

Joanna Baillie

Flynn Dawson, Simon Fraser University

Joanna Baillie, born on 11 September 1762 in Bothwell, Lanarkshire, is widely known as a Scottish poet and dramatist. Baillie was the youngest of three children; in youth, her abilities for storytelling were prominent and noticed by everyone around her. Baillie would later attend a boarding school in Glasgow, Scotland, where her talents for writing and other creative mediums flourished. The first poem Baillie wrote was “Winter Day,” a description of experiences in the neighbourhood she had been living in, but she did not publish her first book of poems until 1790: *Poems: Wherein it is Attempted to Describe Certain Views of Nature and of Rustic Manners*. Baillie also wrote many plays, both tragedies and comedies, and critiques on religious texts.

Baillie published *The Martyr* in 1826, a tragedy about religion, and in 1831 she published work on religious heresies (specifically Arian, Socinian and Trinitarian). At the time of her death in 1851, on the 23rd of February, Baillie was greatly admired and respected amongst her peers and family. Baillie, along with her older sister Agnes (who lived to be one hundred) were buried beside their mother in a churchyard in Hampstead. In 1899, a statue was erected in a churchyard at her birthplace in Bothwell to honour her life. Baillie was said to be the most famous woman poet of her time, and, according to Sir Walter Scott and others, a female Shakespeare.

While Baillie is now best known for her Romantic poems and plays, she also had very passionate beliefs in Christ and God, which is reflected in “Thoughts Taken from the 93rd Psalm.” At the time, her views on Christianity were controversial, in criticizing how Christianity was practiced. It may be odd considering Baillie’s own father was a church minister and a professor of divinity at Glasgow, but Baillie’s personal religious beliefs were highly liberal, specifically Unitarian (as we see in her play *The Martyr*). Unitarianism emphasizes that every human is God’s child. However, in this poetic biblical paraphrase in iambic tetrameter hymn stanza, Baillie emphasizes divine power in a traditional way.

Further Reading

Richtie, Fiona. “Joanna Baillie: The Female Shakespeare.” *Women Making Shakespeare: Text, Reception and Performance*, 1st ed., Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014, pp. 97–102.

Zall, Paul M. "The Cool World of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Question of Joanna Bailie." *The Wordsworth Circle*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2014, pp. 17–20.

Thoughts Taken from the 93rd Psalm³⁶³

CLOTHED in majesty sublime,
 And girt³⁶⁴ with strength th' Almighty reigns;
 And, through the wreckful³⁶⁵ course of time,
 His hand the stedfast³⁶⁶ world sustains.

Wide doth the mighty thunder fill 5
 The darkened earth with dread dismay,
 But mightier far is he whose will
 The lightning and the storm obey.

Deep, heaving under land and sea,
 The earthquake uttereth his sound, 10
 Awful though low; more awful he
 Who holds its rage in prison bound.

The powerful billows,³⁶⁷ huge and grand,
 Rise swelling from the troubled main,³⁶⁸
 More powerful is the powerful hand 15
 That doth their threatening rage restrain.

O Lord, adored! from race to race,
 Men shall thy righteous laws proclaim,
 And holiness become the place

³⁶³ *Fugitive Verses*, Moxon, 1840, pp. 407-408; *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*

³⁶⁴ *girt* wrapped by a belt or girdle

³⁶⁵ *wreckful* causing disaster

³⁶⁶ *stedfast* immovable

³⁶⁷ *billows* waves

³⁶⁸ *main* ocean

Called by thy great and glorious name.



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