ANNA LETITIA BARBAULD

1743–1825

Anna Barbauld, born Anna Letitia Aikin, received an unusual education from her father, who was a minister and a teacher at the Warrington Academy in Lancashire, the great educational center for the Nonconformist community, whose religion barred them from admission to the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. During the eighteenth century Dissenting academies such as Warrington had developed a modern curriculum in the natural sciences as well as in modern languages and English literature. This progressive educational program deviated significantly from the curriculum, scarcely altered since the sixteenth century, that was supplied by the old universities. The benefits Barbauld received from her exposure to an educational system that the Dissenters had designed with their sons in mind are suggested by the astounding versatility of her literary career.

She made her literary debut in 1773 with *Poems* and *Miscellaneous Pieces in Prose*, the latter co-written with her brother John. The books immediately established her as a leading author. Her marriage the next year to Rochemont Barbauld, a Dissenting minister like her father, and their decision to set up a boys' school together therefore struck the critic Samuel Johnson as squandering this woman's own unusual education: "Miss [Aikin] was an instance of early cultivation, but in what did it terminate?" Thereafter, until Rochemont Barbauld's increasing mental instability necessitated the closing of their school, Barbauld divided her time between writing and teaching the younger boys. Because of the popularity of Barbauld's *Lessons for Children* (1778–79) and *Hymns in Prose for Children* (1781), William Hazlitt was recording a common experience when he recalled that he read her books "before those of any other author . . . , when I was learning to spell words of one syllable." This writing for child audiences registered Barbauld's Enlightenment faith in human potential.

Her fame continued to grow in the 1790s, and in 1797 the up-and-coming poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge walked forty miles to meet her. During this decade Barbauld contributed poetry to her brother John's *Monthly Magazine*, published her "Epistle to William Wilberforce" attacking British involvement in the slave trade, and wrote pamphlets that opposed the war with France and campaigned for the repeal of the Test Acts that had barred participation in the public life of the nation to Nonconformists (those men who would not subscribe, as "tests" of their loyalty, to the thirty-nine Articles of the Established Church). She accompanied this writing with editing, producing editions of William Collins's poems (1797) and the novelist Samuel Richardson's letters (1804). Her fifty-volume compilation *The British Novelists* (1810) was the first attempt to establish a national canon in fiction and thereby do for the novel what Samuel Johnson's *Works of the English Poets* (1779–81) had done for poetry. Its introductory essay, "On the Origin and Progress of Novel-Writing," makes a pioneering argument for the educational and artistic value of the still disreputable genre.

Barbauld's last major work was *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* (1812), a long poem that despairs over the war with France (then in its seventeenth year) and the corruption of English consumer society. (An excerpt may be found in "Romantic Literature and Wartime," on p. 754.) Critics were unnerved, even disgusted, by the poem's apocalyptic vision of a future in which England, its pride humbled, would lie in ruins—the more so because of its author's gender. The Tory critic John Wilson Croker thus warned Barbauld "to desist from satire": it was not up to a "lady-author" to sally forth from her knitting and say how "the empire might . . . be saved." Despite this abuse, Barbauld did not stop writing. She continued, as had long been her practice, to circulate work in manuscript and published a few poems in magazines. The posthumous collection of Barbauld's *Works* her niece Lucy Aikin brought out in 1825 contained several previously unpublished pieces.

The Mouse's Petition[1]

Found in the trap where he had been confined all night by Dr. Priestley, for the sake of making experiments with different kinds of air

"Parcere subjectis, et debellare superbos."
—Virgil

Oh hear a pensive prisoner's prayer,
For liberty that sighs;
And never let thine heart be shut
Against the wretch's cries.

For here forlorn and sad I sit,
Within the wiry gate;
And tremble at th' approaching morn,
Which brings impending fate.

If e'er thy breast with freedom glow'd,
And spurn'd a tyrant's chain,
Let not thy strong oppressive force
A free-born mouse detain.

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[1] Addressed to the clergyman, political theorist, and scientist Joseph Priestley (1733–1804), who at this time was the most distinguished teacher at the Nonconformist Protestant Warrington Academy, where Barbauld's father was also a member of the faculty. The imagined speaker (the petitioning mouse) is destined to participate in just what we now call oxygen. Tradition has it that when Barbauld showed him the lines, Priestley set the mouse free. According to Barbauld's modern editors, the poem was many times reprinted and was a favorite to assign students for memorizing. The Latin epigraph is from *The Aeneid* 6.853, "To spare the humbled, and to tame in war

Oh do not stain with guiltless blood
Thy hospitable hearth;
Nor triumph that thy wiles betray'd
A prize so little worth.

The scatter'd gleanings of a feast
My frugal meals supply;
But if thine unrelenting heart
That slender boon deny,

The cheerful light, the vital air,
Are blessings widely given;
Let nature's commoners enjoy
The common gifts of heaven.

The well-taught philosophic mind
To all compassion gives;
Casts round the world an equal eye,
And feels for all that lives.

If mind, as ancient sages taught,[2]
A never dying flame,
Still shifts through matter's varying forms,
In every form the same,

Beware, lest in the worm you crush
A brother's soul you find;
And tremble lest thy luckless hand
Dislodge a kindred mind.

Or, if this transient gleam of day
Be *all* of life we share,
Let pity plead within thy breast
That little *all* to spare.

So may thy hospitable board
With health and peace be crown'd;
And every charm of heartfelt ease
Beneath thy roof be found.

So, when destruction lurks unseen,
Which men, like mice, may share,
May some kind angel clear thy path,
And break the hidden snare.

ca. 1771 1773

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[2] Lines 29–36 play on the idea of transmigration of souls, a doctrine that Priestley believed until the