

MORALITY AND ETHICS:

The Economics of Mice in Barbauld and Burns

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This essay is only one of several I remember receiving from Ben which consistently lifted my spirits and intellect from the morass of marking, and convinced me once again that I have the best job in the world. It's hard to say what is most impressive here: the wit and clarity of the comparison; the precise and perceptive interpretation; the attention to prosody; the deft combination of approaches; or the colourfully cheeky style and tone, skipping from the "disgustingly academic" to the "obliquely high-falutin'." Or maybe it's the way whole new territories are glimpsed in tossed-off parenthetical remarks on Barbauld, such as nationalism and Novalis at the end of the paper. Either way, there's nothing mousy about this effort, but there's plenty to entertain and edify any reader.

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Anna Letitia Barbauld's "The Mouse's Petition to Dr. Priestly," and Robert Burns's "To a Mouse"³ may appear, at first glance, to share a great deal of thematic similarity. With a bit of digging, however, one unearths a subtle, although important,

³ I will henceforth refer to the poems as "Petition" and "Mouse," respectively.

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thematic and tonal discontinuity between the two. While Barbauld is writing something of a morality play with an emphasis on equivocation, Burns is tentatively addressing an issue of ethics that concerns the possibility of pre-linguistic discourse. A high-minded claim such as this warrants an in-depth and disgustingly academic explanation, and so, in that vein, this paper will address this thought by investigating these poems from three specific angles. The first is *structural*; the second, for lack of a better term, *philosophical*; and the third, interestingly enough, concerns an important *economic* dimension of these works, which ties my seemingly unrelated analytical perspectives more closely together.

A broad structural analysis of “Petition” reveals a poem that is easy to read, pleasant to recite and listen to, and conducive to memory in terms of both rhyme scheme and tempo. The poem demonstrates stylistic choices that emphasize ease of communication. There is little variation in verse structure throughout: a simple ABCB rhyme scheme persists from the first to the last stanza. Lines alternate between four and three iambic feet within each stanza, leaving the stress on the final syllable of a line, giving it a strong, “masculine” emphasis. One could easily compare the aural element of this poem with the appeal of

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a marching tune, or even a particularly tone-conscious sermon. It is a well-built piece of work.

“Mouse,” on the other hand, adopts a more unique structure and style that is somewhat off-putting in contrast. The immediate obstacle to the reader is Burns’s choice to write in a rural Scottish dialect - “a daimen icker in a thrave” (Burns 15), for example, as opposed to “an odd ear in twenty-four sheaves,” which would be the Standard English wording. The rhyme scheme runs AAABAB throughout, but the tempo varies in strange ways; it is, in a sense, more fluid than “Petition,” while simultaneously seeming rather impenetrable, at least at first glance. Longer “A” lines vary between four-and-a-half and four iambic feet (with five at line thirty-two), while shorter “B” lines switch between two and two-and-a-half. Although particular stanzas retain an internal consistency, the poem as a whole seems to operate much more haphazardly than “Petition” in this regard; I should add, however, that the somewhat odd metrical structure is construed in the service of dialogue and tone. The above noted inconsistencies, for example, dictate that some lines end on weak, “feminine” beats, while others end on strong, “masculine” ones, making the tone of the poem not only alienating (for many reading audiences, and certainly for the mouse to which it

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is addressed), but also, as it were, “hermaphroditic” when held up against Barbauld’s “masculine” work. Visually, it may be noted that the poem has a strange, somewhat inconsistent look to it as well. The structural decisions on display here are differentiating, but conducive to the overall theme about which Burns’s work orbits.

While, narratively speaking, we know that the principal subject of address in “Mouse” is the mouse itself, in “Petition” the mouse ostensibly plays the uncanny role of addressor. The addressee of “Petition” is Dr. Priestly, an eminent contemporary chemist and the discoverer of the structure of oxygen; the dialogue on display, however, represents a symbolic address to a much wider audience:

If e’er thy breast with freedom glowed,
And spurned a tyrant’s chain,
Let not thy strong oppressive force
A free-born mouse detain! (Barbauld 9-12)

This passage represents an appeal to liberality, and further along, in a passage that addresses “the well taught philosophic mind” (25), we find an appeal to intelligence as well (and a literate audience of the eighteenth century is likely to have been acutely aware of its superior intellectual standing). Of course, morality and intelligence are not necessarily interchangeable terms, but Barbauld’s

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statements appear to carry some universalizing inertia that appears to render them so. Barbauld places emphasis on the mind, “a never dying flame” (30), in an idealistic passage midway through her poem and, even further on, she uses the terms “soul” and “mind” (34, 36) interchangeably within the same stanza, conflating formal essence and intelligence. With that said, Barbauld’s focus becomes more pronounced in the following lines:

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

Sense, here, gives way to sensitivity, and cold, purely rationalistic intelligence to a metaphysics of moral equivocation. Indeed, something is being cultivated and protected in this appeal that exceeds even the scientific endeavours of Dr. Priestly (a champion of rationality, who is cast as a potential tyrant in the passage above). By addressing a symbolic “humanity,” the mouse is thereby made into a symbol itself, or perhaps into a surrogate. Mice, of course, have no voice to speak of (or with), cannot enter into discourse and, therefore, cannot make appeals. “Petition” champions ideals of pity and tolerance, which are accompanied by an idealized equivocation that exceeds

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both human discourse (represented as the mouse's appeal to a man of science) and nature (in the figure of the animal itself). Barbauld's symbolic moralizing is driven home in the final lines of her poem: "So when destruction lurks unseen, / Which men, like mice, may share, / May some kind angel clear thy path" (Barbauld 45-47). Men and mice may share some material boundary which proscribes foresight, but we should read herein the triumph of moral agency over what appears to us as some kind of temporally contingent, worldly doom. The poem - for all its structural competence and aesthetic appeal - is actually gesturing toward something *higher*, toward something beyond itself.

Is anything being occluded in this moral equivocation? We could very well ask what is suggested by *speaking for* a mouse. Is positing a linguistic animal akin to some kind of psychological anthropomorphism? Let us turn back to Burns's poem, in which a mouse is neither spoken for nor given a voice at all. "Mouse" exhibits a pre-linguistic, pre-anthropocentric, extra-psychological through-line, which separates its subtle ethical message from the moral idealism of Barbauld's poem.

"Wee, sleekit, cowrin, timorous beastie" (Burns 1): themes of sympathy are communicated from the very opening lines of "Mouse," despite the obscurity of terms

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such as “sleekit.” An apology soon follows for the disconcertment the speaker knows he has inflicted upon the fleeing rodent. He pines, “I’m truly sorry man’s dominion / Has broken Nature’s social union” (Burns 7-8). What kind of union is this? It is certainly not a sublative union, as the speaker shows the distinction between man and Nature to be a radical divide - a “break” that the speaker then shatters; such breaks are, in the first place, something that Barbauld and her mouse would venture to occlude. The speaker reflects upon the small price⁴ the mouse has likely exacted upon his household, in a fashion that one might productively contrast with a similar passage in “Petition,” wherein the mouse appeals to Dr. Priestly for the little that it requires to live (Barbauld 17-20). While the former is an economic concession, as in, “I’ll get a blessin wi’ the lave, / An’ never miss’t” (Burns 17-18), the latter is a moral appeal: “But if thine unrelenting heart / That slender boon deny” (Barbauld 19-20). The supply of hearth, hospitality, and hearty meal for a mouse must take a higher power into consideration in Barbauld, while, in Burns, an ethical responsibility is taken up toward the little alien in light of the creature’s disenfranchisement - at least as far as

⁴The aforementioned, “daimen icker in a thrave” (Burns 15).

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can be practically expected to lie within the speaker's means. "Thy wee bit housie, too, in ruin!" (Burns 19), after all, calls attention to the tenuous hold one might hope to claim over one's well-structured economy of life, both in the face of Nature, as well as human nature. The word "cell" (30) is chosen to refer to the mouse's ruined home; this choice is ironic, in that the word brings with it connotations of inviolable separation, self-enclosure, and autonomy. Apparently, the sentiment has not held up in the face of a farmer's plow.

The following lines are likely the poem's most timeless and enduring: "The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men / Gang aft agley"⁵ (Burns 40). Sympathy, as we have seen, is an important component of this poem: is the divide between mouse and man thereby bridged in this stanza? Further, how is it that mice "scheme"? "Still thou art blest, compared wi' me! / The present only toucheth thee," the speaker continues, "But och! I backward cast my e'e / On prospects drear!" (43-46). The chasm re-opens: while the mouse is wholly reactive and instinctual in its being, man is capable of temporalizing experience. He possesses memory, laments and regrets, and, importantly, he plans

⁵ That is, "Go oft awry."

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and anticipates: “An’ forward, tho’ I canna see, / I guess an’ fear” (47-48). In contrast, “Petition” allows its mouse a sense of futurity.⁶ It is no great wonder that “Mouse” ends on a far more foreboding note than “Petition,” with the latter’s talk of “kind angels” (Barbault 47). And yet, that ethically responsible sympathy, evident throughout “Mouse” on even a cursory reading, is what preserves the mouse, which, for all its panic, is not (at least explicitly) threatened. In Burns, the connection to the mouse is pre-linguistic (communication between man and mouse fails – the mouse is not taken up into the man’s line of reasoning, or into reason at all), pre-anthropocentric (the mouse is neither spoken for nor anthropomorphized), and extra-psychological (the irreconcilable mental capacities of mice and men are acknowledged – the mouse cannot be taken up into the speaker’s *time*). Mouse and man have been, and will continue to be, together, in union – without one truly reconciling itself to the other, even at this moment of extreme mutual exposure. Any further “reconciliation,” one surmises, would have to come beneath a boot.

The economic dimension of my analysis has already been hinted at, particularly in the investigation of “Mouse.”

⁶ “And tremble at the approaching morn, / Which brings impending fate” (Barbault 7-8).

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However, before going further, a brief etymological side-note is in order. The prefix “eco-” is descended from the ancient Greek word for “home,” *oikos*, with “-nomy,” being derived from *nomos*. “Economy,” then, translates roughly to something like “home management,”⁷ and this is the sense in which those monastery-bound, caretaking Christian monks who coined the term intended it. The “management” part of this translation refers to time (in the sense of organization, or even “scheming,” and, in Barbauld’s case, historicism), while the thing managed, which is alluded to (as it were) *behind* the word “home,” is space. The terms time and space are, roughly and classically speaking, analogous to *masculinity* and *femininity*, respectively.⁸

Time and temporality play into both texts (particularly at their conclusions) but, in contrast, the economical *space* or simple *presence* of the home is only explicit in “Mouse,” although it may be tacitly figured, if taken for granted and passed over unthinkingly, in “Petition.” In my

⁷ Source: Oxford Dictionaries Online. (<http://oxforddictionaries.com>)

⁸ The equation of time with masculinity and space with femininity are not ideas that have sprung fully formed from my head, so to speak. They are influenced by the work of feminist analyst and theorist Luce Irigaray, particularly her book, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. My attempt to utilize her rhetorical terminology is, likewise, not arbitrary; I believe her gender-situated terminology best ties my thesis together.

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analysis, this is evidence of Barbauld's masculinist optimism: the same kind of thinking (although cast from a nationalistic perspective as pessimism) that landed her in trouble for her most famous work, "Eighteen-Hundred and Eleven." Burns plays with time and space in his poem, breaking through boundaries and releasing something destructive - exemplified in the use of masculine tools to tear down the mouse's abode and eat up resources. But also present is the feminine unknown: that Nature to which our "best laid schemes" are laid bare. His use of time and space reveal the same hermaphroditism that is evident even in the structure of the piece. In this vein, Burns's poem is structurally self-aware in a way that Barbauld's is not: it draws the eye to its awkward language and metrical composition, as if winking at us. It returns the gaze and implicates us in its transgressions, as the gaze of the mouse implicates the speaker.

Barbauld's poem is the truly romantic one, as it allows for the sublimation of two beneath one ideal. This observation holds true whether one considers the economic dimension I have outlined, or simply the appeal to Dr. Priestly to facilitate his fellow creature under an all-encompassing (though solipsistically human) moral feeling, or, as Barbauld puts it: "*all*" (38, 40). Burns, on the other

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hand, is doing something different. Novalis would have equated it with darkness, although I've chosen to cast it as explicitly feminine. With that being said, the mouse's sermon in Barbault may itself have been endemic of a period in which women could only enter into the male discursive sphere by way of petition, and then acquiescence. Could I have gotten it wrong? In my disingenuous, indeed my appallingly insincere, obliquely high-falutin' little paper . . . have I used her?

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