Critical essay: Anna Maria Bennett's *Anna: or Memoirs of a Welch Heiress*

It is clear that contemporary reception of the novels of Anna Maria Bennett paints a rather mixed picture of her literary prowess. On the one hand, fellow poets and writers of fiction seemed to have huge admiration for Bennett's works, with Samuel Taylor Coleridge describing her novel of 1797, *The Beggar Girl and her Benefactors*, as 'the best novel […] since Fielding'[1], and Mary Russell Mitford alluding to a 'freshness and truth' in the same novel 'which I have never found in any fiction except that of Miss Austen'.[2] No such comments regarding *Anna: or Memoirs of a Welch Heiress*[3] from 1785 survive, but the rather unenthusiastic response to this novel by contemporary periodicals is characteristic of this medium's evaluations of most works by Bennett. In fact, the comments of the *Critical Review* and the *Monthly Review* about *Anna*, such as the claim in the former that 'in the conduct of the story we have nothing to praise or blame; similar characters have often been displayed, and the adventures are not uncommon'[4], can be described most suitably as ambivalent, which is actually more generous than the at times scathing comments the two publications provide about other novels by the same author. It will become clear that this ambivalence reflects the novel's status as one of Bennett's earlier works; a formative novel as

[1] Anna Maria Bennett, *The Beggar Girl and her Benefactors* (London: The Minerva Press, 1797). This novel will subsequently be referred to as *The Beggar Girl*. Coleridge's comment appears In *Table Talk and Omniana* (1884) and quoted by Dorothy Blakey, *The Minerva Press 1790-1820* (Oxford University Press, 1939), p. 54. Any subsequent references to Blakey are taken from this book.

[2] In Mitford's *Letters* (1872), and quoted by Blakey, p. 54.

[3] Bennett, *Anna: or Memoirs of A Welch Heiress* (London: The Minerva Press, 1785; 2nd edn. 1786). Subsequent mentions of this novel's title will refer to it simply as *Anna*.

[4] *Critical Review*, 59 (June 1785), 476; the review is reproduced in full in *The English Novel 1770-1829: A Bibliographical Survey of Prose Fiction Published in the British Isles, volume I: 1770-1799*, ed. by Peter Garside et al (Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 352. Any subsequent references to the *Critical Review*'s comments on *Anna* are taken from this page.

she tested out her literary abilities and limitations in the early years of her career, and characterized by her seemingly following the template for a textbook romance, ahead of her greater experimentation later as she matured as a writer. Nonetheless, some key social themes are expatiated on here, and the novel is not totally devoid of controversy.

The tale revolves around Anna, an orphan who commences the novel in the care of the avaricious Reverend John Dalton and his wife, after her previous carers both die. Thus commences a tale when custody of Anna changes hands frequently; it is not long before she is knocked down by a coach, and is taken in by the lady passenger within it, Mrs Melmoth, and her husband. Under the guidance of the latter, and more specifically her governess Mrs Barlow, she becomes well-educated in music and needlework. Unfortunately for Anna, Mrs Barlow becomes Mrs Mansel by marrying a Welsh parson, and Anna's new governess, the lazy Mademoiselle Frajan, proves much less satisfactory. However, worse is to come when Colonel Gorget, a visitor to Melmoth-Lodge and guilty of stealing a general's wife, kisses the fourteen-year-old Anna. Following this, he bribes Frajan, the sole witness, not to tell anyone, and advises Mrs Melmoth to part with Anna. Fortunately, Anna receives an invitation to live with Mrs Mansel at Llandore, and there she encounters the Edwins and the Herberts, and becomes a companion of Lady Edwin.

All the while, other men besides Gorget are competing for Anna's affections; Charles, son in the Herbert family, and Wilkinson, a business partner of Mr Herbert, are soon joined in this pursuit by Lady Edwin's son Hugh, who has

just returned from abroad after seducing a woman, stealing her fortune and being forced to pay her five hundred pounds a year as a consequence. Further to this, Anna rejects marriage proposals from Mr Mordant, the son of an East Indies Merchant, and a baronet by the name of Stanley. Cecilia, daughter of Lady Edwin, is convinced that Anna is attempting to snare Hugh, but it is in fact Charles who is the object of Anna's affections. A brief spell in the care of Dalton after the death of Mrs Mansel had threatened to put an end to this, but normal service was resumed when Anna became Lady Edwin's companion once more. The first sign that Anna's love for Charles is reciprocated comes when Patty, Mrs Herbert's daughter, shows Anna her lost breast bow from a dance, which she discovered in Charles' room.

All of a sudden, Lady Edwin dismisses Anna, who ends up with Dalton once again. While there, she rejects a marriage proposal, much to the anger of the greedy Daltons, from Gorget, now called Lord Sutton, and bats away the attentions of Hugh, who claims to be in her service, despite the fact that he is soon to marry a lady called Miss Turbville. Unable to bear living with Dalton, Anna escapes to London, where her coach overturns and she is forced to seek refuge with a Mrs Hughes. It is only now that we discover the reason for her forced departure from Lady Edwin's care: the Edwins had discovered that Anna had been accused of stealing lace from Mrs Melmoth. Worse still, while visiting his father living above a grocer's prior to his spell in prison thanks to debts of seven hundred pounds, Charles pushes an aggressor, Tyrell, down the stairs and is advised by his father to flee the country. Tyrell signs a confession, but

Charles chooses to depart anyway, believing that life with Anna is now impossible.

Anna appears to be free from accusations of criminality when, after the revelation of the letter outlining his proposal to her earlier, Sutton is forced to confess that Frajan, his accomplice, was the perpetrator of the theft at Melmoth-Lodge. However, this quickly changes when Bates, Mrs Hughes' brother and servant to the Edwins, steals an embroidered jacket that Anna was working on in her new job for the Desmoulins, who own a clothes shop. Anna promptly gets the blame for its disappearance and his summoned to court, but Mr Bently, a wealthy gentleman, pays ten thousand pounds to secure her bail. Even better, he discovers Mr Mordant, whom it transpires is Anna's long-lost cousin, and who is able to prove that Dalton withheld some of Anna's possessions. These primarily comprise Anna's watch and rings, which Mrs Dalton returns to her. Mr Mordant senior, Anna's uncle, gives her two thousand pounds and tells her to reward her friends and scorn her enemies. But all these pieces of good fortune are trumped by the revelation by Lady Edwin that Anna is the daughter of the late Earl of Trevanion and heiress to his estate. She moves into her new residence with Mrs Wellers, who was a companion of hers in Layton, location of Dalton's residence. Fortunes are far different for the Edwins, though; Hugh has lost a large sum of money through gambling, and Cecilia's lover, Colonel Maxwell, has departed. Worst of all, though, is the news that Hugh has murdered Maxwell and been fatally wounded himself.

However, there is still one thing that could be the ultimate fairytale ending: Anna marrying Charles, but this is now impossible in Anna's mind, for she believes that Charles is dead, having read his name in the deaths section of a magazine and not realized that this refers to Charles' father, who died in prison. Anna attempts to busy herself through the good deeds that Mr Mordant senior alluded to, making sure the Melmoths are financially secure, after stumbling upon them in a coach collision. But it is thoughts of Charles that preoccupy her the most, and the ideal conclusion is pleasingly reached when she does indeed marry him, but only after Charles shows her the breast bow as proof of his love for her and, later, a letter from Cecilia cancelling the proposed marriage between them. All characters receive the endings that they deserve: the mischievous Cecilia's marriage to Captain Dunbar quickly breaks down owing to his disdain for the increased expenditure brought on by wedlock; Sutton dies; and Patty, ever a loyal friend to Anna, marries Wilkinson, after it turns out he is wealthy thanks to his possession of a valuable locket. This object, bizarrely, also serves as proof that Sutton is in fact his father.

A possible reason for contemporary critics' reluctance to offer genuine praise to Bennett for this novel lies in its at times amateurish appearance, reflecting the importance that the book as a physical object plays in determining one's reception of it. As the *Critical Review* itself states, 'the language [in *Anna*] is generally incorrect'. A hint of this is provided on only the third page of the novel's first volume[5], which contains a rather odd use of commas in the phrase

[5] All page references from *Anna*, and all page references in parentheses in the main body of text, are taken from the 1786 second edition. This edition of the novel comes in four volumes.

‘for the assiduity, with which she had prepared their rooms and procured a nurse, was rendered unnecessary’. However, far more obvious printing and grammatical errors are evident later on. For instance, in an episode where Mrs Mansel is talking to Anna (2.51), there are no quotation marks to be seen. They return shortly afterwards (2.68), but inconsistently they are not always present when they should be. Perhaps worryingly, this second edition is partly subtitled ‘corrected by the author’, leading one to wonder about the extent of errors present in the book’s initial version.

More of a telling factor in the critics’ apathy in response to this novel is its excessively conventional and at times cloying romantic style. By the 1797 release of Bennett’s novel *The Beggar Girl*, she was employing the technique of the ‘mockery of a female novelist’, according to *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English*.[6] The writer in question was the fictional Mrs Wouldbe, ‘who, too old to intrigue, attempts to write *The Grim Abbess* and *The Dumb Nun of St. Bog and Moat*’.[7] Such parodies of Gothic writing were common from the 1790s onwards, such as Eaton Stannard Barrett’s *The Heroine* from 1813, which contains such intentionally ludicrous juxtapositions of the mundane and the supernatural as ‘she began shrieking and adjusting her hair at a mirror’.[8] However, with the Gothic phenomenon not fully upon England in the 1780s, *Anna* is devoid of such attempts at satire. While Janet Todd asserts that

[6] *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English*, ed. by Virginia Blain et al. (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd., 1990), p. 82. Any subsequent references to this book, which will in subsequent mentions be referred to as *The Feminist Companion*, are taken from this page.
[7] *Dictionary of British Women Writers*, ed. by Janet Todd (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 57. Any subsequent references to Todd are taken from this page.
[8] Quoted in *Gothic Documents: A Sourcebook 1700-1820*, ed. By E. Clery (Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 204.

Bennett's works 'were intended not as romance but as realistic portrayals of modern life', she admits that Bennett 'used romantic elements; for example, *Anna* […] is a reworking of the Cinderella story'. Returning to Barrett, it is interesting to note his lead male character Theodore de Willoughby's opinions on the romantic form. He states that romances relate 'adventures too improbable to happen, and [depict] characters too perfect to exist'[9], and it can be said that the latter claim here indubitably applies to Anna.

Anna is the epitome of the perfect woman of morals, as encapsulated by her refusal to let Mrs Wellers tell Charles about Cecilia's misdemeanours (4.135), even though it would clear the way for a possible union with him. Indeed, this moral perfection is matched with physical perfection; even at fourteen years old, it is 'difficult to conceive any thing more bloomingly attractive than our heroine at this period' (1.98). This pulchritude leaves Anna as seeing herself as 'an object of general observation' (2.187), a person with the compelling quality that can turn heads. She is frequently described by Bennett, rather overdramatically, as 'my heroine' (e.g. 1.28) or 'our heroine' (e.g. 1.212), and this is one of many examples of the excessively saccharine portrayal of Bennett's lead character. For instance, there is her childlike characterization; even as she enters adulthood, she is advised by Mrs Mansel 'never to forsake or deny parental care to the child of her heart' (2.75). Additionally, there is the device of tears, wept so often by Anna that after one illness they were 'the first proofs […] that she was sensible' (3.171).

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[9] *Gothic Documents*, p. 206.

Perhaps inevitably, though, such an overly sentimental portrayal is also evident in the case of her male equivalent, Charles, who is, as 'one of the bravest, yet most compassionate of men' and someone who is 'too generous to be rich, and too sincere to be reckoned a saint' (both 2.25), himself perfection. Indeed, there are strikingly similar levels of emotive language in Anna's plaintive cries to Frajan, such as 'Do, dear mademoiselle, beg for me!' (1.168) after being dismissed from Melmoth-Lodge, one of many such examples of emotional speeches by her, and the description of Charles' delight at hearing that Anna has no plans to marry anyone else, the consequence being that an 'excess of pleasure took the place which the pangs of despair had a moment before dreadfully filled' (4.126-127). In fact, to enhance the goodness of Anna and Charles still further, there is the diametrically opposed presence of Lord Sutton in the role of the villain, a 'Machiavel' (1.189) whose 'arrogance and cruelty were unbounded' (1.72), and a figure so abhorrent that even Anna, 'for the first time in her life, felt herself obdurate to the pleas of penitence' (4.182) for him.

However, while Sutton is undoubtedly the primary evil element in the plot, Bennett also cleverly uses ridicule to undermine his authority, describing him as of 'truly comic' appearance, with 'his fine laced ruffles hanging in tatters over his wrists' (both 1.147). Indeed, this and other examples prove that *Anna* does contain some striking devices besides the faithful romantic style. For instance, there is frequent self-reflexivity which almost has the quality of thinking aloud, such as upon the first mention of Sutton, greeted with the author's exclamation 'what am I about? to introduce a hero at the end of a chapter? He deserves and

shall have one to himself' (1.67). Additionally, we see instances of both prolepsis, evident in the foregrounding of significant plot elements such as the role of Dalton, who, Bennett reveals, 'will cut so considerable a figure in the succeeding pages, that I think it necessary they should know something of the person with whom they are likely to be more intimately acquainted' (1.12); and analepsis, such as Charles' explanation after the event of why his marriage to Cecilia did not happen (4.236). Closely related to this device is Bennett's penchant for delaying the revelation of an already introduced character's name until the following chapter to prolong the suspense, such as in the case of the return of Frajan, with Bennett finally declaring 'for it was that very lady' (2.136) upon the disclosure of the identity of the 'woman' (2.135) in the previous chapter.

Most intriguing, though, is Bennett's frequent self-deprecatory remarks within the narrative, apologizing for the occasional inadequacy of her descriptive powers. For example, she claims that the instance when Sutton bribes Frajan not to tell anyone about his kissing Anna 'requires an abler pen than mine to do it justice' (1.144). In light of this, the occasional appearance of italicized foreign words, such as the French '*maugre*' (2.226), can be seen as an attempt to compensate for this perceived deficiency. But perhaps Bennett's shortcomings in this department are understandable, considering her suggestion that Mrs Herbert's 'anguish' on one particular occasion 'may be better conceived than described' (2.73). That is, although this section of the plot is a relatively conventional one, there are others that stretch the realms of plausibility, particularly the aforementioned perfection of the characters of Anna and Charles,

thus making adequate description of such outlandish scenarios problematic. The *Critical Review*, on its part, seems unsure on the issue of realism in its review of *Anna*. It claims that the novel has a 'happy termination not highly improbable or greatly forced', but goes on to say that 'in some parts of [the novel] the incidents are scarcely within the verge of probability'. However, this appraisal is certainly no more scathing than the same publication's review of Bennett's novel of 1786, *Juvenile Indiscretions*[10], in which 'the improbability of the story is frequently disgusting'.[11] Ultimately, the rather ambivalent response by critics to *Anna* can be said to be a consequence of the fact that the novel's often overbearing sentimentality is counterbalanced with some more thought-provoking social commentary.

There is little doubt that *Anna* does not quite reach the levels of 'robust satire' said by *The Feminist Companion* to be present in *The Beggar Girl*. Nonetheless, there are occasional examples of such a device here, including the ironic description of Sutton as a 'generous creature' (1.166). More forceful than this is the potentially controversial satirical treatment of church-affiliated individuals. Admittedly, the criticism is hardly a Blakean crusade against the church as an institution, but the contemptuous depiction of men who are supposed to be trusted members of society is still striking in eighteenth-century literature. For instance, Dalton's despicable character is made all too clear, for, no sooner has Anna made what he calls an 'unwelcome' (2.84) return to his residence at Layton, he declares to her that 'it was time for her to think of some

[10] Bennett, *Juvenile Indiscretions* (London: The Minerva Press, 1786).
[11] *Critical Review*, 62 (July 1786), 68-69; quoted in the aforementioned *The English Novel 1770-1829*, pp. 375-376.

mode of living, without being a hanger-on' (2.85). Then, his anger at Anna's rejection of Sutton's marriage proposal, which has led the Daltons to 'set themselves down as made people' (2.175), further exposes his grasping tendencies. Indeed, Bennett describes Dalton's subsequent threat to throw Anna out if she does not comply as 'Christian resolution' (2.207), a phrase heavily loaded with irony given his shunning of the very principles of his religion that he is supposed to uphold. Interestingly, Dalton is not the only religious figure to be criticised in *Anna*. Sutton mysteriously bequeaths his financial legacy to two hitherto unmentioned individuals, but the reason for this is soon explained: the two men are under orders to deliver the money to a priest living on the continent, for Sutton bribed him, making 'the whole of his fortune the price of absolution' (4.251).

These are not the only examples of satire at work in *Anna*, though. For instance, Bennett provides a brief disparaging comment about the education system for young females in England, describing the programme of learning at the first seminary Anna is sent to as consisting of 'spelling badly words of two syllables, with needlework in proportion' (1.27), implying that such a curriculum does little to stimulate the minds of its pupils. When the aristocracy is demeaned in the novel, on the other hand, it is done using the medium of lampoonery, employed against an anonymous ducal suitor for Anna, whose 'hair was curiously frized out at the sides, in close imitation of the royal Adonis; he wore a blue ribband, and was vastly addicted to falling in love'. Indeed, the Duke's

appearance is so risible that Anna 'had too much good sense to feel anything but contempt' (both 2.95) for him.

However, a more significant use of the aristocracy in the novel is in Bennett's ultimate tendency to blur class boundaries. *The Feminist Companion* reports that there is a 'free range of low life, high life and the economic interactions in between' in *The Beggar Girl*, but much the same could be said about *Anna*. Indeed, it seems that Bennett got the variety of characters just right here. In the contemporary *Monthly Review*, critic William Enfield states that in this work there is 'a sufficient variety of character and incident to keep up the reader's attention, and make them in some degree interesting'.[12] However, the same author was not so complimentary about *Juvenile Indiscretions*, opining that here 'the characters are more numerous and are strained beyond real life'.[13]

Class is undoubtedly crucially important to many of the characters' actions in *Anna*, as encapsulated in the image of the young ladies who 'withdrew to laugh over the prejudices of high blood' (1.228). Furthermore, when upper and lower classes mix when Sutton entertains the Daltons, the hierarchy is undoubtedly maintained, with Sutton easily leading on his guests, whose 'ideas of the owner were accompanied with an awe which increased with each new thing that appeared' (2.201-202). But the fact that Bennett chooses to blur the boundaries towards the denouement of the novel and using its lead character underlines the significance of this action. This is achieved through the contrast

[12] *Monthly Review* , 73 (August 1785), 153; quoted in the aforementioned *The English Novel 1770-1829*, p. 352.
[13] *Monthly Review* , 75 (October 1786), 315; quoted in the aforementioned *The English Novel 1770-1829*, p. 375-376 (p. 376).

between Anna's rise to the gentry, and Hugh's gambling debts and Cecilia's dalliance with Colonel Maxwell, a series of events that leads to the ironic scenario of Anna, apparently of humble birth until the novel's final volume, being the Edwins' saving grace. As Bennett comments, 'indeed, were it not for the lovely Anna, the long-boasted dignity of that ancient family would wear a very unfavourable aspect' (4.39).

This trick on Bennett's part serves to emphasize the novel's moral messages, thus demonstrating that it is far from being solely a vapid romance. In fact, the presence of such didactics leaves the *Critical Review*'s suggestion that *Anna* is 'without any pretensions to exact discrimination of manners or any very intimate acquaintance with the human heart' seeming somewhat harsh. For a start, it is clearly Bennett's aim to point out that happiness is more important than money or honour, as we see from the corrupting powers of riches in the novel. For instance, the introduction of wealth to Miss Turbville and Cecilia is said to have 'introduced an inordinate love of dress, pleasure and admiration; sensibility was banished, and the finer feelings were no more' (2.119-120). Such degradation could never happen to Anna, but when we see Bently criticizing what he perceives as Anna's 'ingratitude' (4.9) at her new-found life of luxury as Lady Trevanion, we know that her distance from Charles is the root cause of this sullenness, and no amount of money could compensate for the lack of a union with him. Those that do pursue wealth first of all, on the other hand, are wisely scorned by Bently, who, despite his noble background, prefers 'the society of uncultivated poverty, to that of unfeeling affluence' (4.17).

Another moral instruction to be delivered in *Anna* is a warning against the perils of vice, epitomized by Hugh's reflection on the subject. After hearing of the grisly downfall of Mr Herbert, a 'man of pleasure' (3.149), he reflects on his own waywardness, recognizing 'the awful justice' of men becoming 'the prey of the unhappy wretches they themselves have robbed of feeling and conscience' (both 3.150). Interestingly, Bennett's exploration of such a theme proved controversial, with *The Feminist Companion* reporting, not specifically about *Anna*, that 'her vivid sexual comedy and strong handling of sexual exploitation quickly became equally unacceptable'.[14] While the former seems largely absent here, the latter makes occasional and often significant appearances, such as Sutton's kissing Anna, which 'for a moment deprive[s] her of all power of resistance', and leads Sutton to reflect on 'not how far he was removed from that country where rape and murders are tolerated acts!' (1.144). Most likely to prove controversial, though, is Bennett's digression in the opening volume on the topic, which reads more like a treatise than a passage from a piece of fiction. It addresses directly the married female victims of abuse from men other than their husbands who consider 'their right, to treat a woman of no character as their own impertinent whims direct, […] to be indisputable' (1.84). Bennett states that a man like this 'suffers no inconvenience, labours under no disgrace, is subject to no mortification […]; it is rather a recommendation of him that he has ruined you', and the piece finishes with the defiant announcement that 'this digression has no apology but the motive which is excited by the subject' (both 1.85). Whether or not such a polemic was considered 'unacceptable' at the time, which seems

[14] Quoted, without further exploration, in my author biography of Bennett, p. 3.

unlikely given that such political debates were common at the time of publication, there is a clear potential for contentiousness here that belies the generally rigid romantic style of the novel.

In conclusion, *Anna* may seem an unappealing novel to examine, particularly judging by the *Critical Review*'s comment that 'we have seen many worse novels; more dull in their progress, and more pernicious in their tendency', which is as faint as praise can be before it develops into overt criticism. However, despite the novel's largely formulaic romantic model, it is far from being a vacuous work, as J.S. Tompkins underlines with the suggestion that Bennett 'wrote versions of the Cinderella and Griselda stories which, though they claim the indulgence awarded to popular literature, do not affront the reader's intelligence'.[15] Indeed, this remark is a most fair reflection on the novel's slightly unprofessional appearance and overly conventional romantic model drawn out perhaps beyond its natural length on the one hand, but some enlightening social commentary on the other.

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[15] J.S. Tompkins, *The Popular Novel in England 1770-1800* (London: Constable & Company, 1932; repr. 1967), p. 173.

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