

Introduction

The Puzzle and the Myth

fas est et ab hoste doceri

The worst review in the world. That is the way one recent blogger describes the anonymous article on *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* by Anna Letitia Barbauld that appeared in the *Quarterly Review* for June 1812.² The attack is personal, relentless and tears the poem to shreds on the grounds both of ineptitude and political sentiment. The work was a prophecy of Britain reduced to ruins by its refusal to end the interminable war with France. Barbauld, then aged sixty-nine and the veteran of a long and illustrious career as poet, educationalist, essayist, polemicist, literary editor, herself a reviewer, is characterised by the critic as a ‘fatidical spinster’ (her husband had in fact committed suicide three years earlier), a would-be clairvoyant who is ‘induced’ to ‘dash down her shagreen spectacles and her knitting needles’ and take up her pen from ‘an irresistible impulse of public duty’ and is advised in future to stick to children’s books and miscellanies rather than putting ‘herself to the trouble’ of writing interventions on public issues ‘for the sake of this ungrateful generation’.³ We have Internet trolls; the Regency period had the quarterly review journals.

The exact terms used in the full review will be examined in due course, but it is sufficient to give a general picture in order to discuss the myth that has arisen from this act of journalistic demolition. Anna Letitia Barbauld (1743–1825) is no longer a household name, as she was in 1812 and indeed had been from her debut in the 1770s and continued to be until the end of the nineteenth century. However, her stock has been rising again among literary historians in the past twenty years, facilitated by the arrival of an edition of her poetry in 1994, an affordable paperback selection of her poetry and prose published by Broadview Press in 2002, both edited by William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft, and in 2008 the appearance of a major biography by William McCarthy, widely reviewed and rightly admired. But the process of critical recovery has

been haunted by the notion that her career was ended by the jeers of a misogynist reviewer.

Like many with a research interest in women's writing of the period, my first encounter with *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* was by way of its inclusion in Duncan Wu's anthology, *Romantic Women Poets* (1997). I was intrigued by the poem, which is indeed captivatingly strange and spectacular in its geographic and historical scope; aggressive and seductive, lucid and cryptic by turns; a prophecy of disaster with, for the most part, the tone of a celebration. Wu's explanatory notes and biographical introduction were enlightening, but something irked me about the editor's final sentence: 'The ridicule that greeted one of her most important works effectively brought her literary career to an end; she published no further volumes of poetry during her lifetime.'⁴ Since then, I have found this assertion repeated *ad nauseum* in almost every account of the poem or general assessment of her career. No record has survived in Barbauld's own words of her feelings about this or any other review. The story originates in the first biographical account of the poet, the 'Memoir' attached to the 1825 edition of her *Works* by Barbauld's niece Lucy Aikin, herself a writer and poet:

This was the last of Mrs. Barbauld's separate publications. Who indeed, that knew and loved her, could have wished her to expose again that honoured head to the scorns of the unmanly, the malignant and the base? Her fancy was still in all its brightness; her spirits might have been cheered and her energy revived, by the cordial and respectful greetings, the thanks and plaudits, with which it was once the generous and graceful practice of contemporary criticism to welcome the re-appearance of a well-deserving veteran of the field of letters. As it was, though still visited by

... the thoughts that voluntary move
 Harmonious numbers,

she for the most part confined to a few friends all participation in the strains which they inspired. She even laid aside the intention which she had entertained of preparing a new edition of her Poems, long out of print and often enquired for in vain; – well knowing that a day must come when the sting of Envy would be blunted, and her *memory* would have its fame.

No incident worthy of mention henceforth occurred to break the uniformity of her existence.⁵

Anna Letitia Le Breton, a great-niece, echoes this account in her *Memoir* of 1874:

This was the last time she appeared in print. No one indeed, who loved her, could have wished her to be again exposed to such a shock to her feeling, or such cruel misunderstanding of her sentiments. The remainder of her

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life was passed quietly at Stoke Newington, among her family and a few friends.⁶

The theme was taken up with enthusiasm by subsequent genteel purveyors of literary lives. Grace Ellis reported that Barbauld ‘was deeply wounded by the insults and personal remarks which this poem ... received from the prejudice and malignancy of a critic’.⁷ Anne Thackeray Ritchie mixes the pathos with light mockery in 1883:

The poem is forgotten now, though it was scouted at the time and violently attacked, Southey himself falling upon the poor old lady, and devouring her, spectacles and all. She felt these attacks very much, and could not be consoled, though Miss Edgeworth wrote a warm-hearted letter of indignant sympathy.⁸

This is largely fantasy, from the mistaken attribution of the review to Robert Southey to the warmth discerned in Maria Edgeworth’s response. It is easy to see that there would have been much grist for the Victorian sentimentality mill in the picture of vulnerable old age, wounded and suffering. Such a picture helped to distract from the troubling assertiveness of many of her writings and *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* in particular.

What has been less easy to understand is why critics today have accepted this picture unexamined. What is invested in this tale of victimage? The fable of the elderly *grande dame* of British letters hounded from the public domain by hostile reviewers has continued to feature as one of the most pitiable chapters in feminist literary history, reinforced by the title of one of the earliest and most influential appraisals of the poem, William Keach’s essay ‘A Regency Prophecy and the End of Anna Barbauld’s Career’ (1994).⁹

Barbauld was not the only writer around whom a myth of a reviewer’s destructive powers gathered. The death of John Keats at the age of twenty-six was famously attributed to an anonymous review by John Wilson Croker, after he savaged *Endymion* in 1818. Byron lamented, ‘John Keats, who was kill’d off by one critique, / Just as he really promised something great’, and reflected, ‘Tis strange the mind, that very fiery particle, / Should let itself be snuff’d out by an article —’. Elsewhere he quipped

Who killed John Keats?
 I, says the Quarterly,
 So savage and Tartarly;
 ‘Twas one of my feats.¹⁰

Shelley, with rather more in the way of pathos, had written the elegy *Adonais* (1821) and in the Preface enshrined the delusion that Keats’s

consumption had been somehow ‘induced’ by the cruelty of the reviewer. At the time Keats had shrugged it off: ‘the attempt to crush me in the “Quarterly” has only brought me more into notice, and it is a common expression among bookmen, “I wonder the ‘Quarterly’ should cut its own throat”’.¹¹ Lady Morgan, who braved Croker’s opinion at the start of both their careers in Dublin as early as 1804, appears to have been impervious to his repeated thunderbolts, and enjoyed the revenge of fixing him in her novel *Florence Macarthy* (1818) as ‘Conway Crawley’ of ‘a bilious, saturnine constitution ... turning his words to sarcasm, his ink to gall, and his pen to a stiletto’.¹² Maria Edgeworth, however, did not publish any novels for a period of fourteen years following a malicious review of her *Memoirs* (1820) of her father, and Frances Burney, in an uncanny convergence, was stricken at the age of eighty by Croker’s vindictive handling of the *Memoirs* (1832) of her father, the great musicologist Dr Charles Burney.¹³ He even hounded Burney after her death with a brutal response to her *Diary and Letters* (1842). But in no case does a review from that bygone age continue to blight the understanding of the writer as fully as that of Croker’s on *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*.

It is intolerable, in something of the way that the overshadowing of a murder victim’s life by the focus on the perpetrator is intolerable. Barbauld’s energy and idealism and hard work and, yes, genius, apparently reduced to this. The problem is not in the facts of the matter; the reality is that Barbauld *did* continue to publish. There can no longer be any dispute on that score. Contrary to Lucy Aikin’s statement, she published poems in journals and miscellaneous collections, some of them unabashedly signed, including two poems for the *Monthly Repository* in 1822, and furthermore continued to plan a collected edition of her poetry into the 1820s.¹⁴ She prepared an anthology, *A Legacy for Young Ladies* (1825). She wrote reviews for the *Monthly Review* until at least 1815.¹⁵ She published no further volumes of poetry but then she had only ever brought out one collection previously, and two long poems as separate publications. She had never been prolific. She was now a septuagenarian. There is nothing extraordinary about the lack of substantial new work.

The problem, rather, lies in the attribution to Barbauld of a naivety that verges on stupidity, and leaves the triumph to Croker. This simply doesn’t accord with what we know of her life and what we can read in her works. She was, after all, the author of a classic essay ‘Against Inconsistency in our Expectations’, a primer in Stoicism which was frequently reprinted and which warned precisely against expecting the impossible. It was anthologised by William Enfield and praised by Charles James Fox, Mary

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Wollstonecraft, Anna Seward, William Hazlitt and Leigh Hunt.¹⁶ The prominent liberal politician Sir James Mackintosh, who did not know her at the time except through her writing, wrote to a mutual friend some words of consolation after the death of Barbauld's husband and paid her the compliment of imagining that she lived by her own rules: 'she who has so beautifully taught us the folly of inconsistent expectations and complaints, can never want practical wisdom under the sharpest calamities'.¹⁷

No one expects an orange tree to survive outdoors through an English winter, she observes in the essay. Nor that an acorn will become an oak in a few months. Can it be expected, we might add, that a rabidly Tory journal would deliver a polite, fair-minded review of an anti-war poem by a Dissenter, just because the author was also an elderly woman of considerable literary fame? Everything we know about Barbauld, her toughness and her acumen, suggests that she would not have expected that pigs might fly in this fashion. According to her creed:

[t]he man ... who has well studied the operations of nature in mind as well as matter, will acquire a certain moderation and equity in his claims upon Providence. He never will be disappointed either in himself or others. *He will act with precision; and expect that effect, and that alone, from his efforts, which they are naturally adapted to produce.*¹⁸

This lesson was so important and fundamental to her way of thinking that she even incorporated it in the most simplified form in her *Lessons for Children, from Two to Three Years Old* (1778). Little Charles's arm is scratched by Puss; Mamma cries 'Poor arm, let me kiss it. There now all is well' and assures the child that 'Puss did not intend it, she was only at play'. She is less sympathetic on another occasion:

I have hit my head against the table, naughty table!
 No, not naughty table, silly boy!
 The table did not run against Charles;
 Charles ran against the table.
 The table stood still in its place.¹⁹

If this seems harsh, then its source in the works of the Stoic philosopher Epictetus is even more peremptory: 'In Infancy ... if we happen to stumble, our Nurse doth not chide *us*, but beats the Stone. Why: what Harm hath the Stone done? Was it to move out of its Place, for the Folly of your Child? ... It is he whom you are to correct and improve.'²⁰

Croker is Puss at play: he is simply acting in accordance with his ideological agenda in lashing out at Barbauld. The *Quarterly Review* is the table: it is part of the furniture of Regency print culture, a known quantity,

and if Barbauld will run against it, the consequences are inevitable. The periodical's editorial policy stood still in its place. The majority of past and present commentators on the poem and its reception are like Epictetus's Nurse – they are content to blame the stone while neglecting the agency of the injured party.

Was it folly that made Barbauld run against the *Quarterly Review*? The representations of Lucy Aikin and others who wrote in her wake implicitly suggest that she was indeed driven by a kind of inane idealism. It is the purpose of this study to present an alternative case: that in publishing *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* Barbauld was, in the words of her own essay, 'acting with precision' and fully expecting from her efforts that effect which they were 'naturally adapted to produce'. I have always felt that the story of Barbauld's demise as a writer was wrong. Now, thanks to a period of research and aided by indications in William McCarthy's magnificent biography, I know it is wrong.

The reader may wonder why Croker is given such prominence here, as in the previous accounts of Barbauld's career. Isn't that simply to compound his malevolent influence on her reputation? True, at this stage the effect is the same; but the motive is very different. The aim is not to recount yet again the tale of Barbauld's victimage, but rather the reverse. I intend to show that in reality *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* was recognised by John Wilson Croker to be a deliberate and carefully targeted attack on the political and economic interests he represented. The poem was a provocation, in other words, that courted hostility from a certain quarter (namely the *Quarterly Review* and Tory politicians) while rallying support for opposing views. Although Croker complained that the poem was muddled and cryptic, he better than anyone understood its stratagems and his review remains the best guide to interpreting it.

Piecing together the evidence for this reading of the poem will be a painstaking business; hence the surprising length of this study of a single work of a mere 334 lines. As McCarthy has movingly described, Barbauld's story has been left 'as full of gaps as a bombed out building'.²¹ On 25 September 1940 the lodging house in which her descendant Charles William Brodribb kept the family papers was destroyed in the Blitz. He had intended to write her biography. Her present-day biographer has been forced to rely on published writings and whatever fragments have survived elsewhere, frustrated at every turn by the destruction of other archives: 'we could imagine that a malign power had set out to erase her from history, for the papers even of her friends and associates came to violent ends'.²² Those looking for information have been thrown back to an unusual extent on Victorian or

early twentieth-century constructions, which downplay her engagement with public debate. Selections of her verse and letters from this period were designed to produce an acceptable Barbauld, one worthy of reverence; McCarthy has stated, ‘it was the Victorians who took charge of her posthumous fame, and they must be said to have loved her to death’.²³ He has wrested one document from their grasp, and succeeded in restoring to its proper context a letter in which she declines to head ‘a kind of literary Academy for Ladies’, thereby vindicating her against criticism that arose during the first wave of feminist scholarship in the 1980s and early 1990s.²⁴ My aspiration is to make an equally persuasive case for Barbauld’s strategic *savoir-faire* and political courage in the writing and publication of *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*.

This is a kind of detective story. The mystery is not ‘whodunit’ but rather ‘whatwasdun’: if in spite of appearances this is not a murder scene, then what *is* going on? The consequences of the enquiry are more wide-ranging than I could ever have imagined.

The poem takes the form of a mental flight through space and time. If questions are asked about the precise historical moment that inspired it, elliptically referred to in the text, it can take the reader on another journey: to the coffers of the Bank of England and the birth of the London money market; to the offices of the *Edinburgh Review* and its rival the *Quarterly Review*; to the engine rooms of British and French war policy; to the battlefields of the Peninsular campaign against Napoleon; to the factories and seaports of the North of England, the Luddite rising and frantic anti-government protest; speculative trade in South America; the outbreak of the 1812 war between Britain and America; the development of political economy as a science; the alternative communication networks of the Protestant nonconformists; and into the mind of a remarkable woman who rose above her circumstances to become an acute and visionary analyst of emergent modernity.

The chapters in Part I address a series of questions, moving through the poem from beginning to end, bringing into view its relation to the explosive situation current in the years 1811 to 1812, and exploring the way it emerges out of the long-running war of ideas surrounding patriotism, loyalism and Dissent, back to the 1790s and deep into the eighteenth century. Why the strange tonal shifts of the opening section, ending in references to an economic crisis? Why was the poem labelled as a satire, when to us it reads for the most part like an elegiac prophecy? What are the clues that point to its place as part of a concerted protest campaign rather than a lone lament? The fourth chapter pauses to consider the ethical, religious

and philosophical foundations of Barbauld's brand of oppositional patriotism, and the way it set her on a collision course with other major figures in British Romanticism, notably the Lake poets Wordsworth, Southey and Coleridge. The next three chapters centre on enigmas in the latter part of the poem: the topical purport of the soaring prophetic vision; a curious ambivalence about ruins; and the identity of the mysterious 'Spirit' who will bring about Britain's demise.

Part II presents a chronological survey of events from the start of the year 1812 and the publication of the poem to the appearance of the damning review in the *Quarterly* in August: a story involving personal treachery, armed rebellion, a deluge of petitions, war crimes, a political gaffe, assassination, bilious attacks, a government U-turn and the outbreak of a new war. It ends with a glimpse of the near future, and some reflections on the broader significance of the crisis.

The project began with a single confrontation between poet and reviewer, and an enquiry into the motivations of Barbauld and Croker. It has developed into a case study with implications for the way the relationship between literature and politics in the Romantic period has been regarded, and these will be reviewed briefly in the Conclusion.

Strange as it may seem for a book focused on one not particularly long poem, it doesn't offer a line by line reading of it and is certainly not intended to be exhaustive. The quest into the year 1811 and its hinterland has taken a great deal of my attention, as has investigation of some of the vast range of resources on which the awe-inspiringly well-read and well-informed Barbauld drew for her intervention. I must apologise to previous interpreters: although I've learned much from their readings and cite a considerable number, the scope of the historical research has meant that only limited space could be given to critical debate on the poem. I am also conscious that this revised orientation opens up many new avenues still to be explored. Passages of close reading are offered as examples of the way Barbauld's poetic method is informed by the pressure of events.

Before beginning, let us pause for a flashback that will help to illuminate the story. It is 1810. Anna Letitia Barbauld and Maria Edgeworth, two of the most illustrious women of letters of the day, continue a correspondence that now has an added professional purpose. Barbauld is currently preparing a new edition of Edgeworth's successful 1801 novel *Belinda* to include in her collection *The British Novelists*. Edgeworth writes from her father's home in Edgeworthstown in the Irish Midlands, detailing the substantial revisions she has been making to the work, in response to criticism

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that the novel condones interracial marriage and that her heroine, because she agrees to marry a man after showing an inclination for another, is a jilt:

‘*Jackson*’ is substituted for the husband of Lucy instead of ‘*Juba*,’ many people having been scandalised at the idea of a black man marrying a white woman; my father says that gentlemen have horrors upon this subject, and would draw conclusions very unfavourable to a female writer who appeared to recommend such unions; as I do not understand the subject, I trust to his better judgment, and end with – for *Juba* read *Jackson*.²⁵

In the third volume, Edgeworth goes on to explain, Belinda’s demeanour to Mr Vincent will never rise above ‘esteem’ to avoid the implication of a ‘want of constancy’.²⁶

In reply, Barbauld gossips about Walter Scott and his new bestselling poem *Lady of the Lake* before addressing the thorny question of negative reception through the indirect means of mentioning Lucy Aikin’s newly published long poem *Epistles on Women*, a bravely femino-centric account of the growth of civilisation:

Have you read my Niece’s Poem? I dare venture to predict that you will be pleased with it, and I hope the gentlemen will allow that the partiality of a woman to her sex has not led her to assume more importance for them than fairly belongs to them.

She begins to feel a little of the trepidation about the Reviews, very natural in a young author, but you, my dear Miss Edgeworth, I hope, feel yourself quite above them. You cannot be judged by them, *they* may be judged by their strictures upon you.²⁷

In both letters, ‘the gentlemen’ serve as code for public opinion generally and the opinion of the reviewers specifically. Barbauld then alludes to a hostile review of Edgeworth’s own most recent publication, *Tales of Fashionable Life* (1809). It had appeared in the *Quarterly Review*, a newcomer on the reviewing scene, established in 1809 as a rival to the liberal *Edinburgh Review*:

I had not seen the *Quarterly* before you mentioned it. I then read it with great indignation indeed, nor could I help venting a little of it, as much as I thought would do good, in a paper, which perhaps you saw in the *Gentleman’s Magazine*.²⁸

And so we find that Barbauld had already crossed swords with the *Quarterly Review* after reading its second issue. The reviewer was H. J. Stephen, who broadly approved of Edgeworth’s work, but William Gifford exercised his oft-used editor’s prerogative to insert four paragraphs taking the author to task for failing to include religion as part of her moral message, a criticism

that had already been made of *Practical Education*, co-authored by her reform-minded father.²⁹ The *Quarterly Review* was making its mark as the more heavy-weight ally of the *Anti-Jacobin Review* in the defence of Church and Crown against any sign of insubordination in British culture. In Barbauld's anonymous 'paper' addressed to the editor of the *Gentleman's Magazine* she defends Edgeworth from the charge of omitting religion, observing that this has never been an essential part of modern fiction, and that obtrusive morality detracted from realism; she is even more indignant at what she takes to be a libertine interpretation of the story *The Dun*, potentially damaging to the author's reputation. But what is most interesting for our purposes is the way in which she carries the battle into the enemy camp. She begins with withering irony:

Independently of any high opinion of the taste or impartiality of those self-erected tribunals, which assume the right of directing the taste of the publick, I am entirely of the opinion, that, in general, it is very idle to appeal from their decision.³⁰

And she goes on to question the veil of anonymity that gives the reviewer's judgement the mystique of a higher authority: an effect that Croker would later refer to as 'the magical We':³¹

The Critick's judgment may be right, or it may be wrong; his taste good or bad: there is no greater probability, that an unknown person, who gives his opinion upon books once a month, or once a quarter, should be right, than that any other unknown person should be so, who delivers his in a parlour or a coffee-house.³²

There is much that is suggestive about this episode. The mention of Lucy Aikin's anxiety about reviews, for instance, places her representation of the impact of the reviews of *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* on her aunt in an interesting light. Then there is Edgeworth's response to the revelation of the identity of her champion. She writes on 1 August 1810 that Barbauld's letter had been welcomed for 'its proving to us that your mind has resumed all its energy, and that you have recovered from that cruel and unavoidable depression of spirits', following the death of her husband Rochemont Barbauld.³³

But there is something forced about her gratitude to 'my kind and able defender': 'May it ever be my fate to be so attacked and so defended'.³⁴ Edgeworth could be forgiven for feeling ambivalent about Barbauld's intervention, which gave additional publicity to the initial charges and helped to prolong the embarrassment they caused, and as Barbauld had stated herself of the reviewers 'it is very idle to appeal from their decision'. When