

THE UNCONQUERED ISLAND:
BRITISH POETIC RESPONSE TO THE FALL OF THE CORSICAN REPUBLIC

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A thesis submitted to the

Graduate School-Camden

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Arts

Graduate Program in English

Written under the direction of

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Camden, New Jersey

May 2018

THESIS ABSTRACT

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The Corsican Republic, defeated by the French in 1769 after fifteen years of independence, elicited a passionate, yet little explored, response from much of the British public. Poetic response to its defeat, seen in "Corsica" published in 1773 by Anna Laetitia Barbauld, and "The Cynnean Hero" published in 1772 by Robert Colvill, shared a struggle to accept that defeat. Both poems feature a contentious relationship with time. "The Cynnean Hero" acknowledges the fall of the Corsican Republic, but insists that they may still succeed as if the war with France were still ongoing. "Corsica" takes this further; much of the poem contemplates the Republic's imminent success, until the final 18 lines lament its defeat, treating 1769 and 1773 as the same point in time. Colvill's poem shows his support for Scottish independence, and Barbauld was both a dissenter and a woman, making the two poets political outsiders. As such, I argue the collapsed time present in both poems stems from an inability to reconcile their ambition with their sense of inevitable failure. Both poems struggle with the concept of fate; Barbauld's even more so as she writes that the Corsicans will succeed against fate, but ultimately concludes that the "iron fates prevail". The Corsican Republic represented the hope they held for their own nations, while at the same time its fall felt predetermined. Barbauld and Colvill too hope for success while simultaneously expecting failure against the ingrained political structure of Great Britain.

Introduction

The understudied poetry published in the United Kingdom following the defeat of the Corsican Republic reveals an attempt to deal with both political loss and hope, explored here through works by Anna Laetitia Barbauld and Robert Colvill. The Corsican Republic survived for nearly fourteen years after declaring its independence from the Republic of Genoa in 1755. Under President Pasquale Paoli, it produced one of the earliest modern constitutions, which led Rousseau to write of it *in The Social Contract*, "I have a premonition that some day this little island will astonish Europe." Before it had any chance to do so, Genoa ceded 'ownership' of Corsica to the French in 1768. That same year, James Boswell published *An Account of Corsica*, detailing the island, its politics, and Paoli's life. The book was a huge success and inspired the British public to take a passionate interest in Corsica's struggle with France.

Boswell led the lobbying for British intervention, but across the nation writers began publishing on the subject. Some of these works include "Corsica, an ode" by Edward Burnaby Greene, which calls for Britain to aid Corsica in the fight against France. Others, like the works by "a very large number of those despicable wretches who go in this kingdom under the appellation of the Grub-street writers" (Baretti, 129) alluded to in secondary works, are still more difficult to locate. Boswell published again in 1769, this time a collection of *British essays in favour of the brave Corsicans: by several hands*. Other writers had plans for works that they never completed, such as an opera by Carlo Francesco Badini who stated "political cautions however quashed my design" (Badini, vii) when explaining why he never finished it. Despite the wide and passionate interest, the British government chose not to intervene, and Corsica was defeated by the French in

May of 1769. Apart from a brief time as the Anglo-Corsican Kingdom at the end of the eighteenth century, Corsica has remained a part of France to this day.

Though interest in the Corsican Republic didn't disappear entirely, especially with Paoli's presence in Britain during his exile, the number of published works on the topic dropped dramatically with its defeat, despite still being referred to in 1772 as "a fine subject for heroic Poetry" (Ball, 120). Interest would shift as the Prime Minister, the Duke of Grafton, stepped down the following year amidst a great deal of criticism, including for his handling of Corsica, and the American Revolutionary War would begin only a few years later.

As brief as its time in the spotlight may have been, Corsica came to represent a nation founded on liberty and equality. Its constitution implemented a separation of powers, and while "all the inhabitants of each village" (Boswell, *Account*, 105) voted for their local representative, there was nothing banning women over the age of 21 from voting in general elections as well. The Corsican Republic influenced the American Revolution as well, as Alexander Hamilton was part of a militia called The Corsicans (they were later renamed The Hearts of Oak), suggesting that the Corsican Republic served, in part, as a model for the United States as well.

Anna Laetitia Barbauld's response was published as her poem "Corsica", the opening poem in her first book *Poems* (1773). Heavily inspired by Boswell's *An Account of Corsica*, it describes Paoli, the island, and its struggle against France. A note on the first page of the poem says that it was written in 1769, likely shortly before Corsica's defeat, with the final eighteen lines which allude to the defeat, being written sometime between 1769 and the poem's publication. In Robert Jones' article on the nature of

celebrity for writers publishing works on freedom and the Corsican cause, he notes the conflict of "Corsica" as being between Barbauld's pacifism and the violence inherent in the battle for freedom. As the majority of the poem revels in the violence of the battle, only for the final stanza to glorify "the freedom of the mind" ("Corsica", 201) in place of physical freedom, he argues that Corsica's defeat may have been able to reconcile Barbauld's conflict, for "honour and valour are best preserved in the absence of victory" (Jones, 300).

"Corsica", though, is not simply a poem of 1769. The only extant source text is the revised version published in 1773. The very existence of the final stanza, assumed by its separation from the rest of the text by a physical line to be written after Corsica's defeat, implies its revised nature as a poem published for a 1773 audience. As mentioned, "Corsica" is also the first poem in her book, making its opening line "Hail generous CORSICA! unconquer'd isle!" the very first line of poetry the reader would see. The line brings the conflict of 1769 into 1773, collapsing the two points in time. It reads as a political statement as well, declaring the republican cause that Corsica represented as far from over. This fractured sense of time and its political implications will form the main site of inquiry for this article.

Published a year earlier, Robert Colvill's "The Cyrnean Hero" provides a useful contrast, as it doesn't feature quite as sharp a collapse, but still struggles to reconcile Corsica's past and present states. Colvill, a Scottish reverend, has been largely forgotten over time, though several of his poems have survived. "The Cyrnean Hero", in particular, is rather clearly political, addressed to the Duke of Queensberry, and moving openly between Corsican and Scottish independence. "The Cyrnean Hero", which casts Paoli in

the same light as Scottish heroes such as Robert the Bruce, more openly acknowledges Corsica's defeat than "Corsica" does, but at the same time it refuses to acknowledge that the battle is over.

The common thread between Barbauld and Colvill is that they were both political outsiders. Barbauld was both a woman and a dissenter – affording her limited political power – and much of her work demonstrates republican ambition. Though little is known about Colvill, his poem shows strong support for Scottish independence, nearly three decades after the Battle of Culloden which effectively ended Scotland's rebellion. Both had ambitions that went against the ingrained political system of Great Britain, and the Corsican Republic came to represent those ambitions. Corsica was a symbol of hope that large powers could be overthrown, and it became a model for a free and enlightened nation. Its defeat by the Kingdom of France would have been devastating, and such a defeat would represent the fear of their own seemingly inevitable failures. "The Cyrnean Hero" deals with that fear and hope by refusing to accept the defeat for what it was, but "Corsica" deals with it by fracturing time, by trying to remain in 1769 while simultaneously trying to learn to cope with 1773. It is important to understand the temporally collapsed nature of these poems as they give us an insight into the mindset of the eighteenth century political minorities of Great Britain, as they attempt to believe that defeat didn't completely mean the end for their causes.

"Above a Throne": The Corsican Republic as Political Model

The Corsican Republic served as both a model of free society and a symbol of success against the ingrained political climate of the United Kingdom. Scotland's contentious relationship with England has been ongoing for centuries, persisting to this

day, but the first half of the eighteenth century was particularly bleak and violent. The century began with the Act of Settlement in 1701. Though England and Scotland had been under the same monarch since 1603, Scotland, unwilling to give up the House of Stuart, responded with the Act of Security in 1704. In 1705, England responded with the Alien Act which declared that Scots in England should be treated as foreign nationals and put an embargo on Scottish imports, and the Acts of Union were passed by 1707 and Scotland officially became part of the Kingdom of Great Britain. The formation of the Union led to multiple Jacobite risings, culminating in the Jacobite Rising of 1745 - an attempt to seat Charles Edward Stuart on the Scottish throne - when Colvill would have been about ten years old. The rebellion came to an end with the Battle of Culloden, in which Scotland suffered a devastating defeat. To prevent another uprising, many Scottish cultural aspects were outlawed by the British government in 1746, including the wearing of tartans and kilts. By the 1760s, opinions of Scotland, its culture, and even toward the Jacobites, began to soften. As nostalgia grew, the actions of Prince William, Duke of Cumberland, who earned the name "Butcher Cumberland" for his excessive execution of Scottish rebels, whether combatant or not, and the burning of their homes and livestock, became a reason to sympathize with Scotland (Stewart, 487). But while the history and culture were being romanticized, regaining independence was a far more distant dream than it had been in the 1740s.

Colvill uses the Corsican struggle to highlight the ongoing political and cultural struggle in Scotland in "The Cyrnean Hero". Little appears to be known about Robert Colvill apart from him being an eighteenth-century minister and poet from Fife (Radcliffe), but his work gives us insight into the political moment following Corsica's

defeat, and "The Cyrnean Hero" reveals his political ambitions. Written to the Duke of Queensberry, who promoted the development of the Scottish economy at the time, Colvill directly ties the Corsican cause to the Scottish, beginning on line 174,

See! CALEDONIA, once depress'd and low,
When pow'r and slav'ry forc'd the *brave* to bow,
Exalts her tow'ring front, and hastes to greet
the cause of liberty (174-177).

Colvill uses the Greek name of the island Cyrna, rather than the name Corsica, and so he continues the parallel between the Scottish and Corsican causes on line 179 as he imagines Paoli – the Cyrnean hero of the title – to be like the Scottish heroes Robert the Bruce, John de Graham, and James Douglas ("Douglas" could also refer to William the Hardy, James' father, as the end of the line says "firm and bold" and "le Hardi" would mean "the bold", but as Robert the Bruce is listed in the poem as "Bruce", and there is simply the name "Douglas" rather than "Hardi", and James Douglas was also known as "Black Douglas", he seems the more likely candidate. However, "Douglas" could be simply referring to both of them), who fought during the First War of Scottish Independence in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century.

"The Cyrnean Hero" is not a poem that depicts Britain in a negative light, not by far. England is "fair" (59), and its first king, Alfred, is depicted as a victorious hero, as are its historic kings who fought against France. All the peoples of the British Isles are described as freedom's "true race" (103). The speaker sees support for the Corsican cause on a level with patriotism, that patriots "feel their kindred passions rise" (8) and the Muse "feels the pangs which rend [Paoli's] patriot heart" (38), so that it is patriotism uniting the people of both countries, and allowing those of one to sympathize with the strife of the

other. The speaker extends Corsica's cause to all of Britain, perhaps even implying that those who don't support it, don't really love their country.

Yet, specifically pro-Scottish sentiment slips through. Scotland is treated as its own separate entity within the poem, referred to in capital letters by its Latin name Caledonia, and admiring Paoli as one of its own ancient heroes. Those heroes

toil'd for SCOTLAND in the throat of death,

and peal'd her triumph with his latest breath (180-181).

The speaker emphasizes Scotland's senates, and, by the end of the poem, depicts it as a pastoral landscape. In the preface, Colvill states that his reason for writing the poem was in the hope to publish it while Paoli was touring Scotland - a time frame that he missed. The poem aims to portray Scotland as though it were another Corsica with its own great heroes and its own admirable government. For Paoli, "[Scotland's] *cities* hail thee, and her *senates* wait" (182, italics original). While Scotland's cities hail Paoli, her senates must wait. Scotland didn't have its own parliament in the 1770s, as it was under the British government. Here the speaker looks toward a more republican future for Scotland, one which could be realized by Paoli or another hero like him.

Though British culture was beginning to sentimentalize the Scottish, it wouldn't have quite been appropriate to openly praise Jacobite leaders or conflict with England. "The Cyrnean Hero" is careful to avoid doing so. The Scottish heroes mentioned are all centuries old and long dead. On the other hand, though, Robert the Bruce was successful in his campaign against England.

Colvill is careful in the choice of monarchs mentioned throughout. The only living monarch named is Louis XV of France, and only ever through his family name Bourbon, referring to him even as "tyrant Bourbon". That's not totally surprising, since the poem is pro-Corsican and views France as the enemy. However, all the other kings mentioned within the poem are dead; even as it praises England, and the British Isles as a whole, it never mentions any living or recent British monarchs. Both "The Cyrnean Hero" and Barbauld's "Corsica" tend to be vague or uncertain on the concept of liberty, which I will go into later, but for now it's important to understand, since Great Britain is a constitutional monarchy and the Corsican Republic was an enlightened republic, where on that political spectrum that "The Cyrnean Hero" sits. The speaker's conflict is with tyranny, which is mentioned multiple times throughout the poem. On line 97 he calls for liberty "to shield the nations from despotic pride". When discussing the Roman Republic, he says "in senates bold not tyrant arts could tame" (108), and that Brutus was

sternly good,

to save fall'n Rome, redeem'd by Caesar's blood (49-50).

Caesar is brought up again later in the poem, depicted as "expelling freedom from her fam'd abode" (205). All of this, along with the poem's lack of comment about George III or George II before him, the two British kings during Colvill's lifetime, suggests that "The Cyrnean Hero" is far more in favor of Corsica's enlightened republicanism.

Though Barbauld's work would become increasingly overtly political over time, "Corsica" is an early poem and doesn't have the direct references to contemporary Britain that Colvill does. She mentions Britain early on when she says that the British should

"kindle at a fire so like their own" (18) - that the British and Corsicans should be united in the cause, and even a challenge to the British to support the Corsicans (Jones, 293). Barbauld, though, was no stranger to political isolation and the work of living in a nation that disagreed with her. Born to a family of dissenters, and to a father who was the headmaster of a dissenting academy, she was always a political outsider. Anna Laetitia Aikin, as she was unmarried when she published "Corsica", was fortunate to be so closely associated with a dissenting academy, as it gave her access to an education that she otherwise might not have had. She could apparently read without having to sound out words by the age of two, and began learning astronomy at age seven. While not a formal student of her father, she managed to convince him after a time to teach her Latin and some Greek (McCarthy, 32), which may have only served to isolate her further, as she would be seen as a woman with too much learning. As a dissenter, her belief was that science was a way of understanding God, and this notion would lead her to write *Lessons for Children*, early children's literature that was made for home education on science, nature, and religion. Her niece would later publish letters of hers which show that she agreed with Mary Wollstonecraft that women should be educated so they could better perform their duties as a wife and mother ("On Female Education") which, for the time, was very progressive.

The social and political oppression Barbauld would have faced as a woman and a dissenter can be seen as connected. Wollstonecraft certainly thought so, as she wrote in *Vindications of the Rights of Women*, "Oppression thus formed many of the features of their character perfectly to coincide with that of the oppressed half of mankind" (Chap. XIII, Sect. VI), and described dissenters as going to each other and relying on each other

as women might. After the seventeenth century Test Acts and Uniformity Act, dissenters were barred from holding public office and attending university (hence, dissenting academies), much the same as women.

Like "The Cyrnean Hero", a good deal of "Corsica" is about Paoli as a heroic figure, and it's through her depiction of Paoli that "Corsica" shows much of its political ideals. The speaker says that Paoli, by helping the Corsicans, will

give mankind

a glimpse of higher natures (108-109).

There's an emphasis on his devotion to the public, and that even "if he falls, he falls above a throne" (130). Above a throne, rather than in one, implies a greater position than a monarchical, and that better position is strongly associated with the social aspects of an elected General.

"The Darts of Fate": The Conquered/Unconquered Temporal Collapse

"Corsica" and "The Cyrnean Hero" both feature a temporal collapse that carries the emotional weight of losing the hopeful symbol of political reform. Colvill's note in "The Cyrnean Hero" states that the poem was written around 1772, three years after the Corsican Republic's defeat, and so its temporal collapse is made with that defeat firmly in the past. The timeline for Corsica isn't as clear and, as a result, is typically viewed as a poem written before Corsica's defeat, with the final stanza added on sometime before publication, as the poem does have the note "written in 1769" on the first page, and the conclusion is separated from the rest of the poem by a visible line. The temporal collapse in "Corsica" might even be labelled an aesthetic failure, but it's important to see "Corsica"

as the product of deliberation and revision that it is. Though published as the first poem in her 1773 book *Poems*, for most of the poem Corsica is still in its fight with France, yet to be defeated. There is some anxiety about the future in the violence she attributes to their conflict and her descriptions of their winning against fate, but it isn't until the final 18 lines that she at last laments their defeat. It's easy to attribute this divide to her having simply written the majority of the poem in 1769, adding the conclusion much later for its publication. It's possible that all she did in preparation for publication was add the final 18 lines. However, the revision of "Corsica" would not have been rushed. Following his own literary success, her brother, John Aikin, encouraged Barbauld to publish her own poems, and she spent months revising her choices in 1772 (McCarthy, 108). The decisions going into the revision of "Corsica" would have been careful and thoughtful, and so what she chose to publish in 1773 was a poem which collapsed that year with 1769, presenting a fractured reality.

Colvill's collapse of pre and post defeat in "The Cyrnean Hero" is not as distinct as Barbauld's, but it can be seen early in the poem. On line 29 he writes, "Unconquer'd *Cyrna*, struggling to be free", depicting Corsica as both a conquered island, and an unconquered one at the same time. While "The Cyrnean Hero" doesn't have any clear Jacobite references, or any mention of Stuart monarchs, as already discussed, its references to the First War of Scottish Independence, and its publication less than three decades after Culloden do lend to a particular understanding of this line. Colvill had lived through the latest, at this point, attempt by the Scottish to gain their independence, and was aware of its failure as anyone living in Britain at the time would have been. Corsica had been defeated by France, which Colvill doesn't ignore; the poem is, after all,

about Paoli's exile in Britain. But for the speaker, the defeat can't be the end of it, even as their leader retreats, the speaker still needs to believe that the end isn't really the end.

A similar concept comes up later in the poem when he describes a bold people, following liberty:

Unconquer'd struggle, or, should freedom bleed,
sink, crown'd with glory, 'mid the honour'd dead (91-92).

Death might be the end result of such a struggle, but even then it isn't a failure to him, and it doesn't equate to being conquered. The collapse in "The Cyrnean Hero" is brief, as it soon looks to the future, declaring that,

Still *Bourbon's* mercenary host shall bleed;
Again high *Cyrna* lift her laurel'd head;
Again triumph in thy victorious sword,
The public father to his sons restor'd (33-36, italics original).

But even its depiction of events that haven't happened yet stem from that moment where conquered and unconquered exist at once - a belief that defeat can't really be defeat, and that eventually even dying won't mean defeat. Inhabiting the poem is a need to believe that the Corsican - and therefore the underlying Scottish - cause isn't a lost one.

There's no way of knowing if Colvill ever thought that Corsica could have won the battle with France, as "The Cyrnean Hero" is published three years later, with the full knowledge that they did not. Whether or not, it's important to view the poem through its collapsed lens, in which Corsica is both conquered and unconquered. The speaker's approach to fate is conflicted. He describes Corsica as "sinking" more than once, and that it would take "godlike strife" (3) – Paoli's, specifically – and "great designs" (153) to save

it. The battle is again and again depicted as one that Corsica can't win. On line 22, fate needs to relent; on line 133, they are in a loud fight with fate. When discussing Boswell's travels to Corsica, and his book, he is said to have "leagu'd with Princes to avert her fate" (197). This could be due to the fact that the poem was written after Corsica's defeat and knows how the battle plays out, except that, within the poem, Corsica is still unconquered. This brings about the theme of believing in a cause that goes against an ingrained political system, believing that it will inevitably fail, but still needing to believe that fate can be successfully fought, all the same.

If fate is conflicted in "The Cyrnean Hero", then it's further convoluted in "Corsica". Most of "Corsica" reads with the confidence of imminent victory, but anxiety slips through. When virtue is described "like a firm shield against the darts of fate", it becomes apparent that here, too, Corsica's battle is against fate as well as France. That anxiety isn't out of place, considering the large power that France was. If Corsica is to win, it must overcome fate, but in the final stanza the speaker declares "the iron fates prevail" (185), as Corsica loses. The loss is described as

the moon

in dubious battle with the gathering clouds (188-189),

that the battle was one that could have never been victorious, as the moon can do nothing to prevent being obscured by clouds.

The theme in "The Cyrnean Hero" plays out in "Corsica" too, but is even more directly stated. Earlier in the poem, she writes:

It is not in the force of mortal arm,

Scarcely in fate, to bind the struggling soul
 That gall'd by wanton power, indignant swells
 Against oppression; (102-105)

Fate here, whatever its control over events, cannot control feeling or belief or rebellion, especially when they are against oppressive forces. However events might go, in the poem the Corsicans will still fight the French, and the speaker will still carry their own political ambitions. When the speaker laments that "The iron fates prevail" (185) in the final stanza, she says she "read the book of destiny amiss" (194). But did she? If the poem continuously stated that fate was against the Corsican Republic, then it was only her hope that was in the wrong place. Perhaps the sense of misreading destiny comes from a sense of misplaced hope. I'd argue, though, that this is another component of the unconquered/conquered fracture within the poem. If the island is unconquered, then it is victorious. If it is conquered, then it is doomed to fail as the moon would fail in fighting clouds - then it's fate. If it's against fate, but unconquered, it must win against predetermined events saying it will fail. Like being stuck in a loop, the two can't seem to reconcile.

Yet, it's this very conflict between action and destiny that the speaker glorifies. Greatness isn't found in peace and revelry, but in danger and "wrestling with the stubborn gripe of fate" (158). Virtue is "Like a firm shield against the darts of fate" (167). The Corsican struggle is a great because it is fighting against fate. But if they are against fate, then it is their fate to lose. The opening of the poem states that Corsica is unconquered, its success assured. Her view of fate is fractured because she cannot accept one side or the other. Corsica is both against fate, but sure to win - because Corsica is one island fighting a losing battle against the Kingdom of France, but she needs it to win. Unable to

reconcile the two, we end up with a fractured poem in which Corsica is both defeated and unconquered.

Through this chaotic presentation of fate, we can understand the emotion behind the poem's temporal collapse. The very first lines, which were the opening lines of her book, create almost an alternate history of a Republic set to succeed.

Hail generous CORSICA! unconquer'd isle!
The fort of freedom; that amidst the waves
Stands like a rock of adamant, and dares
The wildest fury of the beating storm (1-4).

The very nature of these words being published in 1773 implies something that didn't happen, and paints a picture of a place that doesn't quite exist. As the poem moves forward, it begins to discuss the conflict with France and the physical violence involved in maintaining Corsica's independence. By the last stanza, the poem acknowledges that Corsica has lost the conflict, and so like "The Cyrnean Hero", in "Corsica" the Corsican Republic has both won and lost its war with France. But unlike "The Cyrnean Hero", which doesn't begin with such a strong statement, "Corsica" immediately sets up a distinct contrast between the conquered and unconquered points in time.

It isn't difficult to understand how Barbault had hoped for the Corsican Republic to survive. As a model for what could be, there was a lot of hope riding on its success. For a poet like Barbault, while the Corsican Republic would have been physically far away, its implications would have been very close to home, and so the fact that the Corsican Republic didn't fall of its own accord but was instead taken out by France would have been devastating. But at the same time, it would have been expected. The French began

their conquest in 1768, and it was clear that Corsica would fail without help. It was a defeat those invested see coming, but that didn't keep the British public from forming a passionate hope that it could win. The British government did not send aid, and so the outcome could not have been surprising; and yet the defeat was still a massive blow to those who invested their own hopes in that Republic.

"Corsica" deals with that devastation by creating an alternate history where the island remains undefeated. The existence of this alternate history alone contains both her hope and sense of loss. The hope is there because within the poem, at least, the Corsican Republic is heroic and unconquered. As an idea, it can remain so, and the ambitions it symbolizes can still have hope as well. The sense of loss is there because it's still an *alternate* history, not reality. Her collapsing of the unconquered 1769 with the post-defeat of 1773 doesn't unravel this, either, as the poem concludes that still preserved is "The freedom of the mind" (201). Hope and loss exist here simultaneously.

Barbauld's "Corsica", then, shows us the emotional devastation of those looking to the Corsican Republic as a symbol of hope, as well as the shifting perceptions of time and history. Dariusz Gafijczuk argues that the eighteenth-century concept of the sublime has roots, in part in the 1755 Lisbon earthquake (155). The earthquake could be felt throughout Europe at virtually the same moment, altering the social perception of space and time. The role of sympathy in the sublime that Edmund Burke would detail only two years later in his *Enquiry* is about how we are invested in the distress of others, whether through poetry or through the ruins of history. Corsica would not be a centuries-old ruin, but Barbauld had never visited the island in the first place, and so its existence for her would have been largely conceptual. Gafijczuk argues as well that "ruins" doesn't just

apply to damaged, decaying buildings, but to "a process of ruination, which also allows the past to emerge in the moment of our encounter with the 'afterlife' of various events, inscribed in texts, photographs, or, in their most extended range, architectural edifices" (150). "Corsica" goes through this process, depicting both an ideal land and culture as well as its loss, merging the two. The Lisbon earthquake meant that disasters could be experienced by those living far from where the disaster is taking place, and that the conception of time and space would have to adjust for that. While Gafijczuk discusses the American and French Revolutions as having "created a sense of prolonged spatial disorientation whose immediacy, at least in part, activated the modern historical perception" (154), I'd argue that the responses to the Corsican Republic demonstrated this first. The grief of its defeat became a shared grief for many in Great Britain.

"Heaven's Best Prize" The Unattainable Liberty

The goal on the other side of fate is liberty, which both poems personify as they attempt to understand a concept that continually eludes them. "The Cyprian Hero" paints liberty as a "dread Goddess" who spreads terror and vengeance. Following liberty, and therefore attaining it, means going through "toil, war, bonds, and death" (89), and that the violence seems a necessary aspect for it. The concept of following liberty fits in with the Goddess image, as there's something akin to worship in lines like "For THEE, what hardships would the bold endure?" (87). Liberty in "Corsica" is a goddess as well, but a "mountain goddess" who is warm and motherly, but is also accompanied by violent imagery. Jones notes a retroactive shame about this violence in the final stanza of "Corsica", which he attributes to Barbauld's pacifism.

The violence in these poems goes beyond the sublimity of divine personification mixing with cruelty. The speaker in "The Cynnean Hero" wants liberty to

Rouze them to feel for the atrocious deed;
Brandish thy terrors at the guilty head (109-110).

He wants those fighting for her to "drench the island with invader's gore" (28). There's an anger underlying these lines. Even with the tone of discomfort, that anger can be seen in "Corsica" when those against oppression are

breathing great revenge,
Careless of life, determined to be free (105-106).

This anger and frustration stems from how the concept of liberty seems unattainable to the speakers of both poems. Even as "The Cynnean Hero" attempts to look to the future, the speaker can't completely relinquish his sense of despair, saying, "The lot of man is stamped with grief and pain" (221). This grief and pain is specifically a "*public woe*" (239, italics original) against "the wrongs of outrage we have learn'd to bear" (240).

"Corsica" ultimately settles on a conceptual freedom that the speaker says is "Beyond the proud oppressor's cruel grasp" (199), which while saying that conceptual freedom can't be taken away, it also gives the sense of liberty as always being at a distance.

As liberty seems perpetually beyond their grasp, both poems struggle with defining it. "The Cynnean Hero" gets most specific with its reverence for senates and its references to Scottish independence, while "Corsica" remains more vague. In place of specificity, they both turn liberty into an object, giving it the air of attainability. In "The Cynnean Hero", liberty is "man's first and choicest treasure" (75). As a treasure liberty can be found or won; but treasure is also a grand thing, beyond the grasp of the

unwealthy. Liberty is many things in "Corsica". On line 74, "Defends their homely produce. LIBERTY", liberty is something that can be grown. On line 96 liberty is "man's dearest birthright". But even as a birthright, liberty

must be seiz'd

By that bold arm that wrestles for the blessing:

'Tis heaven's best prize, and must be bought with blood (140-142).

The imagery here is violent - liberty is taken. As a prize, she must be won. To be bought makes her a commodity. These three lines present conflicting actions on how liberty is to be gained, adding to the sense of frustration at how unattainable she is. This leads back to the sense that, though both poems need to believe that their causes can be successful, they are constantly expecting failure.

"Corsica" tries to find consolation in its conceptual liberty at the end, the "freedom of the mind" (201) that neither "kings or senates can destroy or give" (198). There is a struggle for hope here, in both poems, as they struggle to find some way forward. Hope is a personified figure as well in "The Cyrnean Hero". Described as "our good Angel" (41), she is introduced early into the poem. As the temporal collapse of "The Cyrnean Hero" is a brief one, soon looking to the future, hope plays an integral role. She is consistently accompanied by descriptions of light and guidance, implying that, even with the battle lost, those fighting for liberty are heading in the correct direction. Hope "gilds dark providence with orient rays" (44), providing illumination and celestial guidance ("orient", OED) so that the "shipwreck'd mariner" (45) can return home. This concept of hope is in character with the persistent tone of the poem. In "The Cyrnean Hero", even death doesn't amount to defeat, and so a shipwreck doesn't mean a doomed voyage. As

the poem attempts to reconcile the conquered/unconquered dilemma, it is hope that the speaker relies on to believe that the Corsican and Scottish causes can survive.

"Corsica", however, takes a more pessimistic approach. Where hope in "The Cyrnean Hero" "allays misfortune's stound" (42), in "Corsica" hope is "patient" and "must wait the appointed hour" (137-138); hope cannot make a thing happen or keep a cause going on its own. This becomes especially apparent in the final stanza when success was "too fondly hop'd" for (185). Her lament of fate, however, provides cover for the speaker's anger. Corsica was

Less vanquish'd than o'erwhelm'd, by numbers crush'd,
Admir'd, unaided, fell (187-188).

She accuses here that hope alone could not save Corsica as the British government refused to send aid. This, perhaps, is the key to understand how the speaker can claim to misread destiny when she repeatedly described Corsica as in a struggle against fate. Fate, here, loses its divine quality, and in its place is left the real anxiety of the poem - that change cannot occur without substantial help. The consolation prize of "freedom of the mind" (201) that the speaker offers at the end, is more than the compromise between violent battle and pacifistic honor that Jones suggests, but is an acknowledgement of the only liberty left in lieu of that substantial aid.

Conclusion

The British response to the Corsican Republic, especially the literary response, remains largely understudied. "Corsica" and "The Cyrnean Hero" give us a glimpse into both the political moment of the years following Corsica's defeat, as well as poetic choices made in expressing that moment. As political outsiders, Barbauld and Colvill

invested hope in the success of the Corsican Republic, an island that had declared its independence from a large sovereignty, founded its constitution on enlightenment principles, and attempted to hold its own against the Kingdom of France. Yet the anxiety present in the poems reveals their expectations for failure, in spite of that hope. Liberty becomes distant, unattainable, through the fear that their political ambitions will never be realized. Fate is against the Corsicans, not only because the Corsicans lose, but because of the fear that fate is against their own nations as well. Unable to truly reconcile their hope and fear, time fractures in the poems, collapsed, so that Corsica - the symbol of hope - becomes trapped in a space where it is both conquered and unconquered.

The political and stylistic effects of the French Revolution on British poetry have been far more studied. Gafijczuk argues that the French Revolution was partly responsible for activating "the modern historical perspective", that history could be knowable. Barbauld herself would note this shift decades later when reading David Ramsay's *The History of the American Revolution*, a 'history' book about an event that had barely been over. She wrote in a letter to her brother, "I do not wonder that the old story of Greece and Rome grows, as you say, flat, when we have events of such importance passing before our eyes" ("Letter", 194-195), showing her perception that the political events she was living through to be equal in importance to the histories of ancient Greece and Rome. I argue that shift in perception can be seen earlier, in the British response to the Corsican Republic. As ruins could be used in literature to merge the past with the present, these poems collapse the Corsican Republic's unconquered past with its conquered present. History is knowable in these poems, especially as they demonstrate republican ideas leading into the second half of the eighteenth century.

"Corsica" marks an important, though understudied, moment in Barbauld's literary career. It was not only the first poem in her first book, *Poems* (1773), but her first book was the first between her and her brother to be published under the Aikin name, as their previous publications had all been anonymous (McCarthy, 107). "Corsica" was the first poem to be read by the public that was published with her name on it, marking the beginning of her literary career. Its political sentiments and temporal collapse may even be what define her as a poet, threading through her work as far as her famous and final publication, *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*, published nearly forty years later. Her work deserves to be examined for the thoughtful, deliberate pieces they are.

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