project itself, or merely a consequence of the corrupting influence of a patriarchal, repressive establishment. Barbauld does make clear that the cause of Britain’s fall rests in the corruption of its economic basis, but such commercialism is by this time associated by her with the exploiting, invasive, controlling agendas of an Enlightenment which stands in opposition to the Warrington project of Liberty. Barbauld states that this commercialism is built upon an opposition: “the alternate ills that haunt/Enfeebling Luxury and ghastly Want” (63-4). The poem acknowledges the contributions that an Enlightened Britain has made to world art and culture, but suggests that the increased wealth which has been a product of eighteenth century technological developments, has been used avariciously, to colonise and exploit other countries, and improve Britain’s mercantile interests.

In Barbauld’s vision Britain is returned to a state of pre-Enlightenment Gothic ruins, when “Night, Gothic night” again shades “the plains/Where power is seated, and where Science reigns” (121-2). This transformation takes place as the enlightening Spirit “forsakes” (241) Britain’s shores and turns his light instead upon the New World. The figure of this “Spirit” or “Genius” caused a great deal of confusion amongst contemporary critics who all pointed unfavourably to the mysterious nature of the personification, some hazarding bizarre guesses at what the Spirit might represent. The *Anti-Jacobin Review* writes sarcastically that “if *obscurity be clearness*, Mrs. B. has been most happy in her delineation of the “*spirit*,”...[a]s nearly as we can guess - for we cannot speak with certainty - this said *moody* and *vienless* spirit, is *liberty*”; The *Quarterly Review* describes the figure as “a mysterious Spirit or Genius....but who or what he is....or whence he comes, does not very clearly appear”; and the *New British Lady’s Magazine*, although on the whole offering a far

more positive reading of the poem than these other Tory reviews, expresses a similar degree of uncertainty on this point:

We cannot help wishing that the poet had been more explanatory in this part of the work, and had entered into a fuller description of the power to whose presence and absence such effects are assigned as the growth and decay of nations and empires. It is doubtless, some principle personated, analogous to Truth and Virtue, which includes liberty and knowledge. [36]

Even a recent critic of the poem finds this section a weakness and writes that the ambiguity of Barbauld's description "needlessly mystifies the historical shifts in cultural power and authority".[37] I would argue, however, that Barbauld's "mysteriousness" and her refusal to name what this figure represents, is deliberate and is rooted both in the historical moment at which she was writing, and in her continued uncertainty about the Enlightenment project.

Elsewhere in her poetry Barbauld is extremely precise in her use of abstraction and personification, even down to their gender significance, which would indicate that the ambiguity here is an intentional strategy of evasion. She describes the personification in what can only be seen as deliberately mysterious terms, as "Secret", "unknown his birth" (216), and as "Moody and viewless as the changing wind" (217). These acts of evasion are evidence of Barbauld's continuing uncertainty about what the Enlightenment really means. The Spirit, like the images of science and canal-building found in her earlier poetry, is riven with contradictory meaning; he is identified initially with the ideal Enlightenment project:

Where'er he turns, the human brute awakes,  
And, roused to better life, his sordid hut forsakes:  
He thinks, he reasons, glows with purer fires,  
Feels finer wants, and burns with new desires:  
Obedient Nature follows where he leads;  
The steaming marsh is changed to fruitful meads[.] (219-24)

As with the earlier representations of the progress associated with the Enlightenment however, other imagery points to a negative, darker side. Nature is once again shown to be controlled and exploited, as “stricter bounds the cultured fields divide” (234) and “from” the earth’s “bed is drawn the ponderous ore” (227). From the increased wealth which Britain enjoys as a direct result of this exploitation and control, the country is able to engage in act of colonialism overseas, symbolised by the “Gems of the East” which “adorn” her “crown” (307). There is a fatalism about Barbauld’s imagery at the end of the poem which seems to suggest that corruption is in fact inherent in the Enlightenment project, she writes that “The worm is in thy core” (314), and hints that it contains the seed of its own destruction: “Arts, arms and wealth destroy the fruits they bring/Commerce, like beauty knows no second spring” (315-6).

While Barbauld refuses to completely disown the ideal project of the Enlightenment rooted in her early experiences at Warrington, she is profoundly critical of other aspects of the Enlightenment agenda which are ultimately shown to belong to the same project: slavery, colonialism and the exploitation of nature. What her poems always celebrate, and what this darker side of the Enlightenment represses and rejects, is freedom. It is this legacy of the Warrington Enlightenment agenda which she wishes to bestow upon the New World in her prophetic vision at the end of the poem; the Spirit turns his light upon the shores of America and declares, “Thy world, Columbus, shall be free” (334). In the context of the poem however, this would seem to be an unhelpful vision, since Barbauld not only suggests that the Enlightenment project is fundamentally flawed, but by gendering the Spirit of the Enlightenment masculine, reminds us of women’s continued exclusion from that project, and suggests that the darker forces would once again prevail.

*Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* is a bleak view of the future from the perspective of one eighteenth century woman writer who had experienced the Enlightenment at its most progressive, but who had lived to see that progressiveness and liberalism crushed, by a repressive and reactionary male establishment. Barbauld’s compassion and empathy for slaves, colonised peoples and an exploited natural world, and her gendering of these feminine, is perhaps evidence of the degree of frustration she felt

at her own exclusion from a movement which promised her and others greater freedom. She suggests that the Enlightenment project itself, while functioning to dispel the darkness of ignorance and superstition, had engendered its own, perhaps even more insidious darkness, which denied basic human and civil rights to dissenters, women and slaves, and which deployed the wealth created by scientific and technological developments to exploit, colonise and oppress other peoples. The ideals of liberty, toleration, and liberal understanding which she assimilated from her experiences at Warrington as a young girl remain the central tenets of her poetry and other writings, but the European Enlightenment is no longer figured as the harbinger of these values.

In this, Barbauld's last major poem to be published in her lifetime, her refusal to name the Spirit as specifically that of the Enlightenment is however, evidence of a continuing inner conflict. The mysteriousness of the Spirit's name and origins, and his being described as "capricious" (242), leaves the poem with a sense of uncertainty in the future, which could be interpreted as evidence of her unwillingness to completely give up hope in a project from which she had expected so much, but which had further legitimated her exclusion from mainstream Enlightenment thinking. The most determining gesture of the poem though would seem to be the masculinising of the Spirit of the Enlightenment, which leaves us with the sense that she believed the darker side of that project, what she represents as a masculine agenda, had come to dominate and completely supersede the feminine. While Barbauld's final hope for a new Enlightenment is one of freedom, Liberty is shown elsewhere to belong to a feminised agenda, and as women were in practice denied access to the dominant masculine project of the Enlightenment, there is an implied awareness in this poem, that that feminine ideal could not be realised.

### Notes

[1] Dorinda Outram, *The Enlightenment*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 63.

[2] There is not sufficient space in this paper to challenge the now fairly commonplace construction of Barbauld as anti-feminist. To pursue the question more fully, other poems and writings by Barbauld would have to be studied rather

than those addressed here. Most obviously Barbauld's poem "The Rights of Woman", which is usually read simply as a reactionary response to Wollstonecraft's criticism of Barbauld's poem, "To A Lady With some Painted Flowers", in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Marlon Ross follows this conventional reading when he claims that "Barbauld argues *against* women's rights because she thinks that political demand leads to misshared desire" (Marlon Ross, *The Contours of Masculine Desire* [New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989], p. 217). I would want to argue however, that a close examination of the imagery, context, and language of this complex poem, suggests that it functions only ironically in its relegation of women to the non-public realm of blushes and tears, a realm which was certainly not occupied by Barbauld in her own life. As an active writer of political pamphlets and poetry she frequently created enemies in her involvement with the volatile political issues of the day, such as the demand for the repeal of the Test and Corporation acts, and the French Revolution. Although Barbauld on some occasions distanced herself from the perceived radicalism of Wollstonecraft's feminism, she was infamously allied with Wollstonecraft as one of a band of "Amazonian" revolutionaries by the Anti-Jacobin Richard Polwhele in his poem *The Unsex'd Females*, because of her repeated transgressions into the political sphere and her apparent support of French Revolutionary politics (Richard Polwhele, *The Unsex'd Females: A Poem Addressed to the Author of The Pursuits of Literature* [London: Cadell and Davies, 1798]). Within the context of the period at which she was writing, such transgressions into the political must be seen as an active gesture of support for the freedom of voice and right to an opinion in matters of politics, which Wollstonecraft claims for women.

[3] Lucy Aikin, "Memoir", *The Works of Anna Latitia Barbauld With a Memoir By Lucy Aikin*, (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green: 1825), I, p. x-xi.

[4] Betsy Rodgers, *Georgian Chronicle: Mrs Barbauld and her Family*, (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1958), p. 41.

[5] Dr. Taylor cited in Rodgers, p. 39.

[6] Cited in Rodgers, pp. 33-4.

[7] Stephen Prickett, "The Religious Context", in *The Romantics*, ed. Stephen Prickett (London: Methuen and Co, 1981), p. 119.

[8] Prickett, "The Religious Context", p. 120.

[9] Aikin, "Memoir", I, p. vi.



[10] Harriet Martineau, *Harriet Martineau's Autobiography with Memorials*, ed. Maria Weston Chapman, I, p. 302 (London: Smith, Elder, and Co, 1877).

[11] "Mrs. Anna Lætitia Barbauld", *Lady's Monthly Museum*, 1 (September 1798), pp. 170-1.

[12] Whether or not Barbauld took on board these liberal attitudes towards female education is often seen as a matter of some doubt. A letter written by Barbauld in response to Elizabeth Montagu's request for her support in establishing an academy for young girls, is cited as evidence of Barbauld's anti-feminist and anti-progressive stance on female education. In the letter she declines to assist with the project of teaching girls "in a regular systematic manner" and her statement, that she believes the project ill-calculated to produce "good wives or agreeable companions", would appear to suggest that she wanted to deny other women the liberal education she had herself received (Cited in Aikin, "Memoir", I, p. xvii). However, the letter actually demonstrates the extent to which Barbauld was aware of the problems facing women with regard to education in the eighteenth century. She writes of her own education that her "situation has been peculiar, and would be no rule for others" (p. xix). Barbauld had been surrounded by liberal and progressive thinkers from an early age, and had been permitted to display her intelligence in a way few women at this period would have been. She had nevertheless seen, even in this environment, the limited extent of her access to fields of knowledge and writes that "to have too great a fondness for books is little favourable to the happiness of a woman" (p. xix). The letter expresses a bitterness and a sense of futility in receiving an education which could not be openly displayed. She writes that "Young gentlemen, who are to display their knowledge to the world" should be taught openly at academies, but, as any knowledge in a woman will be "carefully concealed" by those around her and "if displayed, punished with disgrace", she should acquire learning "in a more quiet and unobserved manner" (p. xviii). Barbauld is far from rejecting education for women in this letter, but she is pointing out that in the two roles realistically open to a woman in the eighteenth century, wife and companion, an ill-disguised education could function less as a source of freedom than as another area of repression.

[13] Anna Barbauld, "A Summer Evening's Meditation", in *The Poems of Anna Letitia Barbauld*, ed. William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft (Athens and London: The

University of Georgia Press, 1994). All subsequent references to Barbauld's poems refer to this edition and line numbers only are given in parentheses in the text.

[14] William McCarthy, "'We Hoped the *Woman* Was Going to Appear': Repression, Desire, and Gender in Anna Letitia Barbauld's Early Poems", in *Romantic Women Writers: Voices and Countervoices*, ed. Paula R. Feldman and Theresa M. Kelley (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1995), p. 130.

[15] In the original version of the poem published in 1773, Barbauld unconventionally feminised the planet Saturn, personifying it as "an exil'd Queen". The 'error' was however, pounced upon by William Woodfall reviewing the poems in *Monthly Review*, who termed this "a slight mark of seeming inattention" and an "offence against ancient mythology" (48:2 [1773], p. 136). Following this criticism Barbauld amended her poem and in all later editions of *Poems* Saturn is masculinised. This incident is revealing and adds weight to my argument, that Barbauld may have been trying to move beyond the conventional in her gendering of specific abstractions and personifications female. Although the feminising of the planet may have been an error on Barbauld's part, it would seem to be significant that in ancient mythology Saturn symbolised freedom and was celebrated at festivals in which the conventional rules of society were turned upside down. The feminising of this planet, if deliberate, would tie in with the tendency I have noted in Barbauld's poetry of feminising those abstractions and personifications which represent freedom.

[16] L. J. Jordanova "Natural Facts: A Historical Perspective on Science and Sexuality", in *Nature, Culture and Gender*, ed. Carol P. MacCormack and Marilyn Strathern (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 42-69 (p. 45)

[17] This version of science bears a close resemblance to that other, more famous female critique of male science, by Mary Shelley in *Frankenstein* published in 1818. Frankenstein is depicted as wanting to "unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation" and to do so "pursued nature to her hiding places", in a similar act of male audacity and control. (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 96 and p. 102.

[18] Jordanova, p. 45.

[19] Medical journals for example worked towards demonstrating that women's brains were smaller than men's, therefore rendering them less capable of intellectual thought. See Elizabeth Fee, "Nineteenth-Century Craniology: The Study of the Female Skull", *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 53 (1979), pp. 415-33.

- [20] Isobel Armstrong, “The Gush of the Feminine: How Can We Read Women’s Poetry of the Romantic Period”, in *Romantic Women Writers: Voices and Countervoices*, ed. Paula R. Feldman and Theresa M. Kelley (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1995), p. 18.
- [21] Marlon Ross, *The Contours of Masculine Desire: Romanticism and the Rise of Women’s Poetry* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 221.
- [22] Hannah More, “Slavery”, in *Women Romantic Poets 1785-1832: An Anthology*, ed. Jennifer Breen (London: J. M. Dent, 1994), p. 12.
- [23] Anna Barbauld, “Correspondence”, in *Works*, ed. Lucy Aikin, II, p. 81 [emphasis added].
- [24] Hannah More cited in McCarthy and Kraft, p. 285n [emphasis added].
- [25] Hannah More cited in *Memoir of Mrs. Barbauld, Including Letters and Notices of Her Family and Friends*, Anna Letitia Le Breton (London: George Bell and Sons, 1874), pp. 67-8 [emphasis added].
- [26] William Cowper cited in *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution 1770-1823*, David Brion Davis (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 369n.
- [27] *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1953).
- [28] Horace Walpole cited in Rodgers, p. 112.
- [29] Catherine Macaulay cited in “The Enlightenment Debate on Women”, Sylvana Tomaselli, *History Workshop*, 20 (1985), p. 107; Olympe de Gouges, “The Declaration of the Rights of Woman”, *Women in Revolutionary Paris 1789-1795: Selected Documents*, ed. Darlene Gay Levy, Harriet Branson Applewhite, and Mary Durham Johnson (Chicago and London: University of Illinois Press, 1979), p. 93; Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Penguin: London, 1992), p. 262.
- [30] Charlotte Smith cited in “Introduction”, in *Desmond*, by Charlotte Smith, ed. Antje Blank and Janet Todd (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1997), pp. xi-xxxix (p. xi).
- [31] William Cowper, “The Negro’s Complaint”, in *The Poetical Works of William Cowper*, ed. H. S. Milford (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 372, l. 38.
- [32] Outram, *The Enlightenment*, p. 72.
- [33] Anna Barbauld cited in Rodgers, p. 211.

[34] Jonathon Wordsworth, "Introduction", in *A Farewell Sermon* (1794) by Joseph Priestley (Oxford: Woodstock Books, 1989).

[35] *Anti-Jacobin Review*, 42 (June, 1812), p. 209; *Monthly Review*, 67 (1812), p. 428 and p. 429.

[36] *Anti-Jacobin Review*, 42 (June, 1812), p. 208; *The Quarterly Review*, 7 (June, 1812), p. 312; *New British Lady's Magazine*, 2 (1815), p. 321.

[37] William Keach, "A Regency Prophecy and the End of Anna Barbauld's Career", *Studies in Romanticism*, 33 (Winter 1994), p. 574.