

Slippery Moral Messages and Political Pedagogues: radical politics in *Evenings at Home*

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The fable form has received short shrift in literary circles, particularly in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and few these days consider its capacity to introduce young readers to politically incendiary ideas. In a book devoted to the fable, Thomas Noel disparagingly declares:

In the sense that an art form lives only so long as it present possibilities for creative innovation, [...] the fable was dead long before the death knell was sounded. [...]

Simplicity and brevity are paramount virtues in the fable [...] The genre demands neither subtlety, nor philosophical profundity, nor poetical lyricism.¹

Noel's statement, 'Simplicity and brevity are paramount virtues in the fable [... which] demands neither subtlety [...] nor poetical lyricism' reveals a critical preference for texts that display 'depth' and 'thickness' and an assumption that texts not exhibiting these features are innately less literary.² Yet this bias against literary simplicity is not and has not always been a criterion for defining literature. In his 1764 essay on fables, Robert Dodsley argued that the ability to write in a simple, elegant style required *more* literary skill than writing in a complex style, 'loaded with figure and metaphor', as writers able to exclude 'coarse and provincial terms; all affected and puerile conceits; all obsolete and pedantick [sic] phrases' showed their ability to communicate ideas in a way that was applicable beyond the discourse of their immediate social contexts.³ Moreover, resisting the equation of literary simplicity with a lack of intellectual sophistication enables twenty-first century readers to see how Anna Laetitia Barbauld and John Aikin utilised fables in *Evenings at Home* (1792–96) as part of their programme in disseminating radically anti-authoritarian political ideas, opening up broader discussions concerning the pedagogic, and hence political, functions of literary forms such as the fable.

¹ Thomas Noel, *Theories Of the Fable In the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), p. 13.

² Ibid.

³ Robert Dodsley, *An Essay on Fable* (1764) (Los Angeles: The Augustan Reprint Society, 1965), p. lxxv.

This paper argues that Barbauld and Aikin's six-volume miscellany *Evenings at Home* (1792–96) was a Rational Dissenting text that used the politically charged fable form to project a familial reading audience and generate conversations that could produce socio-political reform. In making this claim, the paper draws upon Barbauld and Aikin's background of Rational Dissent and their subsequent concept of the family as the fundamental unit upon which society is constructed. Anna Laetitia Barbauld, née Aikin, and John Aikin were born in the 1740s to a Rational Dissenting family of Unitarian leanings. Although excluded from the centre of Establishment power, the Barbauld-Aikin circle was associated with the Warrington Academy Dissenters, a circle that participated in significant economic and cultural circles of British society and was noted for its attempts to use conversational circles to generate ideas that could lead to social reform.⁴ As Rational Dissenters, Barbauld and Aikin shared a vision of the domestic family as the fundamental social unit.⁵ While the eighteenth-century concept of the family is complex, this paper examines the Dissenting paradigm of the domestic family unit, which in eighteenth-century Britain was generally understood as a household organisation involving co-residence and structures of authority.⁶ In this paradigm, the domestic family unit has the potential to impact the wider public sphere by generating new socio-political values and theories through home-based discussions. These ideas could be disseminated through the neighbourhood through other kinship-based discussions,⁷ eventually reaching a large enough portion of society to re-mould wider socio-cultural paradigms and values.⁸ This vision inflected Barbauld and Aikin's writing practices, as their publication of polemics and *Evenings at Home* mimicked the idea of a familial exchange of ideas in the more public world of print culture. Scott Krawczyk has compellingly traced in Aikin and Barbauld's correspondence and *Miscellaneous Pieces* a

⁴ Jon Mee, *Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention & Community 1762 to 1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 16, pp. 60–61.

⁵ See Barbauld's Hymn VIII in *Hymns in Prose* where the individual family becomes synecdochic for the world in which 'All are God's family' in *Hymns In Prose for Children* (London: J. Johnson, 1781), ECCO; Sylvia Tomaselli also discusses Rational Dissenting concepts of the family in 'The most public sphere of all: the family', in *Women, Writing and the Public Sphere, 1700–1830*, edited by Elizabeth Eger, Charlotte Grant, Cliona Ó Gallchoir and Penny Warburton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 239–256.

⁶ Naomi Tadmor, *Family and Friends in Eighteenth-Century England: Household, Kinship and Patronage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 27–40.

⁷ For more on the idea of kinship ties as a type of connection including and extending from the nuclear family, see Tadmor, pp. 106–165.

⁸ Daniel E. White, "The 'Joineriana': Anna Barbauld, the Aikin Family Circle, and the Dissenting Public Sphere", *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 32.4 (Summer 1999); also *Early Romanticism and Religious Dissent*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), especially pp. 11–13 and pp. 67–72.

‘dialogic consciousness [...] that manifests itself in [...] *responsive collaboration*’, noting that their published polemics examine the same political issues from different perspectives: Barbauld’s *Address to the Opposers of the Repeal and Test Corporation Acts*, for instance, was released on the same day as Aikin’s *Address to the Dissidents of England on their late defeat*.⁹

Evenings at Home follows this pattern of familial authorship: Barbauld and Aikin implicitly announced their joint responsibility for the work’s ethical and political agendas through their pseudo-anonymous publication of the first volume in 1792.¹⁰ Although neither author put their name to the works, their joint authorship is indicated in the original version (editions 1–12) by a half-page advertisement beneath the contents page, promoting works lately published by Mrs. Barbauld and Dr. Aikin.¹¹ Within the miscellany, there is no attribution of individual pieces to individual authors, which resulted in authorial misattributions that continue to this day.¹² With an almost indignant tone, Lucy Aikin insisted in her 1825 memoir that Barbauld only wrote fourteen of the ninety-nine pieces in *Evenings at Home*,¹³ but as Michelle Levy notes, Lucy Aikin’s statements have resulted in critics ‘portioning [...] a family document.’¹⁴ The united voice of the family is fundamental to the production of *Evenings at Home*, as it enacts Barbauld and Aikin’s vision of the work as an object designed by, and for, family use.

The introduction of *Evenings at Home* presents a literary account of its production and dissemination that echoes its real-life production and dissemination. It describes the Fairborne family, whose habit of inviting educated friends to participate in familial activities conflates the domestic and ‘academic’ spheres and bears a remarkable similarity to the Aikin household in which Anna Laetitia and John were raised.¹⁵ Resonances

⁹ Scott Krawczyk, *Romantic Literary Families* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 10, pp. 78–90.

¹⁰ Michelle Levy, *Family Authorship and Romantic Print Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 25.

¹¹ Mrs [Anna Laetitia] Barbauld and Dr [John] Aikin, *Evenings at Home: or, the Juvenile Budget Opened; consisting of a Variety of Miscellaneous Pieces for the Instruction and Amusement of Young Persons* (London: Joseph Johnson, 1792), Eighteenth Century Collections Online, vols. 1–6, I, p. iv. Henceforth cited in-text as *Evenings*.

¹² Edward Copeland accidentally ascribes ‘Half-a-crown’s worth’ to Barbauld in *Women Writing About Money: Women’s Fiction in England 1790–1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 24.

¹³ Lucy Aikin, *The Works of Anna Laetitia Barbauld. With a Memoir*, 2 vols., (1825), ed. by Lucy Aikin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) pp. xii–xiii.

¹⁴ Michelle Levy, *Family Authorship and Romantic Print Culture*, (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 26.

¹⁵ McCarthy recounts an incident where Anna’s father, John, and his pupil were conversing on passions and emotions over the dinner table, and Anna Laetitia inserted herself into the conversation to correct her father; William McCarthy, *Anna Letitia Barbauld: Voice of the Enlightenment* (Baltimore: Baltimore University Press, 2008), p. 32.

abound between the production of *Evenings at Home* and real-life literary practices in the Warrington Academy circle. Daniel White has drawn attention to the familial nature of literary production in the Warrington Academy community, in which students and participants were encouraged to submit compositions into Mary Priestley's handbag, affectionately termed the 'Budget', and from this pieces were randomly selected for reading and discussion, which formed the basis of that evening's entertainment. Through these manuscript-based modes of circulation, Anna and John's work became familiar to Warrington-associated members long before they entered the print world.¹⁶ Thus, the titular 'Budget' is a reference to the real-life Warrington 'Budget', and it is a publicised vision of a domesticated communal practice. In her preface to the 1823 revised version of *Evenings at Home*, Lucy Aikin affirms that the work was initially conceived in a familial context: 'His (John Aikin's) invention flowed freely, - the applause of parents and the delight of children invited him to proceed.'¹⁷ In a similar way, the introduction of *Evenings at Home* presents the publication of the Fairborne's 'Budget' as a process of gradual dissemination that began in the family home and spread to the community: 'Other children were admitted to these readings; and as the *Budget of Beechgrove Hall* became somewhat celebrated in the neighbourhood, its proprietors were at length urged to lay it open to the public' (*Evenings* I, p. vi). White describes this social form of literacy as 'a realized poetics of nonconformity,'¹⁸ in which the voices of writers and readers—male and female, adult and child—are equally valid. This nonconformity shapes the ideology behind, the method of composition of, and the literary processes depicted in, *Evenings at Home*.

While Barbauld and Aikin frame the seemingly haphazard content tables in *Evenings at Home* as the result of the random selection of stories from a fictional 'budget' or box, this randomisation is 'fixed in print' and it projects a specific social reading context.¹⁹ As Aileen Fyfe has astutely observed, this structure is designed to address and produce a particular reading audience: the family.²⁰ Projected adult readers are encouraged to emulate the literary adults in *Evenings at Home* by guiding children in

¹⁶ White, "The 'Joineriana'", p. 519.

¹⁷ Lucy Aikin, 'Preface', *Evenings at Home*, 13th edition (London: Longman and Co; Hamilton and Co; Whittaker and Co; Smith, Elder, and Co; H. G. Bohn; Cowie and Co; Harvey and Co; Darton and Clark; L. A. Lewis; J. S. Hodson; G. Routledge; J. Murray; C. H. Law; Grant and Griffith; and Simpkin, Marshall, and Co., 1823), p. iii.

¹⁸ White, *Early Romanticism and Religious Dissent*, p. 11.

¹⁹ Aileen Fyfe, 'Reading Children's Books in Dissenting Families', *The Historical Journal*, 43.2 (2000), 453–473, p. 457.

²⁰ Fyfe, p. 457.

conversations concerning complex cultural and scientific issues. That the projected reading audience of *Evenings at Home* is the family is suggested through its title, its frame story, and through the content of its stories: ‘A Boy Without Genius’ is addressed to adult readers, not children, for it explores the growing eighteenth-century interest in individual genius.²¹ It suggests ways in which adults may enable children who do not exhibit signs of genius to become functioning social citizens. The story is nested between an animal poem and a fable, clearly directed toward child readers, further indicating Barbauld and Aikin’s vision for the work as a family reading project that would equip families to question and criticise contemporaneous British cultural values and attitudes. In a further indication of the strategic organisation of the ostensibly random organisation of the stories, Aikin and Barbauld’s extended version of *Evenings at Home* in 1823 retained the 1792–96 structure of the dialogues, plays, and fables. If the arrangement of compositions were purely miscellaneous, a second version would have been a prime opportunity to re-arrange the pieces. Aikin and Barbauld’s retention of the original structure of dialogues, plays, and fables, suggests that their juxtaposition of stories was designed to generate a particular reading experience in which child readers were trained to question the Anglo-centric cultural values heavily promoted in Britain in the wake of the French Revolution.

In one sense, the argument that *Evenings at Home* challenges British cultural values and structures is not new: even when Matthew Grenby argues that the *Evenings at Home* does not directly engage with concepts problematised by the French Revolution, he concedes that the stories demonstrate a Dissenting pacifism that conflicts with the actions and attitudes promoted at that time by the British Government.²² In a more detailed reading of individual compositions within *Evenings at Home*, Levy identifies Barbauld and Aikin’s deconstruction of British nationalism through their demystification of British military culture in ‘Things by Their Right Names’, in which Barbauld’s narrator declares that war is ‘murder of the most bloody kind’ (*Evenings* I, p. 152).²³ Similarly, Darren Howard identifies Barbauld and Aikin’s simultaneous tactics of defamiliarising and demystifying British culture in ‘A Traveller’s Wonders’, in which a father describes a

²¹ An interest evinced, for instance, in Edward Young’s ‘Conjectures on Original Composition. In a letter to the author of *Sir Charles Grandison*’, in *Critical Theory Since Plato*, 3rd edition, ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing, 2005), 338–347.

²² Matthew Grenby, ‘Politicizing ‘Politicizing the Nursery: British Children’s Literature and the French Revolution’, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 27 (2003), 1–26, p. 2.

²³ Michelle Levy, ‘The Radical Education of *Evenings at Home*’, *Eighteenth Century Fiction*, 19.1&2 (2006), 123–150.

strange land where people live in homes of mud and stone and perform strange cultural practices, only for his children to recognise that he is describing Britain.²⁴ These deconstructions of assumptions of British cultural supremacy and normativity clearly resist anti-Jacobin British national agendas. As these stories were published in the immediate years surrounding the beginning of the Franco-British wars, this suggests Barbauld and Aikin were specifically combating the post-Revolution political agendas promoted by the British Establishment.

However, not all the pieces in *Evenings at Home* decentre British cultural self-projections: the opening dialogue, ‘On the Oak’, celebrates militaristic conceptions of English nationalism. Moreover, few have analysed Barbauld and Aikin’s use of the fable form as a political tool for disseminating radically democratic, anti-Establishment ideals in *Evenings at Home*. Penny Mahon’s overview of peace education in children’s literature affirms that *Evenings at Home* is a seminal work in the development of children’s literature as a politicised, contextually responsive print medium that sought to engage with concepts of militarism, nationalism, and citizenship.²⁵ However, Mahon’s analysis focuses on Aikin and Barbauld’s dialogues that either condemn war or revise concepts of greatness and heroism. The fable form in *Evenings at Home* has largely escaped such focused political readings. This paper redresses that imbalance by exploring the political and pedagogical significance of Aikin and Barbauld’s structural placement, and thematic development, of fables in *Evenings at Home*. In *Evenings at Home*, Aikin and Barbauld’s fables are designed to provoke readers to question the bases underlying monarchical authoritarian institutions, to affirm the power and subjectivity of marginalised citizens, and ultimately to question the pedagogic and political functions of literary tropes.

In actual fact, Aikin and Barbauld were utilising an innately political form when they appropriated the fable for their family miscellany. From an historical perspective, Mark Loveridge reminds us that Phaedrus’s versification of Aesop’s fables occurred in a book titled *The Aesopic Fables of Phaedrus the Freedman of Augustus*, a title associating liberation and servitude, and questions of citizenship, with fables.²⁶ Moreover, fables have always had the potential to act in a ‘strange *double capacity*, at once for and against structures of power’ due to their oblique allegorical nature, and Loveridge describes

²⁴ Darren Howard, ‘Talking Animals and Reading Children: Teaching (dis) Obedience in John Aikin and Anna Barbauld’s “Evenings at Home”’, *Studies in Romanticism*, 48.4 (Winter 2009), 641–666, pp. 655–56.

²⁵ Penny Mahon, “‘Things by Their Right Name’: Peace Education in *Evenings at Home*”, *Children’s Literature* 28 (2000), 167–174.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 67.

English Augustan fables as ‘highly responsive to [their] historical and cultural moment.’²⁷ Noel, too, notes the heightened eighteenth-century interest in the revolutionary fable, identifying a sub-genre of fables that ‘endured approximately as long as did enthusiasm for the Revolution,’ and describes English fable writing as particularly political and social.²⁸ It is in the context of the political eighteenth-century fable, popularised and epitomised by John Gay’s versified fables, that Barbauld and Aikin inflected their children’s miscellany with a literary form associated with potential resistance to authoritative socio-political bodies and figures.

One method by which Barbauld and Aikin provoke their readers to examine the fable’s potential to facilitate a consciousness that resists authoritative claims and structures is through their strategic juxtaposition of fables with other compositions that produce an oppositional thematic tension. The textual implication is that child readers should ask, or should be guided to question, the rationale underlying the different value systems, thus developing the capacity to form individual moral judgements. As Mee identifies, the ability to assess multiple perspectives was valued within Barbauld-Aikin conversations, where participants ‘exercised their right [...] to examine, compare, choose, reject,’²⁹ and as Michèle Cohen notes, ‘Training children to think rationally and critically meant allowing them that right too.’³⁰ In *Evenings at Home*, child readers are presented with compositions with opposing messages in a way that encourages them to critically evaluate the ideas and values promoted in each composition.

This oppositional tension can be seen in the placement of the first fable, ‘A Young Mouse’, immediately after the opening dialogue, ‘On the Oak’. Aikin’s ‘On the Oak’ is the first of eleven botanical dialogues where a Tutor gives George and Henry natural history lessons. As botany was seen as a gendered science favoured by women and girls, this suggests a quiet resistance to arbitrarily assigned gender interests within the world of scientific discovery.³¹ The story explores the nature and uses of the oak, an emblem for English nationalism, and explicitly discusses the relationship between the British navy and British militaristic nationalism. It is unproblematic in its pro-

²⁷ Mark Loveridge, *A History of Augustan Fable* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 30, p. 1.

²⁸ Noel, pp. 12–36.

²⁹ Mee, *Conversable Worlds*, p. 122

³⁰ Michèle Cohen, ‘The pedagogy of conversation in the home: “familiar conversation” as a pedagogical tool in eighteenth and nineteenth-century England’, *Oxford Review of Education*, 41.4 (2015), 1–17, p. 8.

³¹ Deidre Coleman, ‘Firebrands, letters and flowers: Mrs Barbauld and the Priestleys’, in *Romantic Sociability: Social Networks and Literary Culture in Britain 1770–1840*, ed. by Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 82–103, p. 96.

Establishment celebration of the British colonial imperial project: the Tutor exclaims that this tree is the source of Britain's 'chief glory and security' as it is used to build naval boats and is central to Britain's national defence and war efforts (*Evenings* I, p. 7). He proceeds to teach his charges the song 'Hearts of Oak', and exclaims in a pseudo-Burkean manner, 'whoever drops an acorn into the ground, and takes proper care of it when it comes up, may be said to be a benefactor to his country' (*Evenings* I, p. 9, p. 16). This dialogue inducts its readers in the perspective at the heart of the post-French Revolution British Establishment: the celebration of Britain's naval military culture, and a call to value and nurture the oak, which Burke associated with British tradition and traditionalism. However, this dialogue is immediately followed by Barbauld's 'A Young Mouse: A Fable', which fundamentally destabilises this perspective by positioning readers to adopt the perspective of the disempowered. Thus, 'A Young Mouse: A Fable' implicitly suggests that the cultural values celebrated in 'On the Oak' facilitate the oppression of marginalised citizens.

In Barbauld's fable, a young mouse finds herself continually driven out of the family living space by the household cat, only to discover to her joy that the 'good people' of the house have built her a personal home, fit perfectly for herself with a steel door, and complete with cheese inside (*Evenings* I, p. 18). Upon finding this home she runs in 'great joy' to inform her mother of the humans' generosity (*Evenings* I, p. 19). As the mouse describes the house in simple, paratactic clauses that reflect her building excitement, Barbauld's skilful use of dramatic irony fills readers with an increasing sense of pathos and pity for the misunderstanding mouse. The reader's suspicions are confirmed when the mouse's mother identifies the benevolent house as a fatal mousetrap. Barbauld then delivers the moral: 'Though man has not so fierce a look as a cat, he is as much our enemy, and has still more cunning' (*Evenings* I, p. 20). The story seeks to produce within its child readers an ability to adopt the dual perspective of animals *and* humans, a radical duality that encourages its readers to be suspicious of the apparent benevolence of human actions. As Howard posits, this technique of child identification with animals resists eighteenth-century educational projects that encouraged children to discipline their animal-like instincts, participating in the larger project of *Evenings at Home* in fostering the values of plurality and difference.³² Moreover, the fable operates in a surprisingly non-fable like way, for the implied readers are human beings living in houses that conceivably utilise mousetraps. By humanising a real-life

³² Howard, p. 653, p. 666.

mouse, rather than merely making the literary mouse operate as an allegorical figure, the fable powerfully asserts the importance of considering the voices of those denied voices in the human world (dominated, politically, by the Establishment). In contrast to ‘On the Oak’, which positions its readers at the centre of a British cultural-political perspective and promotes the militaristic structures facilitating British nationalism, ‘A Young Mouse: A Fable’ moves its readers *outside* the centre of human (Establishment) power. It suggests that the politics of violence that structure society also perpetuate social inequalities and callousness, a society in which a defenceless mouse is cruelly and perpetually kept outside the productive space of the domestic home.

Aikin’s fable, ‘The Mouse, the Lap-Dog, and the Monkey’, similarly adopts the perspective of a marginalised mouse to criticise English social hierarchies. The fable is again focalised through a ‘poor little mouse, being half-starved’, Aikin’s cumulative use of adjectives highlighting the disproportionate level of violence with which the family responds: calling for the cat, picking up objects, and attempting to ‘crush the mouse to pieces’ (*Evenings* I, p. 100). Having escaped to her mouse-hole, the mouse witnesses a fawning lap-dog and a theatrical monkey who obtain morsels and human affection, and laments her ignorance: ‘to imagine that poverty and distress were sufficient recommendations to the charity of the opulent’ (*Evenings* 1, p. 100). Thus Aikin’s fable critiques the system of patronage for serving the moneyed, empowered Establishment, and for limiting the ability of the poor to articulate self-respect and earn their living without catering to the wealthy Establishment. Unsurprisingly, the Anglican children’s author, literary critic and self-appointed ‘guardian’ of the children’s nursery, Sarah Trimmer, violently objected to this fable for impressing children with ‘prejudice against the higher orders of society.’³³ Yet this highly political, anti-authoritarian resistance was precisely what Aikin and Barbauld sought to inculcate through their fables: mind-sets that could accept the existence of, but question the arbitrary reasons for, social hierarchies.

In his fable ‘The Rat with a Bell’, Aikin is even more strident in his deconstruction of the concept of a ‘higher order of society’. The fable opens when the owners of a rat-infested house attach a bell to the neck of one of the rats. The other rats perceive this rat’s distinction and avoid their companion, who initially enjoys free reign of the house, until he perceives his loneliness and is ultimately caught and consumed by a

³³ Sarah Trimmer, ‘Review of *Evenings at Home*’, in *The Guardian of Education*, ed. by Matthew Grenby, vol 2 of 5 (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 2002), p. 307.

household cat. In an *epimythium*, Aikin portentously declares, ‘He who is raised so much above his fellow subjects as to be the object of their terror, must suffer for it in losing all the comforts of society’ (*Evenings* III, p. 63). The publication of *Evenings* coincides with the Reign of Terror and the rise in English Conservative monarchism expressed in polemics such as Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), making Aikin’s anti-monarchical use of the term ‘terror’ unambiguously political—indeed, extremely radical in its implied support of the principles underlying the Terror in France.

To emphasise the political purpose of their fables, Barbauld and Aikin placed their fables alongside overtly anti-monarchical plays. The strategic placement of Barbauld’s ‘Canute’s Reproof to his Courtiers’ sows anti-monarchical attitudes in readers’ minds, preparing them for the set of stories loosely grouped under the ‘Tenth Evening’ sub-chapter heading. This group of readings opens with Barbauld’s fable, ‘The Flying Fish’ and is immediately juxtaposed with Aikin’s play ‘The Robbers’. This set of readings extends the anti-monarchical ideas sown in ‘Canute’s Reproof to his Courtiers’, and suggest that such monarchical hierarchies perpetuate reprehensible moral value systems. In Barbauld’s ‘Canute’s Reproof to his Courtiers’, King Canute rebukes his courtiers by pretending to believe their fawning assertions that even the wind and waves will obey his commands. As his courtiers mutter in disbelief as Canute sits among the rapidly rising tide, Canute declares, ‘A king is but a man, and man is but a worm. Shall a worm assume the power of my great God?’, removes his crown, and publicly disgraces his courtiers (*Evenings* I, p. 105). Barbauld’s parallelism recalls Job 25:6 and Psalm 22:6 where Job and King David respectively liken themselves to worms, and she thus invokes Biblical authority to undermine human notions of the divine right of kings and other concepts of the innate supremacy of monarchs. This anti-monarchical dialogue prepares readers for the set of pieces anthologised under the pseudo-chapter title ‘The Tenth Evening’.

The readings for ‘The Tenth Evening’ open with Barbauld’s ‘The Flying Fish’, a fable that implicitly critiques individuals for seeking unnatural exaltation over his or her fellow citizens. In ‘The Flying Fish’, the fish is criticised for possessing ‘an ambitious and discontented temper’, and when Jupiter grants her wings, like Aikin’s rat with a bell she initially delights in her mark of distinction before realising that it makes her unsuitable amongst fellow fish in the sea, but leaves her inferior to the birds of the air (*Evenings* II, pp. 119–20). Read in light of Barbauld’s play, ‘Canute’s Reproof to his Courtiers’, the fabular fish appears as an allegorical antithesis to Canute, the King who recognises that there is no essential difference between himself and his citizens. Rather, the flying fish’s

hubris suggests that any system that elevates an otherwise unremarkable individual to a position of particular distinction is inherently morally suspect, catering more to individual pride and discontent rather than fostering benevolence and civic care. Closing this set of politically charged family evening readings is Aikin's play 'The Robbers', which argues that monarchical hierarchies facilitate the application of moral double standards. Centring upon a fictionalised conversation between Alexander the Great and an unnamed Thracian robber, 'The Robbers' ends with the robber challenging Alexander to consider that conquerors and robbers are similar: 'plundering, ravishing, killing, without law, without justice, merely to gratify an insatiable lust for dominion', and with Alexander's reflections: 'Are we then so much alike? – Alexander to a robber? – Let me reflect' (*Evenings* II, p. 152). By ending the play with a series of open-ended, rhetorical reflections, Aikin invites his implied readers to interrogate the ethical responsibility of leaders to the marginalised and criminalised members of society. Thus the robber in 'The Robbers' is like the mouse in Barbauld and Aikin's fable: culpable for scavenging and taking what is not theirs, but simultaneously the victims of authoritarian systems that relegate them to the margins of society and brand them such that they must remain outside the Establishment.

By pairing 'oblique' fables with explicitly anti-authoritarian plays, Barbauld and Aikin complicate Howard's assertion that the fables in *Evenings* act as a screen to disguise the more radical elements of the story.³⁴ Rather, Barbauld and Aikin use the fable form in overtly radical ways—as has been demonstrated, the fables frequently evoke anti-authoritarian sentiments and affirm the dignity of marginalised individuals. Moreover, Barbauld uses the fable to invite her readers to question the pedagogic (and hence political) function of literary forms. She opens this conversation in 'The Flying Fish', as she self-reflexively draws readers' attention to fictional nature of fables: 'The Flying Fish, says the fable, had originally no wings' (*Evenings* II, p. 119). Barbauld highlights the arbitrary nature by which pedagogic literary forms such as the fable make claims that readers are expected to assume are true. As the fable only *says* that the Flying Fish initially had no wings, readers may be left wondering whether or not this was indeed the case. Yet this is of fundamental significance for the moral purpose of the fable, for the fish's initial unremarkable existence is central to the fable's critique of the fish's hubris in asking for wings. If this moral message is based on an unsupportable premise, then the ability for the didactic fable to communicate any particular message becomes

³⁴ Howard, p. 664.

compromised, and the idea of using a literary form to communicate any specific moral or political agenda becomes suspect. Thus Joseph Addison's description of the fable as an Establishment-friendly form able to 'bring the Man after God's own Heart to a right Sense of his Guilt and his Duty' becomes a tenuous claim.³⁵ Moreover, Barbauld invites readers to question the apparently authoritative voice of the anonymous fable-teller, promoting a radical expression of individual autonomy in the face of accepted literary tradition.

Barbauld and Aikin's belief in a child's ability to assess multiple perspectives is the foundation for their dissemination of radical Dissenting ideals of social equality and moral virtue. In *Evenings at Home*, projected child readers are presented with the pro-Establishment dialogue 'On the Oak' and are encouraged to weigh it against the anti-Establishment fable, 'A Young Mouse'; are invited to question, like Aikin's poor, half-starved mouse, what motivates the Establishment to show charity to the poor: care for individuals, or hierarchical vanity. *Evenings at Home* uses fables to provoke readers' emotions and thoughts in a way that prefigures William Godwin's declaration that the child's sympathetic imagination is 'the ground-plot upon which the edifice of a sound morality must be erected,'³⁶ and foreshadows Percy Shelley's insistence that '[t]he great instrument of moral good is the imagination.'³⁷ Amongst Dissenting thinkers an influential strain of thought argued, 'To look up to government for the removal of moral evil, is like looking to a College of Physicians for the removal of diseases,' and that moral reform depended upon the education of children.³⁸ Barbauld and Aikin's *Evenings at Home* is designed to produce child readers whose morality is grounded in their ability to sympathise with marginalised citizens, who are able to recognise the ability of individuals to interpret and question the truth-claims made by apparently authoritative textual forms, and who can critically question the benevolence of the British monarchical system. In this way, Barbauld and Aikin demonstrate the potential of the 'simplicity and brevity' of the fable to participate in contentious socio-political discussions, and to self-reflexively

³⁵ Joseph Addison, *The Spectator* 138, 29 September 1711, URL <

<http://spenserians.cath.vt.edu/TextRecord.php?action=GET&textsid=33815>>, para. 1.

³⁶ William Scofield [William Godwin], Preface to *Bible Stories*, (London: Thomas Hodgkins, 1806), p. 1.

³⁷ Percy Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry', in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Donald Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), p. 513.

³⁸ David Williams, *A Treatise on Education. In which the general method pursued in the public institutions of Europe; and particularly in those of England; that of Milton, Locke, Rousseau, and Helvetius are considered; and a more practicable and useful one proposed* (London: Printed for T. Payne; E. and C. Dilly; G. Kearsley; and P. Elmsley, 1774), pp. 20–22.

consider the function of literature in shaping political and moral values: to facilitate social progress, as it were, by shaping the minds of the rising generation.

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