Barbauld's *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*

The last published work of Anna Barbauld, *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* was released in 1812 to scathing reviews attacking her treasonous sentiments and her transgression of gender norms. In his *Quarterly Review* article, John Wilson Croker snidely commented, "Our old acquaintance Mrs. Barbauld turned satirist! The last thing we should have expected, and, now that we have seen her satire, the last thing that we could have desired" before mockingly referring to her as "a *lady*-author" who has "dash[ed] down her shagreen spectacles and her knitting needles" (emphasis added). While several critics have analyzed the satirical or prophetic nature of *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* or looked at its political portrayals of Fancy, tracing flower and wreath imagery provides insight into who or what deserves recognition and holds power, while Barbauld's use of the word pilgrim to name the returning American reflects a Dissenter's view of genius.

Barbauld uses the imagery and function of flowers throughout *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* to describe the falling of the British Empire and rise of, not a new empire, but of individual genius. Building off the first stanza, which relates the dire situation of the Napoleonic War, the second and third stanzas lament how nature and humans are "bounteous in vain" due to the destruction wreaked by fighting and bloodshed. Though Barbauld writes of "orange-blossoms scent[ing] the gale," she immediately follows this with images of "Famine…Disease and Rapine" and "the ensanguined field." By the third stanza, the plenteousness of the orange-blossoms seems cruel when we realize "[the matron's] *blooming* youths" have become "her *fallen blossoms* [who] strew a foreign strand" (emphasis added). Despite Barbauld's celebration of British achievement and hegemony in stanza five, Fancy laments at the end of stanza six, "That Time may tear the garland from [England's] brow,/And Europe sit in dust, as Asia now." This tearing of the garland, suggestive of dethroning, signifies the end of the British Empire's rule, while the latter

line relegates England to the ranks of "the dim, cold crescent." But if Britain's garland, representative of strength and power, is thrown off, in whose hands does it belong? In the next stanza, we notice these bands of flowers belong, in fact, to "the ingenuous youth whom Fancy fires with picture glories of illustrious sires, [who] with duteous zeal their pilgrimage shall take from the Blue Mountains or Ontario's lake." In other words, they belong to Americans, but interestingly enough, these "pilgrims" do not keep their garlands, instead deciding to "hang fresh wreaths round Newton's awful brow" (a mirroring of the garland on "her [England's] brow") and "ask[ing] where Avon's winding waters stray and thence a knot of wildflowers bear away." "Wreath" is echoed later in the stanza in relation to William Roscoe, an outspoken abolitionist and Dissenter, and his successful experiments in converting moorland to fertile agricultural land, but this time it is he who creates the wreath. It appears then that the wreath, or crown, is not intended for whole empires but for individual genius (embodied in the fifth stanza by Newton, Shakespeare and Roscoe). A more careful look at the fifth stanza suggests a similar attitude: although Barbauld praises England, "oh my country – name beloved, revered," she does so by, again, commending certain individual men, "thy Lockes, thy Paleys," "in Thompson's glass," "Shakespeare's noble rage," etc., displacing the glory from Britain and her formalized institutions onto the dissemination of British men, who spread "from Ganges to the poll, o'er half the western world thy accents roll." The Spirit himself, "moody and viewless as the changing wind," is unbound by any nationalistic allegiances; instead, he is the producer of "fruitful meads" and master of Nature. The Genius, though fickle, persists, even as "with enthusiast love the pilgrim roves" over the ruins of vanished empires.

Barbauld's equating of the American with "pilgrim," a word connoting religious worship and devotion, lends a Dissenting tone throughout the poem, especially since it is this pilgrim to whom the new wreath belongs. Barbauld, like Roscoe, practiced Unitarianism, a religion which

focused on personal experience and greatly valued human intellect. Like other Dissenters in England, Unitarians resisted state interference and attempted to align the Christian experience with reason. If some Dissenters, like the highly renowned Priestley, have left England for America, a country, Barbauld claims, of more religious tolerance and freedom, then perhaps the traveler who returns to Britain is a *true* pilgrim, making it fitting indeed for these pilgrims to crown and acknowledge *individual* genius instead of honoring entire nations, including the state of England which discriminated against them in the first place. While Barbauld's descriptions of London and the British Empire as a whole are often fraught with prophetic warnings – "evil days portend," "the golden tide of commerce leaves thy shore," "Crime walks thy streets, Fraud earns her unblessed bread" – Barbauld praises the many *individuals* the tourist, or pilgrim, eagerly commemorates: "Howard's sainted feet," "Clarkson, friend of man," "all-accomplished Jones," "Chatham's eloquence in thunder…" Indeed, the only time Barbauld directly applauds London is when she writes of the city's busy and diverse streets, "where the turbaned Moslem, bearded Jew, and woolly Afric, met the brown Hindu," but this could be read as reflecting the Dissenter's call for religious toleration or deflecting emphasis from the empire's formalized institutions, as in stanza five, and placing it on the everyday workings of commerce, a subject which gained importance in several dissenting academies.

While Barbauld makes it clear that empires must fall, the question of whether individual genius also fades is more difficult to answer. I believe wreaths, though they can be gifted or created, cannot be *kept*, for both empire and genius, though this is only genius embodied by certain men. In the first four lines of the last stanza, Barbauld writes –

> But fairest flowers expand but to decay;
> The worm is in thy core, thy glories pass away;
> Arts, arms and wealth destroy the fruits they bring,
> Commerce, like beauty, knows no second spring.

It seems quite evident Barbauld meant for these lines to be applied to the rise and fall of empires. From third stanza onward, Britain is clearly addressed as "thou," and there is no indication of the pronoun switching subjects as the poem continues. Here, then, the worm must be in *England's* core, *her* glories must pass away. Barbauld also incorporates the very ephemeral nature of flowers in the first line; all roses, in the end, must wither, and so too, will garlands of flowers – indeed, the fairest bloom only to die. Individual genius shares a fate similar to empire, albeit differently in that genius never quite disappears, it is only repositioned. Barbauld writes in lines 287-8, "While British tongues the fading fame prolong of Tully's eloquence and Maro's song." Yes, the English have remembered the achievements of Cicero and Virgil but importantly, the fame is *fading*, and so the individual geniuses of these two great men must fade eventually as well. And yet, at the same time, it is only the genius *of* these two men. The dynamic Spirit ensures genius will endure but in different places and for different persons: "Then blow the flowers of Genius and Art; Saints, heroes, sages, who the land adorn, seem rather to descend than to be born." Individual genius, then, is more deserving of the wreath than entire nations, and this wreath, because it too withers with time, must constantly be re-gifted but to *changing* embodiments of this genius.

The succession of the wreath, symbolic of a crown and thus of power and prestige, departs from the empire and is bestowed by the pilgrim onto the individual genius or is simply created by the genius himself. The fact that a *pilgrim* does the giving and presents it to an *individual* demonstrates a Dissenting view of religion, in which reason and individual intellect are greatly esteemed. And yet, despite this prizing of individual genius, even that too will lose its grandeur, though it never disappears; rather, the Spirit, or genius, who "walks…o'er the peopled earth," will appear in new places to inspire wonder and knowledge.