

## MLR, 110.2, 2015

*Anna Letitia Barbauld and Eighteenth-Century Visionary Poetics.* By DANIEL P. WATKINS. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. 2012. xvi+245 pp. \$60; £31. ISBN 978-1-421-40458-5.

- R04959** Anna Letitia Barbauld (née Aikin) burst onto the literary scene in 1773. Two hundred and forty years later, we are recapturing something of the excitement which greeted her first volume. Thanks to the tireless biographical and editorial endeavours of William McCarthy and other scholars, her work has now begun to receive serious critical attention; this, however, is the first book-length study of her ground-breaking debut volume. As Daniel P. Watkins brilliantly shows, *Poems* (1773, reprinted 1792) is a fascinating volume, not least because of its changeable, at times conflicted, nature. The poems move between different modes, shifting in genre, voice, and form, through which Watkins confidently guides us. A key example is his analysis of the shift between the first two poems, 'Corsica' and 'The Invitation'. Reading these together helps us fully to appreciate the 'complicated relationship between pastoral and prophecy' in Barbauld's work (p. 56). She is at once attracted to and made anxious by the prophetic mode which 'Corsica' at first seems to embrace, and the changes within and between the poems further demonstrate her awareness of human experience as 'vexed and multilayered' (p. 71) and her self-consciousness about her own idealism. Analysing the 'self-reflective and self-correcting character' (p. 49) of Barbauld's poetics, Watkins shows how she constantly interrogates her own standpoint.

The study, then, is attentive not only to the specifics of individual poems, but to the ways in which they answer, echo, and correct one another, an endeavour which lies at the heart of this monograph. As the preface explains, the book began life as a three-volume study comparing Barbauld's *Poems*, Ann Yearsley's *Rural Lyre* (1796), and Joanna Baillie's *Metrical Legends* (1821). These books share interests in ideals of love and benevolence, 'human betterment', and the ways in which this might be achieved, inflected by the authors' backgrounds in Protestant Dissent. But, with engaging and persuasive frankness, Watkins makes the case that each volume should have the tribute of a close, detailed analysis. They are, he maintains, 'among the most important poetic statements of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and should be placed alongside works by Blake and Wordsworth for their visionary sophistication and revolutionary thought' (p. xi).

'Visionary' is a key word here, since a central concept for Watkins is that of 'visionary poetics', inherited from Joseph A. Wittreich (see, for example, *Visionary Poetics: Milton's Tradition and his Legacy* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1979)). The study diverges from Wittreich, however, in showing the importance of women writers, and the ways in which they intervene in, and challenge, male traditions of visionary thought and poetics. In the eighteenth century, argues Watkins, such traditions 'took an odd but important detour into the imaginations of many women writers' (p. 202), and, while it focuses on Barbauld, this reading of female visionary poetics also reflects on a range of poets including Mary Leapor, Elizabeth Hands, and Anne Bannerman to demonstrate the wider application of his the-

### Reviews

ories. Thoughtfully engaging with major trends in critical perspectives on female poetics, Watkins's goal, explored in his introduction, is to enlarge our discussions of women's writing in the period partly through his awareness of this larger span of visionary thought, and partly through close attention to form and style, the 'particulars of poetic expression' (p. 8).

This, indeed, is the great strength of his discussion of Barbauld as visionary and as poet: he seeks to bring out the allusive richness of each poem while remaining alert to the larger aims of the volume as a whole. *Poems*, he argues, is marked by a 'visionary tension between the world as [Barbauld] wants it to be and the world as it is' (p. 47): this important study helps us to respond to Barbauld's vision, and to recognize its depth and complexity.

UNIVERSITY OF LEICESTER

FELICITY JAMES

*Below you should find the contact details (postal and email addresses) that are on file. If the information is not there, please write it in if you are sending the proof back to the editor, or else email it to the assistant editor John Was ([john.was@ntlworld.com](mailto:john.was@ntlworld.com)). The details should be correct and valid at least until April 2015. (Note that sometimes an item has to be postponed to a later issue if the volume in preparation proves to be over-long: please advise of any change of contact details up till the actual publication of your contribution.)*

Dr Felicity James  
School of English  
University of Leicester  
LE1 7RH  
email address: [fj21@le.ac.uk](mailto:fj21@le.ac.uk)