



10

**GENDER AS A CRITICAL FILTER IN THE WORKS OF ANNA LAETITIA
BARBAULD AND CHARLOTTE SMITH**

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Abstract:

There is a longstanding tradition of reading the works by women writers as solely that. This kind of gendered reading of the works of women writers is focused on finding, and at times affirming, a sort of universal female sensibility or aesthetic. Thus, leading to rather a narrow approach to the vast body of women's literature, the present paper focuses on two women writers of the romantic tradition, Anna Laetitia Barbauld and Charlotte Smith, to explore the effect of using gender as a major (if not the only) critical filter to analyze the works of women writers. The paper also talks about reading a work of literature in a gender-neutral way so that the divide of male/female literature can be avoided. Such a divide might cause for two fractured and inevitably rival sections of literature, possibly fighting for dominion over the other. Further, the paper also highlights the shortcomings of a gendered approach and how it takes away from a wholesome discussion, often undermining the unity of the work. Would not the practice of attributing certain characteristics to women's writing perpetuate the gender disparity, further undermining the female experiences outside the domestic domain?

Keywords: *Gender, Feminist Criticism, Female Sensibility, Gender-neutral Criticism, Femininity, Women writers. etc.*

Both Anna Laetitia Barbauld and Charlotte Smith were amongst the important women writers of the 18th century. Anna Laetitia Barbauld wrote in multiple genres, she was a poet, essayist, literary critic, editor, and even authored several books of children's literature. She had a successful and longstanding literary career spanning more than half a century. Similarly, Charlotte Smith was a poet and a successful novelist. She wrote novels for financial reasons to provide for her children. It is interesting to note that both the women were fairly popular in the literary circles of their times and even inspired their contemporary male romantics. Nevertheless, their contribution in literature remained largely forgotten until the emergence of the feminist literary criticism movement in the latter half of the twentieth century. This could be one of the reasons that unlike their contemporary male romantic writers, their work is mostly read and analyzed now through a gendered lens. A number of critics have studied how and why gender became a critical filter when looking at the works of women writers. Isobel Armstrong among many, reasons that before women writers could make it to the front, all attention and discourse was concentrated on male writers, making literature as predominantly a male space.

Expanding along the same lines, Judith Pascoe writes that the way in which female writers emerged and were later "resurrected", makes it natural that "critical discussions of their work focused on how the poems elucidate a uniquely female experience" (Pascoe, 219).



However, women writers are often clubbed together on the basis of their gender and a shared (at times presumed) dissent from patriarchy. This results in an erasure of individual literary traits in their works and exposes them to a particular kind of critical attention.

The choice and usage of genres, themes and imagery in the works of women writers is mostly attributed to their gender. Though this manner of reading their works, it can lead to overlooking of other critical aspects of their works. For example, Smith played an important role in the revival of the sonnet tradition, making it her own by inserting it with the elegiac and producing unique poetry confirming to the very core of the Romantic Movement. Breaking away from the sonnet tradition that put love or courtship at the forefront, Smith imbued her sonnets with a brooding, ruminating mood, often culminating in some sort of comforting advice and offering the readers a ray of hope. For example, the following lines from the sonnet *Huge Vapours Brood Above the Clifted Shore*:

All is black shadow but the lucid line
Marked by the light surf on the level sand,
Or where afar the ship-lights faintly shine
Like wandering fairy fires, that oft on land
Mised the pilgrim—such the dubious ray
That wavering Reason lends in life's long darkling way (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org>).

It talks about the tense and dark atmosphere of the shore, dominated by clouds and darkness, but then there is also a 'ray' of light, however 'dubious', that lights the way. Smith here is talking about the uncertainty of decisions one has to take along the way to survive life. Following a 'dubious ray' of light might yield better results than remaining in the stormy sea with no shore in sight to offer some respite. The 'Dubious ray' also serves as a confirmation that there is a shore ahead, giving some sense of direction to the weary sailors on-board. Her sonnet finds solace in nature even in the darkness of the night, overcast with brooding clouds.

But instead of looking at her works as quintessentially dealing with the very heart of romantic themes, the choice of elegy as a genre on her part is often ascribed to her being a woman and therefore having a 'natural' leaning towards sensitivity, suffering, lamentation, and powerlessness.

Charlotte Smith and Anna Laetitia Barbauld, had an access to education and classical language and literature traditions. They used this knowledge to challenge, redefine and remake the tropes and traditions from a largely female perspective. In her poem *To a Nightingale*, Smith takes the existing tradition of bird poetry or more specifically nightingale poetry and does something different. Her nightingale is free of the erotic and sensuous associations attached to it by male poets, it is grieving:

Poor melancholy bird—that all night long
Tell'st to the Moon, thy tale of tender woe;
From what sad cause can such sweet sorrow flow,
And whence this mournful melody of song (<https://allpoetry.com>).

It is in direct contrast with Keats's nightingale in *Ode to a Nightingale* which "hast never known" (Keats, 3: 2) human suffering. Keats envied the pleasures of the nightingale while Smith sympathizes with its pain yet envies its liberty, and freedom to express her pain. If we were to read the poem purely along gendered lines then we might cite it as an example of "the poetic tendency of women to identify self and emotions with animals or birds" (Pascoe, 217).



A writer's work is always reflective of their experiences and situations so it is inevitable that women writers who had an access to the inner quarters of domestic life should write from a different perspective. Barbauld in her poem *Washing Day* uses a very mundane phenomenon of life and brings us excellent insights from a child's perspective talking about the gendered roles in households. When it is a laundry day all the females are occupied with the herculean task of washing and drying while the males, and even the children or pets, avoid crossing their paths to save themselves from the wrath of busy women.

The red-armed washers come and chase repose.
Nor pleasant smile, nor quaint device of mirth,
Ere visited that day; the very cat,
From the wet kitchen scared, and reeking hearth,
Visits the parlour, an unwonted guest (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org>).

On contrasting her memories of childhood to that of Wordsworth or any other male romantic poet we would find many differences. But her focus on domestic life and usage of simple language is very close to what Wordsworth would have applauded as the language of the rustics, again, situating her work at the very heart of the romantic tradition.

Barbauld's other poem *The Rights of women* explores the eponymous topic in a unique and surprising way. The language of the poem is in tandem with a male rhetoric tradition and the imagery and tone of the poem is of warfare and military nature. Yet, the point she is making is essentially in favor of mutual understanding as the only way for getting true equality. Polwhele, who classified Barbauld as not feminine enough because she rejects feminine softness and chooses to go with Wollsentcraft's rejection of sensitivity, would have been thrown into at least a slight confusion as this poem reads coy on the surface despite of forwarding women's interests.

The problem with applying a gender filter on the works of women writers is that some authors would be read as too 'feminine' and the others as not 'feminine enough'. This is further problematic because the 'femininity' or the lack thereof is again hard to define. While certain critics highlight the overtly gendered tropes like Jacqueline Labbe reads in Smith's poetry "culturally admired attributes of femininity" (Labbe, 17-18), the others like Polwhele in *Unsex'd females*, bemoan the lack of sensitivity and feminine charms. To applaud some women writers for their feminist writings and to criticize some for not conforming to the feminist writings is a rather narrow approach and might lead to some women writers being more 'women' than others which is absurd and almost comic. A good example to illustrate this point is how the poem *To a Little Invisible Being Who is Expected Soon to Become Visible*, by Barbauld is often misread as an account of pregnancy or childbirth, inspired from the poet's personal experience. However, we know that Barbauld did not give birth! Such comic and wildly incorrect readings show the dangers of forcing certain perspectives on a piece of literature to affirm the gender (or any other conformity pertaining to social standing, personal ideology, etc.) of the author.

By considerably narrowing our perspective towards a poem through applying the filter of gender, we also stand in danger of committing what Wimsatt and Beardsley termed as "the intentional fallacy". Moreover, by thus restricting ourselves, we might also affect the unity of the discussion on the poem, making space for only those interpretations and commentaries that affirm the gender of the poet, and discarding or blocking the way towards a larger discussion of the poem in a gender-neutral arena, with the works of other poets. This does not seem to be in tandem with the close reading method heralded by the New criticism.



To conclude, as a critic rightly points out “by separating women writers into a critical work of their own, [we] make the gender of the writer their most essential and pertinent trait” (Warner, 195). We as readers do not read women writers’ work in gender neutral manner and try to find empathy, sensitivity/sensibility and pathos in their work. It is similar to reading the works of male writers as susceptible to being misogynistic or employing the male gaze. While it is inevitable that gender reflects in the writings owing to difference in experiences and privileges, it would be unfair to make gender the only exclusive filter to view female authors’ works. While the value of a comparative study of the female and male authors cannot be undermined (it would offer interesting insights into the social norms, the gender roles, etc.), a comparative study that solely focuses on the differences is likely to deepen the prejudices about tracing some ‘universal feminine attributes’ in the works of female writers, rather than looking at them as autonomous works of literature, fit to be studied in and of themselves. Moreover, it is futile to boast of the existence of a shared female aesthetic or sensibility as many women writers might be closer to male writers in their understanding and treatment of many themes. Therefore, approaching a work with the prejudice or pre-expectation of finding gender specific themes or sensibility might not be the best way to read it.

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