

ENGL 3041: Adventures in the Literary Marketplace
Assignment 1.3: Author Biography

Anna Maria Bennett was born in Merthyr Tydfil in 1750.¹ She first moved to London with her husband, and had probably left him before she worked first as a shopkeeper, selling ready-made naval clothing², and then as a workhouse matron.³ She became Sir Thomas Pye's mistress, and gave her surname to two of his children, Thomas and Harriet.⁴ The latter became known as Mrs. Esten, a reasonably famous actress, whom Bennett helped to 'diffuse the scandal' of her apparently bigamous marriage to the Duke of Hamilton.⁵ Bennett and Pye separated in 1785, the original year of *Anna's* publication, after Pye accidentally sent a letter meant for another woman to Bennett; coincidentally, he died just three weeks later.⁶

Bennett's other published novels, aside from *Anna: or Memoirs of a Welch Heiress*, her first, comprised *Juvenile Indiscretions* (1786, one edn., five vols.)⁷; *Agnes de-Courci* (1789, two edns. (second edn. 1797), both four vols.)⁸; *Ellen, Countess of Castle Howel* (1794, two edns. (second edn. 1805), both five vols.)⁹; *The Beggar Girl and her Benefactors* (1797, seven vols., three edns. (2nd edn.

¹ *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English*, ed. by Virginia Blain et al. (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd., 1990), p. 82. All references to this book are taken from this page. Hereafter referred to as *The Feminist Companion*.

² *Dictionary of British Women Writers*, ed. by Janet Todd (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 57. All references to this book are taken from this page unless otherwise stated.

³ *The Feminist Companion*.

⁴ *Dictionary of British Women Writers*.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Dorothy Blakey, *The Minerva Press 1790-1820* (Oxford University Press, 1939), p. 139. Any subsequent references to Blakey are taken from this book.

⁸ *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* <<http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/ECCO?locID=unisoton>>, hereafter known as *ECCO*; and (for second edn) <<http://www.copac.ac.uk>>, hereafter known as *COPAC*.

⁹ Blakey, p. 165 (first edn.) and p. 215 (second edn.). This novel is hereafter referred to as *Ellen*.

1799, 3rd edn. 1813, both five vols.)¹⁰; *De Valcourt* (1800, one edn., two vols.)¹¹; and *Vicissitudes Abroad* (1806, one edn., six vols.)¹². All of these books were published by William Lane's The Minerva Press, except the first edition of *Agnes de-Courci*, produced by S. Hazard of Bath, and *De Valcourt*, published by R. Dutton of Cornhill. Although reviewers complained about the lengthiness of Bennett's works¹³, the quality of her fiction was such that her obituary in *The Athenaeum* rated her as 'the equal of Fielding or Richardson'.¹⁴ However, the attainment of such high standards was reached in far from ideal conditions, judging by her 'Apology' prefacing *Ellen*. This brief passage describes how both running and fighting legal battles over the lease of the Edinburgh Theatre¹⁵, which she claimed in 1793, just a year before *Ellen*'s publication, in tandem with Harriet from the Duke of Hamilton¹⁶, left her 'in the greatest Distress, both of Mind and Circumstances'.¹⁷ In the event, writing proved a welcome escape from 'Mental Derangement'¹⁸.

Nonetheless, the praise flowed in, with *The Beggar Girl*'s 'verbal irony' and 'robust satire' said by later observers to be reminiscent of Dickens, with its focus on 'high life, low life and the economic interactions between'.¹⁹ Also, like Dickens, she was not afraid to add a strong satirical edge either, such as her lampooning

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 180 (first edn.), p. 188 (second edn.) and p. 241 (third edition). This novel is hereafter referred to as *The Beggar Girl*.

¹¹ *ECCO*.

¹² Blakey, p. 221.

¹³ *Dictionary of British Women Writers*, pp. 56-57.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ *The Feminist Companion*.

¹⁶ *Dictionary of British Women Writers*.

¹⁷ *ECCO. Ellen*, p. 3.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 4.

¹⁹ *The Feminist Companion*.

of conventions of the romance genre with the chapter names 'the long story', 'the long story continued' and 'no end to the long story' in *The Beggar Girl*.²⁰ In fact, on occasions Bennett, described as a writer of 'scandalous memoirs' in the *Bloomsbury Guide To Women's Literature*²¹, overstepped the mark, and 'her vivid sexual comedy and strong handling of sexual exploitation [...] quickly became equally unacceptable'.²²

However, the knowledge of her penchant for controversy, exemplified by the fact that even her publisher Lane was not safe from criticism, accepting sarcastic references to his empire in *The Beggar Girl* with good grace²³, must be tempered by the 'devotion to the royal family' evident in the three dedications that she wrote for her novels.²⁴ For instance, in the dedication addressed to the Princess Royal, Charlotte-Augusta-Matilda, in *Anna*, her praise is obsequiously conveyed, declaring that it is surprising that she has not brought the 'Welch heiress' 'nearer perfection', given her thoughts of the Princess.²⁵ In fact, it is interesting to note that the subject matter of this dedication proves to be an exemplary model of the aforementioned *mélange* of 'high' and 'low' life in her fiction, with its comparison of the glorious Princess with Bennett and 'the deficiencies of [her] trifling production'.²⁶

²⁰ *Dictionary of British Women Writers*.

²¹ *Bloomsbury Guide To Women's Literature*, ed. by Claire Buck (London: Bloomsbury, 1992), p. 335.

²² *The Feminist Companion*.

²³ *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. 101.

²⁴ Both *The Feminist Companion*.

²⁵ *ECCO. Anna*, p. viii.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. iv.

As we have seen, a reasonable amount is known about Bennett. Nonetheless, there are still some areas of ambiguity that underline her relative obscurity when compared to her contemporaries such as Austen. For a start, the *European Magazine* stated in 1790 that Bennett's father, David Evans, and husband were customs officers and her brother an attorney, whereas other sources claim that her father was a grocer and her husband a tanner.²⁷ Furthermore, as Helen Plimmer notes in her 1998 Corinne project, Anna Maria Bennett is often confused with Elizabeth Bennett.²⁸ Indeed, COPAC states that *Emily, or the Wife's First Error* and *Faith and Fiction*, the latter being published by Lane's Minerva successor Anthony King Newman, were both attributed variously to either name.

Other works that apparently caused confusion among publishers at the time include Sarah Harriet Burney's *Clarentine*. This novel's Dublin edition, published by P. Wogan in 1797, is, according to the title page, by 'Mrs. Bennett'²⁹, which seems perplexing given that G.G. and J. Robinson's London edition of the same year was simply anonymous. Additionally, the translation of *Juvenile Indiscretions* into French as *Les imprudences de jeunesse* by Buisson in 1788 seems to think that the author was Fanny Burney, since the author on the title page is given as 'par l'auteur de *Cécilia*', a Burney novel of 1782.³⁰ In fact, even Anna Maria Bennett's name was unclear, with some sources, such as *The*

²⁷ *The Feminist Companion*.

²⁸ <<http://www.shu.ac.uk/schoolsics/corvey/corinne/Corinne%20Authors/1Bennet/2ndary.html>>.

²⁹ ECCO.

³⁰ Ibid.

Feminist Companion and Dictionary of British Women Writers, giving her first name as 'Anna', and others, like *ECCO* and *COPAC*, preferring 'Agnes'.

Bennett died in 1808.

Bibliography:

Blakey, Dorothy, *The Minerva Press 1790-1820* (Oxford University Press, 1939)
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<<http://www.copac.ac.uk>>

<<http://www.shu.ac.uk/schoolsics/corvey/corinne/Corinne%20Authors/1Bennet/2ndary.html>>

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