Firebrands, letters and flowers: Mrs Barbauld and the Priestleys

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A year after the tremendous success of her Poems, and Miscellaneous Pieces in Prose, both published in 1773, the Dissenter Anna Letitia Aikin received a charming letter from the patrician bluestocking Elizabeth Montagu. As part of Montagu’s ploy for opening up ‘a more intimate correspondence’ with Aikin, she launches into a meditation on the sociability of ‘polite letters’ and the exclusions of the public sphere, both in the literary world and in the political realm:

The genuine effect of polite letters is to inspire candour, a social spirit, and gentle manners; to teach a disdain of frivolous amusements, injurious censoriousness, and foolish animosities. To partake of these advantages and to live under the benign empire of the muses, on the conditions of a naturalized subject, who, not having any inherent right to a share of office, credit, or authority, seeks nothing but the protection of the society, is all I aim at.¹

The modesty, deference and self-deprecation of the woman writer is a familiar rhetorical ploy. Montagu appears to argue that, when it comes to genius and inspiration – ‘the benign empire of the muses’ – she does not enjoy by birthright the rights and privileges of a native; she can only be admitted to such after long residence and acculturation. But if womanly modesty entails self-exclusion, Montagu’s discourse of citizenship – the use of terms such as ‘empire’, ‘naturalized subject’, ‘inherent right’ and ‘authority’ – is primarily concerned with exclusions imposed on women from without. The world of polite letters is a gentlemanly, homosocial one, she implies, a world which, if it does not exclude women completely, only tolerates them as ‘naturalized’ foreigners; and of course this exclusion from the world of letters mirrors the wider exclusion of women from political life. Thus, Montagu’s modesty cloaks an appeal to the shared experience of women’s marginal position within the public sphere. This bid for solidarity with her new Dissenting friend is then cleverly consolidated by Montagu’s allusion to the function and status
of the Dissenting public sphere within the national republic of letters, manifest in her appeal to a minimalist model of the state, whose sole purpose is the protection of the individual and his/her rights. Montagu’s alignment of the literary woman’s marginalization with the civic disabilities suffered by Dissenters was an astute gambit, calculated to woo and flatter her correspondent.

In a recent article on Barbauld and Dissent, Daniel E. White describes the Dissenting public sphere as a sub-category of the classical public sphere, a ‘fragment that exerted critical pressure from within’. His focus is on the Warrington Academy, and his model is familial literary collaboration, his readings centring on Barbauld’s co-authored productions with her brother, John Aikin, *Miscellaneous Pieces in Prose* (1773) and *Evenings at Home* (1792–6). Arguing that readings of Barbauld as feminist or anti-feminist are off-target, White presents Barbauld as a moderate whose writings attempt to “domesticate” the oppositional and rigorous identities of rational Dissent, to colour its austere religious and civil values with familial and domestic hues that would endear virtue, piety, and commerce to the affections of her readers. There are many excellent aspects to White’s article, such as his probing of the constituent elements of Barbauld’s ‘moderation’, and his examination of the dialectical movement in her writings between establishment and sects, but his focus on familial collaboration and on ‘the intimate plentitude of the home’ obscures the extent to which women writers like Barbauld challenged private/public distinctions through their longing for equal participation in the world of knowledge and learning.

In Barbauld’s own case, despite a loving relationship with her father and brother, filial and fraternal bonds brought their own particular demands, requiring some dexterous negotiations, as can be seen in Barbauld’s unpublished poem to her brother, ‘To Dr Aikin on his Complaining that she neglected him’ (1768). The poem is notable for its regret that, whereas in early youth, brother and sister pursued the same studies, they are now assigned quite different paths, according to cultural prescription. Embittered by this exclusion from ‘masculine’ pursuits, the challenge for Barbauld is to recreate the ‘bounded sphere’ of women as a positive – a challenge she meets by describing it as the realm of fancy, or poetry, and domestic virtue. In order to arrive at this resolution, Barbauld mobilizes various modalities of ‘friendship’. Initially ‘friendship’ is enlisted as the basis of her sibling relationship, but as the poem develops ‘friendship’ breaks free from familial ties to assume the shape of a socially useful and healing skill which, with its non-specialized,
universal language of words and gestures, transcends the (masculine) ‘art’ of medicine and pharmacology:

Beyond thy art thy friendship shall prevail
And cordial looks shall cure, when drugs would fail:
Thy words of balm shall cure the wounds of strife,
And med’cine all the sharper ills of life. (Poems, p. 19)

By means of an all-inclusive social friendship, Barbauld inscribes the ‘bounded sphere’ within the wider world of her brother’s knowledge. Furthermore, by the end of the poem, her earlier elaboration of the overlapping familial and public meanings of ‘friendship’ licenses her poetic voice to participate in the public and social realm: ‘when fair friendship will unloose my tongue,/My trembling voice shall ne’er refuse the song’ (Poems, p. 19).

Thus, missing from White’s model of collaboration is Barbauld’s experience and understanding of knowledge as a gendered issue, requiring careful negotiation through language of the terms on which she is permitted to participate in the world of polite letters. His essay also rests upon a somewhat tame reading of the woman whose ‘unfilial’ politics distressed some of her most ardent admirers. Henry Crabb Robinson, for instance, rereading her earlier writings, and looking back on the hostile reception of her Eighteen Hundred and Eleven, a Poem (1812), was disturbed by the ‘unqualified jacobinism of her politics’. Similarly, after her death in 1825, the anonymous reviewer of her collected writings regretted that her ‘fiery democracy sometimes carried her almost the length of profanation’ (Poems, p. 295).

This chapter goes beyond domestic and familial collaboration to focus on Barbauld’s close but argumentative relationship with Joseph Priestley, the eminent scientist, theologian, philosopher and controversialist. Much as she admired, and was influenced by, the eminent Priestley, Barbauld was never a disciple, holding strongly in her early writings to a belief in the virtues ascribed to her sex, such as sympathy and affection, sociability and conversation, and innate delicacy of taste. In the 1770s, under the influence of an emerging language and culture of sentiment and sensibility, Barbauld took it upon herself to soften and temper Priestley’s masculine rigour by subjecting it to an aesthetic discourse of beauty and sentimental standards of morality – an ambition which found her treading dangerously upon ‘enchanted ground’, travelling towards ‘the regions of chivalry and romance’ (Works, vol. II, p. 246). Her critique of
Priestleyan rationalism here anticipates that of Edmund Burke fifteen years later, in *Reflections upon the Revolution in France* (1790), where he lampoons Dissent as a ‘hortus siccus’ (dry garden), his brilliant and enduring emblem for the Unitarians’ dead, dry, theoretical language of science, against which he so fulsomely pits ‘the flowers of rhetoric’ (as Mary Wollstonecraft in her turn so contemptuously characterized his style), together with a chivalric code associating women with flowers, beauty, innocence and passivity.

Priestley took Barbauld’s strictures seriously. Indeed, he was so disturbed by the drift of her opposition to him in the 1770s that he accused her of siding with the Papists in holding that ‘ignorance is the mother of devotion’; he also charged her with giving cover and comfort to Dissenters defecting to the Establishment. By the 1790s, however, Barbauld was firmly back inside the fold, celebrating the Establishment’s opposition for the ‘mark of separation’ it placed upon Dissenters like herself, and heroically recommitting her sect to internal exile and persecution (*Works*, vol. ii, p. 365). The regulation of her earlier emphasis on the primacy of feeling over intellect (‘few can reason, but all can feel’, *Works*, vol. ii, p. 172) is further evident after the Birmingham riots of 1791, when the scale and level of intimidation against Dissenters escalated, and friends like the Priestleys lived under the shadow of a return of the mob’s mindless ferocity. With formerly close-knit communities of Dissenters splintering under renewed popular hostility, and many blaming Priestley for inciting the rioters, the Enlightenment sociability represented by Warrington in the 1760s and 1770s suddenly seemed a thing of the past. Rising to the occasion, undaunted, Barbauld wrote her magnificent *Civic Sermons to the People* (1792). Celebrating reason, or ‘discourse’, as the faculty distinguishing humans from brutes, she boldly throws wide the doors of civic and political participation to all men and women, regardless of class, so long as their actions are governed by reason.

**JOSEPH PRIESTLEY AND MRS BARBAULD**

All his life, and well before he earned the nickname ‘Gunpowder Joe’, Priestley revelled in controversy. A couple of years after leaving Warrington he wrote gleefully to Barbauld that the Academy was lucky to have severed its connexion with him, for he was ‘about to make a bolder push than ever for the pillory, the King’s Bench Prison, or something worse’ (*Le Breton, Memoir*, p. 37), a reference to his *View of the Principles and Conduct of the Protestant Dissenters* (London: J. Johnson, 1769), ‘the freest
and boldest thing' he had written to date, he claimed (Rutt, _Theological_, vol. 1:1, p. 103). Priestley had been appointed tutor in languages and _belles lettres_ at Warrington in 1761, when Anna Aikin was eighteen. The following year he married Mary Wilkinson, a year younger than Aikin, to whom the poet addressed a number of verses, calling her 'Amanda', a poetical name meaning 'beloved'. Altogether, Barbauld addressed eight poems to Mary or Joseph Priestley, and at least a half dozen other poems arise out of her relationship with this couple. Indeed, Barbauld's first known poem was entitled 'On Mrs P[riestley]'s Leaving Warrington', thrown into the chaise as the Priestleys left Warrington for Leeds in 1767.¹³ This departure occasioned a significant rupture in the social circle so lovingly evoked in Barbauld's early poetry, and it is from this point onwards that her more concerted criticism of Priestley begins.

Priestley was proud of his own and his wife's involvement with Barbauld's literary career. In his _Memoirs_, published posthumously, he boasted:

Mrs Barbauld has told me that it was the perusal of some verses of mine that first induced her to write any thing in verse, so that this country is in some measure indebted to me for one of the best poets it can boast of. Several of her first poems were written when she was in my house, on occasions that occurred while she was there. (Rutt, _Theological_, vol. 1:1, p. 54)

This insertion of himself into the poet's fame was a long-standing habit. In 1782, on the publication of _Two Discourses: 1. On Habitual Devotion: 2. On the Duty of not living to ourselves_, Priestley announced that, though ignorant of it, the public was already under considerable obligations to his first sermon, 'On Habitual Devotion' (1767), 'as it was the occasion of that excellent poem of Mrs Barbauld's, entitled _An Address to the Deity_, which was composed immediately after'. The intimate relationship between Barbauld and Priestley, advertised by the latter in 1782, had, in fact, been long known to the public, for in 1773, upon the publication of Barbauld's 'The Mouse's Petition' (Poems, pp. 36–7), the two friends found themselves somewhat unexpectedly pitted against each other in the controversy arising out of this playful poem about a mouse doomed to suffocate as a result of the scientist's experiments with different gases. The mouse's humble and plaintive petition to Priestley – 'Let not thy strong oppressive force/A free-born mouse detain' – stirred a hornet's nest in the public press, with reviewers fervently espousing the mouse's sentimental plea and denouncing the cruelty of experimental philosophers. Such was the furore that, in subsequent editions, Barbauld appended a
note to the poem defending Priestley from the charge of cruelty: 'what was intended as the petition of mercy against justice, has been construed as the plea of humanity against cruelty... cruelty could never be apprehended from the Gentleman to whom this is addressed... the poor animal would have suffered more as the victim of domestic economy, than of philosophical curiosity' (Poems, p. 245). Despite her assertion that the mouse would have suffered more in a mouse-trap than through Priestley's experiments on it 'with different kinds of air' (Poems, p. 36), Barbauld had unwittingly bequeathed a hostage to Priestley's later enemies and persecutors. In Burke's propaganda war against revolutionaries in the 1790s, the association of chemistry and experimental science with unfeeling, hard-hearted metaphysics immediately called to mind the figure of Priestley; in 1796, for instance, raging against experimental philosophers as indifferent to 'those feelings and habitudes, which are the supports of the moral world', Burke thundered: 'These philosophers, consider men in their experiments, no more than they do mice in an air pump, or in a recipient of mephitic gas.'

Despite her public defence of Priestley in 1773, and the latter's assertion in 1782 of the profound influence of his sermon 'On Habitual Devotion' on Barbauld's Address to the Deity, there remained serious differences between the two friends, differences which flared out in 1775, with Barbauld's 'Thoughts on the Devotional Taste, on Sects, and on Establishments'. Written the year after her marriage, Barbauld argues that the language of love, with all its 'exaggerated expressions' and 'romantic excesses' (Works, vol. ii, p. 245), is the ideal language for religious devotion, a belief which may have reflected the 'exaggerated passion' upon which her own marriage was built, to the disapproval of her family, who resented Rochemont Barbauld's 'crazy demonstrations of amorous rapture, set off with theatrical French manners' (Le Breton, Memoir, p. 43). A less speculative explanation of the essay's thrust and general temper is to read it as Priestley read it, as a directly personal attack on him. Philosophy, 'metaphysical subtleties', 'a disputatious spirit, and fondness for controversy': Barbauld argued that all these had given the mind 'a sceptical turn, with an aptness to call in question the most established truths' (Works, vol. ii, p. 235). Barbauld's stand is not only on behalf of religion, however; as her title 'Devotional Taste' makes clear, she is also arguing for the primary importance of literature, taste and the fine arts. Devotion, properly called, is 'a taste, an affair of sentiment and feeling... Its seat is in the imagination and the passions, and it has its source in that relish for the sublime, the vast, and the beautiful, by which we taste the
charms of poetry and other compositions that address our finer feelings' (Works, vol. ii, p. 232). Priestley's low opinion of aesthetics and the fine arts, his scorn for 'the elegant enjoyments of life' are writ large in his sermons and published writings. When a tutor at Warrington he encouraged his students to write poetry, 'not with any design to make them poets, but to give them a greater facility in writing prose', a pedagogical method he warmly recommended to all subsequent tutors (Rutt, Theological, vol. i:1, p. 54). Fiction, too, had very limited uses, namely to 'amuse the imagination, and give play to the passions' (Rutt, Theological, vol. xxiv, p. 27).

This denigration of the literary is also evident in his response to the style of Barbauld's essay; for instance, to her claim that establishments are 'the womb and grave' of sects he retorts: 'though this is very prettily said, it is by no means true in fact' (Rutt, Theological, vol. i:1, p. 283).

For Barbauld, as a woman writer dedicated to expanding and enhancing the discursive space allowed to literature and its sociable contexts, Priestley's philistinism posed a threat to the principal sphere in which she felt able to make her mark. Thus, where Priestley drove a wedge between the love of God and what he described as the 'lower appetites' – 'sensual pleasure, the pleasures of imagination and ambition' (Rutt, Theological, vol. xv, p. 134) – Barbauld strove to bring these into close alignment. The chief problem with Priestley's grand and stupendous ideas of the Deity was the threat these ideas posed to the integrity of the self. While careful to point out that she is no enemy to philosophy and reason, Barbauld nevertheless believed that enlarged and abstract ideas of the Deity raised God 'too high for our imaginations to take hold of', and that growing 'giddy with the prospect the mind is astonished, confounded at its own insignificance ... and the only feeling the soul is capable of in such a moment is a deep and painful sense of its own abasement' (Works, vol. ii, pp. 237–8).

When Barbauld wrote to Mary Priestley, indirectly asking for Priestley's estimate of the essay, he responded candidly and forcefully, beginning his letter of December 1775: 'As my wife informs me that you wish to know what I think of your late publication, I shall very freely tell you' (Rutt, Theological, vol. i:1, p. 278). Given his pre-eminence as a theological controversialist,16 Priestley was anxious to reinstate the profound connection between philosophy and piety. But what disturbed him most was Barbauld's desire to shift devotion away from a hierarchical/filial model to a more egalitarian/Romantic model. Instead of devotion resembling, as Priestley thought it should, the 'mixture of love and reverence that a child bears towards his parent', Barbauld modelled devotion
upon the passion of heterosexual love. To Priestley, this was impious, even profane.

When the essay was republished in 1792, Barbauld omitted one of the sections most objectionable to Priestley, but for the moment she held to her views. Indeed, a year later, in 1776, in private correspondence, she put her views even more strongly, arguing that magnificent conceptions of God went beyond inducing a worm-like ‘abasement’ to ‘such an annihilation of ourselves as is nearly painful’. Following Burke, who offset the sublime with the beautiful in *A Philosophical Enquiry* (1757), she warned that, while such grand views
give some high pleasures & set religion upon a broad & firm basis . . . we must correct what unfavorable tendency they may have, by often suffering our minds to dwell on those more affecting circumstances which arise in what we may call the more personal intercourse of a devout heart with its maker. The former is the sublime, the latter the pathetic of Religion.  

In 1775, Barbauld’s view of Christian history was that she was living in a period of reasoning and examination. With religious persecution well behind them, sectarians had given themselves over to ‘a critical and disputatious spirit’ with the result that public worship consisted of argumentative sermons rather than the more desirable ‘prayer’ or ‘praise’. Although she conceded that the oppositional energies of sectarianism were vital to the health of a nation’s religious culture, Barbauld came to the rather negative conclusion that, while sects ‘communicate a kind of spirit and elasticity necessary to the vigour and health of the soul’ – just as ‘the process of vegetation restores and purifies vitiated air’ – this revivifying effect is ‘soon lost amidst the corrupted breath of an indiscriminate multitude’ (*Works*, vol. II, pp. 258–9). The other analogy, taken from the natural world, concerns the relation of rivers to ocean:

So the purer part of the element, continually drawn off from the mighty mass of waters, forms rivers, which, running in various directions, fertilize large countries; yet, always tending towards the ocean, every accession to their bulk or grandeur but precipitates their course, and hastens their reunion with the common reservoir from which they were separated. (*Works*, vol. II, p. 258)

The language of this second analogy is very close to her ‘Character’ of Priestley, a poem of uncertain date, written after his time at Warrington – probably during the divisive climate of the later 1760s and early 1770s, when there were renewed accusations that Dissenters were disloyal. Whilst celebrating the sublimity of Priestley’s arduous genius – his ‘eccentric, piercing, bold’ work in theology and natural
philosophy—and urging him to pursue the track revealed by his ‘ardent genius’, Barbauld is nostalgic for the lost world of Warrington sociability, before the turbulent years of Priestley’s mature, public life. The contrast of past and present is a contrast between the beautiful stream and the sublime river, with a preference for a return to her poetic beginnings, which she owes to the ‘wild cascade’ of Priestyan inspiration:

So, where the’ impetuous river sweeps the plain[,]  
Itself a sea, and rushes to the main,  
While it’s firm banks repel conflicting tides  
And stately on its breast the vessel rides;  
Admiring much, the shepherd stands to gaze  
Awe-struck, and mingling wonder with his praise;  
Yet more he loves its winding path to trace  
Thro beds of flowers, and Nature’s rural face,  
While, yet a stream, the silent vale it cheer’d  
By many a recollected scene endear’d,  
Where, trembling, first, beneath the poplar shade  
He tun’d his pipe to suit the wild cascade.  

(Poems, p. 38)

The poem stops short of the essay’s dispiriting conclusion that it is the destiny of sectarianism’s sublime energy to be obliterated in the nondescript ocean of Establishment, but it is still assimilationist in its overall drift. The concern is to emphasize Priestley’s loyalty to church and state: for all the turbulence of this ‘impetuous river’, the vessel of state rides safely on his breast. Despite this assurance, however, the poet is still more comfortable attuning her poetic art to the softer ‘social hours’ of their earlier intimacy:

But, O forgive, if touch’d with fond regret  
Fancy recalls the scenes she can’t forget,  
Recalls the vacant smile, the social hours  
Which charm’d us once, for once those scenes were ours!  
And while thy praises thro wide realms extend  
We, sit in shades, and mourn the absent Friend[.]  

(Poems, pp. 37–8)

MARY PRIESTLEY AND MRS BARBAULD

Blessed with ‘So cool a judgment, and a heart so warm’ (Poems, p. 1), Mary Priestley represented for Barbauld the harmoniously organized temperament so central to definitions of sociability, unlike her
philosopher-husband whose rough and unamiable rationality sometimes seemed at odds with the habits of social existence.\textsuperscript{22} The early poems of the Warrington period which Barbauld addressed to Mary Priestley involve a number of shifting and complex languages, so much so that, in 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft used one of these poems to praise Barbauld, another (famously) to attack her. The poem which Wollstonecraft attacked in her \textit{Vindication of the Rights of Woman} (1792), entitled 'To a Lady, with some painted flowers', dates from the Warrington period, with Mary Priestley ('Amanda') a likely candidate for the 'Lady'. Wollstonecraft's attack is a surprising one, for in the late 1780s both she and Barbauld had moved in the same radical circles associated with the publisher, Joseph Johnson.\textsuperscript{23} Wollstonecraft was also an admirer of Barbauld, anthologizing her writings extensively in her educational works, and, even at the moment of attack, praising Barbauld for two lines from the poem, 'To Mrs P[riestley], with some Drawings of Birds and Insects': 'Pleasure's the portion of th' inferior kind;/But glory, virtue, Heaven for Man design'd' (\textit{Poems}, p. 8). Whereas these lines qualify as the language of truth and soberness, the language of 'To a Lady, with some painted flowers' epitomizes for Wollstonecraft the artful flattery and the sexual compliments of a debased language of male sentimentality. Without taking much stock of the fact that the poem is an intimate poetic epistle from one woman to another, Wollstonecraft accuses Barbauld of an 'ignoble comparison', the traditional metaphoric association of women with flowers. Wollstonecraft argues: 'This has ever been the language of men, and the fear of departing from a supposed sexual character, has made even women of superior sense adopt the same sentiments.'\textsuperscript{24}

As many critics have noted, Wollstonecraft's own rhetorical practice involved a pointed deflowering of language, an emphasis on utility rather than beauty: 'I shall disdain to cull my phrases or polish my style; – I aim at being useful, and sincerity will render me unaffected; for, wishing rather to persuade by the force of my arguments, than dazzle by the elegance of my language, I shall not waste my time in rounding periods, or in fabricating the turgid bombast of artificial feelings . . . I shall try to avoid that flowery diction which has slide[d] from essays into novels, and from novels into familiar letters and conversations.'\textsuperscript{25} She quotes the following passage from Barbauld's poem, with the most offensive words capitalized:

\begin{quote}
Flowers to the fair: to you these flowers I bring,
And strive to greet you with an earlier spring
Flowers, sweet, and gay, and delicate like you;
\end{quote}
Emblems of innocence, and beauty too.
With flowers the Graces bind their yellow hair,
And flowery wreaths consenting lovers wear.
Flowers, the sole luxury which nature knew,
In Eden's pure and guiltless garden grew.
To loftier forms are rougher tasks assign'd;
The sheltering oak resists the stormy wind,
The tougher yew repels invading foes,
And the tall pine for future navies grows;
But this soft family, to cares unknown,
Were born for pleasure and delight ALONE.
Gay without toil, and lovely without art,
They spring to CHERISH the sense, and GLAD the heart,
Nor blush, my fair, to own you copy these;
Your BEST, your SWEETEST empire is — to PLEASE.26

Here and elsewhere in her text Wollstonecraft's horror of female homosociality is evident.27 Unlike Barbauld, who praised nunneries as refuges for women (Works, vol. II, p. 212), Wollstonecraft disliked exclusively female societies, and had a horror of female intimacy: 'To say the truth women are, in general, too familiar with each other, which leads to that gross degree of familiarity that so frequently renders the marriage state unhappy.'28 Furthermore, the 'language of passion' which they use towards each other 'slips ... from their glib tongues', and is a language composed entirely of 'phosphoric bursts which only mimic in the dark the flame of passion'.29 Whereas Barbauld would have agreed about the 'gross material fire' of masculine desire, her evaluation of the differences between men and women ran directly counter to Wollstonecraft's denigration of the feminine. Women's love, for each other and for the opposite sex, was intrinsically social, characterized by a friendship rooted in 'those endearing intercourses of life which to a woman are become habitual'. Men, on the other hand, 'are hardly social creatures till [their] minds are humanized and subdued by that passion which alone can tame [them] to "all the soft civilities of life"' (Works, vol. II, pp. 3–4).

Barbauld wanted to 'burn' Dr Fordyce's Sermons to Young Women (1765) for its aspersions on female friendship (Works, vol. II, p. 59). Another noxious conduct book, published in the same year, was the popular A Picture of True Conjugal Felicity (1765), in which the mild and docile 'Amanda' enjoys 'the amiable female privileges of ruling by obeying, of commanding by submitting, and of being perfectly happy from consulting another's happiness'. Her harmonious marriage to Manley represents, needless to say, 'strength and softness blended together'.30 Barbauld's poetical name of 'Amanda' for the recently married Mary Priestley may have
been something of a shared joke between the two young women, each of whom had been too rationally educated to indulge in the prospect of what Wollstonecraft would later denounce as woman’s ‘illicit sway’. But even if ‘To a Lady, with some painted flowers’ does not emerge out of some shared private understanding of the limitations of conduct book discourse, its oppositions of masculine and feminine reflect Barbauld’s un-Wollstonecraftian desire to maintain the distinction of the sexes. Over twenty years later, however, in the era of the rights of man, Barbauld’s feminist language of sensibility had become a liability.31

THE BIRMINGHAM RIOTS

During the summer of 1791, there was to be no protection for Britain’s ‘naturalized’ Dissenting subjects. On the second anniversary of the Fall of the Bastille, a group of about eighty Birmingham citizens ‘of various denominations’ attended a celebratory dinner at a local hotel.32 This anniversary event provoked several days of horrific rioting and looting by church and state mobs. In her unpublished eye-witness account of these events, Martha Russell, a pupil of Priestley then in her mid-twenties, tells a remarkable story of Mary Priestley’s spirited response to her female friends’ fears of trouble brewing over the Bastille anniversary dinner. Mrs Humphries and other Dissenting women were ‘very much alarmed & wished the dinner might be put off’, an alarm increased by the appearance of an anonymous and inflammatory handbill, supposedly written by a Dissenter. Mrs Priestley, was ‘quite of a different mind [from Mrs Humphries] . . . she said she sd have no objection to stand in the shoes of him that wrote the handbill & that she had no idea that any ill consequences cou’d arise from having the dinner’.33 In the end, the Old and New Meeting Houses of the Unitarians were destroyed, and twenty-seven private houses burned or pulled down. The first object of the mob’s rage was Joseph Priestley, who lost not just his house and his library, but his laboratory as well, reputedly one of the finest in Europe. By all accounts, he was lucky to escape with his life. Burning him alive was the chant of the mob,34 although they had to be satisfied with burning him in effigy.35

The victims’ accounts of these riots, particularly those by the Russell and Hutton families, close friends of the Priestleys, powerfully convey the terror of that time, when the principles of open association and friendship underpinning Dissenting sociability broke down. William Hutton, between the burning and looting of his town and country houses, was obliged to ‘run away like a thief’ (he wrote) and ‘skulk behind hedges . . . avoided as a pestilence’.36 Martha Russell wrote vividly of
the great danger they were in, even after they had fled to London. While her father William Russell made repeated calls on Pitt, urging him to send reinforcements to Birmingham, Priestley (she wrote) ‘never stir’d out of the house and only was vi’ble to his intimate frds – he told my Father we must come & see him for that he was like a wild Beast he did not show himself in the streets & when he did it was only at night with his keepers’.

Whilst admiring Priestley, and acknowledging the extent to which he was goaded into controversy by his opponents, William Hutton had no doubt that his friend’s ‘warm expressions’ and his passion for proselytism had contributed to the ferocity unleashed against his own and other prominent Dissenting families in Birmingham. In his *Narrative of the Riots*, Hutton wrote: ‘If the Doctor chooses to furnish the world with candles, it reflects a lustre upon himself, but there is no necessity to oblige every man to carry one. It is the privilege of an Englishman to walk in darkness if he chooses.’ Hutton’s ambivalence about Priestley is pervasive. Within a few pages the candle of Enlightenment transforms itself into a dangerous spark, unleashed by the Unitarians’ enemies: the ‘many-headed monster’ of an enraged mob had escaped the control of its masters, Hutton wrote, for ‘what man could play with a candle amidst gun-powder, because he thinks he is master of the blaze?’

Catherine Hutton shared her father’s view of Priestley. Although a ‘good man, attached to his King and country, and meaning well to every creature’, he was (she wrote) ‘one of the primary causes of the riots . . . by rousing the spirit of bigotry’. Martha Russell may have claimed, immediately after the riots, that ‘we found all our friends very sociable our common trou[ble] seemed to have unitd us & the dissenters never were so united one amongst another & so sociable & friendly’, but the truth was that very few Dissenters wanted to see the Priestleys again in Birmingham. ‘[W]e have been driven off the Birmingham stage by the audience and our fellow-actors’, Mrs Priestley wrote to Barbauld, adding bitterly that she hoped she had learned ‘to bear other people’s misfortunes . . . as well as many under the mask of friends have borne ours in this place’ (*Rutt, Theological*, vol. 1:2, p. 366). Hutton confirmed the ostracism, writing to his daughter that Priestley’s own congregation at the New Meeting House had voted that he ‘should not return’ adding that ‘the Doctor has said this hurts him more than all his sufferings’.

Despite Mary Priestley’s confidence on the day of the riots that there was nothing to fear, she had actually been burning all her correspondence a few days before. A few weeks after the riots she wrote to Barbauld:
Our property may be said to be entirely destroyed; the few remains that have been picked up so demolished as to be of little value... A few days before the riot, I burnt all my letters. I had often taken them out, and burnt part before; but that morning I determined to burn all. I consumed every parcel. The last bag was full of yours. I put a handful into the fire, when casting my eye upon a letter with some verses, I thought I would save them a little longer, and read them over before I burnt them. These went with every thing else; but whether destroyed, or kept for private amusement, I cannot say. (Rutt, *Theological*, vol. 1:2, pp. 366–7; 26 August 1791).

With so many government spies and informers surrounding them, as well as malicious neighbours, there was a worse fate for letters than destruction by fire. 'One of the most mortifying circumstances in this calamity', Priestley informed the public, was 'the dispersion of a great number of letters from my private friends... into the hands of persons wholly destitute of generosity or honour' (Rutt, *Theological*, vol. xix, p. 382).

In the same month that Mrs Priestley composed this letter, Priestley was penning a remarkable passage on the loss of his house, his library and his laboratory. Suffering terribly at the thought of the pleasure many took in his losses, he imagined to himself the outrage which would have greeted the reverse situation — a clergyman of the Church of England attacked by Dissenters:

I was forcibly struck with this idea on seeing a most ingenious imitation of plants in paper, cut and painted so like to nature, that, at a very small distance, no eye could have perceived the difference; and by this means they were capable of being preserved from the attacks of insects, so as to be greatly preferable to any *hortus sicus*. It appeared to me that weeks, and in some cases months, must have been employed on some single plants, so exquisitely were they finished.

What would this ingenious and deserving young lady have felt, how would her family and friends, how would all botanists, though they should only have heard of the ingenious contrivance and the labour and time she had spent upon her plants; nay, how would the country in general have been filled with indignation, had any envious female neighbour come by force, or stealth, and thrown all her flowers into the fire, and thus destroyed all the fruits of her ingenuity, and patient working for years, in a single moment...

If the same malicious female should not only have thrown this lady's flowers into the fire, but ransacked her apartments, and, getting possession of all her private letters, have amused herself with reading them, and published them in all the neighbourhood, in order to do her all the injury in her power, would not the crime be thought worthy of the severest punishment, as a violent breach of all the bonds of society?
In *Mansfield Park* the unpleasant Bertram sisters, having summarily looked over and dismissed their mouse-like cousin Fanny, return to their ‘favourite holiday sport of the moment, making artificial flowers or wasting gold paper’. There is, however, nothing trivial, wasteful or decorative about Priestley’s artificial flowers. Indeed, he seems almost in awe of these flowers; they are the miraculous creations of female labour and ingenuity, a complete triumph of artifice over nature. If flowers have a tendency to unsettle oppositons between natural and artificial realms, they also unsettle public/private realms. Priestley’s imagined creator of paper flowers epitomizes the privileges of private, domestic space, and yet those flowers have an important public/scientific role to play. In the mid to late eighteenth century, botany was generally regarded as women’s favourite science, with women taking the lead in promulgating botanical knowledge through the collection, drying, painting and engraving of flowers. Dissenting women were particularly prominent in botany, but there were others too, such as the likely source for Priestley’s young lady, namely Mary Delany, whose ‘hortus siccus’, her exquisite art of paper mosaic, was celebrated for its scientific accuracy and elegant taste in Erasmus Darwin’s *The Loves of the Plants*, first published in 1789 and reprinted by Joseph Johnson in 1790 and 1791.44 In focussing upon the ‘delightful science’ of botany, Darwin’s aim was a reconciliatory one: to ‘inlist Imagination under the banner of Science, and to lead her votaries from the looser analogies, which dress out the imagery of poetry, to the stricter ones, which form the ratiocination of philosophy’ (Advertisement, *The Botanic Garden*).

Darwin’s poem enables Priestley to stare down Burke’s taunt about the ‘hortus siccus’ of Dissent by celebrating a new, feminized scientific garden: this young woman’s painted paper flowers are superior to dried specimens because less perishable, less vulnerable to the attacks of insects. Their beauty resides, in effect, in their supreme scientific utility. We might even say that they exemplify a manly rather than feminine beauty, in so far as they have been achieved, like the sublime, through supreme exertion. The analogy Priestley draws between these paper flowers and his exquisite, irreplaceable laboratory instruments works to achieve a number of different aims. Most obviously, the analogy makes intimate and personal the public violence and violation of the Birmingham riots. More subtly, the analogy draws the teeth of Priestley’s scientific radicalism. Even the radical socio-sexual implications of Darwin’s poem are annulled by the assertion that these flowers escape fertilization by insects, transforming the ‘hortus siccus’ into the ‘hortus conclusus’ of virginal
enclosure; there will be no polygamous marriages and other scandalous practices taking place here. Poignantly, despite these advantages, the paper flowers are exquisitely vulnerable to fire.

Priestley's substitution of a female victim for himself is a brilliant stroke, sensationalizing the violence whilst also working to contain acute feelings of outrage and grief. But why does he also represent the destructive, anti-social force of the riots as feminine? Only a year before, Burke had represented the uncontrollable revolutionary violence of France 'in the abused shape of the vilest of women' (Reflections, p. 165). Given Priestley's careful concern to lay the blame for the riots on those directing the mob, he would not have stooped to Burke's scapegoating of the lower classes. His analysis is in fact closer to the one Wollstonecraft was to devise a year later in refutation of Rousseau's strictures that young women should be subject to the 'most constant and severe restraint' of decorum, and that they should have 'but little liberty' for 'they are apt to indulge themselves excessively in what is allowed them'. Wollstonecraft responded by aligning middle-class women with violent insurrection from the most oppressed groups: 'Slaves and mobs have always indulged themselves in the same excesses, when once they broke loose from authority. The bent bow recoils with violence, when the hand is suddenly relaxed that forcibly held it.' Whereas Wollstonecraft argues against restraints for women, Priestley is more ambivalent. Indeed, that the polarities of extreme civility and extreme savagery should meet in the figure of the middle-class woman and her neighbour suggests some conflict on his part concerning the important role of sociability underpinning polite culture. In extremis, Priestley recognized that sociability as feminine, but (as Montagu so well understood) granting this recognition any enduring meaning, would undermine the male homosociality on which his authority was based.

When Mary Priestley died in America, three years into their exile, Priestley's grieving correspondence aligns his new personal loss with the losses of the riots, particularly the loss of those intimate poems through which Barbauld had memorialized their early years at Warrington. To Barbauld he wrote:

Though for many years she wrote but few letters, there were not many persons who were more frequently the subject of our conversation, or whom she spoke of with so much pleasure as yourself. Indeed, pleasing impressions of so early a date, are not soon effaced... If my diaries had not been destroyed in the riots, I should have been able to retrace some of them better than I can do now.
She often lamented the loss of a folio book, into which she had copied all your unpublished poems, and other small pieces, especially the first poem we ever saw of yours, on taking leave of her, when we left Warrington. The perusal of it would give me more pleasure now than it did at first. (Rutt, Theological, vol. 1:2, p. 364)

The following year we see him writing again to Barbauld: ‘You had no copy of your first poem to my wife, or I should value that above any other; and also the little poem you wrote on the birth of Joseph’ (Rutt, Theological, vol. 1:2, p. 411). The poetry he seeks to retrieve through correspondence with Barbauld commemorates important moments of domestic, familial life in the context of female friendship: leave-taking, the birth of a child – records of moments which perished with his diaries, and with his wife’s folio book, but which might just have been preserved by their author. The phantasmatic relationship Priestley creates here between letters and bodies – letters and poems standing in for bodies – suggests a new appraisal of the value of Warrington’s vanished ‘social hours’ (Poems, p. 37).

SOLIDARITY IN ADVERSITY

Shortly after the Birmingham riots, Barbauld produced her Civic Sermons to the People, a sixpenny pamphlet published anonymously by Joseph Johnson in 1792. The title, while unique, reconfirms the central role of religion and theology in eighteenth-century political discourse and practice. More pointedly, but without ever naming her opponent, it cocks a snook at Burke, who, at the same time as he was characterizing Dissent as a ‘hortus siccus’, had villified the ‘political sermon’ as one of the ‘nondescripts’ beautifying it (Reflections, p. 94). For Barbauld radical politics were an extension of her religious and moral principles. As she put it so succinctly in her 1792 dispute with Gilbert Wakefield, ‘Public Worship is a civic meeting . . . a virtual declaration of the rights of man’ (Works, vol. II, pp. 446–8).

Barbauld opens her first Civic Sermon by wittily stepping around Burke’s notorious description of the people as the ‘swinish multitude’. Instead, she reflects upon the sociability of cattle:

I have called these Sermons. A Sermon is a discourse. Your cattle cannot discourse; they like each other’s company, they herd together, they have a variety of tones by which they can make each other sensible when they are pleased, angry, or in pain, but they cannot discourse. To discourse is to communicate ideas, that is thoughts, to compare – to reason upon them. This is the privilege of man. It is by this faculty that he is above the brutes, and it is to persuade you to use this faculty that these discourses are chiefly written. Many seem to think that poor people, or those who work to maintain themselves, have not this faculty and
that you ought to be led and governed like the brutes, without knowing why or how. But this is worse than sinking you from your station, it is degrading you from your species. (*Civic Sermons*, pp. 4–5)

Barbauld is emphatic that government is the concern of everyone. It is ‘proper to enquire why some men are set over and govern other men’ – why three million should be ‘allowed to manage as they please’ the affairs of nine million men and women of the lower classes. In order to demystify the operations of government, and thereby minimize the distance between the idly sauntering fashionable world and the world of the industrious poor, she wittily reveals the ‘mystery’ of every realm in which one is not a participant:

You can all of you get information enough concerning your respective trades and handicrafts, and yet many of them are very difficult and full of mystery to those who have never taken the pains to enquire into their principles. The clay that is wrought into shape under the hands of the potter, seems to the stander-by to be swelled, and rounded, and touched into form, as it were by enchantment. The dextrous throwing of the shuttle, and the web of cloth that grows beneath the fingers of the weaver, is gazed at with admiration by the fine gentleman or fine lady, who saunter through your busy manufactories, and they see colours mingle, and flowers and figures start into the work, without being able to comprehend how they are produced there . . . The principles of Government . . . are not more difficult than the principles of the arts by which you get your bread. (*Civic Sermons*, pp. 6–7)

If the ‘enchanted ground’ of Barbauld’s 1775 essay on ‘Devotional Taste’ had been sexual love, in 1792, swept along by the French Revolution’s momentum, the enchanted ground becomes the factory floor, with pots magically ‘touched into form’, and coloured ‘flowers and figures’ springing to life within woven fabric. The miracle of Priestley’s paper mosaic garden has shifted from the drawing room to the manufactory.

Almost twenty years after the publication of Barbauld’s *Civic Sermons*, the secret of their authorship was still a well-kept one.48 The radical open invitation to the people to participate in government is, however, suddenly abrogated towards the end of the first sermon, when Barbauld mentions the Birmingham riots. To the rioters she makes it clear that they are not called ‘to the assemblies of Citizens’, for they are brutes and ‘must’ be governed like brutes’. The exclusions are graphically announced:

You who own no law, cannot judge of laws. You must be slaves, not thro’ the appointment of men, but by the eternal law of nature. A King, with such dispositions, cannot govern; he may prowl about for a time, and tear in pieces and
destroy; but he cannot govern ... To you Government is known by its restraints, and Religion by its terrors ... for you ... it builds hospitals, workhouses, and prisons. (Civic Sermons, pp. 17–19)

In breaking loose and attacking the persons and properties of Dissenting families, the rioters had forfeited their rights to be addressed within Barbauld's rubric of universal brotherhood, defined according to principles associated with sociability. Nor is she less hostile to the King and his minions, believing them responsible for letting loose the mob which they could not, in the end, control. Instead of governing the people by means of the proper exercise of his reason, which includes respect for the social dispositions and habits of his people, the King rules by terror like a wild beast, emerging sporadically and unpredictably to inflict arbitrary injury.

Two months after the riots, the terror was still such that Priestley's friends in the north were too frightened to offer hospitality to him, leaving him to remark to his wife's brother: 'Thus the chased deer is avoided by all the herd.'49 Barbauld's 'To Dr Priestley, Dec. 29, 1792', published in January 1793, harnesses the pathos of her friend's intense isolation and vulnerability, positioning it as the climax of the first half of her poem, in which she urges Priestley to participate in her own indignation at the abuse and persecution he has suffered:

Burns not thy cheek indignant, when thy name,
On which delighted science lov'd to dwell,
Becomes the bandied theme of hooting crowds?
With timid caution, or with cool reserve,
When e'en each reverend Brother keeps aloof,
Eyes the struck deer, and leaves thy naked side
A mark for power to shoot at? ... (Poems, p, 125)

In the wake of the Birmingham riots, the protection society owes to Priestley as a 'naturalized subject' has evaporated, together with the protection and support he might reasonably have expected from his fellow Dissenters. The pathos of the failed brotherhood of Dissenters is counter-balanced, however, by the second half of the poem, which shifts register to celebrate the singularity and sublimity of Priestley's prophetic mind. Inspired by Milton's own resignation and stoicism ('On evil days though fallen and evil tongues'), the poet transmutes her narrow indignation into a wide and elevated prospect, from which she and Priestley together gaze on futurity:
Mrs Barbauld and the Priestleys

To thee, the slander of a passing age
Imports not. Scenes like these hold little space
In his large mind, whose ample stretch of thought
Grasps future periods. – Well can’t thou afford
To give large credit for that debt of fame
Thy country owes thee. Calm thou can’t consign it
To the slow payment of that distant day;
If distant, when thy name, to freedom’s join’d,
Shall meet the thanks of a regenerate land.

(Poems, p. 125)

The poem is a powerful statement of Barbauld’s solidarity with her old friend. Gone are her reservations concerning an abstract and unsociable pursuit of knowledge at the expense of imagination and feeling: a feminized ‘delighted science’ now dotes on Priestley’s name. Gone too is the ‘fond regret’ for the past which had so muted her earlier celebration of Priestley’s public life and fame; the genius which, once upon a time, had made him an ‘absent Friend’ to his social circle is now mobilized for the benefit of the nation as a whole. In the end, the violence of the riots vindicated Barbauld’s ‘pretty’ paradox about establishments as the ‘womb and grave’ of sects. At this point in time, with friends falling off on all sides, the past is sealed off, the future beckons. From the ashes of the riots and ‘Priestley’s injured name’ will rise the epic prospect of Barbauld’s Eighteen Hundred and Eleven.

NOTES

I would like to thank Carol Willock for her imaginative research assistance on this topic, and for her perceptive comments on drafts of this chapter.
For full citations see Bibliography.
1 Le Breton, Memoir, pp. 38–9.
2 Montagu’s formulation fits the description of ‘double dissent’ recently ascribed to the writings of Dissenting women; see Ross, ‘Configurations’, p. 93.
4 Barbauld, Poems, pp. 17–19.
5 Even the most sympathetic reviewers found Barbauld’s dystopic Eighteen Hundred and Eleven (1812) unpalatable, with one commenting: ‘The whole tone of it is in a most extraordinary degree unkindly and unpatriotic – we had almost said unfilial’ (Eclectic Review, 8 (1812), p. 474; quoted Barbauld, Poems, p. 310).
7 ‘Women are naturally inclined not only to love, but to all the soft and gentle affections; all the tender attentions and kind sympathies of nature’, she wrote
11 On this topic, see Wykes, “‘The Spirit’”.
12 For a refutation of the image of Priestley as innocent victim and martyr, see Ditchfield, ‘Priestley Riots’.
13 William Turner of Newcastle (1761–1859) includes this detail in his memoir of Mrs Barbauld, in the *Newcastle Magazine* in 1825; see Barbauld, *Poems*, pp. 219–20.
14 Burke, *A Letter*, p. 62. For readings of ‘The Mouse’s Petition’ and its controversy, see Keach, ‘Barbauld’, and Saunders, ‘‘Mouse’s Petition’”.
15 Remonstrating with Barbauld, Priestley made direct application of her words to himself: ‘but I, whose religious sentiments have undergone what you call (p. 9) “a total revolution ...”’ (Rutt, *Theological*, vol. i:1, p. 279).
16 Priestley admitted to Barbauld: ‘few persons now living have had more to do with religious controversy than myself’ (*ibid.*, vol. i:1, p. 284).
17 Rutt annotates the revisions in footnotes to Priestley’s letter to Barbauld; see *ibid.*, vol. i:1, pp. 278–86.
19 Two dates have been suggested, 1771 and 1800; see Barbauld, *Poems*, p. 246.
20 See Miller (ed.), *Priestley*, p. xxii. For Priestley’s conversion to Socinianism and his attack on monarchical politics in 1768, see Clark, *English Society*, pp. 396–406.
21 See Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability*.
22 For a brief commentary on their marriage, see Schofield, *Enlightenment*, pp. 91–3. See also McLachlan, ‘Mary Priestley’.
23 See Tomalin, *Life* and Anne Janowitz’s chapter in this volume.
25 *Ibid.*, vol. v, pp. 75–6. One of the best articles on Wollstonecraft’s rhetoric is Furniss’s ‘‘Nasty Tricks’”.
27 For an excellent discussion of this topic, see Johnson, *Equivocal Beings*.
28 Wollstonecraft, *Works*, vol. v, p. 197. The passage continues: ‘Why in the name of decency are sisters, female intimates, or ladies and their waiting-women, to be so grossly familiar as to forget the respect which one human creature owes to another?’
30 Quoted in Vickery, * Gentleman’s Daughter*, p. 84.
31 For an astute account of the differences between Wollstonecraft and Barbauld, including a timely rebuttal of the usual readings of Barbauld’s ‘The Rights of Woman’ (c. 1793), see Newlyn, *Reading, Writing*, pp. 155–60.

33 Russell, ‘Birmingham Riots’.

34 ‘the mob... said if they cou’d find doctr Priestley they wou’d burn him alive’, *ibid*.


38 ‘To dispute with the Doctor was deemed the road to preferment. He had already made two bishops, and there were still several heads which wanted mitres’ (Hutton, *Life*, p. 231).


42 The King’s pleasure was widely reported, and apparently Edmund Burke ‘could not contain his joy’ (Rutt, *Theological*, vol. xxv, p. 398).

43 Priestley originally composed the passage as Preface to his *Letters*; and later included it in *An Appeal to the Public, on the Subject of the Riots in Birmingham* (1792), in Rutt, *Theological*, vol. xix, pp. 385–6. The *Letters* is accessibly reprinted as Priestley, *Farewell Sermon*.

44 For Mrs Delany’s ‘mimic bowers,’ made of ‘paper foliage’ and ‘silken flowers,’ see Darwin, *The Botanic Garden*, Canto ii, lines 155–64, pp. 69–70. Its publisher Joseph Johnson brought out Part ii a second time in 1791, together with Part i. For a fascinating discussion of the overlap between scientific botanical illustration and decorative flower painting, see chapter 4 of Pointon, *Strategies*.

45 For an incisive and entertaining essay on the scandalousness of Darwin’s project, see Bewell, ‘“Jacobin Plants”’.


47 A title-search for the period does not yield any other ‘Civic Sermons’. Coleridge translated his learned title, *Conciones ad Populum* (1795), as ‘Addresses’ rather than ‘Sermons’ to the people.

48 In 1811, Henry Crabb Robinson noted, in scandalized terms, that Barbauld ‘confessed’ to him that she had written them; see Robinson, *Henry Crabb Robinson on Books*, vol. i, p. 23.

49 Joseph Priestley to his brother-in-law, 8 September 1791, from typescript of Priestley’s letters held in Warrington Library (British Library, 10902. i. 8).
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