

Anna Laetitia Barbauld: Poet of Pregnancy among the Romantic Radicals

*Bernadette Waterman Ward**

ABSTRACT: Already an important poet as the Romantic movement began, Anna Letitia Barbauld inspired poets like Coleridge. She supported extending suffrage, religious toleration, elimination of slavery, and revolutions in France and America. She broke ground for the Romantics as to subject matter. Overshadowed by major Romantic theorists from the late nineteenth century until critics rediscovered her in the late twentieth century, she aroused ambivalence in feminists. They misread her satire on critics of women's rights. Contemporary students are attracted by her poetry asserting the dignity of the expectant mother and the child in the womb. Barbauld's careful rhetorical work elevates the dignity of motherhood—a form of radicalism in her day. Her work roused my students because she defends pregnancy, which is attacked in the media that they encounter.

* *Bernadette Waterman Ward, Ph.D.*, earned her Ph.D. from Stanford University. Her research interests include Gerard Manley Hopkins and John Henry Newman. She was tenured at the State University of New York before admiration for the Core Curriculum brought her to the University of Dallas in 2000. She has written *World as Word: Philosophical Theology in Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Catholic University of America, 2002) and dozens of articles on both nineteenth-century British writers and twentieth-century Americans. She is on the editorial boards of *The Hopkins Quarterly* and the *Newman Studies Journal*. She is a member of the board of directors for both the Newman Association of America and University Faculty for Life.

IN THE SPRING of 2021 I taught the Romantic and Victorian Literature Survey at the University of Dallas. Early in the term I like to have students write a short essay analyzing a poem in relation to the way that its formal aspects serve the argument of the work. I ask students to choose any of the short lyrics we have read thus far in the term. By that time we had seen many poems by William Blake and Robert Burns, a few by poets popular in the time such as Robert Southey, Joanna Baillie, and Charlotte Smith, and some lyrics by the major Romantic poets William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Of my thirty-five students in two sections, six (all women) chose to write on a poem about pregnancy by Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1743–1825): “To a Little Invisible Being Who Is Expected Soon to Become Visible.” It was by far the most popular poem. On the strength of that poem alone Barbauld trailed only Blake as the most popular poet in the course. What struck a nerve among so many students?

They were studying Romanticism in its historical roots and its cultural legacy. Barbauld was already a well-known intellectual by the time the Romantics began to write. We had studied her as background to the writers she fostered with friendship and advice. The ambitions, insights, assumptions, and even failures of Romantic thinkers were a both a response to and an impetus for vast social change. Barbauld was important to the Romantics’ political legacy of revolutionary sympathies and of championing the rights of the oppressed. Romantics had momentous, lasting effects not only on the literature of England but also on the social and cultural world dominated by the British Empire. Among those effects was the movement toward elevating the status of overlooked groups of people, including the poor and women.

In the youth of the founders of Romanticism (William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge) Anna Laetitia Barbauld was among the principal literary voices of social and political transformation. Her most celebrated poems (from the 1770s through 1811) dealt with current politics. In domestic politics, she pressed for religious toleration in “An Address to the Deity,” which promoted enlightened dissent from the Anglican Establishment, and she furthered that cause by aggressive pamphleteering against the Test and Corporations Act. That Act was repealed piecemeal over the course of the nineteenth century; some aspects of it lingered into the twentieth century. The act was meant to prevent those dissenting from

the government's official Anglican Church from gaining entry into higher education, respected professions, and Parliament; it constrained other civil rights as well.¹ Barbauld also wrote about the poor and about common everyday work (as in "Washing-Day") with the sensitivity and respect that characterized her Romantic successors. Moreover, her poetry was celebrated for its opposition to animal cruelty. Her anthropomorphic mouse, calling for mercy from its cage in Joseph Priestley's laboratory, represented helpless prisoners everywhere. It may have been a source for similar tropes in the more famous "To a Mouse" by Robert Burns thirteen years later, influencing his poem that rues the ruin of "the best-laid plans of mice and men."

In international politics, Barbauld's "To a Great Nation" celebrated the French Revolution at a time when, like many of her Unitarian coreligionists, Barbauld expected that "France was exchanging an authoritarian government for representative institutions and a constitutional monarchy like their own."² Barbauld's poems also condemned exploitative colonization, most famously when France was subjugating Corsica in 1769. In "Sins of the Government, Sins of the Nation," she excoriated the 1792 war of the European monarchs against France, upon the principle that violence destroys the souls of the aggressors. She favored American independence and consorted with the radical literary circle that included Thomas Paine, William Godwin, Henry Fuseli, William Blake, William Wordsworth, and Mary Wollstonecraft.³ She had, in short, impeccable credentials as a progressive leader in the literary world at the turn of the nineteenth century. But this fame was not what moved my students.

My students were excited by literature in opposition to slavery, but our anthology did not include Barbauld's work in this area. This omission elided the fact that her most ringing rhetorical success during her lifetime was her 1787 "Epistle to William Wilberforce," the father of the abolitionist movement, in response to a 163-to-88 Parliamentary "Rejection of the Bill

¹Susan J. Levasseur, "'All monstrous, all prodigious things': Anna Barbauld's 'The Rights of Woman' and Mary Wollstonecraft's Revolution in Female Manners," *Nineteenth-Century Feminisms* 5 (2001): 10-36 at p. 15.

²Levasseur, p. 22.

³Levasseur, p. 15.

for Abolishing the Slave Trade.”⁴ There she followed the Ciceronian strategy of antiphrasis—saying the opposite of what she means, with heavy irony. At the end, she turns to a future in which the heroism of the abolitionists will be honored and the mercantile greed of the colonizing parliament abhorred—an acknowledgment of present defeat, but not a surrender of principle.

I said “Ciceronian” quite deliberately, for Barbauld “convinced her father to teach her Latin, French, Italian, and some Greek, and read widely in classic and Augustan writers.” Though personally shy in mixed company, she was widely admired, especially among other literary women, for her “display of a rigorous, ‘masculine’ education.”⁵ The novelist Maria Edgeworth admiringly distinguished Barbauld’s “style from that of any other female writer by the ease, frequency, and felicity, of its classical allusions—allusions sufficiently intelligible to the unlearned, and which serve as freemason signs to the learned.”⁶

Notably, in 1797, the young Coleridge, on the verge of his own rise to poetic fame (and long before his return to Trinitarian theology) walked forty miles to meet Barbauld. She responded with a little ode, “To Mr. S.T. Coleridge,” wherein she advised him to stick to activism like hers:

Not in the maze of metaphysic lore
Build thou thy place of resting; lightly tread
The dangerous ground, on noble aims intent;
And be the Circe of the studious cell
Enjoyed, but still subservient. Active scenes
Shall soon with healthful spirit brace thy mind,
And fair exertion, for bright fame sustained,
For friends, for country, chase each spleen-fed fog....⁷

⁴ McCarthy and Kraft, *Anna Laetitia Barbauld: Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2002), p. 122.

⁵ Levasseur, p. 14.

⁶ Letter, Sept. 23, 1804, quoted in Levasseur, n. 10.

⁷ Barbauld, in McCarthy and Kraft, p. 143.

Despite her importance in her own time, Barbauld's reputation washed away under the tide of the Romantic movement in literature. The cultural influence of Coleridge was far deeper, ultimately, than hers, for he, as Newman put it, "after all instilled a higher philosophy into inquiring minds than they had hitherto been accustomed to accept."⁸ Barbauld, invoking Deistic platitudes like, "GOD is seen in all and all in GOD" remained in the chillier rationalist camp, careful to prove that her capacity for rational, dispassionate thought equaled that of the males. Her Deism evidenced what her younger contemporary John Henry Newman called "the dry and superficial character of the religious teaching and the literature of the last generation, or century." Born into the Romantic generation in 1801, he wrote of "the need which was felt both by the hearts and the intellects of the nation for a deeper philosophy"⁹ and praised Samuel Taylor Coleridge for his willingness to confront spiritual profundity. John Keats, too, spoke with yearning of how Coleridge approached the "penetralium of mystery."¹⁰

But Barbauld, older by a generation, lived in a literary culture in which women had to defend the idea that they were able to think rationally. She wrote in the shadow of Alexander Pope (1688-1744), who had mocked women for irrational appetites: "Most Women have no Characters at all... [E]v'ry Woman is at heart a Rake."¹¹ Her poetry's "archaic construction links Barbauld with a long line of poets, such as Spenser, Dryden, Pope and Cowper, in keeping with her wide knowledge of the canon of English, and especially Augustan, poetry."¹² Her language asserted educational qualifications that bolstered the prestige of her subject matter. Some of Barbauld's loss of importance stems from the fact that she, perhaps rather defensively, used the stiffly formal poetic language that was associated with

⁸ John Henry Newman, *Apologia pro Vita Sua, Being a History of His Religious Opinions* (London UK: Longman Green, 1865), p. 97. Accessed at <https://www.newmanreader.org/works/apologia65/chapter3.html>.

⁹ *Apologia pro Vita Sua*, p. 97.

¹⁰ John Keats, letter to George and Tom Keats, 21-27 December 1817, *The Letters of John Keats: Volume 1, 1814-1818*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1958), p.194.

¹¹ "Epistle to a Lady," l.2, 216 (<https://www.ling.upenn.edu/courses/hum100/lady.html>).

¹² Levasseur, p. 25.

a kind of formal education reserved for males of the upper classes. These traditions of poetic language were precisely what William Wordsworth attacked in the manifesto that effectively began the English Romantic movement, the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798—his vision of poetry as “the very language of men.” He successfully asserted that poets should unfold “the essential passions of the heart” in “a state of greater simplicity.” Wordsworth condemned “[p]oets, who think that they are conferring honour upon themselves and their art in proportion as they separate themselves from the sympathies of men, and indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression in order to furnish food for fickle tastes and fickle appetites of their own creation.”¹³ His lyrical charm and simplicity won the day—nay, the next two centuries and more.

In a poetic trajectory far differing from Wordsworth’s fascination with how “the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature,”¹⁴ Barbauld’s subject matter tended to be immediate and political. Over the next generations, these topics faded into matters of historical rather than live interest. Even as the political radicalism of the Romantic poets began to rouse critical acclaim in the 1970s and 1980s, however, Barbauld was disdained. Amidst all her progressive credentials, she seemed to lack what was essential to the twentieth-century flowering of interest in women’s literature. She was considered antifeminist, based on two letters and a poem called “The Rights of Woman.” The letters had been edited deceptively and set in false context to make it seem as though she disdained the idea of women’s education and also the idea of a literary journal by and for women.¹⁵ This disservice to scholarship had been done by Barbauld’s niece, Lucy Aikin, who hoped to save Barbauld from the taint of association with the marital and sexual chaos of the Godwin circle, which included the Shelleys and Mary

¹³ William Wordsworth, Preface, *Lyrical Ballads, with Other Poems*, vol. 1, 2nd ed. n.p., 1800, accessed through Project Gutenberg, (<http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/8905/pg8905.html>). This electronic text has no pagination.

¹⁴ Wordsworth, *op. cit.*; no pagination is available in this edition.

¹⁵ William McCarthy, “Why Anna Laetitia Barbauld Refused to Head a Women’s College: New Facts, New Story,” *Nineteenth Century Contexts* 23 (2001): 349–79 at p. 351.

Wollstonecraft. Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, the great 1792 feminist manifesto that called for equality of opportunity. Although somewhat at odds with Wollstonecraft's personal history, her argument, based on the equality of moral responsibility inherent in God's relationship to every human soul, proposed a virtue-based "dignitarian" feminism, as Erika Bachiochi has termed it.¹⁶ In her manifesto, despite several favorable comments on Barbauld,¹⁷ Wollstonecraft critiques a poem "To a Lady, with some Painted Flowers" in which Barbauld admiringly compared a female friend to flowers "born for pleasure and delight alone."¹⁸ Misled by Aikin into believing that the poem was an attack on Wollstonecraft in response to the critique of that poem, feminist scholars rained opprobrium upon Barbauld.¹⁹ An insensitivity to classical rhetorical forms lent the scholars ammunition as they misread Barbauld's ironic call to arms in "The Rights of Woman," which seemed only to reinforce the notion that sexual attraction and chastity were women's only powers:

Go, gird thyself with grace; collect thy store
Of bright artillery glancing from afar;
Soft melting tones thy thundering cannon's roar,
Blushes and fears thy magazine of war....

Awe the licentious, and restrain the rude;
Soften the sullen, clear the cloudy brow:
Be, more than princes' gifts thy favours sued;--
She hazards all, who will the least allow.

¹⁶ Erika Bachiochi, "The Rights of Women: Toward a Dignitarian Feminism," presented at *Prolife Feminism, the Law, and Women's Health*, 31st annual conference of the University Faculty for Life, June 5, 2021, via electronic distribution over Zoom.

¹⁷ Penny Bradshaw, "The Limits of Barbauld's Feminism: Rereading "The Rights of Woman," in *Anna Letitia Barbauld: New Perspectives*, ed. William McCarthy and Olivia Murphy (Lewisburg PA: Bucknell Univ. Press, 2014), pp. 23-37, n. 9.

¹⁸ Barbauld, ed. McCarthy and Kraft, 95. Line 14

¹⁹ An extensive list of her hostile critics may be found in Bradshaw, n. 2.

They did not recognize the Ciceronian antiphrasis or the classical rhetorical figure of *cacozelia*, the ironic use of grand language. Literacy in her day was still an upper-class phenomenon. The Methodist Sunday School movement was new. Her expected audience was schooled in detecting tropes, schemes, and figures of rhetoric. Thus the poet could reasonably presume that a literate reader would recognize that the comparisons that match cannon with “soft melting tones” and artillery with “blushes and fears” make perfectly clear the hopelessness of traditional accounts of the power of women over men.

Without consciousness of the figures of rhetoric that Barbauld is invoking, twentieth-century feminists reacted with aversion to the last stanza as it presents an ideal of egalitarian heterosexual matrimony. They were outraged by the apparent proposition that domestic coziness could correct the injustices of the oppression of women:

Then, then, abandon each ambitious thought,
 Conquest or rule thy heart shall feebly move,
 In nature’s school, by her soft maxims taught,
 That separate rights are lost in mutual love.²⁰

Barbauld’s place in the canon became that of the antifeminist woman whose benighted prejudices needed to be exposed and eliminated, despite all her work for radical causes.

William McCarthy, the twenty-first-century editor of Barbauld’s work, did some detective work to discover that Barbauld’s refusal to open an academy for women was addressed not to the feminist campaigner Lady Montagu but to Barbauld’s own fiancé Theophilus Rouchemont Barbauld, who wanted to capitalize on the fame of the poet, then known as Miss Aikins, instead of headmastering a school himself. Unable to get placement as a Church of England minister because of his dissent from Parliament’s Articles of Religion, he copied out the letter to a patron he had hoped to entice, probably to show that the failure to pursue the project was not his fault but hers.²¹ McCarthy found that in this archived, unedited copy of the

²⁰ Barbauld, in McCarthy and Kraft, eds., p. 131.

²¹ McCarthy, n.8

letter, the poet makes clear that she wants some “leisure” once she is married—presumably for writing—rather than the double workday of parenting and business. McCarthy’s revelatory article on Barbauld’s true intent praises her resistance to “compulsion” that would propel her unwilling into the workplace. It rebukes, as did the late Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, “Another feminist expectation...that a feminist woman always seeks opportunities to act in the public sphere” such that “the public carried all the value.”²² This expectation about feminism is violated when “The Rights of Woman” moves decisively into the domestic sphere as the place in which some measure of victory against oppression might be achieved.

The Ciceronian irony and the deeply curtailed hope at the end of “The Rights of Woman” indicate discouragement about progress in changing woman’s situation. The ending replicates not only the rhetorical strategy of her famous poem about the anti-slavery efforts of Wilberforce but also that of several other poems of a political nature where she admits the defeat of her ideals but comforts the reader with gentle, future-oriented expectation at the end.²³ In deploying this strategy, Barbauld is not critiquing but supporting Wollstonecraft’s virtue-based feminism and mocking the same ideology that Wollstonecraft criticizes: the idea that a woman’s power in the world depends entirely on male sexual desire. Nevertheless, she indeed hopes that some vaguely envisioned improvement in virtue will produce egalitarian relations between men and women, for it is in the moral realm that Barbauld constantly argues that true change is accomplished.

The poems anthologized for my students were “The Rights of Woman,” “Washing-Day,” and “To a Little Invisible Being Who is Expected Soon to Become Visible.” In the hands of editors insensitive to Barbauld’s classical rhetorical training, this grouping of poems was arranged so as to motivate students to dismiss Barbauld as a woman brainwashed into wanting women sexually subjugated: tied to the drudgery of household chores and the burdens of pregnancy. Fortunately, English majors at the University of Dallas are themselves trained in the classical

²² McCarthy, p. 354. See Fox-Genovese’s classic, *Feminism Is Not the Story of My Life* (Anchor, 1996).

²³ For instance, “On the King’s Illness,” “To Dr. Priestley,” and “To a Great Nation.”

forms of rhetoric with a rigor unusual in college English departments in our day. By the middle of junior year, they are expected to be able to recognize the meaning and use of matters that have become arcane: various tropes of irony, cacozelia, parallelism, antithesis, litotes, allusion, chiasmus, and a host of other technical tools, tricks, and strategies that in previous centuries formed the basis of a classical education in good writing.

Armed with this knowledge, my students encountered the poem:

To a Little Invisible Being Who is Expected
Soon to Become Visible

By Anna Laetitia Barbauld

Germ of new life, whose powers expanding slow
For many a moon their full perfection wait,—
Haste, precious pledge of happy love, to go
Auspicious borne through life's mysterious gate.

What powers lie folded in thy curious frame,—
Senses from objects locked, and mind from thought!
How little canst thou guess thy lofty claim
To grasp at all the worlds the Almighty wrought!

And see, the genial season's warmth to share,
Fresh younglings shoot, and opening roses glow!
Swarms of new life exulting fill the air,—
Haste, infant bud of being, haste to blow!

For thee the nurse prepares her lulling songs,
The eager matrons count the lingering day;
But far the most thy anxious parent longs
On thy soft cheek a mother's kiss to lay.

She only asks to lay her burden down,
That her glad arms that burden may resume;
And nature's sharpest pangs her wishes crown,
That free thee living from thy living tomb.

She longs to fold to her maternal breast
Part of herself, yet to herself unknown;
To see and to salute the stranger guest,
Fed with her life through many a tedious moon.

Come, reap thy rich inheritance of love!
Bask in the fondness of a Mother's eye!
Nor wit nor eloquence her heart shall move
Like the first accents of thy feeble cry.

Haste, little captive, burst thy prison doors!
Launch on the living world, and spring to light!
Nature for thee displays her various stores,
Opens her thousand inlets of delight.

If charmed verse or muttered prayers had power,
With favouring spells to speed thee on thy way,
Anxious I'd bid my beads each passing hour,
Till thy wished smile thy mother's pangs o'erpay.²⁴

What my students noted about Barbauld was in part connected to the other texts we had read, in particular Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, which features a running joke about pregnancy. In that Romantic-era novel, a loudmouthed and uncouth but motherly character, Mrs. Jennings, has a married daughter who is pregnant. She cannot resist speculating upon her daughter's "great size by now" and other aspects of her expected "confinement," as Austen delicately puts it in the narrator's voice. Whenever Mrs. Jennings bursts forth with conversation upon this topic, any character with any semblance of propriety falls all over herself to change the subject, offering opportunity for Austen's sly wit. I had explained that pregnancy and childbirth were not mentioned in polite company. In fact, though I did not mention this to my students, it seems that the aversion to

²⁴ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43617/to-a-little-invisible-being-who-is-expected-soon-to-become-visible>.

discussing the mother's relationship to her child during pregnancy is not much weaker among modern academics than among well-bred eighteenth-century British ladies. Neither the feminist critics nor earlier twentieth-century critics deal with Barbauld's poem on pregnancy, if they mention her at all. Though "To a Little Invisible Being" is one of the most widely anthologized of Barbauld's works, a search of the MLA database, JSTOR, and Academic Search Complete turned up no articles discussing the poem except as an example of something else. The great magisterial voice among Romantic critics of the late twentieth century, Jerome McGann, takes it upon himself to engage with the poem for a page and a half, but transforms the lyric unrecognizably into "a poem about poetry."²⁵ The taboo obeyed by the critics may spring from the poet's unconflicted joy at the idea of ordinary motherhood. Romantic writers and modern critics seem to have a penchant for mad mothers, evil mothers, and even incestuous mothers, in the more sensationalistic Shelleyan mode.²⁶

My students, on the other hand, took the work as directly addressing a social problem that Barbauld faced. Several mentioned Austen's novel as evidence that the most characteristically female process had been made into a matter of shame and concealment. I had pointed out the elevated style that Barbauld uses, alien to that recommended by Wordsworth, and had speculated that perhaps that elevation was itself part of the argument of the

²⁵ Jerome McGann, *The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style* (Oxford UK: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 67-68. My thanks to Tristan Connolly, whose book advertisement about his book on literature and medicine noted the odd "sublimation of birth into metapoetry" in more than one critic. See <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315653457-23/anna-barbauld-little-invisible-being-maternity-poetry-medicine-tristanne-connolly>.

²⁶ See, for a little trove of instances, Jennifer Thorn's enthusiastic review of *Romanticism, Maternity, and the Body Politic* by Julie Kipp (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003) in *Studies in Romanticism* 44 (2005): 647-50. No happy or even competent mother makes an appearance, and the critic takes leave of her readers by expressing a longing for an essay by the same author on *Frankenstein*—a text notable for the void where maternity ought to be. The monster is made without any woman's involvement, and the only mothers in the story die before the main action begins.

poem. Students took this up enthusiastically. All my students had been through their “Junior Poet” training in prosody, tropes, and figures; none failed to discuss the meaning of Barbauld’s stylistic choices.

There are several aspects to elevated style. Meter is fairly basic. Barbauld writes in tightly structured stanzas, though in her circle it was acceptable to write a poem in free verse even in the late eighteenth century. Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, for instance, is very loosely structured, and Wordsworth’s “Ode: Intimations of Immortality” is wildly irregular in length of lines, use of rhyme, and stanzaic breaks. Regular meter and the repetition of structured stanzas lend a degree of formality to a poem and demonstrate a familiarity with forms that commanded respect, as Wordsworth noted in his *Preface*. Regular meters serve to give the reader a sense of predictability, and to guide the reader’s attention. Once a beat is established, a poet can then reverse or vary the units (called feet) or substitute another rhythmic unit to make a reader notice a change and call attention to a line or word. Sometimes a variation requires the reader to use a particular kind of pronunciation, such as contraction or lengthening of word, for subtle effects of emphasis.

I had pointed out the poem’s metrical formality: fairly regular iambic pentameter, the most common in English. My student Fiona Mitchell observed that in the stanzas describing the unborn child in the womb, the meter forces the reader to speak some words in a contracted form: “powers” and “curious.”²⁷ Likewise, in the stanza describing the tedium of the last weeks of waiting for birth, Mitchell noticed foot substitutions that inserted extra syllables, difficult to elide, in lines with “many” and “tedious” in them. The form emphasizes meaning by lengthening the lines beyond the established rhythms.

Another student, Isabella Childs, noted the rhyme scheme, one commonly used in hymns, which would have roused associations with religious themes. Barbauld did write hymns and makes use of such associations, especially as the poem closes, establishing an association of

²⁷ Fiona Mitchel, “Made Worthwhile,” essay submitted in Romantic and Victorian Literature, University of Dallas, Spring 2021.

sacredness with pregnancy, as three of my students contended.²⁸ This had, of course, been common in Christian hymnody celebrating the Incarnation, but as miracles became suspect among the upper crust and Deism became fashionable, divinity was less associated with pregnancy.²⁹ The biblical allusion to “worlds the Almighty wrought” also emphasizes the sacredness of pregnancy. For the same reason Barbauld makes frequent allusions to religious practices.

In terms of argumentative strategy, the poem begins as a long apostrophe addressed to the baby in the womb. This forces the reader to imaginatively recognize the child as a rational being, capable of understanding. The first two stanzas of the poem emphasize the child’s powers of apprehension and urge the child to begin to exercise them. Then the poet lushly describes the welcoming natural world awaiting the child’s coming, and then culminates her rhetoric with a portrait of the welcoming mother. In the course of teaching the poem, I had of course drawn attention to some of its formal aspects, such as the near-chiasmus in “to free thee living from thy living tomb.” Students enthusiastically and successfully took up the hunt for more. Once the poet arrives at the portrait of the mother, the rhetorical figures come thickly. Barbauld employs paradox: “lay her burden down/That her glad arms that burden may resume,” “nature’s sharpest pangs her wishes crown,” and “Part of herself, yet to herself unknown,” followed by the oxymoron of “stranger guest.” Elevating inversions of the ordinary syntax of sentences appear frequently throughout the poem, but as they approach the mother’s attitude they are even obtrusive. The most elaborate rhetorical figures are reserved for the woman herself, though in many lines circumlocution dignifies the matters that were yet considered too low for poetical treatment: “life’s mysterious gate” for the birth canal and “living tomb” for the distasteful but rhyming “womb”;

²⁸ Isabella Childs, “To a Little Invisible Being,” essay submitted in Romantic and Victorian Literature, University of Dallas, Spring 2021. Samantha Tieman and Paula Chang made similar arguments, citing different lines.

²⁹ For reflections on the effect of theology upon imagery having to do with the Christ Child, see Theresa Kenney, “The Manger in the Early Modern Period.” In *The Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*, ed. Rachel Fulton Brown and Rika Spiekermann (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019).

“germ of new life,” “precious pledge of happy love” and “little captive” to name the child; “lay her burden down” and “nature’s sharpest pangs” for the process of birth.

These rhetorical tools serve a central purpose. Through mastery of the culturally masculine realm of rhetorical tropes, figures, and arrangement, they display the erudition and dignity of the poet. Her familiarity with poetic convention asserts intelligence and frees the poem from any accusation of being a mere emotional effusion. Thereby the subject matter is granted greater dignity insofar as it is made worthy of such treatment, without irony. When writing in a more casual vein, Barbauld had been mocked for writing poems about low topics such as laundry—though Homer certainly did the same in the *Odyssey*.³⁰ With a stiff wall of apostrophe, allusion, chiasmus, inversion, and carefully managed meter, Barbauld defends this poem about the powers of the female body against such mockery. My students’ zealous explication of these devices constituted good application of their training. Still, the skill of their analysis does not explain the fact of their choice of Barbauld’s poem, though her expertise rewards investigation so well.

As one might expect in 2021, a year fraught with race-based rhetoric, questions of race, class, and gender emerged—or rather, students explicitly rejoiced in the poet’s freedom from naming those “artificial and base limitations,” as one student called them.³¹ Students marveled that explicit references to the child’s economic or social situation were totally absent. However, they were alert to the fact that Barbauld was aggressively addressing social oppression. Indeed, they found in Barbauld a defender from a kind of oppression they felt themselves. They found her ideas, as one wrote, “much needed in today’s society, which tells women to ignore

³⁰ Book Six of *The Odyssey* opens with an epic account of doing laundry. Francis Jeffrey’s contemporary mockery of Barbauld is cited in McCarthy and Kraft, p. 143: “All the world laughs at Elegiac stanzas on a sucking-pig—a Hymn on Washing-day—”

³¹ Samantha Tieman, “An Insight into the Challenging of Society to Give Voice to the Voiceless,” essay submitted in Bernadette Waterman Ward, *Romantic and Victorian Literature*, University of Dallas, Spring 2021.

every selfless desire of family and children.”³² There have been popular media attempts to impose ecological guilt on women who bear children, especially in first-world countries.³³ One student, Paula Chang, defended motherhood with reference to the selflessness evidenced by the mother’s willingness to undergo “Nature’s sharpest pangs”: “Childbearing forms the perfect image of love as the mother loves her baby as herself.”³⁴

One explained Barbauld’s focus on nature as an assertion that, as the student put it, “even if the ‘young bud of life’ was born into unfavorable circumstances, its worth and dignity would remain in the beauty of nature and the will intended for us by God. The natural dignity in our claim as humans is what brings our worth, not societal prescriptions of calculated worth and economic potential.” Having read some radical Utilitarians in the early weeks of the course and having seen Charles Dickens attack them, students disdained the idea of looking to a person’s capacity for economic contribution as a measure of human value.

Several took Barbauld’s work as an opportunity for opposing the economic considerations currently touted in the popular media as a discouragement to parenthood. Some considered this an attempt to erase their femaleness and denigrate things that can only be done by women in favor of things that are traditionally done by men, pressuring women, as one said, “to prove their equality to men.” She analyzed the pressure as an attempt to erase femaleness altogether, “demanding the disappearance of these differences.” She had ample reason to take offense at these demands. The transgender movement has denied that childbearing is something that

³² Dayne Patillo, “Barbauld’s Defense of the Traditional Woman,” essay submitted in Bernadette Waterman Ward, *Romantic and Victorian Literature*, University of Dallas, Spring 2021.

³³ See the notorious “Is Having A Baby In 2021 Pure Environmental Vandalism?” by Nell Frizzell, (*British Vogue*, April 25, 2021; accessed at <https://www.vogue.co.uk/mini-vogue/article/having-a-child-sustainable>, June 10, 2021). The title encapsulates the trend, though the article itself is milder and admits that the author is a parent. It is worthwhile to imagine the child, as a teen, reading such an assessment of her existence.

³⁴ Paula Chang, “Short Poem Analysis,” essay submitted in Bernadette Waterman Ward, *Romantic and Victorian Literature*, University of Dallas, Spring 2021

women do. Transgender advocates assert that social presentation of stereotypical male behavior, perhaps accompanied by surgical or chemical alteration of secondary sexual characteristics, constitutes manhood, even if the person who has undertaken these changes is fully capable of pregnancy and birth. Mothers, even in the official pronouncements of the President of the United States, are no longer women but “birthing people.” Fertility is separated from womanhood. Thus this trend was reported:

The pro-choice nonprofit NARAL defended use of the term, tweeting, “When we talk about birthing people, we’re being inclusive. It’s that simple. We use gender neutral language when talking about pregnancy, because it’s not just cis-gender women that can get pregnant and give birth. Reproductive freedom is for *every* body.”³⁵

The very physical womanhood of my students is disregarded by the politically ambitious. Reckless of nature such as Barbauld and the Romantics cherished, they cancel “woman” in the name of freedom. All the essayists embraced Barbauld as a sort of champion of their own rebellion against having to defend their own identity as women, and the identity of women as mothers.

A key to the argument in every one of those six essays was Barbauld’s celebration of fertility in nature—the “genial season,” duly understood in its root relation to generation, when, “Fresh younglings shoot, and opening roses glow!/ Swarms of new life exulting fill the air.” The students all seized upon Barbauld’s exaltation of the desire to participate in “the fertility of nature.”³⁶ They joined forces with the Romantic zeal for nature in order to preserve their own dignity, and some of them were rather fierce about it.

Therefore, the radicalism of Barbauld in dignifying pregnancy with high diction and poetic form roused my students to join a protest that has been suppressed in the media that they encounter. Anna Letitia Barbauld inspired Coleridge and other radical literary figures because she supported

³⁵ Benjamin Fearnow, “Biden Admin Replaces ‘Mothers’ With ‘Birthing People’ in Maternal Health Guidance” (*Newsweek*, June 7, 2021) accessed June 10, 2021, at <https://www.newsweek.com/biden-admin-replaces-mothers-birthing-people-maternal-health-guidance-1598343>.

³⁶ Paula Chang, op. cit.

the extension of suffrage, religious toleration, elimination of slavery, and revolutions in France and America. Educated in rhetoric sufficiently to understand her basic purposes, my students found in Barbauld another radical challenge—against our own increasingly artificial and alienating culture denigrating biological women and biological men, and disregarding fertility as an aspect of identity. This strong attraction to Barbauld’s work reflects how, in our century, the dignity of motherhood remains contested. My students celebrated Barbauld as an important voice for nature as the foundation of women’s rights today because they recognize, as Barbauld did, that the rights of women cannot finally require the rejection of the female body.