“DISCORDANT NATURES TO COMBINE”
ANNA LETITIA BARBAULD’S POETIC ENGAGEMENT WITH NATURAL PHILOSOPHY

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By

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This thesis looks at how Anna Letitia Barbauld's poetry engages with natural philosophy, or science. I explore the scientific and cultural backdrop to five of her poems that involve references to zoology, astronomy, and chemistry. I read the ways that these poems engage with larger eighteenth-century cultural discourses surrounding natural philosophy and the inequality of education for women. I also explore the connection between poetry and natural philosophy, made evident by Barbauld's verses. Due to the ability of both the study of natural philosophy and the publication of poems to thrust people onto a public stage, both are modes for gaining 'eminence.' Barbauld's poems question the value of 'eminence' over the pursuit of virtue, found, according to Barbauld’s work, in domestic felicity.
To my parents, Debra and Camden, and to Zan Gillies.
Thank you to my advisor, Duncan Wu, and to Ashley Cohen.

Many thanks,
Abigail Calvert Fine
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INTRODUCTION

“I Seize the Pencil, or Resume the Pen”

The poetry of Anna Letitia Barbauld takes readers on a journey through the scientific and technological worldview of late eighteenth century England. In her verses, Barbauld watches the Montgolfier air balloon float like a soap bubble through the sky, and soars among the stars and planets meditating on the unfathomability of eternity and the unknowability of the nature of God. Barbauld’s poems make evident that the study of natural philosophy permeated her world-view. She questions the ethics of scientific experimentation on living creatures in “The Mouse’s Petition,” and performs the task of the naturalist through her descriptions of British fauna in “To Mrs. Priestley with Some Drawings of Birds and Flowers.” She uses aspects of natural philosophy as a basis for philosophical musings, such as her contemplation of the divine in “A Summer Evening’s Meditation,” and she evokes the universally recognized image of an air balloon in “Washing Day.” Yet, while these poems engage with public conversations and cultural touchstones, many of Barbauld’s poetic discussions of science and technology proceed naturally from Barbauld’s personal, everyday life. She wrote many of her poems for her friends and neighbors. Barbauld’s poems which engage with public conversations on natural philosophy usually comment also on domestic events or fulfill tasks of friendship. Other poems, like “A Summer Evening’s Meditation,” are inflected with natural philosophy only through Barbauld’s own intimate knowledge of astronomy and the scientific community.

The study of natural philosophy and writing poems were Barbauld’s life-long pursuits. She began studying astronomy at the age of seven and wrote her first poem in her late teens or
early twenties. As she approached her fiftieth birthday, her adopted son sent her a book on chemistry owing to his knowledge of her keen interest in the subject, and she wrote her last poem in her early eighties. Barbauld’s poetry indicates that an engagement with natural philosophy, and the act of writing itself, constituted powerful tools that allowed her to explore her both her natural and cultural environment. Moreover, writing on natural philosophy allowed Barbauld to acquire an influential voice in larger societal conversations. Her poetry celebrates the power of education and the study of natural philosophy for affording knowledge and beauty to those who seek it. Yet, the poems display conflict within themselves: while praising scientific inquiry, Barbauld’s verses also question aspects of natural philosophy for its potential to cause harm to the natural order. Most importantly, her poems question the integrity of the pursuit of ‘science,’ or education, which led natural philosophers towards ‘eminence,’ rather than ‘virtue.’

This project seeks to offer thoughtful, new insights into five of Barbauld’s poems through readings grounded in a historical examination of the eighteenth-century cultural and scientific conversations that serve as the backdrop to their composition. Because Barbauld’s gender played a critical role in the ways that she could (or could not) engage with and write about natural philosophy, it has therefore been taken into consideration. As Isobel Armstrong noted in her article “The Gush of the Feminine,” however, “many women poets [did not consent] to the idea of a special feminine discourse.” Consequently, I have tried not to class Barbauld as a “woman poet” in a generalized sense, but instead to view her as an individual with unique thoughts, experiences, and ideas which she put into writing. As part of this effort, I have made use of William McCarthy’s recent biography, Anna Letitia Barbauld: The Voice of the

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1 Armstrong, 15.
Enlightenment, to further ground my research in specific historical fact, and to determine
Barbauld’s own relationship to the larger scientific community in Britain and Europe.
Additionally, Jenny Uglow’s work, particularly The Lunar Men: The Friends Who Made the
Future, 1730-1810, illuminates people, attitudes, and fields of inquiry that were important in the
scientific community with which Barbauld engaged. While in her work Uglow mentions women
in conjunction with their relationship to the men of the Lunar Society, she does not focus
specifically on women’s relationship to this scientific community. Additionally, as her project
focuses on the history of science rather than on literary texts, Uglow’s project does not attempt to
elucidate new interpretations of the literary endeavours of any members of this group.

In literary criticism, however, the recent trend has been to examine literary and scientific
discourses as interrelated, arising from the same sociohistorical context. In Languages of
Nature, Ludmilla Jordanova writes that instead of focusing on influence—which usually implies
the unidirectional effect of science upon literature—scholars should “emphasize shared cultures,
contexts and even philosophical structures, since historically specific ways of knowing the
natural world give rise to related modes of writing about it.”

Similarly, George Levine asserts
that “science and literature reflect each other because they draw mutually on one culture, from
the same sources, and they work out in different languages the same project,” and Peter D.
Smith calls for “a discursive space in which literature and science can be considered equally

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3 George Levine, “One Culture: Essays in Science and Literature” in One Culture: Essays in Science and Literature,
without denying the unique contributions each has to make to human understanding.” My project attempts to locate that discursive space in Barbauld’s poems through an examination of the intersection between her poetry and her knowledge of scientific culture.

In criticism that relates specifically to the works of Anna Letitia Barbauld, Isobel Armstrong’s interpretation of Barbauld’s poem “Inscription for an Ice House” opened up new ways of understanding how Barbauld’s poetry—even, and perhaps especially, that which engaged with technology—operated intertextually with other contemporary writers, natural philosophers, and politicians. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, Mary Ellen Bellanca’s and Julia Saunders’ altered the approach to reading “The Mouse’s Petition.” Instead of viewing the poem as merely an allegory for political oppression, they interpreted Barbauld’s text in light of eighteenth-century debates on animal welfare and the use of living creatures in scientific experimentation. Following Bellanca’s and Saunders’ lead on “The Mouses’s Petition,” this project reads Barbauld’s poetry against the background of scientific culture, elucidating the ways that it engages with current events in the scientific community and in her own intimate circles, weaves in commentary on societal norms and cultural events, and engages in discourse with the published treatises by natural philosophers. Moreover, I seek to offer a new approach to understanding the divided attitude towards scientific progress that is apparent in

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Barbauld’s poetry through an examination of the ways that she links natural philosophy with the supernatural or divine.

Lastly, this thesis proposes that through an engagement with science and technology, Barbauld’s poetry reveals attitudes of discontent with the limits on women’s opportunities in eighteenth-century British society. Simultaneously, the poems evoke a sense of longing for contentedness with that limited position. In his 1995 article, “‘We Hoped the Woman Was Going to Appear’: Repression, Desire, and Gender in Anna Letitia Barbauld’s Early Poems,” McCarthy draws a similar conclusion. Through a pointed analysis of the feminine aspects of poems like “Groans of a Tankard,” “Lines Written in an Alcove,” “A Summer Evening’s Meditation,” and “The Invitation,” among others, McCarthy seeks to reverse a now-discredited version of a rigidly “anti-feminist” Barbauld. In so doing, he convincingly argues that “the personal is (not surprisingly) encoded in displaced forms” in Barbauld’s poetry. While perhaps he pushes this too far in his simple equation of the word “Wisdom” as a stand-in for the tutors at Warrington, the concept is intriguing. In 2014, Olivia Murphy acknowledged that as readers of Romantic literature “we need to keep in the forefront of our minds the knowledge that Barbauld and her contemporaries wrote—and read—in…guarded, selective, allusive, encoded ways.”

Therefore, in my readings I have tried to recover some of the implications under the surface of Barbauld’s words.

In the first chapter, I argue that Barbauld’s poetic engagement with natural philosophy often critiques the exclusion of women from higher education and from the pursuit of serious

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scientific inquiry. Through a close reading of several of her early poems, I assert that Barbauld’s poetry reveals a felt dissatisfaction with the cultural norms that limited the opportunities of respectable, eighteenth-century women. At the same time, her poetry evinces divided feelings towards a desire for “virtue,” and a desire for “eminence.” Barbauld’s verses reveal frustration with what she terms her “bounded sphere,” yet they also seek to glorify this sphere as a place in which virtue flourishes. Yet, through verse-writing Barbauld engaged with larger cultural conversations on the ethics of natural philosophic experimentation, and gained eminence for herself. She managed to remain within the bounds of respectability, however, by expressing her opinions in poetry—a form of writing with societal approbation for women—rather than in a scientific treatise or a political pamphlet. Barbauld thereby avoided the cultural censure against overly educated women. In the second chapter of the thesis, I focus on her poem “A Summer Evening’s Meditation.” By placing it in conversation with the conclusions drawn in the first chapter, I offer a new reading of the poem that takes into consideration contemporary events in the British scientific community. I further suggest that “A Summer Evening’s Meditation” reveals that Barbauld not only wrote poetry that enacts critiques of the patriarchalism of eighteenth-century British culture, but that her poetry also reclaims self-worth in the face of a society that traditionally did not allow women to fully participate in scientific culture.

In the third chapter, I discuss the ways in which Barbauld’s poetry reveals divided attitudes towards the benefits of scientific progress, and towards writing poetry. I contend that the anxieties evinced in the poems over the value of scientific achievement, and the value of composing verse, relate to the conflicted attitudes they display towards the limited opportunities for women to receive higher education in eighteenth-century Britain. Though in earlier chapters
I briefly explore instances in Barbauld’s poetry that question the ethics regarding experimentation in the name of natural philosophy, here I focus more closely on how Barbauld used her poetry to voice concerns about the prudence of man harnessing nature with scientific and technological advancement, or trying to use poetry to engage with critical conversations. Although Barbauld primarily celebrates scientific innovations, even her most commendatory verses contain imagery that denotes that a slight hesitation about approving the exploits of natural philosophers. Thus, while the overall tone of Barbauld’s poetry is one of admiration for technological marvels and scientific feats, her words occasionally suggest caution in the face of natural philosophy.

One final note on the text: unless otherwise marked, when citing Barbauld’s poetry I have used William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft’s 1994 edition of *The Poetry of Anna Letitia Barbauld* for all of my quotations and line numbers.
CHAPTER ONE
“Our Path Divides”

In October 1768, Anna Letitia Barbauld (then Aikin) wrote a poem to her younger brother, John, which she sent as a letter. John, completing his professional studies in Manchester, had complained that she had not kept up her correspondence with him. The poem, now known as “To Dr. Aikin on his Complaining she neglected him” engages with a serious meditation on Barbauld and John’s sibling relationship and the different opportunities that emerged for each as they reached adulthood. In the following chapter, I will first argue that through shifts in tone and diction, Barbauld’s poem “To Dr. Aikin…” establishes the idea of a conflict between education, or “science,” (line 58) which has the ability to lead to public eminence, and between virtue, which flourishes in a circumscribed space, or a “bounded sphere” (line 60) In the poem, John pursues science and a career in medicine, while Barbauld—who writes that she “sighs” for the “tree of knowledge” (line 57)—ultimately decides to attempt to remain content with pursuing virtue.

The conflict between science and virtue recurs in Barbauld’s fictional prose piece “The Hill of Science: A Vision,” and—similarly to Barbauld in “To Dr. Aikin…”—the character of the dreamer chooses to pursue virtue rather than forge ahead to the top of the Hill of Science. Yet, in the second half of the chapter I propose that despite Barbauld’s endorsement of choosing a retired life of virtue, rather than a life of science and universal fame, the poems “To Mrs. Priestley with some Drawings of Birds and Insects,” and “The Mouse’s Petition,” paradoxically allow Barbauld to engage with natural philosophy publicly. Skillfully, these poems participate in
public discourse while seemingly remaining part of a private spaces: in their published form, either the title or paratext of both professed that these verses were written for friends, and were initially given to their recipients in the private space of the home.

In “To Dr. Aikin…” Barbauld starts out quite seriously asking John to forgive her for being remiss in her writing. She begins in the first person, “Forgive a fault I strive not to defend;/ For oft remorse has touch’d my conscious breast” (lines 2-3), then her tone changes abruptly. In a series of rhetorical questions, posed in the third person, Barbauld impishly suggests that John’s pleas for letters formerly made her feel, paradoxically, less remorseful for her neglect: “But what, if now your penitent confess/Your kind upbraiding made her sorrow less” (lines 7-8). She continues on, asking “What if she half enjoy’d the anxious care,/ And almost triumph’d in the jealous fear” (lines 11-12) betrayed by John’s entreaties. Barbauld incorporates a sense of playfulness into the verse: the poem turns from a sincere supplication for understanding, voiced as imperative statements in the first-person, to a succession of tongue-in-cheek questions, written in the third-person.

Moreover, the opening diction indicates that the writer feels shame over neglecting to write to her brother for so long: she calls herself a “penitent” (line 7), one who feels sorrow, or guilt, for committing a wrong. She no longer writes in the first person as she did for the initial six lines—instead, she switches to the third-person, thereby distancing herself from her confessions. Now, John’s “upbraiding make her sorrow less” and “she half enjoy’d” his distress. Syntactically, the “she” who revels in John’s pain is not the same Barbauld who initially begged his forgiveness. Moreover, by posing these sentiments as a series of rhetorical questions, beginning with “But what, if now your penitent confess…” (line 7), the poem further
displaces the shame of expressing gratification at John’s pleas for letters. Though Barbauld willingly states her fault in failing to write to John, she cannot so easily admit her satisfaction at his discomfort. Instead, she acknowledges this gratification in an open-ended question; she attempts to disguise it with humor and playfulness. The question form itself enhances a sense of embarrassment at these sentiments: through the uncertainty of the question, the poem deflects these particular thoughts, rather than stating them outright.

In the poem, Barbauld asserts that she only liked John’s distress because it proved to her that he loved her not just as a sister, but as a true friend. Yet, she also writes that she took satisfaction in creating in him a “jealous fear” (line 12)—a fear, perhaps, that she had found something or someone more important than him to occupy the time she might otherwise devote to letter-writing. By eliciting this fear, Barbauld wrote that she “almost triumph’d” (line 12). The definition of triumph is to conquer over another and to exult in victory. But, in the poem Barbauld states that she loves her brother, and she truly does not want to feel too gleeful over the fact that, for once, he appears jealous of her. She does not want to revel in his uneasiness and his disappointment. Yet, she also writes that she cannot help feeling triumphant. Through posing this triumph as part of a rhetorical question (“What if she half-enjoy’d the anxious care,/And almost triumph’d in the jealous fear…”), the poem evokes the sense that the writer wanted to make John jealous over something in her life because—as she comes close to admitting—she feels jealousy towards the life he leads. For, in the poem Barbauld acknowledges that although once they grew “like two scions on one stem” (line 27), they no longer do.

As a man, John could enter the world in a way that Barbauld could not: as Barbauld spends nearly thirty lines of the poem describing (lines 62-89), John filled his time with the study
of natural philosophy and medicine, preparing for a career as a doctor. As Barbauld’s poetic preoccupation with John’s study of medicine suggests, the fields of science and technology fascinated Barbauld from a young age. At seven years old, she began to learn about astronomy through a popular treatise by Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle’s, entitled *Entretiens sur la Pluralité des Mondes*. Her early education included lessons on botany from her father, the Reverend John Aikin. During her twenties Barbauld watched one of the great technological developments of the eighteenth century come to fruition, as laborers and engineers cut the newest section of the Duke of Bridgewater’s canal into the ground near her home in Warrington.¹ Barbauld’s fascination with technology and science continued into her late adulthood and married life: in a letter to a young female pupil, written in the late 1780s, Barbauld advised, “The great laws of the universe, the nature and properties of those objects which surround us, it is unpardonable not to know…Under this head are comprehended natural history, astronomy, botany, experimental philosophy, chemistry, and physics.”² Moreover, in March of 1793, Barbauld received a letter from her adopted son and nephew, Charles Rochemont Aikin, accompanied by a new book on chemistry. In his letter, Charles thought she might “employ a few hours in perusing the new French theory of Chemistry,” for he knew her fondness for “ingenious and striking new theories.”³

Barbauld could not pursue her interest in science and technology at university as did her brother. Instead, respectable, middle-class women like Barbauld might study the natural world

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for “rational amusement,” and for personal improvement. Many Dissenting families, like the Aikins, granted an education founded in the discourses of natural philosophy not only to their sons, but to their daughters. Jenny Uglow notes that the men in the Lunar Society, with whom the Aikin family were acquainted through their friendship with the chemist and Dissenting theologian Joseph Priestley, “all encouraged their daughters to study botany, chemistry, and mechanics.” Uglow goes on to add that “This, however, was a matter of general education rather than preparation for a practical future life of involvement with science and technology…they regarded their daughters as plainly destined for marriage and motherhood.” Indeed, there was a fine line between an accomplished woman and an overly learned woman. Mary Ellen Bellanca notes that Barbauld’s career “is emblematic of a ‘cultural paradox’ in attitudes towards women’s learning: general knowledge, including science knowledge, was approved, but ‘excessively’ serious pursuits were ridiculed as pedantic and unfeminine.” Barbauld herself voiced concerns about the negative way that society reacted to overly-educated women when in 1774 she declined an invitation to open an academy for young ladies: she wrote that women “ought only to have such a general tincture of knowledge as to make them agreeable companions to a man of sense…The thefts of knowledge in our sex are connived at while carefully concealed, and if displayed, punished with disgrace.”

A contemporary review of Barbauld’s Poems, published in 1773, encapsulates this ‘cultural paradox’ towards female education. The reviewer, William Woodfall, enjoyed the

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6 Bellanca, 50.
7 Quoted in Bellanca, 52.
volume: he praises Barbauld’s “justness and vigour of thought,” and he “congratulate[s] the public on so great an accession to the literary world, as the genius and talents of [Barbauld].” Yet, he still found too much distasteful learning in Barbauld’s work. He criticizes her poems for what he perceives as their lack of femininity: “If she…has trod too much in the footsteps of men, it has been owing, not to want of genius, but to a want of proper education.” He proposes that the poems may have been better if “the amiable Writer of these poems had been educated more under the direction of a mother, than of a father,” noting that “There is sex in the minds as well as in the bodies…[a woman] appears inferior only when she quits her station, and aims at excellence out of her province.” This cultural paradox existed not just in the wider society of eighteenth-century England, but even in Barbauld’s own home. Through an examination of personal letters and contemporary memoirs, William McCarthy demonstrates that though Barbauld’s parents took pride in her intelligence, they strictly reined in her ambition, attempting to mould her into a woman of accomplishment. Consequently, in the above quoted letter Barbauld recommended displaying “only a general tincture of knowledge.” Her understanding of discourses of natural philosophy served only as a polish to her character, much like playing an instrument, drawing, or embroidery.

Thus, in 1768, Barbauld composed “To Dr. Aikin…” at home in Warrington, while John continued his formal education. John experimented with chemistry, physics, and anatomy while studying surgery in Manchester, and he had already attended the University of Edinburgh. Unlike Barbauld, John had been allowed to begin his education at a Dissenting school, the Warrington Academy. Barbauld’s father had served first as a classics tutor, then as headmaster.

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9 Woodfall, 137.
at Warrington Academy from 1758, when Barbauld was just fifteen. Warrington Academy offered two courses of study, a three year course and a five year course, and both included scientific instruction—or, more accurately, instruction in ‘natural philosophy.’ For Barbauld and her contemporaries, the word ‘science’ meant only general knowledge or mastery of some branch of learning. In the eighteenth century, the term ‘natural philosophy’ would have more closely approximated our current twenty-first century usage of ‘science.’ Uglow explains that “when people spoke of the ‘arts,’ they did not mean only the fine arts but the ‘mechanic arts’…So the relationship of philosophy to the arts could mean the usefulness of natural knowledge to industry—almost the opposite of what we mean today.” From this consideration, Uglow contends that to understand eighteenth century attitudes towards ‘arts,’ ‘sciences,’ and ‘natural philosophy,’ we need to “wrench our minds” around this problem of language, and to abandon our own cultural connotations of words.

For Dissenters, the natural philosopher’s examination and re-examination of the natural world mirrored the theologians examination and re-examination of holy texts. Thus, most Dissenters viewed natural philosophy and religion as companions. Indeed, many Dissenting

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10 McCarthy, Voice of the Enlightenment, 37.
12 The OED defines the eighteenth-century usage of “science” as the now archaic “Knowledge or understanding acquired by study; acquaintance with or mastery of any branch of learning,” while the now chiefly historical term “natural philosophy” reads, “The study of natural bodies and the phenomena connected with them.” The current definition of “science” is given as “The intellectual and practical activity encompassing those branches of study that relate to the phenomena of the physical universe and their laws,” or—somewhat problematically, given my assertion that science is, like literature, a construct—“A branch of study that deals with a connected body of demonstrated truths or with observed facts systematically classified and more or less comprehended by general laws, and incorporating trustworthy methods (now esp. those involving the scientific method and which incorporate falsifiable hypotheses) for the discovery of new truth in its own domain.” See: "science, n.". OED Online. December 2014. Oxford University Press. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/172672?redirectedFrom=science#eid, and "natural philosophy, n.". OED Online. December 2014. Oxford University Press. http://oed.com/view/entry/235692?redirectedFrom=natural+philosophy#eid.
academies and universities—such as the University of Edinburgh—were leaders in fields of scientific inquiry. Thus, Barbauld’s exposure to Dissent, rather than to the establishment, was a great boon for both her analytic and scientific understanding. Barbauld likely read the works of her father’s teacher, the famous non-conformist Philip Doddridge, who connected the study of the natural world with religious study: he wrote that “as a thousand Charms discover themselves in the Works of Nature, when attentively viewed with Glasses, which had escaped the naked Eye; so our Admiration of the Holy Scriptures will rise, in Proportion to the Accuracy, with which they are studied.”

Many Dissenters, including those in Barbauld’s Warrington circle, such as her father and Priestley, believed that through scientific investigation humanity unlocked the truth of the natural world which God created. Through an understanding of the natural world, humanity grew closer to comprehending the magnificence of the almighty creator. Therefore, Barbauld would have understood the study of natural philosophy as intimately connected to greater universal revelations with implications for both religion and politics.

During her fifteen years living near the school, Barbauld saw nearly two-hundred and thirty young men pass through the three- or five-year course at Warrington Academy. After they finished their course they moved on to university, then a career in medicine, law, or theology.

Despite her intelligence and desire to learn, as a woman Barbauld could never have the kinds of career to which her brother and her father’s pupils aspired. She would never be admitted to the University of Edinburgh. She would never practice medicine. Nor, without the benefit of formal education, could she ever hope to learn as much about the natural world as her male friends. By Dissenting logic, she would therefore never learn as much about the truths of

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14 Quoted in McCarthy, *Voice of the Enlightenment*, 43.
God’s universe and divine plan for humanity. As she continued her letter-poem to John, Barbauld wrote of her disappointment with regards to these limitations:

Those hours are now no more which smiling flew
And the same studies saw us both pursue;
Our path divides—to thee fair fate assign’d
The nobler labours of a manly mind:
While mine, more humble works, and lower cares,
Less shining toils, and meaner praises shares. (lines 48-53)

The structure of the lines conveys her sentiments as much as the words. Barbauld divides line fifty with a caesura, enacting aurally their divided path. In her description of John’s vocation, she uses alliteration and internal consonance: “fair fate,” “nobler labours” and “manly mind.” The alliteration and internal consonance serve to draw our ear to the words; the repetition of sounds heightens and emphasizes the sentiment conveyed. Additionally, in these lines John’s fate is written succinctly and elegantly; Barbauld sums it up in one unbroken thought. Her fate poetically contrasts with his, meandering fitfully over two lines. And, whereas John performs one type of duty—“nobler labours”—Barbauld describes her own destiny as a series of relatively unimportant “works,” “cares,” and “toils,” poetically enacting both the sheer number of her domestic tasks and the tedium of her day-to-day existence. There may be a hint of irony, too, in her description of how “fair fate” marked out their destinies, for the word “fair,” in addition to denoting ‘pretty’ or ‘pleasing,’ also means ‘just’ or ‘characterized by equitable conduct.’ These lines suggest that Barbauld does not think it just or equitable that she cannot follow in her brother’s educational and professional footsteps.
These were deep-seated grievances, according to McCarthy’s biographical work on Barbauld. As a child, Barbauld was apparently something of a prodigy. In a letter written in 1784, Barbauld’s mother, Jane Aikin, reminisced about her, “I once…knew a little girl who was as eager to learn as her instructors could be to teach her…and who at two years old could read sentences and little stories in her wise book roundly without spelling, and in a year more read as well as most women.”15 Moreover, her father, John Aikin, allowed her to participate in some philosophical debates and to listen to conversations between himself and his students. In an anecdote told by one of Aikin’s pupils, when Barbauld was a child at the dinner table she questioned one of her father’s philosophical assertions on the place of joy in Heaven:

“I think you are mistaken, papa,” exclaimed a little voice from the opposite side of the table: “Why do you think so Laetitia?” “Because, papa, in the chapter I read to you this morning in the Testament, it is said there is more joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, than over ninety-nine just persons that need no repentance.”16

In the anecdote, the Reverend Aikin treats Barbauld like a student, rather than an impertinent child. He asks her to explain her reasoning, rather than growing angry that she voiced a disagreement with his conclusion in front of a pupil. In this instance, Barbauld was allowed to speak her mind on philosophical and theological matters.

Yet if her upbringing offered her a taste of the kind of education she wanted, according to her niece and early biographer Lucy Aikin, it also left her feeling guilty over her desire for an education and career deemed suitable only for men. Her mother and her father, though proud of

her learning, also desired that in her behavior she would conform to eighteenth-century standards of feminine propriety. Aikin wrote in her unpublished, autograph copy of “Family History” [Jane Aikin], a woman of sense and a gentlewoman said, that there was no alternative for a girl brought up in a boy’s school, between being a prude and hoyden. She preferred the first, rightly, no doubt, if the case must be so, but it was owing to this training, I presume, that Mrs. Barbauld never appeared at her ease, nor felt so, as she has often told me, in general society.  

In her official “Memoir,” Aikin explicated further on Barbauld’s discomfort, writing “Maternal vigilance effectually… instill[ed] into [Barbauld] a double portion of bashfulness and maidenly reserve.” Another family memoirist, Anna Letitia LeBreton—the daughter of Barbauld’s nephew and adopted son, Charles—wrote of Barbauld, “In her youth, great bodily activity, and a lively spirit struggled hard against the tight rein which held her.”  

LeBreton continued, “[Barbauld] observed to me once, that she had never been placed in a situation which suited her… the manner of her home savored no doubt of puritanical rigor, [and Barbauld] and her mother, neat, punctual, strict, though of cultivated mind and polished manners, were thoroughly uncongenial.” Moreover, according to Aikin, even Barbauld’s father did not allow her to pursue fully the kind of education she desired, despite the fact that he encouraged the development of her rational, logical thought. When Barbauld asked to learn Greek and Latin, he refused on the belief that classical learning was appropriate only for a masculine education. So, though her brother learned Latin and Greek at school, Barbauld learned Latin and a little Greek

17 Quoted in McCarthy, Voice of the Enlightenment, 24.
18 Quoted in McCarthy, Voice of the Enlightenment, 24.
19 Anna Letitia Le Breton, Memoir, 25.
20 Le Breton, 26; meaning, Barbauld and her mother didn’t get along, not that Barbauld was uncongenial.
only by teaching herself to read some in her father’s library; she acquired that after wearing down her father’s resistance to the idea. According to her relatives and earliest biographers, then, Barbauld struggled between wanting to engage with the academic body at Warrington Academy, and with wanting to feel content with the societal strictures placed on women’s intellectual and public behavior which her mother taught her to observe.

Barbauld enacts this internal conflict in her letter-poem to her brother. She follows lines 48-53, with her delineation of their separated paths and designated tasks, with the assertion “Yet sure in different moulds they were not cast/Nor stampd with separate sentiments and taste” (lines 54-55). Here, the tone of the poem most overtly evokes a sense of frustration. The words declare an inherent similarity between the writer and her brother; they were not born different, but as adults their society afforded them different opportunities. With this assertion, she dissolves the assertion that, as Woodfall framed it, “sex exists in the mind”—then, as if realizing the enormity of what she has said, she immediately reproves herself, and attributes the words not to her rational mind, but to her sentimental heart:

But hush my heart! Nor strive to soar too high,
Nor for the tree of knowledge vainly sigh;
Check the fond love of science and of fame
A bright, but ah! a too devouring flame.
Content remain within thy bounded sphere,
For fancy blooms, the virtues flourish there. (lines 56-61)

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After the build of personal frustration in the previous lines, “But hush my heart!” turns the tenor of the poem again towards an attempt at conciliation, both within herself and, the initial purpose of the poem-letter, with her brother. She bashfully checks herself and her bold assertions, thus ending the meditations on her frustrations and beginning her rationalization of her fate, which, if somewhat unpersuasive, preoccupies the rest of the poem. “But hush my heart!” creates a caesura in line 56; the caesura gives Barbauld a moment to catch her breath, and to formulate her words. For, the next one and a half lines do sound formulated: “…nor strive to soar too high,/Nor for the tree of knowledge vainly sigh,” read as if Barbauld repeats words spoken to her time and time again by her mother and her father. Her musing on “virtues” flourishing in her “bounded sphere” sounds like a rote repetition of advice from a moral treatise, rather than a true rebuff. Yet, I do not think that Barbauld meant to sound insincere or sarcastic with these lines. The shifts in the poem indicate true bafflement over how to reconcile a yearning for knowledge and “eminence” in the larger world, with the desire to seek virtue in a “bounded sphere.” By repeating advice on humility and virtue, the poem attempts to assert the primacy of these values over academic study and the pursuit of fame.

Reproof over the desire for higher education and the longing for the chance to prove intellectual worth in a more public sphere recurs in Barbauld’s other works. In her prose essay “The Hill of Science, A Vision,” published in 1773 in Miscellaneous Pieces in Prose, Barbauld writes as a dreamer who falls asleep in an autumnal field and dreams of a towering mountain—which she soon learns is the Hill of Science. At the top of the Hill sits the temple of the goddess Truth, who, in words reminiscent of line 59 in her letter-poem—“A bright, but ah! A too devouring flame”—is described as one “whose head is above the clouds, and a veil of pure light
covers her face.” The dreamer becomes “one of the votaries of Truth [on] the path of Science,” and begins to ascend the Hill. Perhaps unsurprisingly, however, in light of her internal conflict between the pursuit of knowledge or contentment, the allegory takes a ‘twist’ ending.

Barbauld’s dreamer forsakes the path of Science and Truth in favor of Virtue:

Happy, said I, are they who are permitted to ascend the mountain [to Truth]! — but while I was pronouncing this exclamation with uncommon ardour, I saw standing beside me a form of diviner features and a more benign radiance.

Happier, said she, are those whom VIRTUE conducts to the mansions of Content!... Science may raise you to eminence but I alone can guide you to felicity! 22

The dreamer’s choice at the end of the allegory resonates with Barbauld’s poetic admonition to her heart to “Content remain within thy bounded sphere,/ For fancy blooms, the virtues flourish there.” In effect, the allegory serves the same purpose as the poem. In the poem Barbauld acknowledges her desire for science and fame, then dismisses it in favor of a “bounded sphere” where “the virtues flourish”; similarly through the act of the dreamer attempting to climb the Hill of Science, the essay explores the value of the dreamer’s aspirations for high education and deeper knowledge. The essay ultimately asserts that virtue is more desirable than science.

In both “To Dr. Aikin…” and “The Hill of Science, A Vision,” the text voices a desire for the pursuit of “science,” yet, at the emotional pinnacle of both of the pieces—in the allegory described as the moment that the dreamer pronounces her desire “with more than uncommon ardour”—the tone abruptly shifts, and the pieces sincerely attempt to reaffirm deference “virtue”

and to the status quo. Still, despite these attempts, Barbauld’s poetry suggests that the desire for science and fame has not entirely dissipated: she concludes “To Dr. Aikin…” with a mild lament that fate decreed that her brother should do great things, while she has only “the low murmurs of the tuneful reed” (line 93) upon which to sing her “worthless lays” (line 97). Yet, the poem makes an attempt to rationalize the inequality of their fates. By the end of the poem Barbauld no longer imagines that she and her brother were formed in the same mould, with the same desires, enjoyments, and understandings—instead, in an unconvincing contradiction to that earlier line, she writes that though “the Muses fir’d” their breasts “with equal love” she and her brother were “not alike inspir’d” (lines 90-91).

The act of writing offers a space of reconciliation between these conflicting attitudes towards science and virtue, particularly on natural philosophy and technology. Through her poetry, Barbauld could participate in the larger political, religious, and scientific culture of eighteenth-century England. While in Warrington, Barbauld developed a close friendship with Joseph Priestley and his wife, Mary. She visited them often: in a poem dedicated to Mary Priestley, Barbauld writes that at the path to their home was “well-worn” by her footsteps, and that there she found “No cold reserve, suspicion, sullen care,” but instead the “pleasing fires of lively fancy play,/And wisdom mingles her serener ray” (“On Mrs. Priestley’s Leaving Warrington,” 45, 47-48). According to Joseph Priestley, he first inspired Barbauld to write: “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.”23 The Priestley household also afforded Barbauld opportunities to engage with natural philosophy and to hear the latest news of scientific advancement. Joseph

23 McCarthy, Voice of the Enlightenment, 73.
Priestley experimented with many branches of natural philosophy; while in Warrington, he wrote *The History and Present State of Electricity* (1767) and began to experiment on various kinds of air. Unsurprisingly, then, many of Barbauld’s early poems take as their subject matter either one of the Priestley’s, or use some branch of natural philosophy to make their commentary.

For example, William Turner, one of Barbauld’s early memoirists, famously records an anecdote in which, while dining at the Priestley home, “captive [mouse] was brought in after supper, too late for any experiment to be made with it that night.”24 The mouse was caged in the laboratory to await the morning. During the night, however, Barbauld composed a poem titled “The Mouse’s Petition,” and pinned it to the bars of the mouse’s cage, where Priestley found it the next morning. The poem, which makes an eloquent appeal for the mouse’s release—from the point of view of the mouse—was said to have been so effective that Priestley let the creature free after breakfast. Through the medium of poetry Barbauld could comment on scientific work; as Bellanca notes, “Barbauld commented on Priestley’s work not in the laboratory or in scientific correspondence, but in the domestic spaces of the dining room and the meal table.”25 Barbauld used her poetry to question the ethics of Priestley’s experimentation, and to voice her views regarding the rising wave of public debate on animal welfare and the use of live animals for scientific purposes.26

In order to have pinned a poem to a mouse’s cage Barbauld must have had access to Priestley’s laboratory. Moreover, she knew him well enough to have written a teasing,

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24 William Turner, quoted in Bellanca, 47.
25 Bellanca, 49.
26 Bellanca, 48. The image of the caged, trapped mouse might also, as Marlon Ross and Stuart Curran have argued, have allowed Barbauld to make a serious petition for the rights of enslaved Africans and exploited groups, like women
humorous poem entitled “An Inventory of the Furniture in Dr. Priestley’s Study.” The poem, which surveys the books, papers, and artifacts in Priestley’s study, alludes to her familiarity with his experiments on electricity:

A shelf of bottles, jar and phial,

By which the rogues he can defy all.—

All filled with lightning keen and genuine. (lines 17-19)

In the last four lines of the poem Barbauld also seems to refer to Priestley’s experiments on air:

“But what is this,” I hear you cry,

“Which saucily provokes my eye?”

—A thing unknown without a name,

Born of the air and doomed to flame. (lines 55-58)

William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft gloss this line with the observation that “Barbauld seems to be witnessing a moment of discovery in one of Priestley’s experiments—perhaps the discovery of hydrogen (“inflammable air.””).”²⁷ Recently, however, Sonia Hofkosh has proposed that instead of alluding to the discovery of inflammable air, these last lines refer to the poem itself—a thing written on a piece of paper, untitled, surreptitiously left in his study for him to find after she had gone, which he may burn after reading.²⁸ Given Barbauld’s fondness for delivering her poetry to its intended recipients in surprising ways, she very well may have left the poem in Priestley’s study for him to find.²⁹ Indeed, Barbauld may have intended to leave the

²⁹ In addition to pinning a poem to a mouse’s cage, Barbauld is said to have flung “On Mrs. Priestley’s Leaving Warrington” through Mrs. Priestley’s carriage window, as she left Warrington. Until that time, neither Joseph nor
“thing unknown without a name” ambiguous: it could refer either to his experiment, or to her poem. Through this ambiguity, she links the act of scientific experimentation with the act of writing. For Barbauld, composing verse served as her laboratory. Bellanca suggests that Barbauld used writing, especially writing that engaged with current scientific conversations (like in “A Mouse’s Petition), as a way to experiment with creatively speaking to larger scientific and political issues while avoiding the censure against “too learned” women.

Barbauld’s poetry enacted a culturally-sanctioned interaction with the natural world, while also giving her the chance to press against the boundaries of her self-described “bounded sphere.” For example, in “To Mrs. Priestley, with some Drawings of Birds and Insects” Barbauld addresses Mary Priestley, whom she poetically calls Amanda. The poem contains zoological descriptions of birds and insects. As Bellanca notes, it mimics the naturalist’s task through a cataloging of the behaviors and habitats of Britain’s various fauna. But the poem is, in many ways, also about writing. Barbauld bookends the poem with references to its written-ness: it begins “Amanda bids; at her command again/I seize the pencil, or resume the pen” (lines 1-2), and after her last poetic zoological ‘illustration’ Barbauld writes, “Thy friend thus strives to cheat the lonely hour,/ With song, or paint, an insect, or a flower” (lines 121-122). With these four lines, Barbauld connects the act of composing poetry to the study of zoology with the explicit parallel between contemplation of the natural world and the act of verse-writing. In lines 121-122, the syntactic positioning of the word ‘song’ aligned with the word ‘insect,’ indicates a similarity between verse-writing and the study of the natural world. The poem also draws a

Mary Priestley knew she was composing the poem. Even when delivered in a more typical method, such as through the post, her poems usually arrived without warning. McCarthy notes that her brother, John Aikin, observed, “he never knew what moved her to write; occasionally and unpredictably she would send him something to print [when he was editing the Monthly Magazine.” (McCarthy, Voice of the Enlightenment, 74)
parallel between the natural world and eighteenth-century feminine accomplishments like sketching and illustration; it therefore authorizes Barbauld’s interest in zoology as a natural extension of respectable womanhood, rather than as an incursion into a male-dominated field.

Moreover, the poem displays the joys of a female friendship, which further makes it seem like a portrait of respectable female amusement. It presents itself as nothing more serious than the trifle of an afternoon: “Thy friend thus strives to cheat the lonely hour” (line 121). But the syntax allows line 121 to be read in two ways. First, given that the poem is written to Mrs. Priestley, the line suggests that Barbauld attempts to enliven Mrs. Priestley’s free moments with her writing; or, secondly, the line implies that Barbauld attempts to relieve her own tedium through the dual acts of writing and observing the natural world. The choice to call it ‘*the* lonely hour,’ rather than ‘*your* lonely hour’ or ‘*her* lonely hour,’ allows Barbauld to hint that not only did she write the poem to entertain Mrs. Priestley, but she also wrote it to invigorate her own mind. The word ‘*lonely*’ itself carries implications: though perhaps Barbauld describes only an hour in which she has no visitors and nothing else to do, ‘*lonely*’ also connotes a sense of uneasy isolation and solitariness. In ‘cheating the lonely hour’ through writing about the natural world, Barbauld is using the acts of writing and scientific inquiry—which she has conflated in this poem—to escape from the feeling of mental seclusion occasioned by her time-consuming domestic employments and her educational limitations.

Certainly, her choice of subject matter allowed Barbauld the chance to engage with the writings of a larger community of natural philosophers. Likely, she used Thomas Pennant’s four-volume treatise *British Zoology* as one of her sources for her information on birds. Barbauld would have been familiar with Pennant’s book through the printer William Eyres, the
Barbauld’s poem echoes the scientific material found in Pennant’s book. She writes that “The tawny EAGLE seats his callow brood/. . ./On Snowden’s rocks, or Orkney’s wide domain” (line 31-33) which agrees with Pennant’s notes on the golden eagle. In that subsection, he records that eagles are occasionally “bred in Snowdon [sic] hills; from whence some writers give that tract the name of Creigiau’r eryrau, or the eagle rocks,” and he mentions that in the Orkneys they are so pernicious that a law allows anyone who kills one of these birds to have a hen from every house in the parish in which it was killed.

Indeed, Barbauld’s poem may even have been written in response to Pennant’s preface, in which he encourages British writers to “expatiate on the clouds of Soland Geese which breed on the Bass island,” explaining that descriptive poetry is indebted to the natural world. Barbauld’s description the “unnumber’d tribes” of a variety of birds that yearly travel to the sea where they “In clouds unnumber’d annual hover oe’r/The craggy Bass or Kilda’s utmost shore” (lines 67-68) echoes Pennant’s exhortation. In answering Pennant’s call, Barbauld used the poem to speak to the scientific community in a culturally-proscribed mode.

Yet, within the poem Barbauld inscribes a check to her scientific interest. She protests that writing on zoology is a “humbler theme,” and that she’s only cheating a lonely hour, rather than attempting to engage in any serious scientific observation of the natural world. She thereby attempts to deflect any charge of over-learnedness in the poem. She describes the poem as originating from her “artless hand,” and, at its close, she writes,

Yet if Amanda praise the flowing lines,

And bend delighted o’er the gay design

27
I envy not, nor emulate the fame
Or of the painter’s, or the poet’s name:
Could I to both with equal claim pretend,
Yet far far dearer were the name of FRIEND. (lines 123-126)

The ending of “To Mrs. Priestley…” echoes that of “To Dr. Aikin…”: in both, Barbauld ends on a note of humility. In lines 123-126 of “To Mrs. Priestley…” Barbauld asserts her own inadequacy both at writing and, because her ability to write is linked to her skill at scientific observation, at the study of natural philosophy. Still, she garners joy from the understanding that her friend will delight in the poem, even if it does not deserve universal applause. She uses the same trope at the end of “To Dr. Aikin…”, writing that though her words are as undeserving as the “low murmurs of the tuneful reed” (line 93), as compared to her brother’s “flute and sounding lyre” (line 92), yet she “will smile to see thy partial praise,/ With lovely error crown my worthless lays” (lines 96-97). In both, friendship matters more than poetic preeminence.

The degree to which Barbauld truly felt inadequate, however, is questionable. Certainly, she understood that her writings could be made public, or semi-public, without her knowledge or consent. This might help to explain why she steps back from bold assertions, like that made in “To Dr. Aikin…” stating an inherent similarity of taste and sentiment between herself and her brother. Though “To Dr. Aikin…” was not published until the twentieth century, Michelle Levy presents evidence that suggests that it—like many of her poems—circulated in manuscript among her intimate social circle, and perhaps even reached a somewhat wider audience.30 Such

30 Michelle Levy, “Barbauld’s Poetic Career in Script and Print,” Anna Letitia Barbauld: New Perspectives, eds. William McCarthy and Olivia Murphy (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2014), 49; Levy notes that the reviewer William Woodfall alludes to having seen Barbauld’s work in manuscript, including an “epistle to her
cultural context might explain why, after writing to a female pupil that she should learn about the branches of natural philosophy, Barbauld tempers this advice with the explanation, “In these you will rather take what belongs to sentiment and utility than abstract calculations or difficult problems. You must often be content to know a thing is so, without understanding the proof…You cannot investigate; you may remember.” Moreover, throughout her work Barbauld advocates for virtue to take precedence over the pursuit of knowledge and fame.

The letter quoted above, in conjunction with Barbauld’s poetry, evokes a divided attitude towards female education: she writes that she wants deeper knowledge, but she always returns to the idea that women must feel content without the benefit of an advanced education. In “To Dr. Aikin” Barbauld acknowledges her desire for “the tree of knowledge,” and her “fond love of science and of fame,” yet she also advises her heart to “Content remain within thy bounded sphere”—which in the poem contrasts with the place where she might seek fame and “science,” or an advanced education. Barbauld’s own poems, however, often display her learning and her familiarity with natural philosophy. Through her poetry, she participates in discourses on science, technology, and philosophy in a culturally-sanctioned mode: she answers an ornithologist’s call to write on the fauna of England; she probes at the ethics of scientific experimentation on live animals. Yet, in her letter of 1774, Barbauld advises education for women only insofar as they make suitable marriage partners; she describes overly-educated

\[\text{\textsuperscript{31}}\text{Kraft and McCarthy, SPP, 480.}\]
women as having committed a “theft of knowledge,” and alludes to a punishment for those women who display their learning. In her letter to a female pupil, she once more advises contentment over advanced education. Therefore, though Barbauld’s poetry participates in public discourse, it also serves as a space in which she reaffirms to herself the importance of unassuming virtue and endorses societally-sanctioned modes of address.
Barbauld’s poem “A Summer Evening’s Meditation” begins with a spondee: “Tis past!” The excitement conveyed in the opening foot sets the tone for the duration of the poem. At its heart, the poem is an adventure, an imaginative journey among the stars, past planets, to the ends of the universe, an incredible leap into the unknown and beyond. In “A Summer Evening’s Meditation,” like in “To Dr. Aikin on his Complaining she neglected him,” Barbauld struggles with her frustration over the limitations that society has placed on her as a woman. But in this poem, Barbauld uses an engagement with natural philosophy to break free from these bonds imaginatively, to resist societally imposed limits on her desire for a traditional education, and to revel in other modes of understanding that are available to her. Instead of a wry, almost bitter reflection on her fate, “A Summer Evening’s Meditation” is full of hope, enthusiasm, and promise. The poem allows Barbauld the opportunity to enter into a topical conversation on astronomy, to explore a branch of natural philosophy that attracted her from an early age, and to voice her resentment that she cannot more deeply engage with the kinds of scientific knowledge that she desires. At the same time, Barbauld once again attempts to reconcile herself to her fate, finding comfort in the promises of her faith.

Barbauld was interested in many branches of natural philosophy—from chemistry, to zoology, to botany—but in this poem she chose to use astronomy to facilitate her meditations on more personal subjects. Likely, she decided to write about astronomy owing not only to personal interest, but also due to topicality. Though the exact date of composition is unknown, the poem
was published in 1773, and so must have been written before then. Given its sophistication, modern editors William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft place it shortly after her poems written in 1767 and 1768, so it was most likely composed near the end of the 1760s or in the early 1770s. During this time frame, astronomy became a focal point for natural philosophers, including Barbauld’s friend Priestley, as astronomers the world over heeded Edmund Halley’s call to measure the distance from Earth to Venus—also known as the “astronomical unit”—during the Transits of Venus in 1761 and 1769. Nor did the excitement surrounding the two Transits immediately abate following 1769: due to the far-flung nature of many of the observatories, collecting the results of the observations continued for several years.

For Barbauld, surrounded by learned men at the Warrington Academy, and involved in a close friendship with the Priestleys, the excitement surrounding the Transits of Venus must have been palpable. The astronomical events had been long anticipated: Halley recognized the importance of the Transits of Venus in 1716. However, the next Transit of Venus would not occur until 1761, followed by second transit in 1769, and then would not occur again for another 105 years. Thus, on June 6th, 1761—just weeks shy of Barbauld’s eighteenth birthday—the whole of the academic world stood poised to observe the transit, and to attempt to solve one of the greatest problems of the universe. Observers waited at sixty-two international stations, in expeditions sponsored by the governments of Britain, Denmark, France, certain kingdoms of the Germanies and Italian city-states, Portugal, Russia, and Sweden. Unfortunately, by 1763, it became apparent that the observers had failed to reach a reliable conclusion regarding the distance of Earth from Venus. Thus, preparations began on an even larger scale for the next
transit, which would occur on June 3rd, 1769. This was a second chance for astronomers to
determine the astronomical unit, and they did not want to miss it.

Jenny Uglow writes that the Lunar Society, a group of Priestley’s natural philosophy-
minded friends, took pride in their connections to various astronomical expeditions.¹ In
America, Benjamin Franklin—a friend of many of the men in the Lunar Society—helped to buy
a new telescope for his friend John Winthrop, who hoped to find sponsorship for an expedition to
Lake Superior. Most excitingly for Priestley—and thus Barbauld’s immediate circle—the Royal
Society sponsored Captain James Cook’s voyage to Tahiti to observe the second Transit of
Venus. Cook’s voyages took an especial importance among the Warrington Circle because upon
the publication of Priestley’s book *History and Present State of Discoveries relating to Vision, Light, and Colours*, Cook himself invited Priestley along on his second expedition. After
consulting his family, Priestley decided to make the voyage, but his appointment was ultimately
blocked by clerics in the Board of Longitude, who fervently disagreed with Priestley’s religion
and politics. In the end, though Priestley did not make the voyage, one of his discoveries—soda
water—circumnavigated the globe with Cook on the ships *Endeavour* (the ship he took on his
first voyage to observe the Transit) and *Resolution*.²

In her Warrington circle, Barbauld could appreciate all of the excitement spawned by the
dual transits, as well as the honor of Priestley’s invitation to make an expedition with Cook. At
the same time, she knew that even an invitation to accompany Cook on such a voyage could
never be hers. The crew rosters indicate that only men were included on Cook’s expeditions to

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map the heavens. Yet, in “A Summer Evening’s Meditation,” Barbauld does, imaginatively, make an astronomical journey. The entire poem is predicated on gazing at the night sky, but the actual journey of her soul through the solar system comprises lines 71-98. Within those lines, she twice references the idea of sailing. As she gazes at the stars, she wishes to travel amongst them. She writes,

…Seiz’d in thought,

On fancy’s wild and roving wing I sail,

From the green borders of the peopled earth… (lines 71-73).

Her words in line 72—with the repeated “w” sounds of “wild” and “wing,” cut with the “r” that begins “roving”—sound like the wind whipping through the sails of boats, while leaving the “green borders” of earth recall the color of land on a map, as much as (or more) than the actual look of solid land from sea. And again, after passing Saturn—the farthest known planet until 1781—she writes: “fearless thence/I launch into the trackless deeps of space” (lines 81-82). In the absence of modern spaceship, only sailing vessels launched. Her soul, then, metaphorically becomes a ship that allows her to make an expedition amongst the heavens. In her imagination, she sails closer to the stars than Cook ever can on his voyages. Despite the fact that she is a woman without a formal education, she learns more about the heavens than he, or any of the astronomers with him, discover with their observations. She maps distances between celestial bodies with her mind, soaring beyond the known planets the light of ten thousand suns more potent than the sun which shines upon the Earth by following the light of their “elder beam[s].”

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Similarly, of course, eighteenth-century astronomers attempted to determine the astronomical unit by following the light patterns of the sun around the planet Venus.

Barbauld’s personal interest in astronomy began earlier than her interest in other branches of natural philosophy. In 1750, when she was seven years old, she received a copy of *Entretiens sur la Pluralite des Mondes*, written in 1686 by Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle. The tract became very popular reading in the eighteenth-century, especially for children, and Barbauld herself ordered a copy for Palgrave School—the school that she and her husband ran together from 1774-1785. Fontenelle’s treatise consisted of six dialogues between a philosophe and “madame la marquise de G—”, in which Fontenelle explains elementary astronomy and meteorology to the marquise in her garden each night. The dialogues have a flirtatious tone: Fontenelle’s philosophe asks why lovers always address their elegies to night, and remarks on a local custom of a far-off land in which beautiful women grant “everything” to their first visitor. Perhaps such loaded and risqué language influenced Barbauld’s choice of images, for she describes the heavens with sensuous and voluptuous language. The heavens are filled with “splendours” that come “bursting” onto her sight; they will “stand unveil’d” before her “ravish’d sense” (lines 120-122). In terms of the poem, these words indicate a deep desire for a greater understanding of the heavens and the natural world.

The poem connects this desire for knowledge with the acts of looking and seeing. Specifically, the poem allows Barbauld the opportunity to look and see into the heavens in a way that she could not otherwise. Through her imaginative journey into the heavens, she observes

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4 McCarthy, *Voice of the Enlightenment*, 44.
5 McCarthy, *Voice of the Enlightenment*, 44.
6 In *Voice of the Enlightenment*, McCarthy postulates that another line from *Entretiens* that resonated with Barbauld is Fontenelle’s assertion that “We have inquiring minds and bad eyes. 45.
the stars in a manner contemporary astronomers could not. She imagines that she gleans not only scientific knowledge of planets and stars through her contemplations, but also divine knowledge. This imaginative voyage of discovery originates in Barbauld’s ability to gaze upon the sky. The capacity to look allows Barbauld to contemplate existence, and thereby to gain knowledge. The poem opens at sunset: “The sultry tyrant of the south/Has spent his short-liv’d rage” (lines 1-2). With the sun set come more “grateful hours,”

the skies no more repel

The dazzled sight, but with mild maiden beams

Of temper’d lustre, court the cherish’d eye/

To wander o’er their sphere (lines 3-6).

The masculine sun contrasts with the night sky, which Barbauld configures as feminine, with the words “mild maiden beams.” These opening lines set up a contrast between day and night, masculine and feminine. Barbauld describes the sun as a “tyrant,” cruel and oppressive. During the day, ruled by the sun, she cannot gaze at her leisure—which keeps her from engaging with Contemplation, a personified, feminine, concept who cannot exist in the sunlight (line 18). Thus the sun, which dazzles the physical sight, also prevents Barbauld from insight; during the day, she cannot see nor think clearly. Sight, in this poem, becomes linked to mind and knowledge. The inability to look during the day keeps Barbauld from forming any kind of deeper understanding, despite the fact that she longs for knowledge.

The night sky, on the other hand, actually courts her “cherish’d eye.” The eye, here, becomes loved; at night Barbauld’s eyes are invited not only look, but to wander. While the day repels her gaze, the “maiden” beams of night give her eyes free rein. Thus, the initial excitement
of the poem, which arises from the moment when the too bright and oppressive sun sets and
Barbauld, relieved, finally has the ability to look, connects to Barbauld’s ability to begin to think
and learn. Moreover, in “A Summer Evening’s Meditation,” Barbauld explicitly figures the sun
as the brother of the feminine moon. She writes that the moon “lifts high its beamy
horns/Impatient for the night, and seems to push/Her brother down the sky” (line 8-10).
Barbauld’s moon does not “push” with violence, however, but with excitement and anticipation
for the wonders of the night. The impatience of the moon connects to the enthusiastic tone set by
the initial spondee, for, once “her brother” is gone, the “temper’d lustre” of the moon takes
precedence. The moon may never shine quite so brightly as the sun, but in this poem, that milder
light only adds to her charms. The sun burns too hot, but the moon allows for true
contemplation. Though the moon is often considered the lesser of the siblings, in this poem the
sun does not illuminate, but stifles—it is the light of the moon that allows for a greater
knowledge and deeper understanding. The arrival of the moon opens up a new world of thought.

An explicit connection exists between the light of the moon and increased thoughtfulness,
for once the sun has gone, Contemplation awakes. Barbauld writes,

…Tis now the hour

When Contemplation, from her sunless haunts,

The cool damp grotto, or the lonely depth

Of unpierc’d woods, where wrapt in solid shade

She mused away the gaudy hours of noon,

And fed on thoughts unripen’d by the sun,

Moves forward… (lines 17-23)
These lines slow the poem after the “impatient” moon, but they are no less exciting; they are full of anticipation. Line 18 begins languorously; the word ‘contemplation’ sounds like water slowly dripping inside a cave or near small woodland spring, the very places Barbauld suggests that Contemplation dwells during the day. The lines move slowly, enacting Contemplation beginning to stir from slumber. This happens first with the vowel sounds of the words in lines 18-21, which force the reader to linger. Words like “cool,” “mused,” “noon,” and even “woods” draw out the “oo” sound, while “grotto,” “gaudy” and “hours” loiter on the “ah.” The alternate “oo”s and “ah”s enact the relaxed breathing of a sleeping person. The lines are also slowed by the meter: the three stressed syllables in the first two feet of line 19 (“the cool damp gro-tto”) oblige the reader to take time on the words, fully pronouncing the three stresses. Moreover, the caesura and endstop of line 18, combined with the caesuras in lines 19 and 20 slow the pace of the poem; Contemplation begins to rouse with starts and stops. The lines gain a little speed after the caesura in line 20, however, as “wrapt in solid shade” begins to scan more quickly with alternating stressed and unstressed syllables. The enjambment of line 20 into 21 also allows the pace to quicken, and line 21 is the first without a caesura since Contemplation’s introduction; she has almost fully awakened.

The spondee in the first foot of the line 23, “Moves forward,” calls the reader to attention. This is the first stressed syllable at the beginning of a line since Contemplation began to rouse. With the spondee, Contemplation has awoken and begins to move. Once Contemplation has left her sunless haunts and “moves forward” in line 25, the meter quickens:

…and with radiant finger points

To yon blue concave swell’d by breath divine,
Where, one by one, the living eyes of heaven
Awake, quick kindling o’er the face of ether
One boundless blaze… (lines 23-27)

In line 25, the words “one by one” trip quickly and easily past, making way for the “living eyes of heaven” that in line 26 “awake, quick kindling o’er the face of ether.” Line 26, too, reads speedily, enacting the quickness it describes. The repetition of the ‘kuh’ sound in the first three words of the line sound like the crackling of a newly made fire, while the word “kindling,” and, in the next line, “blaze” suggest that the stars are lighting so rapidly, they have blended into one another. The fire sounds of line 26 contrasts with the water sounds of line 18: from the drip-drop of “Contemplation” to the crackling of “quick kindling,” from line 18-27, Barbauld shifts the tone of the poem from one of slow mulling to one of quick mental activity. The image of the stars lighting, one-by-one recalls the practice of lighting signal beacons in watchtowers to convey information across long distances; the device is found in the Greek tragedy Agamemnon, to signal the end of the Trojan War, and was known to Barbauld’s contemporaries, such as Ann Radcliffe, who referenced it in the 1794 novel The Mysteries of Udolpho. The stars, as they light, also convey a message: they signal that the long day has done, and the time has come to seek wisdom. They are, Barbauld writes, “ten thousand trembling fires” (line 27). Like signal fires, Barbauld’s stars speak a direct message: “is there not/A tongue in every star that talks with man, and wooes him to be wise” (lines 48-50). The glory of the night sky, then, courts (or “wooes”) wisdom, in just the same manner as it courts a “cherish’d eye.”

Thus, while the brightness of the sun kept Barbauld from both looking and thought, the light of the moon and the stars allows Barbauld the opportunity to see and to exercise her
intellect. She follows these meditations of the messages of the stars with one of the most beautiful moments of the poem: “This dead of midnight is the noon of thought,/And wisdom mounts her zenith with the stars” (lines 51-52). Barbauld brilliantly uses the word “noon” as a counterpoint to “midnight”: if, in terms of wisdom, midnight is noon, it follows that noon is midnight. She thus reverses the darkest and brightest parts of the day and night to figuratively enhance her previous reversal of the sun and the moon. The reversal privileges the wisdom of the moon, over that of the sun. The light of the moon, rather than the sun, allows for truly inspired understanding. Moreover, she cleverly plays on the word “zenith” with its double meanings of the moment that a celestial body reaches its literal high point, and the time that something or someone reaches the height of its power.

Lines 23-27 return to poem to its focus on looking. When Contemplation points to the sky, Barbauld’s gaze follows. She looks and sees the sky transformed into a “boundless blaze.” As she gazes at it, the night sky returns her looks: the stars are described as the “living eyes of heaven,” which awake as Contemplation awakes. Because of their mutual ability to gaze on each other, an equality exists between the stars and Barbauld. Each may look unabashedly at each. At night, Barbauld may use her creative imagination to fly among the stars, with whom she shares an equal gaze. Barbauld is overwhelmed with excitement at this prospect: as she looks back at the stars, she writes that the night sky is

…where the unsteady eye/

Restless and dazzled wanders unconfin’d/

O’er all this field of glories: spacious field! (lines 28-30).
The beauty of the image is striking. She begins line 29 with a dactyl ("Restless and") followed by a trochee ("dazzled"): the meter produces the effect of excitement in this line. Barbauld suggests with the dactyl and trochee that as she regarded the multitude of stars appearing in the sky her heart began to race. The word “restless” itself suggests an inability to remain calm or focused. Additionally Barbauld leads into this line with “where the unsteady eye.” Line 29 scans with a pyrrhic foot (“the un-“) and an extra beat—it is, then, unsteady meter discussing an unsteady eye. The meter of these lines seems to mimic Barbauld’s physical and mental states as she watches the stars emerge—slightly disheveled and very eager to gaze at the splendor of the firmament. For now, unlike in her daily life, Barbauld can pause to gaze. At night, unlike during the day, she has no “meaner” tasks to accomplish that keep her from contemplation. Once the moon has risen and the pressures exerted by the male-dominated world of Barbauld’s every-day cease, nothing can divert her attention from her desire to think.

Barbauld uses her creative imagination not only to look up, but to look in. For, in looking outwards, Barbauld is following Contemplation’s lead, and contemplation, of course, is an internalized action. In contemplating the outward stars and the moon, she sees reflected in their light a piece of herself. She writes that, in gazing upon the heavens, her soul

Turns inward, and beholds a stranger there
Of more than mortal rank;
An embryo GOD; a spark of fire divine
Which must burn on for ages, when the sun
(Fair transitory creature of the day!)

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7 From the 1792 edition and the 1825 edition; in Kraft and McCarthy’s edition of Barbauld’s poems, as in 1773, it is found as "th‘ unsteady."
Has closed his golden eye, and wrapt in shades

Forgets his wonted journey thro’ the east (lines 54-60).

The lines build to a crescendo with the words “An embryo GOD”—what a revelation! Barbauld uses her gaze to look inward and beholds, within herself, a piece of divinity. The words “An embryo God” are set off by the lines preceding and following them. Lines 54-55 are enjambed, allowing the words to flow and to grow more frenzied; the alliteration of “more” and “mortal” highlights the sentiment conveyed, and helps to build the excitement—but 55 is endstopped, forcing the reader to pause before pronouncing her own partial divinity. “An embryo GOD” sits alone, after an endstop. “An embryo GOD” is the apex of this passage; is revelation is what Barbauld has been building towards since she first listened to the stars wooing her to wisdom. A knowledge of the embryo God within her is, in fact, the zenith to which wisdom mounted. This is ultimate understanding. The passage softens after these words. With a similar excitement, the line continues “A spark of fire divine” but the words are not endstopped to highlight their importance or to cause the reader to linger over them. Instead, they begin a decrescendo with their enjambment into line 57.

By the end of line 57, the revelation is complete and she can begin to process what the spark of the divine means. First, it contrasts with the sun. The sun, which erroneously supposes itself to be the brightest thing in the universe is dwarfed by a spark within her. The lines again focus on sight: her soul beholds the embryo God, which will continue to burn when the sun has closed his golden eye. Traditional knowledge is not all-knowing, nor infinite, because it is not all-seeing. Only the kind of knowledge that Barbauld gains from her contemplations will maintain its worth. The parenthetical in line 58 further downplays the sun’s importance: she
dismisses it as “transitory.” In the parenthetical, she seems to shake her head and sigh, as one might when pitying a spoiled child who will soon learn that he is not as important as he has always believed. Here, “fair” almost seems to make the sun a fragile being, conjuring the connotation of “the fairer sex,” just as “transitory” casts aspersions on the constancy of the sun—traits traditionally reserved for women. The sun is also a creature of the day—and, as we have seen, daytime does not afford the same opportunities for wisdom as the night. Further, the idea of the sun “wrapt in shades” evokes the image of a funeral shroud. Earthly knowledge, the lines suggest, will pass away when the mortal eyes close and can look no longer, but inside the soul a different kind of wisdom lives, a spark that burns eternally.

Barbauld then wishes to soar among the stars. No sooner does she wish it, but her soul leaps up. As mentioned above, she takes an imaginative journey past the earth, the moon, Mars, Jupiter, and then to Saturn. In the 1773 edition of “A Summer Evening’s Meditation,” she cast Saturn as female, rather than male: her soul journey’s to the end of the solar system

Where cheerless Saturn ‘midst her wat’ry moons

Girt with a lucid zone, majestic sits

In gloomy grandeur, like an exil’d queen,

Amongst her weeping handmaids… (79-82, from the 1773 edition of Poems). The decision to make Saturn female continues Barbauld’s poetic vision of the heavens as a feminine space. Yet, fittingly, her female Saturn has a melancholy aspect. Barbauld clearly drew her description from the classical and alchemical understanding of Saturn as filled with lead, and therefore gloomy; in astrology, those born under Saturn were said to have a low-
spired or “saturnine” aspect. But the image of an “exil’d queen” evokes an image of one cast away from a place, thing, or person she loves. While once Barbauld studied natural philosophy with her brother, now she was exiled from those studies. While educational opportunities presented themselves to the men in her life, Barbauld could only watch from afar. Yet, Saturn nevertheless sits “majestic.” Though cheerless, she retains her dignity. The tone of the poem denotes something noble in the exiled queen.

In a 1773 review of Barbauld’s Poems, William Woodfall wrote of this moment, “There is, in [“A Summer Evening’s Meditation], a slight mark of seeming inattention, where the ingenious Writer speaks of Saturn in the feminine.” And in later editions of Poems during the 1770s, Barbauld did change the passage. By 1777, as in subsequent editions, it read:

Where cheerless Saturn ‘midst his wat’ry moons
Girt with a lucid zone, in gloomy pomp,
Sits like an exil’d monarch… (lines 79-81, from 1777 re-edition of Poems)

Yet, to change Saturn from an “exil’d queen” to a masculine monarch weakened Barbauld’s vision of a feminine space in the heavens: the masculine Saturn never sits quite comfortably in the poem, however. Barbauld cuts an entire line from his description (in 1792, Saturn warranted only three lines of explanation, versus the four of the 1773 edition), and the imagery does not resonate so powerfully. He sits in gloomy pomp, but not majestically like she does. Moreover, “pomp” comes very close to suggestion “pompous;” he, then, perhaps deserves his gloomy state, if he pretends to self-importance and grandeur. Overall, Barbauld’s changes leave her masculine

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9 Woodfall, 136.
Saturn lacking the pathos of her “exil’d queen.” Moreover, he stands out in a poem that otherwise concerns itself with the feminine dominance of the night.

For just after passing Saturn, the poem reaches its greatest pitch of excitement: Barbauld views ten thousand suns in the outer reaches of space, so bright and beautiful that they

...ask no leave to shine

Of our terrestrial star, nor borrow light

From the proud regent of our scanty day (lines 84-86).

These “ten thousand suns” align with the “stranger” that Barbauld sees inside herself: they burn brighter than the earth’s sun, for ages, just as does the more than mortal being inside Barbauld’s soul. In a sense, these otherworldly suns are the outward manifestation of that soul: their knowledge is deeper and more ancient than the earthly sun’s, their light brighter—yet not conceited, like the earthly sun. For in these lines, Barbauld does disparage the earth’s sun once more. He does not shine so brightly as the stars of the heavens; he does not have their deep knowledge, but rather shines only with a “scanty light.” He is proud—in fact, he sounds like the pompous masculine Saturn, rather than the majestic feminine Saturn.

At the apex of her journey Barbauld propels past the end of the solar system and into the “desarts of creation, wide and wild” (line 95) where she sees “embryo systems and unkindled suns/Sleep in the womb of chaos” (96-97). By imagining the womb of heaven as the place beyond the known planets, Barbauld figures the heavens as an incredibly feminine space, fertile and waiting for birth. Her words, however, echo Milton’s description of the difference between earth and heaven in Book 3 of *Paradise Lost*, in which he describes the newly created Earth as

...a Globe farr [sic] off
It seem’d, now seems a boundless Continent
Dark, waste, and wild, under the frown of Night
Starless expos’d, and ever-threatening storms
Of Chaos blustering round, inclement skie [sic]. (PL, Book 3, lines 422-426)

Though drawing from Paradise Lost, in “A Summer Evening’s Meditation” the “desarts of creation, wide and wild” are not the haunts of Satan, but rather the frontiers of natural philosophy. Barbauld’s tone brims with excitement and only a hint of fear—perhaps only awe—unlike Milton’s ominous warnings of gathering storms. Barbauld’s stars wait for their birth; for Milton, stars do not exist in the womb of chaos. In Natural Supernaturalism, M.H. Abrams asserts that for Romantic authors “many of the most distinctive and recurrent elements in both the thought and literature of the age had their origin in theological concepts, images, and plot patterns.” He cites the way that authors such as Wordsworth and Blake used Paradise Lost as a “chief model,” molding old dramas of Christian experience into new mythologies. Abrams focuses on Blake’s Los, who declares that he “‘must create a System’ or be enslaved by the ready-made system of the current Christian creed, institutions, and morality.” The “System” that Blake’s Los labors at constructing echoes Barbauld’s “embryo systems.” I suggest that by basing her heavens on Milton’s vision, Barbauld alludes to the societal status quo and the institution of the Christian church that—whether Establishment or Dissenting—regarded women as inferior to men. By referencing the embryo systems, waiting for birth in the heavens, Barbauld subverts that institution. She creates her own mythologies; even the concept of God

11 Abrams, 67.
shifts in her poem from an outside force, to an “embryo” inside of her (line 56). By traveling out
beyond the known universe and towards “embryo systems,” Barbauld comes close to seeing God
in the stars, her soul “longing to behold her Maker” (line 111). Again, Barbauld reasserts the
connection between sight and knowledge, in this case divine.

Then, as in her letter-poem, Barbauld once more steps back at the critical moment of
voicing her rawest feelings and desires: in a line evocative of “But hush my heart! Nor strive to
soar too high,” she writes, “But now my soul unus’d to stretch her powers/In flight so daring,
drops her weary wing” (lines 112-113). In “To Dr. Aikin…” she writes of her heart, and in “A
Summer Evening’s Meditation” she writes of her soul, but in both Barbauld alludes to her
longing to learn and understand more than she is permitted to study. In both lines she feels that
she has soared too high, and made statements too daring. The effect of lines 112-113 in “A
Summer Evening’s Meditation” and lines 56-61 in her poem to her brother, is to leave the reader
with the sense that Barbauld has more to say—or more to explore—but that she checks herself
out of deference to feminine propriety. She seems suddenly once more conscious of an audience
she forgot—an audience whose eyes gaze at her words on the page, at her longings laid bare, but
whom she cannot likewise look upon. Her soul returns to earth, seeking “again the known
accustomed spot,/Drest up with sun, and shade, and lawns, and streams…” (lines 114-115). In
line 115, Barbauld’s list of the “accustomed spots”—each one separated and emphasized by a
repetitive “and”—enacts both the comfort and the tedium of the numerous domestic tasks, or
“lesser toils,” that she sought to escape in her imaginative flight. It echoes a moment in her later
poem, “Washing Day,” in which she recalls her mother keeping the women of the house
employed in the most tedious tasks of the laundry, “To fold, and starch, and clap, and iron, and

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plait” (“Washing Day,” line 77). There is something comforting about the repetition of the “and,” but, compared to a journey through the stars, the “known accustom’d spot” feels dull indeed. Thus, as in her poem to her brother, where she tries to remain content in a bounded sphere, in “A Summer Evening’s Meditation” Barbauld again attempts to find satisfaction with contentment. Rather than pursuing the blazing excitement ignited by knowledge, her soul drops from its flight to its accustomed spot, and Barbauld entreats “Let me here/Content and grateful, wait th’ appointed time/And ripen for the skies” (117-119).

Yet, unlike in “To Dr. Aikin…,” “A Summer Evening’s Meditation” does not end on a downcast note. The excitement promised by the beginning spondee carries through: Barbauld does not finish the poem playing on low murmuring reeds while her brother plays the flute and sounding lyre, but instead she awaits the day that she will understand the mysteries of the universe. The language crackles with promise.

…the hour will come

When all these splendours bursting on my sight

Shall stand unveil’d, and to my ravished sense

Unlock the glories of the world unknown. (lines 119-122)

These closing lines reinforce the pervading theme of looking and seeing: the splendours of the heavens will burst on her sight—and her mind. The unveiling of this knowledge to her sight contrasts with the eye of the sun wrapt in shades; Barbauld’s inner spark will grow and burn for ages, while the sun remains cast in ignorance. She, rather than any of those astronomers adventuring to remote locations to observe the Transit of Venus, will “unlock” the secrets of the universe; and by the end of the poem, she has sought and is promised something greater than the
correct calculation of the astronomical unit. Instead of ultimately submitting to her own unworthiness, as she seems to in “To Dr. Aikin…,” Barbauld revels in her secret understanding.

Through a poetic engagement with natural philosophy, Barbauld reclaimed her worth. With this early poem, she learned that she could write on topical scientific matters without impropriety—and this soon translated to writing on political issues, as well. Moreover, through her imaginative journey through the solar system, Barbauld claimed for herself a birthright to a greater education than anyone on earth can ever offer her.
CHAPTER THREE

“Mortal! Ours the Potent Spell”

During the Christmas season, Barbauld enjoyed composing riddles for the children of her friends. One riddle, now known as “Riddle IV,” describes its answer—given in Anna Letitia LeBreton’s Memoir of Mrs. Barbauld as “Figures on a Slate”—in terms both scientific and supernatural. The riddle begins with the lines “We are spirits all in white,/ On a field as black as night” (lines 1-2). Speaking from the point of view of numbers written on a slate, Barbauld imbues her subject with an otherworldliness. The idea of these figures as “spirits all in white” connects them to tales of ghosts, especially as they appear only in a darkened field. In that nighttime-colored haunt, these spirits, “dance and sport and play,/ Changing every changing day” (lines 3-4). From the standpoint of a puzzle, the first four lines appear to connect to astronomy: a spirit in white on a black field, that changes with every changing day, suggests that the answer might be “stars.” That answer seems especially apt upon reading the following two lines—“Yet with us is wisdom found/ As we move in mystic round” (5-6). Although these lines recall Barbauld’s declaration that “wisdom mounts her zenith with the stars” in “A Summer Evening’s Meditation,” the answer cannot be stars, since the tenth line promises the solver of the riddle the ability to number “the stars that Herschel views.”

This invocation of the famous eighteenth-century astronomer William Herschel directly connects the numerical figures on a slate to the study of natural philosophy and astronomical enterprises. Moreover, the numbers on the slate can be used to count “leaves that yellow

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1 By “figures” Barbauld means “numbers.” This can be inferred from lines in the riddle that allude to the fact that the figures come from “Araby,” that in every land they are the same, and that they are the same in number as the “Aonian quire,” or the nine muses.
Autumn strews,” perhaps a reference to botany, and can help to “measure central depths below,” a reference to geological excavations of Earth’s layers conducted by natural philosophers like Priestley’s friends, James Hutton, James Watt and Erasmus Darwin. These numbers are powerful, immortal creatures: Barbauld writes that they have “fairy feet” (line 15) which they use to “step by step ambitious climb/ The cloud-capt mountains’ height sublime” (line 17-18). Their ambition reflects the ambition of natural philosophers, like Cook, who traversed the globe to discover the astronomical unit, or Joseph Banks, who undertook expeditions to study new kinds of flora. The “cloud-capt mountains” which the figures climb recall the actual terrain of natural philosophers in search of new knowledge. These mountains also recall the allegorical Hill of Science, described in Barbauld’s prose essay as a summit so high that “at length [the mountain] appeared to lose itself in the clouds.”

At the same time that the figures are linked to astronomical science, they are also associated with supernatural and magical realms by qualities such as their “fairy feet.” So, too, does the fairy-tale like rhetoric of magic: the figures ask,

Would’st thou cast a spell to find

The track of light or speed of wind?

Or, when the snail, with creeping pace,

Shall the swelling globe embrace? (lines 25-28)

Just a few lines later, the figures exclaim, “Mortal! Our’s [sic] the potent spell,/ Ask of us for we can tell” (lines 29-30). Within these lines, the figures position themselves as supernatural beings, and as the mystical key to infinite knowledge. The figures are not all powerful by

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2 For more information, see Chapter 25: Dull Earth & Shining Stones in Jenny Uglow’s The Lunar Men.
themselves. Instead, they contain the seeds of magic. They ask the reader to use them to “cast a spell;” they are the words to the spell. As such, the figures contain deep magic and hold great power, but they alone do not wield it. Instead, the figures twice declare that their power will transfer to whoever knows what to ask of them and how to make them answer: “Ask of us and thou shalt know” (line 14) and “Ask of us, for we can tell” (line 30). Barbauld’s riddle suggests that the person who knows how to create the proper formulations, or, who can control the figures on the slate, will find the answers to the deepest questions of the universe. The mortal that unlocks the magic of these figures will accomplish impossible feats, like counting “the grains/That Ceres heaps on Lybian plains” (lines 7-8). This person will be able to number the stars, to count the drops of water in the ocean, to measure the depth of the Earth and the speed of the wind, and even to discover the secrets of a beam of light. Moreover, by likening the figures on the slate to the potent words of a magic spell, Barbauld implies that the person who knows how to access and command this wisdom takes on supernatural dimensions. Wizards, witches, and fairies brandish magical wands, utter spells, and gain control over the world around them; natural philosophers, likewise, brandish formulas, slates, and numbers to gain power over nature. Through the conflation of natural philosophy with supernatural elements within “Riddle IV,” Barbauld asserts that skilled natural philosophers, like beings possessed of magical powers, have the ability to exercise control over their environment.

An examination of Barbauld’s poetry on natural philosophy reveals that scientific pursuits are often couched in the language of the supernatural. Because the supernatural has the ability both to enact miracles and devastating turns of fortune, as a metaphor it reinforces the idea that Barbauld’s poetry evokes a sense of conflict between praise and wariness for the study
of natural philosophy. In one of her earliest poems, “The Invitation,” Barbauld entreats her friend Betsy Belsham to come view the technological marvel of the Duke of Bridgewater’s canals. She describes the way that these canals have transformed the countryside near her home in Warrington, explaining how laborers, “the sons of toil” (line 59) have carved the waterways from the rocky Earth. These canals now “stretch their long arms, to join the distant main” (line 58) and the sight of them “cheer[s] the barren heath or sullen moor” (line 66). Barbauld imagines a traveler to the area who “views the alter’d landscape with surprise,/And doubts the magic scenes with round him rise” (lines 69-70). The poem avers that in the hands of laborers and engineers, like Priestley’s fellow Lunar Society member James Brindley, scientific advancement has the ability to alter—or control—the natural landscape, almost like an enchantment in a fairy story changes an old witch’s hut into a cottage of candy.

In a later poem, “The Unknown God,” Barbauld more explicitly compares natural philosophers to supernatural beings:

And like a giant roused from sleep
Man has explored the pathless deep
And lightnings snatched from heaven. (lines 16-18)

In this poem, the ability to control the forces of nature renders the natural philosopher something more than human: he who learns the secrets of nature and controls elemental forces becomes “like a giant.” Again, in “Inscription for an Ice-House,” Barbauld compares mankind with supernatural creatures, imbuing humanity with the power of sorcery. In the poem, which Isobel
Armstrong has referred to as “one of the earliest hymns to technology,” Barbauld imagines that behind the door of the ice house,

…confined

By man, the great magician, who controuls [sic]

Fire, earth and air, and genii of the storm,

And binds the most remote and opposite things

To do him service and perform his will—

A giant sits; stern Winter… (lines 3-8)

Here, the mortal who can control the seasons becomes a “great magician.” At the same time, the elemental force itself, Winter, is described as a giant: the comparison suggests that in “The Unknown God,” Barbauld intended to advance the idea that through the pursuit of natural philosophy, humankind becomes as powerful as nature itself. Winter, an unstoppable force, a “giant,” can be trapped by man through the use of technology. Man, an unstoppable force, a “giant,” can control the elements and bend nature to his will. Through scientific advancement, humanity achieves preeminence over nature.

Barbauld’s “Riddle IV,” too, asserts the idea that through the study of natural philosophy humankind can unlock the secrets of the universe. If wisdom is found with the numbers written on the slate, Barbauld’s riddle emphasizes that whoever controls the numbers also controls wisdom. Yet, the answer given to the riddle is not simply “numbers” in the abstract, but specifically “Figures on a Slate.” Because the figures are on a slate, they are of necessity

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written. Barbauld previously connected the acts of writing and scientific inquiry in “To Mrs.
Priestley with some Drawings of Birds and Insects,” where the musing on natural philosophy
allowed her to “cheat a lonely hour” through engagement with a larger scientific community.
But in “Riddle IV,” Barbauld asserts that if enacted in a certain way, the act of writing has the
ability to achieve more than the entertainment of an hour. When properly effected, the writer
connects with something deep and powerful; writing allows the poet to realize ambitious dreams.
In “Riddle IV” the figures on a slate declare that ultimate wisdom, a power so great as to seem
supernatural, is attained through the dual acts of writing and scientific inquiry. Power stems
from knowledge, and in this poem, knowledge is effected through making marks on a slate.
When humankind learns how to wield effectively the formulas of nature, to properly write on
natural philosophy, it will find itself atop of the “cloud-capt” mountain where, in Barbauld’s
allegory, Truth resides.

Yet, though these poems primarily celebrate technological advancement, Barbauld also
evinces a concern over man’s ability to harness nature. Her poems allude to the potential harm
that scientific experimentation can cause: for example, in a commendatory passage in “The
Invitation,” Barbauld writes that the “magic scenes” created by the canals are only effected
through compelling “th’ unwilling flood” through the “brown horrors of aged wood” (lines 64-
65). Though the tone remains generally celebratory, the description subtly creates a slight sense
of uneasiness. It reminds the reader that canal-building involves forcing nature to do unnatural
things. Moreover, forcing nature into unnatural places puts domestic tranquility at risk: in her
humorous verse, “An Inventory of Dr. Priestley’s Study,” Barbauld writes that if the lightning in
Priestley’s jars escapes, it “among the neighbours makes a rout” as it “kills their geese, and
frights their spouses” (line 24). And of course, Barbauld also questioned the ethics of Priestley’s experimentation in “The Mouse’s Petition.” Barbauld even imbues the figures on a slate in “Riddle IV” with a kind of haunting ethereality she compares them with spirits. The figures may lead to the top of “cloud-capt mountains,” but in her poetry and prose Barbauld always comes back to the idea that virtue, rather than eminence, should win the day. In Barbauld’s poetry the study of natural philosophy holds great power and promise, but she advises those who pursue it to approach with caution.

Moreover, in Barbauld’s verses the pursuit of natural philosophy—and therefore the power associated with it—often falls specifically into the hands of men, while women participate only nominally. In “The Invitation,” Barbauld views the building of the canals from afar, but does not participate in their construction; instead, that is done by the “sons of toil.” In “To Mrs. Priestley with some Drawings of Birds and Insects,” Barbauld engages with natural philosophy by writing descriptive verse for light entertainment, rather than through composing her own scientific or theoretical treatise. Indeed, “To Mrs. Priestley…” was Barbauld’s poetic response to Thomas Pennant’s *British Zoology*, and it contrasts with her brother’s response: while as a young woman Barbauld engaged with Pennant only through the societally acceptable form of a poem based on female friendship, John Aikin felt compelled to compose an academic discourse entitled *An Essay on the Application of Natural History to Poetry*. He dedicates his essay to Thomas Pennant, writing that an acquaintance with Pennant’s works inspired the treatise. Yet, in the work, Aikin muses on the Copernican and Ptolemaic theories of the solar system, discusses the uses of chemistry in poetry both modern and early modern, and mingles his analysis of natural history with allusions to classical authors. If the “figures on the slate” are correct that
wisdom and power lies with those who understand natural philosophy—and more importantly, with those who are able to write about natural philosophy—men, rather than women, had the best chance at attaining these elusive concepts.

In her satirical poem “Washing Day,” Barbauld again links verse-writing with natural philosophy through the invocation of the Montgolfier air balloon. Yet this poem, unlike “Riddle IV” or “To Mrs. Priestley with Some Drawings of Birds and Insects,” does not otherwise attempt to connect to a larger conversation on natural philosophy: instead, “Washing Day” takes the form of a mock-heroic to describe a very menial household chore. The overall tone of the verse is humorous: Barbauld opens the poem with an invocation to the “domestic Muse,/ In slip-shod measure loosely pratting on” (lines 4-5), which pointedly contrasts with the Milton-esque muses of serious epics. Her muse sings of “pleasant curds and cream” (line 5), while Milton’s muse in Paradise Lost inspired the Biblical text. Yet, the poem should not be discounted as an attempt at thoughtful cultural critique simply because of its general humor, or mock-epic style; after all, funny is not the opposite of serious.

The poem situates itself firmly within everyday life, and appeals to a broad audience. Barbauld’s poem would have spoken to almost anyone who had experience living as part of a middle-class domestic family unit: first to the housewife, “Ye who beneath the yoke of wedlock bend,/ With bowed soul, full well ye ken the day” (lines 10-11), then to the husband, “…require not thou/ Who call’st thyself perchance the master there,/Or study swept, or nicely dusted coat” (lines 34-36). The maids employed by the family look cross, and Barbauld writes that as a child that she felt “awe” at the power of a washing day, which could so disturb domestic peace as to destroy her customary joy in receiving from them “butter’d toast,/Where butter was forbid”
Even the family cat feels the sad effects of a washing day, banished to the parlor. So, the sudden appearance of the Montgolfier balloon at the end of the poem—even as it follows from a soap bubble blown on a washing day—marks a shift away from the poem’s focus on the small details of the domestic scene. Barbauld turns to a philosophical musing on the purpose of natural philosophy and writing.

Through the evocations of the Montgolfier air balloon, soap bubbles, and verse, Barbauld again brings together the threads of writing, natural philosophy, magic, and her own conflicted views towards societal expectations of women. Barbauld writes that as a child she sometimes used an empty pipe and soapy water to

…[send] aloft

The floating bubbles, little dreaming then

To see, Montgolfier, 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. (lines 80-86)

In these seven lines, Barbauld links both the act of verse-writing and the Montgolfier air balloon to a soap bubble. Therefore, through the commonality of the bubble metaphor, Barbauld’s verse is loosely linked to the air balloon—a scientific marvel whose roots lay in the chemical discoveries Priestley made in his laboratory.\(^5\) Barbauld knew that while respectable women were not encouraged to write scientific treatises, they were encouraged to while away an hour writing

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\(^5\) On page 371 of *The Lunar Men*, Jenny Uglow states that the Montgolfier brothers credited Priestley’s work on inflammable air as an inspiration for the air balloon.
verse. Yet, by bringing this technological marvel into a poem otherwise concerned with domestic spaces and menial chores—and by evoking it in a metaphor so closely linked with verse-writing—Barbauld seems to probe at the question of what kinds of writing effect (and affect) power, and how language can be used to attain control.

From one perspective, the phrase “silken ball” represents nothing greater than a literal description of an air balloon. Yet, if Barbauld intended only to convey an exact sketch of the renowned device the very words “air balloon” would fit the meter of line 82 just as well. Instead, she chose to align the balloon with a specific kind of cloth in a poem that takes as its conceit a day dedicated to washing fabric. By calling the machine a ‘silken ball,’ rather than an ‘air balloon,’ the balloon has a foil with the only other object made of a specific kind of cloth in the poem: a coarse-check’d apron. She warns the master of the house that,

…should’st thou try

The ‘customed garden walks, thine eye shall rue

The budding fragrance of thy tender shrubs,

Myrtle or rose, all crushed beneath the weight

Of coarse check’d apron… (lines 39-43)

Thus, in Barbauld’s poem the scientific device soars glorious through the sky, but the apron—a garment used primarily for the “lesser toils” of women’s work—has the potential to destroy the beauty of the garden. These flowers groan under the weight of the apron, as the housewife’s soul bows under the weight of the yoke of wedlock. The different values placed on scientific work and women’s work is also evident in the contrast between the materials of the balloon and the apron: the silken ball is made of a rich fabric—contemporary reports describe balloons clad in
their expensive “taffetys” shining like gold in the sunlight—while the coarse check’d apron is made of cheap, rough cloth.\textsuperscript{6} Sonia Hofkosh proposes that “Barbauld thinks with and through the physical object world as the ground and context of human action,” and that her “poetics of the everyday …arise out of such encounters between persons and things.”\textsuperscript{7} Following Hofkosh’s lead in applying affect theory to the poem, which examines the human capacity to act and be acted upon by our immersion in the material world, the different reaction to coarse cloth versus silks creates a specific sentiment towards the objects created from those materials. The word “coarse” carries with it the evocation of something rough, or of little value, just as “silken ball” evokes the image of something luxurious and valuable.

In the poem, the coarse-check’d apron seems to have belonged to one of the woman employed to do the laundry, while the silken ball belongs to a man. Barbauld writes that the balloon is specifically “Montgolfier’s silken ball.” The poem depicts some women as laborers—they are “employed to wash, to rise, to wring/To fold, and starch, and clap, and iron, and plait” (lines 76-77), while the mistress of the house takes on a managerial role and urges on the work. Within the poem, women—including the housewife—do not have agency outside of the work of the washing day. Women in the poem do not enjoy the garden, like the master of the house. Nor can they soar through the sky, like the Montgolfiers. Women within the poem cannot talk of higher matters, either: they eat a “silent breakfast meal” (line 19) and their voices are only heard urging on the work of washing day (lines 74-75). Moreover, even the female muse who sings the washing day has purportedly “lost/ The buskin’d step, and clear high-sounding phrase/ Language of the gods” (lines 1-3). Yet, when Barbauld writes that the men of the house expect

\textsuperscript{6} The Public Advertiser, November 26\textsuperscript{th}, 1783.
\textsuperscript{7} Hofkosh, 84.
nothing greater from women than to mend stockings, this same domestic muse suddenly has a grasp of classical mythology:

…ask not, indiscreet,

Thy stockings mended, tho’ the yawning rents

Gape wide as Erebus. (lines 36-38)

The combination of the homely image of a torn stocking with the classical image of Erebus creates a humorous burlesque image that wryly implies that the “domestic muse” might have more intelligence than originally conceded, despite her colloquial phrases and low subject matter. If so, perhaps the housewife, too, has more to say than is allowed.

Moreover, Barbauld writes that on washing day—a day of tedious toil—women do not weave their usual tales of the supernatural:

…for then the maids,

I scarce knew why, looked cross, and drove me from them;

Nor soft caress could I obtain, nor hope

…

…[For] thrilling tale

Of ghost, or witch, or murder— (lines 59-66)

As her other poems evidence, Barbauld located power and control within the supernatural and often used it in conjunction with elements of natural philosophy. The curtailing of women’s ability to tell stories about preternatural creatures might indicate that the drudgery of women’s work prohibited women from accessing power or exerting any control over their environment. Barbauld alludes to women’s lack of control over their environment at the beginning of the
poem, too, for she writes that women must wash on washing day, regardless of whether nature
provides a sunny day or a rainy one. In “Washing Day” women are at the mercy of the elements;
they do not control them.

But yet again in “Washing Day,” as in “To Mrs. Priestley…” and “The Mouse’s
Petition,” Barbauld uses the act of writing to claim access to a discourse with which she could
not otherwise engage. As mentioned above, the metaphor of the soap bubble that applies first to
the Montgolfier balloon and then to Barbauld’s verse links writing with natural philosophy. Just
as “The Mouse’s Petition” gave Barbauld a voice within Priestley’s laboratory, and “To Mrs.
Priestley…” allowed Barbauld to connect the act of writing verse with the act of scientific
inquiry, Barbauld uses verse in “Washing Day” to speak to larger issues concerning the utility of
scientific advancement and the place of women in natural philosophy. For in addition to linking
poetry with natural philosophy, composing verse in “Washing Day” also connects Barbauld’s
poetry to the supernatural. While the women working the laundry cannot tell their tales of
magic, Barbauld’s reflection on her poem in lines 85-86 echoes the conversation in Act I, Scene
3, lines 181-184, of Macbeth between Banquo and the titular character regarding the witches:

    BANQUO: The earth has bubbles, as the water has,
              And these are of them. Whither are they vanish’d?

    MACBETH: Into the air; and what seem’d corporeal melted
              As breath into the wind. Would they had stay’d!
Like the figures on a slate in “Riddle IV,” those “spirits all in white” dancing and sporting on a “field as black as night,” Barbauld’s comparison of the lines of her poem to the witches in Macbeth renders her verse into a supernatural being, with magical powers. Moreover, the words that Barbauld uses to characterize bubbles—and thus, verse—in “Washing Day” echoes the imagery that characterizes the power of the male natural philosopher in “Inscription for an Ice House.” In “Washing Day,” Barbauld writes that verse-as-a-bubble floats above and within “Earth, air, and sky, and ocean” (line 85) while in “Inscription for an Ice House” she writes that “man, the great magician…controuls [sic]/ Fire, earth and air, and genii of the storm” (lines 4-5).

Through the connection between verse-writing, natural elements, and the Montgolfier balloon, the poem suggests that verse-writing, like the study of natural philosophy, could give people the chance to control their environment. If natural philosophy gives mankind domination over the natural environment, verse-writing effects agency in domestic or cultural matters. The poem perhaps implies that composing verses serves as a mode of gaining a measure of authority, or of speaking to larger cultural discourses, just like composing scientific treatises. Certainly, Barbauld’s own body of work creatively engaged with larger conversations on the state of natural philosopic study, and allowed her a public platform. The idea that verse might afford power in a similar way to natural philosophy allows the last lines of “Washing Day” to read almost as a response to Priestley’s preface to his second edition of The History and Present State of Electricity. He wrote “The immediate use of natural science is the power it gives us over nature, by means we acquire of its laws; whereby human life is, in its present state, made more
comfortable and happy…and our common nature improved and ennobled.”

Certainly, Barbauld’s poems indicate that she believed his assertion that natural science gave whoever controlled it power over nature. “Washing Day,” however, implies verse, too, could help to make human life “more comfortable and happy,” and that poetry—like the Montgolfier balloon—could ennoble human nature.

Barbauld certainly read Priestley’s preface, and it made an impact, as evidenced by the fact that in her prose essay “The Hill of Science: A Vision” she responded to another part of it. Near the beginning of the preface, Priestley imagined himself atop a mountain of scientific knowledge. He wrote, “To look down from the eminence, and to see, and compare all the gradual advances in the ascent, cannot but give the greatest pleasure to those who are seated on the eminence, and who feel all the advantages of their elevated situation.” As discussed above, in “The Hill of Science” Barbauld writes that “Science may raise you to eminence, but [Virtue] alone can guide you to felicity!,” a sentiment that she repeats in poems like “To Dr. Aikin on his Complaining She Neglected Him,” and “A Summer Evening’s Meditation.” These poems are characterized by an internal conflict between a desire for knowledge and a desire for virtue—or, at least, a desire to feel content behaving with the propriety expected of an eighteenth-century English woman. If writing could afford the poet power and fame in the same way that Priestley saw scientific pursuits granting the natural philosopher eminence, certainly Barbauld must have

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felt conflicted about writing and publishing her work; indeed, during her lifetime she only
published about one-third of her poems.10

In her article “Anna Letitia Barbauld’s ‘Washing Day’ and the Montgolfier Balloon,”
Elizabeth Kraft asserts that upon first reading the last two lines of the poem (“Earth, air, and sky,
and ocean hath its bubbles/ And verse is one of them—this most of all”), “the reader, caught up
in the charm of the poem, cannot help but feel ‘deflated,’ a bit betrayed.”11 Following Kraft’s
observation, we could say this ‘deflation’ occurs because of Barbauld’s divided attitude towards
the pursuit of natural philosophy and writing poetry. Kraft continues, “this sentence may strike
us as an abrupt dismissal, an unwelcome invocation of the pejorative meanings of ‘bubble’—
financial ruin, impractical plans, silly chimeras.”12 But, after rehearsing that interpretation, Kraft
suggests negative reading of these lines is incorrect, and that the bubble is a positive image.
Kraft argues that the bubble connects both the balloon and verse to whimsy and child’s play,
which aligns the poem with the transformative power of the creative imagination: because she
views the balloon as a positive icon, she reads the last lines solely in a positive light. While the
balloon has as positive attributes, the last lines of the poem do call into question the degree to
which Barbauld intended to celebrate the balloon and, perhaps, writing verse. While Kraft
contextualizes the balloon in the history of scientific achievement celebrated by Barbauld and
her circle, Kraft’s research throws into relief a more complex history of attitudes towards the
balloon to eighteenth-century society:

11 Elizabeth Kraft, “Anna Letitia Barbauld’s ‘Washing Day’ and the Montgolfier Balloon,” Literature and History
12 Kraft.
When "Washing-Day" was published in December of 1797, the Montgolfier balloon was not the topic of excitement and intrigue that it had been some thirteen or fourteen years before. Difficulties with France had intervened--first the French Revolution and then England's own protracted war with France. A 1785 air balloon flight in Boulogne had ended in disaster—the deaths of balloonist Jean-François Pilatre de Rozier, his assistant Pierre Romain, and onlooker Susan Dyer.¹³

Barbauld potentially wrote the poem long before its initial publication, perhaps in the early 1780s, during a period of optimism with regards to the future of the balloon. Yet even in the 1780s society divided over the practicality and usefulness of the balloon. In his treatise Hints on Important Uses to be Derived from Aerostatic Globes (1784), English natural philosopher Thomas Martyn writes that “Of what use are balloons?” is a “question not unfrequently asked.”¹⁴

If Barbauld wrote or revised the poem closer to the date of its publication, she would have already witnessed the rise and fall of the ‘balloon mania.’ As Paul Keen demonstrates in his article “The ‘Balloonomania’: Science and Spectacle in 1780s England,” for a brief moment in time simply putting an image of an air balloon on a book, or describing a hat as made with ‘air balloon colors,’ would guarantee a best-seller. Balloonists became celebrities overnight, and some used their celebrity not to further scientific knowledge, but to turn a profit or to seduce young ladies. For a few short years, England was caught up in an ‘air balloon’ bubble. Moreover, Keen demonstrates that balloon had always had a Frenchified flare in the English imagination, and in Barbauld’s poem the balloon explicitly connects to the French through the

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¹³ Kraft.
¹⁴ Thomas Martyn, Hints on Important Uses to be Derived from Aerostatic Globes (London, 1784), 15.
Montgolfiers. By 1797, Barbauld had participated in the excitement that the beginning of the French Revolution occasioned among liberal thinkers, and had also witnessed the shift from days of promise to days of terror. The promise that Barbauld believed the French Revolution held for mankind, like the overwhelming optimism fostered by ‘balloon mania,’ had burst like a bubble by 1797. If, as Kraft suggests, through the image of the bubble Barbauld intended to give the same attributes to verse-writing as she gives to the air balloon, those attributes cannot be simply categorized as “positive” or “negative.” Barbauld’s poems often celebrate science and technology, while simultaneously questioning the ethics of natural philosophers harnessing of nature, or the ultimate value of scientific achievement. Perhaps the balloon in “Washing Day” is no exception. If so, by evoking verse-writing in the same metaphorical language as the balloon, the poem calls into question the value of the act of composing poetry.

By calling verse a (soap) bubble, the poem appears to echo the attitude towards writing in “To Mrs. Priestley…”—that is, that it did nothing more than “cheat a lonely hour” (line 121). Moreover, she condemns her verse to vanish, as her verse vanishes in “An Inventory of the Furniture in Dr. Priestley’s Study,” in which her poetry becomes “A thing unknown, without a name./Born of the air and doomed to flame” (lines 57-58). Yet, because of the slight evocation of the supernatural through the Macbeth reference, we must ask what Barbauld means by “bubble:” the witches in Macbeth vanish, but their words resonate after they have gone. The genius of the poem as a whole is that it does seem, in a way, like a child’s soap bubble. In its overall tone, “Washing Day” feels mostly light, frothy, and humorous; by writing on explicitly domestic spaces, and casting her verse as bubble, it could easily pass as an ephemeral slice-of-life poem. But those same qualities allow Barbauld to speak creatively to larger issues.
In “Washing Day” the images of the soap bubble, the Montgolfier balloon, and verse embody a sense of conflict towards the practice of studying natural philosophy and towards writing poetry. Through publication of her work, Barbauld achieved greater eminence than many women in eighteenth-century Britain earned, speaking particularly to fields of inquiry that required an understanding of natural philosophy. But, Barbauld’s poetry and prose often advocate domestic felicity, and with it, a concept of virtue that appears in “The Hill of Science” and “To Dr. Aikin…” as opposed to eminence and public engagement. In “To Dr. Aikin…” she admonishes her heart to “content remain within thy bounded sphere.” In “Washing Day,” the balloon—a public, universally recognized object in eighteenth-century Britain, and a symbol of scientific advancement—soars beautiful and buoyant through the sky akin to a soap bubble. But the balloon, with its undercurrents of bursting bubbles and failed optimism, has just the hint of a dark side. Like the balloon, Barbauld also renders verse as a bubble. Like the balloon, verse in “Washing Day” also traces path through the natural world that Barbauld can pursue only through the act of writing. But, just as the poem subtly questions the value of the balloon, it also questions the value of verse-writing. “Washing Day,” then further confirms the trend in Barbauld’s poems between wanting to engage with natural philosophy and thereby achieve eminence, and wanting to feel content with a retired life of domestic felicity and virtue.
CONCLUSION

“Here Cease My Song”

In her 2014 article “Riddling Sibyl, Uncanny Cassandra: Barbauld’s Recent Critical Reception,” Olivia Murphy outlines the field of current scholarship on Barbauld, and suggests that the future of this work should seek to illuminate new aspects of Barbauld’s poetry and prose through its engagement with eighteenth-century culture. Murphy offers several paths forward: “The bookish poet’s relationship with her reading, the professional writer’s relationship with her industry, the eminent teacher’s relationship with educational theory, and the intellectual’s relationship with the spirit of the age, are all subjects which cry out for further investigation.”¹ I hope that my thesis has contributed towards answering the last of these calls. This thesis has demonstrated how Barbauld’s poetry actively engaged with contemporary pursuits in natural philosophy. In its subject matter and metaphors, her work responds to current discourse in fields relating to chemistry, zoology, and astronomy. Additionally, her poetry often meta-poetically reflects on the act of verse-writing, questioning the value of poetry and its importance as a form of discourse. By placing Barbauld’s work in conversation with historical scientific and cultural world-views in eighteenth-century Britain, this project has attempted to illuminate Barbauld as an intellectual who used her poetry to question scientific culture, societal norms surrounding the education and occupational pursuits of women.

Most importantly, Barbauld’s work reveals the perception of a conflict between ‘eminence’ in the public eye and ‘virtue,’ which her poetry alludes to as flourishing in a bounded sphere. This thesis has attempted to demonstrate that Barbauld’s poetry establishes the idea that

¹ Murphy, 297
both the study of natural philosophy and the act of writing constitute modes of gaining control over one’s environment (both natural and cultural) and for obtaining a voice in larger societal conversations. Yet at the same time, Barbauld’s poetry rarely celebrates the study of natural philosophy, or the composition of verse, without also hinting at the potential that these two enterprises have for creating chaos, as in “An Inventory of the Furniture in Dr. Priestley’s Study,” or the damage they inflict on the natural environment, as in “The Mouse’s Petition.” Most troubling of all, Barbauld’s poems suggest that the power that made natural philosophy and literature forces for cultural and societal transformation also allowed them to be used to obtain ‘eminence’ in a public sphere, rather than to guide the natural philosopher or the poet towards domestic felicity, and ‘virtue.’

The evident divide between ‘eminence’ and ‘virtue’ does not resolve itself in Barbauld’s poetry on natural philosophy. While celebrating the studies and pursuits that lead to eminence, her work always chooses (though sometimes reluctantly) to accept virtue, rather than eminence, as the best course for a life of felicity. Yet, paradoxically, Barbauld herself achieved public renown through these very works. However, with few exceptions (notably, *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*) Barbauld’s poetry—even that which engages with larger cultural discourses—remains grounded in the domestic sphere. She composed verses for friends, sent poetry with wedding gifts and as replies to letters, and even wrote inscriptions for various household objects and tools. Though Murphy’s call, quoted above, for the future of Barbauld scholarship places studies of Barbauld as an “intellectual” engaging with the spirit of her age into a separate category from Barbauld the “eminent” teacher, I suggest that in order to fully grasp how Barbauld’s work engages with concepts of eminence and virtue, a comprehensive investigation
into her work on education might prove valuable. For Barbauld, an engagement with early childhood education gave her a place in both the domestic and public sphere: teaching at her school, Palgrave Academy, afforded Barbauld respectable domestic employment, and also served as inspiration for pieces of poetry and prose. This thesis, however, has not attempted to resolve the conflicted attitudes revealed in Barbauld’s work; instead, this project has sought only to offer readings that illuminate new modes of understanding the historical scientific and cultural backdrop to five of Barbauld’s poems that engage with natural philosophy, and to uncover new insights that might point the way forward in future Barbauld scholarship.
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