

The Progressive Ideas of Anna Letitia Barbauld

Submitted by Rachel Hetty Trethewey to the University of Exeter
as a thesis for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in English
in January 2013

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Abstract

In an age of Revolution, when the rights of the individual were being fought for, Anna Letitia Barbauld was at the centre of the ideological debate. This thesis focuses on her political writing; it argues that she was more radical than previously thought. It provides new evidence of Barbauld's close connection to an international network of reformers. Motivated by her Dissenting faith, her poems suggest that she made topical interventions which linked humanitarian concerns to wider abuses of power. This thesis traces Barbauld's intellectual connections to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century religious and political thought. It examines her dialogues with the leading thinkers of her era, in particular Joseph Priestley. Setting her political writing in the context of the 1790s pamphlet wars, I argue that it is surprising that her 1792 pamphlet, *Civic Sermons*, escaped prosecution; its criticism of the government has similarities to the ideas of writers who were tried. My analysis of Barbauld's political and socio-economic ideas suggests that, unlike many of her contemporaries, she trusted ordinary people, believing that they had a right to be involved in government. She argued that intellectuals should provide them with information but not tell them what to think. These democratic ideas were reflected in her literary approach; she employed different genres to reach different audiences. She critiqued and used the discourses of enthusiasm and sensibility to appeal to the emotions of her readers. I argue that, by adapting the traditionally male genre of political pamphlets, her work was part of a tradition of progressive female political thought dating back to the seventeenth century. Her innovative defence of civil liberties contributed to the development of liberalism.

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