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**“Correct though free, and regular though fair”: Anna
Laetitia Barbauld’s Ambiguities of Style**

MA Dissertation

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Statement of Intellectual honesty

_Your name: María Sánchez Souto

Title of Assignment: “Correct though free, and regular though fair”: Anna Laetitia
Barbauld’s Ambiguities of Style.

I declare that this is a totally original piece of work; all secondary sources have been correctly cited. I also understand that a misuse of AI, such as presenting work as original that has been generated by an AI tool or programme, will similarly lead to a zero grade for this activity.

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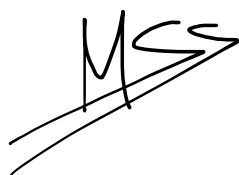
A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of the letters 'M', 'S', and 'S' in a stylized, cursive-like font. The signature is written over two parallel diagonal lines that slope upwards from left to right.

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Abstract

The present MA dissertation approaches the study of Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1743-1825), poet, essayist, and literary critic, who lived between the traditions of the Enlightenment, the culture of Sensibility, and Romanticism. By analyzing three poems — “On a Lady’s Writing” (1773), “Verses Written in an Alcove” (1773) and “Eighteen Hundred Eleven” (1812) —, this thesis looks at the particular traits that characterize the author’s style in order to demonstrate the manner in which Barbauld reflects upon the conception of poetic language through her praxis as a poet and as a critic. This perspective leads to tensions and experimentation in form that are considered in this work as elements that enrich the study of her figure and reveal the limitations that she suffers from being a female writer. In this way, without fully abandoning her conception of virtue and after the consolidation of the Romantic movement, Anna Barbauld finds in poetry a space to write more freely, not only by embracing the theories of imagination and poetic freedom of her contemporaries but also by contributing her own viewpoint to literary criticism. Thus, this close-reading analysis is concerned with Barbauld’s attention to form in order to examine how the confluence of literary movements provides in her a stimulating environment to shape a poetics of her own.

Keywords: Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Enlightenment, Sensibility, Romanticism, Close-Reading Analysis, Gender.

Introduction

In the past thirty years there has been an emerging interest not only in the recovery of women's writings but also in the reappraisal of their works from contemporary perspectives. Over the past two decades, Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1743-1825) has garnered scholarly interest for her biography as a bluestocking member and her diverse body of work, encompassing poetry, essays, children's literature, and miscellaneous pieces blending prose with dialogues and epistles. Despite her prolific literary career and having achieved much recognition during her lifetime, her essays and poems were not reprinted long after her death. However, she is now featured in numerous anthologies of women's poetry and acknowledged as a significant female author. While her works have gained widespread recognition through her inclusion in eighteenth-century anthologies, there is a pressing need for more comprehensive study, since—acknowledged indeed as an organic intellectual (McCarthy xi)—Anna Barbauld still deserves therefore deeper examination.

Although Anna Barbauld is usually framed within the Enlightenment and was familiar with the culture of sensibility, she lived long enough and was acquainted with key publishers to experience and assimilate the Romantic style of poets such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, just as they had previously done with her poetry. Therefore, she shares traits of both traditions, which enriches her pieces with fruitful contradictions. These ambiguities are also amplified by the fact that she was female author interested in writing about politics, society and literary criticism, just as men would do. In this regard, virtue, moderation and prudence—values cherished by the Enlightenment—allow her not only to conjure the strong political component of her elegies, hymns, war poems and abolitionist pieces but also to be respected in the literary field. Her various interests led her to be also engaged as a literary critic and—in a manner resembling Wordsworth's and

Coleridge's Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*—she discussed the formal aspects of poetry in her commentary to Mark Akenside's *The Pleasures of Imagination* (1794). Yet, the extent to which Barbauld was influenced by the Romantic movement as much as she was an influence in it is yet to be ascertained, particularly in terms of form.

Despite her being a respected writer, Anna Barbauld faced severe repression when she began to deviate from the conventional dualistic values of reason and leaned towards a more unified perspective—monism—using poetry to critique the English government through emotional and rational arguments. Gender played a significant role in her work, particularly when she ventured into the politically charged realm, which was unwelcoming to women. Anna Barbauld's writings denied the apparent limitations of her sex in order to freely write about politics. Seeking to become part of this male-dominated field and be recognized, she adopted a highly enlightened stance dictated by reason. This echoes Gilbert's and Gubar's words when acknowledging that “in order to define herself as an author she [the woman writer] must redefine the terms of her socialization” (49) and the Enlightened tradition allowed Barbauld to shape her style according to the dualistic conception of the self at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Nonetheless, as it will be proven, the poet's rationality progressively becomes corrupted by the inclusion of affects. It is precisely after the publication and ensuing criticism of “Eighteen Hundred and Eleven” when she stops writing poems as a result of her authorial anxiety.

While the content of her poems and essays has already been an object of sustained if yet incomplete scholarly attention, there is a gap concerning the analysis of her writing style, the characteristics that shape her as a poet and her critical work on the art and function of poetry. For instance, the first dissertation written on Barbauld by Catherine Moore is an attempt to gather her pieces and categorize them according to their content and genre. Although Moore's work is useful to identify the poet's writings, it does not

comprehensively analyze her usage of language and her conception of poetry. Also, William McCarthy's biography on Anna Barbauld's work contextualizes the moment in which the author wrote most of her pieces; however, like the former scholar, he does not include a close-reading analysis of the poems.

Additionally, the works of academics such as Ota Yuko, Amy Welton, Penelope Bradshaw, Jessica Pallard and John M. Anderson have been useful for the process of this dissertation; their close-reading analysis—pursued to frame Barbauld within the Romantic movement, to study her as a Dissenter or to integrate her within the canon of eighteenth-century female writers—reveals the main qualities that define her style. Nonetheless, beyond only considering her as feminist, romantic, enlightened, or a dissenter, her intellectual bent was silenced not only for stepping out of the domestic sphere but also due to her criticism of English politics. Therefore, it should also be embraced the multifaceted nature of her figure and her belonging to a liminal space, because precisely in this way the poet is not confined within a specific tradition typically represented by canonical writers such as William Blake and Samuel Coleridge whose shared traits and circumstances do not resemble those of Anna Barbauld.

To this end, the aim of this MA thesis is to examine the more formal and stylistic features in Anna Laetitia Barbauld's poetry through the selection of a host of lyrical pieces and her own critical work in order to demonstrate the traits that define her as a poet and her own conceptualization of poetry as an art and a praxis. In this regard, this thesis will also pay attention to Barbauld's own conception of women's role in society so that I can discuss the contradictions, boundaries and difficulties that she endured for being a woman writer. Through the close-reading analysis of "On a Lady's Writing," "Verses Written in an Alcove," and "Eighteenth Hundred and Eleven,"¹ as well as a closer consideration to

¹ The first three poems are compiled in an anthology published in 1773, while the latter—"Eighteen Hundred and Eleven"—is set in the year specified by its title.

Barbauld's preface to Mark Akenside's *The Pleasures of Imagination*, my analysis seeks to foreground Barbauld's engagement with a Romantic conceptualization of freedom of form and expression in her poetry, in struggle with the righteous morals of the Enlightenment. Overall, her literary production warrants a closer look at the formal aspects of Barbauld's work in order to further understand her influence and reception as a major woman poet of her time, taking also into account the gender stigma as a result of her effort to write pieces that were meant to be the province of men.

Regarding the structure of this MA thesis, I have divided it into two parts: on the one hand, I will focus on the virtuous values that Barbauld embodies, the way in which these shield her from criticism, her different influences and her interest in writing about the cultural and political tendencies that affect her society. On the other hand, in the second part of my dissertation, through a close reading analysis of "On a Lady's Writing" and "Verses written in an alcove" I will study how the lyrical pieces explore—in a metaliterary manner and from an enlightened perspective—the creative process of a woman writer, her manners, and the struggle to attain freedom. After all, Barbauld "wrote in an age when intellectuals believed in the power of language to represent a really existing world" (McCarthy xii), and it is for this reason that this thesis is focused on the manner in which Barbauld conceives poetry and how writing is intertwined with gender. Also, the analysis of "Eighteen Hundred and Eleven" aims to study the poet's usage of the Romantic style in order to highlight the contradictions that revolve around her figure. Both parts attempt to demonstrate how the different contradictions and the integration of various cultural currents prevent her from being categorized within a specific literary movement, taking into account that being a woman also limited her stylistically.

The methodology on which this dissertation is based responds to the necessity of examining Anna Barbauld's poetry without framing her into a specific tradition so that

the complexity of her production can be fully grasped. In order to uncover the contradictions and ambiguities of her work, the main approach of this MA thesis is close-reading analysis. Therefore, with the aid of Barbauld's essays on literary tradition and criticism, William McCarthy's biography of the poet along with the works of scholars such as Jessica Pallard and Penelope Bradshaw, among others, this dissertation attempts to analyze the main traits and character of Anna Barbauld's writing style and the ambiguities that it embodies. In this regard, I also have considered the biographical circumstances of the author alongside the different questions of gender and authorship that may have constrained her as a writer.

As Devoney Looser asserts, McCarthy's "biography ought to inspire additional book-length studies of Barbauld" (298), because there is much left yet to study about the author. Although the space constraint of this MA thesis prevents an insightful approach of all the lyrical pieces, this dissertation represents a further step in the process of understanding Barbauld's sense of poetics as an art and practice. Therefore, it is a question of future research to explore the intricacies of Barbauld's style as the language of the new literary traditions are integrated into the canon.

Part 1: “Like a firm shield against the darts of fate:” Anna Barbauld’s Perception of Virtue

Similarly to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Locke and Immanuel Kant among other eighteenth-century thinkers, Anna Barbauld contributed to the latent discussions present during the Enlightenment around happiness, pleasure and righteousness. In this regard, one of the ideas that characterize Anna Barbauld’s writings since the beginning of her career is her insistence on virtuosity. It is understandable that this was a recurrent topic in her first writings—dated in 1770—when she was a student in the Dissenter’s academy of Warrington,² because this was considered to be “one of the intellectual centers of Enlightened Dissent in England” (Welton 7). However, this is a principle that will remain present even when she integrates elements from Romanticism to her poetry and the later becomes freer in terms of content and form. This section attempts to analyze the manner in which Anna Barbauld recurs to virtuosity both for her religious background, her desire to be respected in the literary field and for the integration of the Enlightenment within the liminal space that places her between the aforementioned literary tradition and Romanticism.

It is convenient firstly to define virtue according to Anna Barbauld’s conception of this principle. A female writer highlighting the importance of virtue could be easily mistaken for the society’s pressure on keeping their “chastity, esp. on the part of a woman” (*OED*). Nevertheless, this is not the case with Barbauld, as virtue is for her intrinsically linked to moderation, prudence and the good usage of a rational discourse. It is also essential to consider Barbauld’s dissenting background, as Dissenters “depended on appeal to reason, equity, and humanity; they put their trust in rational discourse and

² The Warrington Academy (1756-1782) was a Dissenting school, where Anna Barbauld’s father—Arthur Aikin—and her brother—John Aikin—worked as tutors. Here, Barbauld would get her first insights on poetry, philosophy and literary traditions that would be fundamental for her development as a writer.

the better natures of their fellow men” (McCarthy 13). Virtue comes in hand with the exemplary behavior of an individual and its consequent happiness. In this manner, although it is possible that Anna Barbauld may have insisted on this principle in her writings in order to be respected amongst her male peers, the claim for the virtuous individual was inherent to the culture in which she was raised.

Additionally, the Dissenter’s conception of virtue echoes the austere idea of the virtuous individual also present in Greek philosophy and Stoicism; indeed, Barbauld “much admire[d] the spirit of ancient philosophers” (Barbauld 189). This doctrine responds to the idea of the righteous individual, as it implies the focus on the self and their correct response to the stimuli that surrounds them, i.e., an attempt to stick to one’s identity despite the boundaries and difficulties created by society. As William McCarthy claims, “To Anna Laetitia, conscious of great powers but deprived by reason of her sex of full social priviledges and therefore relatively straitened to what she could expect of life, Stoicism must have been tremendously attractive in both its aspects” (53). It is for these reasons that this philosophy was useful to her, because—despite being a woman and a dissenter—she freely created literary pieces that were not commonly written by women due to their content. Embracing this philosophy also prompted her to advocate for individual freedoms, including the liberty of religion, speech, and thought, which were ignored and oppressed by the English government.³

In this sense, Anna Barbauld’s views on individual freedom are acclaimed in “Corsica,”⁴ (1773) where she praises the island’s independence and admires its “heroic citizenship” (McCarthy 101). Despite its patriotism, this poem exemplifies Barbauld’s

³ English dissenters often encountered scrutiny and persecution for their beliefs in religious freedom and their insistence on the separation between the Church and the State. In fact, in 1790 Barbauld signs a political manifesto (*A Dissenter*) defending their right for religious liberty and freedom of thought.

⁴ “Corsica” was published in *Poems* (1773), printed by Joseph Johnson. This would be the first compilation of poems written by Barbauld. Also, “On a Lady’s Writing” and “Verses Written in an Alcove” can be found in the same anthology.

belief in the importance of virtue and the freedom of the mind, as it can be perceived in the last stanza of the piece:

Not with the purple colouring of success
Is virtue best adorn'd: th' attempt is praise.
There yet remains a freedom, nobler far
Than kings or senates can destroy or give;
Beyond the proud oppressor's cruel grasp
Seated secure; uninjur'd; undestroy'd;
Worthy of Gods: The freedom of the mind. (lines 113-119)

Despite the evident synesthesia that associates the color purple—characteristic of royalty and high society—with virtue, this attribute is far superior to these ranks, as it embodies the freedom of thought, which is one of most important qualities of an individual according to Barbauld. Thus, following a Stoic philosophy, personal judgment stays resolute against the corruption of “kings or senates” (line 116), i.e., “the proud oppressor” (line 117). Also, the powerful force that is represented through the freedom of the mind is reinforced through the usage of the following adjectives: “uninjur’d” (line 118) and “undestroy’d” (line 118). This idea enhances the importance of personal judgment despite corrupt surroundings, which will be melancholically approached in “Eighteen Hundred and Eleven” as well. As we shall see, Barbauld promotes critical thinking in her essays and poems. This concept of the righteous individual is not opposed to the doctrine of Romanticism; rather, in Barbauld’s case, it complements it, since individual freedom is also one of the fundamental pillars of Romanticism.

With regard to the importance of maintaining one’s own judgement, in her essay “Against Inconsistency in Our Expectations” (1773), Barbauld writes about the rise of commerce, its influence on citizens and their inevitable corruption, but she also insists on

the manner in which individuals should behave and react regarding the changes of society. Certainly, Barbauld's consistent adherence to Stoic principles throughout her literary career emphasizes her dedication to upholding her beliefs regardless of shifting circumstances. Hence, when it comes to the freedom of the market, Barbauld states,

Everything is marked at a settled price. Our time, our labor, our ingenuity, is so much ready money which we are to lay out to the best advantage. Examine, compare, choose, reject; but stand to your own judgment: and do not, like children, when you have purchased one thing, repine that you do not possess another which you did not purchase. Such is the force of well-regulated industry, that a steady and vigorous exertion of our faculties, directed to one end, will generally insure success (185).

Despite the numerous similarities that we can find in today's society, this discourse exemplifies the manner in which the individual should behave in order to pursue a virtuous path. This attitude—typical of the Enlightenment and the Dissenting culture—can be easily perceived in Barbauld's writings, as she always attempts to “examine, compare, choose, reject.” In other words, Barbauld's advocacy for critical thinking amidst change and the advent of new traditions is another defining characteristic of her personality and writings.⁵ For this reason, she cannot be confined to a specific tradition, as she adopts the traits that best align with her evolving perspective throughout the century.

The aforementioned essay is included in *Miscellaneous Pieces, in prose*⁶ (1773) which she cowrites with her brother John Aikin. Here they discuss topics present during their time, which reassures Jessica Pallard's statement when asserting that “Literature

⁵ Indeed, the importance of commerce is again present in “Eighteen Hundred and Eleven.”

⁶ The essays that were claimed the most were Anna Barbauld's. In fact, William McCarthy demonstrates it by quoting John Aikin's words when several intellectuals approached him to congratulate him for the pieces, but the favorite ones were indeed “my [his] sister's” (McCarthy 112).

during this time was a major source of information, and the primary goal of writers was to articulate contemporary and fundamental issues of society and humanity” (23). Many theories and ideas studied by seventeenth, and eighteenth-century thinkers are developed in Barbauld’s and Aikin’s book. Also, a matter that indicates Barbauld’s interest in the discussions of her time is her position regarding science, as she approaches it emphasizing the importance of virtue as well. Hence, Aikin’s and Barbauld’s awareness of the technological advances of their time leads them to write their thoughts upon science in their essays. Throughout her life, Barbauld will be aware of the different intellectual theories, technological advances and the elements that affect society and they will be present not only in her poetry but also in her prose and critical essays.

For instance, in “The Hill of Science: a Vision” (1773), Barbauld articulates her opinion concerning the increasing growth of science and instructs her readers about the challenges of pursuing knowledge at all costs. Therefore, the poet allegorically writes about the different paths that individuals may follow according to their goals and she claims that, although the path of knowledge is rewarding and praiseworthy, it is indeed being virtuous the principle that will make an individual happy. This task resonates with Anne Mellor’s statement concerning the role of the Enlightened female poet:

Again and again, female poet insisted that she spoke on behalf of Virtue, a virtue that consistently gendered as female, a virtue that in a Christian nation govern both the private and the public sphere, thus taking precedence all merely expedient considerations of government policy or commercial advancement. (264)

In this regard, Barbauld asserts that “Science may raise you to eminence, but I [Virtue] alone can guide you to felicity!” (170). Although knowledge is indeed relevant to the growth of an individual, the main value that they must have in order to achieve knowledge along with other pursuits is virtue itself. This echoes John Locke’s idea concerning

happiness, as the English philosopher considers that “For, God having, by an inseparable connexion [sic], joined virtue and public happiness together, and made the practice thereof necessary to the preservation of society, and visibly beneficial to all with whom the virtuous man has to do” (Locke 50). Both Locke and Barbauld believe that in order to achieve a happy society its individuals must embrace their virtue.

Within the conception of the virtuous individual, it is also relevant to consider the connection between the self and nature. Again, Barbauld follows the tradition of poets and thinkers who understands that knowledge can be obtained through the observation and interaction with nature. Indeed, at the beginning of the aforementioned essay, the narrator “was wandering in a beautiful and romantic country”⁷ (Barbauld 163) and reflects on how “the objects around me [her] naturally inspired,” which echoes Locke’s philosophy when asserting that the impression and the contemplation of outward objects lead us to the path of meditation, hence, knowledge (100). In this sense, the virtuous individual sees nature as a resort to find themselves. Also, while the aforementioned essays are similar to Locke’s conception of nature with its emphasis on reason, Barbauld’s work reflects the culture of sensibility by incorporating elements from the affections in her discourse, as modest and righteous men are the ones who “show learning and judgement as well as passion and sensibility” (McCarthy 109).

Anna Barbauld focuses on the personal improvement and growth of the individual, not only in the cultivation of reason but also in their ethics, morality, and well-being. In this regard, Barbauld’s essays and poems also resonate with Rousseau’s thoughts. For instance, in *Les rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (1782), Rousseau explains that “These hours of solitude and meditation are the only ones in the day when I am entirely myself,

⁷ The model of reveries also echoes Greek philosophy and is a common way to begin philosophical reflections, as Barbauld does in this essay. In fact, the beginning of Anna Barbauld’s essay echoes William Wordsworth’s famous poem “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud.”

and for myself, without diversion, or obstacle; and when I can truly say, I am what nature designed me” (Rousseau 7). Within this discourse, we can also incorporate ideas of pleasure, as they are also found in the interaction with nature. Thus, although Barbauld’s discourses are generally very enlightened and based on reason, she leaves a gap for the awakening of feelings specially in terms of her poetics, as this genre is defined by being the source of pleasure, yet as Edmund Burke states in *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of The Sublime and Beautiful* (1754) the ideas that come from a refined and rectitude of judgement (23) constitute the source of taste and beauty.

In this sense, according to William McCarthy, the culture of sensibility represents the culture of introspection and inner feelings (63), which echoes Rousseau’s reflections: the philosopher employs outward objects and their contemplation to engage in introspection and reflect on matters concerning himself and the society in which he lives. Nonetheless, this tradition goes beyond the exploration of sensations and inner feelings. As Jane Todd claims, “A ‘sentiment’ is a moral reflection, a rational opinion usually about the rights and wrongs of human conduct” (Todd 7) and Barbauld does exactly what Todd explains in her reflections and poems as well. The culture of sensibility, therefore, suits Barbauld, as she encodes and “over-refines” her feelings concerning public matters by addressing them through rational arguments. Although this will be studied throughout the analysis of the lyrical pieces, this position keeps her off the canonical perception of female writers, who “were thought to express emotions with their bodies more sincerely and spontaneously than men” and tended “to depict themselves as helpless ladies, moral monitors and chaste entertainments” (Todd 21). Hence, it is convenient to differentiate Anna Barbauld’s traits of the culture of sensibility from the conception of the female writers who belonged to this tradition, because Barbauld precisely does not fall into the

stereotypes that divide masculine poetry from feminine poetry, even when it comes to the portrayal of sentiments in literature.

Given this, Anna Barbauld's writing takes inspiration from a variety of sources, blending different traditions and incorporating the traits that best resonate with her mindset. Therefore, it is not unexpected that "Her intellectual independence could lead to disconcerting appearances of self-contradiction" (McCarthy 126). However, by embracing the Stoic philosophy that Barbauld admires, she maintains her principles with conviction and critically engages with various intellectual currents. Consequently, as it will be demonstrated in the following chapter, although Barbauld's thinking aligns with Romanticism and is influenced by the emphasis on imagination found within its theories, this alone does not categorize her strictly as a Romantic. Similarly, her incorporation of ideas from Locke or Rousseau does not confine her to their respective traditions either. Instead, she synthesizes these influences into her own unique perspective and contributions.

Part 2. The Shape of the Muses: Thoughts and Analysis of Anna Barbauld's Poetry

In Anna Barbauld's introduction (1794) to Mark Akenside's *The Pleasures of Imagination*, the writer displays her thoughts concerning the manner in which poetry should suggest ideas and concepts rather than explain them explicitly; consequently, this art cannot "confine itself" or "teach the elements of any art or science" (Barbauld 2). From this notion, it can be stated that Barbauld portrays a very romantic discourse regarding the idea of poetry, as she additionally relies on the impressions and emotions that a piece should provoke on the reader so that it can stimulate and be considered laudable. This echoes Wordsworth's *Preface of the Lyrical Ballads* and Coleridge's theories on imagination, as both authors insist on the active role of the reader. According to the former, "the understanding of the Reader must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, and his affections strengthened and purified" (6) in order to find pleasure in the lyrical pieces that he writes. Indeed, Barbauld agrees with this idea of the reader since she states that "those who have studied the metaphysics of mind and who are accustomed to investigate abstract ideas will read with a lively pleasure" (6). Both writers share the theory that poetry should be an element that awakens the mind, that is, it should be original and creative rather than prescriptive.

In this manner, throughout the eighteenth century, there is a shift in the paradigm that moves away from *imitatio* and embraces *inventio*. Anna Barbauld, despite being acknowledged for her role as an educator, also adopts this paradigm and includes it in her poetry. Such is this idea that the author even claims that "Imagination is the very source and well-head of Poetry and nothing forced or foreign to the Muse could easily flow such a subject" (6). This notion of poetry resonates with Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, since the poet asserts that "GOOD SENSE is the BODY of poetic genius, FANCY its DRAPERY, MOTION its LIFE, and IMAGINATION the SOUL that is every where, and

in each; and forms all into one graceful and intelligent whole” (Coleridge 214). In this regard, Anna Barbauld in the same manner of these authors discusses the role of poetry and its purpose and she agrees and contributes to the theories that they develop. It is undeniable then that she shares the traits that belong to Romantic criticism, but her conception of poetry does not merely confine her within this tradition, as her role as an educator also remains present in her compositions.

Anna Barbauld’s pragmatism and her pedagogical background cannot be denied when studying her lyrical pieces either. Although in Mark Akenside’s introduction Barbauld states that “Didactic, or preceptive Poetry, seems to include a solecism, for the end of Poetry is to please, and of Didactic precept the object is instruction” (1), she also embraces the latter type of poetry. Indeed, she adopts it from a rather Horatian and at the same time Enlightened point of view, that is, through the *utile dulci* or *docere delectando*. In the same manner as Holkheimer and Adorno, Barbauld is aware that language “becomes more than a mere system of signs,” as it “teaches us to read from its features the admission of falseness which cancels its power and hands it over to truth” (18). In this regard, language serves a fundamental vehicle for the dissemination of ideas and the promotion of critical thinking. Additionally, feelings and passions should not be omitted either, because it is poetic language indeed that is capable of evoking pleasure and emotions in its reader. Indeed, as Percy Shelley claims, “this [poetry] springs from the nature itself of language, which is a more direct representation of the actions and passions of our internal being” (43), which resembles Barbauld’s conception of a laudable lyrical composition. In this sense, the role of the poet and the educator regarding the use of language may appear contradictory, much like Barbauld’s persona is also perceived ambiguously, but she employs both the passionate language of poetry and the pragmatic language of education according to the purpose that she pursues.

According to Stuart Curran, “The hegemony of neoclassical rules, with their simpleminded and impossible clarity, broke down in the eighteenth century” (8). Therefore, without fully abandoning the hermetic structure of the neoclassical rules, Anna Barbauld explores the different tendencies in her times. Then, as a result, there is a clear dialogism that separates didactic poems from stimulating lyrical pieces. Regarding this difference, this section of this MA dissertation aims to analyze how Anna Barbauld combines these two types of poetry and it will examine how she incorporates traits from various traditions: how the Enlightenment together with her pragmatism helps her remain stoic and respected in the literary field, and how Romanticism enables her to explore new ways to engage and stimulate readers.

2.1. “On a Lady’s Writing”

“On a Lady’s Writing” appears in Anna Barbauld’s first collection of poems, which was published in 1773. This poem exemplifies the author’s thoughts not only on how a woman should approach writing, but also on how she should behave. Although Barbauld was not apparently interested in instructing women,⁸ not only does she write the aforementioned poem but also edits the following book: *The female speaker, or, Miscellaneous pieces, in prose and verse selected from the best writers and adapted to the use of young women* (1816). In this collection of pieces thought for women, Barbauld upholds the following opinion regarding the role of women; a perspective she similarly exhibits in her essay “Against Inconsistency in Our Expectations” (1773), in which she states that

There is a cast of manners peculiar and becoming to each age, sex, and profession; one, therefore, should not throw out illiberal and commonplace censures against each other.

⁸ Anna Barbauld rejected Elizabeth Montagu’s proposal concerning being the headmistress of an academy for higher education for women, as Barbauld affirmed in a letter, “I should have little hope of cultivating a love of knowledge in a young lady of fifteen who came to me ignorant and uncultivated. It is too late then to begin to learn” (Morris 68).

Each is perfect in its kind. A woman as a woman: a tradesman as a tradesman. (Barbauld 194)

Despite the forty-three-year gap between one piece of writing and another and the dissemination of controversial works like Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Barbauld still defended that "her primary allegiance was always to her roles as wife, mother, and teacher" (Pallard 26-27). In other words, there is a clear tendency in her writings towards highlighting the domestic sphere for women, which might suggest that she did not advocate for women's liberation. Nonetheless, Barbauld's personal actions present a different perspective from the position that she defends in her essays: her engagement in authoring political works and subscribing to political manifestos suggests a more complex stance, one that transcends mere adherence to traditional gender roles.

With regard to the pedagogical role of women, both Barbauld and Wollstonecraft emphasized the importance of educating young girls and the former insisted on the importance of women configuring themselves as 'the nation's teachers' and thus becoming the instructor of the moral education of the young⁹ (Watts 22). However, the education that Barbauld advocated for women was entirely constricted to gender conventions. Indeed, according to the following words, Barbauld believed that the education of women should be different from that of men:

The editor has only to add, that this Collection, being intended chiefly for females, she has considered that circumstance, not only in having a more scrupulous regard to delicacy

⁹ Barbauld writes passionately about this idea in *The female speaker*, as the lyrical voice states in the poem "In part she is to blame, who has been tried:" "O woman, lovely woman! Nature form'd you, / to temper men; they had been brutes without / you" (Barbauld 8).

in the pieces inserted, but in directing her choice to subjects more particularly appropriate to her duties, the employments, and the dispositions of the softer sex. (5-6)

It is perceivable Barbauld places significant pressure on women, most likely as an intent to ensure that women felt respected in their attempt to pursue an intellectual career. Likewise, it is convenient to mention that she edits *The female speaker* four years after being attacked for being a “lady author” who dared to criticize the English government (Watts 11). In this regard, Barbauld’s contradiction between her ideas about women’s education and her own persona appears to be “pointing out that in the roles realistically open to a woman in the eighteenth century — wife and companion — intelligence and ill-disguised learning could function less as a path to freedom than as another area of repression” (Bradshaw 40).

According to Anne K. Mellor, “the female poet could and did claim a moral and literary authority equal to—or even greater than—that of those male poets who worked within a neoclassical literary tradition” (265) and Anna Barbauld’s often embraces this position through her writings and poems. “On a Lady’s Writing” also illustrates Barbauld’s serious regard for the righteousness of women, especially those who are writers, as she is acutely aware that she is instructing future writers to enter a traditionally male-dominated sphere. This awareness likely explains the strict expectations concerning how women should engage with the writing profession found in the poem. In fact, as Penelope Joyce Bradshaw asserts, there is a pattern suggesting that “Barbauld needs to employ the authority of neo-classic poetic forms in her moments of most anxious and transgressive politicising” (34). Although in the case of “On a Lady’s Writing,” Barbauld’s stance is not transgressive, the fact that she relies on a discourse grounded in reason and therefore enlightened helps her encourage women to write, which is itself a subversive act.

When Barbauld writes certain poetic pieces like “Eighteen Hundred Eleven,” it is evident that, as Bradshaw notes, she “unsex’d” herself (23) addressing political themes and entering spheres traditionally associated with masculinity. However, when she instructs on how women should write, her position is much more conservative in both content and form, as evidenced in “On a Lady’s Writing:”¹⁰

HER even lines her steady temper show;
Neat as her dress, and polish'd as her brow;
Strong as her judgment, easy as her air;
Correct though free, and regular though fair:
And the same graces o'er her pen preside
That form her manners and her footsteps guide. (lines 1-6)

At first glance, the composition is distinguished by a pronounced parallelism throughout its lines. Barbauld seeks this stylistic regularity to emphasize the message she is conveying since, as Geoffrey N. Leech, “Linguistic parallelism is very often connected with rhetorical emphasis and memorability” (67). As a result, the lyrical voice insists on the qualities that a woman must have by a recurring insistence on the repetition of the syntactic structures of the piece. Additionally, since “Interpreting the parallelism involves appreciating some external connection between these elements” (Leech 67), it seems that the form of the poem is as regular as the expected conduct of a woman and her approach to the task of writing. In other words, Barbauld not only instructs and provides prescriptive content but also serves as an example because the poem itself embodies the regularity and balance that she is advocating.

¹⁰ Another important aspect to consider is the playful nature of the title. Anna Barbauld is not merely discussing how to approach a lady’s writing; she cleverly utilizes this theme to highlight the importance of virtuous manners.

Through a close examination of the nominal content of the poem, Barbauld's stoic perspective is noticeable, particularly regarding female behavior. In this sense, the descriptive adjectives should be analyzed, as they collectively define Barbauld's conception of a virtuous woman. In the case of the first line, Barbauld alters the syntactic structure to emphasize the nominal content of the piece, thus leaving the verb for the end: "HER even lines her steady temper show." Both the term *even* and *steady* portray the firmness that should characterize a woman, whose significance will be present throughout this brief composition. Consequently, the next four lines are characterized by an accumulation of adjectives aimed at defining how a woman should approach the task of writing: *neat, polish'd, strong, easy, correct, free, regular* and *fair*. It is relevant to pay attention to these adjectives because they all point in the same direction: the virtuosity of both external appearance and internal character, echoing the author's sentiments in *The female speaker* when she declares that "Virtue is the health of the soul, and cleanliness is the virtue of the body" (Barbauld 7).

Through a concatenation of similes in the second and third lines, Anna Barbauld initially defines a woman through her appearance: "Neat as her dress, and polish'd as her brow." By employing the terms *polish'd* and *neat*, the poet attempts to highlight the tidiness with which a woman should present herself, as "Strength and honor are her clothing, and she shall rejoice in time to come" (Barbauld 5). The aforementioned similes, connected by the conjunction "and," make the lyrical voice move from the physical appearance of the dress to the forehead, which metaphorically represents the freshness of ideas. Building upon this metaphor, Barbauld then focuses on the spirit of the woman writer, employing a series of similes that emphasize her insistence on the importance of critical thinking and virtue.

Then, from the third line, the adjectives she uses may seem antithetical: *strong* and *easy*. Thus, according to Anna Barbauld, the strength of a woman's judgement must merge with the simplicity of her demeanor. This combination of apparently antithetical adjectives is intensified through the polysyndeton in the fourth line: "Correct though free, regular though fair," since, by employing an adversative conjunction (*though*), Barbauld evinces the contradiction that may be created by joining two adjectives whose content is clearly different from each other. Also, it is convenient to remark the author's conception concerning the term *free*, as it does not resemble individual freedom promoted by the Romantics but rather the freedom understood from the perspective of dissenters, as previously discussed in the first chapter, that is, the liberty of expression, thought, and religion. The aim of this enumeration and the precise use of these adjectives appears to highlight how balanced a woman must be to venture into the literary world since the entire poem revolves around achieving a moderate attitude and trying to find a balance between emotion and reason. Indeed, this resonates with Isobel Grundy's words when asserting that "She writes here with relative formality, with ease and flow but also with balance, antithesis, and logical reasoning" (Grundy 28). Nevertheless, this characterization is entirely utopian because even Anna Barbauld herself does not fulfill it throughout her personal literary career.

This insistence is also evident through the repetition of the sounds /r/ and /f/ associating *correct* with *regular* and *free* with *fair*. Consequently, the emphasis is focused on the syllables containing these sounds, which clearly carry a significant pronunciation strength. Within the different parallelistic structures, Leech distinguishes certain "patterns of sound" (67), which are noticeable in this line. The linguist identifies Barbauld's pattern as a case of "chiming" since it deals with "connecting two words by similarity of sound so that you are made to think of their possible connections" (95). In simpler terms, the

repetition of these sounds and their strength serve as another way to emphasize the qualities that a woman should possess from a formal and lyrical perspective. Also, such is the emphasis on adjectives that verbs are scarcely present in the composition. Only three verbs are found: *show* (line 1), *preside* (line 5), and *form* (line 6), with the latter two located within the same clause. Additionally, apart from *preside*, the other verbs are not indicative of action, and it is not the woman who “presides,” but rather her pen¹¹. In this context, albeit unintended, this also implies a certain passivity regarding women’s conduct, as the pen is usually associated with the male-dominated literary hegemony and metaphorically refers to the masculine.

Concerning the meter and the rhyme, the latter is consonant and regular, and the composition follows the structure of heroic couplets (AA BB CC). In this manner, each verse consists of ten syllables¹² with a pause in the middle, indicated either by a comma or in the diction itself due to Barbauld’s chosen linguistic structure. These details further enhance the composition’s perfection, as it almost appears to be an academic exercise. Additionally, the regular rhyme should also be mentioned, as the last syllable results in a rhyme scheme that is oxytone and, consequently, considered to be feminine. Therefore, the language employed appears to be simple along with the rhetorical devices seeming to be relatively unelaborated, which is an indicative of the austere stylistic tendencies associated with the Enlightenment era. Nonetheless, it is apparent that each sound, word, and verse is meticulously selected to effectively communicate Barbauld’s proposed message. Therefore, “On a Lady’s Writing” perfectly encapsulates the author’s conception of didactic literature, as she not only employs the Greek *techné* to craft a composition that is well-structured, but also, while it can be interpreted through a

¹¹ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* metaphorically associate the pen with the penis; thus, the presence of women in the literary field were radically omitted in the past due to its phallogocentric structure.

¹² Curiously the adjectives of the composition, which are precisely selected, also amount to ten.

Horatian paradigm of *utile dulci*, its content is intended to instruct rather than solely evoke pleasure or stimulate the reader's imagination.

2.2 “Verses Written in an Alcove”

“Verses Written in an Alcove” can also be found in Anna Barbauld’s first work of *Poems* (1773). This lyrical piece should be understood as a composition of transition between the culture of Enlightenment and the arrival of Romanticism. Also, it should not be forgotten the manner in which the culture of sensibility is present as well in this poem: the lyrical voice emphasizes feelings, specifically affections that should be sweet and morally good. The objective of this analysis is to identify the characteristics associated with the aforementioned currents and to understand how Barbauld positions herself in relation to them. Furthermore, another aspect to consider is that the poetic voice is female and addresses another woman (Lissy) within the framework of domesticity. Once again, writing is presented — as the title itself indicates — from a woman’s perspective.

The poem begins by framing the space and time of day in which the lyrical piece starts, as can be observed in the first stanza:

NOW the moon-beam's trembling lustre
Silters o'er the dewy green,
And in soft and shadowy colours
Sweetly paints the chequer'd scene. (lines 1-4)

Even within the night itself, there is light, as evidenced by the use of terms such as *beam*, *lustre* and *silters*. In this way, through an emphasis on colors (*silters*, *green*, *colours*), Anna Barbauld describes the atmosphere of the night, which continues in the next stanza. The night is not negatively perceived at the beginning because there is clarity due to the presence of the moon. However, there is a segregation of spaces that divides what would

be considered a “good” space, associated with light, and a “bad” space, associated with darkness. This becomes evident through the usage of adverbs related to location (*here* and *there*): “Here between the opening branches / Streams a flood of soften'd light; / There the thick and twisted foliage / Spreads the browner gloom of night” (lines 5-8). Through nature, Barbauld describes two antithetical spaces: the open branches suggest clarity and openness, while the thick and twisted foliage not only brings darkness but also evokes and creates an atmosphere of confusion and mystery.

Through the representation of this landscape, Anna Barbauld describes or even anticipates the changes that her society was experiencing. As reflected in the following stanzas, there is, far from where she writes, an incipient interest in the mysterious, which evokes emotions that Barbauld identifies as negative at the moment she writes “Verses Written in an Alcove:”

Far from hence be noisy clamour,
Sick disgust and anxious fear;
Pining grief and wasting anguish
Never keep their vigils here.

Tell no tales of sheeted spectres
Rising from the quiet tomb;
Fairer forms this cell shall visit,
Brighter visions gild the gloom. (lines 13-20)

This rejection is noticeable through the chaining of adjectives and nouns associated with emotions. It seems that in this early period of Barbauld’s work, she constantly resorts to adjectives to emphasize her stance, as in these verses practically almost every noun is preceded by an adjective: “noisy clamour,” “sick disgust,” “anxious fear,” “Pining grief,” “wasting anguish.” Curiously, this employment of the adjectives resonates with

Anna Barbauld's analysis of Mark Akenside's *The Pleasures of Imagination*, as the former states that "He [Akenside] is fond of compound epithets, led to it perhaps by his fondness of the Greek, and delights in a giving classic air to his composition by using names and epithets the most remote from vulgar use" (31-32). In this regard, the usage of epithets in this composition—as Barbauld herself asserts—gives also a classic air to "Verses Written in an Alcove" and evinces the author's fondness and awareness of the Greek poets' style. Additionally, the alliteration within this accumulation of adjectives and nouns should also be noted, as Anna Barbauld may be employing the sounds /s/ and /j/ in order to further emphasize the aggressiveness with which the darkness of the night is presented. As can be observed, the repetition of sounds and linguistic parallelism are two rhetorical devices that Barbauld employs in the two of the analyzed poems.

The light described by the lyrical voice in the first stanza appears to be seen from the alcove, that is, from the interior. However, the external world is described as hostile and full of suffering, and it even features a distinct Gothic element after the reference to the tales of ghosts "rising from the quiet tomb" (line 17). In this regard, as Stuart Curran suggests, "Anna¹³ and Lizzie between them will banish gothic passions" (234). Nonetheless, by mentioning the existence of the Gothic and the romantic mysterious atmosphere, a proto-romantic acknowledgement of the cultural currencies outside the alcove can be witnessed. In this regard, it can be compared to this timid interest in the entry of new traditions with their culmination in the poem "To Mr. [S.T.] C[oleridge]" (1797). In this piece—as opposed to "Verses Written in an Alcove"—, the poet fully incorporates romantic elements and images into her writing style, as seen in the following verses:

Dreams hang on every leaf: unearthly forms

¹³ Stuart Curran associates the lyrical voice with Anna Barbauld's persona (236).

Glide through the gloom; and mystic visions swim
Before the cheated sense. Athwart the mists,
Far into vacant space, huge shadows stretch
And seem realities; while things of life,
Obvious to sight and touch, all glowing round,
Fade to the hue of shadows. (lines 7-13)

In this sense, there is a shift in the description of the atmosphere. The poet embraces this Romantic tendency, as the verses are enveloped in a dark aura of mysticism. The first verses of “To Mr. [S.T.] C[oleridge]” resonate with the “thick and twisted foliage” (line 7) that “Spreads the browner gloom of night” (line 8) in “Verses Written in an Alcove.” The night once again becomes the protagonist of the composition; thus, dreams—unreachable by rational thought—give way to mysterious forms that elude our senses.¹⁴

In order to portray this new Romantic tradition, in the composition “To Mr. [S.T.] C[oleridge],” Anna Barbauld sets aside her Enlightened rationalism not only by emphasizing the power of dreams but also by expressing how the senses—one of the sources of the origin of ideas according to John Locke (87)—fail to fully capture these mysterious forms: “while things of life, / Obvious to sight and touch, all glowing round, / Fade to the hue of shadows” (lines 9-11). In this sense, emphasis is placed on imagination, as explained by the author herself in her critical introduction to Mark Akenside’s *Pleasures of imagination*: “to consider the powers of Imagination as residing in the human mind (...) with ideas of all that is great and beautiful in nature” (Barbauld 26). Nonetheless, it should be taken into account that Anna Barbauld’s balanced temper prevents her from fully surrendering to the power of imagination. In fact, once again the author’s objective with this piece retains a didactic tone since, as Jessica Pallard suggests,

¹⁴ Also, this conception of the dreams is visually explained in Francisco de Goya’s Black Paintings, as “el sueño de la razón produce monstruos” [The sleep of reason breeds monsters].

“Throughout ‘To Mr. Coleridge,’ Barbauld makes the reader increasingly aware of dangers of abstraction and subjectivity that inhibit the poet’s social role” (99). In other words, according to Anna Barbauld, poets ought to embody a moral responsibility, a characteristic that is not always evident in Romantic writers.¹⁵ However, despite Barbauld’s intention to instruct or advise Romantic authors on the limits of imagination, it is undeniable that she opts to employ the style of these authors to achieve this goal.

As a result, without abandoning the stylistic tendency to pair each noun with an adjective — “unearthly forms,” “mystic visions,” “cheated sense,” “huge shadows,” “vacant space” — Anna Barbauld explores the Romantic style. Thus, with the selected verses alone, the poet focuses on creating an atmosphere filled with mysticism, darkness, and uncertainty. Then, each adjective underscores Barbauld’s objective with this poem, which is to depict images captivating enough to portray “a didactic cautionary tale for the edification of poets, namely young Romantics like Wordsworth and Coleridge, whom Barbauld perceived to be privileging passion and imagination in their pursuit of ‘high progress’ and ‘eternal truth’ (Pallard 27). In this sense, the difference in years between one piece and another highlights an evolution not only in the cultural traditions but also in Barbauld’s stance towards them, as the rejection of darkness and uncertainty perceived in “Verses Written in an Alcove” is aesthetically embraced in “To Mr. [S.T.] C[oleridge].” Additionally, despite the evident differences, both poems share Anna Barbauld’s instructional approach in her writings: in the latter, she provides guidance to young Romantic poets, while in the former, she demonstrates how young female poets should approach their creative abilities.

¹⁵ In fact, in her essay “Against inconsistency in our expectations” writes about this matter: “The poets have been a very unreasonable race, and have often complained loudly of the neglect of genius and the ingratitude of the age” (191). Therefore, with “To Mr. [S.T.] C[oleridge]”, she aims to instruct the new generations of poets not to commit the same mistake she outlines in her essay.

Through both pieces, Anna Barbauld emphasizes once again the importance of balance and moderation, implying that each individual has a role in society. In the case of the poets of “Verses Written in an Alcove,” the author insists on the protection found in the domestic sphere. Thus, both the muse and the poet, along with its addressee, Lissy, withdraw to the alcove to write and explore poetic freedom, completely removed from public space. It is important to note the use of “alcove,” as by definition it is “A part of a room separated off from the main part in some way” (*OED*). Therefore, Barbauld associates the woman not only with a confined space but specifically with the alcove, which represents an intimate or secluded space within the home. According to Stuart Curran, “Barbauld’s alcove is explicitly understood to be a female space, one in which the rites of friendship are honored as a shared poetry” (234). Although it is understood as a safe place, they are confined within the domestic and detached from external and public affairs.

As a result, the lyrical voice dismisses other female poets who are influenced by the external world, that is, by events outside the alcove, characterized by sorrow and solemnity:

Not the Muse who wreath'd with laurel

Solemn stalks with tragic gait,

And in clear and lofty vision

Sees the future births of fate;

Not the maid who crown'd with cypress

Sweeps along in sceptr'd pall,

And in sad and solemn accents

Mourns the crested hero's fall; (lines 37-44)

The evident parallelism between one stanza and another aims to describe two types of female poets, or rather, two types of muses: on one hand, Melpomene, the muse of tragedy, and on the other, Calliope, the muse of epic poetry.¹⁶ In this sense, Barbauld discreetly includes all the symbols that define both muses, whose poetic work is characterized by solemnity and seriousness. Thus, the author highlights these common traits through the use of the adjectives *Solemn*, *tragic* and *sad* and through the symbolism of a series of objects; the head of the first muse is adorned with a laurel, i.e., the symbol of the poets' honor, while the cypress that crowns the latter represents mourning and death, along with the cloak that dresses her. In fact, the verbs also contribute to this sense of solemnity, as the movements they make (*Sweeps y stalks*) are accompanied by nuances related to sadness, which are clearly contrasted with the characteristics of the poets who reside in the alcove.

Therefore, this association with the muses and mythology can already be inferred from the poem's subtitle: "Jam Cytherea chorus ducit Venus imminente Luna. HORAT." This epigram by Horace places Venus as the starting point of the lyrical piece (Curran 234), since it is the goddess who leads the choral pieces under the rising moon, specifically the joyful singing of the muses in the alcove. In this way, in contrast to the two more solemn muses, in this alcove, "Care can never cross the threshold, / Care was only made for day" (lines 11-12). The attitude of the lyrical voice resonates with three of the nine Muses from Greek mythology: Euterpe, Erato, and Terpsichore, whose poetry is joyful and cheerful. Consequently, the feelings expressed by the poetic voice and the

¹⁶ A notable characteristic of the author's style is the reference to the Greek muses. In fact, this reference is not unique to Barbauld; Richard Samuel also depicts the writers of the era by associating them with the Greek muses in the Temple of Apollo.

inhabitants are light-hearted, aligning with the sympathy and the literature of sentiments traditionally considered feminine:¹⁷

Soft, as when the evening breezes
Gently stir the poplar grove;
Brighter than the smile of summer,
Sweeter than the breath of love. (lines 29-32)

Barbauld emphasizes the sweetness and softness with which the poets/friends write or sing, introducing each verse with an adjective that emphasizes these emotions: *soft*, *gentle*, *brighter* and *sweeter*. Indeed, the most repeated term in the composition is *sweet*, which evinces Anna Barbauld's influence concerning the literature of sentiments and her intention to depict the kind-hearted manners of women. It is not strange then that, as Ota Yuko suggests, "love, friendship, affection for others, pity, sympathy, and other sentiments acquired through one's sensibility are the main constituents of her poems" (Yuko 98), especially in her poems of youth.

In this sense, it is important to consider the poem's conclusion, which underscores the woman poet's retreat to the alcove, characterized by her selfless and benevolent attitude:

But that other smiling sister,
With the blue and laughing eye,
Singing, in a lighter measure,
Strains of woodland harmony:

All unknown to fame and glory,

¹⁷ The poetization of the domestic sphere is also present in other poems such as the "Washing-day." As its title suggests, it romanticizes the moment of doing laundry and views it as a time of joy and unity for the women: "Come, Muse, and sing the dreaded washing day" (line 8).

Easy, blithe and debonair,
Crown'd with flowers, her careless tresses
Loosely floating on the air.

Then, when next the star of evening
Softly sheds the silent dew,
Let me in this rustic temple,
LISSY! meet the Muse and you. (lines 45-56)

With the adversative conjunction in the first verse—*but*—, Barbauld restates the sentences introduced by “Not the Muse...” (line 37) and “Not the maid...” (line 41) from the previous stanzas to further emphasize the kind of company the poetic voice should have in the alcove. Certainly, Barbauld chooses the gentle woman, who sings selflessly, and whose defining characteristics are underlined in the following triad: “Easy, blithe and debonair” (line 50). These adjectives echo those found in “On a Lady’s Writing,” as the manners associated with freshness, subtlety, and charm depicted by Barbauld are exactly the same. Also, just as the muses of tragedy and epic have their heads adorned with symbols representing their poetry, the muses of the alcove have their heads adorned with flowers and loose hair, which again highlights the light-heartedness and joviality of their manners.

Additionally, it is convenient to take into account the following verse: “All unknown to fame and glory” (line 50). It seems that the lyrical female voice should not seek the fame or glory of the two previously mentioned muses. Applying this concept to the context of the time, it appears that the poets that Barbauld describes share “the preserve of ambitious men competing in a literary marketplace, and therefore they can relax in their true selves” (Curran 234). For this reason, the alcove is identified as a protected place where sensitivities and joviality can be explored without external

pressure, which, as noted in the fourth stanza, is a place of suffering, uncertainty, and confusion for the poetic voice, the muse, and her friend. Thus, it is understandable that, since the “sedentary way of life of women allow them more leisure” (Barbauld 44), the tone—along with its content—is more jovial and the style much freer. It depicts a woman with casual indifference to the outside world who finds entertainment in the domestic space. In this regard, the piece completely differs from “On a Lady’s Writing,” as in the latter the poet instructs women taking into account the public sphere; therefore, her style is much more regular and consistent, in contrast to this poem, whose jovial and cheerful tone disagrees with the seriousness of the former.

In this manner, this freedom also allows her to find in the night a space to explore the imagination, distancing herself from the rationalism of the Enlightenment and approaching the literature of sentiment. In this sense, according to Jessica Pallard, “For Barbauld, the rationalism of the Enlightenment and the Romantic imagination combine to create the complementary way of seeing” (116). However, it is not exactly like this, since the culture of sensibility also plays a significant role in shaping Barbauld’s vision of poetry. Consequently, the poem concludes with a passionate vocative, where the poetic voice invites her friend to join her in the alcove once night has fallen:¹⁸ “Let me in this rustic temple, / LISSY! meet the Muse and you” (lines 55-56). In this sense, Anna Barbauld poetizes the domestic space where feelings can be freely expressed and, despite the uncertainty of the outside world, especially in the darkness—as expressed in the opening stanzas—within the alcove, the night offers the muse enough freedom to be themselves.

¹⁸ William McCarthy identifies this moment with a lesbian encounter, as the scholar states that: “the poem incarnates a moment in which the poet, her friend, and her muse seem to merge a moment of love” (83).

In this manner, according to William McCarthy, “her [Barbauld’s] contribution to Sensibility culture was to flow from her own introspective and emotional needs to fashion an identity for herself as a woman and to make a place for her womanhood within the religion to which she had been born” (62). Therefore, “Verses Written in an Alcove” contributes to that conception, as the muses and the poetic voice engage in a process of introspection “without appearing improperly self-centred” (McCarthy 61) by retreating into the domestic space, free from the external pressure and the emerging cultural traditions of the time.

2.3. “Eighteen Hundred Eleven”

Anna Barbauld publishes “Eighteen Hundred Eleven” in 1812. Here she criticizes the intervention of the British government in the Napoleonic wars, which started in 1793 and was taking a major cost not only to the British government but also to its citizens. Barbauld uses this attrition to highlight the crisis and consequently the decline of her country along with the decadent future that awaits it. According to McCarthy, this piece “was her statement of where she stood and who she was; it summed up a lifetime of reflection and declared her loyalties, ethical and cultural” (467). Having explained this context, the objective of this analysis is to explore the changes in style between the previous pieces and “Eighteen Hundred Eleven,” taking into account the difference between the years of composition and the evolution of cultural traditions. Indeed, as Isobel Grundy asserts, “consistency of style is not something that Barbauld aims at for the totality of her oeuvre; she commands for differing occasions a more various set of voices even than do most professional writers” (25). Therefore, considering that in 1812 Romanticism was firmly consolidated in Britain and that Barbauld was acquainted with the tendencies—both scientific, political and cultural—that affected society, it is

comprehensible that she took advantage of the romantic style in order to explore a freer manner to create poetry and criticize the government and its recent political action.

Additionally, this attempt to freely write about her thoughts without the hermetic structure of her previous pieces had repercussions on her public figure. After all, although she had been building a reputation of her own for forty years since the publication of her first compositions, writing “Eighteen Hundred Eleven,” meant interfering in politics, that is, in a male-dominated public sphere. Consequently, as Ruth Watts explains, “Barbauld’s poem ‘1811’ particularly led to bitter remarks and malicious ridicule of her as a ‘lady-author’” (Watts 11). Although the poet demonstrated throughout her career that she was perfectly capable of writing and discussing this kind of matters, it did not prevent her from being stigmatized because of a reason of gender. In other words, “In writing *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* Barbauld has transgressed into the sphere of male politics, a sphere which was by this date very closely guarded by a repressive and reactionary British establishment” (Bradshaw 133). As discussed, although the usage of an enlightened style based on reason and on a conservative posture did initially prevent her from harsh criticism, “Eighteen Hundred Eleven” was the proof that demonstrated that, once a woman started intervening in a masculine sphere—in this case by criticizing the government and British politics—, she would be strongly criticized to such an extent that she stopped publishing poems after the publication of the aforementioned piece.

It is also paradoxical to consider that Anna Barbauld was criticized for being a “lady author” considering her own conservatism concerning the role of women in society. In this regard, Adelaide Morris states that “Barbauld’s apparent conservatism seems very much at odds with her biography and her writing. From the outset, her alterity is demonstrated by her precocious abilities, her education, her political views and her religious dissent” (48). Therefore, despite being a woman, Barbauld allowed herself to

write political pieces perhaps because of her Disserting educational background along with the support of her father, brother and husband, which resonates Gilbert's and Gubar's word when stating that women "have been subjugated to (and subjects of) male authority" (11). Nevertheless, Anna Barbauld is aware that she is an exception; otherwise, she would not have written pieces such as *A Legacy for Young Ladies*—which was edited in 1811 according to William McCarthy¹⁹—as it contradicts with her own political acts. Here Barbauld states that

A woman is not expected to understand the mysteries of politics, because she is not called to govern; she is not required to know anatomy, because she is not to perform surgical operations; she need not embarrass herself with theological disputes, because she will neither be called upon to make nor to explain creeds. (43)

According to these words, the author considers that the mysteries of politics should be foreign to a woman; however, she had already been given her opinion about public issues in her essays and poems since the publication of *Miscellaneous Pieces, in Prose*. Moreover, in "Eighteen Hundred and Eleven" not only does she discuss politics but also criticizes historical and political events such as the Napoleonic Wars, the inception of the free-market system and the advancements in science.

This kind of ambiguities evinces Anna Barbauld's conflict between her intellectual aptitudes and the role in society that women were meant to pursue. In this sense, it is logical that she found in schooling a comfort space to instruct children and share her varied knowledge. In this sense, as Mellor claims, "women, both as writers and as educators, philanthropists, and social reformers, participated fully in the discursive public sphere and in the formation of public opinion" (3). Although this is a space

¹⁹ This book was published posthumously by Lucy Aikin—Anna Barbauld's niece—in 1826.

separated from the domestic sphere, it appears that women were allowed to interfere in this public area as long as they did not question the authoritarian power of the government.²⁰ This statement is demonstrated by the criticism that Anna Barbauld received in the *Quarterly Review* regarding the publication of “Eighteen Hundred Eleven:”

We had hoped, indeed, that the empire might have been saved without the intervention of a lady-author... Not such, however, is her opinion; an irresistible impulse of public duty [...] have induced her to dash down her shagreen spectacles and her knitting needles, and to sally forth... in the magnanimous resolution of saving a sinking state, by the instrumentality of a ... pamphlet in verse. (McCarthy 477)

Here not only is her poem criticized but her own persona and her work are ridiculed as well within the context of a very delicate political moment for the English government. This type of criticism highlights the threat posed by women’s involvement in the public sphere, which evinces Penelope Bradshaw’s words when asserting that “for women to write poetry which addresses public issues is transgressive and becomes in itself a political gesture” (Bradshaw 8). However, it should also be taken into account that this criticism must have affected the poet enormously, as this was the last poem that she published.

In this regard, as seen in *The Quarterly Review*, it is possible to associate the author’s shyness concerning the continuity of her poetic career with Sandra Gilbert’s and Susan Gubar’s anxiety of authorship, because “Her battle, however, is not against (male) precursor’s reading of the world but against *his* reading of her” (49). In fact, although Barbauld had also built a literary reputation based on constructive criticism of poets from

²⁰ After all, the French Revolution had occurred relatively recently, and those in power were intent on preventing any potential insurrections by the people.

her generation, this case is entirely different: critics were actually mocking women poets who dared to enter the public sphere. Thus, this criticism does not only affect Barbauld, as it implies that “language itself was almost literally alien to the female tongue. In the mouths of women, vocabulary loses meaning, sentences dissolve, literary messages are distorted or destroyed” (Gilbert and Gubar 31). Although the literature written by women caused certain discomfort, Barbauld had spent her entire life not only writing her own oeuvre but also instructing and criticizing the works of her contemporaries without receiving such criticism herself.²¹ Nonetheless, it is convenient to bear in mind that “Eighteen Hundred Eleven” also means a change in her lyrical style, primarily in form, as it presents content that is less rational and focuses more on *pathos* than on *logos*.

Nonetheless, she did not drastically change her viewpoint concerning her enlightenment perspective, since—as seen in “To Mr. [S.T.] C[oleridge]” — she rejects the abandonment of the individual to a self-indulgent imagination and seeks balance between both cultural traditions. Then, as pursued in the aforementioned poem, the Romantic style allowed her to create a mysterious and attractive atmosphere merged with a passionate tone in order to defend her opinions regarding the horrors of war. At the same time her enlightened posture is present throughout each line of “Eighteen Hundred Eleven” through its versification. Thus, as William McCarthy claims, “one aspect of her poem’s conservatism proclaims itself immediately: its heroic couplet” (469). As discussed, the beginning of the poem portrays both traits:

STILL the loud death drum, thundering from afar,

O'er the vext nations pours the storm of war:

To the stern call still Britain bends her ear,

²¹ Although the criticism of “Eighteen Hundred Eleven” was the severest judgment that Anna Barbauld received in her life, she also had to apologize for the political component of one of her youth poems “The Mouse’s Petition” (McCarthy 77).

Feeds the fierce strife, the alternate hope and fear;
Bravely, though vainly, dares to strive with Fate,
And seeks by turns to prop each sinking state.

Despite being versified according to the heroic couplet, the poem is not perceived as an enlightened exercise in which each piece is reasonably measured, as seen in “On a Lady’s Writing.” Indeed, the traits from both cultural traditions are combined in order create a powerful piece. In this sense, although Barbauld likely selected each sound and word meticulously, a change in style can be easily perceived through comparison with the previously studied pieces.

Firstly, Anna Barbauld moves towards “fluent vernacular” language (Anderson 722), meaning that her style is very close to the spoken language. This point of view resonates with Wordsworth’s preface of Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads*, as the poet claims,

I answer that the language of such Poetry as is here recommended is, as far as is possible, a selection of the language really spoken by men; that this selection, wherever it is made with true taste and feeling, will of itself form a distinction far greater than would at first be imagined, and will entirely separate the composition from the vulgarity and meanness of ordinary life; and, if metre be superadded thereto, I believe that a dissimilitude will be produced altogether sufficient for the gratification of a rational mind. (Wordsworth 13)

Barbauld makes this selection of words drawn from spoken language, as can be seen through the personification in the following verse: “Britain bends her ear” (line 3). Despite its refined and measured style, the language remains accessible, which, according to Wordsworth, is crucial for making a lyrical piece appealing and enjoyable to readers. The poem’s effectiveness and impact hinge largely on the poet’s mastery and tasteful use of language.

Another element that highlights this change is the use of verbs. From the first stanza, these verbs determine the rhythm of the composition. It is noticeable then that the subject of the first stanza—Britain—is followed by a series of verbs (*Bends, feeds, dares* and *seeks*) which evinces the movement of the piece. Thus, unlike previous poems, “Eighteen Hundred Eleven” is characterized by a higher frequency of verbs compared to adjectives. In fact, in earlier poems, the content was predominantly descriptive; indeed, the movement in “Verses Written in an Alcove” was nearly stagnant. In this sense, it is perceivable — according to John M. Anderson — the manner in which one of the main characteristics of the greater Romantic lyric is related to the movement from meditation to action (723). Not only do the verbs themselves contribute to this, but their use in the present tense also adds dynamism to the piece. After all, Barbauld’s aim with this poem is to write about Britain’s intervention in the war and to condemn it. Thus, the message is much more effectively conveyed through these action verbs.

It is convenient to pay attention to the usage of the nominal content concerning the environment, as—at first glance—it differentiates Anna Barbauld’s enlightened style from the romantic. In this poem, the lyrical voice is no longer hidden in an alcove observing the obscurity and the mystery of the outside. Indeed, she embraces the atmosphere that she rejects in “Verses Written in an Alcove:” “Sick disgust and anxious fear; / Pining grief and wasting anguish” (lines 14-15). This description of the atmosphere resonates with the following verses found in “Eighteen Hundred Eleven:” “Night, Gothic night, again may shade the plains / Where Power is seated, and where Science reigns; / England, the sea of arts, be only known / By the gray ruin and the mouldering shone” (lines 121-125). Romanticism allows Barbauld to express her negativity concerning the future of her country; therefore, the night and the repetition of this term suggests “that darkness might triumph over the light of Enlightenment ideas.” (Trethewey 297).

However, the ambiguity that characterizes Barbauld's style suggests through the use of the conditional *may* that perhaps all is not lost. Despite the catastrophic tone of the composition, she leaves a space for hope.

Concerning this hope, Anna Barbauld embraces at the same time the nostalgia felt regarding her enlightened childhood: "Yet, O my Country, name beloved, revered, / By every tie that binds the soul endeared, / Whose image to my infant senses came / Mixt with Religion's light and Freedom's holy flame!" (lines 67-70). The content of these verses clearly shows the author's dualism regarding the passage of time and the advent of new traditions coinciding with political and tragic events like the Napoleonic Wars. Aesthetically, in the aforementioned verses, there are a host of resources that Barbauld employs to appeal to emotions and to emphasize feelings, which, unlike the previous pieces analyzed, are depicted melancholically. Throughout the apostrophe "O my Country," Barbauld demonstrates a certain patriotism towards her country, an element rooted in the popular idiosyncrasy of the nineteenth century with the progressive foundation of nations. However, this vocative can also be perceived tragically, as it underlines the decline of the empire and the nostalgia for times past. In this regard, as Mellor claims, Barbauld goes beyond the Romantic tradition when she "offers no salvation or escape, no turn to a 'country-party' georgic idyll of enlightened leisure or a romantic concept of regeneration through Nature" (272). In this manner, the country is doomed to failure, a sentiment expressed not only through the atmosphere that envelops the poem but also through the stylistic resources that Barbauld employs.

In fact, it is convenient to bear in mind that one of the most repeated words of the piece is *vain* — combined in different grammatical forms. Already in the first stanza, it is mentioned that although Britain fights valiantly, its effort is in vain, which continues in the next stanza. As Leech asserts, "by underlining rather than elaborating the message, it

presents a simple emotion with force” (79). Therefore, by emphasizing this concept, the subsequent *pathos* is further accentuated, appealing to readers’ emotions. In this regard, through the figure of the mother, Anna Barbauld highlights the emotional element of the piece:

Fruitful in vain, the matron counts with pride
The blooming youths that grace her honoured side;
No son returns to press her widow'd hand,
Her fallen blossoms strew a foreign strand.
Fruitful in vain, she boasts her virgin race,
Whom cultured arts adorn and gentlest grace;
Defrauded of its homage, Beauty mourns,
And the rose withers on its virgin thorns. (lines 23-30)

As Lauren Schachter asserts, “Barbauld pivots from one scene to another (...) to layer a sense of countless possibilities for the British civilian and the broader human experience” (1183). In these lines, Anna Barbauld depicts a common family situation characterized by its tragedy: a widowed mother witnesses the loss of her children due to the war while her daughters appear not to have the possibility of any descendance. Additionally, Barbauld allegorically approaches this situation from a natural perspective: the soldiers are the flowers which fall, while women’s virginity progressively fades as a rose withers. It is evident that she does not write from an enlightened stance but embraces nature in order to depict a tragic situation and emphasize its sensitivity.

Additionally, despite the insistence on women’s virginity, this stanza is focused on women’s pain concerning the war, as not only do the soldiers suffer its horrors, but also the women who remain in the household. This composition demonstrates Jessica Pallard’s words when stating that “Female reform writers like Barbauld attempted to

incorporate the expectations of female composition — the recording of the ‘small, daily experiences’ — and social/political issues into a single entity that resonated with the reading public” (74-75). Therefore, even from a domestic and female point of view, Anna Barbauld criticizes the war and the English system also featuring female characters as protagonists, which resonates with the following statement: “The links and parallels between political acts of war and aggression, and the mistreatment of women by a masculine establishment are suggested at the level of imagery in several of Barbauld’s key political poems” (Bradshaw 130).

Then, in terms of form, Anna Barbauld repeats the sentence “Fruitful in vain” with a linguistic parallelism between the line 23 and 27 in order to emphasize women’s fertility along with the waste that this implies because of the war. In this sense, she insists on the virginity of women due to the absence of men; hence, “Instead of glorifying these actions she emphasized the waste. She did not accept that this sacrifice was necessary of political or economic grounds” (Trethewey 293). Additionally, Barbauld insists on the feelings of grief and loss also in the following lines: “Oft o’er the daily page some soft-one bends / To learn the fate of husband, brothers, friends” (lines 33-34). This description is very quotidian and down to earth as well: the movement of a woman bending towards the newspaper to see if her relatives are still alive. Although “Eighteen Hundred Eleven” is considered to be Barbauld’s most political piece, she does not leave behind the injustice situation in which women, albeit in the household, are found due to the war.

Finally, according to Ota Yuko, “Her [Anna Barbauld’s] poems allow the free expressions of sensibilities within the formalistic poetic conventions, mediated by the affection and imagination for other and God, eventually, influencing the views on nature held by various Romantic poets” (99). In this sense, the ending of the poem also illustrates these views of nature which are so present in the romantic style, as Anna Barbauld

portrays a taste for the sublime in the following verses: “midst mountains wrapt in storm, / On Andes' heights he shrouds his awful form; / On Chimborazo's summits treads sublime, (...) La Plata hears amidst her torrents' roar” (lines 323-329). As Edmund Burke suggests, the objects that are analogous to terror are a source of the sublime, which produces the strongest emotion which is the mind capable of feeling (45) and Barbauld's verses resonate with Burke's conception. Anna Barbauld also finds beauty in the superiority of nature since poetically it gives a strong sense of feeling and evinces the insignificance of the individual before the magnificence of nature, as she claims in the these verses: “on yielding Nature urge their new demands, / and ask no gifts but tribute at her hands” (lines 303-304).

All these elements—the exotism of the foreign, nature, its heights and superiority in comparison to the individual—are combined at the end of the piece in order to invoke the figure of the Genius, who “To other climes (...) soars” (line 321) to claim “Thy world, Columbus, shall be free”²² (line 334). This final reference also echoes Samuel Coleridge's conception of the Genius who is defined by “a high degree of talent, combined with taste and judgement, and employed in works of imagination” (Coleridge 25). In this manner, this entire atmosphere demonstrates how Romanticism becomes a fundamental aspect in this piece: therefore, the measured use of words, its language close to the people, their everyday lives, the harshness of nature, and the appeal to emotions constitute crucial elements that demonstrate Anna Barbauld's attachment to Romanticism. Once again, the traits of both the Enlightened and Romantic traditions are combined, since the piece concludes by calling for freedom, which, as explained in the first section, concerns freedom of thought and reasoning.

²² The ending of this composition resonates with “Corsica,” as it also finishes claiming for the freedom of the mind.

Conclusions and Further Research

As demonstrated in this MA thesis, Anna Barbauld's poetry experiences a noticeable change from her earliest writings dated in 1773 to "Eighteen Hundred Eleven." However, she neither fully embraces the Enlightenment tradition nor indulges in the self-absorption of Romanticism; in fact, she is critical of it. As shown in the first section of this dissertation, this critical approach towards the different traditions entering England is due to her Dissenting background and her Stoic attitude. In this sense, Barbauld was aware of the various cultural, political, and scientific tendencies affecting England in her lifetime. This knowledge is fundamental to understand how the British author selectively adopts the traits that best suit her from each tradition for different purposes, which can be didactic, critical, or aesthetic. Barbauld shares ideas with her contemporaries, and her conception of poetry resembles that of Samuel Coleridge, William Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley, but she does not fully embrace it, just as she does not strictly follow the Enlightened rationalism either.

The variation of cultural tendencies demonstrates the contradictory style of Anna Barbauld, but this is also perceived concerning her stance on the role of women in society. In this manner, she insists in several of her works on the necessity for women to remain on the sidelines of public life and to educate the next generations. Also, this MA thesis aims to demonstrate the intrinsic connection between gender and style because, as proven, her political actions contradict the arguments that she defends in her writings. Thus, Anna Barbauld interferes in public life, considered to be a masculine arena, and is not attacked until she deviates — although not entirely — from her more rationalist side and criticizes the English government, an establishment that evidently rejected the inclusion of women in public affairs.

Hence, the moderate and balanced style of “On a Lady’s Writing,” the manifestos about women’s behavior, the emphasis on the domestic, and the support for the literature of sentiments are elements that help her gain a reputation in the literary field. However, her growing interest in the Romantic style and the freedom in terms of creativity and imagination that it offers evince a change in the author that establishes her as a poet. Because of this versatility, it is understandable that—throughout the years—her writing style underwent different variations and even contradictions since, as proven in “Verses Written in an Alcove,” the lyrical voice detaches herself and hides from the dark and romantic atmosphere, while in later pieces she adapts this same style to her own oeuvre. In terms of form, her pieces are characterized by its conservative nature, as even in her most Romantic poem — “Eighteen Hundred Eleven” — the versification is strictly measured. However, Anna Barbauld employs a register concerning the language that is close to the daily and the domestic, which is proven to be one of the aspects that distances her from the Enlightenment tradition and places her within the culture of sensibility.

Finally, the substantial length of the poem “Eighteen Hundred Eleven” would enable a close-reading analysis of all the trends that Barbauld incorporates into her oeuvre, without the spatial constraints of this MA thesis. In this sense, Anna Barbauld’s extensive production allows for a deeper exploration of the evolution and the ambiguities that concern her writing style, which would inevitably enrich the study of her figure. Her having cultivated both the lyric and the essayistic genres enables the approach of her work from various perspectives with the aim of ultimately establishing her as a primary author of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

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