

“Kindred powers in nature”: Anna Barbauld and S. T. Coleridge

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Coleridge's changing regard for Anna Barbauld is often presented by Coleridgeans as a measure of his development as a thinker. If we examine this relationship from Barbauld's point of view we might see things differently. David Fairer has suggested that Coleridge's shift from ardent admiration for Anna Barbauld (walking from Stowey to Bristol to see her) to ungentlemanly contempt (the Mistress Bare and Bald jokes with Charles Lamb) is a measure of Coleridge's need to see progression in himself. David Fairer suggests that Barbauld was just one in a series of influences which Coleridge needed to feel that he had outgrown. The image of him outgrowing the influence of a well-known writer of children's literature is compelling, and partly explains why Coleridge might have felt the need to diminish both her and his 'babyish' self: hence his caricature of her Unitarianism as a 'dry stick of Licorish'. [1]

To re-examine the way Coleridge cast off his former self, I'd like to suggest that the terms of Coleridge's early admiration for Anna Barbauld are almost all based on her status as a moral guide: the 'great and excellent woman Mrs. Barbauld' (1798); 'admirable people!' (about Mr. and Mrs. Barbauld in 1800) 'that wonderful Propriety of Mind' (1800).[2] Mingled with this regard was Coleridge's awareness of Mrs. Barbauld as an influence in the reviews stakes: in 1796 Coleridge told Southey that he 'owed' a favourable review of *Joan of Arc* in the *Analytic* to 'Estlin's praises of the poem at Mrs.

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Barbauld's'. [3] In 1800 we find Coleridge attempting to secure a good review of *Lyrical Ballads* by sending a copy to Mrs. Barbauld.[4]

The sudden reversal of Coleridge's good opinion seems to have been occasioned by an unfavourable review of Lamb's *John Woodvil* which Coleridge and Lamb attributed to Mrs. Barbauld: this continued to poison their opinion of her even after Crabb Robinson's assurances that she was not the author. Having built her up as a benign fairy godmother, Coleridge begins to refer to her as a cold step-mother. From 1804 onwards she becomes a shared joke between Lamb and Coleridge; her alleged comment that 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' was improbable and lacked a moral, together with her children's stories, has been used to place her with the moral and hence unimaginative or un-Romantic school of poetry.[5] Betsy Rodgers's 1958 study of Mrs. Barbauld claims, 'she never escaped from the rigidly didactic and rational outlook of an earlier generation'. [6] After Barbauld's death, and trying to be as positive as possible, Henry Crabb Robinson writes - 'even her poems have gratified me tho' I have studied in a school of deeper wisdom and endeavoured to raise myself to the apprehension of works of a higher imagination'. [7] So Barbauld is often 'fixed' as a lower, lesser, poet than Coleridge. By the time we reach the 1811 lecture series, he is openly disparaging about her poetry and her Unitarianism but this obscures the important influence she had exerted at the time that Coleridge was developing

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most rapidly as a poet. He outgrew Barbauld when he outgrew a crucial phase in his own poetic creativity.

What I would like to do now is to open up a space for speculation about how we might see Anna Barbauld and S.T.C. as poetic doubles. The editorial work of J.C.C. Mays is encouraging us to look at Coleridge as much more of a rhymester than previous editors have allowed; Mays sees the playful, associative, doggerel side of Coleridge as making a significant contribution to his canonical presence. With this possibility about Coleridge in mind, I'd like to suggest that we can see Mrs. Barbauld as daring, imaginative, inventive and Romantic - with a capacity for mental voyages equal to Coleridge's and a power of observation, stripping away the film of familiarity, which very often exceeds his. I'm going to draw on several senses of the word speculation: as sight and vision, especially intelligent or comprehending vision; as observation or examination -especially of the heavens and the stars; as contemplation and profound study; and as abstract or hypothetical reasoning especially of a conjectural nature (OED). I shall leave aside the sense of business ventures or risks which offer the chance of great gain, although Coleridge's little-discussed poem 'To Fortune: On Buying a Ticket in the Irish Lottery' did tempt me to re-examine Barbauld's poem 'What do the Futures Speak of?'

A key figure in this speculative relationship is Joseph Priestley: coincidentally he died in 1804, the year in which Coleridge's regard for Barbauld collapsed. Priestley was described by Coleridge as Nature's 'gazing son' in his *Sonnets on Eminent Characters* (1794). Coleridge was in his early twenties when he wrote this, about the same age as Anna Barbauld had been when Priestley taught at the famous Warrington Academy where her father was a tutor. Priestley arrived there in 1761 when he was 28 years old and Anna Barbauld - then Aikin - was 18; he left to take up a situation at Leeds six years later when she was 24. In his memoirs, Priestley wrote that his removal to

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Leeds enabled him to resume the application of Speculative Theology which he had put to one side whilst at Warrington, working as a tutor in Languages and Belles Lettres. He also wrote that in his early life he was a great versifier and that it was the 'perusal of some verses of [his] that first induced [Anna Aikin] to write anything in verse [...] several of her first poems were written when she was in my house on occasions that occurred while she was there.'[8]

Priestley set a high value on the activity of speculation. In his memoirs he recorded it as an advantage for which he was truly thankful that his health received a check when he was young since, as he said, 'a muscular habit from high health, and strong spirits, are not [...] in general accompanied with that sensibility of mind, which is both favourable to piety, and to speculative pursuits.'[9] Priestley, however, was also a scientist and in the Preface to his work on *Natural Philosophy* (1779-86) wrote that '*speculation*, without *experiment*, has always been the bane of true philosophy'.[10] It was Priestley's experimental activity which led to the composition of 'The Mouse's Petition' in which Barbauld counterpoises Priestley the scientist with Priestley the Unitarian philosopher. The mouse is confined in a trap by Dr. Priestley 'for the sake of making experiments with different kinds of air' and it addresses Priestley in the poem to warn him to

Beware, lest in the worm you crush
A brother's soul you find;
And tremble lest thy luckless hand

Dislodge a kindred mind.[11]

Barbauld neatly captures the distinction between scientist and philosopher in the phrase 'kinds of air' and 'kindred mind'. We are told that philosophical speculation over-ruled the necessity of making experiment and the mouse was released.

A way in which Priestley can help us see Barbauld and Coleridge working in parallel is in the matter of detailed attention to nature. This different quality of natural observation is accepted as a characteristic of Romantic poetry. We can draw on H.W. Piper's summary of a change in attitude: 'in the eighteenth century the poets had seen the universe as the beautiful handiwork of God; the Romantics were able to see it as full of human significance and full of a life which answered to man's [...] what was new in the Romantic period was the belief that through the imagination, a real communication was possible between man and the forms of nature.'[12] Unitarianism had an obvious part to play in this change. Priestley's devout Unitarian approach to science is evident in his writing on *Vision, Light, and Colours* (1772). There he offers 'a striking lesson to all philosophers, not to despise the most trifling observation; or to withdraw their attention and study from those powers of nature, or even those single facts, which may seem, at first sight, to be the most insignificant. [...] Every new fact,' Priestley claimed, 'should be carefully examined, as a treasure of unknown value, the real worth of which time, and the discovery of other kindred powers in nature, may bring to light.'[13] Like all the Romantics, Barbauld was intensely interested in new scientific discoveries. Her works of natural

observation may be seen as a poetic development of Addison's picture of myriads of living creatures from Spectator No. 519 (Oct. 25, 1712), which he refers to as 'a speculation [he has] often pursued with great pleasure':

Every part of matter is peopled; every green leaf swarms with inhabitants. There is scarce a single humour in the body of a man, or of any other animal, in which our glasses do not discover myriads of living creatures [...] we find [...] in marble itself, innumerable cells and cavities that are crowded with such imperceptible inhabitants as are too little for the naked eye to discover.[14]

Addison presents a 'scale of being' with an ordered ascent from 'the most despicable insect' to man. Barbauld's poem 'To Mrs. Priestley, with some Drawings of Birds and Insects' goes beyond Addison's account of the respective situations of creation into descriptive specificity for its own sake. In particular, Barbauld's use of colour defines a move away from Addison, Newton and Locke. Addison had argued that light and colours are only ideas in the mind and not qualities that have any existence in matter. Coleridge we know disagreed with this view - 'To me, I confess, Newton's positions [...] have always [...] appeared monstrous FICTIONS!' - and I think we can see that Barbauld disagreed with it first.[15] McCarthy and Kraft's edition of Barbauld's work comments that the poem begins with 'neoclassical cliché' but then for the rest of the poem notes that 'the sources of ALA's zoological information are not fully known' (p.224). This suggests that Barbauld is doing something unusual, and I think what we find in these lines is the battle between generality and the

particular which also marks Coleridge's early verse. The passage on birds inclines more to the general:

Yet who the various nations can declare
That plow with busy wing the peopled air?
These cleave the crumbling bark for insect food;
Those dip their crooked beak in kindred blood:
Some haunt the rushy moor, the lonely woods;
Some bathe their silver plumage in the floods; (ll.21-26)

The 'peopled air' is a phrase found elsewhere in 18th century poetry - Thomas Gray's 'Ode on the Spring' (1742), for example, describes how 'through the peopled air/ The busy murmur glows'.^[16] Gray's Ode describes 'the insect youth' and then draws an analogy with humankind 'To Contemplation's sober eye/Such is the race of man'. Barbauld, however, is using the phrase to suggest that the earth is both full and able to communicate.^[17] Her lines embrace Gray's Ode - bathing silver plumage in the floods, for example, recalls an earlier eighteenth-century poetic idiom. But when we reach the passage on the 'Insect race' we find something much less predictable:

Not so the Insect race, ordain'd to keep
The lazy sabbath of a half-year's sleep.
Entomb'd, beneath the filmy web they lie,
And wait the influence of a kinder sky;
When vernal sun-beams pierce their dark retreat,
The heaving tomb distends with vital heat;
The full form'd brood impatient of their cell
Start from their trance, and burst their silken shell;
Trembling a-while they stand, and scarcely dare
To launch at once upon the untried air:
At length assur'd, they catch the favouring gale

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And leave their sordid spoils and high in Ether sail.
So when Rinaldo struck the conscious rind,
He found a nymph in every trunk confin'd;
The forest labours with convulsive throes,
The bursting trees the lovely births disclose,
And a gay troop of damsels around him stood,
Where late was rugged bark and lifeless wood.
Lo! the bright train their radiant wings unfold,
With silver fring'd and freckl'd o'er with gold:
On the gay bosom of some fragrant flower
They idly fluttering live their little hour;
Their life all pleasure, and their task all play,
All spring their age, and sunshine all their day. (ll.73-96).

Again we sense echoes from the earlier eighteenth-century: the ‘filmy web’ seems to recall Pope’s description of Ulysses’s clothing in *Odyssey* Book XIX, but Barbauld is turning a description of epic artifice to the minute natural world. Her couplets deliver unflinching detail very precisely, both the beautiful and the grotesque: according to the poetry database the phrase ‘sordid spoils’ has no eighteenth-century precedent. The use of the word ‘bursting’ is interesting as it is one which also signals a change in Coleridge’s way of looking at landscape: in the lines on Brockley Coomb we find ‘From the forc’d fissures of the naked rock/ The Yew tree bursts!’[18] It carries a sense of shock and violence on a small scale which we don’t find in Thomson or Young or the Wesley brothers where ‘bursting’ is always associated with tombs, tempests, patriotic or heroic emotions and cosmic prospects. In the same way, ‘convulsive throes’ turn up frequently in hymns by Charles and John Wesley where Satan’s captive struggles ‘with convulsive throes’. Here, Barbauld is naturalising religious language. Another point of interest in the poem is her imaginative sympathy with things idle, fluttering and playful:

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motions which seem to prefigure an early Coleridgean image of the fancy.

If we turn to examine Coleridge’s natural observation in his early verse we find that, for the most part, it lags behind the precision of his Notebooks. To compare with ‘The Mouse’s Petition’ we have Coleridge on ‘To a Young Ass’ (1794):

Poor little Foal of an oppressed Race!
 I love the languid Patience of thy face:
 And oft with gentle hand I give thee bread,
 And clap thy ragged Coat, and pat thy head. (ll.1-4)

and Coleridge fantasizes about liberating his ‘brother’ and taking it to the ‘Dell of Peace and mild Equality’:

How thou wouldst toss thy heels in gamesome play,
 And frisk about, as Lamb or Kitten gay!
 Yea! and more musically sweet to me
 Thy dissonant harsh Bray of Joy would be,
 Than warbled melodies that soothe to rest
 The tumult of some SCOUNDREL Monarch’s breast!
 (ll.31-36)

Like Barbauld’s ‘The Mouse’s Petition’, the poem is humorous and it shows Coleridge writing out of the Dissenting tradition of kindness to animals, and a ‘kindred’ community in the surrounding world. But the phrase ‘warbled melodies’ points us to a tradition of generalized nature which appears very frequently in Coleridge’s early 1790s verse. Akenside writes of the ‘warbling shade’ and Goldsmith of the ‘warbling grove’. In Coleridge’s sonnet to La Fayette ‘warbled strains are heard’; in ‘Lines on an Autumnal Evening’ Coleridge gives us ‘warblings of the grove’ and ‘warbled song’ and in ‘Songs of the Pixies’:

Here the wren of softest note

Builds its nest and warbles well;
 Here the blackbird strains his throat;
 Welcome, LADIES! to our cell. (ll.5-8)

The word 'strains' here seems particularly unhappy. Unlike 'swells', it offers the chance of a pun on the sense of a musical sequence, but it is also open to the suggestion of an effort to vomit. We can hear a more effective contest between the general and the particular in Coleridge's 'Lines on an Autumnal Evening' which begins:

O thou wild FANCY, check thy wing! No more
 Those thin white flakes, those purple clouds explore! (ll.1-2)

The first line is general - Coleridge's early verses give us conventional personifications like shadowy pleasure on wings; British freedom on wings; Fancy, Folly; Wisdom; Love; Memory; Hope on wings and Hours on pinions. The second line, however, looks forward to the detailed observation of the Conversation poems or the flakes of cloud in 'Christabel'. In Coleridge's early verse, birds in particular are allegorical figures for moralistic purposes such as the image of the 'Unfortunate Woman at the Theatre' as a mute and moulting skylark (1797), 'The Raven' or the image of humans as

we, poor Insects of a few short Hours [...]
 Proud to believe that with more active powers
 On rapid many-coloured Wing
 We thro' one bright perpetual Spring
 Shall hover round the Fruits and Flowers
 ('From an Unpublished Poem' 1796)

Coleridge rarely gives vivid images of living creatures in his early verse. In his later and more mature verse, it is always the sound of insects or birds - particularly bees and skylarks - a sound from a source unseen which stirs his imagination. If we compare both writers in their twenties, Barbauld is the writer who more often captures the

visual strangeness of that world in all its minute and perilous beauty. Compare Coleridge's 'rapid many-coloured wing' with Barbauld's

Their wings with azure, green, and purple gloss'd,
 Studded with colour'd eyes, with gems emboss'd,
 Inlaid with pearl, and mark'd with various stains
 Of lively crimson thro' their dusky veins
 (To Mrs. P[riestley], with some Drawings of Birds and Insects', ll.105-8)

'Dusky veins' is a phrase which seems to have no eighteenth-century precedent. Only on very rare occasions do we find a comparable visual defamiliarization of living creatures in Coleridge's verse up to 1802. 'The Nightingale' is one of those rare moments when the natural world is estranged in half-light:

On moonlight bushes,
Whose dewy leaflets are but half-disclosed,
You may perchance behold them on the twigs,
Their bright, bright eyes, their eyes both bright and full,
Glistening, while many a glow-worm in the shade
Lights up her love-torch (ll.64-9)

It is a blend of sharp visual particularity together with what is undisclosed which makes the lines so effective. We feel we are on the verge of a discovery because we see edges very distinctly - leaflets, twigs, eyes and then the pressure is lost with the general euphemism of the love-torch.[19] The lines from 'The Nightingale' give us speculation in the sense of examination and conjecture - in this case, conversational conjecture. The excitement comes when the iambic pentameter rhythm is disturbed ('You may perchance behold them// Their bright, bright eyes'). Anna Barbauld's blank verse too, shows a capacity for rhythmical disturbance which recreates the

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unpredictability of nature and the human mind. An example of this occurs in 'Corsica' (1769) composed when Anna Barbauld was 26. Corsica in this poem is a landscape of the mind and of the freedom of the mind:

Hail to thy rocky, deep indented shores,
And pointed cliffs, which hear the chafing deep
Incessant foaming round their shaggy sides [...]
Thy swelling mountains, brown with solemn shade
Of various trees, that wave their giant arms
O'er the rough sons of freedom; lofty pines,
And hardy fir, and ilex ever green,
And spreading chestnut, with each humbler plant,
And shrub of fragrant leaf, that clothes their sides
With living verdure; whence the clust'ring bee
Extracts her golden dews: the shining box,
And sweet-leav'd myrtle, aromatic thyme,
The prickly juniper, and the green leaf
Which feeds the spinning worm; while glowing bright
Beneath the various foliage, wildly spreads
The arbutus, and rears his scarlet fruit
Luxuriant, mantling o'er the craggy steeps. (ll.35-61)

The energy which drives those lines is to do with freedom - not restraint or dacticism. Again scale and particularity are important. The poem takes imaginative pleasure from the luxuriant variety

of a tangled wood and a revolutionary energy which ‘wildly spreads’ - it’s partly Milton’s Eden but it’s also a condition of imaginative speculation. I would like to suggest, therefore, that the young Barbauld and Coleridge were drawn to speculation and that they used verse for their experiments. Both writers use a tremendous range of poetic modes and verse forms from extempore epigrams to hymns and odes and blank verse contemplations.

Priestley’s *Lectures on Oratory and Criticism* (1777), based on his Warrington lectures, makes clear that Barbauld and Coleridge followed traditional assumptions about propriety of form: ‘a serious

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subject, which wholly engrosses the mind’ should be delivered in plain prose, ‘the only language of real serious emotions and passions.’ We can see this in their pamphlet writing. ‘On the other hand, if the composition be not intended to raise any very serious emotion, but be of such a nature as that it may easily leave the mind at liberty to attend to, and relish, a variety of different pleasures, *verse*, and even *rhyme*, [...] may give an additional poignancy and relish to it. In works of an intermediate nature, namely, such as moderately elevate and affect the mind, without wholly engrossing it, *blank verse* may be most suitable.’[20] In rhyming forms, he argues, the rhyming heroic (which is closer to prose) is better suited to serious subjects although Priestley allows that the Hymn form is entirely suitable for praise of the deity.

It is in the ‘works of an intermediate nature’ in particular that I think we can see Barbauld and Coleridge working most clearly together. I’d like to focus now on the shape of their best known blank verse compositions - Coleridge’s ‘Effusion XXXV’, later ‘The Eolian Harp’, and Barbauld’s ‘A Summer Evening’s Meditation’. If we look at the shape of both poems we see that they both begin by setting a scene before embarking on speculation. Joseph Priestley suggested this pattern in his lecture on oratory: ‘The generality of writers deliver their sentiments to the public upon subjects of speculation in a looser [...] method. Far from always laying down propositions, and then entering upon the proof of them, they as frequently begin with observations or experiments, and show how they lead to the principles they intend to establish.’[21]

Both poems begin with observation by establishing a time of intermediate light:

The shadows spread apace; while meek’d Eve,
Her cheek yet warm with blushes, slow retires

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Thro’ the Hesperian gardens of the west, (ll.14-16)

Coleridge sits with Sara her ‘soft cheek reclined’ as they

watch the clouds, that late were rich with light,
Slow sad’ning round, and mark the star of eve
Serenely brilliant! (such should Wisdom be)
Shine opposite! (ll.6-9)

The next lines have always been among my favourite pieces of Coleridgean exactitude: ‘How exquisite the scents/Snatch’d from yon bean-field!’. That said, a literal and pedestrian part of my brain has

always wondered about how a poem composed August 20th could invoke the fragrance of beanflowers (which, even in Scotland, flower much earlier in the year). Coleridge was clearly drawing on memory, but whose? Then, while researching Mrs. Barbauld's works, I encountered Dr. Aikin's *Calender of Nature*, and the entry for June:

a still more exquisite odour proceeds from the beans in blossom, of which Thomson speaks in this rapturous language: 'Let us walk/Where the breeze blows from yon extended field/ Of blossom'd beans. Arabia cannot boast/ A fuller gale of joy, than liberal, thence/ Breaks thro' the sense and takes the ravish'd soul'[22]

Possibly, we can suggest, Coleridge is remembering Thomson (through Aikin?) as he composes the setting for his own 'ravish'd soul'. Observation or the sense of sight frames both poems: Barbauld's poem begins with the 'mild maiden beams/ Of temper'd lustre' and ends with 'ravish'd sense' as Coleridge begins by watching the clouds or 'marking' the star and is brought to a conclusion by 'mild reproof' from the eye of his 'heart-honor'd Maid'. Visual

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perception, however, gives place to silence and the conditions for insight. Here is Coleridge:

and the world *so* hush'd!
The stilly murmur of the distant Sea
Tells us of Silence. (ll.10-12)

and Barbauld:

Nature's self is hush'd,
And, but a scatter'd leaf, which rustles thro'
The thick-wove foliage, not a sound is heard
To break the midnight air; tho' the raised ear,
Intensely listening, drinks in every breath.
How deep the silence. (ll.42-47)

In both, the verse moves from a charged, audible silence to erotic intimacy. In both cases, the intimate charge to the surroundings is lent by Unitarianism: 'the one life within us and abroad,/ Which meets all motion and becomes its soul'.[23] For both writers, the world is 'filled' but Barbauld is more explicitly in praise of God and the 'embryo GOD' in each 'self-collected soul'. The internal rhyme 'soul' and 'behold' alerts us to the startling contrast between 'self-collected' and 'stranger'. Barbauld's consideration of the stranger's 'high descent' leads her gradually upward to more cosmic speculation whilst Coleridge's plunge into the 'Soul of each', and God of all' is more immediately whimsical:

Full many a thought uncall'd and undetain'd,
And many idle flitting phantasies,
Traverse my indolent and passive brain. (ll.31-33)

I don't want to force the two poems into the same shape - and one of the most striking differences within similarity is the way Coleridge's

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poem grows out of indolence as an intermediary condition - 'half-yielding', 'on the midway slope', 'thro' half-clos'd eye-lids' where as Barbauld makes a more deliberate move into speculation: 'Seiz'd in thought, / On fancy's wild and roving wing I sail' and a little later, 'fearless thence/ I launch'. But they both portray fancy working as a kind of dance: Coleridge's 'sunbeams dance, like diamonds, on the main'; his organic Harps 'tremble into thought'. In 'A Summer Evening's Meditation'

the living eyes of heaven
Awake, quick kindling o'er the face of ether
One boundless blaze; ten thousand trembling fires,
And dancing lustres, where th'unsteady eye
Restless, and dazzled, wanders unconfin'd (ll.25-29)

Jupiter's 'huge gigantic bulk' we are told, 'Dances in ether like the lightest leaf' - Barbauld's playful view of the universe is ahead of Priestley's scientific speculation - almost as if the poem anticipates his theory that the physical world was made up of God's energy (although four years after Barbauld's poem was published, Priestley rejected the theory of aether in his 1777 *Disquisitions Concerning Matter and Spirit*). A peculiar sense of movement, I would like to suggest, is vital to the speculative writing of both Coleridge and Barbauld. This movement is a dancing, trembling, flitting sort of motion associated with the working of Fancy and a stage between childhood and adulthood. Moments like this are well-known in Coleridge's poetry: in 'The Destiny of Nations' spirits 'Dance sportively' before a reflection on the power of Fancy; we think of the fluttering film and 'idling Spirit' in 'Frost at Midnight' or the poet 'Silent with swimming sense' in 'This Lime Tree Bower, My Prison'; or the 'hovering' birds of Paradise and 'Bubbles that glitter as they rise and break' in 'The Eolian Harp'. For all her 'propriety of mind' Anna Barbauld's poetry is continually drawn to a space where 'soft affections play' as she writes in 'Verses Written in an Alcove' or

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where mirth may be found 'Still hovering' with the 'play' of 'lively fancy' in the verse to Amanda Priestley. In 'An Address to the Deity', Barbauld contemplates the final moments of her life when 'earth recedes before my swimming eye' and she will be able to view earth and a transcendent existence simultaneously. In one of her most anthologised poems, 'Washing Day', Barbauld ends the mock-heroic account of domestic labours by gazing away from the earth: after all the activity the last nine lines of the poem move into a different realm:

Then would I sit me down, and ponder much
Why washings were. Sometimes thro' the hollow bole
Of pipe amused we blew, and sent aloft
The floating bubbles, little dreaming then
To see, Mongolfier, thy silken ball
Ride buoyant thro' the clouds - so near approach

The sports of children and the toils of men.
Earth, air, and sky, and ocean, hath its bubbles,
And verse is one of them - this most of all. (ll.78-86)

Lots of recent anthologies of women Romantic poets use this poem as an example in the argument that the inclusion of domestic detail in poetry separates male from female writers in the period. I don't agree with this because Coleridge, for example, is perfectly capable of writing a mock-heroic 'Monody on a Tea Kettle' and because this poem is not just a miniature domestic epic - Barbauld reaches upwards, as so often with an act of speculation. The hot-air balloon combines childish play with 'the toils of men' or Priestley's experiments with air. Then, with another shift, Barbauld's Unitarianism allows her to link earth, air, sky and ocean with the workings of the human mind - verse is one of the bubbles which issue from our world. By describing it like this Barbauld embraces the sense of verse as a toy of thought but she does not simply dismiss the 'shapings of the unregenerate mind' as Coleridge does at the end of 'The Eolian Harp'. Instead the poem leaves verse as a cause for delight and wonder 'riding buoyant thro' the clouds'.

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The end of 'Washing Day' is in some respects slightly unusual. In many of her other poems, Barbauld contemplates 'unguarded sallies of the soul' or 'free prospects' and 'more unbounded scope' only to correct herself as she does in 'To Dr. Aikin' 'But hush my heart! nor strive to soar too high,/ Not for the tree of knowledge vainly sigh'. This dutiful reigning in of speculation 'within thy bounded sphere' is part of feminine propriety but also (and this is what Barbauld and Coleridge have in common) a combination of Christian responsibility and a scientific obligation.[24] Coleridge incorporates a rebuke to 'babbling philosophy' in the 'Eolian Harp' where his experimental 'And what if' meets with mild correction from Sara. Sara's reproof fulfils the Christian duty of mutual exhortation which was taken very seriously by Coleridge (as a sermon writer) and by Anna Barbauld. However, there is a sense in which both poets wavered over whether the advice that could be given to 'sinful and most miserable man' was the same as advice that ought to be offered to a poet.

Writing on poetry, Priestley argued that 'some bounds [...] must be set to the licentiousness of the human imagination, particularly that of poets, which otherwise would ramble from one subject to another by very slight transitions, such as may be forgotten the moment they have been made use of, [...] so that, though a real train of connected ideas transmitted the thoughts of the poet [...] there remain no traces of that medium of transition, and the reader can perceive no connexion at all between the parts of it'.[25]

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We have seen how both Coleridge and Mrs. Barbauld could wander 'beyond the cloud-wrapt sky' and how they are both conscious of their tendency to 'wander' or 'soar'. In a postscript of 1800, however, Coleridge described the difference between them as if Mrs. Barbauld were completely earth-bound while he alone exhibited the Mongolfier potential:

She has great *acuteness*, very great - yet how steadily she keeps it within the bounds of practical Reason. This I almost envy as well as admire - My own Subtleties too often lead me into strange (tho' God be praised) transient Out-of-the-waynesses. Oft like a winged Spider, I am entangled in a new spun web - but never fear for me, 'tis but the flutter of my wings - & off I am again![26]

It is easy to see here how Coleridge expects his recipient to appreciate his 'out-of-the-waynesses'. The 'bounds of practical reason' are there as a measure of limitation as well as strength. But just because bounds are expressed does not mean that one cannot see beyond them. Betsy Rodgers's argument that Barbauld 'never escaped from the rigidly didactic and rational outlook of an earlier generation' misrepresents the 'rigidity' of Barbauld and that earlier generation.

We can examine Barbauld's testing of propriety in a little more detail if we turn to one of her best-known didactic pieces, the essay 'The Hill of Science: A Vision'. In the penultimate section of my paper I would like to consider the relationship of this essay with Barbauld's verses 'To Mr. S.T. Coleridge'. The 'Hill of Science' appeared in the volume *Miscellaneous Pieces in Prose* jointly edited by J. and A.L. Aikin in 1773.

The essay begins with a drowsy reverie and moves into the territory of allegory. The Hill of Science is topped by a temple in which truth sits with pure light beaming from her countenance. About half way up the hill, however (remember that Coleridge is on midway

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slope in 'The Eolian Harp'), a thick forest grows on each side of the path. This forest is, we are told,

'covered with continual fogs, and cut out into labyrinths, cross alleys, and serpentine walks, entangled with thorns and briars. This was called the *wood of error*...' Nearby, in the pleasantest part of the mountain were placed the bowers of the Muses, the fields of fiction and the *dark walk of allegory* 'so artificially shaded, that the light at noon-day was never stronger than that of a bright moon-shine. This gave it a pleasingly romantic air for those who delighted in contemplation.' The paths and alleys of allegory were 'perplexed with intricate windings', and all terminated with the statue of a Grace, a virtue, or a muse.[27]

So Barbauld's dense wood of error with its thick shade and labyrinthine paths is very similar to the dark walk of contemplation (and to the tangled wood of free Corsica). When Barbauld turns her attention to those climbing the mountain, the confusion between the moral value of the search for truth and the aesthetic value of imaginative genius becomes even more marked:

I turned my eye towards the multitudes who were climbing the steep ascent, and observed amongst them a youth of lively look, a piercing eye, and something fiery and irregular in all his motions. His name was GENIUS. He darted like an eagle up the mountain, and left his companions gazing after him with envy and admiration: but his progress was unequal and interrupted by a thousand caprices. When Pleasure warbled in the valley he mingled in her train. When Pride beckoned toward the precipice he ventured to the tottering edge. He delighted in devious and untried paths; and made so many excursions from the road that his feebler companions often outstripped him.[28]

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The Muses, we are told, regard this figure with partiality. A lot of his energy is wasted but we feel the appeal of his excursions, we envy him. Genius, pleasure and poetry are all shown to be of dubious moral standing but immensely attractive for all that. Of all the seducers who were attempting to draw

away the votaries of truth, INDOLENCE is the most beguiling. In Barbauld's vision she persuades her victims simply to delay,

as they glided down the *stream of insignificance*; a dark and sluggish water, which is curled by no breeze, and enlivened by no murmur, till it falls into a dead sea, where the startled passengers are awakened by the shock, and the next moment buried in the gulph of oblivion.[29]

The little sketch of the pleasures and pains of indolence has, I think particular relevance to Coleridge. Indolence is the other side of the creative idling spirit which flutters and flaps and darts in his early poetry and 'Kubla Khan' follows the indolent imagination 'with a mazy motion' until it too sinks into Barbauld's 'dead sea' or lifeless ocean.

Barbauld did not know Coleridge when she wrote 'The Hill of Science' - she was probably thinking of poets like Young and Collins. What I want to stress is the way that Barbauld's approach to poetic genius is far from a consistent rigid didacticism. The moral problem of Genius, I think preoccupied Barbauld throughout her life. In the essay 'Against Inconsistency in our Expectations' we are told that men of Genius 'feel themselves lifted above the common bulk of mankind' but also that 'their excentricity and turn for speculation disqualifies them for the business of the world' so they are partly admonished and partly excused.[30] In her prefatory essay to the edition of Collins she produced in 1797, Barbauld wrote:

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A real poet must always appear indolent to the man of the world. The alacrity and method of business is not to be expected in his occupation. His mind works in silence, and exhausts itself with the various emotions which it cherishes, while to a common eye it appears fixed in a stupid apathy. The poet requires long intervals of ease and leisure, his imagination should be fed with novelty, and his ear soothed by praise.[31]

We could imagine that as music to Coleridge (and Wordsworth), but Barbauld's poem to Mr. S.T. Coleridge (dated September 1797 just after they met for the first time) was much less certain about the special dispensation of the poet: in this poem, all the vocabulary of flitting, swimming, and floating recurs as a warning and an exploration of the pleasures and pains of the desultory stimulation.[32] The poem recognizes that Coleridge's best creativity is a flicker away from vacancy:

Midway the hill of Science, after steep
And rugged paths that tire th'unpractised feet
A Grove extends, in tangled mazes wrought,
And fill'd with strange enchantment: (ll.1-4)

Nor seldom *Indolence* these lawns among
Fixes her turf-built seat, and wears the garb
Of deep philosophy, and museful sits,
In dreamy twilight of the vacant mind,
Soothed by the whispering shade; for soothing soft
The shades, and vistas lengthening into air,
With moon beam rainbows tinted. Here each mind

Of finer mold, acute and delicate,
In its high progress to eternal truth

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Rests for a space, in fairy bowers entranced;
And loves the softened light and tender gloom;
And, pampered with most unsubstantial food,
Looks down indignant on the grosser world,
And matter's cumbrous shapings. Youth below'd
Of Science - of the Muse below'd, not here,
Not in the maze of metaphysic lore
Build thou thy place of resting; lightly tread
The dangerous ground (19-36)

Barbauld is using blank verse in an entirely different way here - we have all the cushioned synaesthesia and enjambement of Indolence then all the firm caution and resolve of 'Looks down'; 'Not here, /Not in' and the brilliant mimetic effect of 'lightly tread/ This dangerous ground'. It is a heart-felt warning 'Now heaven conduct thee with a Parent's Love', and her exhortation to the poet to pursue 'Active scenes' seems to have struck a chord in Coleridge's mind about the time of the visit to Barbauld in Bristol. On 1 August 1797, Coleridge describes Thelwall's 'Energetic Activity, of mind and of heart [...] he is the man for action'.^[33] Coleridge knew that he wasn't the man for action and Mrs. Barbauld knew that he knew. The proximity of their views about his imaginative strengths and weaknesses can be seen in a poem which Coleridge wrote in 1796, 'To A Young Friend on his proposing to domesticate with the Author'. The poem describes a Quantock landscape:

A mount, not wearisome and bare and steep,
But a green mountain variously up-piled,
Where o'er the jutting rocks soft mosses creep,
Or coloured lichens with slow oozing weep;
Where cypress and the darker yew start wild;
And 'mid the summer torrent's gentle dash
Dance brighten'd the red clusters of the ash;
Beneath whose boughs, by those still sounds beguil'd,
Calm Pensiveness might muse herself to sleep. (ll.1-9)

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Coleridge imagines how lovely it would be to be 'seated at ease' with his friend 'Beneath the cypress, or the yew more dark', 'Save if the one, his muse's witching charm/ Muttering brow-bent, at unwatch'd distance lag'. So he imagines himself not climbing the hill but being led-off by 'witching charm'. If this all sounds slightly familiar, the third section of the poem confirms the sort of landscape we are in:

Thus rudely vers'd in allegoric lore,
The Hill of knowledge I essayed to trace;
That verdurous hill with many a resting-place,

And many a stream whose warbling waters pour
To glad and fertilize the subject plains;
That hill with secret springs, and nooks untrod,
And many a fancy-blest and holy sod
Where Inspiration, his diviner strains
Low-murmuring, lay.' (ll.49-57)

Coleridge tells his friend that they will climb the hill

And from the stirring world up-lifted high
(Whose noises, faintly wafted on the wind,
To quiet musings shall attune the mind...) (ll.63-65)

So Barbauld wasn't being presumptuous when she wrote 'To Mr. S.T. Coleridge' - she was placing him where his own imagination led him anyway. Coleridge's mental landscape has all the signs of turning to Indolence, musing, sleeping, seating, lying, oft pausing, being beguiled and set apart from the 'world's vain turmoil'. Whereas Coleridge is addressing Charles Lloyd very much as a young friend at the end of the poem:

They whom I love shall love thee, honour'd youth!
Now may Heaven realize this vision bright! (ll.75-6)

Barbauld recognizes that Coleridge is the child who needs to be guided: 'Now Heaven conduct thee with a Parent's love!'

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Barbauld's moral advice to Coleridge, therefore, doesn't come from an overly didactic bearing. Her poetic temperament is very close to his: she sympathizes with the allure of fanciful reverie and the dim forested path of imaginative exploration. The advice to Coleridge is specifically to Coleridge and should not be taken as a general reluctance to explore of the powers of the human mind. As I hope I've shown, Barbauld loved the idea of unconfined roaming and much of her verse celebrates imaginative licence and speculative pleasure.

I would like to end by bringing Coleridge and Barbauld together in one final comparison. In 'Religious Musings' and 'To Dr. Priestley' both Coleridge and Barbauld defend Priestley from the 'blind multitude' and 'hooting crowds'; they both depict him beyond and above the tumult of the present, and both suggest that Priestley is not so much exiled as on a mental journey:

Coleridge: 'calm, pitying he retir'd,/And mus'd expectant on these promis'd years' (1794-96). Barbauld's poem was published a little earlier in 1793 though it was composed in December 1792. It addresses Priestley after his Birmingham Home had been destroyed by the mob:

Scenes like these hold little space
In his large mind, whose ample stretch of thought
Grasps future periods.(ll. 14-16)

It is important that Barbauld sees Priestley's mind as a cosmic space holding a view of future potential. She celebrates mental space, the power of the human mind which can roam beyond the constraint of the present and the petty to reach for and grasp the future. Priestley becomes a cerebral creator: we are supplied with a sense of the universe waiting to unfold in 'his large mind'. Coleridge locates a calmness in Priestley which is not present in his own 'desultory poem'. Barbauld, too, identifies Priestley as calm while her questions tell us what her own mood is: 'Stirs not thy spirit, Priestley?...Burns not thy cheek indignant?' It is this outspoken passion which allows us

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to hear the political idealism of Anna Barbauld in her late forties more clearly and intensely than that of Coleridge in his early twenties. After her death in 1825, Crabb Robinson found in his journal 'expressions of displeasure in the unqualified Jacobinism of her politics'.^[34] Unlike Coleridge, Barbauld did not alter when she alteration found and I don't think we should allow Coleridge's preeningly self-indulgent view of 'That wonderful Propriety' to obscure what was also the remarkable freedom of her mind.

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[1] *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Kathleen Coburn, vol. 2 (1804-1808) (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), 2509.

[2] *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Earl Leslie Griggs, vol.1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), pp. 393; 577; 578.

[3] Griggs, I, 201.

[4] Griggs, I, 654; VI, 1013.

[5] As Seamus Perry pointed out in the discussion which followed this paper in 1997, it is not entirely impossible that Coleridge invented this anecdote in the interests of elevating his own reputation.

[6] Betsy Rodgers, *Georgian Chronicle: Mrs Barbauld and her Family* (London: Methuen, 1958), p.147.

[7] *The Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson*, ed. by Edith J. Morley, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), I, 150.

[8] Joseph Priestley, *Memoirs of Dr. Priestley to the Year 1795. Written by himself with a continuation, to the time of his decease, by his son*, 2 vols. (London: J. Johnson, 1806-7), I, 49.

[9] *Memoirs*, I, 103.

[10] *Experiments and Observations Relating to the various branches of Natural Philosophy; with a Continuation of the Observations on Air*, 3 vols. (London: J. Johnson, 1779-86), I, vii.

[11] All quotations from Barbauld's poetry refer to *The Poems of Anna Letitia Barbauld*, ed. by William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1994).

[12] H.W. Piper, *The Active Universe: Pantheism and the Concept of Imagination in the English Romantic Poets* (London: Athlone Press, 1962), p.1.

[13] *The History and Present State of Discoveries relating to Vision, Light, and Colours* (London: J. Johnson, 1772), p.56.

- [14] *The Spectator*, ed. by George A. Aitken, 8 vols. (London: John C. Nimmo, 1898), VII, 218.
- [15] Griggs, IV, 750. See Richard Cronin, *Colour and Experience in Nineteenth-Century Poetry* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988).
- [16] *The Poems of Gray, Collins and Goldsmith*, ed. by Roger Lonsdale (London: Longman, 1969). Lonsdale notes Pope, *Essay on Man*, 1.120 ("The peopled grass").
- [17] Wordsworth uses the 'peopled air' at the end of *Excursion* Book I. In this case, the air is peopled by the melodies of different birds.
- [18] All quotations from Coleridge's poetry refer to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Poems*, ed. by John Beer (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1963; repr.1975).
- [19] In discussion of this paper at the Kilve weekend in 1997, Duncan Wu offered a different reading of these lines, praising their specificity.
- [20] *A Course of Lectures on Oratory and Criticism* (London: J. Johnson, 1777), p.268.
- [21] *Oratory and Criticism*, p.55.
- [22] *Aikin's Calendar of Nature: The Natural History of the Year, being an enlargement of Dr. Aikin's Calendar of Nature* by Arthur Aikin (London: J. Johnson, 1798), p.98.
- [23] 'The Eolian Harp' rather than 'Effusion XXXV'.
- [24] This question is considered in William McCarthy, "'We Hoped the Woman Was Going to Appear': Repression, Desire, and Gender in Anna Letitia Barbauld's Early Poems", in *Romantic Women Writers: Voices and Countervoices*, ed. by Paula R. Feldmann and Theresa M. Kelley (Hanover: University of New England Press, 1995). For another stimulating consideration of contemplation in Barbauld's verse, see Julie Ellison, 'The Politics of Fancy in the Age of Sensibility' in *Re-Visioning Romanticism: British Women Writers, 1776-1837*, ed. by Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Haefner (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), pp.228-55.
- [25] *Oratory and Criticism*, p.67.
- [26] Coleridge to Estlin: Griggs, I, 578.
- [27] J.& A.L. Aikin, *Miscellaneous Pieces in Prose* (London: J. Johnson, 1773), pp.31-32.
- [28] *Miscellaneous Pieces in Prose*, pp.32-33.
- [29] *Miscellaneous Pieces in Prose*, p.36.
- [30] *Miscellaneous Pieces in Prose*, pp.71-72.
- [31] *The Poetical Works of Mr. William Collins with a Prefatory Essay by Mrs. Barbauld* (London: T. Cadell, Jun. and W. Davies, 1802), p.vii. Wordsworth objected to Barbauld's editions of Akenside and Collins (according to Crabb Robinson) because they prettified the poems.
- [32] For a recent discussion of this poem, see Lisa Vargo, 'The Case of Anna Laetitia Barbauld's "To Mr C[oleridge]"', *The Charles Lamb Bulletin*, 102 (April 1998), 55-63.
- [33] Griggs, I, 339.
- [34] *Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and Their Writers*, ed. by Edith J. Morley, 3 vols. (London: Dent, 1938), I, 64.