

Melissa Bailes. “Literary Plagiarism and Scientific Originality in the ‘Trans-Atlantic Wilderness’ of Goldsmith, Aikin, and Barbauld.” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 49, no. 2, 2016, pp. 265-79.

Some of the most innovative recent work on the history of science has accounted for the distinctively literary turn of scientific rhetoric across the eighteenth century. In this vein, Melissa Bailes argues that poets Oliver Goldsmith and Anna (Aikin) Barbauld, along with Barbauld’s doctor-writer brother, John Aikin, find a mutually constitutive relationship between natural history and poetry that maps onto broader sociopolitical issues. Bailes situates these authors’ works – particularly Goldsmith’s celebrated “Deserted Village” (1770) and Barbauld’s critically panned poetic response to this work, *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* (1812) – within the pre- and post-Revolutionary periods. For Bailes, the competing critical reception of these two poets reflects shifting ideas about British nationalism and intellectual property. While Goldsmith was praised for his imaginative recycling of Buffon and other naturalist writers for poetic ends, Barbauld’s similar use of Goldsmith and naturalist writers was condemned as plagiarism. Bailes brilliantly connects such anxieties to a post-revolutionary moment in which critics sought “to fracture America’s associations with originality” (277).

This might all sound like a lot to accomplish in a single essay. But Bailes’s deft analysis, always grounded in an impressive balance of close reading and historical-contextual detail, convincingly supports the multiple layers of her argument. A key example of this methodology is in her introduction, where she notes an understudied detail in Goldsmith’s poem. Typically read as offering an anti-colonial vision of degeneration, the poem’s closing “praises the migration of Poetry itself, with British subjects, to colonies across the Atlantic” (265). From this seeming contradiction, Bailes traces the deployment of what she sees as a core thematic relationship – migration (of poetry and people) and degeneration (of environment and nation) – in the context of political, scientific, and poetic originality.

Bailes sees Goldsmith’s plagiarism – found in both his poem and in his volume on natural history composed concurrently with it – as a mechanism to construct matters of fact about natural history. Indeed, plagiarism allowed him to participate “in the collective, collaborative mode of natural history, a science that invited amateur participation and revision in this era” (266). Here, Bailes develops a core revisionist point concerning traditional history of science narratives. Rather than offering new findings, Goldsmith emphasized the *literary*, seeking to “enhanc[e] science’s stylistic appeal... [His] borrowings are enlivened with engaging descriptions and personal observations of the natural world, as well as skillfully compared arguments from the most heated scientific debates of the day” (267). Bailes observes that Goldsmith’s descriptions of European barrenness in both his poetry and natural history contrast with images of American fecundity. Bailes also offers a compelling reading of the agents of such social-scientific change: “the ‘vulgar English’” who are now travelling to the colonies to “gain [similar] control of nature in the New World” (269).

In the final section on Goldsmith, Bailes explains how the author justifies his plagiarism through another analogy: in his natural history, he devalues the song of the British nightingale (a potent trope identified with Romantic-era poets) to elevate that of the American mock-bird, whose ability to imitate – or, like Goldsmith’s own methods,

to plagiarize – makes its song “the sweetest and the most various notes of any bird whatever” (qtd. in Bailes 273). Reading this proclamation alongside Aikin’s *Essay on the Application of Natural History to Poetry*, Bailes finds both authors advocating a British poetic agenda grounded in the exploration of the endlessly new topic of natural history, an approach that attends specifically to America: “a location of possibility not only for improvement, civilization, and prosperity, but also for poetry, which, according to Goldsmith, ushers in the most valuable national virtues” (274).

Four decades later, Barbauld’s critically panned *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* transforms the Goldsmithian message of poetic and social reform into one in which Britain’s “destruction [is] inevitable,” while the American capacity for reformation “emphasiz[es] a positive synergy between humans and their ecology in the New World” (276). Barbauld’s direct invocation of Goldsmith enraged critics in a culture that saw “literary property as a form of enclosure” (qtd. in Bailes 277). This prophecy incited British anxieties about imperial losses – both belatedly, because of the Revolution, and anticipatory, because of the ongoing Napoleonic Wars. By the second decade of the nineteenth century, the ideological relationship between poetry, natural history, and national identity had become increasingly conservative. Bailes’s detailed focus on this volatile period demonstrates the significance of poetic interventions in scientific discourse during the long eighteenth century; perhaps even more impressively, she underscores the significance of the post-revolutionary era in history of science studies.

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