Freeing Herself: Anna Letitia Barbauld's *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* and the Emergence of Feminine Authority from a Patriarchal System

One of the last published works of Anna Letitia 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).[1] Opening with a denunciatory account of England's involvement in the Napoleonic Wars, *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* alarmed audiences with its vivid depictions of a fallen British empire that functions merely as a "pilgrimage" destination for American tourists. Despite the seemingly male-dominated and inevitable progression of empire, the transference of literature, and by implication, cultural hegemony, seems to follow its own trajectory and, away from the influences of the masculinized Genius, offers a chance for female authority.

The equating of the Genius with the rise and fall of empire/civilization seems to make him a figure of unparalleled supremacy. In the fourteenth and fifteenth stanzas, Barbauld clearly associates an empire's success or deterioration with the Genius's arrival and departure, illustrating his abilities to bring the sparks of civilization – "There walks a spirit o'er the peopled earth…Where'er he turns, the human brute awakes, And, roused to better life, his sordid hut forsakes…" – and his abilities to cause its ruin:

The genius now forsakes the favoured shore,

[1] Croker, John Wilson. "Art. IV. *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven. A Poem*. By Anna Letitia Barbauld. 4to. London. Johnson and Co. 1812." *The Quarterly Review* Mar. and June 1812: 309. Online.

And hates, capricious, what he loved before;
Then empires fall to dust, then arts decay,
And wasted realms enfeebled despots sway…

This "vagrant Power" is the origin, and demise (upon his departure), of dozens of ancient empires, including "the Vale of Tempe," "Ausonian plains," northern Europe, and, most recently, England. Because Commerce, Plenty and "Obedient Nature" are all fully controlled by the Genius, only he appears to have the authority to declare which nations will flourish and which ones will be left to "the mass of misery."

A closer look at Barbauld's descriptions of Genius not only reveals his seeming omnipotence but also how empire is, to a significant degree, patriarchal, with a masculinized figure consistently ruling a feminized one. This is evident in both the definition of civilization and the actual process of one empire displacing the old. As mentioned earlier, the Genius dominates Commerce, Plenty, the Muse, etc., all of whom have been gendered female. In particular, his authority over *Mother* Nature appears to be an essential component of civilization's establishment. "Without [the Genius's] fostering smile," the land yields nothing but "thirsty sand absorb[ing] the useless rill, [while] spotted plagues from putrid fens distil." Oases dry, climates change, beasts grow wild, and rivers become choked with "reeds and sedge." In fact, with the Genius's patronage, people "ask not gifts but *tribute* at her [Nature's] hands" (emphasis added), demanding what they believe is rightfully theirs. Furthermore, the Genius even manifests himself in human form, namely in the British writer and agriculturalist William Roscoe, furthering the idea of empire progression as being male-dominated. In the seventh stanza, Barbauld writes of how "Roscoe…led Ceres to the black and barren moor where Ceres never gained a wreath before." Here, Roscoe directly embodies the Genius's abilities to change "the steaming marsh…to fruitful meads" – in fact, a 'mere' Englishman Roscoe *leads* the female figure, the

Roman goddess Ceres who is representative of the feminized earth, implying not only that male domination over a female parallels the new empire's domination of the old but also that this domination is so total it upsets former institutions as powerful as religion. Lastly, the actual lands the Genius conquers are feminized as well. Britain is "an island *queen* amidst [her] subject seas," while "La Plata hears amidst *her* torrents' roar; Potosi hears it, as *she* digs the ore" (emphasis added). In the last stanza, the Genius does not even directly address La Plata and Potosi as he "shouts to [their] mingled tribes from sea to sea" but rather chooses to call to their colonizer, "swear[ing] thy world, Columbus, shall be free." Both Columbus and the Genius indicate the continuation of a patriarchal system – these male figures respectively have dominated and will dominate the feminized Americas.

As I have argued above, the Genius illustrates the patriarchal sphere of civilization development, and Barbauld, throughout the course of the poem, also posits the Genius's progression as inevitable. Even traditionally feminine material, the imagery of flowers, was used to highlight the ephemeral and *natural* evolution of empire. At the beginning and end of her prophetic poem, Barbauld's flower imagery provides a seasonal framework for the progression of empire: originally contrasting with the horrors of war, this imagery rapidly transforms into descriptions of death so that, by the end of the poem, flowers symbolize the natural deterioration of the British Empire. Barbauld writes of "orange-blossoms scent[ing] the gale" but this loveliness, in the midst of war, is in vain and short-lived. As the weather cools, these blossoms can descend only into "the ensanguined field." Like the natural world, humans have also been "fruitful in vain," as young men are called forth to battle, leaving unmarried young women behind, who, like "the rose wither[ing] on its virgin thorns," can do nothing to improve their situation. Instead, these men, "the *blooming* youths that grace

[the matron's] honoured side" will become "her *fallen* blossoms [who] strew a foreign strand" (emphasis added), their blood literally ensanguining the fields and their deaths symbolically heralding England's bleak future. If "commerce, like beauty, knows no second spring," then the England presented in the second and third stanzas has already achieved this glamour and is quickly fading into a somber winter: "Man calls to Famine, nor invokes in vain, Disease and Rapine follow in her train." As Barbauld concludes in the last stanza, "fairest flowers expand but to decay," and these flowers have already prospered in their spring; now, "the worm is in thy [England's] core, thy glories pass away." By aligning England's fate with the changing of seasons, Barbauld shows how a constantly flourishing British Empire is unattainable and how, as with all things in nature, it must eventually collapse to yield to the growing magnificence and genius of the Americas.

Barbauld's suggestion that the progression of empire is inevitable echoes and is reinforced by Edward Gibbon's claims in his popular book *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776). In the fifth stanza, the poet bluntly proclaims, "Yes, thou [Britain] must droop; thy Midas dream is o'er; The golden tide of commerce leaves thy shore." According to Barbauld, this decline is due to extravagance and corruption. She refers to England's "baseless wealth" (the country's un-backed paper currency) in the fourth stanza and concludes by writing, "Arts, arms and wealth destroy the fruits they bring…Crime walks thy [Britain's] streets, Fraud earns her unblessed bread." In other words, if empire succeeds, it must also eventually fail. Her pronouncements are a direct extrapolation of what Gibbon lays out in *History* onto Britain. Gibbon writes, "The decline of Rome was the *natural and inevitable* result of immoderate greatness. Prosperity ripened the principles of decay…the stupendous fabric yielded to the pressure of its own weight"

(emphasis added).[2] As both a student and teacher of history, Barbauld was certainly familiar with *History*, which, upon its publication, sparked controversial discussions of empire across the nation.[3] That she should turn to and incorporate her historical learning into a prophetic poem of English ruin comes as no surprise. That she chooses to extend Gibbon's assertion emphasizes her own conviction that the British Empire will soon see its demise.

In sum then, empire is male-dominated and its progression inevitable. Great nations will rise and fall naturally, as the Genius seizes and leaves with all that is necessary for civilization's success. For example, feminized Commerce, Plenty and fertile earth will cease to exist, forced to travel in the train of the Genius. When he departs, England will be nothing more than a graveyard, with its "hallowed mansions of the silent dead…chill sepulchral marbles...[and] antique shrine." The architectural wonders of London will also decay, disintegrating into "some crumbling turret…the broken stair with perilous step…[and] scattered hamlets." The gloomy picture Barbauld paints seems to indicate nothing can escape the powers of the Genius, and nothing can stem the tide of empire decline…

…Which, however, makes it quite interesting that the earlier part of *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* focuses so heavily on cultural hegemony, particularly in relation to the transference of literature. Barbauld spends stanzas listing the names of Britain's most notable scholars, from Locke and Paley to Milton and Newton. The poem's chronological sequence of events shows the trajectory of cultural/literary movement even before Barbauld's introduction of the Genius and thus appears to suggest cultural hegemony (i.e.

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[2] Crocco, Francesco. "The Colonial Subtext of Anna Letitia Barbauld's 'Eighteen Hundred and Eleven'." *The Wordsworth Circle* 41.2 (Spring 2010): 91-94.
[3] McCarthy, William. *Anna Letitia Barbauld: Voice of the Enlightenment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 472.

what happens to the artistic and philosophical remnants of a great empire) lies outside his influence. (Interestingly, of Commerce, Nature, etc., Art is masculine – "Art plies his tools" – which could suggest Art is a little more autonomous.) With no pressure from the Genius and despite the "Enfeebling Luxury…[and] ghastly Want" he leaves behind in England, the British Empire has already independently "planted…the finer sense of morals and of art" in "nations beyond the Appalachian hills" to the extent that the Americans will "think thy [England's] thoughts…thy leading star direct their search for truth." While many scholars look at how these proclamations will affect the new empire – Nicholas Birns suggests the new empire's literature will only be more of the same, without any "cathartic, Whitmanian barbaric yawp"[4] – taking the opposite approach and examining the impact they have on how the *old* empire will be remembered reveals an important, albeit small, sphere of female potential and authority.

Barbauld's lengthy apostrophe to the poet and dramatist Joanna Baillie is one of the most striking instances in the sixth stanza, if not throughout the whole poem, because it provides the opportunity for a woman writer to receive the recognition and agency she deserves. Although Baillie is the only female artist mentioned in *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*, the eight lines dedicated to her are longer than any given to other male writers and philosophers, and this bears deeper examination. Barbauld first writes of the "high-souled strains" of "loved Joanna" and "Shakespeare's noble rage…with alternate passion shak[ing] the stage" before elaborating on two of Baillie's *Plays on the Passions*. As Birns notes, "[The apostrophe] puts the playwright…on a par with Shakespeare, but also suggests that she will

[4] Birns, Nicholas. "'Thy World, Columbus!": Barbauld and Global Space, 1803, "1811", 1812, 2003." *European Romantic Review* 16.5 (Dec. 2005): 545-562. Print.

be given performances, and her reputation given justice, in America."[5] For a female writer to be treated as equally as any of her male counterparts would have been an accomplishment in the early nineteenth century; throughout her life, Baillie was conscious of the play world's resistance against female dramatists and continually disappointed by critical reception of her work. As she writes to her friend and fellow playwright Margaret Holford in 1823, "If you mean to offer it to the Stage or if you mean to publish it…Let the Author's name be kept a profound secret. It will have a better chance of success being supposed to come from the pen of the most obscure person who has the honour to wear a pair of breeches, than a petticoated worthy of the first distinction."[6] Though her first volume of *Plays on the Passions* was widely acclaimed upon its 1798 anonymous first publication, box office and print revenues immediately dropped upon the disclosure of Baillie's identity and gender. By putting Baillie on an equal footing with Shakespeare, Barbauld breaks nineteenth-century English society's bias towards male writers, while Baillie's involvement in cultural hegemony over the Americas places her above the patriarchal system of empire/the Genius. In fact, the poem furthers future appreciation of Baillie by proposing that her audiences will morally improve and not fall into the same traps her characters, Basil and Ethwald, do[7] – Baillie's literary canon not only provides an avenue for education but also a means for changes in behavior, that is, moral amendment. No other writer in *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* is given as much influence over his reading public as Baillie is.

Barbauld's prophetic satire *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* certainly pushes the limits of what topics were open to "poetesses," and in raising Baillie, Barbauld also seems to raise

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[5] Birns, Nicholas. 547.
[6] Baillie, Joanna. *Further Letters of Joanna Baillie*. Ed. Thomas McLean. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2010. 90-91. Print.
[7] Birns, Nicholas. 547.

herself, proposing the transference of literature to the "New World" will include female writers' works. Perhaps what most obviously transgresses gender boundaries is Barbauld's head-on tackling of political issues (what Croker took so much offense to), a subject often reserved for male writers, but she also seems to establish female authority formally and tonally. Rachel Golland suggests her impersonal, instructive attitude results from a desire to refute "the male critique of women as too emotional…[which is] what compels her to employ a neoclassical, traditional rhyme scheme of heroic couplets. The identification of this old-fashioned form with the rational, conservative language associated with Alexander Pope might help Barbauld to dispel some prejudices toward her own work as a woman in a man's genre."[8] As noted earlier, her entrance into the political arena is still marked with femininity, as the progression of empire is colored with images of flowers and the suffering of *both* women and men. Though this may make Barbauld seem slightly self-congratulatory, perhaps she too hoped to be remembered and recognized by later generations, in the same ways she portrays "British tongues…prolong[ing]…Tully's eloquence and Maro's song" and the future veneration of Joanna Baillie. As McCarthy notes, "Being a liberal Dissenter in Britain prepared Barbauld to sympathize with America, and to be sympathetically received in America."[9] The poet may also have pinned her hopes on the likes of Reverend William Turner and his son on the transference of her literature. The Reverend told his son in 1778 at Warrington:

> Your best way will be to gather up…a good stock of the arts & sciences of this Country, & if you find a weight of despotism & wretchedness overwhelm this hemisphere, follow the course of the Sun to that country

[8] Golland, Rachel. "Otherness in Anna Letitia Barbauld's 'Eighteen Hundred and Eleven': Prophesizing Terror in 19th Century England." *The Rutgers Journal of Comparative Literature* 9 (2008), 35-48. Print.
[9] McCarthy, William. "How Dissent Made Anna Letitia Barbauld and What She Made of Dissent." *Religious Dissent and the Aikin-Barbauld Circle, 1740-1860*. Ed. Felicity James and Ian Inkster. London: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 54. Print.

> where freedom has already fixed her standard…& where the sciences & arts, wealth & power, will soon gather under her, & assist to adorn & strengthen her empire there.[10]

The Dissenters, especially the students and tutors at Warrington,[11] received and often welcomed Barbauld's work, but by the 1810s, the community, facing prejudice and legal and political difficulties, had diminished, which might explain some of the harsh backlash she faced after *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*'s publication. However, as Barbauld points out – "even the exiles her [England's] just laws disclaim, people a continent and build a name" – many of these Dissenters, such as the scientist and clergyman Joseph Priestley, had fled to other lands, including America, and, like Turner's son, would bring over Britain's best literary and scientific work, some of which would hopefully include Baillie's and Barbauld's own. Hence, while England may deteriorate, these women writers' works would be remembered in the United States and there, receive the admiration and respect they deserve. Outside the powers of the Genius and beyond the control of denouncing critics, a realm of female authority and agency, embodied by Baillie and Barbauld, thus emerges. The unjust treatment of women artists and their works will, unlike the rise and fall of empire, not be inevitable. Each new empire will incorporate the best ideologies of the old and allow for more gender equality.

Barbauld's Genius is a masculine figure, dominating the necessities of empire success, and placing civilization within a male-dominated context. His progression, which Barbauld positions within seasonal and historical frameworks, is both inevitable and natural as he travels from one country to the next. What escapes from this patriarchal system is the movement of cultural hegemony, more specifically of literature, and this offers an

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[10] *Ibid.*

[11] Rosenbaum, Susan. "'A Thing Unknown, Without a Name': Anna Laetitia Barbauld and the Illegible Signature." *Studies in Romanticism* (Sept. 2001). Print.

opportunity for more authority and agency for female writers, specifically Joanna Baillie and Anna Barbauld herself. Baillie's play, *Count Basil*, was staged "on a larger scale than ever before"[12] in New York City and Washington, D.C. in 2003. And as for Anna Barbauld, after having been referred to as a "fatadical spinster" by Croker[13] and having her Juvenalian satire *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* dismissed as "cowardly, time-serving, Presbyterian"[14] and "in the most extraordinary degree unkindly and unpatriotic – we had almost said unfilial,"[15] Barbauld is finally achieving recognition in literary and scholarly circles as the British Romantic canon expands to include more women. Developing ways to analyze these female writers will prove invaluable in extending the meanings of and behind Romanticism and will further serve to break the (still existing) gender boundaries Barbauld and her female contemporaries struggled to negotiate and overcome in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

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[12] Birns, Nicholas. 547.
[13] *The Quarterly Review* 7 (1812). Quoted in Martin, Jennifer Krusinger. "Raising a Nation: Anna Letitia Barbauld as Artistic and Pedagogic Mother of the Romantic Citizen." Diss. Northeastern University, 2010. Print.
[14] *Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and their Writers*. Ed. Edith J. Morley. London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1938. Quoted in Newlyn, Lucy. *Reading, Writing and Romanticism: The Anxiety of Influence*. London: Oxford University Press, 2003. 164-169. Print.
[15] *Eclectic Review*, 8: 474. Quoted in Newlyn, Lucy. *Reading, Writing, and Romanticism: The Anxiety of Influence.*

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