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Romantic Poetry in Conversation: Continuation, Critique or Counterpart?

Often romantic poetry is considered (usually by a self-indulgent poet) to consist of stand-alone work; they may reference the ideas or work of another poet and acknowledge their influence but few can be considered to have gone past response and enter conversation. Romantic literature can be written in response to the poet's own work (e.g. a particular piece or an entire body of work) or the work of a cohort, friend, or adversary; its nature may be that of admiration, mockery or disgust. The purpose of such a response and engagement with a text could be many things - to resolve the questions raised by the initial work, question ideas and themes, or continue the narrative sequence or a comparable progression. Although the following discussed pieces of literature do not entail a back and forth rapport, their consequent relationships can be described as somewhat conversational in regards to their content and various references. A primary example of these conversations is William Blake's "The Lamb" and "The Tyger," which aren't explicitly conjoined but it can be inferred that his readership will read the two in tandem as their structure and content are relatively mimetic; in this instance the initiation of the rapport eases the reader into a pastoral-based work and the response continues this framework to comment on the opposing side of Blake's proposed ideas. Of a comparable nature, Mary Wollstonecraft's "A Vindication of the Rights of Men" and "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" published only two years after, discusses two separate ideas on the divide of gender.

Finally, as an example of the aforementioned ‘adversary’ based conversation, Anna Laetitia Barbauld’s “The Rights of Woman” demonstrates the relationship between two separate poets, as she responds via ridicule and critique. Some romantic poetry can be infinitely more engaging and elicit a greater response if contextualized within its corresponding literary response, as a means of strengthening its argument through support, counterpoint or resolve.

William Blake (1757-1827) was raised by his father, James Blake, an entrepreneurial dissenter, critical of Britain’s hierarchical society, (oppressive of merchant and artisan classes of which he was apart of); from a young age, Blake was made aware of connections between art, politics and religion, and their consequent role in his daily life. During his education at the Royal Academy Blake was taught under a strict framework of classic art aggrandization but preferred to focus on the complexity of the sublime, with future works serving as an unsuspecting encapsulation of his political and religious ideas. As demonstrated in the selected poems of analysis, his process of illuminated printing technique gave him greater recognition among romantic poets; his poetry can be considered a significant labor of love - expensive, time-consuming and laborious.

As far as technical elements, “The Lamb " uses iambic trimeter as meter, two ten line stanzaic patterns, and a rhyme scheme of AABBCCDDAA. Blake’s diction begins as informal and undemanding with imagery relating to the titular lamb, nature, spring, heaven, and the child/shepard working jointly with his nursery rhyme structure. Within this work, Blake’s speaker aims to reassure his readership and confirm existing beliefs and opinions of a benevolent and peaceful God; at this point, if his audience read only “The Lamb,” this message wouldn’t

come full circle and would leave them as they were - unassuming and blissfully naive in their faith.

In terms of technical elements for “The Tyger,” it consists of an iambic trimeter as its meter, six four line stanzaic patterns and a rhyme scheme of AABC/DDEE /FFGG/HHII/JJKK/AABC. Due to Blake’s use of the nursery rhyme structure, the diction seems informal and abstract with contrasting imagery in relation to the lamb, relying on images such as the titular tiger, fire, nature, and industrial lingo. Prompting religious and moral contemplation, “The Tyger" demonstrates God’s dual nature as he embodies the good and evil in the world (the lamb and the tiger, respectively). The piece serves as a final message to the reader, initiated by the first portion of Blake’s conversation, working in tandem with the created dual imagery.

Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) was considered a pillar of classic literary feminism and an influential advocate of equal rights and education for women; she sought to illuminate and lessen the manifestation of patriarchal tyranny, which was evident in her own home as well as the homes of most women at the time. After her mother’s death, Wollstonecraft left home and became an independent writer of women and their education and with the help of English publisher Joseph Johnson and a radical circle of renowned poets, her first publications gained traction as part of the development of the women’s movement, inspired by the American and French Revolutions; the French Revolution as a call to arms for equal rights, inspired her to ‘translate’ its sentiments to English. In 1793, she married and had a daughter with American veteran Gilbert Imlay, an unfaithful partner who abandoned and sent her off to Scandinavia; in 1797 she gave birth to daughter Mary Shelley with her second husband writer William Goodwin, a member of the aforementioned Johnson Circle - both were opposed to marriage as a societal

construction but married and kept separate rooms. Although Wollstonecraft was defamed by 19th century thinkers due to her ideas on gender and rectitude, her work has inspired multiple literary successors and advocates for women's education and gender equity.

The structure of Wollstonecraft's "A Vindication of the Rights of Men" entails first an introduction followed by four sections of varying length: "On the 'Cult of Sensibility," "Divine Rights and Human Equality," "Women, Property, and Virtue" and finally "The Rights of the Poor." She touches on multiple ideas such as the revolution of national ideas and values, discussing England's need to modernize the established human rights despite their previous effectiveness and long developed respect and reputation as the country's framework. This work was influenced and responds to Edmund Burke's "Reflections on the French Revolution;" Wollstonecraft wished to imbue these same reflections among her readership in England. Furthermore, her own advocacy for equal rights for women shine through as she emphasizes the opportunity for equal access to education for both men and women, consequently asserting the outdated views of the patriarchy in which women are considered inferior and passive towards their assigned hierarchical roles.

The structure of "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" is as follows: initial address, introduction, Chapter 2: The Prevailing Opinion of a Sexual Character Discussed, Chapter 3: The Same Subject Continued, and finally Chapter 13: Some Instances of the Folly Which the Ignorance of Women Generates; with Concluding Reflections on the Moral Improvement That a Revolution in Female Manners Might Naturally Be Expected to Produce. It must be noted that while Wollstonecraft's "A Vindication of the Rights of Men" is approximately five and a half

pages long, “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman” spans about 24 pages; this disparity in attention speaks volumes of her focus towards women’s rights among her body of work. Within this work she expands her previous argument of gender equality, writing of freedom and its resulting morality among men and women; with a philosophical lens, Wollstonecraft states that the ability to participate and engage in politics and education would allow women to transcend beyond their stunted moral development; with concrete institutions in place, built to diminish their personal freedoms and instill a dependence on patriarchal figures inside and outside their familial circles, women are unable to experience life and gain virtue and morality. Advocating for a human rights issue as dense and complicated as gender equality warrants the exploration of both men's rights and women’s rights and consequently valides Wollstonecraft’s decision for individual publications, with a continuous sequential nature. As discussed previously, the power disparity between the two must be acknowledged to unify the collective.

In a separate conversation “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman” has been proven to have influenced and perhaps initiated Barbauld’s “The Rights of Woman,” demonstrating a pairing in which the two poets come to butt heads, so to speak. Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1743-1825) received encouragement from her father and his Warrington Academy colleague at a young age to pursue a classical education and at 30 she published her first two books *Poems* and *Prose*; both publications gained her recognition and renown, particularly from famed literary critic Elizabeth Montagu. Barbauld declined Montagu’s invitation to co-found a Literary Academy for Ladies due to her belief that women should be educated through conversations with educated male family members. In the following years she opened a boys’ school in Sussex with husband and minister Rochemont Barbauld; during this time she published multiple nationally

recognized books (*Lessons for Children* and *Hymns in Prose for Children*). Once connected with the radical Johnson Circle, Barbauld began publishing on topics such as education, democracy and abolition; her work became widely successful in America as well as Britain.

"The Rights of Woman" answers Wollstonecraft's own reference to Barbauld's "To a Lady, with Some Painted Flowers" in "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman," a reference that either mocks or condemns her patriarchal views on gender and invites readers to interpret their exchange as teasing or ridicule or satire. Perhaps influenced by this previous 'conversation,' she explores similar ideas in "Washing-Day," an inventive but relatively tame experiment of domestic content within the structures of traditionally male-dominated literary forms; she discusses the rigid gender roles with as much application to men as to women. It can be presumed that a particularly harsh and ignorant critique of "Eighteen Hundred and Eleven" by reviewer John Croker discouraged and ended her career, as the poem was the last published work of Barbauld's.

The Rights of Woman includes the following technical elements: iambic tetrameter, eight four line stanzaic patterns, an ABAB rhyme scheme with close rhymes in stanzas 4 and 8, lines 2 and 4, and a formal and pedantic diction. Utilized as a call to arms to the "injured" women of the world, Barbauld seeks to rally her readership and spur them to assert themselves among the oppressive patriarchy of 19th century England. She further acknowledges the withholding of their rightful power and their opportunity to not only unseat men, so to speak: "Go, bid proud Man his boasted rule resign" (182), but secure and maintain the command of womankind. Ultimately, Barbauld argues that peace and unity between the sexes is unattainable and must

sway one way or the other - the rights of one party must be lost at the cost of the other's rise to power. A rather extreme view, "The Rights of Woman" speaks to the portion of her readership that believes in the necessary and absolute domination of men in order to secure the rights of women. Alternatively, her directness and arguably exaggerated language may be considered a parody of Wollstonecraft's "The Vindication of the Rights of Woman."

Bibliography

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