Joanna Baillie as a Philosophical Dramatist

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Abstract

Joanna Baillie (1762–1851) was renowned in the earlier nineteenth century as a playwright. This paper argues that the kind of drama she produced was distinctly philosophical, both in its content, examining the danger of the passions in human life, and its educational aims, showing how the characters' failures to regulate their passions brought about their downfall, which served as a warning to the audience. After exploring why Baillie used drama as her philosophical medium, the paper considers the major criticisms of her from Francis Jeffrey, the first editor of the *Edinburgh Review*. The paper defends Baillie against his criticisms.

Keywords: Joanna Baillie; Scottish philosophy; women philosophers; Edinburgh Review; Francis Jeffrey; philosophy of art; tragedy

I. Introduction

At first sight, Joanna Baillie (1762–1851) might appear out of place in a journal issue on Scottish women philosophers, for she was known in her time as a dramatist and poet. Indeed, in the earlier nineteenth century she was Britain's best-known playwright. Her fame rested on her series of *Plays on the Passions* – in full, *A Series of Plays, in which it is Attempted to Delineate the Stronger Passions of the Mind*, published from 1798 to 1836. Baillie's contemporaries likened her to Shakespeare, with Walter Scott proclaiming her 'the best dramatic writer whom Britain has produced since the days of Shakespeare' (Scott 1894: vol.

1: 99). Given such estimations at the time, it is remarkable that for the entire twentieth century Baillie was forgotten. Since the 1990s, her work has at last been rediscovered and re-evaluated, and now she is often located within Scottish and British Romanticism.[1]

This recovery has occurred primarily in literary and cultural history with historians of philosophy only recently starting to take an interest in Bailie.[2] Thus, one might still wonder whether we should approach Baillie's *Plays on the Passion* as philosophy? The answer is 'yes' because she conceived her *Plays on the Passions* as *philosophical* dramas. Their title already suggests this, and it is worth noting that the passions were considered a philosophical topic in her time and context.[3] With her plays, Baillie conducted her own form of philosophical inquiry into the passions and their effects on human life, our possibilities for regulating them, and the damaging consequences of failing to do so. She explained this theoretical basis of her dramas in the seventy-page 'Introductory Discourse' that opened the first volume of plays.

As part of the wider effort to restore Baillie as a philosopher, this article reintroduces her philosophical drama project, before exploring why she used the medium of drama to philosophise. Then I look at her fiercest critic – Francis Jeffrey, editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, the quarterly journal founded in 1802 which defined nineteenth-century periodical culture across Great Britain and Ireland. As the first permanent editor, Jeffrey was key to the journal's success. He made his critical review of Baillie's first volume of plays the lead article in the first issue of the journal that he edited – a conspicuous placement that is revealing about Baillie's high status. Although Jeffrey saw her work as important and deserving sustained scrutiny, he considered her plays flawed because they hybridised philosophy and art. I will defend Baillie against his criticisms, and suggest that she had a more pluralistic conception of the values of artworks.

II. Joanna Baillie and the *Plays on the Passions*

At the start of her first volume of plays, Baillie announced that they were part of an 'extensive design … which … has nothing exactly similar to it in any language: … which a whole life's time will be limited enough to accomplish' (Baillie 1798: 1). Each play investigated one passion, with each passion presented in both a tragedy and a comedy. She classified the passions into pairs: love and hatred, hope and fear, ambition and jealousy, and remorse.[4] She clarified that the other passions were not suitable for dramatic representation, for various reasons (Baillie 1976: 230–31).[5] The first volume of plays accordingly dealt with love in a tragedy (*Count Basil*) and comedy (*The Tryal*), and hatred in a tragedy (*De Monfort*). The second volume, from 1802, covered hatred in a comedy (*The Election*), and ambition in a tragedy (*Ethwald*) and comedy (*The Second Marriage*). The series had almost the shape of a scientific taxonomy.

Baillie explained that she constructed her plays by:

> Conceiv[ing] the great moral object and outline of the story; … peopl[ing] it with various characters under the influence of various passions; and … strik[ing] out circumstances and situations calculated to call them into action. (Baillie 1798: 62)

Thus, each play had a 'moral object' – to examine how people make moral decisions, what the forces motivating them are, how these forces and decisions change over time. She also had a more specific moral aim, to warn of the dangers of particular passions, even 'good' ones like love or hope. She carried out these aims by inventing characters pursuing these passions, then plotting how these passions would move the characters into actions setting chains of events underway.

'To Tragedy', she explained:

> it belongs, to unveil to us the human mind under the dominion of those strong and fixed passions, which, seemingly unprovoked by outward circumstances, will, from small beginnings, brood within the breast, till all the better dispositions, all the fair gifts of nature, are borne down before them … (Baillie 1798: 30–31)

Accordingly, her tragedies adhere to a certain pattern. At first the main character's passion troubles them, and though they have the ability to restrain it, they fail to do so. The passion strengthens, and the character continues to leave it unchecked. The projects pursued by the ensemble of characters conspire to place the protagonist in a crisis, through which they could navigate if they were already versed in self-control. They are not, so the passion now surges forward decisively and the character is helpless to respond. Evoking these dismal trajectories, Baillie says:

> Representing the passions, brings before us the operation of a tempest that rages out its time and passes away. We cannot, it is true, amidst its wild uproar, listen to the voice of reason, and save ourselves from destruction; but we can foresee its coming, we can mark its rising signs, we can know the situations that will most expose us to its rage, and we can shelter our heads from the coming blast. … Above all, looking back to the first rise, and tracing the progress of passion, points out to us those stages in the approach of the enemy, when he might have been combated most successfully; and where the suffering him to pass may be considered as occasioning all the misery that ensues. (Baillie 1798: 43)

That long last sentence especially clarifies Baillie's project. She shows the first rise, the progress, and the junctures where the protagonist allows the 'enemy' to pass, occasioning the subsequent misery when the passion rages forth unstoppably.

De Monfort and *Count Basil* follow this pattern. We meet De Monfort as a man withdrawn into some terrible and inexplicable gloom (Baillie 2001: 305). He discloses to his

sister Jane that he is consumed with hatred for Rezenvelt, his rival since childhood (Baillie 2001: 331–34). As life has gone by, wealth and titles, honours and praise, have been heaped on Rezenvelt, and De Monfort's hatred has grown stronger. Having dueled Rezenfelt and lost, he broods endlessly on hateful thoughts about Rezenvelt. Jane persuades the two men to attempt a reconciliation. But Rezenvelt proves unexpectedly warm and friendly, De Monfort pulls back, Rezenvelt tries to make a joke of it, and De Monfort ends up hating him more than ever (Baillie 2001: 344–46). Finally, the resentful opportunist Grimbald inflames the situation by pretending to De Monfort that Jane and Rezenvelt are lovers (Baillie 2001: 355). This sends him into a frenzy of hatred – the blast of passion against which he has no shield – and he murders Rezenvelt in a forest at night (Baillie 2001: 363). Finally De Monfort is arrested, feels overwhelmed with grief, and dies of remorse.

Count Basil, a young but already distinguished general, is leading his troops to war. They pass through Mantua, where Basil is captivated by the duke's daughter Victoria. The duke, who is secretly on the side of Basil's enemy, invites him to stay for a few days. Basil is reluctant, but Victoria's charms persuade him to stay (Baillie 2001: 132). Basil 'suffers the enemy to pass' (in military terms as well as psychological). The duke spreads rumours inciting Basil's men to rebel; meanwhile Basil consorts with Victoria at a masked ball (Baillie 2001: 174). Facing his troops in uproar, he recovers himself and quickly demonstrates his mastery (Baillie 2001: 179). But rather than seizing the chance to proceed into battle, he feels compelled to visit Victoria: 'I'll see her once again, and then depart' (Baillie 2001: 189). While they are together, he is informed that his army advanced into battle without him and incurred a heavy loss of life (Baillie 2001: 198). Overcome with shame and guilt, Basil commits suicide.

These bald summaries cannot convey the richness and delight of Baillie's stories, but hopefully they make clear that she regards the passions primarily as dangers. She viewed the

passions ‘as an overbearing and inescapable element of human nature, liable to disrupt any civilized order … unless they were tamed’ (James 1997: 1). Baillie saw drama as a means for educating and guiding us in how to tame these unruly forces. She described drama as a kind of ‘moral writing’ and the theatre as ‘a school in which much good or evil may be learned’ (Baillie 1798: 15, 58). By showing us the terrible fates of those who give their passions free rein, tragedies teach us that *we* need – unlike these characters – to exercise self-restraint, monitor ourselves inwardly, and clip our passions early before they grow beyond control.

III. Why Did Baillie Write Drama?

Why did Baillie investigate the passions in plays, rather than writing a treatise? Did this choice reflect gendered conventions? Such feminist historians of philosophy as Catherine Villanueva Gardner (2004) and Anna Ezekiel (2016) have argued that women often philosophised in genres such as fiction and poetry because the treatise was considered exclusively masculine. As Ezekiel puts it, it was commonly thought that:

> Women should not present themselves as having original ideas or display too much abstract reasoning. This widespread attitude contributed to the relative lack of philosophical treatises by women of this time. As a result, … to benefit from the insights of women of this period, we must look outside the expected systematic or traditional philosophical forms, for example, in poems, novels, letters, diaries, and memoirs. (Ezekiel 2016: 9–10)

Against this view, Karen Green contends that ‘gender, not genre, … explains the neglect of women’s … theorizing’ (2004: 222). Certainly, some women wrote treatises and yet they were still omitted from the canon until recently – Mary Shepherd, for example. In Baillie’s case, she produced a book-length theological essay, *A View of the General Tenour of*

the New Testament Regarding the Nature and Dignity of Jesus Christ (Baillie [1831] 1838). This work was not quite a treatise, but it suggests she felt comfortable writing theoretically. The fact that Baillie was happy to write directly theoretical work on other matters suggests that she wrote plays not as a poor substitute for the treatise but because she thought drama the right medium for her message.

Further support for this thought comes from her high reputation in her time. She was repeatedly described as a genius, by men as well as women. For Walter Scott, writing in an 1808 letter, she was 'the highest genius of our country' (1894: vol. 1: 99). For William Harness: 'In point of genius, [she] is inferior to no individual on the rolls of modern celebrity' (Harness 1824: 162). For John Wilson (a moral philosopher based at Edinburgh University): 'Her plays are built on a 'plan which only the noblest genius could have achieved' (Wilson 1836: 9). An anonymous author spoke of 'the genius of this distinguished woman' (Anonymous 1851a: 246). Amongst women, the poet and essayist Anna Barbauld spoke of 'a genius like Miss Baillie's, soaring far above contemporary dramatists' (1802: 680), and Harriet Martineau spoke of 'really able women – women sanctified by holy genius … [like] Joanna Baillie' (1877: vol. 1: 266).[6] This extensive praise for her talent again suggests that she was accorded the artistic and intellectual licence to choose the medium she judged best, rather than retreating to a non-standard medium faced with overwhelming sexist exclusion.

Why, then, did Baillie see drama as the right medium for her message? I believe this was because of her belief that drama can educate, which in turn depended on her view that we have free will. We are intrinsically free, for Baillie, but we may not use our freedom or may use it in the wrong way, making choices that bring on our destruction. This belief in free will was not one Baillie explicitly defended; rather, it was a presupposition of her entire project. As Christine Colón remarks:

> Baillie returns compulsively to the ideas of individual freedom and responsibility … Baillie believes implicitly that her moral project will help to transform individuals if it is enacted appropriately, but she also acknowledges that the process is not an easy one. (Colón 2009: 53–54)

A key use of our freedom is, of course, to regulate our passions. To educate people that they need to do this, a theoretical statement about the dangerous consequences of uncontrolled passion would be insufficient. People need to be *shown* the consequences. Concrete cases like De Monfort and Basil make a lasting and powerful impression, and engage our curious interest and sympathetic emotions (Baillie 1798: 5). Narratives of chains of successive events are ideal for tracing the 'rise and progress' of passions (Baillie 1798: 44). Utterly disastrous outcomes, like De Monfort's perpetration of murder and Basil's abandonment of his troops to die on the battlefield, bring home strikingly the dangers of the passions, even apparently 'good' passions like love. In all these ways, dramas can motivate people to make better choices than the tragic protagonists have done, and are more effective motivators than any statement of theory.

This only provides a case for some sort of narration; why *drama*? Presumably Baillie found it ideal because, classically, a tragedy narrates the downfall of an individual through their fatal flaw (*hamartia*): Hamlet's indecision, Oedipus's hubris. This makes it perfect to document how a character can, like Basil or De Monfort, bring on his own destruction through unwise choices. Baillie's comedies are not my focus, but her use of the genre reflected Philip Sidney's influential Renaissance definition: 'Comedy is an imitation of the common errors of our life, which [the playwright] representeth in the most ridiculous … sort that may be, so as it is impossible that any beholder can be content to be such a one' (Sidney 1970: 44). Thus, comedy shows the errors and follies people fall into in the grip of strong passions (Baillie 1798: 54). By presenting their actions *as* laughable errors and follies,

comedy encourages us once more to disinvest from our passions, so as not to make a similarly laughable spectacle of ourselves.

More generally, the Greek word *drāma* means 'doing' or 'action'. Dramatic characters perform actions, including actions of speaking. For Baillie, action is important because it manifests and embodies choice. Her tragic protagonists' earliest actions embody their choices not to resist their passions (Basil decides to linger in Mantua; De Monfort succumbs to his childhood animosity towards Rezenvelt). Later, the characters make belated attempts to restrain their passions, but now they struggle, as the passions have grown stronger (De Monfort tries to reconcile with Rezenvelt, but his hatred carries the day; Basil knows battle is imminent, but still dallies at the masqued ball). Finally, even worse, the characters act under the sway of passions that are now overmastering (De Monfort murders Rezenvelt; Basil feels compelled to visit Victoria one last fatal time). They have made choices that carried them into internal psychical states they could no longer control.

This presents a puzzle. For Baillie, the characters have voluntary control over their passions early in the dramatic action, but over time these passions become too powerful to be restrained. The first point seems to entail a libertarian view of free will, where we can choose between the alternatives of controlling and not controlling the passions. Yet the second point seems to entail that emotional limits constrain and sometimes even determine our actions. We can infer how Baillie solves this puzzle from her dramatic practice. She believes that we always have free will to choose amongst the alternatives available to us given our circumstances and our nature, including our emotional make-up. Unfortunately, some of our choices can narrow the available options until, at worst, our emotional make-up no longer falls within the set of issues where we have any alternatives. This does not take away our free will, but it places our passion outside the domain of choice. (Consider by analogy: if every

day when I could jog or not jog, I decide not to, then eventually the day will come when jogging is no longer in my physical power and the choice no longer arises.)[7]

To return to a last aspect of Baillie's use of drama, public staging of the action before an audience is often considered essential to drama, but her plays were seldom performed. They were too intimate and probing to suit public performance, especially since theatres could be crowded, noisy, and chaotic. Her plays were accused of being 'closet dramas', written for reading rather than performance. This genre was deemed inferior, yet suitable for women because it was 'private' (see Purinton 1994, Burroughs 1997). Baillie resisted the closet dramatist label, but in the end resigned herself to it. In any case, the existence of closet drama shows that public staging is not essential to drama. Dramatic action can take place solely in the written word and imagination. As such, drama remained an appropriate form for Baillie's inquiry into the passions.

IV. Baillie's Reception, Francis Jeffrey, and the *Edinburgh Review*

There were dozens and dozens of reviews of Baillie's work. From Ken Bugajski's comprehensive compilation, I count at least eighty-seven reviews spanning the nineteenth century (Bugajski 1998). Amongst them, the thorns in Baillie's side were the ones from Francis Jeffrey. He reviewed her first two volumes of plays in 1803, her miscellaneous plays in 1805, and her third volume of *Plays on the Passions* in 1812 (totalling fifty-four pages of critique – almost a short monograph!). I will concentrate mainly on his first review, which, as I mentioned earlier, opened the first issue of the *Edinburgh Review* that he edited (the journal's fourth issue overall, the previous three having been edited ad hoc by Sydney Smith).

Before detailing Jeffrey's criticisms, I should explain why the *Edinburgh Review*, as well as Jeffrey himself, were significant. The *Edinburgh Review* inaugurated 'the prestigious,

influential, mandarin periodical form of the early to mid-century', as Joanne Shattock puts it (1989: vii). Ina Ferris observes that the journal 'was to alter the landscape and status of periodical publication for the rest of the century … with a striking new format whose impact was dramatic and immediate' (2012). Its four founders were Jeffrey, a lawyer by profession; Sydney Smith, a reformist church minister; the (Adam) Smithian political economist Francis Horner; and the Whig politician and later Lord Chancellor Henry Brougham. The four sought to preserve the vibrant intellectual climate of the Scottish Enlightenment, and to transpose Edinburgh's literary club culture into the printed medium. The quarterly format bespoke seriousness, taking time to filter out the important publications and reflect on them in depth. Reviews were long, up to thirty pages; they were *review-essays*, a new genre (Brake, Dillane, and Turner 2022: 157). As Jeffrey said, the journal aimed to reach a comprehensive critical judgement on its subjects and 'to go deeply into *the Principles* on which its judgments were to be rested; as well as to take large and Original views of all the important questions to which those works [under review] might relate' (1846: vol. 1, xi).

The *Edinburgh Review* gave periodicals their nineteenth-century role as the arbiters of taste and judgement and the site of public intellectual life. Simultaneously, this created a new persona: the professional critic which Jeffrey exemplified. As editor until 1829, his 'name became the one most closely identified with the *Edinburgh Review* for which he also wrote over 200 articles, mainly on political and literary subjects' (Ferris 2012). He was known and feared for his sharp, witty, often contentious judgements. Baillie was not his only victim; he vehemently attacked Wordsworth over a twenty-year period.

Jeffrey's output is so extensive that it can be hard to know how his numerous critical judgements fit together. For an answer, interpreters such as Christie (1993) and Guyer (1949) have turned to his eighty-page article 'Beauty'. It began as an 1811 review-essay of Archibald Alison's *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste*, was recycled into the

supplement to the *Encyclopedia Brittanica* of 1824, and was recycled again for *Brittanica'*s seventh edition of 1841. The piece also headlines Jeffrey's selection of *Edinburgh Review* contributions (Jeffrey 1846: vol. 1: 3–78). This essay shows that Jeffrey too belongs in the history of Scottish philosophy; he was not only a critic, but also a philosophical one.

We learn from 'Beauty' that Jeffrey was an associationist (Jeffrey 1846: vol. 1: 25). For him, we find an object beautiful if its appearance excites positive associations in us (Jeffrey 1846: vol. 1: 30), namely associations with things we love – in the case of the beautiful – or venerate – in the case of the sublime (Jeffrey 1846: vol. 1: 31–33). Because we find beautiful whatever we associate with love, feelings of the beautiful have a moral effect: they call up loving ideas and emotions, fostering our benevolence, our 'tenderness or pity towards sentient beings' (Jeffrey 1846: vol. 1: 53). For Jeffrey, beauty is nothing in things themselves (Jeffrey 1846: vol. 1: 6, 10–11). Even so, a wide consensus exists about what is beautiful, because there are 'common emotions and universal affections upon which the sense of beauty is everywhere founded' (Jeffrey 1846: vol. 1: 78).

This emphasis on our common associations and affections made Jeffrey hostile to claims of genius, the 'idolisation' of those with 'peculiar relishes' (Jeffrey 1846: vol. 1: 78). For him, a singular artistic vision could not possibly be beautiful, for it diverged from our common emotional stock. As he wrote to Thomas Carlyle in 1831, 'The more I see of philosophers and men of genius, the more I am inclined to hold that the ordinary run of sensible, kind people … are after all the best specimens of humanity, and others are … but splendid monsters' (Wilson 1924: 204).

Surveying Jeffrey's anti-Wordsworth campaign, W. H. Christie concludes that 'The conflict between Wordsworth and Jeffrey – between the avant-garde poet and the prevailing taste; between private vision and public demand – was perhaps archetypal' (1993: 268). Jeffrey's conflict with Baillie was archetypal in the same way. She too was revered as a

genius, and he approached her work determined not to be overpowered but to reach an independent critical verdict upon it.

V. Jeffrey's Criticisms, and Baillie Defended

Jeffrey's overarching criticism is that Baillie is forcing her material into the Procrustean bed of a philosophical plan.

> To such peculiar plans … we confess that we are far from being partial; they necessarily exclude many beauties, and ensure nothing but constraint; the only plan of a dramatic writer should be to please and interest as much as possible. (Jeffrey 1803: 271)
>
> Upon the whole, … we are pretty decidedly of opinion, that Miss Baillie's plan … is, in so far as it is at all new or original, in all respects extremely injudicious. (Jeffrey 1803: 277)

He again objects to her 'theoretical' tendency in his 1812 review (see Jeffrey 1812: 261–63). The complaint is that Baillie puts her philosophical commitments above respect for drama as an art-form.

We might think this criticism is irrelevant: Jeffrey fails to take on board what Baillie was trying to do, refusing to accept that drama can be used as a philosophical medium. But his criticisms matter because he argues that Baillie's philosophical project causes her plays to fail aesthetically. If he is right about this, then the plays will also fail to fulfil their purpose of moral education. As I explained earlier, Baillie thought her moral message was best conveyed dramatically because dramas engage our keen interest and sympathetic emotions, and therefore make a more vivid and powerful impression than any mere statement of theory. So

if Jeffrey is right that her plays lack interest, sympathy, and aesthetic appeal, these flaws would potentially undermine her whole project.

First, he takes issue with the examination of the passions as exemplified in one leading individual:

> The writer of the pieces before us, has espoused … *characteristic truth* …; and, in order to magnify its importance, has degraded all the other requisites of a perfect drama to the rank of very weak and unprofitable auxiliaries. (Jeffrey 1803: 269)
>
> The peculiarity of [her] plan consists in limiting the interest of the piece … to the development of some one great passion in the principal character … (Jeffrey 1803: 270).

By 'characteristic truth', Jeffrey evidently means the study of the psychological truth about the central character. The problem this produces is that Baillie's secondary characters are not developed in their own right. Her single-minded focus on one hero or heroine reduces the other characters to foils. As a result, her plays fail to arouse our interest, since an interesting plot requires the entanglement of several agents pursuing various ends: 'a certain portion of our sympathies must necessarily be reserved for … those who are the objects and the victims of this ruling passion in the hero' (Jeffrey 1803: 271), and 'it is of the very essence of dramatic composition, to exhibit the play and contention of many and of opposite affections … in the different persons it represents' (Jeffrey 1812: 262).

Baillie's practice answers this objection. In both *De Monfort* and *Count Basil*, the actions of the key female characters help to drive events forward. De Monfort's sister Jane endeavours to restore him to the warm-hearted and honourable man she once knew. Unfortunately, she fails, partly because Grimbald uses her efforts to mediate with Rezenvelt to convince De Monfort that the two are lovers, which is the final straw goading De Monfort into murder. This denouement could not happen without Jane's actions and their unintended

consequences. In *Count Basil*, Victoria keeps flirting with Basil and will not let him return to his duties. Whereas Jane tries to guide her brother *out* of his passionate hatred, Victoria lures Basil deeper *into* passionate love. The plays are deliberate mirror-opposites. Victoria's advisor, the older intellectual Countess Albini, urges her to relinquish her grip on Basil, to no avail (Baillie 2001: 147–48). Baillie makes a feminist point here: Victoria refuses to renounce her amatory power over Basil because it is the only power she has. Victoria's passion is, therefore, key to the action. In Jeffrey's terms, there is enough reciprocal interaction to hold our interest.

Jeffrey's criticism regarding secondary characters has a political dimension. He dislikes the elevation of the hero, saying that 'the display of great passions is apt to excite an admiration' that is not easily shaken off (Jeffrey 1803: 275). Instead, he wants democratic balance amongst a plurality of characters. This is important to how plays arouse our sympathies: we sympathise with those whom we see as being like us, participants in the human community. For Jeffrey, sympathy, democracy, and a balance amongst multiple characters must go together.

However, Baillie's project *is* democratic in a different way: her principal characters are not perfect. Like everyone else, they are troubled by passions, liable to be undone by uncontrolled emotions. 'To a being perfectly free from all human infirmity our sympathy refuses to extend' (Baillie 1798: 33). These principal actors participate in a common human nature and are 'creatures like ourselves' (Baillie 1798: 33). Thus for Baillie too, sympathy and democracy go together, but this is consistent with concentrating mainly on her central characters, because they are portrayed as being 'subject to like weaknesses and passions with ourselves' (Baillie 1798: 16).

Second, Jeffrey finds it psychologically implausible, and dramatically ineffective, that Baillie's protagonists each struggle with only one ruling passion. In reality, everyone has

many passions. The characters should be shown to be torn between their troublesome passion and another one that is its positive opposite pole:

> To confine the attention … to the observance of one master passion … is plainly impossible; … because that passion, in order to prove its strength, must have some other passion to encounter and overcome in the bosom where it is at last to reign … (Jeffrey 1803: 271)

When Baillie's plays succeed, he continues, they *do* show these contending passions: we see De Monfort's passion for honour battling against his hatred for Rezenvelt before going under; we see Basil drawn back towards his passion for military success but then giving way and going back to Victoria.

It is fair to say that Baillie shows us only distorted residues of the warm qualities De Monfort used to have (e.g., Baillie 2001: 312, when he grimly gives his attendants money to drown their sorrows). Basil is different: we encounter his power of command when he rapidly reasserts control over his mutinous troops (Baillie 2001: 179–81). Nonetheless, Baillie's scope for showing these positive features is limited by her focus on one overpowering passion. For she is carrying out a controlled literary–and–philosophical experiment: isolating one psychological factor at a time, such as hatred or love, to determine what happens when it goes unchecked.[8]

That said, Baillie wants to elicit our 'sympathetick curiosity' about her heroes and heroines (Baillie 1798: 4). Without this sympathy – without our affective participation in the characters' struggles – we will not recognise that the passions they feel are ones we feel too (Baillie 1798: 11–12). And without this recognition, we will not perceive the characters' fates as bearing upon us, and then their stories will not motivate us to make better choices ourselves. 'The Drama improves us by the knowledge we acquire of our *own* minds, from the natural desire we have to look into the thoughts, and observe the behaviour of others' (Baillie

1798: 37; my emphasis). So sympathy is essential to Baillie's educative goals. For the characters to call up our sympathies, they must not only be like us (as we saw earlier – the democratic constraint) but also be essentially good (Baillie 1798: 63). We cannot sympathise with someone who is irredeemably awful. Accordingly, Baillie must give *some* sense of her heroes' positive qualities. She does this partly through the words and actions of others: Jane's reverence for her brother as he once was, the universal respect and acclaim for Basil when the play begins.

On the one hand, then, Baillie's inquiry into one passion per protagonist per play pushes the characters' positive traits into the background. On the other hand, she only needs to show enough of these traits to make her protagonists sympathetic. As long as she does this, she can also keep our interest aroused, because we will follow events hoping the characters will realise their good potential by controlling their problematic passions (although, tragically, they fail).

Third, Jeffrey's point about contending passions rests on an assumption about moral motivation. He takes it that our motivation to restrain any one passion can only come from another contrary passion. Thus the goal cannot be all-round regulation and restraint, but rather balance. 'The greater part of the passions … are laudable in themselves, and only become vicious in their excess' (Jeffrey 1803: 275). His ideal is a rounded character that plays off each passion against the others and thereby holds them all together.

Baillie is warier of the passions and so, despite agreeing that we need an emotional motivation towards self-restraint, she derives this motivation from the reflected emotional force of sympathy (Baillie 1798: 2). Our sympathy for the suffering protagonists arouses our reflected pain for them, which motivates us to seek to avoid similar (direct) pain in our own cases. Sympathetically reflected passion is not the same as immediately felt passion, but is

passion seen through the distancing media of imagination and understanding. By appealing to sympathy, Baillie can avoid relying directly on passions as the force for moral motivation.[9]

The disagreement about moral motivation leads Jeffrey to argue that Baillie's advice to regulate the passions is practically useless. Mild and even moderate passions are 'laudable in themselves' and need no regulation (Jeffrey 1803: 275). Although the passions 'become vicious in their excess', it is impossible to pinpoint exactly when to intervene and curtail them – unless one intervenes right at the start, but then one is stifling desirable forces (Jeffrey 1803: 275–76). However, Baillie would surely reply that while one need not stifle mild passions, one does need to *monitor* them, so as to step in the moment they begin to stir and grow – like allowing a child to play under close supervision. Tragedy helps us to trace when 'the evil [one] contends with arises in [one's] own breast' and to detect 'even the smallest indications of an unquiet mind' (Baillie 1798: 9–10).

Fourth, Jeffrey's criticisms are bound up with his conception of aesthetic value. For him, we find beautiful those things or people that we associate with love or reverence; therefore, if Baillie's protagonists had more positive traits and passions, we would associate them with love, and find them more aesthetically appealing. Likewise, if the surrounding characters had more fleshed-out positive traits they would have greater aesthetic appeal. This diversity of contending affections gives drama 'its chief beauty and excellence … [from] the harmonies and contrasts of the emotions which it successively displays' (Jeffrey 1812: 262). This ties in with his allegation that Baillie curtails the aesthetic qualities of her work to concentrate on moral education. For Jeffrey this is a mistake: the only way artworks can morally educate is by being aesthetically pleasing. It is the feeling of beauty which draws out our associations with love, calling up this emotion and strengthening our motivation to treat people with benevolence. Baillie has gone about making artworks moral in the wrong way: 'To delineate a man's character, by tracing the progress of his ruling passion, is like

describing his person by the yearly advancement of his foot. … A ruling passion distorts and deforms the character' (Jeffrey 1803: 274). Instead, we need to see the characters' *good*, and aesthetically attractive, sides for the plays to have moral effect.

Clearly, Baillie does not think the moral value of artworks must be channelled entirely through their aesthetic qualities as Jeffrey suggests. For her, artworks can have moral value, and develop our moral, intellectual, and practical capacities, in other ways. By learning from tragedies, audiences develop their powers to internally monitor themselves and identify burgeoning evil in their own breasts, as we saw a moment ago. This detective skill is only one of the capacities that audiences mobilise to engage with drama. They use cognitive skills to understand and interpret the characters' words and actions (Baillie 1798: 4–6). They draw on their affective powers of sympathy to feel reflected pain at the characters' pains, and put themselves in the characters' shoes (Baillie 1798: 9–10). They draw on their common experience of human nature to recognise that the characters are in the same emotional situation as everybody else (Baillie 1798: 22–24). At best, audience members grasp the threat of overgrown passions and take responsibility for their choices. Tragic drama cultivates a multi-faceted set of intellectual and moral skills.

Perhaps Baillie thinks artworks have a plurality of kinds of value. This pluralist view, defended by Robert Stecker (2019: ch. 3), is that artworks can have intellectual, moral, practical, aesthetic, and other kinds of value; their value is not confined to the aesthetic. Similarly, for Baillie, dramatic works can have intellectual value, giving cognitive insight into other minds and the common human predicament; practical value, by motivating us to self-regulate; and moral value, in fostering our sympathies and encouraging responsibility.

To achieve these intellectual, practical, and moral goals, though, tragic dramas also need to succeed as dramas. They have to pique our interest in the characters and what happens to them, to portray the characters in a way that arouses our sympathy, to attract and

hold our attention, and to make a suitably vivid and exciting impression through the dramatic unfolding of events. If Baillie's plays did not succeed in these dramatic respects, then their educative project could not succeed either. Her best plays, such as *De Monfort* and *Count Basil*, carry off this difficult balancing-act. Jeffrey thought otherwise: to the extent these plays succeeded as dramas, it was because they had thankfully migrated away from Baillie's philosophical plan (Jeffrey 1803: 271). This judgement reflected his position that dramas could only succeed when they were beautiful rather than theory-driven, conforming to classical standards of unity, organic balance, and wholeness. I have argued that Baillie instead sought to produce a type of drama that was philosophical *and* dramatically effective; indeed, without being effective – engaging, interesting, appealing, sympathetic – it could not fulfil its educational goals, which were key to its philosophical purpose. Rather than crushing the dramatic vitality out of her work and reducing it to a mere cypher for theoretical claims, her philosophical project depended on her work retaining dramatic vitality, which she accomplished in ways that Jeffrey failed to recognise.

VI. Conclusion

Jeffrey's critical reviews were not the end of the Baillie–Jeffrey story. Walter Scott, who knew them both, said of Jeffrey in an 1806 letter, 'I have often wondered that a man who loves and admires poetry so much as he does can permit himself the severe, or sometimes unjust, strictures which he fulminates even against the authors whom he most approves of' (1894: vol. 1: 41). By implication, Jeffrey actually approved of Baillie's work, and he buried some approving remarks within his review:

> We have been induced to express this [critical] opinion more fully and strongly, from the anxiety that we feel to deliver her pleasing and powerful genius from the trammels

> that have been imposed upon it by [her] unfortunate system. … [H]er talents … are superior to those of any of her contemporaries … (Jeffrey 1803: 277).
>
> If Miss Baillie will relinquish her [philosophical] plan, … we shall soon have the satisfaction of addressing her with more unqualified praise, than we have yet bestowed upon any poetical adventurer. (Jeffrey 1803: 286)

Even Jeffrey accepted Baillie's genius, rather strikingly given his antipathy to the notion.

His secret admiration is confirmed by the 1851 *International Magazine of Literature, Art, and Science*, which reported (shortly after Baillie's death) that when she was visiting Edinburgh in 1808:

> He would gladly have been presented to her; and if she had permitted it, … enough of the admiration he really felt for her poetry must have been expressed, to have softened her into listening … to his suggestions for her improvement. (Anonymous 1851b: 312)

She refused: 'the dignified reason assigned was the propriety of leaving the critic more entirely at liberty in his future strictures' (Anonymous 1851b: 312). She could not have been happy to be praised only on condition she jettisoned philosophical drama. Jeffrey was asking her to give up her original project and produce work more like other people's.

By 1820, the magazine report continues, she relented and felt sufficiently secure in her literary status to meet Jeffrey. They formed a lifelong rapport and regularly met from then on. In 1840, Jeffrey said he had just seen Baillie and 'found her … as fresh, natural, and amiable as ever – and as little like a Tragic Muse' (Anonymous 1851b: 312). Likewise in 1838, Baillie informed a friend that she had seen 'Even Lord Jeffrey my former foe. He was very gracious and agreeable and so was I. … "It is surprising how much better one likes a man having fought with him"' (Baillie 1999: vol. 2, 673). Ironically, Jeffrey warmed to Baillie because he found her modest and unassuming, free from avant-gardist pretensions.

Meanwhile, she came to accept Jeffrey because she felt her status as an important writer and thinker was safely assured against his attacks. I hope I have confirmed her judgement. She had the theoretical and artistic resources to answer his objections.

Examining her answer has shed light on how her project of a philosophical drama fitted together. She addressed the passions in the medium of drama because she thought drama could educate the audience more effectively than theoretical treatises. This educational project depended on her plays engaging our interests and sympathies, and having enough aesthetic appeal to arouse and sustain our sympathetic attention and enlist our cognitive engagement. For Baillie, dramatic effectiveness and philosophical purpose went together.

Baillie's work, I have argued, was philosophical; I also claim that she was a *Scottish* philosophical thinker, having being born, raised, and educated in Scotland (to use Deborah Boyle's criteria for being a Scottish philosopher; 2019: 290). Moreover, Baillie was influenced by Scottish Enlightenment figures such as Smith, and her work was prominently discussed in the *Edinburgh Review*, a journal intended, as we've seen, to transfer the spirit of the Scottish Enlightenment from clubs to print.

Gordon Graham has put forward a stronger conception of Scottish philosophy – as extending in time beyond the Enlightenment period but, crucially, being bound up with its institutional framework in the university system (2015: 389–90). The institutional element of his account, as Boyle (2019) has pointed out, unfortunately excludes women. Baillie's case points a way to overcome this: by including print culture and periodicals as core institutions in which philosophical debates happened, alongside universities.

Graham also offers a more intellectual criterion of Scottish philosophers' 'common endeavour':

> First, it was a 'modern' engagement with the perennial and ancient problems of philosophy. Second, it sought to address these problems with the help of close

> attention to general facts about human nature and the human condition. Third, it located the value of these investigations in their bearing on moral education. (Graham 2015: 385)

Baillie fits this criterion. She engaged with perennial problems: self-control, free will, action, the good life, tragedy. She paid close attention to our common human nature, our stock of passions, and our struggles with them. She practised moral education – although in the form of drama rather than through a university appointment. This again suggests that we should consider print and literary culture, alongside university teaching, as a place where moral education could be carried out in a philosophically informed way. By expanding our conception of the location of philosophy to this wider world of print culture – and its elements such as periodicals, books, and literary works – we can accommodate a dramatist such as Baillie in the history of Scottish philosophy.

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[1] See, for example, Bardsley (2004), Burroughs (1997), Clery (2004: ch. 3), Crochunis (2004), and Colón (2009).

[2] This said, a welcome surge of interest in Baillie's philosophical thought is now taking place: see Boyle (2024), Falk (2024), Kopajtic (2024), and Stone (2024)

[3] The passions were an important topic for David Hume and Adam Smith, for example. Hume was probably an influence on Baillie (Duthie 2001: 29–34); Smith definitely was, for he was friends with Baillie's family and she defended his work in conversation (Carhart 1923: 13, 70).

[4] Remorse paired with revenge, she explained, but she did not depict revenge because so many previous dramas had already dealt with it; Baillie (1976: 312).

[5] Here she claimed that anger, joy, and grief were too 'transient' to sustain a drama; pride was not 'turbulent' enough; and we could not possibly sympathise with a character in the grip of envy.

[6] Feminist aestheticians generally agree that the Romantic ideology of genius inherently excluded women, following Christine Battersby's classic analysis (1989). Baillie's case suggests we may need to revisit and complicate this view. As we restore women intellectuals to the historical record, more evidence may emerge of women who were ranked as geniuses.

[7] This part of Baillie's thought is beyond the scope of this paper, but it resembles Robert Kane's account of self-forming actions and ultimate responsibility, part of his wider defence of voluntarism. For Kane, if I make choices that lead me to acquire a certain character and set of motives which then determine further actions on my part, I remain *ultimately responsible*

for the latter actions. ‘Luther’s “Here I stand” would have been an affirmation for which he was ultimately responsible, even if it was determined …, so long as … he was responsible … by earlier undetermined SFAs [self-forming actions] for the character and motives from which the affirmation issued’ (Kane 1996: 77).

[8] Baillie ‘analogized her dramatic project as a facsimile of a medical or scientific experiment’ (Gilbert 2001: 42).

[9] I am presuming that Baillie relied on Smith’s view of sympathy as ‘our fellow-feeling with any passion whatever’ (Smith 1759: 6). For him, this fellow-feeling arises when the observer imagines how they would feel in the other person’s situation (Smith 1759: 2–3). This imaginative act creates a ‘reflected’ emotional response, in which the observer mirrors the feelings of the one observed, where ‘the reflected passion, which he thus conceives, is much weaker than the original one’ (39). I believe Baillie shares this view. For a more detailed discussion of Baillie and Smith, see Kopajtic (2024). Boyle (2024: 7–8) argues that for Baillie we do not imagine what others are feeling but infer it; even if so, this is consistent with our consequent sympathetic feelings having reflected status.