

ANNA LAETITIA BARBAULD AND THE DISCOURSE OF WASHING

**ANNA LAETITIA BARBAULD  
AND THE  
DISCOURSE OF WASHING**

**By**

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## ABSTRACT

This study treats the “feminism” of Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1743-1825), a middle class English woman who is notably responsible for refashioning children’s literature and for advocating the teaching of conformity in childhood education. Though her work has been relatively unexplored, Barbauld was one of the most versatile and prolific writers of her time. This thesis explores what proves to be her most pivotal text, “Washing-Day” (1797), a poem that is particularly indicative of Barbauld’s “feminist” and poetic ingenuity. I begin with an introductory chapter that discusses the exclusion of Barbauld and her female Romantic counterparts from public discourse. In this discussion, I consider strategies for integrating these “new” poets into literary studies, and suggest that we must read their texts *closely*—which entails isolating the ambivalences and self-differences wherein the breath of the poetry subsists. I then turn to a tropological manoeuver inherent in Barbauld’s poetry, which I have called “interruption,” and examine how this manoeuver operates within and without “Washing-Day.” In Chapter One, I theorize the “breath” of “Washing-Day”—that is, how Barbauld performs and occupies the texts of her forefathers in the process of authorizing herself to write. The second chapter circles back to the poem’s beginning and analyzes Barbauld’s “interruption” of patriarchal texts and discourses. Having worked through the poem in two close analyses, I arrive at the conclusion that Barbauld’s feminism is performative, that it tacitly operates at the level—or *movement*—of difference.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Anna Laetitia Barbauld and the Discourse of Romanticism(s): The Little Invisible Being Expected Soon to Become Visible<sup>1</sup>

Now women return from afar, from always: from "without," from the heath where witches are kept alive; from below, from beyond "culture" from their childhood which men have been trying desperately to make them forget, condemning it to "eternal rest."

But only the poets—not the novelists, allies of representationalism. Because poetry involves gaining strength through the unconscious and because the unconscious, that other limitless country, is the place where the repressed manage to survive: women, or as Hoffman would say, fairies.

—Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa"

In his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802) William Wordsworth writes: "What is a poet? To whom does he address himself? And what language is to be expected from him? He is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endued with more lively sensibility . . . ." (601). As Wordsworth's statement tacitly indicates, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries men dominated the very definition of "Poet," and strove to engender poetrywork masculine. The process of this masculinization excluded female poets from public discourse while, concomitantly, thickening the borders that defined the Romantic, patriarchal subject—that is, the male, western, autonomous self against which all "others"

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<sup>1</sup> The title of my introduction is derived from Barbauld's poem "To a Little Invisible Being Who Is Expected Soon to Become Visible" (1825; composed 1795).



are defined and calibrated. That the Romantic subject was decidedly male is reflected in the fact that our Romantic canon is comprised of six major male figures, which is effectively to say, six men represent an age when women's writing was actually flourishing. Stuart Curran has identified three hundred and thirty-nine published and eighty-two anonymous English female poets (Mellor, *Gender* 7), and notes that,

while Goldsmith was writing his two poems and Beattie his one, a succession of women poets came to prominence: Anna Barbauld with five editions of her poems between 1773 and 1777; Hannah More with six sizable volumes of verse between 1773 and 1786; Anna Seward, the Swan of Lichfield, whose *Monody on the Death of Major Andre* of 1781 went through successive editions and was followed in making her a literary force to be reckoned with . . . ; Charlotte Smith, whose *Elegiac Sonnets* of 1784 went through ten expanding editions in fifteen years; Helen Maria Williams, who capitalized on the fame of her first two books of poetry by publishing a collected *Poems, in Two Volumes* in 1786, when she was yet twenty-four; and Mary Robinson, whose first poetic volume was published in 1775, and who . . . in 1800 could survey a literary landscape and see it dominated by women intellectuals. (187)

Excluded from the public discourses of their own time and utterly ignored by contemporary Romantic critics (Harold Bloom and M.H. Abrams, to name but two), today, as Cixous envisioned, these "women return from afar, from always: from 'without,' from the heath where witches are kept alive; from below, from beyond 'culture' from their childhood which men have been trying desperately to make them forget, condemning it to 'eternal rest'" (348).

Now that they are returning, how are we finally to read them? How should we integrate these women into critical discourse, into Romantic studies in the university? Do we study them in the context of "male Romanticism"? Can they legitimately be described

as "Romantic"? Or do we give them a new title? In response to these and related questions,

Isobel Armstrong argues:

We have had two hundred years to discover a discourse of and strategies for reading male poets. They belong to a debate, a dialectic; we know how to think about politics, epistemology, power, and language in productive ways that, whether it is Matthew Arnold or Paul De Man who writes, make these poets *mean* for us. A hermeneutics has evolved. Not so with the female poets. We are discovering who they are, but there are few ways of talking about them. Mercifully, a canon has not yet been founded, for canons seal poets into hierarchies. (15)

To Armstrong, "effectively, these poets are *new* poets" (16). Accordingly, she insists, they must be read on their own terms in this initial phase of their revival: "[i]t will take some time for [women's poetry] to become fully visible" (32); "a one-sided study of women's poetry in isolation from male poetry" is, for Armstrong, therefore justifiable (32). Like Armstrong, Marlon Ross cautions against too hastily integrating these "new" poets into existing Romantic criticisms and argues that, though we try to do female writers justice by designating women like Dorothy Wordsworth and Mary Shelley "Romantic," we do so catachrestically:

[b]y considering [Dorothy Wordsworth and Mary Shelley] as supreme representatives of the feminine arena of romanticism, we promote the idea that romanticism is the standard according to which all poets must be judged; we reconfirm the assumption that women necessarily compete in a different (complementary) arena while simultaneously we make their sphere a mirror image (an obverse imitation) of the original masculine sphere. Like the romantics, who make women (and the world) an extension of themselves, romanticist critics have made women writers of the period an extension of male romanticism. (4-5)

Ross's remarks are useful as far as they go, but I want to suggest that an "obverse



imitation" or "mirror image" is precisely the effect that some female Romantic poets strove to achieve. In this thesis, I will call this poetic strategy "performance."

Arguably, one of the most animated contemporary debates concerning the female Romantic poets surrounds the question of how and where to position them in the context of literary studies. My own analysis turns to Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1743-1825) and her most pivotal text, "Washing-Day" (1797), as a test case with which to explore this question. In focussing on "Washing-Day" alone, I have attempted to be exhaustive, rather than illustrative, since today's critics do not read Barbauld's poetry nearly closely enough. Mindful of the lessons of Paul de Man, I argue that we must begin reading this "new" text more *closely* than ever before.<sup>2</sup>

My own analysis of "Washing-Day" is conducted in two parts that, together, open up the text in ways that have not yet been considered—particularly because I understand Barbauld to be uniquely feminist, whereas other critics insist upon her resolute antifeminism. Later in this discussion, I will examine the problematic position that Barbauld occupies in contemporary feminist Romantic studies. Next, I introduce Barbauld's unique mode of feminism—namely, her strategy of resistance which I call "interruption." A tropological manoeuver detectable in "Washing-Day," interruption functions explicitly in the poem's narrative, and implicitly through gender and genre performance, to subvert reigning

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<sup>2</sup> In 1979, de Man predicted that a new generation of Romantic scholars would show that "by reading the close readings more closely that they were not nearly close enough" (qtd. in Clark and Goellnicht 10). See David L. Clark and Donald C. Goellnicht's *New Romanticisms: Theory and Critical Practice* for more discussion on de Man's influence on contemporary Romantic studies.

patriarchal texts and discourses. The final section of this discussion will examine how Barbauld and “Washing-Day” emerge interruptively into discourse—as “the wet cold sheet” that bears “Washing-Day” “flaps in the face[s]” of Barbauld’s “vain” male readers (“Washing-Day” 45-6, 50).<sup>3</sup>

The two chapters that make up the body of this thesis will “perform” a close reading of “Washing-Day” in the way that the text asks to be read—that is, by way of what I have called “the discourse of washing.” By “discourse of washing,” I refer to a cyclical methodology, one that circles around and about the text, spiraling, as it were, to the text’s various midpoints—a methodology that, in turn, mirrors the cycles of labour that take place on an eighteenth-century washing day, “which week, smooth sliding after week, brings on / Too soon” (“Washing-Day” 12). This cyclical method of analysis follows Barbauld’s lead as she takes us on a mental journey through visions, dreams and memories.

Chapter One examines this mental journey, and argues that “Washing-Day” is a record of Barbauld’s meditative process of eradicating from her mind the expression-blocking presences of her literary and philosophical forefathers—those “unwonted guest[s]” in her mind who, with masculinist words and generic conventions, seek anxiously to exclude her from public discourse, and to restrict her creative freedom to the zone of domesticity (18). Barbauld in effect “washes” the “unwonted guests from her mind”—effacing “dirt and gravel stains / Hard to efface” (25). The process is cyclical, for the “unwonted guests” constantly reappear throughout the poem via the myriad of allusions that constitute the fabric

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<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, parenthetical documentation in this thesis refers to lines from “Washing-Day.” See “Washing-Day” in the Appendix of this thesis.

of “Washing-Day.” As we will see, the poem is composed almost entirely of what I will call “Barbauldian allusions.” Specifically, I will demonstrate that Barbauld’s method of allusion is performative: Barbauld inhabits the dead voices of her forefathers; she “breathes into” and, Muse-like, daemonically possesses the words to which she alludes.

Barbauld possesses the voices of her forefathers in order to claim them and proceed to thwart—or to interrupt—them. Chapter Two takes up these interruptions. In this chapter, I will determine how “interruption” is figured in “Washing-Day,” both in its narrative, and within Barbauld’s subversive performance of patriarchal texts and discourses. “Turning again” to the beginning of the text, I will examine the various interruptions that occur throughout the poem (epigraph). I will begin at the poem’s curious epigraph, and will conclude at the poem’s final interruptive dash.

### I. Barbauld and the Feminist Debate

A middle class woman of letters, Barbauld is notably responsible for redesigning children’s literature and for promoting the teaching of conformity in the elementary classroom.<sup>4</sup> Though reputable for her pedagogical emphasis on productive citizenship, Barbauld was also concerned with social and political issues, such as religious freedom, international policy and revolutionary politics. In *Epistle to William Wilberforce, Esq. On the Rejection of the Bill for Abolishing the Slave Trade* (1791), for instance, Barbauld passionately supports abolition; subsequently, in *Sins of Government, Sins of the Nation*

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<sup>4</sup> Barbauld was born on June 20<sup>th</sup>, 1743, at Kibworth Harcourt, Leicestershire. She was the oldest child of Presbyterian Dissenters Reverend John Aikin, master of Kibworth School, and Jane Jennings Aikin (Kraft and McCarthy xliii).



(1793), she responds to England's declaration of war against the Republic of France. Barbauld was also a prominent literary critic: she wrote a magisterial introductory essay to the fifty-volume collection *The British Novelists*, entitled "On the Origin and Progress of Novel-Writing," which "argued that the function of art is to teach morality or right feeling by arousing readers' sympathies through the representation of *probable* or believable examples of virtuous and evil human behaviour in contemporary situations" (Mellor and Matlack 128); and she edited Samuel Richardson's *Letters*. In contrast to some of her female colleagues and many of her male counterparts, moreover, Barbauld made a substantial living from her writing and achieved high acclaim for her talent. But Barbauld's achievements have been utterly neglected, relative to the pages and years of study devoted to her male counterparts. My own thesis, then, emerges as a compensatory gesture in response to the many years of her neglect.<sup>5</sup>

But with Barbauld's re-emergence into critical discourse, new problems arise, particularly in regard to Barbauld's feminism. Barbauld has occupied an ambivalent place in Romantic feminist criticism: on the one hand, critics have eschewed Barbauld's work as a whole, designating it antifeminist in order to promote other seemingly (and comparatively) more radical feminisms; on the other hand, and equally as problematic,

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<sup>5</sup> It has often been asserted that Barbauld is one of the most neglected poets of her time. For instance, in her review of Lonsdale's anthology *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets*, Terry Castle claims that Barbauld is "one of the most underrated writers of either sex from the period" (1228). Barbara Brandon Schnorrenberg, in 1984, called Barbauld "one of the most neglected writers of her day. . . . [A] far better poet than Anna Seward, she offers imaginative subjects, often portrayed with much humor" (qtd. in Anderson 719-20).

critics have heralded "Washing-Day" as a poem that glorifies female power while denigrating male authority—a reading that is simply not close enough, for it fails to consider the performative aspect that is so crucial to understanding "Washing-Day." In contrast to these readings, I want to suggest that (dis)qualifying Barbauld's work as antifeminist is a grave misnomer, and that "Washing-Day"'s complexity extends beyond the theoretical simplicity of a reversal of gender-specific binary oppositions.<sup>6</sup>

There is, however, a broader problem that stems from the tendency of feminist Romantic critics to read "Washing-Day" and other female Romantic texts solely in terms of their resistance to dominant discourses: these critics risk re-unifying female Romantic texts as unambivalent sites of resistance. Such a homogenization of women's texts inevitably cultivates a (patriarchal) hierarchy of feminisms, one that positions Mary Wollstonecraft's feminism at its crown. Wollstonecraft's work consequently forms the frame of reference by which the value of all other feminisms and, by extension, all eighteenth-century and Romantic texts by women are assessed. In fact, as Elizabeth Kraft and William McCarthy suggest in their book *The Poems of Anna Letitia Barbauld*—a pivotal contribution to the "canonization" (for lack of a better term) of female Romantic poets, and clearly for Barbauld in particular—one of several reasons that Barbauld, in her own time, had disappeared from the literary world appears to be that she was "the victim, along with most of her female contemporaries and predecessors, of the reaction against

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<sup>6</sup> Anne Messenger and Donna Landry read "Washing-Day" simply in terms of its reversal of values: the women have power on this day and the men slink about in the shrubs. See Elizabeth Kraft's "Anna Letitia Barbauld's 'Washing Day' and the Montgolfier Balloon" for a criticism of their readings.

'Wollstonecraftianism,' which set in as early as 1798 in response to William Godwin's incautiously sincere memoir of his wife" (xxxiv). Erased with the advent of anti-Wollstonecraftianism in her own time, Barbauld is yet again erased with the contemporary revival of what, I suggest, may be termed "neo-Wollstonecraftianism." That is to say, Barbauld has been (re)fashioned differentially by contemporary critics (and by her own contemporaries) according to her position between two antithetical poles: 1) Wollstonecraftian protofeminism—the highest denominator of the eighteenth-century hierarchy of feminisms; and, 2) an antifeminist conservatism—the lowest (and lowliest) denominator.

That Barbauld is resolutely antifeminist has been uncritically posited by many contemporary critics—and, at times, by Wollstonecraft herself.<sup>7</sup> Ross, for example, designates Barbauld representative of the eighteenth-century "sentimental poetess" (13),

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<sup>7</sup> Compare Wollstonecraft's footnoted criticism of Barbauld's "To a Lady with Some Painted Flowers," in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (144), with Barbauld's retort, her poem "The Rights of Woman." In *A Vindication*, Wollstonecraft quotes all of "To a Lady" in order to demonstrate the adoption by "women of superior sense" of the "false system of female manners . . . which robs the whole sex of its dignity, and classes the brown and fair with the smiling flowers that only adorn the land" (144). Wollstonecraft's criticism responds directly to these lines among several in "To a Lady": *Flowers, SWEET, and gay, and DELICATE LIKE YOU; / Emblems of innocence, and beauty too*; "*But this soft family, to cares unknown, / Were born for pleasure and delights ALONE*" (3-4; 13-14). Today's critics read "To a Lady" in the same light as did Wollstonecraft. They read the poem for its face-value adoption of Burke's deeply gendered (feminized) aesthetic category of the "Beautiful." But they do not account for the possibility that Barbauld performs these lines. An earlier poem in Barbauld's oeuvre, "To a Lady" betrays glimpses of Barbauld's subtle attempt at a subversive performance of Burke's "beautiful." The line "Nor blush, my fair, to own you copy these," for instance, points to the "copied" status of "To a Lady" itself (17)—that it is a "copy" (or what I see as a performance) of what Burke constructs to be natural and "fair."



and makes claims such as "The limits of Barbauld's feminism are also the limits of her poetics" (215). Anne Mellor and Richard E. Matlack deem Barbauld a "[m]ore conservative thinker" who stands in stark contrast to "[f]eminist thinkers, led by Catherine Macaulay, Mary Hays, and most notably Mary Wollstonecraft"; Mellor and Matlack then augment a scale of feminisms, declaring that, "in between these two poles, women writers of the day staked out other progressive positions" (31).<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, in his pivotal anthology, *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets*, Roger Lonsdale describes Barbauld as having "little sense of a tradition of women's writing, felt no common cause with other literary women" (300). What all of these remarks have in common is a dismissal of any serious consideration of the self-differences pervading the outwardly simplified, submissively "feminine," exteriors of Barbauld's poetry. Instead, these criticisms respond primarily to Barbauld's letters, and to a hasty (mis)reading of "To a Lady with Some Painted Flowers."<sup>9</sup>

Of Barbauld's letters, the most oft-quoted and criticized is her response to a proposal made to her by Elizabeth Montagu to become the Principal of a "Ladies'

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<sup>8</sup>I have taken these statements from the section entitled "Rights of Woman" in Mellor and Matlack's anthology—a strictly feminist context. But the lesson to be learned here is that female thinkers are so quickly and problematically aligned on a hierarchical scale of feminisms. We have yet to determine what "feminism" *is*. Nonetheless, hierarchizing feminisms as such—that is, deeming them more or less radical by processes of differentiation—in effect "patriarchalizes," feminism and no doubt detracts from less ostensible possibilities of meaning (McCarthy 120).

<sup>9</sup> See William McCarthy's essay "'We Hoped the *Woman* Was Going to Appear': Repression, Desire, and Gender in Anna Letitia Barbauld's Early Poems" for an extensive analysis of feminism and Barbauld's earlier collection *Poems*.

College." To the proposal, Barbauld responds as follows:

A kind of Academy for ladies . . . where they are to be taught in a regular manner the various branches of science, appears to me better calculated to form such characters as the *Précieuses* or *Femmes Savantes* than good wives or agreeable companions. The best way for a woman to acquire knowledge is from conversation with a father or brother, and by such a course of reading as they may recommend. . . . (Le Breton 46-7)

Another letter, written by Barbauld in 1804 to Maria and Lovell Edgeworth, has also been a source that leads contemporary critics to make "antifeminist" presumptions about Barbauld. In this letter, Barbauld responds to Maria's proposal to her to help start "The Lady's Paper." Barbauld writes:

I feel also doubtful of the propriety of making it declaredly a *lady's paper* [italics hers]. There is no bond of union among literary women, *any more than among literary men; different sentiments and different connections separate them much more than the joint interest of their sex would unite them. . . . If a number of clergymen were to join in writing a paper, I think they should not call it 'The Clergyman's Paper.'* (emphasis mine; Le Breton 87)

The section of this passage that I have italicized is usually omitted by those critics who argue for Barbauld's antifeminism. It is crucial, however, to note that in this letter Barbauld's response to the Edgeworths is not "antifeminist" at all. On the contrary, both letters reveal Barbauld's skepticism toward a tacit biological essentialism—that is, toward the presupposition that there is such a thing as an essential or innate female experience of life that a human being who is biologically determined to be female would assume if she were not tainted by nurturance or education. What we glean from these letters is neither Barbauld's "presumed personal failings" (McCarthy 114), nor the implacable antifeminism of which critics have accused her in the course of their construction of the eighteenth-



century dawn of modern feminism. Rather, what we glean is a woman who values difference. In short, these letters reveal that Barbauld denounces the biological essentialism that such enterprises as a "lady's paper" and radical feminist "vindications" inevitably cultivate.<sup>10</sup>

What is more revealing than Barbauld's ostensible denial of any bond between literary women, however, is the apparent interaction between these literary women.<sup>11</sup> Barbauld's communications with "literary ladies" Edgeworth, Montagu, and Hannah More regarding issues that pertain to the female literary world—the "Lady's Paper" and the school for girls—is crucially significant for determining the nature of eighteenth-century female and feminist discourse, whatever the particulars of such discourse may be. Figured among Barbauld's intellectual and social acquaintanceship, for instance, were the Bluestockings (as evidenced, too, by the above-cited correspondences), whom she would visit on trips to London. The Bluestocking's reverence for Barbauld is apparent in two poems by one of the Circle's chief members (and a close friend of Barbauld), Hannah

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<sup>10</sup>Compare Barbauld's "The Rights of Woman" to Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. "The Rights of Woman" is a response to Wollstonecraft's condemnation of "To A Lady." The poem is a parodic verse revision of *A Vindication*—a treatment of Wollstonecraft and others (i.e., Jean-Jacques Rousseau) not unlike "Washing-Day's" manipulation of Burke's sublime and the massively gendered conventions to which it is linked.

<sup>11</sup>The extent of Barbauld's acquaintances with literary men and women is evidenced in the collection of Barbauld's letters printed by Lucy Aikin and documented by her great niece, Anna Letitia Le Breton. The collection is entitled *Memoir of Mrs. Barbauld*. There are yet few other surviving documents; therefore, as McCarthy puts it, "the main evidence of her . . . subjectivity is her poetry. . . . [T]he poems are Barbauld's experiments in constructing her own subjectivity" (115).

More. In her poem "Sensibility: A Poetical Epistle to the Hon. Mrs Boscawen." (1782),

More writes:

Oh much-loved Barbauld, shall my heart refuse  
Its tribute to thy virtues and thy muse?  
While round thy brow the poet's wreath I twine,  
This humble merit shall at least be mine,  
In all thy praise to take a gen'rous part,  
Thy laurels bind thee closer to my heart.  
My verse thy merits to the world shall teach,  
And love the genius it despairs to reach. (54-61)

These lines fall amid a myriad of others that are devoted to "literary ladies"—primarily Bluestockings and friends, such as Elizabeth Carter, Elizabeth Montagu, Hester Chapone, Mrs. Boyle Wasingham, and Mary Delany—who are similarly lauded by More in a similar fashion in this poem. And, again, in her *Epilogue to The Search after Happiness: A Pastoral Drama* (1774), More positions Barbauld—whose name was then Anna Aikin<sup>12</sup>—among the prominent female literary figures of her time in another salute to the burgeoning society of female intellectuals:

But in our *chaster* times 'tis no offence,  
When female *virtue* joins with female *sense*;  
When moral Carter breathes the strain divine,  
And Aikin's *life* flows faultless as her *line*;  
When all-accomplished Montague can spread  
Fresh-gathered laurels round her Shakespeare's head  
When *wit* and *worth* in polish'd Brookes unite,  
And fair Macaulay claims a Livy's *right*. (25-32)

It is also worth noting Richard Samuel's inclusion of Barbauld in his painting *Nine Living Muses of Great Britain* (c. 1779)—an inclusion that is largely indicative of

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<sup>12</sup> This poem comes before Barbauld's marriage to Rochemont Barbauld, which took place in May 26, 1774.

Barbauld's prominent position among eighteenth-century England's elite community of female artists and intellectuals. In this painting, Barbauld stands in the company of Elizabeth Montagu, Hannah More, Angelica Kaufman, Elizabeth Griffith, Catherine Macaulay, Charlotte Lennox, and Elizabeth Carter. It is likely, however, that Barbauld would have abhorred Samuel's depiction of her for reasons similar to those that were written by Carter in a letter directed to Montagu, in response to the painting: "I am mortified . . . that we do not in this last display of our person and talents stand in the same corner. As I am told we do not, for to say truth, by the mere testimony of my own eyes, I cannot very exactly tell which is you, and which is I, and which is any body else" (qtd. in Myers 280). Apparently, the individual portraits in the painting were not taken from life; individual differences are neglected. The painting depicts these intellectual women as Samuel envisions them in his mind: draped in flowing, abounding fabric, the statuesque figures of the women are placed in what appears to be an idealistic, ancient Greek temple in the clouds (presumably the home of the Muses, as Samuel imagines it). These Muses in no way resemble "Washing-Day"'s domestic Muse—indeed, they are elevated too high to acknowledge "farm or orchard, pleasant curds and cream" (5), and "all the petty miseries of life" (29). To be sure, Barbauld would have disliked the lack of individuality granted these women writers, the idealist extraction of them from their domestic realities, and the projection of her unindividualized self from Samuel's imagination.

Contrary to Ross's claim that "the limits of Barbauld's feminism are also the limits of her poetics" (215), I propose that we look beyond both of these limits. For Barbauld's poetics and her feminism function beyond the words as we have them. Her feminism does

not, like Wollstonecraft, overtly implore “injured Woman!” to “rise, assert thy right!” (in the spirit of phallogocentrism); rather, Barbauld’s mode of feminism is one that is “Felt, not defined, and if debated, lost” (Barbauld, “The Rights of Woman” 1; 14). Barbauld’s affirmative “taking up” of a culturally-prescribed feminine attribute—namely, that of feeling, or sensibility—in these lines anticipates the mode of feminism that she practices in “Washing-Day”<sup>13</sup>: a feminism with a difference (a *movement*), a shifting of the patriarchal plain of signification which, in turn, exposes this patriarchal plain as resignifiable, occupiable, (re)movable, transposable. Barbauld’s performative strategy of interruption, then, is ingenious in the context of the raging feminisms of her time—a “felt” shift for Barbauld seems to say more than a word.

## II. Barbauld’s Feminism: Theorizing Interruption

The late eighteenth-century, early nineteenth-century bourgeois society was “unabashedly made my men for men” (Poovey ix); the poet by definition was “a man speaking to men” in the “real language of men” (Wordsworth, Preface 601, 606). I ask again, where did women and women writers fit in amid such exclusionary male equations? And how were the women writers responding to their exclusion from public affairs and to a related culturally imposed silence? How, and with what language, were women writers expressing themselves, denied as they were of any “real” language, and of any conventionally active role in public society? When a female poet “tak[es] the pen in hand,” she confronts these questions and an associated anxiety about her authority of

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<sup>13</sup> Barbauld wrote “The Rights of Woman” in 1792.



authorship (Barbauld, "Novel-Writing" 59), for her male counterparts "write from a position and a perspective that . . . would be impossible for [women] to take" (Ross 3). But women writers were indeed taking the pen in hand—and taking the pen to task. They were "everywhere—writing sonnets, writing epics" (Curran 17). Yet by taking up such high canonical genres, female poets were not simply expressing themselves in a conventional fashion, as it would seem. Rather, they were *performing* their chosen genre and, in so doing, bringing into relief the fundamental role that gender plays in (over)determining genre.

"Washing-Day" is an ideal example of a female poet's performance of genre—the Miltonic mock-heroic genre, in particular.<sup>14</sup> The poem brims with self-reflexivity and parody that, in a "crushing" fashion (42), "clap" and "wring / [and] fold" the mock-heroic genre back upon itself (75-6).<sup>15</sup> In other words, Barbauld in effect "interrupts" this previously "Uninterrupted" generic convention (20). She ruptures its self-defined borders, defamiliarizing and redefining those borders by "crossing" them with her own voice (44)—a voice that in fact has been *inside* generic borders all along as their constitutive repudiation. In interruptive texts in general, female voices (and other marginalized voices

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<sup>14</sup> As we shall see in subsequent chapters, Barbauld not only imitates Milton's style and versification in "Washing-Day," but also performs the "high-sounding" language of Milton, Shakespeare, Pope and Edmund Burke. I will expand upon the particular nature of the performance in the next chapters. For now, let us examine the theoretical implications of "interruption," and the ways in which Barbauld "interrupts" dominant discourses both from within and outside of the text.

<sup>15</sup> "Clap" means to "slap or strike with a flat surface, so as to smooth or flatten" (OED; qtd. in Kraft and McCarthy 298n).

such as those of the lower-class and of black slaves), and noncanonical genres like gossip, folk tales and letters, which haunt the self-erected walls of the "language of men," bleed through these walls and, in doing so, rupture them (though the walls were always already ruptured). Thus, an "unwonted guest" (18), the "dreaded" day comes when, wreaking havoc, the "housewife notable" (31) dares to interrupt the master of "the household of man" (Wordsworth, Preface 605)—"crossing lines" with the "Who call'st [himself] *perchance* the master there" (emphasis added; 44, 34).

As a tropological manoeuvre in female Romantic poetry, "interruption" generally works in two ways: externally and internally.<sup>16</sup> On the one hand, an interruptive text such as Barbauld's "Washing-Day" functions subversively to interrupt dominant discourses and canonical literary and philosophical texts, both of which are by definition external to the interruptive text. Externally, then, the interruptive text works as a whole to interrupt the reproduction of patriarchal—logocentric, phallogocentric and phallogocentric (terms that I will define shortly)—discourses and ideologies. Such a text, for example, (and, paradigmatically, in the case of "Washing-Day") seeks out "points of rupture in both gender and genre codes" (Gilmore 42). The interruption is subtle. It occurs in a movement

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<sup>16</sup>In a sense, my own analysis performs a rereading of Leigh Gilmore's *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation*—in particular, the subsection "Interruptions" (41-64). For Gilmore, "interruption" is a significant element of women's self-representation, or of what she calls "autobiographics, that is, . . . those textual places [in the discourses of truth and identity] where women's self-representation interrupts (or is interrupted by) the regulatory laws of gender and genre" (45). Her analysis largely informs my own discussion of interruption as a tropological maneuver in female Romantic poetry. The present subsection is especially indebted to her analysis of the external and internal components of "rupture" (49).

(rather than simply in a word); this movement functions from within the discourse it seeks to interrupt. In "Washing-Day," for instance, interruption occurs within the "clear, high-sounding phrase" (2) that characterizes the "real language of men" and, accordingly, involves a repetition or re-performance of these patriarchal words and themes.

But also inscribed in "Washing-Day" are figures of "interruption." Barbauld has encoded the very idea of "interruption" within the wit and hyperbole that in turn masks the seriousness of the poem (in keeping with the tradition of the mock-heroic genre, indeed). There are four types of external interruption in "Washing-Day." I will introduce them here, and will discuss how they operate in "Washing-Day," in the subsequent chapters. First, there are what I will call "figures of interruption," by which I mean interruptions that are detectable in the narrative of the poem itself. Second, the poem interrupts "logocentric" politics of representation. By logocentrism, I refer to the tendency of patriarchal discourses to "[moor] in the value of 'presence'" (Irigaray 75).<sup>17</sup> Third, Barbauld deflates "phallogentrism," which is to say, she demystifies and in effect brings the egoistic "silken ball" down to earth from sublime heights (82). By phallogentrism, I refer to the doctrine of male superiority and female inferiority, which designates male

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<sup>17</sup> Logocentrism pertains to a form of metaphysics that invests in the power of speech (as opposed to writing) and of language the authority to "make present" that truth which it seeks to represent by way of linguistic signs; and it presupposes the unmediated transmission of meaning. In terms of Romantic discourse, Tilottama Rajan explains that the logocentric, "direct correspondence between the signifier and the thing signified is guaranteed either by some transcendent source or . . . by the true voice of feeling. In a literary sense, it is thus possible to speak of a logocentric *poetics of presence*, which assumes that literature can make present that which it signifies, can make real that which it imagines" (*Dark Interpreter* 17n.8).



human beings universal, legitimate frames of reference. As Ann Rosalind Jones puts it, the phallogocentric position is by definition male, "white, European and ruling class"; and, such a phallogocentric subject would characteristically claim: "I am the unified, self-controlled center of the universe. . . .The rest of the world, which I define as the Other, has meaning only in relation to me, as man/father, possessor of the phallus'" ("Writing the Body" 370). And finally, fourth, "phallogocentric" discourses and language are in effect castrated in "Washing-Day." The term phallogocentrism is a combination of phallogocentrism and logocentrism, for it combines patriarchal assumptions of power, unity, origin and truth. The term precludes women from any access to the "real" symbolic power of the "phallus," by which I mean that overdetermined symbol of the penis, male sexuality and, by connection, all things powerful and authoritative. In phallogocentric discourse, woman is excluded from the category of "human"; "man" means "human." Such literary conventions as linearity and those of centring the ego and defining ego boundaries are examples of phallogocentric motifs.

Though I have so systematically distinguished between the various modes of interruption in "Washing-Day," Barbauld's strategy is not as systematic as I have made it seem. It is important, nonetheless, to distinguish between the various sorts of interruptive movements that are subsumed by the broader scheme of "interruption," as well as the various targets that interruptive texts pursue. (In addition, these terms are sure to recur frequently in the analyses to come.)

Moreover, there are other components to external interruption. These components involve matters that are external to the text itself—for instance, the disruption that the



figure of the woman writer occasions. By "stepp[ing] out of the bounds of female reserve in becoming an author" (Barbauld; qtd. in Le Breton 47), the very presence of the female poet in the public literary domain threatens to interrupt the literary and philosophical patrilineage of the "great" male authors: the female poet in effect throws herself upon the battleground of the father-son cycle of poetic influence, in Harold Bloom's sense of it—that is, in the sense that poetic influence and poetic history are inextricably linked, that both reflect a literary patrilineage. The figure of the female poet and disruptive figures of the "feminine"—"red-arm'd washers" (14), for example—rupture this lineage, "disrupt patriarchal language" and "threaten phallogocentrism with their witchy words and ways" by denying male texts the "univocal voice of their authorship" (Gilmore 62).<sup>18</sup> It is via this sort of external interruption that the occasion for a revolutionary resignification of the paternal symbolic horizon becomes at least conceivable.<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, internal interruption pertains to the ways in which the interruptive

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<sup>18</sup> I am reminded here of Luce Irigaray's provocative repudiation of the philosophical patrilineage from which she finds herself excluded. She writes: "I love you—and where I love you, what do I care about the lineage of our fathers, or their desire for reproductions of men? Or their genealogical institutions? What need have I for husband or wife, for family, persona, role, function? Let's leave all those to men's reproductive laws" (209). I should also note that Irigaray's own subversive strategy is interruptive in that it performatively disrupts patriarchal logic by way of mimeticism, by which I mean miming the texts, the voices, of her philosophical forefathers. Barbauld, in many ways, as my own argument implies, practices a similar mimetic strategy, in the sense that she in effect mimes the texts of her own literary and philosophical forefathers.

<sup>19</sup> By "paternal symbolic" I turn to Butler's discussion of it in *Bodies That Matter*. In her discussion, she asks us to rethink the symbolic as something that is resignifiable—that is, as "the temporalized regulation of signification, and not as a quasi-permanent structure" (22).

text is interrupted *by* external discourses and ideologies. Internal interruptions occur when the very coherence that the text assumes in order to effect an external interruption, upon close examination, proves to be "inter-rupted"—or, to put it differently—inter-ruptured: the text remains characterized by inter-ruptive self-differences brought on by the ultimately inexorable pressures of regulatory ideals shaping the bourgeoisie's notion's of "femininity" and "literature." In other words, internal interruption reflects the female poet's melancholic self-doubt and -castigation, which accompany what Barbauld has described as "the neglect and tedium of life which [the eighteenth-century bourgeois woman] is perhaps doomed to encounter" ("Novel-Writing" 54). Internal and external interruptions, working within and outside of the text, thus, are diacritical rather than antithetical manoeuvres: the text interrupts external dominant ideologies while, concomitantly, it is inter-rupted by those very ideologies.

Barbauld's "Washing-Day" is an exemplary interruptive text. The subject of the poem itself is interruptive: as Elizabeth Kraft has pointed out, "it is not only the burdensome task of washing itself that provokes dread, but also the disruption it occasions to the everyday household economy" (32). Eighteenth-century washing-days interrupted the daily household routines that ran "week, smooth sliding after week" (11). But, though washing-day interrupts the daily goings-on of the household, it remains ruthlessly "Uninterrupted, save by anxious looks / Cast at the lowering sky" (20-1)—the "lowering sky" here symbolizes the oppressive external forces which "bring on / too soon" the interruption of women's creative and experiential freedom.

My analyses of the poem will explore interruption in four ways: 1) this chapter will

continue to discuss the ways in which Barbauld herself, as a female poet, interrupts the male-male cycle of poetic influence, as it has been delineated by Bloom; 2) Chapter One will look at the ways in which Barbauld authorizes herself to interrupt, for in order to interrupt the female poet must be confident and able to mobilize oppressive patriarchal discourses and genres; 3) in Chapter Two, we will examine how Barbauld interrupts the "language [and logic] of men," which is to say, how "Washing-Day"'s allusions function performatively to interrupt patriarchal discourses; and, 4) Chapter Two will also encounter various instances in which "Washing-Day" itself is interrupted by the very ideologies which Barbauld seeks to interrupt.

### III. Interruptive reading

Before moving on to the analyses of the interruptive moves within "Washing-Day," I would like first to discuss the various interruptive manoeuvres that occur at the outer limits of this text. In this section, we will visit the eighteenth-century English, bourgeois society, and will determine precisely how and where Barbauld sees herself as an interruptive performer of canonical texts and genres. For now, we will assume that "Washing-Day" is made up of allusions that function subversively, although I will discuss these allusions at length in the extensive analyses that follow in the next chapters. In this discussion, we will investigate Barbauld as an educated, critical and engaging reader, and will determine, subsequently, just how she engages the various readers of "Washing-Day." The well-read woman that she is, and the established literary critic that she is soon to



become,<sup>20</sup> Barbauld's performance of the mock-heroic genre and of "the language of men," in "Washing-Day," emerges as a critical "interruption" of canonical texts and of the coherent, canonical literary history that such texts (re)inscribe. As we shall see, Barbauld interrupts the history of the reader (as *he* is implicated within traditional texts) by making a space for the female reader, and by in effect thwarting the male reader.

Broadly speaking, the patriarchal texts and discourses that Barbauld interrupts in "Washing-Day" are "uninterrupted" in the time in which she is composing "Washing-Day" (20). That is, according to the definition of "interruption" thus far outlined, the "clear high-sounding phrase[s]" of Milton and Shakespeare (2), for instance, stand as untainted ideals, models of true literary perfection that male successors can only hope to emulate, and that resistant female writers seek subversively to perform. I will elaborate further upon the prevalence of Shakespeare and Milton later on in the discussion. At this point, I want to suggest that the uninterrupted reemulations—though at times, to be sure, they perform their own critical re-readings—work to reinforce and reproduce patriarchal discourses of power, knowledge and poetic genius. What results from this reiteration is the consolidation of regulatory norms that, in turn, work reciprocally to infect the (non)originary grounds of normative, canonical texts. Put differently, canonical texts—in the monolithic (and -logic), combative sense of the word "canonical"—reiterate and reinforce such regulatory narratives as those of sexual difference, gender hierarchy and

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<sup>20</sup> Just how well-read Barbauld was will become clear in the course of this analysis. I will cite various letters that she wrote, reflecting on her own extraordinary education. The myriad of allusions in the poem itself also no doubt indicate the unusual extent of her learning and of her reading.

heteronormativity, which ultimately contribute to the interpellation of the bourgeois housewife "who beneath the yoke of wedlock bend[s], / With bowed soul" (my emphasis 9-10).

The rising bourgeoisie in late-eighteenth, early-nineteenth-century England was in fact immensely preoccupied with the regulation of women. In his analysis of Barbauld's collection *Poems* (1772), William McCarthy describes this regulated society in which Barbauld lived and wrote:

*Poems* . . . has a place in the big debate about gender—specifically, about 'woman'—that occupied public discourse in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. William St. Clair has observed, following Foucault, that the outpouring of books on the subject of female education and conduct between 1785 and 1820 argues that 'women were . . . a problem in Britain' throughout those years; and G.J. Barker Benfield persuasively holds that 'the culture of Sensibility' was a culture dominated by concerns about gender roles. In Barbauld's own life "woman" was similarly a problem: her early poems document her resentment of woman's restricted fate. (115-16)

Carol Shiner Wilson has also remarked upon Barbauld's "resentment of her restricted fate," specifically, that "[a]lthough Barbauld aimed much of her criticism at the lavish expense and status anxiety connected with fashion, this 'tyrant of our own creation,' she also detested the physical pain that women subjected themselves to because of confining garments like corsets" (Wilson 176). Even women's clothing, then, reinforces the self-containment and -unity that she must embody—that is, the "pain" and "confine[ment]" that women seemingly *self*-inflict but that, veritably, are imposed by the male desire to contain female sexual and emotional excess. Furthermore, in *The History of Sexuality* Michel Foucault examines the rigid regulatory regimes that were enforced in bourgeois society.

He states that "four great strategic unities . . . beginning in the eighteenth century, formed specific mechanisms of knowledge and power centering on sex," one being the "hysterization of women's bodies" (103). Clearly, Barbauld is living and writing in a society wherein femininity is undergoing an endless process of refashioning, restriction and regulation.

Uncritical of such rigidly regulated patriarchal ideologies penetrating Romantic society, Harold Bloom has devised a psychohistory that traces the debilitating "filial" relationship that exists between the male poet and his forefathers (*Anxiety* 11). In this seminal study, entitled *The Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom argues that originality is always a priori before and beyond the poet, that the battle for artistic authority might only be won by the later poet violently—albeit, in a tragic sense, impossibly—by usurping in his own poem the lurking presence of his forefather (also called the poet's "Great Original" [Bloom 31]). Indeed, the notion of the reiterative (or reemulative) consolidation of the canon is implicit in such contemporary studies as Bloom's male-male cycle of "[p]oetic influence, or . . . poetic misprision, . . . the study of the *life-cycle of the poet-as-poet*" (emphasis added 7). For Bloom, "poets as poets cannot accept substitutions, and fight to the end to have their initial chance alone" (8).

The sheer pugilism and virility that characterizes Bloom's model of poetic influence, not surprisingly, has brought with it a significant set of feminist responses that will provide a theoretical complement to Barbauld's performative interruption of the male-male cycle of poetic influence. For instance, in *The Madwoman in the Attic* Gilbert and Gubar reveal Bloom's paradigm of literary history to be "intensely (even exclusively) male, and



necessarily patriarchal” (47); and they claim that the “patriarchal Bloomian model” (48) is a product of the “overwhelmingly male—or, more accurately, patriarchal” essence of literary history itself (47). A second significant response to Bloom’s study is that of Annette Kolodny who writes:

Bloom assumes a community of readers (and, thereby, critics) who know that same “whole system of texts” within which the specific poet at hand has enacted his “misprision.” The canonical sense of a shared and coherent literary tradition is therefore essential to the utility of Bloom’s paradigm of literary influence as well as to his notions of reading (and misreading). (1128)

Readers like Barbauld are no doubt well aware of their exclusion from the domain of “readership.” We might, accordingly, deduce that this is one impetus for the speaker’s blatant address to a particular community of readers early on in “Washing-Day”:

Ye who beneath the yoke of wedlock bend,  
With bowed soul, full well ye ken the day  
Which week, smooth sliding after week, brings on  
Too soon;—for to that day nor peace belongs  
Nor comfort; . . . (8-9)

As Barbauld represents them, her readers are oppressed women—“locked” as they are in the chains of matrimony. It is ostensibly these women whose experiences of every-day reality are primarily reflected in “Washing-Day.” To be sure, the poem effects a resurrection of the Many from beneath the ground of the One, or the supposed continuous and coherent, homogeneous “*main tradition*” that Bloom has aided in reinforcing (Bloom 30). These readers, by extension, reflect Barbauld’s own position as a “resisting reader” (Fetterley 570), as she interrupts the “life-cycle of the poet as poet”—attempting to change literary *history* “from a closed conversation to an active dialogue” (Fetterley 571) that will integrate those

who are “cut off and alien from the dominant tradition” (Kolodny 1128).

It is arguable, nonetheless, that Barbauld has already envisioned herself in such an unsettling, interruptive position—that is, already having disrupted the dominant “life cycle of the poet-as-poet” with her collection *Poems*. For she was sure to have read William Woodfall’s remarkable (albeit ambivalent) praise for *Poems*, in his 1773 review of the collection. He writes: “In some of the pieces we have a smoothness and harmony, equal to that of our best poets; but what is more extraordinary, in others, we observe a justness of thought, and vigour of imagination, *inferior only to the works of Milton and Shakespeare*” (emphasis added 54). Since Barbauld was notably attentive to, and indeed sadly affected by, the public’s response to her poetry,<sup>21</sup> how could Woodfall’s praise not inspire her further to

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<sup>21</sup> One of the reasons that Barbauld stopped publishing her poetry was the public’s negative response to her brutally honest epic *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* (Though I am relating the following event in a footnote, I underscore that this event is indicative of the extent to which Barbauld was affected by the bourgeois society’s regulatory regimes and, specifically, by rigidly defined gender and genre codes.) It is, possibly, because of male critics’ reception of *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* that Barbauld stopped publishing, as Le Breton relates: “At the end of the year 1811, a very gloomy period, Mrs. Barbauld wrote a poem bearing that name, which unfortunately reflected too much of the despondency of her own mind, and drew down many severe remarks, notwithstanding the beauty of the verse. . . .It provoked a very coarse review in *The Quarterly*. . . .This was the last time she appeared in print. No one indeed, who loved her, could have wished her to be again exposed to such a shock to her feelings, or such cruel misunderstanding of her sentiments. The remainder of her life was passed quietly at Stoke Newington, among her family and a few friends” (155-158). The review to which Le Breton refers was written by John Wilson Croker, and was featured in the June, 1812 edition of the *Quarterly Review*. In his review, Croker attacks Barbauld for her use of satire: “Our old acquaintance Mrs Barbauld turned satirist! The last thing we should have expected and, now that we have seen her satire, the last thing that we could have desired” (309). This attack tacitly reveals Croker’s anxiety about Barbauld’s (interruptive) entry into the exclusive domain of masculine intelligibility, as evidenced by the remarks that follow: “We had hoped, indeed, that the empire might have been saved without the intervention of a lady-author. . . .[A]n irresistible impulse of public duty—confident



meet those expectations? And, more than twenty years later—in the more mature phase of life and literary career that generates “Washing-Day”—might such a comparison not motivate her to trespass the (gendered and generic) limitations definitive of Shakespearian and Miltonic greatness?<sup>22</sup> Moreover, might Woodfall’s praise not motivate her, as well, to rethink—and to interrupt—the regulations that denote (feminine) “inferiority”?

Before considering these questions, it is necessary to recognize that in the Romantic literary world Shakespeare and Milton were the “fathers” to beat, as it were. (As if it were not enough already for women to be recognized in the public literary arena, interruptive texts seek out the very core of their male counterparts’ influences.) Supplementing Bloom’s text, Jonathan Bate has shown that the Romantics could not have held Milton and Shakespeare

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sense of commanding talents—have induced her to dash down her shagreen spectacles and her knitting needles, and to sally forth, hand in hand with her renowned compatriot [mentioned in the poem], in the magnanimous resolution of saving a sinking state, by the instrumentality of a pamphlet in prose and a pamphlet in verse” (309). Croker’s final statements are the most harsh and indicative of his political incentive: “Mrs Barbauld’s former works have been of some utility; her *Lessons for Children*, her *Hymns in Prose*, her *Selections from the Spectator*, et id genus omne, though they display not much of either taste or talents, are yet something better than harmless: but we must take the liberty of warning her to desist from satire, which indeed is satire on herself alone; and of entreating, with great earnestness, that she will not, for the sake of this ungrateful generation, put herself to the trouble of writing any more party pamphlets in verse” (313).

<sup>22</sup> After all, it was only the male poets that could attempt to attain the sublime heights manifest by literary legends (by Milton in particular). We will talk more about this privileged access to the sublime that male poets were supposed exclusively to have possessed in the final chapter. Moreover, as Margaret Doody has inquired, “was not poetry in [the eighteenth century] subject to set ideas of correctness, enslaved to rules, and directed not (like the novel) to the mass of readers but to well-read gentlemen?” (1). This question leads me to think that Barbauld’s “Washing-Day” is indeed, implicitly, directed to her male readers after all—those that will undoubtedly catch classical allusions like “Erebus” (37), the Miltonic versification, and so on.

in higher esteem<sup>23</sup>: “Coleridge placed Shakespeare and Milton as ‘compeers not rivals’ on ‘the two glory-smitten summits of the poetic mountain’” (*Biographia Literaria*; qtd. in Bate, *Imagination* 2). And, significantly, Bate observes:

The contrast between Shakespeare and Milton, an antinomy that is central to both Coleridge’s and Hazlitt’s criticism, is a creative tension out of which each Romantic finds his own voice. It is as if his lyrical genius is forged from the clash of dramatic and epic as his two mighty forebears are pitted against each other. Just as the Romantic is at his worst when attempting surface imitation of the Shakespearean or Miltonic styles, so he can be at his best when entering into a richer, more intuitive relationship with the two poets. (3)

Despite his supplemental modification of Bloom’s theory, Bate clearly adheres to the pugilism and androcentrism that characterize Bloom’s model of literary influence—describing, for example, the “clash” that “lyrical genius is forged from,” and the “pitting” of one “mighty forebear” against another. Both of these models, then, seem ultimately to reflect the gendered matrices at the core of bourgeois literary expectations and aspirations.

Indeed, the public domain in which works of literature were disseminated in late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries was a man’s world: “Not only was the fundamental

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<sup>23</sup> Bate supplements Bloom by reinserting Shakespeare into his patriarchal narrative of influence. Bate claims that, because Bloom excludes Shakespeare from his study, he “only tells half the story (2). Bloom qualifies the exclusion as follows: Shakespeare, “[t]he greatest poet in our language,” is excluded from Bloom’s argument because he “belongs to the giant age before the flood, before the anxiety of influence became central to poetic consciousness. Another [reason] has to do with the contrast between dramatic and lyric form. As poetry has become more subjective, the shadow cast by the precursors has become more dominant. The main case, though, is that Shakespeare’s prime precursor was Marlowe, a poet very much smaller than his inheritor” (Bloom 11).

bourgeois personality male . . . but the organizational principles of bourgeois society were unabashedly made by men for men” (Poovey ix). Accordingly, the risks that Romantic female writers were taking in order for their work to be read were large, as Mary Poovey explains:

Not only was marriage virtually the only respectable “occupation” for women (and both learning and writing were frequently seen as threats to domestic duty), but writing catapulted women directly into the public arena, where attention must be fought for, where explicit competition reigned. Samuel Johnson’s description of the writer as pugilist suggests the extent to which the literary market was a man’s domain: “he that writes may be considered as a kind of general challenger, whom every one has a right to attack. . . .(35)

In general, as products of an androcentric ideology, texts by women—though they had a wide readership—were never necessarily heard. In “Washing-Day,” Barbauld’s act of alluding to, or mock-performing, “the real language of men,” that unmediated “language of gods” (3), effects a mediation by way of a—or “*their*”—uninscribed voice. This mediation, or interruption, proves to be productive of difference (or, as we shall see, of an interruptive “différance,” as Jacques Derrida would have it). My own analyses ask that we hear and listen to the silences—the interruptive (non)voices who “In slipshod measure loosely prattl[e] on” in all their un/regulated, discontinuous and domestic/ated vigour.

But first let us consider the possibility that Barbauld may tacitly be directing “Washing-Day” to the ears of what Poovey called “man’s domain.” (Indeed, the male figures in the poem, whom we might read as figures for Barbauld’s male readers, are everywhere met with interruption.) In her essay “On the Origin and Progress of Novel-Writing” (1810), Barbauld recalibrates the position of poetry in the genre hierarchy: “[it is not] easy to say

why the poet, who deals in one kind of fiction, should have so high a place allotted in the temple of fame; and the romance-writer so low a one as in the general estimation he is confined to" (2). That the novel has powerful moralizing capacities, and—more significant for determining "Washing-Day"'s audience—that it educates and delights a generic audience, according to Barbauld, are causes for its reevaluation as a genre. Moreover, she writes, "Reading is the cheapest of pleasures: it is a domestic pleasure. . . .Poetry requires in the reader a certain elevation of mind and a practiced ear. It is seldom relished unless a taste be formed for it pretty early" (47). Accordingly, it would be an elite class of male readers who would be expected to apprehend the myriad of allusions and stylistic maneuvers that Barbauld mobilizes in "Washing-Day"; it is the male reader who would apprehend with "anxious looks" his "consort"'s interruption of his literary reign (20, 55). For eighteenth-century women were generally not privileged with higher education; Barbauld herself has claimed that her own situation as a well-read, educated woman is unique. To Elizabeth Montagu, Barbauld explains:

Perhaps you may think, that having myself stepped out of the bounds of female reserve in becoming an author, it is with an ill grace I offer these sentiments: but though this circumstance may destroy the grace, it does not the justice of the remark; and I am full well convinced that to have a too great fondness for books is little favourable to the happiness of a woman, especially one not in affluent circumstances. *My situation has been peculiar, and would be no rule for others.* (my emphasis; qtd. in Ross 216)

These remarks reveal Barbauld to be "conscious of the contradiction between her views on female education and her own status as a famous woman author" (Ross 216), and suggest that she would not expect her female readers to grasp the more "elevated" elements of



“Washing-Day.” But these remarks also demonstrate her assertion of her own authority as an author, and thus her own learned capacity to interrupt.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Crossings: Re-thinking Domestic Ideology

#### I. The Barbauldian Allusion: “Come, Muse, and Sing”

“Washing-Day” is sung in a language that silences women—in “the real language of men” (Wordsworth, Preface 606)—but in a voice that refuses to be silent. To hear this voice beyond the words of “Washing-Day” we must read the poem for the difference that it performs. In other words, we must read the poem for the interruption that occurs between the sheerly allusive surface of the text, and the resistant “voice, / . . . [that] pipes / And whistles in its sound” (epigraph).

Before considering this “voice,” let us look at how “Washing-Day” conceals its self-resistance in a mock-performance of gender roles and, by extension, of gendered generic roles. Because the poem’s epigraph alludes to William Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, it is likely that the speaker of the poem—presumably Barbauld, as the autobiographical data which seeps into the latter half of the poem suggests—takes up a role not unlike that of Shakespeare’s most famous cross-dresser, Rosalind. Barbauld, like Rosalind,

. . . suit[s] [her] all points like a man[,]  
A gallant curtle-ax upon [her] thigh,  
A boar-spear in [her] hand, and, in [her] heart  
Lie there what hidden woman’s fear there will. . . . (*As You Like It*, I.iii.114-7)

In “Washing-Day,” Barbauld puts on the “garb” of what Wordsworth has called “the real

language of men”<sup>24</sup>: “sing[ing] the dreaded Washing Day,” Barbauld suits herself in “the cloak of the mock heroic” (Messenger 186)—that high genre to which only men are privileged according to the “masculine public code of heroic chivalry” (Mellor, *Gender* 10).<sup>25</sup> Barbauld stitches the cloak of “Washing-Day” together with “Miltonic versification and style” and with allusions to Shakespeare and others (Messenger 191); and she places this cloak on something that we may call the domestic female body.

To put it differently, the poem is made up of a chorus of male voices that reverberate and are transposed onto a domestic terrain: the voices of Shakespeare, John Milton,

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<sup>24</sup>My use of the term “garb” alludes to Barbauld’s “To Mr. S.T. Coleridge” (1797): “. . . and wears the garb / Of deep philosophy, and museful sits / In dreamy twilight of the vacant mind” (19-21). In this poem, Barbauld criticizes Coleridge for writing poetry that is too fanciful or, to borrow another term in the poem, “unearthly” (7). Lonsdale describes Barbauld’s use of this term in “To Mr. S.T. Coleridge” as follows: “Barbauld evokes the mysteries and dangers of an ‘unearthly’ Romanticism, in which ‘things of life, / Obvious to sight and touch’—as in her amusing ‘Washing-Day’ . . . , an exercise of the ‘domestic Muse, / In slipshod measure loosely prattling on’—could have no place” (Introduction xli). Accordingly, I want to suggest here that in “Washing-Day” Barbauld not only interrupts the texts of her forefathers, but also the “unearthly” discourses of her Romantic brethren. As Barbauld shows us in “Washing-Day,” “however learned she was, Mrs. Barbauld knows that ‘solid pudding’ and ‘substantial pie’ had a more immediate value than ‘airy systems’”; and “Mrs. Barbauld knows that a man’s or boy’s stomach is more demanding than his mind” (Messenger 177).

<sup>25</sup> As M.H. Abrams defines it, mock-heroic poetry, championed by Pope and Milton, “imitates the elaborate form and ceremonious style of the *epic* genre, but applies it to a commonplace or trivial subject matter. . . . The term *mock-heroic* is often applied to other dignified poetic forms which are purposely mismatched to a lowly subject” (*Glossary* 18). “Washing-Day” is an ideal example of the mock-heroic—so ideal, in fact, that we might call it a “mock-mock-heroic poem,” for Barbauld seems to mock the genre precisely by feminizing it—or by transposing it onto a domestic terrain, and performing her “mock-heroic” in a patriarchal voice (in the voices—the words, the versification, style and, of course, the genre—of her forefathers). That she performs the genre in a patriarchal voice attests to this idea of mockery: Barbauld mocks the male poets mocking what they deem to be trivial—women’s work being one such thing (both domestic and poetical).

Alexander Pope, and Edmund Burke, to name a few, learnedly mingle with one another on the mock-epic stage of Barbauld's "Washing-Day" (8).<sup>26</sup> At first glance, then, the poem might appear to be an experiment with, or even a celebration of, intertextuality and allusion. However, the many allusions that combine to form "Washing-Day" function subversively to resist and undermine—to "interrupt"<sup>27</sup>—these reigning philosophical and literary texts of the eighteenth-century bourgeois culture that Barbauld is alluding to (and in which she made her living). The interruption entails that Barbauld perform the texts to which she alludes, and that she—akin to Shakespeare's Rosalind—put on the male "buskin" (2).<sup>28</sup> Yet in order to perform and thereby to interrupt these texts, Barbauld must claim them; or better yet, she must *possess* these texts.

These performative allusions—or what I will call "Barbauldian allusions"—form the

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<sup>26</sup> See Messenger's chapter on Barbauld, Milton and Pope, in her book *His and Hers*, for a brief account of Barbauld's allusions to Shakespeare (as noted above), Milton, Pope, Jonathan Swift, and Homer, in particular (190). I will refer to most of Messenger's findings throughout this chapter. Also, in Marlon Ross's *The Contours of Masculine Desire*, he claims that "Washing-Day" is a "rewriting of Virgil's *Georgics* from a woman's point of view" (Ross 226).

<sup>27</sup> For the sake of clarity, and since my argument rests on this complicated term, I wish to explain that "interruption" refers, in a certain sense, to a "Barbauldian" strategy of subversion. Reiteratively, I employ the term "interruption" in order to underscore the double movement that I discussed in the previous chapter, and to emphasize *movement* itself, that is, disruptive shifts brought about by way of allusion or, more precisely, by way of the performance of these allusions. Throughout this analysis, and particularly in the next analysis, we will see many kinds of interruptive movements, most of which are introduced in the epigraph itself.

<sup>28</sup> A "buskin" is a tall and thick-soled boot that reaches the knee or calf (Webster's). It was worn by actors in tragedies (Goldrick-Jones and Rosengarten 152).



“germ” of the broader scheme of interruption.<sup>29</sup> Before discussing how Barbauld interrupts the texts to which she alludes, then, it is necessary first to discuss the complex method in which she performs them. In this chapter I wish to ask, how does Barbauld perform the words to which she alludes? How does she in effect occupy these texts in the course of alluding to them? Or, more precisely, how does she *possess* the texts to which she alludes in order to claim and thus to mobilize them within a broader scheme of interruption? How does this performance serve to express and to foster women’s or, more specifically, Barbauld’s desire?

The “Barbauldian allusion” works as follows: like a “domestic Muse,” Barbauld breathes into and inspires the dead words of her forefathers with her own lively voice—and, as we will see, with “their voice” (epigraph).<sup>30</sup> Though the point is not only that Barbauld breathes into dead words but also that it is precisely *by* breathing into these words, like a domestic Muse, that Barbauld exposes the reality that these words are already (and were always) dead, *excess* flesh, as it were. Exposing them as such, Barbauld demonstrates that the monumental, immortal words of her literary and philosophical forefathers are occupiable and, ultimately, that the monolithic canon from which “Washing-Day”’s allusions stem can be, after all, (inter)ruptured. Accordingly, I wish to argue that, “sing[ing] the dreaded

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<sup>29</sup> As I mentioned earlier, “germ” is a significant “Barbauldian” trope. I will explain the trope in detail later on this analysis.

<sup>30</sup>It may be significant that Edmund Burke died on the year “Washing-Day” was composed.

Washing-Day,” Barbauld breathes herself into the words of her forefathers, “muse-like as the animator of [their] ashes” (Greer 8).

With Muse-like breath, Barbauld possesses the “high-sounding phrase” which characterizes the mock-heroic language of Pope and Milton (2),<sup>31</sup> Shakespeare’s “glowing” verse,<sup>32</sup> and related phallogentric high claims of philosophical and aesthetic discourses—like Burke’s tremendously influential doctrine of the sublime—which reinforce and propagate masculinist ideologies, that is, those ideologies that presuppose an essentially male life experience and, more specifically, an essential male language with which to represent such experience; female experience necessarily resides at the opposite extremity of this socially-constructed scale of life experience. While breathing into the male “high-sounding phrase,” Barbauld takes up this opposite (essentially female) extreme: she plays her prescribed role

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<sup>31</sup> Messenger’s analysis of Barbauld’s imitations of the (primarily Miltonic) mock heroic style is an important source for my own analysis. (Since my analysis is grounded upon the assumption that the bulk of this poem is allusive, I will often turn to Messenger’s findings). In terms of imitating the mock heroic genre, Messenger explains: Barbauld “imitates the most Miltonic of devices, the inversion of natural word order. The device was controversial and was felt to be undesirable in excess. . . .Mrs. Barbauld makes regular use of it: ‘From the wet kitchen scared and reeking hearth’ is a fairly long mix-up, while ‘snug recess impervious’ is simpler. The figure lends itself to another Miltonic device, that of repetition: ‘Or tart or pudding:—pudding he nor tart / That day shall eat . . .’; or, without inversion, ‘Cast at the lowering sky, if sky should lower.’ Milton’s repetitions are less formulaic than those of his imitators, but the formulaic repetitions certainly *feel* Miltonic, contributing to the heaviness and spurious dignity of the mock heroic style” (190). To Messenger’s remarks, I wish to add that the effect of such over-“formulaic” repetitions is to call attention to the repetitions themselves or to the *formula* (the system) underlying the mock-heroic genre.

<sup>32</sup> In Barbauld’s “Prologue to the Play of Henry the Eighth. Spoken by a Warrington Student in his morning Gown” she evokes “Shakespeare’s glowing pencil” (28). This trope will be employed throughout my thesis.

—the role of the inscrutable, uncontainable other—and, in so doing, exposes it as a socially-constructed role that can be *performed* and that is thus an arbitrary phenomenon. In short, Barbauld places male “high-sounding phrase” atop the “wet cold sheet” of female domestic experience (45). Analogously, she places the cloak of “the language of men” atop the female domestic body. In doing so, both of these extremes that make up “Washing-Day” interrupt one another by exposing the arbitrary nature of each other’s performance.

Barbauld’s Muse-like occupation of the words of her forefathers, then, involves the transposition of the “language of men” onto a female domestic terrain. This transposition is evident in the beginning of the poem itself:

The Muses are turned gossips; they have lost  
The buskined step, and clear high-sounding phrase,  
Language of gods. Come, then, domestic Muse,  
In slipshod measure loosely prattling on  
Of farm or orchard, pleasant curds and cream,  
Or drowning flies, or shoe lost in the mire  
By little whimpering boy, with rueful face . . . (1-7)

In this opening passage, Barbauld seems to bring male “high-sounding phrase, / Language of gods” (2-3) down to earth, to “farm or orchard” (5). However, it only *seems* that Barbauld has brought the “Language of gods” down to earth because the ostensibly low-sounding gossip is nonetheless still “high-sounding.” That is, the “loose prattling on” in these lines is in fact made up of allusions to Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* and his *The Winter’s Tale*: as Messenger points out, Jaques’s speech in *As You Like It* not only appears in the epigraph of “Washing-Day,” but also

lies behind Mrs. Barbauld’s line early in the poem, “By little whimpering boy, with rueful face”; Shakespeare’s schoolboy is “whining” (he never used the word “whimpering”) and his face is



“shining” rather than “rueful,” but his unwilling creeping would make one think of rueful feelings. The allusion is plain. Perhaps too Mrs. Barbauld was remembering *The Winter’s Tale* when she mentioned “pleasant curds and cream” as a subject for the domestic Muse; in that play, Camillo dubs the lovely Perdita “the queen of curds and cream” (IV.iv.161). (190)

As a whole, “Washing-Day” remains characterized by this strategic transposition of the language of men onto an earthy—or, as I have called it, “low-sounding”—domestic terrain.

We may accordingly call “Washing-Day” a hybrid: Barbauld “crosses” the “high-sounding” language of men with the low-sounding “gossip” of female domestic experience (44, 2); put differently, she crosses the “loaded lines” of the mock heroic with the “loaded [clothes]lines” of female experience (26). In addition to this bipolar “crossing” of the male and female spheres, however, there is another “crossing” that “mars” the possibility of a harmonious union between the two poles of this hybrid. This third, interruptive crossing involves the speaker of the poem as follows (60): Barbauld herself mediates between her socially-prescribed domestic place, “the wet kitchen” (4), and her forefathers’ lofty, unmediated language, the “Language of gods” (3).<sup>33</sup> This third crossing vexes the union as it resides within, and concomitantly resists, both poles of the hybrid. For, as a woman, Barbauld finds herself irresistibly confined to the private domestic sphere; and, as a woman, she inhabits the public sphere as one of its constitutive exclusions. But, as a woman writer,

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<sup>33</sup> By “Unmediated” or god-like language, I refer to Miltonic “high-sounding phrase,” and to the male Romantic poets’ self-claimed ability to grasp “a nature that is entirely unmediated by language—or wholly constructed by its own linguistic tropes—it experiences what the Romantic writers called ‘the sublime’” (Mellor, *Gender* 85). The “language of gods,” then, is as natural as bubbles (of verse) of “Earth, air, and sky, and ocean” (85), but also as fleeting, as illusive, as bubbles in nature.



Barbauld enters boldly into the public sphere and, thereby, occupies a strange position between (or beyond) the socially-prescribed public and private spheres. “Washing-Day,” then, portrays Barbauld’s own grappling with a conflicted subject(ies). And, it seems that, for Barbauld, resistance is possible by way of a surrender to and reconciliation of the two poles that determine, limit and confound her life experience. In “Washing-Day,” Barbauld performs this process of surrender and reconciliation: she possesses each pole, confronts one with the other (in a tentative reconciliation) and, in doing so, collapses that boundary which distinguishes between the two antithetical poles in the first place.

In “Washing-Day,” Barbauld reveals a female subject position that is caught between the irresistible pressure to conform to the regulatory ideals shaping the bourgeoisie’s notions of “femininity” and “literature”—bent as she is “beneath the yoke of wedlock / with bowed soul” (9-10)—, while concomitantly surrendering to her own impulse as a writer to interrupt or to “cross” these ideals in the quest to discover her own voice, or (the plural) “their voice” (epigraph), beyond the unrelenting “cultural imposition of silence on women” (Gilmore 45). //

By crossing these ideals, Barbauld in effect denaturalizes and, by extension, interrupts them: she exposes them as socially-constructed, gendered ideals that as such can be reappropriated, or re-performed, by either sex; and she exposes them as gendered effects of the doctrine of the separate (private-versus-public) spheres, a doctrine that grounds and reinforces the gendered division of work, poetrywork and of life experience, all of which confine women to the household and to its expression- and mind-blocking walls. Upon recognizing her conflicted position between (and beyond) these extremes Barbauld enables herself momentarily to step out of this conflicted position, to “sit . . . down, and ponder much” about

the work (78), and about the pondering itself.<sup>34</sup> But, to be sure, this is a vexed and violent “pondering.”

This activity of “pondering,” figured at the end of the poem, is one clue to understanding what the process of poetry-writing provides for Barbauld on a personal level. That Barbauld gives us a figure of herself as the composer of “Washing-Day” at the end of the poem suggests that poetrywork (as opposed to laundry-work) is a “pondering” process: “Then would I sit me down and ponder much / Why washings were” (78-9). As Ross has noted, this figure of herself as a pondering child is

essentially rhetorical. There is no grand philosophical reason for the labor. It simply must be done by someone. And yet the little girl’s pondering is certainly a mock mirror image of the poet’s own pondering in the poem. Like the little girl, the mature poetess sits down to ponder in her verse why washings are. Is women’s busy labor essentially at odds with the idleness of poeticizing? (228)

Ross’s suggestion that the pondering child is a “mock mirror” for Barbauld is useful. However, more important is the fact that she mockingly mirrors the “pondering” of men, for she ponders in the “language of men.” In other words, she does not, as Ross suggests, simply mock her own pursuit of the “grand philosophical reason” for domestic labour; rather, in a double-gesture, she exposes the groundlessness of both domestic labour and grand philosophical pondering. Pondering “why washings were,” Barbauld in effect possesses and

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<sup>34</sup> Indeed, the very line “Then would I sit me down, and ponder much” alludes to Milton. In Book VIII of *Paradise Lost* he writes:

On a green shady bank profuse of flowers  
Pensive I sat me down; . . .

. . . . .  
When suddenly stood at my head a dream. . . . (286-7, 292)

somatizes, or embodies (as indicated by the enhanced palpability of “why washings were” that is achieved through the device of alliteration<sup>35</sup>), a male, Western metaphysical methodology—particularly, the philosophical tradition of seeking out the “dasein” of things, by which I mean the essence of things, or why things *are*. Thus, as Ross suggests, “the little girl’s pondering is essentially rhetorical.” For everything in “Washing-Day” is sheerly rhetorical and self-reflexive—always bending back upon itself to reflect upon the status of its own discourse amid a male language and metaphysics that, in turn, will not let it *be*.<sup>36</sup>

## II. The “Unwonted Guests”

The child’s “pondering,” then, is a mirror image of Barbauld’s writing process. Barbauld writes about “the dreaded Washing-Day,” but does not “stay to ponder out the question” of why washings are (Ross 228). As I see it, “Washing-Day” is a reflection of Barbauld’s own thought process when she sits down to write poetry. It is a day when she purges her own literary demons, when she washes them from the “recess[es]” of her mind (39). In this section of the analysis, we will explore Barbauld’s psyche as she lays it out for us in “Washing-Day.” We will look particularly at the ways in which Barbauld confronts and engages her literary and philosophical forefathers, whose presences inevitably loom over her when she “take[s] the pen in hand” (Barbauld, “Novel-Writing” 59). These looming

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<sup>35</sup> The alliteration also mocks the generic device of alliteration itself—a “special stylistic effect [employed by later English poets, like Shakespeare] . . . to reinforce the meaning, to link related words” (Abrams 7).

<sup>36</sup> The last line of the poem is hugely self-reflexive: “Earth, air, and sky, and ocean, hath its bubbles, / And verse is one of them—this most of all” (85-6). I will discuss these lines in detail in Chapter Two.

presences threaten to interrupt her progress: their “big manly voice” threatens to silence her (Shakespeare, *As You Like It* II.vii.161-3); their language and logic of “othering” restrict her to the subordinate position of the “other,” and threaten to choke the progress of her own poetry-making.<sup>37</sup> Thus, in answer to the final question that I posed at the beginning of this chapter—how do these allusions function to foster Barbauld’s desires?—I want to suggest that Barbauld takes us through a meditation whereby she tackles the oppressive presences of her forefathers, those presences under which she “bend[s] / with bowed soul” (9-10). Grappling with a subject position that is caught between conflicting socially-constructed extremes, then, Barbauld possesses each extreme and crosses a masculine public code of heroism with a feminine private code of domesticity in a mental battle for her creative will.

Specifically, I am suggesting that “Washing-Day” is a meditation by which Barbauld rids her mind of inevitable restrictions upon her life and, by extension, upon her poetry-writing. In fact, we might locate a germ of this “meditative” poetic writing in Barbauld’s earlier poetry. Such works reveal (in a more overt fashion than “Washing-Day”) that the act of writing is a meditative process for Barbauld. It is a way of coping with the conflicted position in which she finds herself caught, both as a “female” human being and as a “poet.” One particular poem that stands out as a kind of meditation is Barbauld’s “A Summer

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<sup>37</sup> By “logic of othering,” I refer to the patriarchal system of binary thinking that confers power and coherence on the first term of a binary opposition—the self (i.e. the male, white, western, upper-class, heterosexual self); and the second term—the “other” in this opposition (i.e., the female, black, eastern, lower-class, the homosexual other)—finds itself entirely answerable to the first term. When I say “language of othering,” moreover, I speak of presence/absence, something/nothing binary oppositions (which I will discuss, later on, in my analysis of “Washing-Day”).



Evening's Meditation" (1773). In her essay "The Politics of Fancy in the Age of Sensibility,"

Julie Ellison describes the meditative journey that makes up this poem, as follows:

[i]n 'A Summer Evening's Meditation,' . . . fancy leads lyric subjectivity, or intersubjectivity through the cosmos in search of its own powers and limits. Here fancy finds vistas that connect it to epic aspiration through resemblances to Milton's tours of space, and link it to the history of Europe's geopolitical prospects, as well. There is a clear correlation between cosmic place and power relations: Jupiter is central and dominant; Saturn is dethroned and suburban, in the long-standing negative sense of "the suburbs." (231)

There are strong correlations between "A Summer Evening's Meditation," as Ellison describes it, and my own reading of the meditative—albeit, as we shall see, violent and vexed—pursuit of an authority of authorship and creative freedom in (the much later poem) "Washing-Day." The poems are also similar in that they both critique the gendered, asymmetrical dialectic between "Jupiter[']s] huge gigantic bulk" and "Saturn's wat'ry moons" ("Meditation" 76, 79); while the poet, Barbauld, "Sits like an exil'd monarch, . . . / . . . launch[ed] into the trackless deeps of [the] space" of her mind ("Meditation" 81-2), "ponder[ing] much" why or how such things *are* (79).

"Washing-Day"—somewhat similar to the earlier "A Summer Evening's Meditation"—is the product of Barbauld's meditative confrontation with restrictions upon her life and writing. More precisely, hers is a psychic battle with the "unwonted guest[s]" in her mind (18), or those internalized male voices that seek to impede, or to "interrupt," her own creative voice and, by extension, her freedom to experience in life what, as a woman, she can only "little dream" of (81). In a playful yet vital self-authorizing gesture, Barbauld confronts these "unwonted guests" in her mind by taking up their dead words, daemonically

possessing these words, Muse-like, by breathing herself into them. In so doing, Barbauld impels those now “unlucky guest[s] / In silence . . . [to slink] away” and out of the “dark recess[es]” of her mind (57, 39). What Barbauld has left on paper for publication, “gathering dust upon [our] shel[ves]” (Barbauld, “Novel-Writing” 1), is the product of her psychic battle with the ghosts of her forefathers: what is left is the text of “Washing-Day,” a collection of dead allusions to the works of Barbauld’s predecessors that are taken up and possessed by an unlikely (because female) writer. Further, figuring herself as a domestic Muse in the witty spirit of the mock-heroic genre, Barbauld excites and in so doing, interrupts, the exclusive male experience of the sublime—indeed, the experience of the sublime is very much a mode of aesthetics associated with the mock-heroic texts of her exalted forefathers (notably Milton’s *Paradise Lost*)—, evoking feelings of “mixed exaltation and horror,” (again) like a domestic Muse (Greer 4).<sup>38</sup>

That Barbauld felt (and, indeed, was) restricted and oppressed by the rigid codes of “feminine” literary propriety, is evidenced by the kinds of criticism that her poetry incited. I have already noted the reason for her literary demise—Croker’s anxiety-ridden criticism of Barbauld’s attempt at political satire, a genre which (as far as he and most other critics and writers were concerned) was exclusively male terrain and, therefore, was to remain untrodden by sordid slip-shod sibyls.<sup>39</sup> Other criticisms of Barbauld’s poetry tell us that the

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<sup>38</sup> The Muses were said to excite feelings of “mixed exaltation and horror” (Greer 4).

<sup>39</sup> A “slip-shod sibyl” is a derogatory term that literary men would use to insult female poets (Greer xxiii). I will discuss it at length later on in the analysis. See line 4 of “Washing-Day.” Here, as we will see, Barbauld is alluding to Pope’s slip-shod sybil from

bourgeois literary community expected women to write exclusively about an essential female experience that men-as-men could not grasp. For instance, in Woodfall's review of Barbauld's *Poems*, he writes that he wished Barbauld would remain within her own female, domestic and sentimental domain. He writes: "We hoped the *Woman* was going to appear"; further, he wished that Barbauld "had marked from her own feelings the particular distresses of some female situations," and that "she had breathed her wishes, her desires, and given, from nature, what has been hitherto only guessed at . . . by the imagination of men" (133; qtd. in McCarthy 114).<sup>40</sup> Woodfall's remarks reiterate the bourgeois imperative that female poets stick to their sphere of experience as it is "given [them] from nature," which is to say, that they stick to the domain of "sensibility and passion" and domestic situations (Woodfall 133).

Moreover, Woodfall's insistence that Barbauld "breathe" her desires into her poetry epitomizes the imperative that women's poetry stem from her body and, thus, that it correspond to a "biological essentialism," that is, the presupposition that there is such a

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Book III of his *Dunciad*; this is where Barbauld derives the derogatory term.

<sup>40</sup> For a discussion of these remarks by Woodfall, Barbauld's early collection, *Poems*, and of Barbauld's uniquely feminist poetics, see William McCarthy's "'We Hoped the *Woman* Was Going to Appear': Repression, Desire and Gender in Anna Letitia Barbauld's Early Poems." McCarthy, as I do, claims that critics of Barbauld, "from Woodfall to Ross" express a "spurious essentialism" (114). He then proceeds to read *Poems* for the autobiographical elements that, he argues, were the collection's "efficient cause" (115), for Barbauld's particular self-healing idealization of women in the collection, for her strategy of "compensatory fantasies" (which is to say, "What in life she is denied or discouraged from doing Barbauld asserts in imagination") (130) and, finally, for the ways in which Barbauld's *Poems* "anticipate[s]" contemporary feminisms such as that of Monique Wittig (129).



thing as an essential, “given from nature,” or innate female experience of life that a human being who is biologically determined to be female would assume if she were not tainted by nurturance or education. Without taking Woodfall’s criticism too far (since Barbauld provides us with her own interruption of such essentialist discourses) I want to suggest that Woodfall’s desire that Barbauld “breathe” into her poetry tells us that the predominant belief among literary men was that female poetry-writing issued from her female-sexed body or, more specifically for Woodfall, from her lungs. His remarks reveal that, in Barbauld’s time, female poetry was thought to be created by and issued from a biologically female body, that her words were issued from her body, and “breathed” onto a page replete with female feeling and experience—presumably so that male readers and feeling-seeking Romantics (Wordsworth, for example) could inhale and absorb that which was unknown about the female “other,” including her sensibility which was perhaps the only mental faculty that women (albeit essentially) could call their own.<sup>41</sup>

In “Washing-Day,” Barbauld takes essentialist notions to task by composing a kind of hybrid that, in its very construction, exposes the performative nature of such essentialist discourses as the gendered divisions of work and poetrywork that limit her own creativity. Crossing “the language of men” with “female” domestic experience—a peculiar but intriguing match, to be sure—Barbauld constructs herself as a domestic Muse, breathing into

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<sup>41</sup> See Mellor’s *Romanticism and Gender* for her discussion of the male Romantics’ expressed desire to absorb the feminine (and female sensibility in particular—recall Wordsworth’s definition of the “Poet,” i.e., that he is “endued with more lively sensibility,” with which I introduced this thesis) in the all-encompassing experience of the sublime, to which I will return.



male words, and into the female domestic ideology (or male domestic ideality) with “their voice” (epigraph). But, before discussing the ways in which Barbauld conducts her psychic battle with—or, interruption of—those reigning patriarchal texts and discourses that presuppose a biological essentialism which ultimately favours the male body, there is one pressing question that we must consider: what is a domestic Muse?

## II: The “domestic Muse”

Barbauld begins her meditation with the invocation of the domestic Muse, a curious and, as we shall see, heterogeneous figure. Summoning the domestic Muse, she writes:

. . . Come then, domestic Muse,  
 .....  
 Come, Muse, and sing the dreaded Washing-Day. (3, 8)

What is a “domestic Muse”? Why does Barbauld evoke this figure? The invocation itself alludes to a particular invocation in one of Shakespeare’s most famous plays (we will talk about this allusion when we “turn again” to the invocation later on in this thesis [epigraph]). More importantly, however, for the purposes of this discussion I want to suggest that this is a kind of self-invocation. Which is to say, the domestic Muse is, in part, a figure for the poet herself, breathing into the words of her forefathers in order to possess them and thus to interrupt them and, finally, to (re)claim her creative will.

The question then is this: in constructing herself as a domestic Muse, how does Barbauld occupy the words of her forefathers as such? If, as I have been suggesting, Barbauld “breathe(s)” into the dead words of Shakespeare, Milton, Pope and Burke, then, am I not contradicting my own argument? That is, am I not implying that Barbauld is and writes “of the body,” as it were? Which is to say, am I not suggesting that the domestic

Muse—and, by extension, Barbauld—is the materialization of an essential femaleness and, thus, the manifestation of that corporeal “language of women” which Woodfall endorsed? Moreover, is Barbauld, in fact, in accordance with the myth of the Muse, the epitome of that man-made phantasmatic figure in the sky who “breathes” her female experience and desires into poetry? The answers to these questions are not simple. They require, first, that we consider the mythology of the Muse, and the history of her reception. By doing so, we will “near approach” an understanding of the strategy behind the “Barbauldian allusions” in “Washing-Day” (83).

To begin answering these questions surrounding the domestic Muse, I wish to clarify what I will call the “discourse of breathing” at which I have been hinting all along, that is, the historical and mythological details behind the Barbauldian allusion—that meditative strategy by which Barbauld breathes into, and thereby possesses, the words of her forefathers. I am suggesting that the process begins in the invocation of the domestic Muse; and it is most noticeable near the end of the poem, when “Sometimes through hollow bowl / Of pipe amused we *blew*, and sent aloft / The floating bubbles” (emphasis added; 79-81). In this section, I will demonstrate that the discourse of breathing is mythologically connected to this figure. Historically, moreover, we will see that breathing has serious implications for eighteenth-century English women.

Historically, the “discourse of breathing” as I define it is connected to the increasing prominence of figures of breathing in Romantic and Victorian women’s poetry, as Isobel Armstrong explains: “In women’s poetry from approximately 1790 and throughout the nineteenth century there is a powerful figuring of physiological respiration as the breath of

life” (24). Armstrong locates the germ of this powerful figuring of breathing in Burke’s treatise *The Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*.<sup>42</sup> Specifically, Armstrong locates it in Burke’s association of the “beautiful” with imperfection (23): “[women] learn to lisp, to totter in their walk” (qtd. in Armstrong 23). “Such malfunction and impediment to voice or movement,” Armstrong observes, “can be connected with the spasm or paralysis of hysteria. . . .Hysteria comes to mean the seizing up of experience. Illness comes from blocked emotions, a blocked language” (23). Accordingly, for the female poets, Armstrong suggests, breathing is linked to “expiration or ‘expression,’ . . . secretly denied because expression is being denied” (24).

In “Washing-Day,” the final and climactic figure of breathing occurs when Barbauld revisits her childhood: “Sometimes through hollow bowl / Of pipe amused we blew, and sent aloft / The floating bubbles” (79-81). This final breath in the poem sends domestic bubbles en route to the Montgolfier hot-air balloon of Barbauld’s adulthood (it was, after all, “little dream[t] of when she was a child [81])—that symbol of male freedom and transcendence over the mundane reality of women’s domestic world. The activity of blowing bubbles is linked to a childhood experience of freedom, freedom from work, and a freedom of expression denied her in her adult life by such restricting theories as Burke’s, and by such

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<sup>42</sup> I will return to Burke’s treatise later on in the discussion. For now, I want to point out that the treatise was very influential in bourgeois society, especially in regard to its stringent delineation of gender norms: it endorsed a masculinity (or maleness) that was all-powerful and all-encompassing, wherein man was able to experience in life and in language awesome, unfathomable heights (to experience the “sublime”). His definition of a definitively masculine sublime is contingent upon an opposing, “feminine” discourse of the beautiful—of love, nurturance, things delicate and smooth, and so on. As Mellor puts it, the treatise “is distinctly, if unwittingly, gendered” (*Gender* 85).



criticisms of her poetry as Woodfall's and (finally) Croker's. Thus, the "discourse of breathing" corresponds to historical associations of breathing with the freedom of expression, of breaking through "blocked emotions, a blocked language."

Second, the discourse of breathing has a mythological foundation. It stems from the myth of the Muses. The Muses were goddesses of inspiration, mythologized by male poets "so that they [male poets] can rise above the ordinary and tedious reality of women's domestic world" (Ross 226). There are nine of them. They reside "on the secret top / Of *Oreb*, or of *Sinai*, [and] inspire" the male poet by penetrating (or impregnating) his mind with their inspirational breath (Milton, *Paradise Lost* I.6).<sup>43</sup> Germaine Greer describes this particular phenomenon as follows:

The castration of the muse was effected when poets began to explain the conception of the work of art as the consequence of spiritual intercourse between the poet and his personal muse. The act of inspiring or 'breathing into' is a penetrative act; the female muse enacts a male function upon the receptive poet, who thus quickened goes on to utter the idea in physical form. . . . The title of 'muse' would . . . be far more flattering than the title of 'poet'—if only the poet and the muse were not aspects of the same person. (5)

In keeping with the above-cited synopsis of what Greer calls "male-pregnancy metaphor in Renaissance accounts of the genesis of the work of art" (4), I am suggesting that, in "Washing-Day," Barbauld breathes Muse-like into her forefathers' words. That is, she breathes into those words that we see cited (or alluded to) in "Washing-Day."

In addition to this "male-pregnancy metaphor," there is another source for what I

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<sup>43</sup> Recall Richard Samuel's painting that I discussed in an earlier chapter, wherein Barbauld was featured as one of the *Nine Living Muses of Great Britain* alongside her female, literary counterparts.



have called the “discourse of breathing” which, in turn, is also connected to the myth of the Muses and to the “domestic Muse” of Barbauld’s “Washing-Day.” By tracing the ways in which the eighteenth-century female poet related to the muse, we discover that the “domestic Muse” was not an uncommon phenomenon in eighteenth-century English women’s poetry.

“Turning again” to Greer, she explains that these female poets often

presented themselves as attended by domesticated muses, they were also aware of the idea of inspiration as possession. As verse became less and less a medium for social intercourse and the cult of the bard began to take hold of the imagination of writers and readers alike, women were increasingly alienated from active participation, with the exception of those unfortunate individuals who were seduced by the notion that, being female like the muses, they were actually inspiration and could utter poetry spontaneously, virtually extempore. (28)

Greer goes on briefly to examine Barbauld’s domestic Muse. In her short reading, Greer implies that Barbauld is one of “those unfortunate individuals” that she describes in the passage that I cited above. Specifically, Greer claims that, contrary to other late-eighteenth century female poets, “Anna Laetitia Barbauld still felt able, in 1797, to summon a domestic muse, ‘In slipshod measure loosely prattling on,’ to help her give a mock heroic account of wash-day in blank verse” (29). Indeed, Greer’s comment is another instance of contemporary critics’ misunderstanding of Barbauld. Like too many other analyses of Barbauld and her poetry, Greer’s analysis is too hasty and gravely misinterprets the domestic Muse. Though, to be sure, it is worth mentioning that Greer is correct in claiming that Barbauld’s invocation of the muse contributes to the overall mock-heroic tone of the poem<sup>44</sup>;

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<sup>44</sup> But, it should be noted that the way in which the invocation functions to emulate the mock heroic tone of the poem is sheerly ironic. In this (ironic) sense, it is a

and, in a certain sense, Barbauld *is* that “unfortunate” female poet which Greer described, that is, in the sense that Barbauld locates within herself her own “inspiration and [believes that she can] utter poetry spontaneously, virtually extempore.” However, I do not see this as unfortunate.

For Barbauld herself is, in part, the domestic Muse: she invokes and, in so doing, inspires herself to sing “the dreaded Washing-Day.” Since “Washing-Day” is both the title of the poem and the title of the domestic Muse’s song, it is more than likely that the two are indeed the same song. Which is to say, the song of “the dreaded Washing-Day” is, indeed, “Washing-Day” itself. (Yet after all the bubbles—including poetical bubbles—have burst by the songs end, the work of washing remains.) Furthermore, that “Washing-Day,” in line 8 of the invocation, is capitalized also suggests that it refers to the title of the poem. But it is also worth recognizing the possibility here that in capitalizing “Washing-Day,” Barbauld may also be mocking the tendency in Western philosophy to capitalize the first letter of major concepts—such as “Imagination,” “Poetry,” “Reason.”

In contrast to traditional Muses who were said to sing “more sweetly than the Sirens” (Greer 4), Barbauld, the “domestic Muse,” sings “the dreaded Washing-Day”—a bitter (not sweet) song about the “petty miseries of” domestic experience (28). And she sings her song in the mock-heroic genre, in the unmediated—the “Uninterrupted” (20)—“language of

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“Barbauldian allusion,” which is to say one that performatively subverts—that interrupts—such traditions as the male invocation of the muses, by exposing them as excessive and “bubbly” as child’s play. In addition, by summoning a “domestic Muse,” Barbauld interrupts the essentialist premises, such as the heretofore-discussed sex-differentiating “male-pregnancy metaphor in Renaissance accounts of the genesis of the work of art” (Greer 4), that ground the mythology of the muse itself.

gods,” “the real language of men.” Presumably, then, “Washing-Day” and “the dreaded Washing-Day” refer to, and *are*, the same song—a song wherein Barbauld sings about, of many things, “Why washings were” (79).

In another light, we might look at this curious invocation as an instance wherein, amid all the allusions to the dead texts of her forefathers, Barbauld alludes to her own poem. In line 8, then, the poem in effect alludes to itself; like a domestic Muse, Barbauld breathes into the words of her own poem, mobilizing and inspiring the poem’s words internally and eternally. Thus, when, Barbauld cries, “Come, Muse, and sing the dreaded Washing-Day,” she alludes to her own poem as it is being composed, that is, in the course of this self-inspiring and self-willing meditation. Contrary to the dead texts of her forefathers, “Washing-Day” is not a dead text, but always already in the making (and, in the final lines, in the “unmaking” of itself—of “*this*” [emphasis added; 86]). Within the dead allusion to male poets’ traditional invocations of their personal muses—particularly, to the male pregnancy metaphor that I discussed earlier—Barbauld alludes to her own poem, breathing life into a dead order. The invocation, then, is not an “unfortunate” instance of a naive female poet’s self-inspiration; for it is an entirely critical and self-aware maneuver. The allusion to “Washing-Day” itself, within the invocation, is ultimately affirming.

Moreover, unlike Greer, I do not see a female poet’s Muse-like self-inspiration in an “unfortunate” light. Rather, I see it as a positive thing for Barbauld in two respects: first, because Barbauld projects herself as the *domestic* Muse within her text, she enables herself to sing from a position of authority—a crucially important point since Barbauld has chosen for the “domestic” subject of her song a day “when the women of the family and their helpers



reigned supreme and the husbands and fathers lurked in the shrubbery or went to the office, unwanted and unattended to” (Messenger 188); second, she locates a “germ” of power inside herself, and within this female domestic experience which she is restricted to representing, that is, if she wishes to be a respected (as opposed to rejected as “slipshod”) and successful writer. Designating herself a domestic Muse, then, Barbauld exploits this male-constructed “idea” of the Muse, re-presenting herself as self-inspired and, thus, equipped to interrupt prevailing, essentialist discourses—to dull, or “mar” (45), the “glowing pencil” of her male forefathers and Romantic brethren.

However, let us return once again to Greer’s remarks upon Barbauld’s domestic Muse for a moment. Contrary to Greer’s two-line reading of “Washing-Day,” I am inclined to read Barbauld’s Muse in a second—but by no means secondary—more positive light. This reading of the Muse also explains the daemonic component to the Muse-based mythology of the “discourse of breathing.” Specifically, I read Barbauld’s “domestic Muse” in terms of another prolific meaning of the muse for eighteenth-century female poets (a meaning that Greer allots to other, “more fortunate” female poets, I suppose), namely, that the Muses were thought to be associated with “mountains and *daemonic possession*” (emphasis added; Greer 29). For, as I have been suggesting, by breathing Muse-like into the texts of her forefathers, Barbauld possesses their dead words, concomitantly—indeed interruptively—bringing them and their accompanying “slipshod”<sup>45</sup> Muses back “down to

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<sup>45</sup> Greer explains that “[a]lmost as soon as Homer had invoked the muse in serious fashion, poets began to use the convention mock-modestly, apologizing for their personal muses as lazy, slip-shod, barren or unlettered” (5).



earth, and turning their Muses into gossiping housewives who speak in ‘slipshod measure’ rather than in the fanciful language made correct by male poets or the polished and even lines that Barbauld herself has given credence to” (Ross 226).<sup>46</sup>

Thus, like a possessive, daemon-like “domestic Muse,” Barbauld breathes herself into the texts of her forefathers. In so doing, she interrupts this man-made myth of the Muse itself, for she converts the gendered discourse that circulates within it—a discourse that, evidently, is grounded upon the broader discourse of sexual difference—into a source of strength and self-inspiration. The breath that was hitherto hidden behind the words of her forefathers comes to the fore—just as the hidden “discourse of washing,” by which I mean the private goings on of women’s experience, comes to the fore at the highest degree. Barbauld invokes and takes up the position of the voiceless, and confers upon it a voice—albeit an inarticulate one, or one that, unlike patriarchal language and discourse, “moor[s] [not] in the value of ‘presence’” (Irigaray 75). Put differently, in Luce Irigaray’s terms, by taking up the position of the male poet’s Muse, Barbauld “convert[s] a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus begin[s] to thwart it,” which is to say,

[She] tr[ies] to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself . . . to “ideas,” in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make “visible,” by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible. . . . (Irigaray 76)

But is the Muse a figure of subordination, after all? Indeed it seems that because the

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<sup>46</sup> Ross, here, is referring to Barbauld’s “To a Lady, with some painted flowers”—that poem that Wollstonecraft so vehemently opposed in her *Vindication*.

Muse is a female being who by definition penetrates, she is an active being and an originator of male creativity. But Greer suggests that this is not the case. Rather, Greer insists, “the traditional schema of inspiration rather than enabling the woman poet, paralyses her. The more she models herself on the tradition, the more aware she is of the way it is supposed to work, the less able she will be to find her voice” (35). Contrary to Greer’s hypothesis, I want to suggest that Barbauld, as it were, “invokes” the tradition itself in order, first, to glean whatever power she can from it and, second, to thwart the male-glorifying tradition in an Irigararian-like spirit.

As Judith Butler’s eloquently puts it, “There is only a taking up of the tools where they lie, where the very ‘taking up’ is enabled by the tool lying there” (*Gender* 145). The “tools,” in this case, are the myth of the Muse and the patriarchal, gendered discourse at its core. With these tools, Barbauld “mars” the tradition of Muse (45). Simply by repeating in her own voice the (consequently occupiable) words of the invocation, Barbauld in effect “mocks the way male poets have mythologized the Muses so that they can rise above the ordinary and tedious reality of women’s domestic world” (Ross 226).<sup>47</sup> In the process, I would argue, Barbauld resubmits herself to this “idea of herself,” as Irigaray put it, that is, to the role that such patriarchal mythologies allot to women. In other words, Barbauld ekes out whatever subversive potential there is for her to exploit within the myth itself—for example, that she may be equipped, as a woman, to inspire herself to write brilliant poetry,

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<sup>47</sup> We will return again to this invocation, later on, and will see that the invocation itself, after all, is an allusion to a significant invocation in one of Shakespeare’s most famous plays.

like the domestic-Muse-inspired “Washing-Day”—and she flaunts it before the public gaze.

Empowering and authorizing herself as such, Barbauld enables herself to confront the looming voices of her forefathers—those “unwonted guests” who (if they remain uninterrupted) inhibit her creativity. She enables herself to confront those inexorable restrictions upon her life and writing, to confront that phallic “glowing pencil” which robs the female poet of her authority, blinding her with its brilliance and all-powerful luminescence, as it reigns over the literary terrain with the “clear high-sounding phrase, / Language of gods” which flows (divinely inspired) from it (2-3). By subversively taking up the figure of the Muse, she calls attention to a crucial fact embedded in the myth itself: that she has always already been there, inside him, possessing and inhabiting his very words; she has always already been there as his original, and founding repudiation. From within his discourse, then, she extracts sources of empowerment and insinuates herself, accordingly, into the words of her forefathers—“blowing” into them with daemonic breath until, like a washing-day soap bubble, they pop into nothingness.

### III. The Army of Washers

Upon invoking her Muse, Barbauld locates power and a creative will within herself to possess and to claim and thus to thwart or—as we shall see at length in the next chapter—to interrupt the words of her forefathers. In other words, by invoking the domestic Muse, Barbauld authorizes herself as a woman, and an engine of creativity, to sing “the dreaded Washing-Day.” Breathing and consequently speaking through the words of her forefathers, Barbauld “sing[s] the dreaded Washing-Day.” The effect of her “possession” of “the real language of men” in “Washing-Day” is that of a woman speaking with a kind of

patriarchal authority. Hence, the masculine tone of the song. This masculine quality of the song, however, is not only achieved by speaking in the “language of men,” but is also reinforced by the militaristic (or “pugilistic,” as Mary Poovey would say) language that Barbauld employs to represent the female labourers and the tedious labour itself on washing-day.

Examples of such militaristic rhetoric are terms like the twice-employed “dispatch”: Barbauld uses the term, first, to describe the early-morning division of the rations, as it were, of that “silent breakfast-meal”(19)—a meal that, to be sure, fuels the women for the “sad disasters” of battle that they are about to face (25); and, second, “dispatch” is “urg[ed]” by “my mother”—a matriarchal, “earthly” figure indeed (unlike the male fantasy of that ideal and breathy, phantasmatic Muse in the sky):

At intervals my mother’s voice was heard,  
Urging dispatch: briskly the work went on,  
All hands employed to wash, to rinse, to wring,  
To fold, and starch, and clap, and iron, and plait. (74-77)

The mother, or the matriarchal figure whose “voice was heard”—like the child poet that we discussed earlier—is another figure of the poet herself within the poem since Barbauld, too, takes up a similar kind of authority as she wages war against her forefathers. Moreover, in this passage, the “rolling Miltonic periods” and the “loose prattling on,” which characterize the poem rhythmically and stylistically, cease when the text takes on the more serious task of representing the tedious and mechanical nature of domestic work. To accomplish this task, the poem takes a turn to a more regulated, metrical iambic pentametre. It is curious that Barbauld suddenly confines or in effect contains the poem at this point. Indeed, the sudden



change of rhythm makes this passage conspicuous: the monosyllabic, monotonous series of infinitive verbs distinguishes this part of the poem from the (Miltonic) blank verse—that uncontained, flamboyant, “loose-prattling” gossip—which characterizes the rest of the poem; the language is plain, artless like the work it represents. In addition, the sheer mechanicalness of the lines makes it seem as if these women are not humans, but machines—technological innovations which reflect the evolving technology of the time. To put it differently, in relation to the epigraph of “Washing-Day” (which alludes to Jaques’s speech in *As You Like It*), it is as if the women are “merely players; / They have their exits and their entrances” (II.vii.139-40). Similar to Jaques’s players, these female workers are like puppets on a string held tightly by bourgeois regulatory regimes: the work is predictable, cyclical and inevitable. It is as if they are being moved, rather than moving themselves through these mechanical motions. To be sure, that these verbs are infinitive also takes any direct emphasis off the subjects of the action. The tightly controlled metre that Barbauld takes up in this passage conveys not only the monotonous, circular and controlled activity of washing, but also creates a pounding effect—a violent folding, starching and clapping of the page itself, as it were. The motions are forceful, sheerly physical. The word “iron,” in particular, makes one think of these women as warriors. Indeed, they are an army—Barbauld’s army: “all hands employed” in an organized and contained fashion, the “red-arm’d washers” battle against the “loaded lines” that endeavour to confine them (emphasis added; 14, 26).

The phrase “red-arm’d washers” is another example of such militaristic rhetoric in “Washing-Day.” Barbauld writes: “. . . ere the first gray streak of dawn, / The red-arm’d washers come and chase repose” (13-14). “Arm’d” suggests that these washerwomen are

armed for the long battle that they are about to face this day, and every other day. That they come with “the first grey streak of dawn” suggests the cyclical and monotonous—“grey”—routine by which they live. On this “Washing-Day,” Barbauld invokes the “red-army” with the call of the Muse to battle those forefathers whose lines would have them choked.

Indeed, “the red-arm’d washers” are the most colourful, and thus conspicuous figures in the poem. They “turn us again” to Barbauld’s invocation of the domestic Muse (epigraph). Like “Washing-Day,” the domestic Muse is a heterogeneous body. We might deduce that she or “they” is/are precisely “their voice, / . . . [that] pipes / and whistles in its [his] sound” (*As You Like It* II.vii.161-3) in the poem’s epigraph.<sup>48</sup> I want to suggest here that, in addition to Barbauld herself, the red-arm’d washers are invoked in the invocation of the domestic Muse. They, too, are the “domestic Muse” that Barbauld summons to help her in the battle against the looming presences of her forefathers. Invoking the domestic Muse, the speaker summons: “Come, Muse, and sing the dreaded Washing-Day” (8). In response to the speakers’ call to the domestic Muse to “Come,” the “red-arm’d washers *come* and chase repose” (emphasis added; 14). It is as if Barbauld summons them and, following her summoning, the washerwomen answer by “coming” with the dawn, colouring the dismal, grey domestic scene with the blood of their working hands. Appending Barbauld’s

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<sup>48</sup> The variorum edition of *As You Like It* explains that “his” is the “usual possessive of *it*” (Knowles 137). In earlier versions of the play, “his” takes the place of “it” in this phrase. Barbauld has chosen “it,” evidently—a minute interruption of “his big manly voice” (*As You Like It* II.vii.1140) that, in turn, Barbauld also interrupts—or “unsexes,” as it were—reclaiming it as “their voice.”

invocation of her creative will, then, is the “sister-invocation” of this “red-arm[y],” of gossiping “Muses” who come to Barbauld’s aid in the battle with the haunting presences of her forefathers. More precisely, in the invocation of the “red-armed washers,” Barbauld invokes her sister Muse to come to her aid in her psychic battle: the washerwoman poet, Mary Collier (1690?-c.1762).

However, before invoking Barbauld’s washerwomen sister-battler(s), as it were, I wish briefly to address a related problem in contemporary analyses of “Washing-Day”—namely, that critics have confined themselves to the poem’s obvious allusions to texts by men. A case in point is the canonical text to which Messenger links “the red-armed washers.” In her synopsis of the myriad allusions in “Washing-Day,” Messenger claims that the “red-armed washers” who colour the dawn in “Washing-Day” allude to Homer: “Homer’s ‘rosy-fingered dawn’ gets an ironic twist when Mrs. Barbauld’s dawn produces a ‘gray streak’ accompanied by ‘red-armed washers’” (190). This allusion is also possible, to be sure. However, I want to insist that we do not preclude the less obvious allusions to noncanonical poets in our reading of “Washing-Day” and, by extension, of female Romantic poetry in general. As we shall see at length momentarily, the allusion to Collier is just as conceivable in this context as Messenger’s suggestion of Barbauld’s allusion to Homer. For one thing, like Barbauld’s “dreaded Washing-Day,” Collier’s representation of her experience of washing-days (which, for her, presumably occurs more than once a month) begins at dawn. Collier writes, “At length bright *Sol* illuminates the Skies, / And summons drowsy Mortals to arise / Then comes our Mistress to us without fail” (168-70).

On the other side of the problem of contemporary, “gendered” (mis)readings of



Barbauld's allusions is that in Donna Landry's brief analysis of "Washing-Day." In her reading of the poem, Landry does not conceal her aversion to "Washing-Day." She holds Barbauld in contempt for disregarding the subjectivities of "the red-armed washers," for not giving them a voice:

Who are these Muses who have turned gossips? Not, it would seem, those of the plebeian georgic tradition, for no mention is made of laboring-class women's verse, of Collier's representation of washing-day from the perspective of the 'red-armed washers,' of Leapor's disclosure of the domestic economy of the country house, of Yearsley's rural prospects seen from the milkwoman's point of view. Barbauld pays no attention to class differences across the scene of women's writing; this self-parodic "women's" poem claims to take its place in a tradition of domestic verse within which the perspective and the possible articulations, of the "red-armed washers" have become once more invisible, unthinkable. Barbauld writes as if addressing such a domestic topic were newly fashionable, as if the province of such verse belonged to privileged women writers like herself, "loosely prattling on," in ever greater numbers, of domestic events and rural simplicity where Milton once tackled sublimer subjects, but doing so from a leisured perspective, surrounded by and made possible by silent female servants. (272)

I disagree with Landry's contention on several counts. For one thing, Barbauld alludes specifically to Collier within the pool of male voices that make up "Washing-Day." Second, as I have been suggesting throughout, the key to this poem is precisely the fact that it is written in the language of men. How, then, is Barbauld to give washerwomen a voice if she herself is not given an "articulate" voice throughout the poem (and even in the more auto-graphical moments in the poem)? Also, if we concede that Barbauld speaks with a patriarchal sort of authority, then why *would* the red-armed washers be given a voice? To be sure, if they were to have a voice in the poem, they would simply be other versions of Milton's Eve, Wordsworth's Dorothy, Coleridge's Sarah—ventriloquial vessels that are given words in



order to strengthen and support the thoughts of the men who write them. Third, it is clear that Barbauld was indeed concerned with systems of class difference—especially in light of the fact that she was writing among a class of female writers who were "distinctly class-biased in favor of the middle class" (Mellor, *Gender* 59). More indicative of Barbauld's awareness is a letter that she wrote to a friend, which explained that her poem "To the Poor" (1795) was inspired "by indignation on hearing sermons in which the poor are addressed in a manner which evidently shows the design of making religion an engine of government" (qtd. in Castle 228). The letter shows that Barbauld was indeed critical of insidious "engines of government." Indeed, that Barbauld wrote various poems concerning issues of the oppression and misery of those less fortunate than herself—such as "To the Poor," "The Rich and the Poor," and the abolition essay "Epistle to William Wilberforce," to name a few—is a case in point.<sup>49</sup> The argument that follows functions in part as a response to Landry's very problematic misreading.<sup>50</sup>

In contrast to both Landry's and Messenger's readings, I want to suggest that the allusions in "Washing-Day" are not gendered, as Messenger suggests, and do not preclude writers of the plebeian georgic tradition. Rather, there are other important, non-canonical

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<sup>49</sup> It is interesting to note that the last lines of "To the Poor" (1795), which entreat the "Child of distress" to "Prepare to meet a Father undismayed, / Nor fear the God whom priests and kings have made" ("To the Poor" 1, 21-2), recall the final lines of Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper" in his *Songs of Innocence* (1794): "And because I am happy & dance & sing, / They think they have done me no injury, / And are gone to praise God & his Priest & King, / Who make up a heaven of our misery" (9-12).

<sup>50</sup> For additional criticism of Landry's argument, see Kraft's "Anna Laetitia Barbauld's 'Washing-Day' and the Montgolfier Balloon."

pretexts to "Washing-Day,"—pretexts that are not (and, according to the dominant gendered generic codes, cannot be) "loaded" with "clear high-sounding phrase" (26, 2). For the purposes of this analysis, one important non-canonical pretext stands out. As I implied earlier, this pretext is summoned in the inaugural invocation of the domestic Muse: Collier's *The Woman's Labour: an Epistle to Mr. Stephen Duck in Answer to his late Poem, called The Thresher's Labour*, 1739.<sup>51</sup> As its title indicates, *The Woman's Labour* was written by Collier in response to a poem composed by Stephen Duck, a male labourer and colleague of Collier. In his poem, Duck accuses female labourers of gossiping instead of hay-making (Jones 158). Responding to Duck's unfounded accusation, Collier gives graphic accounts of the every-day miseries of women's labour. Such accounts are echoed in Barbauld's "Washing-Day." For example, the "red arms" of the washers recall Collier's description of her work as a washerwoman: "Not only Sweat, but Blood runs trickling down / Our Wrists and Fingers; still our Work demands / The constant action of our lab'ring Hands" (185-187). Barbauld follows Collier's lead by emphasizing the arms and hands of working women on washing-day—"red-arms," "impatient hand / Twitched off when showers impend" (43), "all hands employed" (76). The repeated references to hands stresses physical activity (versus passivity) and, in keeping with the poem's militaristic undertones, suggests "hands of power" and, thereby, reflects the reality that "[w]omen had power on washing day" (Messenger 188). Another perhaps more striking instance of

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<sup>51</sup> Collier's *The Woman's Labour* was published in 1739. A second, expanded edition of this text, which included an autobiographical preface, was subsequently published in 1762—which is, evidently, in and around Barbauld's time.

Barbauld's allusion to *The Woman's Labour* is the phrase "all hands employed" (76), which alludes to Collier's "Had we ten hands, we could employ them all . . . We have hardly ever *Time to dream*" (emphasis Collier's; qtd. in Ferguson 11).<sup>52</sup> That, after watching "all hands employed" to work, Barbauld "little dream[s]" (81), also suggests a correlation to Collier's little "*Time to dream*." Barbauld's allusion to Collier in effect suggests that both women as women can little dream of flying in the dreamy world of men, whatever their class may be.

In addition to alluding to Collier, Barbauld follows Collier's lead in elevating "gossip" to a respectable art form. In *The Woman's Labour* Collier does not simply deny Duck's claim, but exploits and revels in it, as Moira Ferguson explains:

A proud Collier announces that conversation, including gossip, constitutes a special pleasure for women—perhaps (she hints) because they have something worth saying. The gossip that Duck disparages perpetuates—in Collier's view—communal values, and just as much to the point, an opportunity for art. (Ferguson 10).

For Collier, then, sources of gossip—i.e., those "petty miseries of life" (28)—stimulate creative juices. Similarly, in "Washing-Day," gossip is also a source of imaginative stimulation, as Kraft suggests:

Washing-day activity brought together women of three distinct classes—the washerwomen, the mistress of the house, and the household maids. And it is the maids from whom the speaker remembers sensing the import of the day. . . .

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<sup>52</sup> For an informative discussion of Collier's work and her struggle as a lower-class woman writer, see Moira Ferguson's *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets: Nation, Class, and Gender* in which she hails Collier's work as "a sustained feminist manifesto of both famous and deprived, unrecognized people. . . .[S]he signed herself as an individual who was proud to voice the unvoiced" (24-5).



[T]he initial reference to gossip would suggest [that] it also provides access to the world outside the home, another source of imaginative stimulation. Washerwomen were notorious sources of gossip—in fact the muse of washing-day [sic] might very well be considered the red-armed washer that comes into the house from the outside. . . .Gossip and information passed from washerwoman to maid to mistress to household, stimulating the imagination which in turn often engendered the sympathy for the less fortunate others. . . .Gossip and information passed from washerwoman to maid to mistress to household, stimulating the imagination which in turn often engendered the sympathy for the less fortunate others Landry finds so absent from "Washing-Day." (34)<sup>53</sup>

Artistic inspiration may thus be generated from women's mundane domestic experience. But, as important, the imagination is stimulated and cultivated by communal activity—by "all hands" working together to keep the household in order. And the washerwomen's gossip provides a healthy link between "all hands" of all classes of women on this day. This communal aesthetic experience surely contradicts her forefathers' imperative of "Musing in solitude" (Wordsworth, "Home at Grasmere" 2).

In fact, Mellor explains that an oral tradition, which included "ballads, folk-tales, fairy tales, 'old wives' tales,' and gossip" was sustained by the eighteenth-century lower class women (Mellor 5). Such noncanonical genres are featured in "Washing-Day" as outstanding memories in the poet-child's mind:

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<sup>53</sup> Kraft also talks about a letter written to Barbauld by her brother, John Aikin, in 1779. This letter reveals that eighteenth-century washerwomen were notorious for bringing gossip from the outside into the home. In the letter, Aikin informs Barbauld of the "gossip" brought in by the washerwomen in regard to "the problems the working class were then experiencing" (Kraft 34). To this, I would add that the gossip of the washerwoman is portrayed here as a healthy link between the classes, relaying the hardships of lower-class life to the middle-upper classes. The letter, and "Washing-Day"'s references to gossip, reveal that washing-day, of many things, was a democratic day.



I well remember, when a child, the awe  
 This day struck into me; for then the maids,  
 I scarce knew why, looked cross, and drove me from them:  
 Nor soft caress could I obtain, nor hope  
 Usual indulgencies; jelly or creams,  
 Relic of costly suppers, and set by  
 For me their petted one; or buttered toast,  
 When butter was forbid; or thrilling tale  
 Of ghost or witch or murder. . . . (58-66)

For Barbauld, these "thrilling tales" were "Usual indulgencies," and favourite memories of her childhood. This is suggested by the fact that they are gravely missed by the child on washing-day. Because there are no tales on washing-day, the child is forced to seek artistic stimulation elsewhere: "—so I went / And sheltered me beside the parlour fire" (66-7). In this case, the "parlour fire" recalls Prometheus' fire—that symbol of man's originality, creativity, imagination and courage. But this parlour fire symbolizes a domestic imagination, one inspired by the mundane, by community and the "petty" stuff of life.

With the invocation of the domestic Muse, Barbauld invokes a myriad inspirational figures to help her fight off the intimidating presences of her forefathers and to authorize her (and their) authorship. Alluding to Collier and continuing Collier's enterprise of elevating the status of the oral tradition, Barbauld lifts a multi-classed community of "bowed soul[s]" from "beneath the yoke of wedlock" (10, 9). These figures, in response to Barbauld's invocation, "come" and fill the tumultuous stage of Barbauld's psyche with colourful gossip and inspired, "thrilling tales": "the red-arm'd washers come"; they "Come . . . and sing the dreaded Washing-Day" and "all the petty miseries of life" (28).

As domestic Muses, Collier and the gossiping "red-arm'd washers" enter the scene

of "Washing-Day" to sing "in slipshod measure" the "earthly" goings-on of woman's experience:

. . . loosely prattling on  
 Of farm or orchard, pleasant curds and cream,  
 Or drowning flies, or shoe lost in the mire  
 By little whimpering boy, with rueful face. . . . (4-7)

Yet this "loosely prattling on" comes not without the presence of a looming forefather—namely, Shakespeare—since, as I demonstrated earlier, this low-sounding phrase is replete with allusions to Shakespeare's *As You Like it* and *A Winter's Tale*. In addition, the term "slipshod" is a direct allusion Pope's "slip-shod Sybil" in Book III of his *Dunciad*. (I will elaborate upon the implicit significance of this allusion in the next chapter.) Ultimately, Barbauld's mélange of allusions to both male and female poets effects an oxymoronic high-sounding gossip, as it were. These are perfect examples of the ways in which Barbauld "cross[es]" (44) "loaded lines" (26) of her forefathers' "musings" (45) with the "loaded" clotheslines of female, domestic experience. The "crossing" of these antithetical poles is precisely the battle in Barbauld's head between intimidating presences of her forefathers and the Muse-like, inspiring tales of her foremothers.

By figuring the battle on the stage of "the dreaded Washing-Day," Barbauld garners power and authority. Indeed, she possesses patriarchal authority, militaristic as it is. She gathers power and inspiration, and takes up this authorial tool and, in so doing, exposes the contingent nature of patriarchal discourse, that is, the nature of such discourses to be grounded upon a constructed essentialism that favours men and, thus, the male body (since binary sexuality, itself a cultural construction, comes down to a

biological essentialism); in short, she exposes the nature of such discourses to make men "mean" by demeaning women. She does so precisely by *performing* patriarchal authority. In the course of this process, like many of her contemporaries, Barbauld *re*-presents women's domestic experience. That is, she "contest[s] the patriarchal doctrine of the separate spheres by articulating a very different domestic ideology," "a counter-public sphere" (Mellor, *Gender* 84)—one that is alive, threatening, and growing in magnitude. An army, a bonded community of women is in the making. Together, with her foremothers, in the heterogeneous figure of the domestic Muse, Barbauld interrupts the patriarchal subject's univocal reign, "marr[ing] [his] musings" with her "crossing lines" (45,44).

#### IV. The body of the mind: "A Home for Art"<sup>54</sup>

Thus far I have been discussing the battle that Barbauld has staged in her mind in order to interrupt the looming presences of oppressive forefathers. Now, let us set this stage.<sup>55</sup> Rather, let us explore the stage of Barbauld's mind as she has set it for her meditation, and of course for us, in "Washing-Day." First, let us consider the impact of the eighteenth-century washing-day. Indeed, as Barbauld demonstrates, it was a "dreaded" event. This "dreaded" day was in fact a "major event in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century households" (Messenger 187). In her study, *Women, Work, and Sexual Politics in*

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<sup>54</sup>I have borrowed this subtitle from Mary Favret's essay "A Home for Art: Painting, Poetry, and Domestic Interiors."

<sup>55</sup>Note that this is indeed a "stage" that is being set. Again, in relation to *As You Like It*, this stage is located in the domestic theatre, rather than Shakespeare's "wide and universal theater" "wherein we play in" (*As You Like It*, II.vii. 137,139).

*Eighteenth-Century England*, Bridget Hill explains precisely how “dreaded” washing-days were:

Just what demands the washing of clothes imposed on a household is suggested by the infrequency of wash-days. Dirty washing tended to be accumulated, sometimes for as long as two months. Many diarists, both men and women, thought washday an event of sufficient importance, as a rare and noteworthy occurrence, to comment on it. . . . Washing was clearly a household activity that made an impression on all members of the household. . . . [George Woodward, the East Hendred parson] dreaded “the continual fuss and stir there would be with wet clothes.” (110)

Furthermore, washing-day, it seems, loomed as large on the home-front as the intimidating presences of Barbauld’s forefathers loomed within her own mind.<sup>56</sup> Messenger writes that the washing day

loomed as large on the domestic front as the siege of Troy or Heaven on the international or cosmic. It was a day when nothing else could be done, when the women of the family and their helpers reigned supreme and the husbands and fathers lurked in the shrubbery or went to the office, unwanted and unattended to. (188)

It is no surprise, then, that Barbauld chose the chaotic household of washing-day as the locus for her “Washing-Day”—that is, for her self-authorizing meditation. For, to be sure, the home-front on washing-day is the ideal locus at which to garner a commensurate power and thus to begin to thwart the looming spectres of her forefathers with it. Accordingly, Barbauld sets the stage by re-constructing the domestic home that holds this event. But, as I shall

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<sup>56</sup> By extension, the forefathers and washing-day itself are, in effect, complementary or rather antithetical forms of intimidation—or better, things that demand or compel attention. I wish to thank David L. Clark for helping me to think this through.



demonstrate in this section, the home that Barbauld re-constructs is a trope for something (m)other.

Before setting up the household, though, Barbauld clears it. For the stage must be cleared in order for her figuratively to clear her mind for the task of poetry-writing: “they have lost / The buskined step, and clear high-sounding phrase, / Language of gods. . . . (1-2). In these opening lines of the poem, Barbauld clears the stage of the excessive props of patriarchal discourses that are embedded in her mind (perhaps she is clearing the set of Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, evoked in the epigraph). Barbauld requires an “earthly,” domestic set to house her Muses. For her Muses are not “god”-like, but are of the blood and dirt of “earthly” life. It is only upon cleaning or “washing” this male excess from her mind that Barbauld can set the stage with a domestic household—presumably the household of her childhood—and proceed to augur in the domestic Muse and her “red-armed” chorus from the wings of the stage. Immediately in the beginning of her meditation, then, Barbauld clears her mind of patriarchal excess. Having cleared the set, she proceeds to construct the domestic household on this stage of her mind.

But it will become clear in this discussion of the set of “Washing-Day” that the domestic household that Barbauld constructs is interruptive: the chaos, disorderliness, unpredictability and earthiness by which it is characterized diverges from the ways in which the male Romantic poets “internalize[d] and idealize[d]—even spectralize[d]” the home (Favret 62). In Samuel Coleridge’s “Fears in Solitudes,” for instance, he suggests that “the home should recall ‘nature’s quietness / And solitary musings,’ not gothic ‘fears’” (Favret

61). As we shall see, by re-constructing the home in all its earthy, chaotic splendor, Barbauld interrupts such “bubbly” domestic idealities.<sup>58</sup>

The first image of the household that Barbauld (re)constructs is “the wet kitchen” (19). This inaugural image of the home on washing-day tropes the female body. In particular, it is an image of the pregnant womb. This instance in fact is not the first in which Barbauld evokes the female body as a vital trope. The most obvious instance of this occurs in her “To a little invisible Being who is expected soon to become visible” (1795). It is from this poem that I have extracted the significant Barbauldian trope, “Germ.” This trope, like the bulk of Barbauld’s writing, is ambivalent: it signifies both an essential origin and a contaminant. The term is introduced in the opening line of Barbauld’s “To a little invisible Being who is expected soon to become visible” (1795). “Germ” is the very first word of the poem. Addressing her fetus, the presumably pregnant speaker exclaims, “Germ of new life,” and later asks “What powers lie folded in thy curious frame” (1, 5). That “Germ” is the first, or original, word of the poem suggests that the “little invisible Being who is expected soon to become visible” is indeed the poem itself, about to “Launch on the living world, and spring [in] to [the] light!” of public discourse (30). This poem, then,—like most of Barbauld’s poems—is curiously self-reflexive.<sup>59</sup> Which is to say, it reflects upon the processes of its own

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<sup>58</sup> According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the word “bubble” is said to have signified “dupe,” “a deceptive show,” in addition to its more common meanings (a very thin film of soap forming a ball around air, and anything sphere-like—i.e., Montgolfier’s hot-air balloon).

<sup>59</sup> I will talk at length about the self-reflexivity of the very last line of “Washing-Day,” later on. These lines are paradigmatic of Barbauld’s clever self-reflexivity which, in turn, tells us that we must read her poetry with a careful and critical eye, and that her

making. However, in terms of the negative connotation of “Germ,” that Barbault opens the poem with this word also suggests that “invisible Being” is fundamentally self-different—it embodies within it the contaminants that threaten to unmake the poem’s own making.

In “invisible Being,” Barbault evidently locates that ambivalent “germ” of poetry-writing within the maternal body which in turn, as we shall see in the case of “Washing-Day,” is also an ambivalent image for Barbault. Already in the earlier poem, “invisible Being,” we see that Barbault does not exploit the notion of female parturition for its tropological creative potential, as do contemporary French feminists like Julia Kristeva, and Hélène Cixous. Rather, like “germ,” the image of the maternal body is ambivalent: it occupies a conflicted position both within life and death. For instance, in “invisible Being,” Barbault tropes the womb a “living tomb” (20), and the newborn infant a “little captive” who is expected soon to “burst thy [presumably *his*] prison doors” (29). The maternal speaker implores the “germ of new life” to escape from the dark tomb that is her womb, to “Launch on the living world, and spring to light!” (30). The maternal body in this poem is thus portrayed as dead, a prison, dark and mysterious—“life’s mysterious gate” (4). It seems that the “Mother” (26), rather than the fetus, is the “invisible Being”—but she is always only “*soon to become visible,*” never finally visible.

It is curious that Barbault herself would write such a poem and that she would evoke the maternal experience at all because she never actually gave birth in her lifetime; she adopted her nephew. That she never had a child of her own is reflected in such metaphors

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poems function on various levels of expression.

as “the living tomb,” in “invisible Being.” Nonetheless, it was not unusual for eighteenth-century women to write about motherhood since the bourgeois society was excessively preoccupied with regulating the maternal body; and female poets responded to this preoccupation by resisting such regulations. As Mellor explains, in the eighteenth century, an “increased cultural demand that mothers breast-feed their own infants [was] prominently advocated by Rousseau and promulgated in the conduct-books and medical treatises of the eighteenth century, and was widely reflected in the texts of the male Romantic writers” (*Gender* 81). As a result of this outpouring of conduct books and demands on the maternal body, Mellor suggests, “female writers concern[ed] themselves with the various ways in which the socially constructed role of motherhood can be *performed*” (*Gender* 81; 83).

Nevertheless, the bourgeois society’s preoccupation with child-rearing and the maternal body no doubt affected the lives of women who like Barbauld did not bear children. Where do such prevailing discourses leave the barren woman? Is she indeed a “living tomb”? What kind of “subject” is she if she is not a maternal one? In “Invisible Being” and, less obviously, in “Washing-Day,” Barbauld’s repeated allusions to birth and the maternal experience suggest that she is grappling with such questions; and, as a self-healing mechanism in her meditative poetry-writing, she “breathes” into this patriarchal imperative that the female subject is a maternal one, and performs the maternal body in these poems. Barbauld’s own adoption of her nephew is an example of such a “performance” within her own life: she is not the natural mother but a mother nonetheless; she *performs* the role. If she can perform it, then anyone can, regardless of their sex. Motherhood, then, is



threateningly interrogated by Barbauld and her female counterparts. By way of this resistant performance, Barbauld, like other maternal performers, “opens the possibility that men as well as women can and should fulfill the role of responsible motherhood,” re-presents motherhood as “a learned rather than instinctual practise” and, consequently, interrupts “a hegemonic domestic ideology” (Mellor, *Gender* 83).

“Turning again,” then, to “Washing-Day,” if we concede that “the wet kitchen” signifies the amniotic-fluid-filled, pregnant womb, then what significance does this have for Barbauld’s battle with the looming presences of her forefathers? To answer this question we must turn, yet again, to “the red-armed washers.” Of their many connotations, the washers, with their red arms, signify nurses who aid in the “birthing” of the poem; analogously, as I have demonstrated, “the red-armed washers” are invoked with/as the domestic Muse to aid Barbauld in her psychic battle with the looming presence of her forefathers, a necessary battle in her process of poetry-writing. At a metaphorical level, then, as midwives “the red-armed” washers are figured yet again as instrumental helpers in the “birthing” process of “Washing-Day.” By evoking a maternal setting and filling it with maternal figures, Barbauld focuses on another aspect of maternity: the “labour” of childbirth. The labour of poetry writing, of interrupting and battling the “loaded lines” of her forefathers is as significant an aspect as is the “birthing” of the poem. To be sure, this notion is further suggested by the labouring “red-armed washers” or midwives.

This is not to say that Barbauld is “writing the body,” as today’s French feminists endeavour to do—i.e., Cixous who advocates the “female-sexed text” and claims that “she [woman] writes in white ink,” in “that good mother’s milk” (343). I am not suggesting that

Barbauld “writes in *red ink*,” as it were. After all, we have already seen that the activity of “writing the body” for many female Romantic poets is performative. The performance of the maternal body in turn interrupts such biologically essentialist imperatives concerning the female maternal body by demonstrating through performance that motherhood is a role that can be performed by men and women alike.

To be sure, such a performance in “Washing-Day” is all too implicit. As we will see in the next chapter, “interruption” functions as implicitly as images of the maternal body in the poem—similar to the implicit level at which canonical texts themselves, and bourgeois heteronormative regimes regulate and produce the bourgeois subject (and, most forcefully, the bourgeois maternal “subject”). Nonetheless, despite their implicitness, the poem’s subtle allusions to the maternal body are interruptive: Barbauld interrupts phallogocentric discourse which locates power (including artistic power) in the male body and, particularly, in the phallus. She accomplishes this as follows: in the same way that Barbauld resubmits herself to the manmade female Muse, she converts this “prison” in which she is confined (“invisible Being” 29)—that is, the female body—into a subversive locus of power. That is, she confronts the looming presences of her forefathers with that excessive, mysterious, dark and sexual body that they attempt to claim and contain. In other words, she confronts her forefathers with that which haunts *them*—that inscrutable inside of the maternal body which is horrifically uncanny. Moreover, by publishing the poem, Barbauld brings the hidden, private realm—i.e., “the horrors of maternal bowels” (Kristeva 53), “yawning rents /

Gap[ing] wide as Erebus” (37-8),<sup>59</sup> and “the petty miseries of [domestic] life” (28)—into the public eye; thereby, she “collaps[es] the border between inside and outside” in the very act of writing “Washing-Day” (Kristeva 53).<sup>60</sup> Thus Barbauld sets the stage of her psychic battle in “the wet kitchen” and, later, in “snug recess impervious” (39)—another tropologically maternal terrain—that he “who call’st [him]self perchance the master there” cannot “hope to find” on this “Washing-Day” (34, 39). The phallic, “glowing pencil” is banned from these “impervious” recesses in the body of Barbauld’s mind. The male forefather is censored, just as the female body is censored from public discourse.

In “Washing-Day,” then, Barbauld relocates the locus of the imagination in the female body and in female experience, consequently blurring the boundaries between outside-inside, mind-body, and public-private: her private meditation becomes public property, the Romantic house of the mind becomes a (hybrid) mental house of the body and, finally, hidden discourses are publicly exposed at the highest degree.

The washerwoman herself is a tropological figure for women’s hidden experiences. Historically, the eighteenth-century washerwoman has notably been hidden from history in the effort, I suppose, to construct the household as a haven for the male Romantic “muser.” The washerwoman has been extraordinarily little-documented in history books; her work, like the swollen maternal body, has long been “hidden” from the public

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<sup>59</sup> “Erebus” comes from Greek mythology; it is a realm of darkness en route to Hades (Goldrick-Jones and Rosengarten 153n.3). This image juxtaposes such images as Montgolfier’s balloon “Rid[ing] buoyant through the clouds” (83).

<sup>60</sup> We will turn again to the “devouring mother” in the latter half of the analysis (Kristeva 54).

eye (Hill 155)—dissolved in the ideality of public discourse. Patricia Malcolmson has explained that the washerwoman's work was considered "too commonplace, too rough and too undramatic to attract much interest or public attention" (qtd. in Hill 155). Analogous to the hidden drudgery of women's work, the female body was also concealed from the public eye. Accordingly, by entering the washerwoman and the maternal body into public discourse—that is, by committing her meditation to paper and circulating it among the literary, public masses—Barbauld brings hidden female experience to the fore at the highest degree, confronting the male literary community with *she* whose unregulated presence they would shudder at. Thus, by placing the meditative battle at the home-front and, tropologically, in the maternal body, Barbauld makes the private public: she disrupts the private/public dichotomy and, by extension, the doctrine of separate spheres, as these subversive female figures, from within "the language of men" that makes up the poem itself, become legible—subversively bleeding through, and thus threatening to rupture, the borders of patriarchal discourse.

The signs of such rupture are everywhere apparent on the stage of "Washing-Day." Figures of rupture appear in the poem as images of chaos and disorder. Kraft has already noted that "throughout ["Washing-Day"], it is the chaos, the disorder imposed by washing-day that is stressed, rather than either its own special order or the ordered household that springs from the day's confusion" (31). Such images of chaos include "drowning flies, or shoe lost in the mire" (6), "dirt and gravel stains / Hard to efface" (25-6), the domestic "cat / . . . scared and reeking hearth" (16-17), "yawning rents / Gap[ing] wide as Erebus" (37-8), and so on.



These images are also signs of the interruption that Barbauld instigates by crossing hidden female experience and public male “high-sounding phrase”—both, I underscore, represented to be socially-constructed and -positioned to suit bourgeois ideals. For this reason, as well, the entire poem appears unbalanced and catachrestic. As Messenger playfully puts it,

[c]learly, the events of such a day are not true epic matter: no pagan or Christian heroes wage war with Troy or Satan. The domestic is, by definition, less significant—so much so that one feels even Milton struggling to maintain his elevation of tone when Eve prepares a fruit salad for Adam and Raphael; bathetically, she has ‘No fear lest Dinner coole’ (5:396) when their protracted conversation makes them late. (188)

However, this catachresis—this mismatch—works strategically to throw into relief the excessiveness of male language and of the perceived female body. Barbauld reveals that patriarchal language, after all, only really represents its own excess, its own “indulgencies” (63); meanwhile, she reveals the sad fact that women’s (socially-regulated) experience inadequately meets women’s desires.

Turning again to the stage of Barbauld’s mind/body, I want to suggest not only that the disorder in “Washing-Day” reflects a dissolution of the private-public boundary and the catachresis of the crossing of male discourse with female experience, but also that Barbauld’s stress on chaos and disorder in the poem (as Kraft put it) reflects her disordered, conflicted state of mind, confused as it is between the desire to conform to the bourgeois codes of “femininity” and “literature,” and her own resistant impulse to (re)fashion herself and to write freely.

Having taken us through the hidden depths of the female body, then, Barbauld lights

the “parlour fire”:

... —so I went  
 And sheltered me beside the parlour fire:  
 There my dear grandmother, eldest of forms,  
 Tended the little ones, and watched from harm,  
 Anxiously fond, though oft her spectacles  
 With elfin cunning hid, and oft the pins  
 Drawn from her ravelled stocking, might have soured  
 One less indulgent.—(66-73)

Reminiscent of the Promethean original, courageous and creative fire, the parlour fire takes on analogous attributes: it stimulates a series of imaginative memories, self-projections and fantasies. First, by the time Barbauld writes this poem, she is around fifty-four years old. At this late age, she has had her share of monthly washing-days, to be sure: as a child; as a “housewife notable” (31); as a mother; and, finally, as the “dear grandmother, eldest of forms” that she is at the time in which she writes “Washing-Day” (68). In the attempt to fashion herself, as she battles the spectres in her mind, Barbauld looks back upon the various roles she has played (or performed) and the relationships she has garnered throughout her life. She saturates the poem with various self-projections that in turn effect a cyclical narrative of the “ages of woman” (hence the epigraphic allusion to Jaques’s speech on the seven ages of Man in *As You like It*, to which I will return at length in the next chapter).<sup>62</sup> “Dear grandmother, eldest of forms,” for instance, not only alludes to Milton’s

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<sup>62</sup> I say “cyclical” because of the way in which the self-projections are placed: from the housewife, to the child, to the grandmother, the mother, and finally back to the child. Since the child and the poet are rhetorically identical, and since the domestic Muse is a figure for the poet, it seems that the poem indeed comes full-circle, beginning and ending with the figure of an essentially ageless poet.

"Night, Eldest of things," as Messenger suggests (189-90),<sup>63</sup> but also to the sixth age of Jaques's speech, (this is the age to which the epigraph of "Washing-Day" alludes as well) (72):

. . . The sixth age shifts  
 Into the lean and slippered pantaloon,  
 With spectacles on nose and pouch on side;  
 His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide  
 For his shrunk shank, and his big manly voice,  
 Turning again toward childish treble, pipes  
 And whistles in his sound. . . (157-163)

Jaques's "spectacles on nose and pouch on side" resemble Barbauld's "spectacles" and "the ravelled stocking" from whence the grandmother draws her pins (70, 72). This "cunning" figure of the grandmother, moreover, also functions in a certain sense like Barbauld's "Germ"—specifically, in terms of its twofold self-reflexivity: the pin at "dear grandmother"'s side mirrors the poet stitching the mock-heroic cloak of "Washing-Day" (as the poet-weaver)<sup>64</sup>; concomitantly, the pin threatens to unmake the poem, to pop the bubble that—as Barbauld asserts in the final line—"this verse . . . [is] most of all" (86). This double movement is reflected in Barbauld's description of "my dear grandmother": "Anxiously fond, though oft her spectacles / With elfin cunning hid" (70-1). Here, beside the parlour fire, lies Barbauld's innermost anxiety, and a hot, bubbling vexation, which "hides" behind the illusory "spectacle" of femininity.

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<sup>63</sup> This line comes from the second book of *Paradise Lost* (962).

<sup>64</sup> See Carol Shiner Wilson's "Lost Needles, Tangled Threads: Stitchery, Domesticity, and the Artistic Enterprise in Barbauld, Edgeworth, Taylor and Lamb" for a discussion of Barbauld and needlework.

The parlour fire, then, is a figure for a "domestic anxiety," by which I mean the anxiety and accompanying burning desire to unlock herself from the chains of masculine desire—that is, the desire that she nurture, nourish, please, and of course that she wash. The parlour fire is also the home of a "domestic imagination," by which I mean an imagination that is confined to household walls but has the capacity to reach outside itself and beyond "the floating bubbles . . . / To see, Mongolfier,—thy silken ball / Ride buoyant through the clouds" (81-3). The parlour fire is evoked and a rapid series of transformations ensue: the body ages and renews itself; relationships shift and expand; the bubbles of work "turn" to Montgolfier's hot-air balloon; and verse "turn[s] again" to nothingness. Like the "domestic Muse," the parlour fire is not the stuff of gods; it is not Prometheus' fire. The parlour fire serves as a locus for Barbauld's self-examination; and it is a place wherein she authorizes herself from within the regulated, domestic experience that confines her. This is *her* own, inner fire, a fire from her childhood. It represents experience, while stimulating a childlike imagination—that is, one that is free, one that can fly.

Finally, that the "dear grandmother" at the parlour fire is ultimately a figure of the poet attests to the notion that fashioning oneself is a creative, transformative process, since it involves both recreating the self within the limitations in which she finds herself as a woman writer, and transforming a patriarchal narrative into a narrative of something like a female subjectivit(ies): a plural subjectivity is implied by the various ages of herself that Barbauld represents throughout the poem, and by the "I"'s that seem as if they are stamped on the page. The various "I"'s in effect represent the three facets of the "crossings" that I discussed earlier. In short, the "I" itself is a figure of the poet: she lies across the "wet



cold sheet" of the poem, "turning again," always already "in crossing" between the two antithetical "lines" of female experience and of "the language of men." Fragments of herself, always becoming, always crossing the "line(s)."

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Discourse of Washing “Shall Mar Thy Musings”

For Barbauld and presumably for many female Romantic poets, self-authorization is an ongoing cyclical process, one that involves recurring bouts with self-doubt and authority. The “discourse of washing” reflects this cyclical process, and the endless, tiresome mental work of effacing from the mind “dirt and gravel stains / Hard to efface,” and of “chasing repose,” a peace of mind (25-6, 14). Beyond “Washing-Day”’s authoritative cloak of the mock-heroic and the “real language of men” lies a bubbling vexation that interrupts those “Uninterrupted” texts that cloak it (20), emerging most noticeably in the poem’s last lines: “Earth, air, and sky, and ocean, hath its bubbles, / And verse is one of them—this most of all.” In the same sense, what I have called a “bubbling vexation” remains interrupted—and in effect dissipated, “effaced” (26)—by these very texts that, paradoxically, give it a face. In this chapter, we will read the poem for its interruptive self-differences, which entails taking the poem beyond its face value and rereading it as the fundamentally dynamic, ironic text that it is.

#### I. Figures of Interruption

Interruption does not only occur by way of performance, that is, by way of the anxious dialogue between the poem’s cloak of male voices and the resistant pin—perhaps

one of the “pins / Drawn from [“dear grandmother’s”] ravell’d stocking” (71-2)—that threatens to unravel it (and that, in the same token, threatens to pop the bubble that “Washing-Day” becomes in its final line). Barbauld in effect stitches “interruption” into this fraying fabric of “Washing-Day.” In other words, she lays out her feminist mode of interruption for us in the rhetoric of the poem, stitching it into the cloak, as it were. Before examining the interruptive self-differences that work within the poem, let us look at “the figures of interruption” that “mar” its narrative.

By “figures of interruption,” I mean those instances of interruption that occur in the narrative of “Washing-Day”—in the diction, the rhythm and right down to the punctuation of the poem. The most paradigmatic of such instances occurs when Barbauld describes the “sad disasters” attending the “rainy washing-day” (25, 32):

For should the skies pour down, adieu to all  
Remains of quiet: then expect to hear  
Of sad disasters,—dirt and gravel stains  
Hard to efface, and loaded lines at once  
Snapped short,—and linen-horse by dog thrown down  
And all the petty miseries of life. (23-28)

The lines “and loaded lines at once / Snapped short,—” are self-reflexive on several counts (26-7). First, the line refers to Barbauld’s own “loaded lines” in “Washing-Day”—in the sense that her own lines are “high-sounding,” melodramatic and hyperbolic (2). However, “loaded lines” does not simply refer to her own lines, but also to those lines of the texts that she performs in “Washing-Day.” For the “loaded lines” of “Washing-Day” are written in

in Miltonic language, style and versification,<sup>65</sup> and with the words of Milton, Shakespeare, Pope, Burke, and so on. The figures of interruption in this passage occur when Barbauld “snaps [the loaded lines] short,—.” By ending (or stopping) this line with a dash, Barbauld performs the interruption: she in effect “snaps the line short,” and interrupts her own line with a dash—the standard punctuation mark used in writing to signify interruption.

Another figure of interruption occurs when Barbauld describes the events that transpire if “the welkin [is] fair” on washing-day:<sup>66</sup>

—But grant the welkin fair, require not thou  
 Who call’st thyself perchance the master there,  
 Or study swept, or nicely dusted coat,  
 Or usual ’tendance;—ask not, indiscreet,  
 Thy stockings mended, though the yawning rents  
 Gape wide as Erebus; nor hope to find  
 Some snug recess impervious: shouldst thou try  
 The ’customed garden walks, thine eye shall rue  
 The budding fragrance of thy tender shrubs,

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<sup>65</sup> For an extensive analysis on Miltonic versification and style in “Washing-Day,” see Messenger’s *His and Hers*. Messenger points out that Barbauld, like Milton, “combines regularity and metrical freedom as Milton does; she sometimes uses a short line, the kind of dramatic breaking of the pater which Milton used in *Lycidas* and *Samson Agonistes* though not in *Paradise Lost*. After the invocation, the poem is divided into three long verse paragraphs, the first devoted to the washerwomen, the second to the sufferings of unwanted menfolk and children, and the third to the musings of the child. Each paragraph has the true Miltonic sweep, as the thought moves logically but unconfined within the paragraph’s general topic” (189). As this analysis continues, we will see other instances of Milton’s “language as well as his versification and paragraphing” (189). Nonetheless, Messenger provides an informative overview.

<sup>66</sup> “Welkin” refers to “the arch of heavens, sky, firmament” (Mellor and Matlack 188n6). Milton uses this word in *Paradise Lost*: “From either end of Heav’n the welkin burns” (II.538). In addition, as Messenger explains: “Mrs. Barbauld imitates Milton’s language as well as his versification and paragraphing. She does not use epic similes, perhaps because her poem is relatively short, but she does use an occasional Latinism or archaism (‘impervious,’ ‘welkin’) and a few exotic names (Erebus, Guatimozin)” (189).



Myrtle or rose, all crushed beneath the weight  
 Of coarse checked apron,—with impatient hand  
 Twitched off when showers impend. . . . (33-44)

Again Barbauld uses the dash to signify her interruption of the “master” whom she addresses at this point: “. . . —ask not” (36). It is as though the speaker responds to the master’s own “requirements” (33). Furthermore, “Myrtle[s] and “roses” that are “all crushed beneath the weight / Of coarse checked apron” figure prominently in the “masters” musings—that is, the musings of those who I have been calling Barbauld’s male literary forefathers. For instance, in *Lycidas*, Milton begins by addressing, “Ye myrtles brown” (2); and, in *Paradise Lost*, Eve evokes “roses intermixed / With myrtle” (218-19) when insisting that she and Adam “divide [their] labours” (214)<sup>67</sup>; and who could forget Shakespeare’s famous line in *Romeo and Juliet*: “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose / By any

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<sup>67</sup> Interestingly, it is Eve who insists that they divide the labour (perhaps because Milton wants to preclude any possibility of Adam’s contribution to the Fall, since it is their separation that enables Eve to be left alone and, finally, to be tempted to eat the forbidden fruit). In relation to the discussion at hand, I wish to point out one significant reason that Eve provides for dividing the labour: “. . . while so near each other thus all day / Our task we choose, what wonder if so near / Looks intervene and smiles, or object new / Casual discourse draw on, which *intermits* / Our day’s work, brought to little, though begun / Early, and th’hour of supper comes unearned!” (emphasis added; 220-5). In “Washing-Day,” a similar desire to be “Uninterrupted” enters the poem (20). This allusion, though implicit, in effect mirrors the poem itself, in the sense that the poem functions as an interruption. For, it is arguable that the allusion in “Washing-Day” points directly to that crucial reason for the division of labour—that is, to work “uninterrupted,” or “unintermitted” and “to study household good, / And good works in her husband to promote” (*Paradise Lost* 233). But, “uninterruptedness” and “studying household good” are culturally constructed. The best way to subvert the doctrine of the division of labour, then, is to interrupt it—better yet, to interrupt it with women’s gossip, another socially-constructed (albeit derogatory) stereotype of the female labourer. We will see, throughout the course of this analysis, that the poem is saturated with such multi-levelled allusions.

other word would smell as sweet” (II.ii.43-4)? But the myrtles and roses—both conventional symbols of eternal love, and the “myrtle,” a “traditional material for poetic garlands” (Ferguson, Salter and Stallworthy 232n2)—are “all crushed beneath the weight / Of coarse-checked apron,—” (42-3). Here again the dash signifies the interruption, or the “crushing” of celebrated traditional literary emblems.<sup>68</sup>

When the “impatient hand [is] twitched off” several figures of interruption follow: “. . . or crossing lines / Shall mar thy musings, as the wet cold sheet / Flaps in thy face abrupt”<sup>69</sup> (44-6). There are three of such figures in this passage. First, “crossing lines” refers both to the “crossing” of the “loaded [clothes]lines” of women’s experience and that of the “loaded lines” of the mock heroic. The two “lines” interrupt one another as they “cross.” The second rhetorical interruption is no doubt the most violent interruption in the poem. The reader can certainly feel the “flap” of that “wet cold sheet” in his face (to be sure, Barbauld is projecting her male readers into the poem at this point; and, in her mind, she is projecting

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<sup>68</sup> This passage alludes to Jonathan Swift’s mock heroic “A Description of a City Shower” when, as Messenger explains, “amid speculations about rain, the unwanted master of the family cannot have his coat dusted; in the ‘Shower,’ Swift devotes several lines to the problems created by a mixture of dust and rain in the needy poet’s ‘Sole Coat.’ The allusions to the ‘Shower’ continue with the word ‘welkin’ in the same paragraph and with the ‘impatient hand’ that ‘Twitched’ the apron off the shrubs ‘when showers impend’; Swift begins with a scene in which ‘Rain depends’ (which means ‘impends’) and describes ‘Brisk Susan [who] whips her Linen from the Rope’” (191). The passage in “Washing-Day,” is a Miltonic performance of this narrative in Swift. The blatant allusions to Swift, however, are briskly interrupted twice by the dashes in lines 36 and 43.

<sup>69</sup> Messenger has also noted that Barbauld “adopts the Miltonic trick of substituting one part of speech for another: ‘abrupt’ for ‘abruptly,’ ‘indiscreet’ as a noun” (189).

her forefathers into the figure of “thy”). “The wet cold sheet” refers not only to the bed-sheets that the women are washing, but also to “wet cold sheet” upon which “Washing-Day” is inscribed or, more precisely, the sheet onto which Barbauld transposes the lines of her forefathers—their inked “musings” “marred,” as they bleed and blend into one another on the “wet cold sheet.” At the same time, Barbauld “flaps” her forefathers’ “musings” in their faces and, in so doing, interrupts or “mars their musings.” This brings us to the third figure of interruption: Barbauld “mars” her forefathers’ “musings”—the very musings that make up “Washing-Day.” As with all of the figures of interruption that I have discussed, the interruptive maneuver in this passage is threefold: the housewife interrupts the “master” of the house; women’s (clothes)lines threaten to interrupt men’s “high-sounding” lines; Barbauld interrupts her own lines—that is, the very lines that make up the body of “Washing-Day.”

Moreover, these lines (44-6) occur at the exact midpoint of the poem (the poem is eighty-sixth lines long). The midpoint of the poem becomes a point of intersection since, at the narrative level of the poem, it is a point at which two “lines cross” (44). The midpoint of the poem, then, mirrors that vexed point(s) of intersection between the poem’s conflicting external and internal inter/ruptive pressures. In other words, the midpoint of the poem and the midpoint of the “crossing lines” mirror one another. That this multifaceted figure of interruption occurs at the midpoint of the poem has another relevant implication: the figural interruption of “thy musings” at the centre-point of the poem suggests—as I have been demonstrating all along—that the “master”’s musings are the *central* target of the broader (yet more implicit) scheme of interruption, which the poem as a whole performs.

At this midpoint, then, Barbauld directly addresses the looming presences of her forefathers (and analogously her male readers), overtly threatening to “mar their musings.” However, this midpoint is unstable; for it occurs sheerly at the level of the poem’s rhetoric. For there can be no stable centre in a poem that is always already begun and beginning (that “breathes” into lines composed two centuries prior), that never (and always) ends, that is perhaps “most of all” (86)—as Barbauld problematically indicates in the poem’s last lines—no-thing all along: “Earth, air, and sky, and ocean, hath its bubbles, / And verse is one of them—this most of all” (85-6). The poem interrupts itself in its last line. A final dash—we will come back to “this” later on—

#### I. Garbing subversion<sup>70</sup>

The uninhibited appearances of these figures of interruption in “Washing-Day” may (mis)lead us to align Barbauld with today’s more radical feminisms, for she seems, at least overtly, to share a kindred ruthless contestation of male authorities. However, for the most part critics tend to read “Washing-Day” as a playful poem that often exhibits a modest self-deprecation.<sup>71</sup> In the course of this analysis, we will encounter several instances of what critics have understood as Barbauld’s “proper” self-deprecation in “Washing-Day,” but which in fact is the opposite. For self-deprecation is another “tool” that Barbauld employs

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<sup>70</sup> I am recalling here the “garb / Of deep philosophy and museful sits / In dreamy twilight of the vacant mind” (20-2), from Barbauld’s “To Mr. S.T. Coleridge.”

<sup>71</sup> In his analysis of “Washing-Day,” for example, Marlon Ross claims that Barbauld “cap[s] the poem with the good humor that runs throughout. . . . Tongue and cheek, Barbauld frees herself to question the seriousness of her poetrywork, and at the same time she is able to see the making of women’s poetry in a light so naturally homespun that it has the look and feel of just another washing-day” (228-9).



to divert her (male) readers' attention from her obvious castigation of "masters" in the poem. We have already seen that Barbauld makes a habit of taking up socially-constructed positions of female subordination—such as the "slipshod sibyl," the gossip, the washerwoman and the maternal body—and converting them into agency. The "modest and unassuming" woman, which many of today's critics believe Barbauld to be (Mellor and Matlack 165), is another example of such socially-constructed "feminine" positions, as Poovey explains:

powerful strategies for living and for art were derived from what Mary Wollstonecraft called the 'negative virtues' of 'patience, docility, good-humour, and flexibility.' . . . [S]uch strategies of indirection and accommodation could enable women to make their presence felt in bourgeois society, and in some cases they even facilitated the creation of an expressive self within the behavior of the self-effacing Proper Lady. (xi)

"Self-effacement," Poovey explains, "if not natural, is at least proper for [bourgeois] women"; "a woman must be governed by modesty" (4). Like this "unnatural" garb of femininity—or that of what Poovey calls the "Proper Lady"—in which bourgeois women fashion themselves, self-effacement in "Washing-Day" occurs only as "feminine" garb that in turn conceals a risky resistance.

The garb of femininity in "Washing-Day," like that of the Proper Lady, is a product of male desire. Barbauld redeploys conventions of female modesty and self-effacement in order to disguise her interruptive subversion: she must appear "modest and unassuming" in order to avoid public attack that she would no doubt invite were she to hazard a more overt

subversive strategy.<sup>72</sup> In part, the garb functions by amusing and entertaining readers of the poem and, in so doing, diverting attention from the less obvious but more serious implications of “Washing-Day.” (This concealment of seriousness beneath a cloak of mockery and belittlement is also in keeping with the spirit of the traditional mock heroic.) In this sense, “Washing-Day” appears to be a celebration of or experimentation with intertextuality at the expense of the “red-arm’d” washers and women writers—or “slipshod sibyls.”<sup>73</sup> Nonetheless, for the sake of Barbauld’s own self-security amid a misogynistic public domain interruption in “Washing-Day” must function cryptically and quietly under a veil of self-deprecation and beneath the cloak of the mock heroic.

I wish to ask how do the allusions in “Washing-Day” operate subversively? Put differently, how does “Washing-Day” function from within the “language of men” and from within the self-deprecatory “language of women” to resist this language?<sup>74</sup> In what ways does the poem work to expose and subvert logo-, phallo-, and phallogocentric discourses upon which the dominant literary and philosophical texts in bourgeois society depend and reinforce? And, finally how does Barbauld confront these “unwonted guests” that threaten to impede her own artistic progress? In the analysis that follows, I argue that Barbauld’s “Washing-Day” emerges as an “interruption” of the “Uninterrupted” literary and

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<sup>72</sup> The devastating reception of her *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* is a case in point.

<sup>73</sup> We saw in the previous chapter that contemporary critics—Landry in particular—(mis)read the poem in this way.

<sup>74</sup> Both of these languages should be classified as the “language of men,” for both are products of male desire.

philosophical texts and discourses (“Washing-Day” 20). In general, the discourses to which I refer are those discourses that infect the late-eighteenth-century bourgeois society in which Barbauld lives and writes—for example, the phallogentric language and logic of “othering” (which I introduced in the previous chapter), the privilege of men and male writers to certain imaginative and aesthetic authority (i.e., those associated with experiencing the aesthetic category of the sublime), and the patriarchal doctrine of the separate spheres which confines women to “the wet kitchen” while their husbands, as it were, “Ride buoyant through the clouds” (17, 82). On that note, then, let the battle begin.

## II. Epigraph: Washing Instructions

The epigraph of “Washing-Day” is a curious site that harbours a significant function: it provides the key to grasping the complex body of “Washing-Day”—a body uncomfortably fraught with vexed expressions of risky, interruptive resistance and an anxious, inter-ruptive self-deprecation.<sup>74</sup> But, where I designate the epigraph as the clue to unfolding “Washing-Day”’s subversive strategy, other critics designate Montgolfier’s balloon as such (81-2). The most explicit example of this is Messenger’s claim that “[t]he reference near the end of the

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<sup>74</sup> Messenger has pointed out that Barbauld’s resistance was risky, that the blatant “reversal of values was dangerous,” but that Barbauld “minimized the risk by using the mock heroic mode, which lends itself so well to the domestic and which could always be dismissed as merely playful” (192). Perhaps Barbauld is only testing the grounds of the courageous resistance that she finally releases at the highest degree in her unremitting *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*, where “none of the satirical techniques she had used elsewhere, no mock heroics, no irony, no ridicule, sarcasm, allegory, or fable, not even any witty clevernesses of language. It is sober, serious, elegiac in tone, prophesying doom” (Messenger 195). It seems that the doom prophesied is that of her own career, which Britain, in turn, resisted.



poem to ‘Mongolfier’ (properly Montgolfier) is . . . the clue” (191).<sup>76</sup> To be sure, contemporary critics of “Washing-Day” too hastily dismiss the epigraph, just as they tend to overlook Barbauld’s unique mode of feminism. However, it is entirely possible that readers in Barbauld’s time might sense something peculiar immediately in the epigraph of the poem precisely because Jaques’s speech was one of the most oft-cited Shakespearian passages in the political parodies that were circulating in eighteenth-century England. In the 1790’s—that is, around the time in which “Washing-Day” was published—the *Gentleman’s Magazine* put out a guide to readers’ tastes in English society (Bate, *Constitutions* 113). This guide contained Reverend Ford’s political parodies of Shakespearean plays, beginning in October 1792; these political parodies tell us which plays were preferred by the bourgeoisie (113). As Bate explains, Ford’s parodies reveal that “*Hamlet* is the most popular source. . . . The other favourite set pieces are Romeo’s ‘I do remember an apothecary’ . . . and Jaques’s Seven Ages (eleven out of thirteen from *As You Like It*)” (113-4). In addition, that the first line of the speech, “all the world’s a stage,” was supposed to have been the slogan inscribed on the sign of the Globe Theater since 1778 tells us that the public was well-acquainted with Jaques’s speech, and that the speech was an important symbol in itself (Knowles 373), for the theatre and for public, bourgeois ideologies. I am not suggesting that—in light of

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<sup>76</sup> Kraft has in fact responded to Messenger’s misreading in her essay “Anna Laetitia Barbauld’s ‘Washing-Day’ and the Montgolfier Balloon.” In this article, Kraft argues that Messenger’s and Donna Landry’s arguments are abstract in their misuse (and misreading) of the Montgolfier balloon. She suggests that their readings fail because the balloon was not always a symbol of male pride in the late-eighteenth century, as Messenger and Landry presume; rather, historically, it is a symbol connected with mixed emotions and mixed receptions of this most dangerous and sometimes frivolous enterprise.



Barbauld's obvious alterations of the Shakespearean original—Barbauld's readers would necessarily detect a feminist resistance at work in the epigraph; it is possible, though, that they might think that a "slipshod" Barbauld simply misquoted Jaques's speech, as most of today's critics have suggested.

As the key to unlocking "Washing-Day," the epigraph is fraught with all sorts of interruptions that Barbauld, in turn, redeploys throughout the body of "Washing-Day." She introduces various modes of interruption in the epigraph and plays them out in the body of the text. In other words, she prepares us for the interruptive performance of which we must be cognizant throughout the body of the poem. In short, the epigraph is prescriptive: Barbauld—the marvelous teacher (of boys) that she is<sup>76</sup>—teaches her readers to read "Washing-Day" for the interruptive self-differences that it, or that she, performs. Barbauld has given us a built-in instructor that will survive with the poem eternally, as it "gather[s]

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<sup>76</sup> Barbauld was a teacher for boys at her husband's school at Palgrave. As Wilson explains, "she kept both the school and family accounts; held classes in composition, literature, and geography. . . . She took particular pleasure in the boys' dramatic productions of Molière, Shakespeare, and Milton: directing, writing prologues and epilogues, making masks and using her needle in imaginative ways to make costumes" (174-5). Barbauld's interest in directing performances and teaching the drama of Shakespeare and of Milton interests me here. For, this is clearly reflected in her performance in "Washing-Day" and tells us that, in her poetry, Barbauld aimed to instruct, to perform, and to delight her readers. In fact, Mellor and Matlack suggest that Barbauld's aesthetic theory (basing it on her essay on novel-writing, to which I alluded earlier) "endorses the neoclassical dictum that literature must 'delight and instruct'" (166); and, though, as we saw in the introduction to this thesis, they label Barbauld a "conservative" thinker (low on the hierarchical scale of feminisms), they do say (later on) that Barbauld "insisted that contemporary literature must teach a new concept of gender-equality in which both women and men would exercise their rational and moral faculties to their greatest capacity" (166).

dust upon the shelf” (Barbauld, “Novel-Writing” 1), quietly and cryptically teaching us how to read the poem.

Since the epigraph of “Washing-Day” forms the poem’s legible “origin,” let us begin our reading of Barbauld’s interruption of the “masters” at this “originary” juncture:

..... and their voice,  
Turning again towards childish treble, pipes  
And whistles in its sound. -----

Indeed, the epigraph is not as stable an origin as we might imagine; for, to borrow Barbauld’s trope, the “germ” of “Washing-Day” occurs around two centuries prior to its composition: on the stage of Shakespeare’s production of *As You Like It*. The row of ellipses with which the epigraph opens indicates that the “origin” of the epigraph itself precedes it. This calls the notion of originality itself into question. For that the poem’s origin precedes it, and that the entire poem is made up of a menagerie of Barbauldian allusions might suggest that Barbauld is renouncing any claim to generic or rhetorical ingenuity, that she is following the lead of her forefathers, transcribing (and in so doing attaining) poetic “genius.” But, to be sure, following her forefathers’ lead entails, too, that she “other,” trivialize, and devalue women’s work, and women’s poetry—their “slip-shod measure” (4). Accordingly, she must in effect “other” herself. Hence the self-deprecatory aura of certain instances in the poem.

Yet, at the same time, Barbauld’s ostensible renunciation of originality in effect interrupts the traditional value placed upon originality itself (as re-presented by Bloom) and, by extension, ruptures the quasi-permanence of those canonical texts to which she alludes. The “original” interruption in “Washing-Day” occurs at (or prior to) the site of the Shakespearean epigraph. Immediately at the onset of “Washing-Day,” then, Barbauld

interrupts what Bloom called the “Great Originals,” thereby accruing a quiet and unique (and necessary) authority of authorship. Thus, though the epigraph of “Washing-Day” appears to cite *As You Like It* directly—in conformity with epigraphic tradition—, Barbauld has in effect cheated; for her “epigraph” is, rather, the first instance of Barbauldian allusion in the poem. Its position at the traditional epigraphic site is but a “bubble,” that is, a “dupe” or “deceptive show” (OED). This is the first example of the many interruptive maneuvers that we encounter in “Washing-Day.” We will see that this double-gesture of conformity and resistance present in this interruption will be repeated throughout the poem.

Before considering the other interruptions that are introduced in the epigraph, I want briefly to consider why an interruption is so crucial at this entry point of the poem in regard to the authority of authorship. My hypothesis is that, by opening the poem as such, Barbauld effects a cogent entrance into the public domain, one that is so crucial if she is effectively (albeit implicitly) to stir her audience. In addition, as Gilbert and Gubar have shown, “[m]ost literary genres are, after all, essentially male—devised by male authors to tell male stories about the world” (67). Thus, “ladies . . . taking the pen in hand” (Barbauld, “Novel-Writing” 59), in eighteenth-century England, are writing against “Shakespeare’s glowing pencil” (Barbauld, “Prologue” 28), or that phallic instrument of power, knowledge, and reason that such a pencil might portray.<sup>78</sup> The female poet must therefore appear confident and assertive as Barbauld does—stage-hogging the universal stage that Shakespeare wrought, as it were, and providing female housewives with front-row tickets to “Washing-Day.” Though,

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<sup>78</sup> On the “pen [as] a metaphorical penis” (3), see Gilbert and Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* (3-7).



Barbauld's overtly confident display of authority in the poem is not asserted without the accompaniment of the covert anxiety of authorship that haunts the bounds of "Washing-Day"'s legibility. For, as I suggested earlier, it is precisely by confronting a pressing, indeed present, anxiety—i.e., that accompanying the intimidating presences of male predecessors—that an authority of authorship need be affirmed at all. Thus, it is necessary that the poem begin with a strong interruption; for, in doing so, Barbauld will no doubt be heard (if not listened to): the sheer familiarity of Jaques's speech, and the Romantic veneration of it,<sup>79</sup> would certainly attract an eager (perhaps anxious) ear.

The various other interruptions that Barbauld performs in the epigraph—in order both to effect a forceful entry into discourse and to instruct the reader how to read "Washing-Day"—target phallogocentric conventions of linearity, teleology, and male universality present in Jaques's speech in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. Because I will be referring to Jaques's speech throughout this analysis, I quote here at length:

All the world's a stage,  
 And all the men and women merely players;  
 They have their exits and their entrances,  
 And one man in his time plays many parts,  
 His acts being seven ages. At first, the infant,  
 Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.

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<sup>79</sup> The Romantic veneration of Shakespeare's Jaques is evident in William Hazlitt's critical writings. Specifically, Hazlitt wrote that "Jaques is the only purely contemplative character in Shakespear. He thinks, and does nothing. His whole occupation is to amuse his mind, and he is totally regardless of his body and his fortunes. He is the prince of philosophical idlers; his only passion is thought; he sets no value upon anything but as it serves as food for reflection. He can 'suck melancholy out of a song, as a weasel sucks eggs'" (qtd. in Bate 274). Jaques is thus a quintessentially Romantic contemplator. In other words, the figure that Hazlitt describes exhibits that "unearthly" thinking that Barbauld criticizes in "To Mr. S.T. Coleridge."



Then the whining schoolboy, with his satchel  
 And shining morning face, creeping like snail  
 Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,  
 Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad  
 Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,  
 Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,  
 Jealous in honor, sudden and quick in quarrel,  
 Seeking the bubble reputation  
 Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,  
 In fair round belly with good capon lined,  
 With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,  
 Full of wise saws and modern instances;  
 And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts  
 Into the lean and slippered pantaloon,  
 With spectacles on nose and pouch on side;  
 His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide  
 For his shrunk shank, and his big manly voice,  
*Turning again toward childish treble, pipes*  
*And whistles in his sound.* Last scene of all,  
 That ends this strange eventful history,  
 Is second childishness and mere oblivion,  
 Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything. (emphasis added;  
 II.vii.139-166)<sup>80</sup>

Barbauld's epigraph alludes to the penultimate fragment of Jaques's speech. By alluding to this particular fragment in the speech, she in effect halts Jaques in his tracks—she “snaps his lines short,” as it were—deferring (and differing) “that last scene of all, / That ends [his] strange eventful history.” Barbauld interrupts the narrative of the ages of Man that Jaques illustrates for his “universal”—or, more specifically, for his “male”—audience and, in so doing, she challenges the inevitability and predictability that ground the speech (Kraft 37). Indeed, the long dash at the end of Barbauld's epigraph signifies this interruption as well.

Thus, rupturing the teleological frame of Jaques's speech—and interrupting the

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<sup>80</sup> I have italicized the fragment of the speech that Barbauld alludes to in her epigraph.

broader phallogentric conventions of linearity and teleology—Barbauld not only defers the speech’s inevitable “last scene of all,” but she also recasts it in a cyclical (non)frame that has no beginning and no end; for “Washing-Day” begins with voices “turning *again*,” and “Muses” that already “are turned gossips”—are turned “domestic.” The word “turn” reflects not only the notion of transformation (of “Muses turning to gossips,” for instance) but also the cyclical periodicity that characterizes the ages of woman which, in turn, juxtaposes the linearity characteristic of such phallogentric narratives as that of Man’s seven ages. In “Washing-Day,” such “cycles of woman” are represented throughout: the domestic routines run “week, smooth sliding after week” (11); cycles of birth and renewal are represented at the parlour fire, when Barbauld projects herself, at once, as both grandmother and child (66-73); the cycles of washing are “urged” by the figure of the mother “at intervals” (74), and represented in a cyclical rhythm—a monotonous, repetitive iambic pentametre (76-7); and, overall, the poem follows a cyclical meditation in and out of fair and rainy weather, turning again from content to contempt, and spiraling through cycles of memory—for example, the child-Barbauld remembers a past that could not anticipate the future: “Sometimes through hollow bowl / Of pipe amused we blew, and sent aloft / The floating bubbles; *little dreaming then* / To see, Mongolfier, —thy silken ball” (emphasis added; 79-82). That she addresses Montgolfier in this passage brings us back to “Washing-Day”’s time of writing.

By filling Jaques’s words with her voice (and with “their voice”), Barbauld also disrupts his phallogentric positioning of women in the wings of “his big manly” universal theatre; for, in Jaques’s speech, women remain characterized by such marginal figures as the nurse in whose arms the infant “mul[es] and puk[es]” (144), the mistress to whose “eyebrow”

the lover makes “a woeful ballad” (147-9), and finally the (non)figure of absence. But in “Washing-Day,” just as Barbauld fills the words of her dead forefather (Shakespeare, in this case) in the epigraph, female figures in the body of “Washing-Day” fill the vacant female figures of Jaques’s speech. For instance, “it is the maids from whom the speaker remembers sensing the import of the day” (Kraft 34); the husband’s “consort’s brow” will not be “Clear[ed] up propitious” (55); and the absence of maternal figures (60-66) in fact drives the child-poet to sit in solitude, to “ponder much why washings were” (78-9). The point then is this: Barbauld “interrupts” Jaques’s speech by “turning [it] again,” in a “différent” way,<sup>81</sup> and by re-presenting women’s marginality (upon which Jaques’s speech is contingent, since the stages begin with the infant’s separation from the “nurse”) as the condition of the possibility for his “musings.”

The epigraph features obvious interruptive “variations,” as well; Barbauld changes significant words in what Bloom would call Shakespeare’s “Great Original” text. As Butler claims in her theory of subversion, “[a]ll signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; ‘agency,’ then is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition” (*Gender* 145). To be sure, critics have too hastily dismissed Barbauld’s “variation on her repetition” of Jaques’s speech. They often dismiss it as a “misquote”<sup>82</sup>: Messenger, at first, calls this variation a matter of “slightly misquot[ing] . . . lines from

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<sup>81</sup> I borrow the term *différent* from Jacques Derrida. I use it to convey the double interruptive movement that combines difference and deferral.

<sup>82</sup> Richard E. Matlack and Anne K. Mellor call Barbauld’s variation of Jaques’s speech a “misquote” (187); and Elizabeth Kraft, quoting Messenger, calls it a slight misquote, as well (41, n.32)



Jaques's speech" (190). Though, she does imply, later on in her argument, that the misquote serves to minimize the overall risk that Barbauld takes in reversing the male-female binary opposition of values: "'Their voice,' however ungrammatical blunts the sting" (193). Messenger's observation is useful as far as it goes, that is, insofar as she takes Barbauld's variation of the quote as more than a simple "misquote." But I would like to pose further, more precise questions in regard to the difference that is at work, and the subversive *movement* that this difference performs: 1) Why does the learned Barbauld, a prestigious teacher at a boys' school, (re)write this "ungrammatical" phrase at this crucial, inaugural moment of the text?; and 2) How does this movement function as an interruptive strategy?

The answer to the first question is relatively straightforward and need not be overanalyzed. If, as Messenger suggests, this phrase *is* ungrammatical, then Barbauld is interrupting the rigid system of grammar itself—a system that she no doubt encounters daily in her teaching of boys; by extension, she mobilizes and denaturalizes the system by "jamming" it as such (Irigaray 151). But, more importantly, and in response to my second question, the subtle variation performs an interruption of the univocal voice of Shakespeare. That "their voice" interrupts Shakespeare's "big manly voice" is not a "misquotation"; it is a paradigmatic instance of a Barbauldian allusion—an allusion with a difference. By subtly varying the famous words of Shakespeare's text, Barbauld invokes those original words that she repeats with a difference. In other words, Shakespeare's original text is spectralized within "Washing-Day"—it becomes a spectral frame of reference, as it were. The awkward ungrammaticality of the words might also lead the reader to revisit the spectralized Shakespearean original. Turning again, then, to Shakespeare's "Great Original," "big manly



voice,” in *As You Like It*, we find an “original” text that parallels the grandiose, “high-sounding” voice of the father poet—the “unearthly” “Language of gods”—that will be “lost” in the opening scene of the “Washing-Day” (to which we will turn again) (1).

Thus, immediately in the epigraph, Barbauld interrupts phal(logo)centric discourse: “she snaps his big manly voice short.” By extension, this inaugural interruption demonstrates the more specific modes of deflation and castration. For, by replacing “big manly” with “their,” she deflates the “big manly voice,” that “high-sounding phrase”; and she “snaps short—” Shakespeare’s “big manly” “glowing pencil,” as it were. This opening maneuver, then, encompasses three modes of interruption: at once, it ruptures the teleological frame of the speech, deflates high-sounding words, and castrates the phallic pen. Ultimately, she replaces the “big manly” subject with a plural, or communal subjectivities—with “*their* voice”—that reflects the domestic Muses, and the various “I”’s or self-projections that are scattered throughout the text.<sup>83</sup>

Thus, in the epigraph, Barbauld takes up Jaques’s role: like a domestic Muse, she breathes into and possesses his speech, spreading herself over the text, parasitically, penetrating and inhabiting it. She interrupts Jaques, and interrupts Shakespeare, “snapping the loaded lines of these male figures short—.” Upon doing so, she fills his “big manly” words with her own voice and, as we have seen, with “their voice.” Barbauld thereby occupies Shakespeare’s words, making his words her own. Concomitantly, she demystifies

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<sup>83</sup> By “communal subjectivity,” I refer to the putative fact that, in the eighteenth century, “women were urged to think of themselves collectively” (Poovey 28), bound as they were “to other women and the cycles of generation” (Alexander 12).

and objectifies Shakespeare's celebrated verse<sup>83</sup>; she reduces his words to a mere particularity, public property that can be taken, exploited and mobilized. Barbauld ruptures the teleological frame of Jacques's speech, occupies it and enables herself from within it to trespass its teleological limits and to open up new intelligible spaces for the (re)generation—or, the (en)gendering—of new, domestic signification.

As we will see, Barbauld likewise interrupts the slew of texts and voices that haunt the bounds of "Washing-Day"'s legibility. Barbauld will devour these texts, refusing any longer herself to be devoured by them; and, to employ one of the most overused terms in "Washing-Day," she "indulges" in them, refusing any longer to be "indulged" in or upon. Barbauld, thus, "inhabits—indeed penetrates, occupies and redeploys—the patriarchal language itself" (Butler, *Bodies* 45). She occupies "their voice" with her own (imitation of their) "big manly voice": she occupies the voices of Shakespeare, crucially "taking . . . his place . . . to show that it is *occupiable*" (Butler, *Bodies* 36). In the process, she interrupts his text by denying him of his univocal voice of authorship, by usurping his "glowing pencil," in "slipshod measure" (4), with "red-arms" (14), "crossing lines" (44), and the "wet cold sheet" (45) of "the dreaded Washing-Day" (8)—not just writing Shakespeare but, performatively, *overwriting* him. In overwriting him, Barbauld critiques him, and proceeds to recreate her own narrative of the ages of women—to re-present women's experience.

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<sup>83</sup> For a detailed investigation of Shakespeare's profound influence on the Romantics, see Bates's *Shakespeare and the English Romantic Imagination*. In general, Bates reveals that "the Romantics celebrated, indeed, that they worshiped Shakespeare . . . [and] this idolatry affected their creative practice" (3). He also discusses the anxiety that resulted from a combined influence of Milton and Shakespeare on the Romantics.

Hence, having replaced Jaques on centre-stage, Barbauld conjures the “domestic Muse” to sing her song—to “Come, and sing the dreaded Washing-Day” (8)—concomitantly summoning from the wings a chorus of women to sing *their* version of the ages of women to an implicitly male audience. Like an army, the women invade and take-up centre-stage; in so doing, the male readers are in effect snubbed as the domestic muse and/among her choric counterparts summon(s) a female audience to flood the theater to hear the song of the “dreaded Washing-day,” and the “ages” of women that “whistle in his sound.”

### III. Washing in Castalia’s Stream

Once the epigraphic, inaugural interruption of Shakespeare has been performed, the “Muses *are turned* gossips.” And, turning again, a series of interruptions in the body of the text take place, beginning (again) with the invocation of the domestic Muse:

The Muses are turned gossips; they have lost  
The buskined step, and clear high-sounding phrase,  
Language of gods. Come, then, domestic Muse,  
In slipshod measure loosely prattling on  
Of farm or orchard, pleasant curds and cream,  
Or drowning flies, or shoe lost in the mire  
Come, Muse, and sing the dreaded Washing-Day. (1-8)<sup>84</sup>

In the previous chapter, we saw that this passage contains several allusions to Jaques’s speech. These allusions are residual fragments of the initial, epigraphic interruption—that is, of the shattered (or inter-rupted) Shakespearean Great Original. This passage also alludes to several passages from Milton’s *Il Penseroso*: “Come, but keep thy wonted state,

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<sup>84</sup> A “buskin” is a tall boot (reaching the calf or knee) that was worn by actors of tragedies. (Goldrick-Jones and Rosengarten 152).



/ With even step and musing gait” (37-8); “Or what (though rare) of later age / Ennobled hath the buskined stage” (101-2); and, “There let the pealing organ blow, / To the full-voiced choir below, / In service high, and anthems clear” (161-3). I want to suggest that the Barbauldian allusions to Milton in this passage serve to interrupt phallogocentric discourse—that is, discourse that centres itself on the presence, unity and power of the transcendental signifier, namely, the Phallus. Barbauld’s allusion to the term “buskined” is particularly interruptive, as she writes: “they have lost / The buskined step.” The buskin is one of several phallic symbols that we will encounter in the poem: visually phallic, it is a tall boot (reaching the calf or knee) worn by tragic actors; and, nominally, the term contains the word “skin” within it. Barbauld in effect “snaps the *buskin* short” when her Muses “lose” it in the opening lines. Barbauld has castrated her forefathers with their own words. A few lines later, we encounter the remnants of this “lost buskin,” reduced now to a “shoe,” and “lost in the mire” with Shakespeare’s “big manly voice” (5). The “glowing pencil” is once again castrated—perhaps by those “red-armed washers” that emerge not long after.

Moreover, by losing the “buskin” Barbauld not only interrupts phallogocentric language, but also sets the stage and (un)dresses the domestic Muse for her debut appearance. For only “*then*”—that is, after “they have lost / The buskined step, and clear high-sounding phrase”—that Barbauld can proceed to invoke the domestic Muse: “Come, then, domestic Muse.” Which is to say, once the “skin” of “high-sounding” phallogocentric language is performatively shed, “then” the domestic Muse can enter the stage (and, analogously, the public literary scene) bare, having shed “indulgencies” like garments (62),



and having, likewise, “lost / the buskined step and clear high-sounding phrase” of the “real language of men”—where the very “realness” of the Phallus and phallogocentric language is brought into question, denaturalized and, performatively, castrated. Alongside the “naked” domestic Muse, other “earthly” figures—i.e., the “red-armed washers”—emerge, bleeding through the self-erected walls of phallogocentric presence.

However, though this passage is so potently interruptive, it also contains a paradigmatic instance of self-deprecation. Barbauld’s “slipshod measure loosely prattling on” not only reflexively reduces Miltonic versification and style to a “loose prattling”(4), but also, self-reflexively implies that her own attempt to emulate the mock-heroic genre and the “real language of men” is inadequate; it is “slipshod.” As Messenger puts it, “The Muses have discarded their tragic buskins and ‘Language of gods’ for ‘slipshod measure loosely prattling on,’ a most uncomplimentary description of Miltonic blank verse and perhaps also a bit of self-deprecation here” (189). But Barbauld performs this self-deprecation, just as she performs the texts of her forefathers. This is not a matter of emulation; rather, this is a subversive performance(s).

The Barbauldian allusion to Pope’s “slipshod sibyl,” upon close examination, however, is not simply a matter of performed self-deprecation and “an uncomplimentary allusion Milton,” but is also another significant key to the multifarious nature of Barbauld’s interruptive strategy. “Slipshod measure” alludes to the third book of Pope’s *Dunciad*. In fact, bourgeois men often alluded to Pope’s “Slip-shod sibyl” in order to attack female poets, as Greer explains in *Slip-Shod Sibyls*: “the term [“slip-Shod Sibyl”] “is weighted with all the contempt expressed by literary men for literary women who took themselves seriously, who

risked ridicule, exploitation and calumny because they thought they had something to say, and the contempt likewise meted out to the women who fooled around with poetry, who did not try hard enough or fell for the fiction that poetry can come easily” (xxii).

My analysis of Pope’s presence in “Washing-Day” is marginal. This in effect reflects the status of his presence in the poem relative to those of Milton and Shakespeare. For Barbauld concentrates primarily on Shakespeare and Milton, as did the male Romantic poets for the most part (as Bate and Bloom claim). Messenger suggests that “Mrs. Barbauld chose Milton rather than Pope as her model for this poem because, on one level, she wanted the grandeur of blank verse paragraphs (rather than the chime of couplets) to support the *real* importance of the occasion, to dignify the drudgery of women” (189). Nonetheless, there is at least one crucial allusion to Pope. The phrase “Slipshod measure” alludes directly to this passage in his *Dunciad*:

And now, on Fancy’s easy wing convey’d,  
The King descending, views th’Elysian Shade,  
A slip-shod Sibyl led his steps along,  
In lofty madness mediating song;  
Her tresses staring from Poetic dreams,  
And never wash’d, but in Castalia’s streams. (III.13-18)

For obvious reasons, the word “mediating” fits into the context of this discussion. This Barbauldian allusion to Pope suggests that “Washing-Day”’s “slipshod measure,” performs a “lofty madness *mediating* song.” Indeed, Barbauld’s verse exudes a kind of madness—a madness, for instance, that leads the speaker to attack the “unwonted guests” that inhabit her tumultuous mind, those looming presences of her forefathers. Barbauld finds in this particular passage by Pope a “mediative” moment that she can take up and exploit: “In lofty

[“high-sounding”] madness,” Barbauld sings a “mediating song.” “Slipshod measure” thus provides us with the subtlest of clues to decoding the poem, to unveiling its interruptive—or “mediative”—scheme. Furthermore, Pope’s slip-shod Sibyl “never wash’d but in Castalia’s streams.” In Greek myth, the spring of Castalia “was held sacred to Apollo and the Muses”; to the Romans, ““drinking the waters of Castalia’ signified poetic inspiration, since Apollo was the god of poetry” (Chilvers and Howatson 111). Barbauld would surely be acquainted with such mythology. Barbauld’s niece (and her first editor), Lucy Aikin, explains that Barbauld’s father, “proud as he justly was of her uncommon capacity, long refused to gratify her earnest desire of being initiated into this kind of knowledge [Greek and Latin]. At length, however, she in some degree overcame his scruples; and with his assistance she enabled herself to read the Latin authors with pleasure and advantage” (qtd. in Ross 215). And, as Kraft and McCarthy have noted, “Barbauld’s poetry . . . is the product of an active intelligence and a fertile imagination. . . .Lucy Aikin . . . attributes this diversity to Barbauld’s ‘extensive and varied reading’: ‘In youth, the power of her intellect, which exercised itself in rapid, but not unprofitable excursions over almost every field of knowledge.’ Her learning and her imagination combined to produce what Lonsdale has described as ‘a striking confidence and authority’” (xxv). In this instance, then, we learn of another way in which the domestic Muse inspires: beyond the seemingly self-deprecatory allusion lies the Popeian world of the “slip-shod sibyl” who never washed but on her own terms, in a stream of inspiration.<sup>86</sup> Barbauld’s “slipshod measure,” like the “slip-shod Sybil”

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<sup>86</sup> This stream symbolizes the depths of Barbauld’s unconscious. It is a stream of consciousness, fluid, bubbling, babbling and constantly in flux.



is unconstrained, but nonetheless “wedlocked” in Pope’s words and in the conventional “language of men,” respectively. Thus, in this instance of Barbauldian allusion, Barbauld reaches through the allusion to interruptions within the pretext itself; through this allusion, she in effect invokes, revises and redeploys an entirely other linguistic world.

Problematically, however, the term “slipshod” functions in an all-too-implicit way. So much so that, as I suggested earlier, it implies Barbauld’s own self-deprecation—a sign of self-doubt characteristic of the internal inter-ruption—that fundamentally impels the need for self-authorization. In any case, the “slipshod measure” remains subversive, since it mocks mock-heroic conventions and, by extension—as Barbauld will indicate again in the poem’s last lines—“verse” itself (86). This single term, “slipshod,” then, embodies a simultaneous inter-ruption and interruption: a self-effacement and a concomitant interruption of such effacement through the suggestion of the possibility of its resignification, or its redeployment. By extension, in Butler’s terms, “the redeployment enacts a prohibition and a degradation against itself, spawning a different order of values, a political affirmation from and through the very term which in a prior usage had as its [sic] final aim the eradication of precisely such an affirmation” (*Bodies* 231).<sup>87</sup> I am suggesting that, in a certain sense, Barbauld’s use of the term “slipshod” has the same effect, since she (albeit implicitly) redeploys the term to belittle men who insult women with it while, at the same time, urging women to sing in “slipshod” measure—to “banish the feminine correctness demanded by

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<sup>87</sup>This remark by Butler comes in the context of the contemporary redeployment of the term “queer” and, particularly, that the “transferability of a gender ideal or gender norm calls into question the abjecting power that it sustains” (*Bodies* 231).



masculine desire in favor of womanly freedom spawned more from women's own needs" (Ross 226). Alluding to this Popiean woman (and to the men who attack women writers with it), Barbauld claims the term in her Muse-like fashion, interrupts its derogatory cultural significance, and "turns it again" to her own advantage—"flapping it in her forefathers' faces abrupt."

"The wet cold sheet" upon which Barbauld inscribes "Washing-Day" is also a "flap" in the faces of the male, bourgeois society, as she addresses lines 1-32 to

Ye who beneath the yoke of wedlock bend,  
Full well ye ken the day  
Which week, smooth sliding after week, brings on  
Too soon; for to that day nor peace belongs  
Nor comfort . . . (9-13)

As I suggested in the introduction of this thesis, Barbauld outwardly addresses a female readership in "Washing-Day," and thereby interrupts the legacy of the male reader. For in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, poetry is said by definition to involve "a man speaking to men," as Wordsworth put it (601). But the above-cited lines suggest that "Washing-Day" involves a woman speaking to women, for it is "explicitly addressed to those already in the know, or to those willing to embrace the sympathetic resonance of knowing" (Ross 227). By explicitly addressing a female readership, Barbauld interrupts the "smooth sliding" tradition of the male reader and reinscribes the female reader into discourse.

Yet Barbauld addresses her female readers in "the real language of men" and, specifically, of Milton. For instance, "smooth sliding" alludes to Book VIII of Milton's *Paradise Lost* when Adam describes a dream wherein a "shape divine" summons him to "rise" and leads him, "Smooth sliding without step . . . up / a woody mountain . . ." (295,

296, 302-3). Alluding to Adam's upward, stepless—or bodiless—"smooth sliding," Barbauld's interrupts his upward climb by redeploying it in the circular, recurring context of the monthly washing day, "which week, smooth sliding after week brings on / too soon"(11-12). Moreover, there is no stepless, upward climbing in "Washing-Day." There is only an oppressive, downward pressure that is sustained for most of the poem (until the poet looks "aloft," "To see, Mongolfier[']s] . . . silken ball" (80, 82): Barbauld "brings the Muses down to earth, turning them into gossiping housewives" (Ross 226); the women bend "*beneath* the yoke of wedlock" (9); "anxious," the women dread the "*lowering* sky, if sky should lower" and "*should the skies pour down*" (20, 21, 23); the women gossip about "*linen-horse by dog thrown down*" (27). This rhetoric of downwardness (which I have italicized) juxtaposes Milton's upward "smooth sliding" to which Barbauld alludes. A subtle interruption indeed, but one worth mentioning since Barbauld has redeployed Milton's "upward climbing," interruptively placing it within a "downward rhetoric" which Barbauld employs in her address to the housewives who bend "With bowed soul" (9).

In a certain sense, the figures of the housewives join with those of Barbauld and the "red-armed washers" in the figure of the "domestic Muse." Accordingly, the domestic Muse "herselves" bends "*beneath the yoke of wedlock / With bowed soul.*" Indeed, at the time that Barbauld writes this poem, she may find herself in this oppressed position. Lonsdale suggests that "[p]otentially the most versatile of women poets in the period, she accepted for many years a subordinate role in an eventfully painful marriage, contenting herself with writing books for children" (xxxiii-xxxiv). When she composes "Washing-Day," she has been married to Rochemont Barbauld since 1774, and later (in 1808) will find herself so

violently assaulted by her husband that she is compelled to separate from him (Kraft and McCarthy xlv).<sup>87</sup> The first part of the poem, then, involves the invocation of these oppressed women—an invocation for them to come and sing about their domestic experience, about the “petty miseries [of] their liv[es]” (28) that they all, no matter what their class, share in some form, by virtue of being women. They all share the common bond of being victimized by male desire—“bent,” “red-armed,” “wedlocked.” Lines 1-32, then, address women and women’s oppression. Lines 33-46—about the “fair” washing-day—address men: Barbauld leers at “thou / Who call’st thyself perchance the master there.” In these lines, Barbauld converts herself (and presumably all women) into oppressors: “The budding fragrance of thy tender shrubs, / All crushed beneath the weight / Of coarse checked apron” (41-43). Again, Barbauld employs what I have called a “downward rhetoric.” “Crushed beneath the weight,” in this passage, echoes the early line “Ye who beneath the yoke of wedlock bend.” The final addressee appears in the final lines: “Mongolfier,—*thy* silken ball” (82). Ultimately, Barbauld not only addresses her female readers, but invokes them with the domestic Muse to participate in the interruptions that “Washing-Day” performs. By extension, Barbauld is invoking her women readers to write or, in keeping with a burgeoning oral tradition, to sing, to gossip, and prattle, and whistle in vainglorious, slipshod measure.

#### IV. “The Real Language of Men”

Critiquing the theory of poetry put forth by Wordsworth in “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*,” Samuel Taylor Coleridge writes:

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<sup>87</sup> Rochemont Barbauld became mentally ill at that time. He drowned himself on November 11<sup>th</sup> of that year in the New River (Kraft and McCarthy xlv).



Here let me be permitted to remind the reader, that the positions, which I controvert, are contained in the sentences— “*a selection of the REAL language of men*”;— ‘*the language of these men*’ (i.e. men in low and rustic life) “*I propose to myself to imitate, and, as far as is possible, to adopt the very language of men.*” “*Between the language of prose and that of metrical composition, there neither is, nor can be any essential difference.*” It is against these exclusively that my opposition is directed.

I object, in the very first instance, to an equivocation in the use of the word ‘real.’ Every man’s language varies, according to the extent of his knowledge, the activity of his faculties, and the depth or quickness of his feelings. Every man’s language has, first, its *individualities*; secondly, the common properties of the *class* to which he belongs; and thirdly, words and phrases of *universal* use. The language of Hooker, Bacon, Bishop Taylor, and Burke differs from the common language of the learned class only by the superior number and novelty of the thoughts and relations which they had to convey. (653)

Though Coleridge critiques the “realness” of Wordsworth’s “language of men,” he sustains the masculine imperative of such language. Authentic language is still attributed exclusively to men and particularly, as Coleridge indicates in the above passage from *Biographia Literaria* (1817), to individuals like “Hooker, Bacon, Bishop Taylor, and Burke.” Though *Biographia Literaria* was written considerably later than Barbauld’s “Washing-Day,” it is nonetheless indicative of the exclusively male “spirit of the age,” as M.H. Abrams has called it.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup>Coined by M.H. Abrams, the “spirit of the age,” by definition refers to the opinions of the “leading men” of the Romantic period (“Spirit of the Age” 26): Wordsworth is the “‘head’ of the school . . . [and his] ‘genius,’ [Hazlitt] declares, ‘is a pure emanation of the ‘Spirit of the Age’” (27); and the list of the “many very individual poets,” those “chief poets of the 1790’s,” includes “Blake, Wordsworth, Southey, Coleridge . . . Shelley. Byron and Keats also had elements in common with their older contemporaries” (27, 42). Evidently, even in 1963, the “language of men” still stands, and the “language of women” still bends “beneath the yoke of wedlock . . . / With bowed soul.”



But Coleridge was well aware of the burgeoning class of female poets who were infiltrating bourgeois society. And he was most watchful of Barbauld. In fact, as Kraft and McCarthy note, “[t]he young Samuel Taylor Coleridge walked forty miles, from Stowey to Bristol, to meet Barbauld” (xxi) but, later, was perhaps the first to deny her publicly: “In his last lecture on Milton, given in 1812, he ridiculed the diction of her ‘Hymn to Content’” (xxxiii); “both Coleridge and Charles Lamb descended to sophomoric abuse and name-calling: Coleridge with his ‘Mistress Bare and Bald,’ Lamb with his ‘two *bald* ladies’” (xxxiv).<sup>89</sup> Kraft and McCarthy go on parenthetically to suggest that Coleridge’s (and Lamb’s) “need to use such language testifies to the depth of their animus” (xxxiv). It is likely that the “Coleridgian abuse” of Barbauld, as Kraft and McCarthy call it, stems from the literary men’s own anxiety about a woman’s independence and uninhibited criticisms of *their* work:

The Coleridgian abuse [of Barbauld] . . . went largely unopposed; and as the Major Romantics rose ever higher in canonical esteem, culminating in the apotheosis of Coleridge among certain New Critics, their prejudices rose in value with them. By 1940 Barbauld had been whittled down to a woman with a quaint name whose alleged opinion that “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” has no moral could be taken as sufficient evidence of obtuseness, and whose achievement in verse consisted of just one lucky stanza in a single poem, “Life.”<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup>The other “bald” lady was Elizabeth Inchbald (Kraft and McCarthy 218n42). Kraft and McCarthy also note that Lamb made other misogynist remarks which entered the general circulations: [Anna Le Breton mentioned that] [h]e called literary women ‘impudent, forward, unfeminine, and unhealthy in their minds. Instanced Mrs. Barbauld who was a torment and curse to her husband. “Yet,” said Lamb, “Letitia was only just tinted [blue]; she was not what the she-dogs now call an intellectual woman”’ (218n42).

<sup>90</sup> Wordsworth is said to have learned a stanza of Barbauld’s “Life” by heart. Henry Crabb Robinson also claims to have overheard Wordsworth say, ‘I am not in the habit of grudging people their good things, but I wish I had written those lines’ (qtd. in

Presumably, when the older Coleridge gained his own authority of authorship, he proceeded to attack (or interrupt the success of) a woman he had once walked miles to meet. The older Coleridge went to great lengths to destroy Barbauld's literary career (by attacking her personally and professionally). And in the course of doing so, he catapulted literary men to the forefront, designating men—no matter what their class—the solitary keepers of the “real language of men.” The remainder of this analysis will take up the “real language of men”—specifically, the phallogocentric language engendered by thinkers like Burke (as Coleridge stated) and promoted through the intensely gendered aesthetic category of the sublime, which had a tremendous influence on eighteenth-century discourse—both in terms of how works of literature were calibrated, and how the “toils of men” were gratuitously venerated and historicized by the bourgeois public (84).

Burke's treatise *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* is one of the most important documents of the eighteenth century, for it provided eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England with the vocabulary through which to

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Le Breton 153-4). The lines to which Wordsworth referred read as follows:

Life! we've been long together,  
 Through pleasant and through cloudy weather;  
   'Tis hard to part when friends are dear;  
 Perhaps 't will cost a sigh, a tear;  
 Then steal away, give little warning,  
   Choose thine own time;  
 Say not Good night, but in some brighter clime  
   Bid me Good morning. (qtd. in Le Breton 216)

grasp the most potent effects of art, literature and experience.<sup>92</sup> Yet, at the core of his theorization of the sublime lies an anxious misogyny, one that “others” women in order to engender an all-powerful patriarchal subject.<sup>93</sup> To define the sublime, Burke distinguishes it from the beautiful; in fact, the *Inquiry* was “design[ed] to consider beauty as distinguished from the sublime” (165)—“a distinction never to be forgotten by any whose business it is to affect the passions” (206). As Barbara Claire Freeman explains:

[A]t the level of theme, its [the sublime’s] principal theorists [i.e., Longinus, Burke and Immanuel Kant] are able to represent the sublime only through recourse to metaphors of sexual difference and, equally significant, that the structure of the sublime depends upon (and results from) a preexisting construction of “the feminine.” What appears to be a theory of how excess works actually functions to keep it at bay. . . . [T]he sublime [is] an allegory of the construction of the patriarchal (but not necessarily male) subject, a self that maintains its borders by subordinating rather than identifying with that which presents itself as other. (3-4)

Reserved exclusively for men and male writers, the sublime pertains to such themes as mastery, self-empowerment and -preservation; its constitutive antithesis, the beautiful, pertains to themes of love and nurturance, and the quality that women have which arouses in men the desire to reproduce. As Mellor puts it, “[t]he sublime is associated with an experience of masculine empowerment; its contrasting term, the beautiful, is associated with an experience of feminine nurturance, love and sensuous relaxation” (85). In “Washing-

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<sup>92</sup> For an informative discussion of Burke’s sublime and his influence on eighteenth-century literature, see Samuel H. Monk’s “The Sublime: Burke’s Enquiry.”

<sup>93</sup> Mellor claims that, “[f]or Burke and [Salvator] Rosa, the contemplation of the sublime roused an Oedipal anxiety caused by the overwhelming power of the father. For Coleridge, Wordsworth and Kant, the joy of the sublime experience is dependent upon the annihilation of Otherness, upon the erasure of the female” (96).



Day,” Barbauld negotiates with this gendered aesthetic category of the sublime.<sup>94</sup> She ruptures the borders of its definition by possessing Burke’s words and, at times, those of Immanuel Kant in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*; she domesticates the sublime, in the same way that she domesticated the Muse who would excite synchronous feelings of “exaltation and horror” in the invocation (Greer 4). Which is to say, she “deflates” the “high-sounding” phrase that is associated with things grand, things sublime, bringing it down to the earthly realm of (what is supposed to be but is certainly not) the “beautiful.”

For this is not a “beautiful Washing-Day”; rather, it is a “*dreaded* Washing-Day” (emphasis added; 8)—a “domestic sublime,” as it were. The term “dreaded” echos the very rhetoric that Burke employs in his definition of the sublime. As Freeman explains,

Commenting upon his “method of proceeding” in the preface to the second edition, Burke employs a word that was, in the eighteenth century, a synonym for the sublime. When it is a question of dealing with matters of great complexity, Burke emphasizes that “we must make use of a cautious, I had almost said, a *timorous* [emphasis Freeman’s] method of proceeding.” . . . As Adam Phillips points out in his introduction to the *Enquiry*, the word “timorous” “fits accurately into an eighteenth-century discussion of sublimity, meaning, as it did then, “causing fear or dread: dreadful, terrible” (*O.E.D.*). (43)

Samuel H. Monk has also noted that the very “keystone of Burke’s aesthetics is emotion, and

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<sup>94</sup>See Armstrong’s “The Gush of the Feminine” for a discussion of Barbauld’s negotiations with Burke, Malthus and Adam Smith, and Hume in her “Inscription for an Ice House” (c. 1793). Armstrong demonstrates that, for Barbauld, the sublime “belongs to both man *and* nature [in the poem] as both become part of culture in contrast to the woman, who falls outside culture except insofar as she can play the role of servant” (19).



the foundation of his theory of sublimity is the emotion of terror” (27). For Burke, “terror is, in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime” (Burke 130). Moreover, in his theory of the sublime Kant, too, states that feelings associated with the sublime are “sometimes accompanied by a certain dread” (Kant 47). As Barbauld depicts it, washing-day is full of such terrors, and “Washing-Day” is full of such “timorous” rhetoric:

Nor pleasant smile, nor quaint device of mirth,  
E'er visited that day: the very cat,  
From the wet kitchen scared, and reeking hearth,  
Visits the parlour, an unwonted guest.  
The silent breakfast-meal is soon dispatch'd  
Uninterrupted, save by anxious looks  
Cast at the lowering sky, if sky should lower.  
From that last evil, oh preserve us, heavens!  
For should the skies pour down, adieu to all  
Remains of quiet. . . . (15-24)

“The very cat, / . . . scared” (17), and the “anxious looks” (20) brought on by the day all convey the “dread” that is so central to the sublime. “[O]vercast with a shade of . . . dread and horror” (Burke 144), Barbauld’s “lowering sky” (21) echos, and indeed performs, the sublime “sight of a mountain whose snow-covered peak rises above the clouds, the description of a raging storm, . . . [all of which] arouse enjoyment but with horror” (Kant 47). Furthermore, the exclamation, “O preserve us, heavens!” explicitly satirizes the Burkeian description of the sublime “passions which concern self-preservation” (Burke 110). This “most powerful of all . . . passions” (Burke 110) entails that, when “[c]onfronted with . . . overwhelming natural phenomena . . . the human mind first experiences terror or fear and

then—as our instinct for self-preservation is gradually relaxed—astonishment, admiration, reverence and respect” (Mellor 86).

Barbauld consistently performs such sublime “language of men” throughout the course of the poem, not only alluding to Burke, but also to the sublime-inflected discourses of her time. The discourses emerging with the rise of Montgolfier’s hot-air balloon, for instance, were highly influenced by such themes as “individual struggle and self-preservation, of access to reason, of the infinite, of labor and phallic power” (Armstrong 18). Perhaps the most potent example of such discourses occurs in an article about the Montgolfier balloon in *The Monthly Review* which reads as follows (1783):

we found are imaginations warmed by the gigantic idea of our penetrating some day into the wildest and most inhospitable regions of Africa, Arabia, and America, of our crossing chains of mountains hitherto impervious, and ascending their loftiest summits, of our reaching either of the two poles; and in short of our extending our dominion over the creation beyond any thing of which we have now conception. (qtd. in Kraft 27)

It strikes me that Barbauld read this passage and, accordingly, alludes directly to it in “Washing-Day” when she addresses “thou / Who call’st thyself perchance the *master* there” (emphasis added; 34):

. . . nor hope to find  
Some snug recess impervious: should’st thou try  
The ’customed garden walks, thine eye shall rue  
The budding fragrance of thy tender shrubs,  
Myrtle or rose, all crushed beneath the weight  
Of coarse check’d apron, with impatient hand  
Twitch’d off when showers impend: or crossing lines  
Shall mar thy musings. . . .  
. . . Woe to the friend  
Whose evil stars have urged him forth to claim  
On such a day the hospitable rites. . . (38-48)

In this passage, Barbauld takes up the position of the yet unknown, “inhospitable regions of Africa, Arabia, and America”: she will not be “hospitable” to the “masters”’s “penetration”: “Woe to the friend / Whose evil stars have urged him forth to clam / On such a day the hospitable rites!” (48). And proceeds to “mar [such]musings” about “crossing chains of mountains hitherto impervious” with her “crossing lines” (44), and by giving the master no “hope [of] find[ing] / Some snug recess impervious” (38-9).

Finally, the poet relaxes after having “crossed” the “master”—that is, when she has finally reduced him to “the unlucky guest / [who] [i]n silence dines and early slinks away” (56-7). When the restless mind of the poet relaxes after performing this interruptive representation of the “domestic sublime,” she “well remember[s]”

. . . when a child, the awe  
This day struck into me; for then the maids,  
I scarce knew why, looked cross, and drove me from them;  
Nor soft caress could I obtain, nor hope  
Usual indulgencies; jelly or creams,  
Relique of costly suppers, and set by  
For me their petted one; or butter’d toast,  
When butter was forbid. . . (58-65)

In this passage, Barbauld turns again to Burke’s treatise, mock-performing his notions of sublime power and, specifically, the particulars of the following passage:

And it may be observed, that young persons, little acquainted with the world, and who have not been used to approach men in power, are commonly struck with an awe which takes away the free use of their faculties. . . .[W]hilst we consider the Godhead merely as he is an object of the understanding, which forms a complex idea of power, wisdom, justice, goodness, all stretched to a degree far exceeding the bounds of our comprehension. . . .” (141).

In “Washing-Day,” the maids take the place of Burke’s “men in power”: the “young person”

is left awe-struck by their power, as they (she scarce knows why) drive her from them (58-60).

The “awe” and “astonishment” that Burke associates with the sublime, moreover, is sustained by Barbauld throughout the poem since, after all, she writes “Washing-Day” in Miltonic mock-heroic style and versification—she mock-performs his use of repetition, inversion, archaic and philological language (all of which I have noted throughout the course of the thesis)—, so much so that the poem “certainly *feel[s]* Miltonic,” as Messenger put it (190). Both Burke and Kant associate the sublime with Milton’s poetry. In the *Inquiry*, Burke states that “No person seems better to have understood the secret of heightening, or of setting terrible things, if I may use the expression, in their strongest light, by the force of a judicious obscurity, than Milton. His description of Death in the second book is admirably studied; it is *astonishing* with what a gloomy pomp, with what a significant and expressive uncertainty of strokes and colouring” (emphasis added; 132). And, in *Observations*, Kant recalls “Milton’s portrayal of the infernal kingdom, [which] arouse[s] enjoyment but with horror” (47). Female Romantic poets by definition could not arouse such sublime feelings: as Freeman notes, “[t]he genre of sublime poetry was effectively closed to women. Dorothy Wordsworth, or any woman of her period, could not have written a poem such as ‘Tintern Abbey,’ with its celebration of ‘A presence that disturbs me with the joy / Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused and abiding faith in the poet’s infinite ability to ‘revive again’” (8). But Barbauld takes up this masculine genre; she possesses it and, simply by doing so, ruptures its borders—for they are borders that had been constitutively defined by her exclusion.



As the poem closes, Barbauld performs her final interruptions. She interrupts the entire tradition of the sublime: she deflates the awesome feelings, literature and discourses that are associated with the sublime by rendering it a “fabric/ation.” She does so by invoking, breathing into (or “blowing” into [80]), and deflating Montgolfier’s balloon:<sup>95</sup>

. . . Briskly the work went on,  
 All hands employed to wash, to rinse, to wring,  
 To fold, and starch, and clap, and iron, and plait.  
 Then would I sit me down and ponder much  
 Why washings were. Sometimes through hollow bowl  
 Amused we blew, and sent aloft  
 The floating bubbles; little dreaming then  
 To see, Mongolfier,—thy silken ball  
 Ride buoyant through the clouds—so near approach  
 The sports of children and the toils of men. (79-84)

By invoking “Mongolfier”’s balloon, Barbauld alludes to the section of Burke’s treatise entitled “Ambition” (II.xvii). In this section, the “swelling” phallicism and triumph affiliated with man’s appropriation of the power of sublime objects are most explicit. Burke writes: “Now, whatever, either on good or upon bad grounds tends to raise a man in his own opinion produces a sort of swelling and triumph, that is extremely grateful to the human mind; and this swelling is never more perceived, nor operates with more force than when without danger we are conversant with terrible objects” (124). In “Washing-Day,” the “Mongolfier” balloon is an allusion to such lofty “swollen” symbols of man’s triumph.

But note that Barbauld has misspelled Jacques Montgolfier’s name—she has omitted the “t.” This misspelling is a subtle site at which the interruption of this phallic object takes

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<sup>95</sup> The brothers Jacques and Joseph Montgolfier were the first to ascend in a hot air balloon in 1783 (Goldrick-Jones and Herbert Rosegarten).

place. Indeed, we saw that Barbauld teaches us, in the epigraph of the poem, that such interruptive, subtle variations would take place. (And, it is entirely possible that “Mongolfier” is actually an allusion to Shakespeare’s Jaques, since Barbauld only invokes one of the brothers—presumably she is invoking Jacques Montgolfier.) For this misspelling is intentional. It is a very implicit instance of interruption wherein *Mont* (mountain) becomes *Mon* (mine). At the level of linguistics, then, Barbauld brings Montgolfier down from his sublimated height, from his mountaintop; she, as it were, consumes the “name of the father”—engulfing “Montgolfier.” That is, she in effect “takes” his name, subtly interrupting the laws of kinship wherein the woman receives the name of her husband.

Moreover, that Barbauld associated the balloon with the sublime is most strikingly apparent in a letter that she wrote to her brother John upon visiting a balloon exhibition in London, in January of 1784. In the letter, Barbauld writes:

Well my dear brother, here we are in this busy town, nothing in which (the sight of friends excepted) has given us so much pleasure as the sight of the balloon exhibition in the Pantheon, it is sixteen feet one way and seventeen another. When set loose from the weight, it mounts to the top of that magnificent dome with such an easy motion as puts one in mind of Milton’s line, ‘rose like an exhalation.’ . . . Next to the balloon, Miss Burney is the object of public curiosity. (qtd. in Le Breton 52)

For Barbauld, then, the balloon was a “Miltonically” sublime object. And the balloon in “Washing-Day” is clearly an allusion to the lines that she cited to describe the feelings that the rise of the hot-air balloon elicited for her. The lines from Milton come from the first Book of *Paradise Lost*:

Anon out of the earth a Fabric huge  
 Rose like an Exhalation, with the sound  
 Of Dulcet Symphonies and voices sweet. . . . (710-712)<sup>96</sup>

As I demonstrated earlier, in “Washing-Day,” the feelings of “awe” are reserved for the “women in power.” In contrast, the grandeur of the balloon is deflated and in effect propelled down to earth. For Barbauld calls attention to the very “fabric huge” that is the balloon: she calls it a “silken ball.” By extension, she renders the sublime and its corresponding “language of men” a mere fabric that in turn can be lifted and transposed onto the context of washing-day. Which is to say, this “language of men” is not “real”; rather, it is a gendered fabric/ation that need be washed, rinsed, wrung, folded, starched, clapped, iron, plaited, “popped” and rethought, as it is in “Washing-Day.”

Thus, Muse-like, Barbauld breathes into the balloon, possessing and claiming it in order, subsequently, to (inter)rupture it—thereby deflating and propelling it down to earth. But she not only interrupts by way of the subtle variation in Montgolfier’s name and evocation (and transposition) of Milton’s “Fabric huge,” but she also deflates “the toils of men” by relegating them to the status of the “sports of children.” In fact, Barbauld has insulted men’s work in this fashion before. As Messenger has already noted, Barbauld “had made the same point in ‘Written on a Marble’” (191):

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<sup>96</sup> Milton is describing the rise of *Pandemonium*, the Palace of Satan (and also the name of the stadium in which Barbauld stood to view the rising “Fabric huge”)

The world's something bigger,  
 But just of this figure  
 And speckled with mountains and seas;  
 Your heroes are overgrown schoolboys  
 Who scuffle for empires and toys,  
 And kick the poor ball as they please.  
 Now Caesar, now Pompey, gives law;  
 And Pharsalia's plain,  
 Though heaped with the slain,  
 Was only a game at *taw*.<sup>97</sup>

In “Washing-Day,” Barbauld again reduces men to “overgrown schoolboys.” Recalling “Written on a Marble,” Ross suggests that dreaming of the hot-air balloon “is as close as [‘Washing-Day’] comes to dreaming away the tedium of women’s work reality. The children make a game of bubble-blowing from the women’s work, just as men, ‘overgrown schoolboys,’ make a game of marbles from the serious work of building a nation” (228). On the same note, Ross suggests that, in “Washing-Day,” when the child sits down to “ponder much / Why washings were” after watching the women toil, “[t]he disparity between the child’s leisure, the capacity to sit and ponder, and the women’s endless hard work (represented by that series of infinitive verbs) is akin to Wordsworth’s sense that the hard work of building a nation is at odds with the idle pursuit of poetry” (228). Barbauld’s own desire to fly with Montgolfier (to “dream away the tedium of women’s work reality”) and, by extension, to write alongside her male counterparts, is coupled with the desire to bring men down from such sublime heights, that is, to deflate their egos—to deflate that “swollen,”

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<sup>97</sup> The date of this poem’s composition is unknown. But Messenger states that this poem was written earlier than “Washing-Day” (191); and Kraft and McCarthy place the poem long before “Washing-Day” in their chronologically-organized anthology. I have cited the poem from this anthology.



“silken ball / Rid[ing] buoyant through the clouds”—and to bring them back to reality, back to the “real” work of building a nation.

The final lines of the poem enact the final interruption: “Earth, air, and sky, and ocean hath its bubbles, / And verse is one of them—this most of all” (85-6). The question that most of “Washing-Day”’s contemporary readers will ask regarding these lines is to what does “this” refer? Ross suggests that, in the final line, Barbauld is showing “[t]his very poem” to be “most of all a bubble: a silly game, a little dream, a silken ball riding the clouds, a world magically blown from her pen only to pop into nothingness” (229). Somewhat closer to the mark, I think, Messenger adequately describes the curious double movement in the final lines; therefore, I quote from her at length:

The sting [of the earlier lines] is . . . lessened by the claim that the poem is a mere bubble. The self-deprecating quality of the lines is enhanced by the poet-as child blowing soap bubbles a few lines earlier and continuing to exhibit childishness, as she implies, by writing poetry. The self-deprecation becomes even stronger when one thinks of the usual reference to self at the ends of other poems: Pope’s claim that “this Lock” will inscribe Belinda’s name among the stars; Shakespeare’s conclusion to Sonnet 18, “So long lives this, and this gives life to thee”; and all the other statements that the poet can confer immortality on his subject. Mrs. Barbauld says instead that her verse is a bubble, that most ephemeral of creations. Very few women writers make the claim that they can immortalize their subjects. . . .

And yet Mrs. Barbauld is not simply wallowing in self deprecation in her final lines. For she has said “And verse is” a bubble, not just her own verse. And she has equated the most thrilling inventions of men with the sports of children. . . . (193)

Indeed, since “Washing-Day” is made up of a myriad allusions to literary men, it is entirely possible that “this” refers to “verse” itself—and the “bubble reputation” that men’s poetry has gratuitously incurred (*AYLI* II.vii.152). Barbauld casts this “bubble reputation” into

relief, and blows into it women's experience, so much so that the "bubble reputation" pops, dissipates into fragments of rupture, as a sense of the sheer nothingness of the work of words, including her own words, bubbles up at this final line of the poem.

"This," then, refers to itself, and to (logocentric) representation which is fundamentally represented *in* and *of* a linguistic world, as opposed to the "real" world with which it is deemed by male poets (i.e., Wordsworth and Coleridge) to be organically fused. Thus the last line enacts an interruption of logocentric representation: "this" implies that signification is infinitely mediated, interrupted, always in a state of difference from, and deferral of, an endless string of signifiers; we will always be asking, this what?

Another possibility for the "referent" of "this" is Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, a play inundated with bubbles. For who can forget the famous Witches' chants: "Double, double, toil and trouble; / Fire burn, and cauldron bubble"; and "For a charm of pow'rful trouble, / Like a hell-broth boil and bubble / Double, double, toil and trouble; / Fire burn, and cauldron bubble" (III.vi.10-11; 18-21). In particular, the last lines of "Washing-Day" allude to Banquo's response to the sudden vanishing of the witches:

BANQUO. The earth hath bubbles, as the water has  
 And these are of them. Whither are they vanish'd?  
 MACBETH. Into the air; and what seem'd corporal melted,  
 As breath into wind, Would they have stayed! (I.iii.79-82)

As Mary Jacobus has demonstrated, the Romantics anxiously embraced *Macbeth*: "*Macbeth* becomes doubly charged for writers of this period—whether revolutionary sympathizers or not—since it at once makes representation problematic (does this dagger merely figure future action, or conjure into being?) and, as a regicide play, provides a touchstone for 'reflections'

on the French Revolution such as Wordsworth's and Burke's" (36). It is therefore probable that, in these last lines of "Washing-Day," Barbauld hinges on the question of representation and exploits the Romantic "unease about the power of the imagination"—both of which occupy the central focus of Romantic conceptions of *Macbeth*: "Could poetry make something happen, after all?" (Jacobus 37).

But it is also possible that Barbauld invokes *Macbeth* in these last lines because, as Jacobus explains, "*Macbeth* became the most demonic, inward, and unactable to Romantic critics of Shakespeare" (37). Barbauld hinges on the demonic element of *Macbeth*: the women washing and their soap bubbles, in effect, "Like a hell-broth boil and bubble." Kraft has already suggested that

The bubble that Barbauld's poem becomes in the final lines of "Washing-Day" is dismissed in language that paraphrases Banquo's assessment of the witches in *Macbeth*. . . .Through this allusion, women washing, in a sense, become witches stirring a cauldron, a transformation that elaborates on the association between the maids and their tales of ghosts and witches earlier in the poem. . . .Banquo is right in a very real sense, of course: the witches *are* bubbles. But what the play demonstrates is a transfiguring power of the bubble—that is, of the imagination. . . .In the final lines of the poem, through analogy to the witches of *Macbeth*, Barbauld claims for herself the prophetic insight that recognizes the transformative power of the imagination. (37)

Indeed, the implied transformation of the soap bubbles into Montgolfier's hot-air balloon does demonstrate the transfigurative power of the imagination; however, contrary to Kraft, I want to suggest that this transformation is performative. Barbauld performs her male Romantic counterparts' preoccupation with "the transforming power of aesthetic activity" (Rajan 13). And, turning the balloon back again to the "sports of children," Barbauld implies



that imaginative transformation is but childspilay, and (like childhood itself) naive and transient. In that sense, she interrupts the reigning conceptions of imaginative power by suggesting that such transformations do not effect lasting change: the “idle pursuit of poetry” is not “the supreme form of labour,” as Wordsworth thought (Ross 228); it does not productively contribute to building a new nation; it is but childspilay.

I want to suggest, then, that the final allusion is not a “recognition of the transformative power of the imagination,” as Kraft suggests. Rather, in the last lines Barbauld and the women washing—the woman writer and the “hidden” woman worker—vanish like Shakespeare’s “Weird Sisters” (I.iii.33). The analogy casts Barbauld, again, as that supernatural, possessive figure, just as the witches’ “murderous thoughts seem to possess [Macbeth]” (Jacobus 35). But the analogy also re-presents these female figures as “desire disowned and estranged or made ‘weird,’ like the Weird Sisters” (Jacobus 35). Witch-like, the female worker—both the female poetryworker and the female labourer—are figures for men’s anxiety about female desire and sexuality: with “red-arms,” she stirs in her cauldron “drowning flies, or shoe lost in the mire / By little whimpering boy” (6-7), and sings of “ghost or witch or murder” (66). To men and particularly to male poets, the uncontained woman is a frightening spectacle; the female poet is “bare and bald.” Inasmuch as bourgeois society endeavours to exclude female desire and sexuality from the domains of livability—by way of conduct books, self-containing and -restrictive garb, confinement to the domestic, private domain, and by anxiously deterring women from writing—the woman worker bubbles up to the fore and, with vengeful “witchy words and ways” (Gilmore 62), conjures a hidden revolution from within men’s words, from within the very words by which



men have (de)constructed her: “Now women return from afar, from always: from ‘without,’ from the heath where witches are kept alive; from below, from beyond ‘culture’ from their childhood which men have been trying desperately to make them forget, condemning it to ‘eternal rest’” (Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa” 348). Thus, in a final allusive move, Barbauld resubmits herself to patriarchal ideas of herself once again. And, as signaled by the interruptive dash in the last line, Barbauld interrupts such ideas: she and her army of washers vanish, as do the “Weird Sisters,” “Into the air, and what seemed corporal melted / as a breath into the wind. Would they had stayed” (*Macbeth* I.iii.86-7).

## CONCLUSION

### Out Damn'd Spot!

*To conclude this discussion, I ask that we turn again to the invocation of the domestic Muse, that we return again to the opening scene of Barbauld's meditation:*

Barbauld: . . . Come, then, domestic Muse,  
In slipshod measure loosely prattling on  
Of farm or orchard, pleasant curds and cream,  
Or drowning flies, or shoe lost in the mire  
By little whimpering boy, with rueful face;  
Come, Muse, and sing the dreaded *Washing-Day*. (3-8)

*Barbauld's invocation of the domestic Muse recalls this invocation by one of Shakespeare's most famous Ladies—Lady Macbeth:*

Lady Macbeth: . . . Come, you spirits  
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,  
And fill me from the crown to the toe topful  
of direst cruelty! . . .  
.....  
. . . Come to my woman's breasts  
And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers. . . .  
(*Macbeth* I.v.40-3; 47-8)

*Lady Macbeth makes Coleridge rather anxious about his sexuality, and about the threat of an ambitious woman. (He also exhibited this anxiety by abusing another ambitious woman—a woman inferior only to Shakespeare and Milton—who he once walked miles to meet. . . .)*

Coleridge: Lady Macbeth, like all in Shakspeare [sic], is a class individualized:—of high left much alone, and feeding herself

with day-dreams of ambition, she mistakes the courage of fantasy for the power of bearing the consequences of the realities of guilt. Hers is the mock fortitude of a mind deluded by ambition; she shames her husband with a superhuman audacity of fancy which she cannot support, but sinks in the season of remorse, and dies in suicidal agony. Her speech:

Come, all you spirits  
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, &c.

is that of one who habitually familiarized her imagination to dreadful conceptions, and was trying to do so still more. Her invocations and requisitions are all the false efforts of a mind accustomed only hitherto to the shadows of the imagination, vivid enough to throw the every-day substances of life into shadow, but never as yet brought into direct contact with their own correspondent realities. She evinces no womanly life, no wifely joy, at the return of her husband, no pleased terror at the thought of his past dangers. . . . (qtd. in Bate 422-3)

*The male Romantics loathed Lady Macbeth but, at the same time, were enamoured of her.*

*She was a woman that they loved to hate, that they loved to fear. For Lady Macbeth is the epitome of that “unsexed” woman—that laughing Medusa beyond the veil of cultural constructions (or mandatory performances) of “femininity.”*

Hazlitt: [Lady Macbeth] is a great bad woman, whom we hate, but whom we fear more than we hate. (qtd. in Bate 424)

*Barbauld seems to take up this position. She seems to exclaim “unsex me here.” Or, more specifically, she seems at the end of “Washing-Day” to ask: “Why do we have to wash? Why can’t we fly?” (Kraft 35).*

Cixous: Flying is woman’s gesture—flying in language and making it fly. We have all learned the art of flying and its numerous techniques; for centuries we’ve been able to possess anything only by flying; we’ve lived in flight, stealing away, finding, when desired, narrow passageways, hidden crossovers. It’s no accident that *voler* has a double meaning, that it plays on each

of them and thus throws off the agents of sense. It's no accident: women take after birds and robbers just as robbers take after women and birds. They (*illes*) go by, fly the coop, take pleasure in jumbling the order of space, in disorienting it, in changing around the furniture, dislocating things and values, breaking them all up, emptying structures and turning propriety upside down. (357)

*Barbauld does this. She turns things again, again, and around and around—in her harried mind, on “the wet cold sheet.” She battles with figures of anxiety and guilt that the society in which she lives and writes insidiously instills in her mind.*

Lady Macbeth: Out, damn'd spot! out, I say! One; two. Why then 'tis time to do't. Hell is murky. Fie, my lord, fie! a soldier, and afeard? What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our pow'r to accompt? Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him? . . .  
The Thane of Fife had a wife. Where is she now? What, will these hands ne'er be clean? No more o' that, my lord, no more o' that! You mar all with this starting.

*Maddened by men—christened a “slipshod sibyl”—the “red-arm'd” writer submits to madwoman ideas about herself, and proceeds to conjure away the “unwanted guests from her mind.”*

Witches: Double, double, toil and trouble;  
fire burn, and cauldron bubble. (*Macbeth* IV.i.20-1)

*Barbauld daemonically possesses the words of her forefathers. She speaks in their language, in their one- and sameness.*

Irigaray: If we keep on speaking sameness, if we speak to each other as men have been doing for centuries, as we have been taught to speak, we'll miss each other, fail ourselves. Again . . . Words will pass through our bodies, above our heads . They'll vanish, be spoken machines, speaking machines. Enveloped in proper skins, but not our own. Withdrawn into proper names, violated by them. Not yours, not mine. We don't have



any. We change names as men exchange us, as they use us, use us up. It would be frivolous of us, exchanged by them, to be so changeable. (Irigaray 205)

*At the end of the poem, "Washing-Day" turns into the bubble from whence Barbauld derived it, that is, from washing-day and the soap bubbles that the children would blow "through hollow bowl / Of pipe amused" (79-80). There is a sense that these bubbles will "vanish," and that the history of women's work and women's experience will "be lost. Far off, up high" into nothingness. Or else, "Far off, up high" into the history of women's work and women's experience, which is to say, up to that history which follows from the Romantic appropriation of the "immaterial, invisible, even ghostly" "household of man" (Wordsworth, Preface 605), and from the Romantic "internaliz[ation], idealiz[ation] . . . even spectraliz[ation] [of] the home" (Favret 61, 62). Historicized, the women are "calm" (29), and "smiling" (30), like such romanticized, monumentalized figures as "Saints . . . stretched upon the rack," and the king of Mexico, "Guatimozin . . . on burning coals" (29, 30), whose names and deeds will forever, smilingly grace the pages of history books, just as they grace the lines of Barbauld's own poem. But Barbauld's poem is a bubble.*

Barbauld:	Sometimes through hollow bowl Of pipe amused we blew, and sent aloft The floating bubbles; little dreaming them To see, <i>Mongolfier</i> ,—thy silken ball Ride buoyant through the clouds—so near approach The sports of children and the toils of men.
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*"Washing-Day" is framed in a Shakespearean bubble—a flighty, "silken ball": it begins again with the epigraph from As You Like It, and ends again with Banquo's lines from Macbeth. But Barbauld also breathes into Miltonic versification and style, and the words of*

*Milton, Pope, Burke, and Swift . . . into the “glowing,” “swelling” bubble. With the last interruptive dash— “—this most of all”—she deflates the bubble. In doing so, she “unsexes” it. . . .*

Rosalind: It is not the fashion to see the lady the epilogue, but is no more unhandsome than to see the lord the prologue. If it be true that good wine needs no bush, 'tis true that a good play needs no epilogue; yet to good wine they do use good bushes, and good plays prove the better by the help of good epilogues. What a case am I in then, that am neither a good epilogue, nor cannot insinuate with you the behalf of a good play! I am not furnished like a beggar; therefore to beg will not become me. My way is to conjure you, and I'll begin with the women. I charge you, O women, for the love you bear to men, to like as much of this play as please you; and I charge you, O men, for the love you bear to women—as I perceive by your simpering none of you hates them—that between you and the women the play may please. If I were a woman, I would kiss as many of you as had beards that pleased me, complexions that liked me, and breaths that I defied not; and I am sure, as many as have good beards, or good faces, or sweet breaths, will, for my kind offer, when I make curtsy, bid me farewell.

Barbould: Earth, air, and sky, and ocean, hath its bubbles,  
And verse is one of them—this most of all.

*Exeunt.*

APPENDIX

*Washing-Day*<sup>98</sup>

. . . . . and their voice,  
Turning again towards childish treble, pipes  
And whistles in its sound.-----

The Muses are turned gossips; they have lost  
The buskin'd step, and clear high-sounding phrase,  
Language of gods. Come, then, domestic Muse,  
In slip-shod measure loosely prattling on  
Of farm or orchard, pleasant curds and cream, 5  
Or drowning flies, or shoe lost in the mire  
By little whimpering boy, with rueful face;  
Come, Muse, and sing the dreaded *Washing-Day*.  
—Ye who beneath the yoke of wedlock bend,  
With bowed soul, full well ye ken the day 10  
Which week, smooth sliding after week, brings on  
Too soon; for to that day nor peace belongs  
Nor comfort; ere the first grey streak of dawn,  
The red-arm'd washers come and chase repose.  
Nor pleasant smile, nor quaint device of mirth, 15  
E'er visited that day: the very cat,  
From the wet kitchen scared, and reeking hearth,  
Visits the parlour, an unwonted guest.  
The silent breakfast-meal is soon dispatch'd  
Uninterrupted, save by anxious looks 20  
Cast at the lowering sky, if sky should lower.  
From that last evil, oh preserve us, heavens!  
For should the skies pour down, adieu to all  
Remains of quiet; then expect to hear  
Of sad disasters-dirt and gravel stains 25  
Hard to efface, and loaded lines at once

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<sup>98</sup> I have taken this text from Mellor and Matlack's anthology *British Literature 1780-1830*, as indicated in the Works Cited page.

Snapped short—and linen-horse by dog thrown down,  
 And all the petty miseries of life.  
 Saints have been calm while stretched upon the rack,  
 And Guatimozin smil'd on burning coals; 30  
 But never yet did housewife notable  
 Greet with a smile a rainy washing-day.  
 —But grant the welkin fair, require not thou  
 Who call'st thyself perchance the master there,  
 Or study swept, or nicely dusted coat, 35  
 Or usual 'tendance; ask not, indiscreet,  
 Thy stockings mended, tho' the yawning rents  
 Gape wide as Erebus, nor hope to find  
 Some snug recess impervious: should'st thou try  
 The 'customed garden walks, thine eye shall rue 40  
 The budding fragrance of thy tender shrubs,  
 Myrtle or rose, all crushed beneath the weight  
 Of coarse check'd apron, with impatient hand  
 Twitch'd off when showers impend: or crossing lines  
 Shall mar thy musings, as the wet cold sheet 45  
 Flaps in thy face abrupt. Woe to the friend  
 Whose evil stars have urged him forth to claim  
 On such a day the hospitable rites;  
 Looks, blank at best, and stinted courtesy,  
 Shall he receive. Vainly he feeds his hopes 50  
 With dinner of roast chicken, savoury pie,  
 Or tart or pudding:—pudding he nor tart  
 That day shall eat; nor, tho' the husband try,  
 Mending what can't be help'd, to kindle mirth  
 From cheer deficient, shall his consort's brow 55  
 Clear up propitious; the unlucky guest  
 In silence dines, and early slinks away.  
 I well remember, when a child, the awe  
 This day struck into me; for then the maids,  
 I scarce knew why, looked cross, and drove me from them; 60  
 Nor soft caress could I obtain, nor hope  
 Usual indulgencies; jelly or creams,  
 Relique of costly suppers, and set by  
 For me their petted one; or butter'd toast,  
 When butter was forbid; or thrilling tale 65  
 Of ghost, or witch, or murder—so I went  
 And shelter'd me beside the parlour fire:  
 There my dear grandmother, eldest of forms,  
 Tended the little ones, and watched from harm,



Anxiously fond, tho' oft her spectacles 70  
With elfin cunning hid, and oft the pins  
Drawn from her ravell'd stocking, might have sour'd  
One less indulgent.—  
At intervals my mother's voice was heard,  
Urging dispatch; briskly the work went on, 75  
All hands employed to wash, to rinse, to wring,  
To fold, and starch, and clap, and iron, and plait.  
Then would I sit me down, and ponder much  
Why washings were. Sometimes thro' hollow bowl  
Of pipe amused we blew, and sent aloft 80  
The floating bubbles, little dreaming then  
To see, Mongolfier, thy silken ball  
Ride buoyant through the clouds—so near approach  
The sports of children and the toils of men.  
Earth, air, and sky, and ocean, hath its bubbles, 85  
And verse is one of them—this most of all.

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