Rhetorical Styles of Reason and Sensibility in the Poems of Anna Laetitia Barbauld

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INTRODUCTION

Anna Barbauld (1743–1825) has authored many books for the enlightenment of children and the youth as well as religious pamphlets. She claims that reason is important for children's growth, but that perception and an affectionate feeling towards the invisible God generated through the power of the imagination in their daily lives are more significant. Therefore, “the child of reason” (Hymn VI, 36) is condemned for not using his imagination when God is “among the fields” (38), and he is “without God” (42). Apart from such works for children, Barbauld enlightens young women with her work, A Legacy for Young Ladies, edited by her niece Lucy Aikin after Barbauld's death in 1826. Barbauld values the religious attitude towards men and God in knowing the universal rule of nature, and explains that sensibility is just as important as morality; moreover, she advises young women to read novels as they have an advantage over men in having deeper sentiment (Legacy 52). Her correspondences as well as other prose writings indicate that she has deep affection for her close friends and relatives.

Barbauld is regarded as one of the forerunners of the Romantic period. Anne Janowitz claims that Barbauld assumed the role of a “canon shaper,” editing poems of William Collins or Mark Akenside, and influenced Samuel Taylor Coleridge with her “devotional sensibility” (86). Stuart Curran considers Barbauld a part of the group of the first generation of the Romantic female poets (188), including Hannah More, Anna Seward, Charlotte Smith, Helen Maria Williams, and Mary Robinson. However, a close reading of Barbauld's poems shows that they contained the literary characteristic of the coexistence of the rhetorical styles of reason and sensibility: her poems display a well-regulated writing style that is controlled by reason and the revelation of affection. It is presupposed that she tactically used these
two antithetical types of rhetorics to present an ideal vision of a world that is full of virtue, by focusing her description on others, nature, and God. Her educational and social background in the Dissenting culture also supports the existence and effects of these contrasting powers of the mind that are evident in her works.

The aim of this essay is to explain the enhancement of the sensibility of devotion in Barbauld's poems through the mediation of the two antithetical rhetorical styles of reason and sensibility by the power of imagination. It is notable that Barbauld considers devotion to be the elevated form of sensibility; this observation will provide a better characterization of her literary works in terms of the English literary canon.

I.

Flowers to the fair: To you these flowers I bring,
And strive to greet you with an earlier spring.
Flowers sweet, and gay, and delicate like you;
Emblems of innocence, and beauty too.
[.................................]
Gay without toil, and lovely without art,
They spring to cheer the sense, and glad the heart.
Nor blush, my fair, to own you copy these;
Your best, your sweetest empire is—to please.

(“To a Lady, with Some Painted Flowers,” in *Poems*, 1–4, 15–18)

Barbauld's first work *Poems* was published in 1773 as a collaborative effort with her elder brother, John Aikin. It was a success and three more editions were published in the same year. The above poem was written by Barbauld. At first sight, it describes the delicacy of female beauty, praising the female characteristics of sensibility: the lady is likened to “flowers sweet, and gay, and delicate” (3) whose “best” and “sweetest empire” is “to please” (18) men. This poem was criticized by Mary Wollstonecraft in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). However, the ideas of Barbauld and Wollstonecraft on women have many things in common (McCarthy and Kraft, *Anna* 213). Barbauld, by presenting the seemingly conservative poem, satirizes the women of her time as a reaction against the
traditional views on female characteristics (McCarthy 131-33). Barbauld shows her belief that women are to be enlightened in their intellect and reason.

The rise of women poets in the late eighteenth century coincides with that of the cult of sensibility as the experience of having intense feeling became a common poetical theme. Although the subjects of Barbauld's poems range from nature and domestic affairs to social events, many of these poems reveal her affectionate feelings towards the relatives and friends who are closely connected with her. This reveals that the features of Barbauld's poems can be traced to the poems of sensibility as represented by such poets as James Thomson, Thomas Gray, and William Collins who dealt with melancholy in the early and middle eighteenth century.

*The Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) defines "reason" as a concept that evolved in "the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Western Europe, during which cultural life was characterized by faith in human reason" (def. III. 10e). It is "the guiding principle of the human mind in the process of thinking" (def.10.a). While the rhetorical style of reason is connected to the judgement and argument based on one's logical deduction, the rhetorical style of sensibility expresses what is perceived by the writer. The word "sensibility" has a meaning that is peculiar to a concept that was predominant in the late eighteenth century. Using the well-known words in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802), Jerome McGann explains the cult of sensibility in eighteenth-century England:

Sensibility is the language of spontaneous overflow. From the perspective of feeling and emotion and all affective philosophy, it is unteachable. That belief is ancient, but in the eighteenth century it began to be scrupulously re-explored. A passion for enlightenment drove the quest for the reasons of the heart. (48)

Barker-Benfield, an expert in history and women's studies in eighteenth-to nineteenth-century England, asserts that the word "sensibility" denotes the "receptivity of the senses," and that it assumes "spiritual and moral values" when acquired (xvii). Therefore, sensibility in the eighteenth century connotes the idea of human virtue, which reflected Barbauld's Dissenting ideal. Patricia Meyer Spacks claims that "the poetry of sensibility" has the connotation of the "culture of sensibility," which affected the late eighteenth-century England and influenced the
"behavior of men and women, the conception and development of social reform, and the nature of prose and poetry" (249).

In Barbauld's time, women were "certainly central to the discourses of sentimentality, flourishing as writers of sentimental novels and poems" (Morris xiv). In *Conduct Literature for Women 1770–1830*, Morris suggests that after the mid-eighteenth century, femininity "came to be idealized in terms of natural delicacy and susceptible sympathies" (xiv), although women were requested to "adopt the rhetoric, discursive forms, genres and stereotypes approved by men" (xiv). It is natural to assume that the literature of the late eighteenth century dealt with the delicate and sympathetic mode of emotion as represented by sensibility.

In addition to Morris' argument on the literary genre of women's writing, Paula R. Backscheider clarifies that women in the late eighteenth century created the "friendship poems," a new form of poems that represented the sensibility of an individual towards others. This new form enabled the poet and the readers to develop a sense of sympathy (175). Anne Janowitz supports this assertion by claiming that in all the poems that Barbauld mainly wrote in her twenties, she does not mention a strong passion (19). Rather, she attempts to formulate the notion of sensibility in friendship, "the informal polite manner that allows rational discourse to take place, [...] assimilating domestic affection and mental exercise" (Janowitz 20) among men and women.

Brycchan Carey comments that Barker-Benfield views sensibility as the site and expression of the extensive reworking of female manners. Moreover, in *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility*, he states that the "rhetoric of sensibility" is in contrast to the neoclassical rhetoric because the "impact" of a logical argument is "altered by an appeal to the emotion" (42). By using both types of rhetorics—reason and sensibility—in her poetry, Barbauld attempts to formulate the original poetic vision of human minds. Such minds are free and work through compassion and sympathy. In "To Mrs. P[riestley], with some Drawings of Birds and Insects" in *Poems*, Barbauld addresses Mary, Priestley's wife, under the name of Amanda as follows:

Amanda bids; at her command again
I seize the pencil, or resume the pen;
No other call my willing hand requires,
And friendship, better than a Muse inspires.
Painting and poetry are near allied;
The kindred arts two sister Muses guide:
This charms the eye, that steals upon the ear;
There sounds are tun'd; and colours blended here [. . .] (1–8)

This poem shows Barbauld’s aim of mixing some informal polite manner in the traditional forms and rhetoric of poems. Line 5 is a cliché found in classical and neoclassical poems, and the motto is altered from Pope’s *Epistle to Mr. Jervas, with Dryden’s Translation of Fresnoy’s Art of Painting* (McCarthy and Kraft, Poems 224). Barbauld wishes to write poems that describe suffering and labour in human life:

the child of sorrow, wretched *man*,
His course with toil concludes, with pain began:
That his high destiny he might discern,
And in misfortune’s school this lesson learn,
Pleasure’s the portion of th’ inferior kind;
But glory, virtue, Heaven for Man design’d. (97-102)

She emphasizes that man is merely a part of the universe and that it is important to search for virtue.

In the last lines, Barbauld displays all the affection she has for her friend Mary as Amanda, which even overwhelms her wish to write poems. The friendship with Mary acts as a trigger for Barbauld to contemplate on human virtue:

Thy friend thus strives to cheat the lonely hour,
With song, or paint, an insect, or a flower:
Yet if Amanda praise the flowing line,
And bend delighted o’er the gay design,
I envy not, nor emulate the fame
Or of the painter’s, or the poet’s name:
Could I to both with equal claim pretend,
Yet far, far dearer were the name of FRIEND. (121–28)

These last lines also show Barbauld’s technique of infusing her own private affection with the neoclassical writing style of heroic couplets.

In another poem “The Invitation: To Miss B*****,” Barbauld begins the poem with Virgil’s Eclogues (x. 42–43), and there is an echo of Edward Young’s Love of Fame (McCarthy and Kraft, Poems 227).

With richest stores your glowing bosoms fraught,
Perception quick, and luxury of thought;
The high designs that heave the labouring soul,
Panting for fame, impatient of control;
And fond enthusiastic thought, that feeds
On pictur’d tales of vast heroic deeds;
And quick affections, kindling into flame
At virtue’s, or their country’s honour’d name; [. . .] (117–24)

The image that the “bosoms” (117) of young boys are enriched by “thought” and that “affections” (123) flame at virtue’s name is characteristic of the poems that Barbauld composed throughout her life. The OED defines “affection” as “An affecting or moving of the mind in any way; a mental state brought about by any influence; an emotion or feeling” (def. I. 2a), and it is clarified as “Feeling as opposed to reason” (def. I. 3). Juxtaposing “perception” and “thought” or “affections” and “enthusiastic thought,” Barbauld demonstrates the fusion of antithetical powers of the mind here.

Through this poem, Barbauld emphasizes that at Warrington Academy, where her father was a tutor to compensate for the Dissenters’ exclusion from universities, knowledge on science, arts and manners were gained; she claims that these subjects led the youth to the cultivate virtue “for a better age” (114):

Where science smiles, the Muses join the train;
And gentlest arts and purest manners reign.
Ye generous youth who love this studious shade,
How rich a field is to your hopes display'd!
Knowledge to you unlocks the classic page;
And virtue blossoms for a better age. (109–14)

Another poem in a series of poems titled “Characters” in Poems is presumed to be addressed to Susannah Barbauld Marissal, Barbauld’s sister-in-law:

Blest with that sweet simplicity of thought
So rarely found, and never to be taught;
Of winning speech, endearing, artless, kind,
The loveliest pattern of a female mind;
Like some fair spirit from the realms of rest
With all her native heaven within her breast;
So pure, so good, she scarce can guess at sin,
But thinks the world without like that within;
Such melting tenderness, so fond to bless,
Her charity almost becomes excess.
Wealth may be courted, wisdom be rever’d,
And beauty prais’d, and brutal strength be fear’d;
But goodness only can affection move;
And love—must owe its origin to love. (3-16)

In the first six lines here, the poet admires the conventional feminine beauty and talents of her sister-in-law. However, the latter eight lines emphasize her inner characteristics of “goodness” (15) and “affection” (15) which inspire love and devotion. Here, again, sensibility and the rhetorical form of the heroic couplets are skillfully mixed.

“The Mouse’s Petition” was so widely popular among children that they learnt it by heart (Murch 72): it also had a significant educational influence on them. This poem is said to have led Robert Burns to pen “To a Mouse,” and the motto was taken from Virgil’s Aeneid: “To spare the humbled, and to tame in war the proud!” (6: 853) (McCarthy and Kraft, Poems 245). “The Mouse’s Petition” concerns the mouse that Barbauld saw when she visited Joseph Priestley, a Dissenter and
a scientist in Leeds. He used mice in his experiments for studying the nature of various gases. This seemingly sentimental poem is rich with Barbauld’s criticism of the way in which scientific experiments were conducted.

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. (9–12)

As Stuart Curran points out, there is a “direct assertion of the claims of feminine sensibility against male rationality” (197), and that the sensibility is not something sentimental but one that stems from reverence, love, humility, gratitude, and trust towards Priestley.

The well-taught philosophic mind
To all compassion gives;
Casts round the world an equal eye,
And feels for all that lives. (24–27)

The poem can also be interpreted as a plea of the Dissenter against the cruelty of the establishment (McCarthy and Kraft, Anna 70). The mouse suggests that compassion is a common trait among men with a “philosophic mind” (24). Barbauld, within a poem following the didactic-georgic tradition of the Lucretian model, presents a sense of compassion, finally controlling her sensibility with a reasoned satire of the establishment.

Barbauld’s combining the rhetorical styles of reason and sensibility can also be observed in her “An Inventory of the Furniture in Dr. Priestley’s Study” (c. 1771), in which she displays both her knowledge of science and her affection towards Priestley. As Daniel E. White comments, Barbauld was “critical of the rational Dissenting Unitarian culture presided over by Priestley” (42). Therefore, by comparing Priestley’s laboratory with a magician’s grotto full of “bottles, jar and phial” (15), she mimics Priestley’s experiments on electricity; however, she also adopts “the feminine stance of charming the reader, using humour to sweeten the
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biting edge of her wit” (Saunders 509).

Barbauld’s use of two antithetical rhetorical styles of reason and sensibility extends to the description of the political arena, as in “The Rights of Woman” (c. 1792). She addresses women in general, beginning with a strong appeal for resistance to patriarchy.

Yes, injured Woman! Rise, assert thy right!
Woman! too long degraded, scorned, opprest;
O born to rule in partial Law’s despite,
Resume thy native empire o’er the breast! (1–4)

However, following the voice of reason, she finally persuades women to abandon the idea to fight against men:

Then, then, abandon each ambitious thought,
Conquest or rule thy heart shall feebly move,
In Nature’s school, by her soft maxims taught,
That separate rights are lost in mutual love. (29–32)

These lines mean that the conquest or rule of men will not satisfy the gentle heart of women, who know that “separate rights are lost in mutual love” (32). The voices of reason and sensibility are reconciled at the very end of the poem in order to clarify the ideal of universal and mutual love among people. With respect to this poem, Barker-Benfield argues that Barbauld’s intention in writing this poem was to consecrate the act of women hiding their feelings within their breast. The glorification of sensibility in literature was the trend in the late eighteenth-century culture (Barker-Benfield 266), and the “empire of feeling” of a woman’s breast contained “the private, the innermost mysteries” (266) that were “withheld from the publicity of fame” (266).

II.

The culmination of Barbauld’s literary theory of combining the contrastive rhetorical styles can be observed in Barbauld’s well-known poem, “A Summer
Evening's Meditation" in Poems. Employing the typical setting of loco-descriptive poems, the poet tries to find God in nature by meditating upon the universe in the evening.

'Tis past! The sultry tyrant of the south
Has spent his short-liv'd rage; more grateful hours
Move silent on; the skies no more repel
The dazzled sight, but with mild maiden beams
Of temper'd luster, court the cherished eye
To wander o'er their sphere [. . .] (1–6)

The poet describes the geographical grandeur and the existence of God.

he, whose hand
With hieroglyphics elder than the Nile,
Inscrib'd the mystic tablet; hung [the stars] on high
To public gaze, and said, adore, O man! (31–34)

The power of imagination transports the poet to the far end of the universe. The poet then describes the vastness of the universe and the scientific knowledge on the human embryo system:

What hand unseen
Impels me onward thro' the glowing orbs
Of habitable nature; far remote,
To the dread confines of eternal night,
To solitudes of vast unpeopled space,
The desarts of creation, wide and wild;
Where embryo systems and unkindled suns
Sleep in the womb of chaos; fancy droops,
And thought astonish'd stops her bold career.
But oh thou mighty mind! Whose powerful word
Said, thus let all things be, and thus they were [. . .] (92–100)
In the above poem, the dignity of God and the grandeur of the universe are emphasized.

In her "Address to Deity" in Poems, Barbauld tries to see God everywhere through the power of her imagination.

In every leaf that trembles to the breeze
I hear the voice of GOD among the trees;
With thee in shady solitudes I walk,
With thee in busy crowded cities talk,
In every creature own thy forming power,
In each event thy providence adore. (61–66)

These lines echo Barbauld's idea that "there is a devotion, generous, liberal, and humane, the child of more exalted feelings than base minds can enter into, which assimilates man to higher natures, and lifts him above this visible 'diurnal sphere'" ("Thoughts" 234).

Devotion acquired by the use of the power of imagination has the ultimate value.

Barbauld's literary tendency to combine the rhetorical styles of reason and sensibility through imagination is generated by her peculiar social and educational background. Barbauld was a Dissenter; however, her position was different from those of contemporary male Dissenters and scientists. Since there was a need for social management and a code of conduct from 1770 to 1830 under industrialization, as Anne Janowitz suggests, Barbauld's poems show a reiteration of the values relating to family and family bonds (16). Moreover, since the relationships among the members of the Academy were very strained (McLachlan 4), Barbauld, sustained by this familial relationship, intended to write poems to stress the affection prevailing among people.

Barbauld was in a peculiar position as a woman Dissenter, living in the domain of the private sphere, which was different from the public sphere of the male Dissenters. Male Dissenters such as Priestley and Richard Price analysed the works of the human mind from the viewpoint of their Unitarian convictions. However, as Laura Mandell points out, Barbauld's position as a Dissenter was unique as she
was what was referred to as the “free dissenters” (134). Moreover, it is true that she became critical of Priestley, and valued moral feelings:

Philosophy represents the Deity in too abstracted a manner to engage our affections. A Being without hatred and without fondness, going on in one steady course of even benevolence, neither delighted with praises, nor moved by importunity, does not interest us so much as a character open to the feelings of indignation, the soft relentings of mercy, and the partialities of particular affections [. . .] It is also fault of which philosophers are often guilty, that they dwell too much in generals. (“Thoughts on the Devotional Taste, on Sects, and on Establishments” 238)

Here, Barbauld clarifies that “affections” are of more importance than reason. This is coherent with her idea that rather than suffering from melancholic contemplation, a friendly association with others in worshipping God should be attained.

In their doctrine, Rational Dissenters such as Priestley or Richard Price mainly claimed that God can be perceived through human interaction with nature. They maintained that humans can confirm God’s authority and existence through their own experiences in nature. Barbauld held the same religious conviction, but her concept of God was not identical with that of the male Dissenters: she valued an imagination that is influenced by religious affections for God. She was also in a peculiar position, living in the domain of the private sphere, which was different from the public sphere occupied by the male Dissenters. Therefore, Marlon Ross describes her stance as a “double dissent” (93), while William Keach interprets her special position as that of a Dissenter whose spirit is taught to be equal to men but who is unable to speak about politics as men were free to do (47).

In addition to Barbauld’s religious background, the Unitarianism of Warrington Academy also influenced her use of the rhetoric of reason and rhetoric of sensibility. Although she was not officially permitted to attend the Academy, the philosophical enquiries such as John Locke’s *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* influenced her writing style. She adopted the beliefs on the importance of developing reason in children. Locke claimed that pleasant experiences at an early age lead to the development of moral values. Therefore, it is supposed that Barbauld’s works
for children aimed to enlighten people based on the development of reason. In addition, the philosophical inquiries by David Hartley or Jean-Jacques Rousseau considerably influenced Barbauld and other writers such as Hester Chapone and Catharine Macaulay, whose works were intended for children and young people.

The idea of the relationship between reason and sensibility in “On Taste” in *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* written by Edmund Burke supports Barbauld’s use of two styles of rhetorics in her poems. In Burke’s analysis, words are the source of the sublime and emotional communication is the main object of literature (*Philosophical* 266). As Burke, as a Whig, once had a “quite friendly” (Hilton 87) relationship with the Dissenters, it can be assumed that under the influence of Burke, Barbauld achieved a “synthesis of reason and sentiment which helped disseminate the familial culture of the Rational Dissenters with its unique perspective on oppositional issues, its optimistic piety and its concern with progress, to the public sphere at large” (Hilton 88).

Specifically, in *The Improvement of the Mind*, Isaac Watts asserts that “skill in the sciences is indeed the benefits and possession but of a small part of mankind” (2). Barbauld herself mentions that the only book that dealt with devotional taste and provided “a summary of the doctrines of religion” (*Hymns* 3) in children’s books was Watt’s, as it valued the power of imagination. As seen in “A Summer Evening’s Meditation,” Watts’s practice of finding God by using his imagination to compose hymns influenced Barbauld.

Barbauld was of the opinion that humans could find happiness in their lives on earth as well as in Heaven. She valued the invocations of humans to God when observing nature. Using her full sensibility and reason and power of imagination, she searches for the unknown world of God in her poems. Her idea of writing poems of devotional taste was criticized by the male Dissenters, who believed that she debased the idea of religion and literature (Hilton 101). However, Barbauld believed that she might “paint him [God] to my imagination too much in the fashion of humanity; but while my heart is pure, while I depart not from the line of moral duty, the error is not dangerous” (“Thoughts” 240–41).

Devotional sensibility which is developed in the works of William Fenner and Watts greatly influenced Barbauld’s idea of devotion; furthermore, Barbauld explains that the sensibilities of devotion “when early cultivated, continue
vivid even in that uncomfortable season of life when some of the passions are
extinct” ("Thoughts" 234). Romantic figures such as Felicia Hemans or William
Wordsworth used the word “affection” to replace this sensibility which is “forged
between people, principally through reading poetry,” which is “benevolent and
thoughtful form of devotional feeling the believer ideally directs towards, and
receives back from, God” (Mason).

For he who has been early accustomed to see the Creator in visible appearances
of all around him, to feel His continual presence, and lean upon His daily
protection—though his religious ideas may be mixed with many improprieties,
which his corrector reason will refine away—has made large advances towards
that habitual piety, without which Religion can scarcely regulate the conduct,
and will never warm their heart. (Hymns 3)

In this manner, Barbauld describes the ideal religious attitude through her poetic
vision. Love, friendship, affection for others, pity, sympathy, and other sentiments
acquired through one's sensibility are the main constituents of her poems as they
are the main elements of the human minds according to the philosophical theories
Barbauld learned in her youth.

The Dissenting circle at Warrington Academy cultivated in her the importance of
the family; however, it cannot be denied that her existence as a female Dissenter is
peculiar in that she emphasized affectionate feelings among people, the community,
and the country—and in particular, towards God. This distinguishes her from the
male Dissenters.

Her prose works played an important role in enlightening people about social
manners. In contrast to her prose works, her poems were not meant for public
readings; rather, they served as freer expressions of the sensibility of devotion
mediated by the power of imagination.

CONCLUSION
The poems of Anna Barbauld, which were mainly written by her when she was
in her twenties, display both the neoclassical style of the heroic couplet and the
revelation of affection. It can be assumed that she deliberately used such antithetical
rhetorical styles, namely, the mixed styles of reason and sensibility.

Her poetry, which includes the "friendship poems," emphasizes sympathy and affection for others, and her sensibility is fused with the heroic couplet and the descriptive mode of poems. She propounded the idea that friendly associations with others outweighs reason, as exemplified in her "To Mrs. P[riestley], with some Drawings of Birds and Insects" or "The Invitation: To Miss B*****." Moreover, the rhetorical styles of reason and sensibility are reconciled by poetic imagination as evidenced in the poem, "A Summer Evening's Meditation" or "Ode to Deity." "A Summer Evening's Meditation" shows Barbauld's peculiarity as a late eighteenth-century poet because in this poem the two types of rhetoric are reconciled to stress the devotional gratitude for God.

Barbauld's social and religious backgrounds as well as her unique position as a female Dissenter have yielded considerable influence on her writing technique. Unlike the male rational Unitarians in the Academy circle who valued reason to humanize Jesus Christ, Barbauld claims that sensibilities, supported by reason, are enhanced in imagining God and virtue, which may provide an insight into the origins of the Romantic poetics of imagination. Her poems allow the free expressions of sensibilities within the formalistic poetic conventions, mediated by the affection and imagination for others and God, eventually influencing the views on nature held by various Romantic poets.

WORKS CITED

(The poems of Barbauld in this thesis are all sourced from Barbauld, Anna Laetitia, The Poems of Anna Laetitia Barbauld, eds. William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft, Athens: U of Georgia P, 1994.)


Synopsis of “Rhetorical Styles of Reason and Sensibility in the Poems of Anna Laetitia Barbauld”

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In the poems of Anna Barbauld, which she mainly composed in her twenties, her private affection for others is fused with a reasoned writing style.

The affection that Barbauld felt developed through her friendly associations with others—as exemplified in her “friendship poems,” “To Mrs. P[riestley], with some Drawings of Birds and Insects” or “The Invitation: To Miss B*****”—is fused with the neoclassical rhetoric form of heroic couplets in the poem. It is also assumed that she deliberately used such antithetical rhetorical styles, in order to present the ideal female inner characteristic of sensibility and poetic vision of communion with God as evidenced in “Summer Evening’s Meditation” or “Ode to Deity.”

Barbauld’s social and religious background as well as her unique position as a female Dissenter yielded considerable influence on her writing technique. Being critical of the rational Unitarian culture which valued reason to humanize Jesus Christ, Barbauld claims that sensibilities, supported by reason, are enhanced in imagining God and virtue, which may provide an insight into the origins of the Romantic poetics of imagination. She was also in a peculiar position, living in the domain of the private sphere, which was different from the public sphere of the male Dissenters. Therefore, her status can be described as a “double dissent” (Ross 93).

This paper argues that Barbauld tried to invent a style of poetry allowing the free expressions of sensibilities within the formalistic rhetorical style of reason.