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WWA Reflection: “So Near Approach / The Sports of Children and The Toils of Men”: Pandemic Labour, Pandemic Imagination

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Abstract

This reflection calls attention to the idea that the merging of the domestic and the intellectual, while especially intense during the pandemic year of 2020-21, is a familiar conundrum for women especially. It suggests that creativity can emerge from the intensity of domestic labour, noting the domestic mock-heroic poetry that was written by women in 18th century Britain as a counterpoint to the rise of domesticity, and suggests that (for female academics who are also primary caregivers) scholarly responses and reflections may be easier to bring out of this pandemic moment than scholarly research.

Keywords

Anna Letitia Barbauld, domestic mock-heroic, eighteenth century poetry, women's poetry, pandemic teaching, pandemic parenting, domesticity

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The Muses are turned gossips; they have lost
The buskined step, and clear high-sounding phrase,
Language of gods. Come, then, domestic Muse,
In slip-shod measure loosely prattling on...
Come, Muse, and sing the dreaded washing day.

--Anna Letitia Barbauld, "[Washing-Day](#)" (1797)

This wry invocation by Anna Letitia Barbauld first attracted me to eighteenth-century poetry, and ultimately led to my doctoral dissertation, [Eighteenth Century Women and the Domestic Mock-Heroic](#), in which I examine women poets' use of mock-heroic to interrogate 18th century domesticity. I was particularly interested in the way that these poets' work seemed to transcend the drudgery of domestic labour, with which each of them would have been acquainted to one degree another. To lead a washing-day as a housewife is itself an impressive task; to ponder it, concurrently, is another, demonstrating connection and awareness; to write a highly allusive and complex poem about the experience is another thing entirely. Yet female poets in the eighteenth century turned their domestic roles into fodder for mock-heroic criticism repeatedly: the domestic and the intellectual were, for them, connected as well as conflicting.

The convergence of the domestic and the intellectual was a personal matter for me during my doctorate, as well. Over the course of my work for the DPhil, my partner and I had two children (and completed two transatlantic moves), and I often reflected on the way that early motherhood reflected my research: "grossly feminine, indeed," my supervisor and I joked about my swollen ankles as I finished the chapter for my transfer of status application at 6 months pregnant with our daughter (I defended it at 8 months). Two years later, I completed edits on an [article for a peer-reviewed journal](#) while in hospital on bed rest at the end of my second pregnancy. I had that child strapped to my chest the following year as I dropped off the materials for my confirmation of status. I conducted much of my research and writing around nursing sessions and stolen moments during nap times or nursery afternoons. Certainly, parenthood made me more efficient, reading just one more article at a café very close to my kids' nursery, so that I wouldn't lose any time between dropping them off and picking them up. Had you asked me about merging parenthood and research in a pandemic, I would have said that I was very well placed to do it, thank you very much. I would have said that I was intimately acquainted with the guilt of neglecting my research in favor of a child, and of neglecting a child in favor of research. That balancing act, I would have said, was painful but familiar territory.

Yet note the phrase “balancing act”: at Oxford, I was still doing only one job at a time. I dashed down the street to the library or coffee shop while my son and daughter played with my husband, or our sainted nanny, or with their friends at the sweet nursery on Walton Street. It’s the *merging* of jobs that really wore down academics who are also caretakers this year. Like the merging of different modes that is central to Barbauld’s poem and to my work in domestic mock-heroic, the merging of different identities has defined pandemic parenting for me. Covid parenting was, and continues to be, the overlay of one task on top of another: talking to my students about *A Doll’s House* while also keeping an eye on my daughter’s 2nd grade math lesson and encouraging my son to sit up for his kindergarten morning circle Zoom; cooking lunch while talking on the phone to a department member, conferencing about student writing while also watching as the kids run screaming circles around the back yard; reading articles and poems on my phone in bed at night, taking notes on a tiny pad, hoping no one wakes up and needs anything. These moments have been precious as well as intense. I have spent more time with my children and partner than I would have before, and I have settled into a home, a city, a life that I didn’t love before this year as I do now.

Yet the rub of this year has been an inability, for me at least, to really dive into research or intellectual endeavour while also helping two kids learn online – while also changing my own online instruction of secondary students to make it effective – while also holding space for the personal, emotional responses that I, my family, my colleagues, my students, and indeed much of the world is experiencing. I didn’t have the head space to chase down the delightful “I wonder” of research, nor did I have time to work methodically through miscellanies or manuscripts or excel spreadsheets to synthesize information into meaning. I haven’t completed any real academic research this year, despite having made plans for it. And I should emphasize that I had access to many support systems other academics do not: a partner with some time flexibility, a home with a back yard in a part of the world where we can play outside most of the year, occasional childcare. The loss -- perhaps temporary, perhaps not -- of countless voices in academia as a result of this pandemic is unquestionable. I’m unsure how the academy might respond to this, or ameliorate it, without radically changing its expectations. ABO’s decision to request reflections instead of scholarship is one way to address such inequity, an acknowledgement that scholarly inquiry continues even when academic research and scholarship does not.

At the end of this long year, I have come to believe that my scholarly practice has merely changed rather than disappeared. Reflection is possible for me, and even creation. I have returned to my first love, writing fiction. As one of my creative

writing students told me this spring, writing has become not a reflection of the world around me, but a way to honor and re-experience a world that has been placed on temporary hold: a consolation, a sacrament.

Barbauld's poem finishes with a description of the poet as a child blowing soap bubbles with her grandmother, while her mother's voice in the distance urges the other women of the household to hurry to finish the labour of washing-day: "wash . . . rinse . . . wring . . . fold . . . starch . . . clap . . . iron . . . and plait" (77). Barbauld-as-narrator remembers the [Montgolfier brothers'](#) 1793 [balloon launch](#), which her letters indicate that she witnessed, comparing it to the soap bubbles blown by child and carer:

. . . Sometimes through hollow bole
Of pipe amused we blew, and sent aloft
The floating bubbles, little dreaming then
To see, Montgolfier, 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,
And verse is one of them — this most of all (79-86).

As Elizabeth Kraft has noted, "the poem is not so much a celebration of women's labour as an illustration of the way that the imagination can both flourish in and transcend the domestic context" ([Kraft](#)). When I first read these lines, I felt the dizzying heights of human achievement and the giddy delight of a child watching bubbles. It wasn't until later that I thought of the "bubble reputation" to which Shakespeare refers in Jaques' speech, the wish for fame that ultimately proves hollow. The beauty of Barbauld's lines, of her entire poem, rests on these different meanings of the word "bubble" – but, more importantly, on the merging of the worlds in question. "Verse is a bubble," yes, but it elevates "the toils of men." Ultimately, then, I choose to believe that the merging, the mess, of all these different worlds will create something new, as did Barbauld's intense awareness of daily labour and imagination.