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Anna Laetitia Barbauld: A New Tradition

DAVID THORN

The late eighteenth century was a time of rapid change throughout the civilized world. There were revolutions on both sides of the Atlantic as a younger, more populous generation replaced the older, aristocratic regime. New ideas were born and new freedoms won, the result of which laid the foundation to perhaps the most celebrated movement in the history of British Literature, Romanticism. Yet the praxes of this age excluded the voice of women from being heard during this turbulent movement. The prevalent, male-dominated, unacknowledged legislation that was making its mark on the face of Britain overshadowed the few women who were well versed enough to compete with these men. Anna Laetitia Barbauld was one of these women. Her objective and optimistic attitude concerning conventional themes, such as the traditional relations between men and women, enabled her voice to be heard amid the rumpus of her countless male contemporaries. Barbauld is, in fact, an exception to the genre that she has come to represent. Her poem, "Washing Day," is an excellent example of her impartial female attitude that promoted a new conception of gender roles, a destabilization of the traditional norms that had previously held men and women completely separate and distinct.

The speaker begins the poem with an invitation to the "domestic muse," to sing "the dreaded Washing-day." She invites those housewives who, "beneath the yoke of wedlock bend,/ With bowed soul," to witness her perception of the tedious laundry day, "Which week, smooth sliding after week, brings on/ Too soon." She expounds upon the solicitude of the day as she describes an ominous sky that stands to interfere with her chores: "For should the skies pour down, adieu to all/ Remains of quiet: then expect to hear/ Of sad disasters."

In order to describe the many aspects of this loathsome day, Barbauld utilizes a voice with which her male contemporaries and critics were unable to find fault. "Saints have been calm while stretched upon the rack," she writes, "And Guatimozin smiled on burning coals;/ But never yet did a housewife notable/ Greet with a smile a rainy washing day." Avoiding a dismal, negative voice that could justifiably be filled with complaints and demands for more equality, she humbly accepts her designation

as a housewife and the many responsibilities attending the role. She writes from the perspective of a housewife about a subject that, until then, only women were able to apprehend. However, her objective sensibility in describing the "Washing Day" calmly bids men, as well, to witness her dreaded task.

Having established this objective style, Barbauld is now able to include in her poem a radical statement concerning the traditional relations between men and women. After a description of the husband's leisure-full day, she writes, "Woe to the friend/ Whose evil stars have urged him forth to claim/ On such a day the hospitable rites!" Almost threatening, the speaker continues, "Looks, blank at best, and stinted courtesy,/ Shall he receive." She then describes how dinner will proceed later that night and how the husband will "slink away slowly" to his bed without saying a word. Reading this section of the poem, many men in Barbauld's time would most likely have objected to the speaker's apparent disrespect for her husband. They would have conceded that women did not have the right to treat men with such overt insubordination. Nevertheless, Barbauld is able to make these statements because she has already established the right of the speaker. Having described the impending washing day, and comparing it with the husband's day of "garden-walks" and studies, she has earned the right to speak freely.

It is at this point in the poem that Barbauld's ideas begin to form the conception of a new relation between men and women. Specifically, that relationship is one of respect through equality. The speaker does not disrespect *the* husband. Rather, she has earned respect *from* him. Ingeniously, she seals her argument with an anecdote from her youth in which she, in place of the husband, comes to be the observer on washing day. "I well remember, when a child, the awe/ This day struck into me; for then the maids,/ I scarce knew why, looked cross, and drove me from them:/ Nor soft caress could I obtain; nor hope/ Usual indulgences; jelly or creams." When the speaker assumes the position the husband had formerly occupied, she is able to associate with him and witness washing day from the viewpoint of children and husbands, those who are not involved with the tedious task at hand. Thus, the husband is precluded from belittling his wife's disastrous day because she has already witnessed it from a viewpoint similar to his own. Not only does she experience the drudgery first hand, she has witnessed it as her husband has also witnessed it. Simply put, she precludes any argument that could possibly arise because her triumph would surely be inevitable.

To end her poem, Barbauld writes, "so near approach/ The sports of children and the toils of men," and indeed, the toils of men, such as her husband, are more like the sports of children when compared to the responsibilities of the housewife. Such a statement would also have enraged many men had she not previously walked each reader through the dreaded day, ensuring her victory, brilliantly, along the way.

Anna Laetitia Barbauld accomplished something unheard of with "Washing Day."

In a time when equality among the genders did not exist, she is able, though only for a short moment, to narrow the gender-gap to within, or less than, inches. She

intuitively avoids making complaints. Instead she maintains a high level of objectivity, specifically by exchanging viewpoints with the husband, which guarantees the reception of her statement. She earns her right to make such claims through her intelligent arguments, with which it becomes difficult to disagree. For a moment she achieves equality. Not only in the understood sense of respect for the housewife does Barbauld accomplish this parity, but within the male dominated world of literature, she also achieves her prerogative. She has a thought, makes a statement, and then she proves it. She earns her right as a poet in an epoch when the world of literature was dominated by the opposite sex. Consequently, we are left to reconsider who may have been the real "*unacknowledged* legislators of the world."