*Poetical Recreations*

Had Devils never Heaven seen,

Their Hell a smaller Curse had been.

(*Poetical Recreations* 47)

Published in 1687, *Poetical Recreations* will become the most fundamental work of Barker’s career. Without Barker’s consent, Benjamin Crayle, with the help of Barker’s male friends at Cambridge, published the collection in two parts. Part One includes poems “occasionally written by Mrs. Jane Barker” and Part Two includes various poems written by Barker’s friends at Cambridge as well as one (?) by Crayle himself. These two facts—the date of publication and that Barker did not authorize publication—are crucial because they clear up some misconceptions about Barker’s life and work. *Poetical Recreations* is not overtly political: most of the poems are personal in nature, which is why Barker heavily revises them before including some of them in her novels as well as Part Three of the Magdalen Manuscript. The collection does not paint a picture of a pathetic, defeated exile who prefers a life of solitude: Barker wrote sociable verse in manuscript form and shared her work with her Cambridge friends. As Kathryn King notes, *Poetical Recreations* is “far from recording an elegiac retreat from human company” (x). And finally, Barker’s early poems do not depict a feminine world of homosocial bonds between women: Barker’s immediate readers were all men and almost all of the poems in Part One are addressed to men. Thus, at first glance, the poetry collection has virtually nothing in common with the rest of Barker’s work, poems and novels that have led us to label Barker as a proto-feminist, a queer exile, and *the* Jacobite writer of her day.

And yet, this is the work Barker returns to throughout her career to shape her Jacobite politics as well as the identity of her literary persona, Galesia. Indeed, it is in this collection where we see Barker starting to formulate her identity as a woman writer. And it is here that we see what I call her queer feminist politics in embryonic form. *Poetical Recreations* becomes a tool for Barker, one that she uses in her later work to craft a queer temporality that is at once political and personal.

Although Barker did not have a hand in the collection’s publication, it is appropriate that the first word of the first poem written by Barker embodies her temporal and political project. “If” begins her poem “An Invitation to my Friends at *Cambridge*,” and it is this conditional word that defines the rest of Barker’s literary career. The first poem invites her Cambridge friends to reflect on the blissful state of solitude, but it also invites readers of Barker’s later work to read history through a series of conditionals. What if Charles I had never been executed? What if Cromwell had been able to stop the Restoration? What if James II had not been replaced by William and Mary? In isolation the poem suggests that a life of solitude is preferable because we can disembody sin by projecting it onto nature:

Lo here a full Immunity we have.

For here’s no *pride* but in the *Sun’s* bright *Beams*,

Nor *murmuring*, but in the Crystal *streams*.

No *avarice* is here, but in the *Bees*,

Nor is *Ambition* found but in the *Trees*.

No *Wantonness* but in the frisking *Lamb*,

Nor *Luxury* but when they suck their *Dams*. (2)

But when we read the poem in light of the rest of the collection as well as Barker’s later work, which she encourages by inserting numerous poems from this collection into her novels, we see in this poem the origin of Barker’s temporal project; indeed, she is asking her readers to consider a different time to imagine different outcomes. In “To *Ovid’s HEROINES* in his Epistles,” Barker begins five out of fifteen lines with the word “had”:

Had you consum’d those whom your Beauties fir’d,

Had laugh’d to see them burn, and so retir’d…

Had you but warm’d, not melted in their flames…

Had you but fix’d your flowing Love with Frost.

Had you put on the Armour of your scorn… (28-29)

Here, Barker imagines a different life for each of the female lovers we see depicted in Ovid’s *Epistulae Heroidum* (footnote: Dryden translated Ovid’s Epistles). Had Sappho never jumped off the Leucadian cliffs for Phaon—or better yet, had Ovid not appropriated and dramatically revised Sappho’s queer story by replacing a female lover with a male one, an appropriation John Donne critiques by depicting Sappho as queer in “Sappho to Philaenis”—then history, and perhaps even the history of lyrical poetry or female-female desire, would have unfolded differently.

Barker’s use of time—that is, turning back in history to consider what could have been—is both personal and political, and her use of time in *Poetical Recreations* enables her to later establish her position as a queer Jacobite exile. In “Absence for a Time,” Barker politicizes time and personalizes politics:

This time’s as troublesome to me,

As th’Town when Mony’s spent;

Grave Lectures to a *Debauchee*,

Or *Whigs* to th’ Government.

Methinks I almost wish ’twas torn

Out of the Rolls of *Fate*;

Or that some Pow’r, till his return,

Wou’d me *annihilate*. (87-88)

The similes in the first stanza conflate the personal and the political and give us a glimpse of Barker’s Tory position. Whigs are as troublesome to the government as the current moment is for Barker, a moment of political and religious turmoil in which hereditary kingship is losing favor, political parties are beginning to form after the Popish Plot in the 1680s, Parliament is pressuring James II to raise Mary and Anne as Anglican rather than Catholic, and Louis XIV has the biggest army in Europe. Barker conceptualizes time as one of her patchworks that she can tear “out of the Rolls *Fate*,” at least until “his return.” Who is Barker referring to here? Had the collection been published after James II’s exile we could safely assume that she is referring to the king, but it is more likely that she is referring to either her brother, who had recently passed away, or Galesia’s unfaithful lover, Bosvil. Or perhaps it is a religious reference and Barker is referring to Jesus. Readers of Barker’s later work, who like Barker return to this collection for answers, are presented with various answers that conflate Barker’s personal life with her political and religious positions; and, “his return” would have no doubt been understood as James II’s return to court after the bloodless revolution.

But even before James II’s removal, this was a paranoid time for Barker and the king’s supporters who will eventually follow him into exile. In “A Pastoral Dialogue Betwixt Two Shepherd Boys,” Barker uses a metaphor to indirectly warn her readers not to be mystified by contemporaneous affairs. The first boy in the poem is duped by a sweet-looking girl:

I know not, but the other day,

A wanton *Girl* there were,

Who took my *Stock-Dove’s* Eggs away,

And *Black-birds* Nest did tear.

Had it been thee, my dearest Boy,

Revenge I shou’d have took;

But she my Anger did destroy,

With th’ sweetness of her Look. (74)

The second boy responds with a similar story:

So t’other day a wanton Slut,

As I slept on the Ground,

A *Frog* into my Bosom put,

My Hands and Feet she bound:

She hung my Hook upon a Tree,

Then laughing, bad me wake;

And though she thus abused me,

Revenge I cannot take.

This playful and comic poetic dialogue embodies the paranoia that characterized the period right before James II’s removal. Indeed, the “sweetness of her Look” manipulates reality: we cannot trust what we see because everything is not as it seems. Even before the Restoration of 1660, we see administrators such as Sir Edward Hyde plotting against Parliament, and afterwards writers such as Edmund Waller and John Dryden write at length about how historical events can be manipulated through literary representations [add Waller’s painter poems here]. Once again, Barker’s final stanza resonates with her later Jacobite position:

Let’s wish these Overtures of State,

Don’t fatal *Omens* prove;

For those who lose the Power to hate,

Are soon made slaves to *Love*. (75)

In the context of this collection, Barker is likely referring to her faithless lover Bosvil. But when we return to the collection after Barker publishes her novels, this poem begins to convey a different message. In retrospect, what we see is Barker’s skepticism concerning English political affairs—the “Overtures of State”—, and we see an unrelenting Jacobite who will stop at nothing to get her rightful king restored.

A paranoid Barker, like other Royalists of her day—Clarendon, Waller, and Dryden—worries that poetry and politics have decayed to a point of no return. It is in the 1660s and 1670s that members of different political factions turn to poetry to relay—and interpret—historical events. Dryden begins his *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668) with a reflection on that “memorable day in the first summer of the late war,” July 3, 1665, a climactic moment of the Second Dutch War (1665—1667). And although *Astreae Redux* is primarily about the past and future, Dryden begins his cagey poem with what he—and Barker—perceive as the central issue: “now.” In “To my Friends against Poetry,” Barker laments that the Muses have “grown *Prostitutes*,/and wantonly admit the Suits/Of any *Fop*, that will pretend/To be their Servant or their Friend” (95). And like Dryden, Barker feels conflicted about her relationship with the Muses as well as contemporaneous political affairs:

Oft has my *Muse* and I fall’n out,

And I as oft have banish’d her my Breast;

But such, alas, still was her interest,

And still to bring her purposes about:

So great her cunning in insinuation,

That she soon gain’d her wish’d-for restoration:

But when I found this wou’d not do,

A Violent Death I put her to.

But see, my Friend, how your All-pow’rfull Pen

(O Miracle!) has rais’d her from the Dead again. (70)

It is here in “A Second Epistle To my Honoured Friend Mr. *E.S.*” that Barker’s muse resonates with two major events in English history that Jacobites will later constantly return to: the beheading of Charles I and the restoration on the monarch in 1660. In *Paradise Lost*, John Milton indirectly alludes to Charles II in his famous lines first lines:

Of man’s first disobedience, and the fruit

Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste

Brought death into the world, and all our woe,

With loss of Eden, till one greater Man

Restore us… (1-5)

Unlike Milton, who served under Cromwell and against the Royalist cause, Barker, despite the fact that she was a Catholic, supported the restoration of Charles II and hereditary kingship more broadly. Like Milton, though, she shrouds her political sentiments with coded language: the word “restoration” in the fifth line of *Paradise Lost* and in the sixth line of Barker’s poem would have reminded readers of the restoration of Charles II. And Barker is not the first to conflate literary inspiration with the monarchy: in *Astreae Redux*, or “Justice Returned,” Elizabeth I serves as inspiration for Dryden’s representation of Charles II. In fact, Dryden’s restored king embodies the virgin queen. Both Dryden and Barker turn to an idealized past for inspiration and stability: Dryden evokes Elizabeth I and Barker turns to Abraham Cowley and Katherine Philips. Barker writes of the Muses, “Though to *Orinda* they were ty’d,/That nought their Friendship cou’d divide;/And *Cowley’s* Mistriss had a Flame/As pure and lasting as his *Fame*,/Yet now they’re all grown *Prostitutes*” (95). Barker temporarily embodies an anti-Royalist position when she writes that she put her Muse to a “Violent Death,” perhaps a reference to Charles I’s beheading; however, she comes down on the side of the Royalists and the Restoration when she claims that her friend, E.S., “rais’d her from the Dead again.” Here, Barker is poeticizing an imagined resurrection of Charles I, and within a year of the publication of *Poetical Recreations*, these lines would certainly expose Barker as a Jacobite supporter of James II.

What we encounter in *Poetical Recreations* is not a melancholy, feminist Jacobite, but rather the origin of Barker’s political position and conception of time, an origin that she will return to time and again in her future novels and poetry. In essence, Barker’s writing and publication strategies enact the vision of time that emerges in this collection: she remains preoccupied with the past—her earlier poetry as well as defining historical events—in order to constantly revise it to imagine alternative possibilities. And therefore, *Poetical Recreations* becomes political and queer when Barker extrapolates and revises sections of it in *The Galesia Trilogy*.