

Joanna Baillie

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The critically acclaimed poet, playwright, and lyricist Joanna Baillie was born 11 September, 1762 in Bothwell alongside her twin sister who died shortly after delivery. She was raised in Scotland by parents Revd. James Baillie and Dorothea Hunter before moving to London where she spent most of her adult life.

Despite being voluntarily illiterate until the age of ten, Baillie's remarkable talent was evident in her early years in the Scottish countryside where she would perform plays in the schoolyard. It was at this age that she attended Miss McDonald's boarding school in Glasgow and her interest in literature flourished along with her reasoning abilities and talent for the arts.

Her primary work, *Plays on the Passions*, was produced in three parts and used affective means such as comedy and tragedy to provide various social critiques. Although the first part, published in 1798, was an immediate success, she only took credit once the second was released. These works were the subject of both controversy and praise, exemplifying the topics she was best known for: feminist, medical, racial, legal, and political discussions. The analytic and sentimentalist perspectives of her works also reflected her Christian ideology. Accordingly, Baillie engaged with many religious texts and composed her own in the form of analyses such as her theological pamphlet titled: *A View of the General Tenour of the New Testament regarding the Nature and Dignity of Jesus Christ*.

Baillie remained in good financial standing throughout her life despite regularly donating to charity, and she resided with her older sister in Hampstead until her death in 1851. Forty-eight years later, Baillie's extraordinary life as an individual and a writer was honoured by a sixteen-foot-tall memorial constructed at a church in the town of her birth. Today, Baillie's works have made a resurgence as scholars examine social, political, and feminist perspectives from the eighteenth century. Many of them praise her for her deep understanding of society and her influence on the portrayal of history.

Joanna Baillie's "A Mother to her Waking Infant" is comprised of fifty lines of iambic tetrameter, excluding the final line of each stanza which consists of only three metrical feet. The eight stanzas are split into seven sestets and one octave with the rhyme scheme aabbcc(dd). The genre of this poem is an address, wherein a speaker communicates with a subject and the themes are motherhood, children, and domestic life. The long eighteenth century, during which this poem was published, saw a philosophical shift from humanism to sentimentalism. This shift led to the belief that children, along with women and people of colour, embody innocence and are therefore the closest to God. During this period, children often passed away at an early age, leading to a misconception that parents in the eighteenth century did not attach to their children. However, this has been disproven through personal, artistic, and medical accounts. Despite the poem being an address from a mother to her child, Baillie remained unmarried and childless, instead focusing on her work, friendships, and family. However, her life was not devoid of children and their affection. Baillie maintained a strong relationship with her brother's children, one of whom was named in the dedication of her unpublished memoir.

Further Reading

Bailey, Joanne. *Parenting in England, 1760-1830: Emotion, Identity, and Generation*, Oxford UP, 2012.

Hunt, Margaret. "Sexuality and Reproduction." *Women in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, Routledge, 2009, pp. 13–133.

Kucich, Greg. "Joanna Baillie and the Re-staging of History and Gender." *Joanna Baillie, Romantic Dramatist: Critical Essays*, edited by Thomas C. Crochunis, Routledge, 2003, pp. 108–129.

A Mother to her Waking Infant¹

NOW in thy dazzled half-op'd² eye,
 Thy curled³ nose and lip awry,⁴
 Up-hoisted arms and noddling⁵ head,
 And little chin with crystal spread,⁶
 Poor helpless thing! what do I see,
 That I should sing of thee? 5

From thy poor tongue no accents come,
 Which can but rub thy toothless gum:
 Small understanding boasts thy face,
 Thy shapeless limbs nor step nor grace: 10
 A few short words thy feats may tell,
 And yet I love thee well.

When wakes the sudden bitter shriek,
 And redder swells thy little cheek; 15
 When rattled keys thy woes beguile,⁷
 And through thine eye-lids gleams the smile,
 Still for thy weakly self is spent
 Thy little silly plaint.⁸

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But when thy friends are in distress,

¹ *Fugitive Verses*. Edward Moxon, 1840, pp. 89–91. *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*.

² *Op'd*: opened. The apostrophe indicates that the second syllable should not be pronounced, creating a one-syllable word.

³ *Curled*: pronounced curl-ed (two syllables).

⁴ *Awry*: askew, asymmetrical or in an abnormal position.

⁵ *Noddling*: head bobbing or nodding, often done when dozing off.

⁶ *Crystal spread*: saliva, drool.

⁷ *Beguile*: distract.

⁸ *Plaint*: complaint, wail.

Thou'lt⁹ laugh and chuckle ne'ertheless,
 Nor with kind sympathy be smitten,
 Though all are sad but thee and kitten;
 Yet, puny varlet¹⁰ that thou art,
 Thou twitchest¹¹ at the heart.

Thy smooth round cheek so soft and warm;
 Thy pinky hand and dimpled arm;
 Thy silken locks that scanty¹² peep,
 With gold-tipp'd ends, where circles deep,
 Around thy neck in harmless grace,
 So soft and sleekly hold their place,
 Might harder hearts with kindness fill,
 And gain our right goodwill.

Each passing clown¹³ bestows his blessing,
 Thy mouth is worn with old wives' kissing;
 E'en¹⁴ lighter looks the gloomy eye
 Of surly sense when thou art by;
 And yet, I think, whoe'er they be,
 They love thee not like me.

Perhaps when time shall add a few
 Short months to thee thou'lt love me too;
 And after that, through life's long way,
 Become my sure and cheering stay;

⁹ *Thou'lt*: thou wilt (you will).

¹⁰ *Varlet*: rascal, used as a teasing expression of fondness.

¹¹ *Twitchest*: to lightly pull or tug at something.

¹² *Scantly*: barely.

¹³ *Clown*: Countryman, peasant

¹⁴ *E'en*: even.

Will care for me and be my hold,
When I am weak and old.

Thou'lt listen to my lengthened tale,
And pity me when I am frail¹⁵ —
But see, the sweepy spinning fly,
Upon the window takes thine eye.
Go to thy little senseless play;
Thou dost not heed my lay.¹⁶



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¹⁵ [Baillie's note] *Feeble*: in this sense the word is often applied in Scotland.

¹⁶ *Lay*: a short lyric or narrative poem intended to be sung (*OED*).