

# Anna Laetitia Barbauld

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Anna Laetitia Barbauld was a Romantic poet born in Kibworth Harcourt in Leicestershire, England on June 20<sup>th</sup>, 1743. The village Barbauld grew up in did not give her a female companion. Barbauld’s parents, John and Jane Aikin, were her teachers. Her mother ingrained feminine shyness and bashfulness into her, causing her to be reserved in front of men. This seclusion paved her path in education. She was shaped into a poet by her father’s library. The poet is known for works such as “The Mouse’s Petition” and “The Rights of Woman.” Although Barbauld was outspoken in many of her poems, current critics are divided as to whether we should consider her a feminist. Barbauld died on March 9<sup>th</sup>, 1825.

Her niece who edited her poetry posthumously in 1825 identifies “To the Poor” as written in 1795. Barbauld had somewhat reduced social status as a Dissenter – a Protestant who does not take communion in an Anglican church—but was not poverty-stricken. Although the poem is specifically addressed to the poor, the reader of her collection is going to be in the middle and upper classes. Read from this point of view, the poem would be not so much advice to the poor to put up with oppression, but criticism of the upper classes for that oppression.

“To the Poor” is a didactic poem that inspires the reader to act on behalf of those who are crushed by those with affluence and power. The poem is in iambic pentameter couplets and uses the pronoun “thou” instead of “you,” giving a formal tone to a somber poem with a dangerous message of hope for the poor and condemnation for the priests and kings who have consistently harmed them. According to Brad Sullivan, the poem “brilliantly walks a razor’s edge.” He also says the poem “turns the simple injunctions of the privileged on their heads, suggesting to them just how absurd they are,” while recognizing “that the problems will not simply be *fixed* – particularly by rebellion” (Sullivan). “To the Poor” describes the absurdity of the privileged and the helplessness of the poor.

## Further Reading

Barbauld, Anna Laetitia. *The Works of Anna Laetitia Barbauld: With a Memoir*, 1825, edited by Lucy Aikin, vol. 1, Cambridge University Press, 2014.  
doi:10.1017/CBO9781107589148.

McCarthy, William, and Olivia Murphy. "Riddling Sibyl, Uncanny Cassandra, Barbauld's Recent Critical Reception." *Anna Letitia Barbauld: New Perspectives*, edited by Professor William McCarthy, and Olivia Murphy, Bucknell University Press, 2013, pp. 235-251.

### **References**

Sullivan, Brad. "'Cultivating a 'Dissenting Frame of Mind': Radical Education, the Rhetoric of Inquiry, and Anna Barbauld's Poetry." *Romanticism on the Net*, no. 45, Feb. 2007.

## “To the Poor”<sup>1</sup>

CHILD of distress<sup>2</sup>, who meet'st the bitter scorn  
 Of fellow-men to happier prospects born,  
 Doomed Art and Nature's various stores to see  
 Flow in full cups of joy<sup>3</sup>—and not for thee<sup>4</sup>;  
 Who seest the rich, to heaven and fate resigned, 5  
 Bear *thy* afflictions with a patient mind;  
 Whose bursting heart disdains unjust control,  
 Who feel'st oppression's iron in thy soul,  
 Who dragg'st the load of faint and feeble years,  
 Whose bread is anguish, and whose water tears; 10  
 Bear, bear thy wrongs—fulfill thy destined hour,  
 Bend thy meek neck beneath the foot of Power;  
 But when thou feel'st the great deliverer nigh<sup>5</sup>,  
 And thy freed spirit mounting seeks the sky,  
 Let no vain fears thy parting hour molest<sup>6</sup>, 15  
 No whispered terrors shake thy quiet breast:  
 Think not their threats can work thy future woe,  
 Nor deem the Lord above like lords below;—  
 Safe in the bosom of that love repose  
 By whom the sun gives light, the ocean flows; 20

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<sup>1</sup> Copytext from 1825 posthumous publication, edited by Lucy Aikin.

<sup>2</sup> The poem addresses poor people as the product of/inheritors of distress.

<sup>3</sup> “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows” (Psalm 23:5).

<sup>4</sup> The poor person is doomed to see both human-created resources and natural resources go to the rich.

<sup>5</sup> Death, God, or Jesus: e.g. “The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob” (Romans 11:26).

<sup>6</sup> Pester or harass aggressively.

Prepare to meet a Father<sup>7</sup> undismayed,  
Nor fear the God whom priests and kings<sup>8</sup> have made.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> God.

<sup>8</sup> King George III was the King of Great Britain and Ireland circa 1760 to 1820. The king of England is the head of the Church of England (also known as Anglican or Episcopal).

<sup>9</sup> [Lucy Aikin's note (1825)] These lines, written in 1795, were described by Mrs. B., on sending them to a friend, as "inspired by indignation on hearing sermons in which the poor are addressed in a manner which evidently shows the design of making religion an engine of government."



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