

## Anna Laetitia Barbauld

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Anna Laetitia Barbauld was a prominent English writer in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. She was an accomplished writer, poet, essayist, children's author, editor, literary critic, teacher (at Palgrave academy from 1774 to 1785), and abolitionist. She was born in 1743 in Kibworth-Harcourt, Leicestershire and died in 1825 at age eighty-five. Many literary scholars consider her work a cornerstone of feminism and feminist literature. Barbauld was a very politically minded writer and often expressed her views in her works such as *Epistle to William Wilberforce Esq* (1791), in which she explained her disdain for slavery, as well as *Sins of the Government, Sins of the Nation* (1792), which had an anti-war message. During the French Revolution she wrote *An Address to Opposers of the Repeal of the Corporations and Tests Acts* (1790) in which she expressed her desire for dissenters such as herself (British Protestants not members of the Church of England) to have full citizenship rights. Her most famous and prominent work may be "The Rights of Woman" (1792) which some critics have seen as an anti-feminist response to Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, while others see Barbauld as a proto-feminist.

There is also "The Mouse's Petition, Found in the Trap where He had been Confined all Night" (1773), a poem in ballad stanza in which she took a stance on animal rights. The poem is dedicated to Dr. Joseph Priestley, a family friend, who was experimenting with vacuum jars and used mice as test subjects. Most of the critical attention to this poem is to its place in scientific and animal rights discourse (for example, Julia Saunders, Mary Ellen Bellanca, and Kathryn Ready).

During her time, she was heavily praised by other successful authors such as William Taylor, Joanna Baillie, Samuel Johnson, and Joseph Addison. Unfortunately, during her later years, when several of her peers adopted more conservative views, she was shunned. Her works remained largely hidden until the rise of feminist literary criticism in the 1980s, when they regained popularity.

### Further Reading

- Murphy, Olivia. "Riddling Sibyl, Uncanny Cassandra: Barbauld's Recent Critical Reception." *Anna Letitia Barbauld: New Perspectives*, edited William McCarthy and Olivia Murphy, Bucknell UP and Rowman & Littlefield, 2014, pp. 277–297.
- Lichtenwalner, Shawna. "Perambulating Mice and the Confluence of Sympathy and Moral Education." *Essays in Romanticism*, vol. 28. no. 1, 2021, pp. 25–43.

### References

- Bellanca, Mary Ellen. "Science, Animal Sympathy, and Anna Barbauld's 'The Mouse's Petition.'" *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2003, pp. 47–67.
- Saunders, Julia. "'The Mouse's Petition': Anna Laetitia Barbauld and the Scientific Revolution." *The Review of English Studies*, vol. 53, 2002, pp. 500–516.
- Ready, Kathryn J. "'What then, poor Beastie!': Gender, Politics, and Animal Experimentation in Anna Barbauld's 'The Mouse's Petition.'" *Eighteenth-Century Life*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2004, pp. 92–114.

The Mouse's Petition,<sup>440</sup> Found in the Trap where He  
had been Confined all Night<sup>441</sup>

Parcere subjectis, & debellare superbos.

Virgil<sup>442</sup>

OH! hear a pensive<sup>443</sup> captive's prayer,  
For liberty that sighs;  
And never let thine heart be shut  
Against the prisoner's cries.

For here forlorn and sad I sit, 5  
Within the wiry grate;  
And tremble at the approaching morn,  
Which brings impending fate.<sup>444</sup>

If e'er thy breast with freedom glow'd,  
And spurn'd a tyrant's chain, 10  
Let not thy strong oppressive force  
A free born<sup>445</sup> mouse detain.

Oh! do not stain with guiltless blood  
Thy hospitable hearth;<sup>446</sup>  
Nor triumph that thy wiles betrayed 15

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<sup>440</sup> Author's footnote: To Dr. Priestley

<sup>441</sup> *Poems*, printed for J. Johnson, 1773, pp. 37–40; *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*

<sup>442</sup> Epigraph means "to spare the vanquished and subdue the proud," from *Aeneid* bk. 6, l. 853.

<sup>443</sup> *Pensive* to be in deep thought

<sup>444</sup> *Impending fate* a reference to people about to be executed for their crimes

<sup>445</sup> *Free born* somebody not born into slavery

<sup>446</sup> *Hearth* a symbol for one's home

A prize so little worth.

The scattered gleanings<sup>447</sup> of a feast

My scanty meals supply.

But if thine unrelenting heart

That slender boon<sup>448</sup> deny, 20

The cheerful light, the vital<sup>449</sup> air,

Are blessings widely given;

Let nature's commoners<sup>450</sup> enjoy

The common gifts of heaven.

The well taught philosophic mind 25

To all compassion gives;

Casts round the world an equal eye,

And feels for all that lives.

If mind, as ancient sages<sup>451</sup> taught,

A never dying flame, 30

Still shifts thro<sup>452</sup> matter's varying forms,

In every form the same,

Beware, lest in the worm you crush

A brother's soul you find.

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<sup>447</sup> *Gleanings* a word for leftovers gathered by the poor from the rich

<sup>448</sup> *Boon* a requested favour, often from a divine source

<sup>449</sup> *Vital* life sustaining

<sup>450</sup> *Commoner* ordinary person with no rank or lands

<sup>451</sup> *Sage* someone of exceptional wisdom and virtue, here the Greek philosopher Heraclitus

<sup>452</sup> *Thro* through

And tremble lest thy luckless hand  
Dislodge a kindred mind.

35

Or, if this transient<sup>453</sup> gleam of day  
Be *all* of life we share,  
Let pity plead within thy breast  
That little *all* to spare.

40

So may thy hospitable board  
With health and peace be crown'd.  
And every charm of heartfelt ease  
Beneath thy roof be found.

45

So, when unseen destruction lurks,  
Which men like mice may share,  
May some kind angels clear thy path,  
And break the hidden snare.

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<sup>453</sup> *Transient* something that lasts a very short time



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