Cardiff Corvey: Reading the Romantic Text

Archived Articles

Issue 8, No 2

‘The Common Gifts of Heaven’
Animal Rights and Moral Education in Anna Letitia Barbauld’s ‘The Mouse’s Petition’ and ‘The Caterpillar’

Amy E. Weldon

'NOTHING, I think, for centuries past', Anna Barbauld wrote of the anti-slavery movement in 1789, 'has done the nation so much honour, because it must have proceeded from the most liberal motives—the purest love of humanity and justice.'[1] For many Dissenters, the nascent movement against cruelty to animals could 'do the nation honour' for much the same reasons—if it were more fully realised. Whereas the anti-slavery movement had acquired a high profile by the 1790s, what we would call the animal-rights movement, which at this point was often little more than social recognition of the need for kindness to animals, lagged behind. Several cultural currents, however, were in place to anticipate—and in many respects promote—the social movement toward animal rights that began with Parliamentary debate over an anti-bull-baiting bill in 1800 and 1802, continued with the founding of the first Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in 1809, and led eventually to the Victorian era's increased awareness of cruelty to animals, which, if it did not totally abolish the problem, helped to stigmatise animal abuse as socially unacceptable in the manner it is stigmatised today.

During the late eighteenth century, despite its later emergence as a social problem in its own right, raising human consciousness of cruelty to animals was often piggybacked (pardon the pun) onto a set of social issues centred on liberal consciousness-raising about man's inhumanity to man—especially slavery.[2] For Dissenters in particular, anti-slavery, writes historian David Turley, was 'part of a religious, philanthropic, and reform complex' that included pacifism, political reform, and, often, animal rights as well.[3] Although direct links between Dissent and the animal rights movement have not been clearly drawn to date, the degree to which humanity towards animals harmonised with Dissenting moral and political beliefs makes it likely that Dissenters generally supported increased awareness of cruelty and measures to prevent it.[4] 'Based on the dissenters' unitarian concept of life', writes Marlon Ross, 'a seamless thread runs from practical experience through moral conduct to political action. To cut that thread at any point would be to alter the character of all three spheres.'[5] The implicit foundation unifying these types of activism—a humane extension of sympathy not only to powerless humans but to other subject and powerless animal creatures—owed its emotional dimension not only to generalised ideas of 'sensibility' and pity but to Christian ideals of 'mercy, pity, peace, and love', in Blake's terms, that undergirded Dissenting morality and conduct. 'Whatever we do by another', wrote George Nicholson in *On the Primeval Diet of Man* (1801),

1. Quoted in Betsey Rodgers, *Georgian Chronicle: Mrs Barbauld and her Family* (London: Methuen, 1958), p. 111.
2. William Wilberforce and Fowell Buxton, leaders of Parliamentary antislavery debates, were also founding members of the SPCA.
3. David Turley, *The Culture of English Antislavery, 1780–1860* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 6.
4. Religiously based public opposition to cruelty against animals seems to have come mostly from outside the Anglican mainstream: the Puritans appear to have been the first to advance any organised humane or theological objection to bear-baiting, and John Wesley's Methodism injected sentiment and ideals of mercy not only into standards of man's treatment of other men but into man's treatment of animals, earning Methodists the reputation, as E. S. Turner writes, of 'showing unaccountable tenderness to birds, beasts, and butterflies': *All Heaven in a Rage* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1965), p. 50. Wesley advanced theological objections to cruelty by asking his followers to consider the relative positions of animals and men before God: 'What if it should please the All-Wise and All-Gracious Creator to raise [animals] higher in the scale of beings? What if it should please Him when he makes us equal to angels to make them as we are now?' (quoted in Turner, p. 50). In contrast, Revd James Granger, an Anglican vicar who preached an anti-cruelty sermon entitled (in its published version) 'An Apology for the Brute Creation, or Abuse of Animals Censured' (taking as his text Proverbs 12:10, quoted elsewhere in this article) was greeted with ridicule and bewilderment by his congregation: 'The foregoing discourse gave almost universal disgust to two considerable congregations', Granger wrote in a bitter postscript to the published version. 'The mention of dogs and horses was censured as a prostitution of the dignity of the pulpit, and considered as a proof of the Author's growing insanity' (quoted in Turner, p. 72). Advocacy for animals, like many other liberal political causes, seems to have been more strongly embraced by Dissenters or other social 'outsiders' than by the religious and social establishment, including Anglicans.
5. Marlon B. Ross, 'Configurations of Feminine Reform: The Woman Writer and the Tradition of Dissent', in *Re-Visioning Romanticism: British Women Writers 1776–1837*, ed. Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Haefner (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), p. 97.

a tract linking slavery to the consumption of animal flesh, 'we do by ourselves'. This idea of the mutuality between human beings and their social and natural environments was a staple of Dissenting thought and the basis for much Dissenting activism. In the minds of liberal social activists, including Dissenting activists, anti-slavery and the cause of animal rights became philosophically linked, united by the theological belief in the common subjection of human and animal creation before God.

In the eighteenth century, increasing awareness of cruelty to animals and the moral basis of pro-animal activism was reinforced by children's literature, which throughout the eighteenth century had used animals as prompts to the growth of young readers' consciences. An educator and a popular writer for children as well as a poet and public intellectual, Anna Letitia Barbauld (1743–1825), a lifelong member of the liberal Dissenting community centred around Warrington Academy and prominent Unitarian intellectuals such as Joseph Priestley, helped to shape and establish this moral mission. Her *Hymns in Prose for Children* (1781), reprinted in many editions throughout the nineteenth century, makes frequent use of animals and the natural world to impart to children a fairly benevolent but unsentimental view of nature, indicating a belief in the correctness and inevitability of natural hierarchies. '[Animals] may thank [God] in their hearts, but we can thank him with our tongues; we are better than they, and can praise him better', Barbauld writes in Hymn II. 'Trees that blossom and little lambs that skip about, if you could, you would say how good he is; but you are dumb, we will say it for you.'[6] Samuel Johnson, disappointed at what he saw as Barbauld's waste of her classical education on children's writing and marriage to 'a little Presbyterian parson',[7] ridiculed her pedagogical use of animals to reinforce human feelings of superiority: 'She tells the children', he writes, ' "This is a cat, and that is a dog, with four legs and a tail; see there! You are much better than a cat or a dog, for you can speak." '[8] Moira Ferguson has pointed out that the education in natural order found in children's literature of the period is an implicit education in social order as well, training young readers as proper subjects as well as moral beings.[9] As her work for children and adults demonstrates, education in social and intellectual 'order' and systems of hierarchy was an important aspect of Barbauld's work as well.[10] Thus, writing

6. *Hymns in Prose for Children* (1781); rptd in *Anna Letitia Barbauld: Selected Poetry and Prose,* ed. William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2002), p. 240.
7. Actually, Rochemont Barbauld was Unitarian.
8. Quoted in Rodgers, p. 71.
9. See Moira Ferguson, *Animal Advocacy and Englishwomen, 1780–1900: Patriots, Nation, and Empire* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998). Political and nationalistic self-definition and identity formation were frequently contested on the site of cruelty to animals. As Turner indicates, bear-baiting, a favourite sport of royalty—which was also believed by the Elizabethan court to develop the national virtues of courage and 'manliness' in common spectators—was a target of Puritans, who sought to end the sport by the dramatic expedient of shooting the bears. (The political motives underlying this apparent humanitarianism are expressed in Macaulay's famous quip in his *History of England* that 'the Puritan hated bear-baiting not because it gave pain to the bear but because it gave pleasure to the spectators'—and because bear-baiting as a sport was associated with the courtly status quo Puritans despised.) Cruelty was even configured, in the convoluted reasoning of Scottish cockfighter William Machrie, as a means to preserve nations from war: '[V]illage may be encouraged against village, city against city, kingdom against kingdom; nay, the father against the son', Machrie wrote in 1705, 'until all the wars in Europe, wherein so much Christian blood is spilt, be turned into that of the innocent pastime of cocking' (quoted in Turner, p. 57).
10. Order—whether visual, domestic, natural, spiritual, or a combination of all four—is a significant aspect of Barbauld's aesthetics. Her poem 'To the Poor' (1795) urges the poor to accept stoically their existing social status in order to gain everlasting rewards in Heaven. In her children's story 'Order and Disorder' (1792–96), a cheerful but untidy young girl learns to keep her sewing workbasket in order—and hence to accept her feminine role as domestic apprentice. In her posthumously published children's fable 'True Magicians' (1826), Barbauld describes a typically English picturesque landscape, with nature organised and tamed by cottages, fences, and roads, as a direct and desirable result of human industry—the 'magic' that has transformed 'Britain as our ancestors possessed it', a landscape in which 'the woods were tangled and pathless' and 'the howl of wolves was heard' into 'the pleasant land we now inhabit.' See Barbauld's *A Legacy for Young Ladies* (London: Longmans, 1826).

for children can become an occasion for 'education' far beyond the standard injunctions to children to follow the Golden Rule, obey their parents or governesses, and be kind to animals—it can be the first stage in the inculcation of what Gary Kelly has identified as the revolutionary middle-class values of community, responsibility, the denial of present gratification for future good, foresight, and self-monitoring.[11] These values, highly characteristic of and dear to Rational Dissenters, are integral to a politically and socially responsible self such as those liberal Dissenters and activists hoped to create in a new generation of English subjects.

Despite her apparent advocacy of hierarchical systems in the natural world, Barbauld was no mere apologist for political hierarchies. Like many Dissenters, whose politically liberal, anti-hierarchical tendencies were rooted in centuries of 'outsider' status and denial of civil rights under the Test and Corporation Acts, Barbauld calls for a reconfiguration of existing social structures according to what liberal Dissenters saw as common-sense and universal values of equality, mercy, and peace, which drove their political protest and activism in such causes as anti-slavery, governmental reform, pacifism, and animal rights. In her poems 'The Mouse's Petition' and 'The Caterpillar', Barbauld draws upon these interconnected cultural strains to fashion morality tales which, despite their sentimentally exciting animal subjectivities and their subtle whimsy, are primarily for adults, not children. Using the tropes and forms of children's writing—particularly the themes of human tyranny over powerless animals—in combination with the very adult and characteristically Dissenting political and moral concerns of pacifism, the abuse of political power, and examination of one's own position as a morally aware member of society enables Barbauld simultaneously to engage with a number of culturally sensitive issues and literary forms. Thus, she increases the psychological and emotional effectiveness of what are at heart political petitions among a readership that had likely been reared on sentimental moral tales of animals subject to human tyranny and was becoming increasingly aware—if only to a small degree—of the animal cruelty omnipresent in English society.

Accounts of this cruelty make difficult reading for twenty-first-century animal lovers. Visitors to the menagerie housed at the Tower of London could bring a live dog or cat as food for the lions and tigers, to save the price of admission.[12] Larks were trapped *en masse* and sold as food; horses had their ears and tails cropped for a stylish appearance; pigs intended for the table were beaten to death with knotted ropes to tenderise their flesh.[13] Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in the name of 'science' (which was sometimes little more than pseudoscience, although William Harvey's discovery of the circulatory system in 1628 was made possible by dissection of stags), animals were surgically explored while still alive. Joseph Addison relates what he calls a 'barbarous' test of animal love: 'A person who was well skilled in dissection opened a bitch, and as she lay in most exquisite tortures offered her one of her young puppies, which she immediately fell a-licking; and for the time seemed insensible to her own pain; on the removal she kept her eye fixed on it and began a wailing sort of cry which seemed to proceed rather from the loss of her young one than the sense of her own torment.'[14] Bull-baiting, writes Moira Ferguson, 'had long existed due to an ancient law that required baiting before a bull's slaughter; it was probably the first cruelty to be tackled [by activists] because premeditation was easy to prove [...] [and] it was simpler to tackle bulls than horses, with which the aristocracy were much more involved.'[15] The process was described by a contemporary witness: 'They tie a Rope to the Root of the Horns of the Ox or Bull,

---

11. See Gary Kelly, *Women, Writing, and Revolution 1790–1827* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).
12. Turner, p. 53.
13. Cropping a horse's tail is cruel not only because it deprives the horse of natural protection against flies but because the end of the horse's spine extends about eighteen inches into the tail, which may appear to be only a mass of hair. Docked tails were generally cut much shorter than eighteen inches, thus severing the tailbone as well.
14. From *The Spectator* No. 120 (1711); quoted in Tuner, p. 48.
15. Ferguson, pp. 30–31.

[…] Several Butchers, or other Gentlemen, […] let loose one of the Dogs: […] [the dog] runs round [the bull], and tries to get beneath his Belly, in order to seize him by the Muzzle, or Dewlap, or the Pendant Glands […] In the End […] either the Dog tears out the Piece he has laid Hold on, and falls, or else remains fix'd to him, with an Obstinacy that would never end, if they did not pull him off.' Bull-baiting was equally dangerous for the dog, as this observer indicates: '[The bull's] chief Aim is not to gore the Dog with the Point of his Horn, but to slide one of them under the Dog's Belly, (who creeps close to the Ground to hinder it) and to throw him so high in the Air that he may break his neck in the Fall. This often happens.'[16] Those who attempted to intercede on behalf of abused animals usually met with, at the very least, incredulous remarks such as that reported by equestrian and humanitarian John Lawrence, author of *A Philosophical and Practical Treatise on Horses* (1796): 'I once attempted to reason with a fellow (and he was of the rich vulgar) who was cruelly beating an innocent horse, till the blood spun from its nostrils […] the reply I obtained was, "G—— D—— my eyes, Jack, you are talking as though the horse was a Christian.'[17]

Unified or consistent animal-rights movements did not exist until the early nineteenth century; rather, a sprinkling of eighteenth-century pamphleteers, writers, philosophers, and isolated activists approached the question of cruelty to animals from a variety of social and moral perspectives, labouring to establish the awareness of cruelty to animals and broaden the sentimental mindset under which such cruelty could be officially stigmatised. Vegetarianism and anti-slavery were among the causes linked explicitly to the status of animals and to existing political power structures in need of reform. However, such ideas were not generally overtly proclaimed or widespread during the eighteenth century, despite the efforts of isolated activists like Susannah Watts (1768–1842), who 'alongside a circle of activist–abolitionist friends, committed herself to helping diverse, undervalued communities that included animals, birds, insects, slaves, old men and women, and distressed Irishwomen.'[18] Lord Thomas Erskine, abolitionist and proponent of the 1809 Parlimentary anti-cruelty bill, was known for his bizarre menagerie of pets, including a dog rescued from boys who had been tormenting it, a goose which followed him around his estate, a macaw, and even a pair of leeches by which he had been blooded (he kept them in a glass of water and named them 'Home' and 'Cline' after famous surgeons of the day).[19] As one might suspect, in eighteenth-century society in general such activists were often regarded as eccentric at best. E. S. Turner notes that:

> The lone humanitarian was liable to be suspected of every aberration from old-fashioned Puritanism to new-fangled Rousseauism or Methodism. He was dismissed as one suffering from the scourge of 'sensibility,' that often morbid obsession with the sufferings of others; and his seeming unmanly hysteria, his claim to kinship even with creatures that crawled, roused only derision in hardier breasts.[20]

Such isolated humanitarians, however, did effect some change, albeit limited. Outrage over the Parliamentary defeat of an anti-bull-baiting bill prompted the founding of the first SPCA (Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) in Liverpool on 22 October 1809.[21] Elizabeth Heyrick, a Quaker who had been among those campaigning for the passage of the bill, 'secretly purchased' a bull intended for the annual bull-baiting events at Bonsall, a town in Derbyshire, after her attempt to stop protests against the events proved ineffective.[22] Fox-hunting and the abuse of cart and carriage horses were also targets of activists' inquiry. Unfortunately, despite such efforts, glaring abuses persisted: 'one patriotic journalist regretfully concluded in 1825 that "attached as we are to

16. Ibid., p. 31.
17. Quoted in Turner, p. 68.
18. Ferguson, p. 70.
19. Christine Kenyon-Jones, *Kindred Brutes: Animals in Romantic-Period Writing* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), p. 88.
20. Turner, p. 65.
21. Ferguson, pp. 31, 30.
22. Ibid., p. 31.

our native land […] we are bound to confess that the proverb is but too true, 'that England is the hell of dumb animals' " '.[23] For Rational Dissenters and other religious activists, the sentiment expressed in this 'proverb' would have stood in ironic contradiction to Proverbs 12:10: 'a righteous man regardeth the life of his beast, but the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel'.[24]

The overtly educational or moral aims of pro-animal writers and activists were often supported not only by Christian values of mercy but also by the language of sensibility. Augustan thinkers, following Locke, began to question the notion, relied upon by both serious scientists and amateur vivisectors, that animals were machines incapable of feeling genuine pain. Addressing this issue in *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (printed 1780, published 1789), Jeremy Bentham argued that '[t]he question is not, Can they *reason?* nor, Can they *talk*? but, Can they *Suffer*?'[25] In the *Spectator* No. 120 (1711), Addison scolded 'the innumerable retainers of physic' who experimented upon live animals.[26] Essayist Soames Jenyns, in 'On Cruelty to Inferior Animals' (1782), asked the florid yet pointed question, 'How will man, that sanguinary tyrant, be able to excuse himself from the charge of those innumerable cruelties inflicted on his unoffending subjects committed to his care, formed for his benefit, and placed under his authority by their common Father?'[27] Even the great satirical artist William Hogarth was not immune to the tactics of sentimental and moral appeal; he described his motivation for making his well-known print series *The Four Stages of Cruelty*, which depicts a progression from torturing dogs in the 'first stage' to murder in the third and, fittingly, medical dissection of the torturer and murderer in the fourth, in terms that foreshadow nineteenth-century concerns with the rights of animals and reflect eighteenth-century ideals of sensibility:

> The four stages of cruelty, were done in hopes of preventing in some degree that cruel treatment of poor Animals which makes the streets of London more disagreeable to the human mind, than any thing whatever, the very describing of which gives pain. […] but it could not be done in too strong a manner as the most stony heart(s) were meant to be effected [*sic*] by them.[28]

Perhaps the most well-known expression of pro-animal sentiment in the eighteenth century was Lemuel Gulliver's exaggerated (and misanthropic) preference for horses over humanity following his visit to the Houyhnhnms in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), which Christine Kenyon-Jones, in describing a similar tendency in Byron, calls 'theriophily'.[29]

Children's books in particular, new as an eighteenth-century genre, 'quickly [recognised animals] as promising didactic instruments, and works of both juvenile natural history and moral fiction were loaded with uplifting messages about the need to treat them kindly', writes Harriet Ritvo.[30] Sarah Trimmer's popular *Fabulous Histories: Designed for the Instruction of Children respecting their Treatment of Animals* (1786) instructs children in social and moral practices through the example of a 'family of robins nested in the orchard of a benevolent household, the Bensons, whose children, Frederick and Harriet, with the help of Joe the gardener, tend the birds.'[31] Trimmer's story teaches that animals are to be subordinated to humans whenever possible—the Bensons are no vegetarians,

---

23. Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 126. I am unable to locate the author of the original 'hell of dumb animals' remark, which appeared in 'The Lion Fight', *New Monthly Magazine* 14 (1825), 288.
24. Proverbs 12:10 (KJV).
25. Quoted in Turner, p. 74.
26. Ibid., p. 48.
27. Quoted in Ferguson, p. 9. Jenyns's essay originally appeared in his *Disquisitions on Several Subjects* (London: Dodsley, 1782) and was reprinted in the *Annual Register* (1782).
28. William Hogarth, quoted in http://www.haleysteele.com/hogarth/plates/four_stages.htm. Online: Internet (10 Nov 2000).
29. See Kenyon-Jones, *passim.*
30. Ritvo, p. 131.
31. Ferguson, p. 7-8.

for instance—but that as God created humans and animals alike, humans, as the stronger and more reasonable lords of creation, have a duty to treat their inferiors kindly, since 'even men and women might expect to be *annihilated*, by the power of the great Creator' as animals are too frequently crushed by callous humans.[32] Mary Wollstonecraft's *Original Stories* (1788), laden with injunctions to be kind to animals, features the strict and moral governess Mrs Mason, who, to the astonishment of her chastised charges, steps off a path into wet grass to spare a passing snail. In Maria Edgeworth's story 'The Little Dog Trusty' (1801), a boy frightened of punishment blames the milk he has just spilt on his long-suffering dog, who becomes the property of the boy's kind brother once their parents discover the deception. Eleanor Frere Fenn (1743–1813), author of (under the pseudonym 'Mrs Lovechild') of *The Rational Dame; or, Hints towards supplying Prattle for Children* (1790?) justified the pedagogical use of animals by claiming that 'nothing could more effectually tend to infuse benevolence than the teaching of little ones early to consider every part of nature as endued with feeling.'[33] In an echo of Rational Dissenting beliefs about the interconnectedness of personal attitudes towards one part of creation with actions toward another, one children's book editor noted:

> Every one must have noticed in most children, a tyrannical, sometimes a cruel, propensity to torment animals within their power, such as —— persecuting flies, torturing birds, cats, dogs, &c […] [Children need] lessons of compassion for the *dumb creation*, as a fellow feeling for their own species […] because an early neglect of the duties of humanity, in regard to the *first*, leads but too naturally to an omission of those duties as to the *last*.[34]

Alexander Pope echoed this sentiment:

> One of the first pleasures we allow [children] is the licence of inflicting pain upon poor animals; almost as soon as we are sensible what life is ourselves we make it our sport to take it from other creatures. I cannot but believe a very good use might be made of the fancy which children have for birds and insects.[35]

Teaching children to have sensitivity to the feelings of animals develops their capacity for empathy with other people as well, making the individual child aware that he or she is part of the mutually responsible and responsive network of interlinked, divinely created beings—human and animal—that makes up the moral universe of Christianity in general and Rational Dissent in particular. A child who has thoroughly internalised and developed his or her own compassion for animals, and by extension other human beings, will grow up to become, morally and intellectually, a true Christian and a true citizen of the world, as able to feel moral indignation about slavery or the carnages of the Napoleonic Wars as to be outraged at the abuse of a cart-horse in the street outside his or her own front door.

A whimsical plea for release from a mouse Priestley has imprisoned for scientific experiments, 'The Mouse's Petition' (composed *c.*1769, published 1792) lends itself easily to political readings, as well as to commentary on animal experimentation and vivisection. However, like Barbauld's poem 'An Inventory of the Furniture in Dr. Priestley's Study', its use of particular physical detail (in this case, the details of the mouse's imprisonment) points at an animating moral order that, although it does have obvious political implications, is not limited to politics. The poem humorously yet pointedly expresses a belief in interconnectedness between humans and animals, the small and the large, and the concrete and the abstract—all as part of the ordered Christian universe. The emphasis on the unity of spirit and 'mind' throughout time and 'matter's varying forms', animated by the same breath of life although the 'forms' of that life may vary, have been linked

32. Sarah Trimmer, *Fabulous Histories* (1786; New York: Garland Publishing, 1977), p. 161.
33. Quoted in Ritvo, p. 131.
34. Ibid. (original emphasis).
35. Quoted in Turner, p. 49.

through James Thomson's poem 'Liberty' (1735–36) to the theories of Pythagoras, with which Barbauld (and almost certainly Priestley) may have been familiar in their unmediated form. 'Liberty' runs, in part, '[Pythagoras] taught that Life's indissoluble Flame, / From Brute to Man, and Man to Brute again, / For ever shifting, runs th' eternal round.'[36] In 'The Mouse's Petition', in keeping with Rational Dissenting ideology, all spheres of rational and spiritual inquiry, including political theory, classical education, and contemporary literature are brought to bear upon one another, united to a common purpose—the promotion of rational personal judgment in questions of social morality.

The poem begins with a plea from the caged mouse to any available listener to 'hear a pensive prisoner's prayer, / For liberty that sighs; / And never let thine heart be shut / Against the wretch's cries' (ll. 1–4).[37] The mouse casts its imprisonment in contemporary political terms, pleading that

> If e'er thy breast with freedom glow'd,
> And spurn'd a tyrant's chain,
> Let not thy strong oppressive force,
> A free-born mouse detain. (ll. 9–12)

Arguing its case logically, the mouse reasons that even if its jailer denies it the 'scatter'd gleanings of a feast', the theft of which has been its only offense, it surely cannot be denied 'the chearful light' and 'the vital air', which 'are blessings widely given' and not subject to individual control, as food from another's table may be (ll. 17, 21–22). The jailer should 'let nature's commoners enjoy / The common gifts of heaven', since, as Rational Dissenters believe,

> The well taught philosophic mind
> To all compassion gives;
> Casts round the world an equal eye,
> And feels for all that lives. (ll. 25–28)

In a resonant philosophical plea, the mouse warns of the moral implications of its execution: to kill it is to do injury to creation as a whole, since all of creation is connected:

> If mind, as ancient sages taught,
> A never dying flame,
> Still shifts thro' matter's varying forms,
> In every form the same,
>
> Beware, lest in the worm you crush
> A brother's soul you find;
> And tremble lest thy luckless hand
> Dislodge a kindred mind. (ll. 29–36)

Acknowledging contemporary theological doubt as to the exact amount of respect animals deserve as fellow creatures—they may or may not have 'souls' in the human sense, and hence their deaths may not have quite the moral weight of the deaths of human beings—Barbauld nevertheless reinforces Rational Dissenting ideals of mercy in dealing with fellow creatures:

> Or, if this transient gleam of day
> Be *all* of life we share,
> Let pity plead within thy breast
> That little *all* to spare. (ll. 37–40)

Showing mercy to a fellow creature may mean that a person—similarly powerless in comparison to the will of God—will likewise receive mercy in the future:

---

36. Quoted in McCarthy and Kraft, p. 246n.
37. Textual quotations are taken from McCarthy and Kraft's edition of Barbauld's poems.

So, when destruction lurks unseen,
Which men, like mice, may share,
May some kind angel clear thy path,
And break the hidden snare. (ll. 45–48)

The Dissenting connection of intellect and spirit is employed in 'The Mouse's Petition' to challenge the politically powerful to recognise that they are, like the powerless, creations of God and subject to the laws of mercy and accident. Barbauld's use of the petition form itself is bound up with this type of connection across social and political spheres, as Marlon Ross writes:

> From Barbauld's dissenting perspective, petitioning, rather than tearing apart the political from the moral fabric, is transformed into a weaving gesture that binds the aggressive act of a political demand to the submissive act of prayerful blessing. By ending with petition as *both* demand and prayer, Barbauld points the reader away from the hypothetical, figurative scene of the poem and toward the consequential circumstance of life which no poem can refigure.[38]

Reinforcing this aim of moral and social connection, the quotation from the *Aeneid* which stands as epigraph to the poem can be translated as 'To spare the humble, and tame in war the proud'.[39] As Barbauld's poem 'The Caterpillar', also makes clear, such instances of confrontation with animals or with the natural world can become opportunities for self-examination and moral awareness, followed by the impulse to extend this awareness to the rest of humanity.

The overt moral aim of the poem is reinforced by a deliberate indeterminacy as to the origins of the mouse's 'petition'; by forcing the reader to consider the circumstances of its (fictional) composition, the 'petition' directly implicates the reader in the mouse's imprisonment, reinforcing Rational Dissenting ideals of moral connection and responsibility among all living creatures. The original footnote to the poem reads: 'Found in the trap, where he had been confined all night by Dr. Priestley, for the sake of making experiments with different kinds of air.'[40] Deliberately ambiguous, the note not only recalls Barbauld's practice of leaving poems in physical circumstances that convey additional meaning (supposedly, the poem was brought to Priestley twisted among the bars of the mouse's cage),[41] but also raises several questions about the fate of the mouse and the meaning of its imprisonment. Has the writer of the poem 'found' the mouse in the trap, set it free, and composed the poem after the fact as a cautionary lesson? Has the writer 'found' only the 'petition' itself lying on the floor of the cage, left as a sort of message-in-a-bottle by the mouse itself before its execution, and acted as amanuensis? The mouse invites not only the reader's moral but intellectual and political involvement, prompting him or her to consider both the emotional pathos of the imprisoned animal and the arbitrary, random intervention of power and tyranny in the life of a powerless subject—an intervention that leaves its victim, ironically freed from 'dumb beast' status, no recourse but words.

Contemporary critics of 'The Mouse's Petition' were apparently more tempted to engage with its pathos than with its politics. One reviewer used the poem as a springboard for a proto-PETA jeremiad: 'We heartily condemn the lady's humanity for endeavouring to extricate the little wretch from misery, and gladly take this opportunity to testify our abhorrence of the cruelty practised by experimental philosophers, who seem to think the brute creation void of sensibility, or created only for them to torment.'[42] Rushing to her friend Priestley's defense, Barbauld noted in the third edition of her *Poems* that

38. Ross, p. 101.
39. McCarthy and Kraft, p. 245n.
40. Ibid., p. 36.
41. Ibid., p. 244n.
42. Quoted in ibid., p. 245.

> what was intended as the petition of mercy against justice, has been construed as the plea of humanity against cruelty. She is certain that cruelty could never be apprehended from the Gentleman to whom this is addressed [Priestley]; and the poor animal would have suffered more as the victim of domestic economy, than of philosophical curiosity.[43]

The note, when combined with the indeterminacy of the 'petition''s origins, encourages the reader's personal involvement in moral judgments of the mouse and its jailers, a moral involvement which is, as we have seen, directly in keeping with the spirit of Rational Dissent.

'The Caterpillar' (composed *c.*1816, published 1825), like 'The Mouse's Petition', engages its reader in a moral issue through the use of nature, ultimately reinforcing the ethics of Rational Dissent in a plea for humane, rational approaches to public issues. The speaker of the poem has been conscripted into a struggle with nature in the form of a mass slaughter of garden-destroying caterpillars, yet looking at an *individual* caterpillar as it crawls over her arm drives her to reassert the Christian ideals of virtue, mercy, and sympathy present in 'The Mouse's Petition'. Barbauld's tale of bloody agricultural war and its insect survivor (which 'stretche[s] out' its neck like an aristocrat on the guillotine) deliberately echoes the conflicted British (and particularly Nonconformist) reaction to the 'carnage' and refugees of the Napoleonic Wars, with which Mary Wollstonecraft was also deeply—and notoriously—concerned. Like Wollstonecraft, Barbauld, confronted with the questioning gaze of the innocent caterpillar, must gaze back—and in that gaze is found the moral and aesthetic courage to protest the carnage which has dispossessed the insect.

A sudden focus on the particular physical details of the caterpillar's body and the moral details of its own 'little life'—linked, as 'The Mouse's Petition' implies, with her own—prompts the speaker to assert the liberal ethics of Rational Dissent and the sentimental ethics of humanity to animals. As in 'The Mouse's Petition', the direct implication of the speaker in the caterpillar's survival—here, seen as a direct physical contact—brings a re-evaluation of the caterpillar's worth as a fellow creature.

> No, helpless thing, I cannot harm thee now;
> Depart in peace, thy little life is safe,
> For I have scanned thy form with curious eye,
> Noted the silver line that streaks thy back,
> The azure and the orange that divide
> Thy velvet sides; thee, houseless wanderer,
> My garment has enfolded, and my arm
> Felt the light pressure of thy hairy feet;
> Thou hast curled round my finger; from its tip,
> Precipitous descent! with stretched out neck,
> Bending thy head in airy vacancy,
> This way and that, inquiring, thou hast seemed
> To ask protection; now, I cannot kill thee. (ll. 1–13)

From this moment of moral realisation, the speaker is recalled to her socially imposed 'duty' and struggles to reconcile moral and agricultural imperatives, the reality of conscience with economic reality. She 'cannot harm' the tiny caterpillar through a despotic use of human strength, yet she realises the need to protect her own species against the anonymous mass of caterpillars that will destroy the food supply. Her tone implies that she recognises the apparent contradiction of saving the one after having killed the many:

> Yet I have sworn perdition to thy race,
> And recent from the slaughter am I come
> Of tribes and embryo nations: I have sought

43. Ibid., p. 245n.

With sharpened eye and persecuting zeal,
Where, folded in their silken webs they lay
Thriving and happy; swept them from the tree
And crushed whole families beneath my foot;
Or, sudden, poured on their devoted heads
The vials of destruction. (ll. 14–22)

Gazing upon the individual caterpillar makes the speaker realise that it is a part of social and familial structures like her own, a member of 'tribes and embryo nations' which she has helped to destroy without pity. Anne Mellor points out that women Romantic writers often draw instinctive parallels between familial and political structures, both of which are torn by tyrannous acts.[44] 'The Caterpillar' extends this point further: the reproduction of political tyranny in the individual family can also occur in individual relationships to nature, as humans are tempted to 'tyrannise' over animals, thus recreating human-to-human political conflicts in human-to-animal conflicts. As in 'The Mouse's Petition', confronting an individual member of a heretofore demonised group of 'others' makes the speaker realise the Pythagorean connection of its life with her own, extending her own domestic sentiments and ties to nature as a whole:

This [killing of other caterpillars] I've done,
Nor felt the touch of pity: but when thou,—
A single wretch, escaped the general doom,
Making me feel and clearly recognize
Thine individual existence, life,
And fellowship of sense with all that breathes,—
Present'st thyself before me, I relent,
And cannot hurt thy weakness. (ll. 22–29)

The 'war' at the domestic level, the killing of the caterpillars, is a deliberately employed testing ground for the possibilities of moral action in other, larger 'wars'. Just as the speaker, confronting an individual caterpillar, has realised the necessity of sparing her enemy, so would soldiers at the national and international levels be moved by individual pleas for mercy if they allowed themselves to be:

——So the storm
Of horrid war, o'erwhelming cities, fields,
And peaceful villages, rolls dreadful on:
The victor shouts trimphant; he enjoys
The roar of cannon and the clang of arms,
And urges, by no soft relentings stopped,
The work of death and carnage. Yet should one,
A single sufferer from the field escaped,
Panting and pale, and bleeding at his feet,
Lift his imploring eyes,—the hero weeps;
He is grown human, and capricious Pity,
Which would not stir for thousands, melts for one
With sympathy spontaneous:—'Tis not Virtue,
Yet 'tis the weakness of a virtuous mind. (ll. 29–42)

The caterpillar, part of a network of 'tribes and embryo nations', has made the speaker realise that killing it means disrupting the emotional order of an insect community just as human communities would be disrupted by the loss of one of their members. Similarly, the caterpillar's plea for mercy has prompted her to reconsider the larger social connection between the human and the animal worlds; if she, as an individual member of one invading 'army', can grant clemency to another in

44. See Anne Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

this domestic 'war', why cannot a similar pardon take place at the international levels of war? If such widespread clemency were practiced on the battlefields of Europe, existing political orders would be reconfigured according to the 'domestic' (and Rational Dissenting) virtues of mercy and love.

Like 'The Mouse's Petition', 'The Caterpillar', in its treatment of the individual effects of war, raises a course of moral action that disrupts domestic order on several levels, seeking to reconfigure existing political values in favor of explicitly Christian values of compassion and moral responsibility. Calling a halt to 'the storm / [o]f horrid war' on a national and international level, granting mercy to the enemy as the speaker has granted mercy to the caterpillar, would disrupt existing moral orders on a grand scale, radically reconfiguring them according to the Dissenting virtues of mercy and pacifism, with an animal, so frequently subject to human 'enemies' in real life, as the agent of change. To this end, the poem invites readers, through the plea of the Caterpillar, to substitute secular definitions of 'strength', which include glorying in violence, outward displays of power, and pride in one's ability to kill, for a Christian definition of 'strength', demonstrated in self-control, accordance with moral imperatives, and humble responsibility to a higher ethical code. A deeply ironic human tendency, indicative of the gulf between these value systems, is established by 'The Caterpillar': we may be able to justify the slaughter of thousands, but when confronted with a 'single sufferer from the field escaped', even the 'capricious Pity' of a hero, 'which would not stir for thousands, melts for one / With sympathy spontaneous' (ll. 36, 39–41).

Barbauld's insistent and pointed focus on the human (or caterpillian) costs of war resembles Mary Wollstonecraft's description of fire-ruined Copenhagen in *Letters from Norway* (1796). While some travellers may be able to look upon the ruins and pass onward without giving the scene more than a passing thought, or to consider the ruins an artefact of picturesque tourism, the truly 'benevolent heart', in Wollstonecraft's words, cannot look at such devastation without suffering along with the dead or the survivors. Such physical scenes, Wollstonecraft writes, are necessarily animated by the anguish of those 'who are no more':

> Entering soon after, I passed amongst the dust and rubbish it had left, affrighted by viewing the extent of the devastation; for at least a quarter of the city had been destroyed. There was little in the appearance of fallen bricks and stacks of chimneys to allure the imagination into soothing melancholy reveries; nothing to attract the eye of taste, but much to afflict the benevolent heart. The depredations of time have always something in them to employ the fancy, or lead to musing on subjects which, withdrawing the mind from objects of sense, seem to give it new dignity: but here I was treading on live ashes. The sufferers were still under the pressure of the misery occasioned by this dreadful conflagration. I could not take refuge in the thought; *they suffered—but they are no more!* a reflection I frequently summon to calm my mind, when sympathy rises to anguish.[45]

Like Wollstonecraft, Barbauld protested the human tendency to consider war and its depredations as something remote from, and therefore not affecting, our own lives. In her pamphlet *Sins of Government, Sins of the Nation, or a Discourse for the Fast, appointed on April 19, 1793*, published just after the declaration of war with France, Barbauld declares:

> Of late years indeed, we have known none of the calamities of war in our own country, but the wasteful expense of it; and sitting aloof from those circumstances of personal provocation, which in some measure might excuse its fury, we have calmly voted slaughter and merchandized destruction [...] We devote a certain number of men to perish on land and sea, and the rest of us sleep sound, and protected in our usual occupations, talk of the events of war as what diversifies the flat uniformity of life.

45. Mary Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (*Letters from Norway*, 1796), ed. Richard Holmes (London: Penguin, 1987), pp. 163–64 (original emphasis).

> We should, therefore, do well to translate this world war into language more intelligible to us. When we pay our army and our navy estimates, let us set down—so much for killing, so much for maiming, so much for making widows and orphans, so much for bringing famine upon a district.[46]

True to Rational Dissenting ideals, Barbauld insists that human action, particularly human tragedy such as war, cannot exist in isolation; misery and suffering in one corner of the world should be the concern of people everywhere. Wollstonecraft and Barbauld imply that while the public, confronting natural disasters or war, tends to focus on aesthetically pleasing ruins (in the eighteenth-century convention of picturesque tourism) or fine points of political debate, the properly moral heart and 'philosophic mind' must feel for the individual victims of humanity's war against other humans. A mind that can feel thus, in Rational Dissenting religious and educational rhetoric, is usually a mind that has been taught to feel compassion for not only those equal to itself in the human world but for those inferior to itself—those of the animal world. Drawing on contemporary questions of man's inhumanity to man, and to animals, 'The Caterpillar' and 'The Mouse's Petition' ask readers to consider that accepting the Rational Dissenting imperative to activism and social change prompted by moral change can begin with the simple yet vital act of accepting the viewpoint of another living being—human or animal.

---

46. Quoted in Rodgers, p. 118.

COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

This article is copyright © 2002 Centre for Editorial and Intertextual Research, and is the result of the independent labour of the scholar or scholars credited with authorship. The material contained in this document may be freely distributed, as long as the origin of information used has been properly credited in the appropriate manner (e.g. through bibliographic citation, etc.).

REFERRING TO THIS ARTICLE

A. E. WELDON. ' "The Common Gifts of Heaven": Animal Rights and Moral Education in Anna Letitia Barbauld's "The Mouse's Petition" and "The Caterpillar" ', *Cardiff Corvey: Reading the Romantic Text* 8 (June 2002). Online: Internet (date accessed): <http://www.cf.ac.uk/encap/corvey/articles/cc08_n02.html>.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Amy E. Weldon is a PhD candidate in nineteenth-century British literature at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.