

Children's Literature in the Eighteenth Century: Re-defining the Child

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Abstract

This paper attempts to outline the basic ideologies of childhood in the Romantic period and examines literary texts written for children by often neglected women authors Anna Letitia Barbauld and Sarah Trimmer.

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In the eighteenth century there seemed to be an increasing amount of interest in the concept of childhood and the raising of children. Although the eighteenth century is commonly linked to Romantic literature and nature, there were many books written specifically for children during that era, and unfortunately these books have not received as much attention as the major Romantic poets of the period. However, writers of children's literature in the Romantic period are recently being studied along with the work they published for children, ranging from prose to poetry. Critics and scholars have centered their research around children's literature in the eighteenth century in light of the conceptions of childhood and emerging ideas in society, proposed by the highly influential philosophers Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and John Locke. Both Rousseau's and Locke's attempts at a certain type of social reformation were practiced in this period in England, particularly concepts and understandings of childhood and the child's function in the world.

Rousseau's views are considered radical and somewhat conservative. He placed great emphasis on the ideas of man and nature and how they are closely linked. In order for a person, or a child, to find their place in society, they must be placed in the natural world, away from the corruptions of society and civilization. Rousseau's ideology is best demonstrated throughout his *Emile: Or, on Education* written in 1762. He focuses on the education of the young citizen without corrupting his "natural goodness." An interesting link is made between Rousseau's philosophy on human nature and *Robinson Crusoe* in Jane Bingham and Grayce Scholt's *Fifteen Centuries of Children's Literature*: "It was followers of Rousseau who seized upon Robinson Crusoe as a splendid example of the natural man, who, like a noble savage, innocently but reasonably and fearlessly worked out his design for living" (Bingham, Scholt 85). For Rousseau, it was of utmost importance to evaluate the man and the child in relation to their natural state: "The French writer, Jean Jacques Rousseau, heralded the new ideas which slowly made themselves felt in growing concerns for the natural man and his emotions...and for a new view of the essential worth of ordinary people" (80). Because Rousseau elevated the "ordinary" man, as a direct result the child's position was also elevated and writers were producing works aimed at children.

John Locke's theoretical approach to the idea of childhood was perhaps more effective and reached a larger portion of English society. Locke seems to employ a more concrete approach, rather than an abstract notion of the natural world in regards to the human self. Perhaps the major difference between Locke and Rousseau was that Locke did not stress the importance of finding "God, as well as reason, in nature" like Rousseau did (85). Locke focused more on the "use of reason as well as the importance of environment in the molding of a child's life." (85) Andrew O'Malley highlights Locke's fundamental views in *The Making of the Modern Child*: "John Locke's notion of the child's mind as tabula rasa...was even more so than Rousseau's concept of the child as uncorrupted product of nature...the mind of the child was similar to the 'man in his natural state' as described by Locke in his Two Treatises of Government" (5). For Locke, the child's mind resembles a clean slate which allows room for the

inscription of ideologies and belief systems. Since the mind was a blank slate, there were no previous convictions or experiences before birth. This takes us to John Locke's idea of "original sin" in relation to the child. Locke's emphasis on the importance of educating the child's mind and shaping the child's character reached the majority of writers as well as mothers aiming to raise, or educate children. Locke "gave advice to the strict but not unkindly British mothers about diet, clothes, exercises...and other 'common-sense' details of raising children" (Bingham, Scholt 85).

After Locke came more changes, including the rise of books for children. As Tess Cosslett suggests in *Talking Animals in British Children's Fiction* that Locke might as well be "credited with initiating a liberalisation in the way children were treated, and a new interest in their education and reading matter" (9). She goes on to highlight that, specifically, "the more humane attitude to children, which was one of the causes of the growth of children's literature, can partly be ascribed to the cult of sensibility; and the arguments in children's books for kindness to animals belong to the same structure of humanitarian feeling" (16). The family institution in the eighteenth century focused more on the child and elevating the child, the family had "become increasingly child-centered, and parents began to invest more, emotionally and financially, in their children...at the same time, an ideology of social aspiration and betterment fuelled the desire to educate one's children out of their class" (Cosslett 12). As such, "betterment" also included establishing a strong religious sense of the existence of God within the child's mind. There was an increasingly prevailing interest in religious piety and the "goodness of God" (Cosslett 17). Interestingly enough, "natural religion was seen as a gentle and easy way to lead children towards the concept of God" (Cosslett 17). A religious doctrine was instilled in children from a very early age. As such, religious values and social class were inextricably linked.

Anna Letitia Barbauld and Sarah Trimmer are two writers who wrote children's literature revolving around religious, social, and educational themes. Their works, aimed at children, are extremely didactic. The common qualities shared between the two writers are the emphasis on instilling morality in the child, and creating social as well as religious awareness for the child. Anna Barbauld's *Lessons for Children of Three Years Old* was published in Dublin in 1779 and consists of two volumes. The second volume revolves around the central character, Charles, and everything that he learns from his mother and the world surrounding him. His mother's voice functions as the teacher's voice; she is constantly guiding him and even disciplining him. Barbauld employs the technique of simple language and writes in an uncomplicated manner so that her voice may reach children and enlighten them. Aware of her audience's mental capabilities, she is able to establish a connection to the child. She stresses the importance of education throughout her book and we can postulate that she was, like most of the public, highly influenced by the works of John Locke and his views on education and the child's mind. The opening line of her book is: "Charles! What a clever thing it is to read!" (3). Immediately we are able to sense the close link between being "clever" and being literate in light of the child's

upbringing. Barbauld moves on to highlight the difference between humans and animals: “I never saw a dog or cat learn to read. But little boys can learn. If you do not learn, Charles, you are not good...you had better be drowned” (6-7). The distinction between animals and children is made apparent to the protagonist, Charles, as well as the readers. The narrator (the mother) is imposing education upon the child as if there is no other alternative, and there is almost a threatening tone at the end, “you had better be drowned.” It implies a sort of disciplinary action in order to raise the child to love reading and strive for education. As such, the child becomes a better man when fully grown up, and consequently, he has achieved a type of “betterment” for himself and for society. She goes on to address the beauty of nature through various instances, for example, referring to the sun and the moon, by statements such as “How pretty the Sun looks...And how beautiful the clouds are” (18). In a very Romantic view, Barbauld underlines the magnificence of nature in order to link nature to God and his supremacy, which would consequently establish a love of nature and a reverence for God. At the same time, Barbauld succeeds in establishing a sense of empathy for animals, by confirming to Charles that dogs are good creatures, “dogs do not hurt...they love little boys and play with them” (82).

Yet another one of Barbauld’s literary achievements was *Hymns in Prose for Children* first published in 1781 in London. This book was aimed at an audience older than three years old and was more serious in terms of religious doctrines. In the Preface, Barbauld states how crucial it is that the child learns of God’s presence from the earliest age. She labels her goal or the function of her book as simply “to impress devotional feelings as early as possible on the infant’s mind...by connecting religion with all that he sees, all that he hears” (3). Barbauld seems to be entirely inscribing religious ideology on the child’s mind. Interestingly enough, she tends to always use the pronoun “he” or a male child protagonist. Her opening line is “Come, let us praise God, for he is exceeding great” (7) Pretty straight-forward and also allowing no room for doubt or questioning God’s goodness, or let alone his existence. Barbauld is almost Puritan in her style of writing, and there is a certain demanding or affirming tone when she states “I will praise God with my voice...though I am but a little child...and my tongue shall praise him...let him call me, and I will come onto him, let him command, and I will obey him” (8). The irony is in Barbauld’s fixation on the terms “will” and “shall.” If read out loud to a child, presumably the word “will” would be stressed. She moves on to emphasize the existence of God amongst nature and amongst us, by raising such questions as: “Who is the Shepherd’s Shepherd? Who taketh care of him...God is the Shepherd’s Shepherd. He is the Shepherd over all” (12). Barbauld seems to overtly assert her religious views and practically force the child to follow her beliefs. There is no other option or any alternative.

Sarah Trimmer’s *Easy Lessons for Young Children* was published in 1790 in London. Her book focuses more on social morality and etiquette or confirming to society’s definition of being a “good” child. For example, in one of the chapters she tells the story of Tom Bird who would bully other children, but one day is taught “not to knock teeth out” when “George Blunt sent him home with two black eyes” (13). The obvious moral of the story would be to educate

children how to treat others with respect. Another lesson revolves around a boy who abuses his dog, and in return an older man teaches him a lesson by beating him up “as hard as he could” so that he may learn never to hurt animals (20). This closely relates with the humanitarian view taken up in the eighteenth century in relation to treatment of animals and even social hierarchies, which also included the animal. Trimmer’s lessons are not as didactic or straight-forward as Barbauld’s, perhaps because Barbauld applies a lot of religious morals and beliefs, while Trimmer draws upon social skills, punishment and refinement.

William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* serve for a solid comparison between his style and Barbauld’s in relation to their understanding of children and writing for an audience of children. Although Barbauld does give voice to the child in *Hymns in Prose for Children*, she does not allow room for any multiple visions or multiple voices. The child speaker is constantly speaking of God and his devotion to God, while in Blake’s poems the child speaker seems to have a different voice in each of the songs. At times the speaker is happy, and at times distressed. There is more discrepancy and even realism in Blake’s depictions of the child’s experiences of the world. Blake allows room for the different social classes and the different children’s voices to seep through. In his song “The Shepherd” he speaks of lambs and states: “how sweet is the Shepherd’s sweet lot...He is watchful while they are in peace/For they know when their Shepherd is night” (Wu 180). Barbauld’s description of the shepherd in *Hymns in Prose for Children* accelerates only to state that the shepherd exists only because God does, and God is the “Shepherd’s Shepherd.” Blake’s version allows room for speculation and he could even possibly be hinting that people are the lambs, while the Shepherd is God. The difference between their approaches to children is that Barbauld bluntly attempts to inscribe her beliefs on the child’s mind, while Blake elevates the child’s mind, leaving room for imagination the child’s own analysis. Also, unlike Trimmer, Blake offers a social critique, rather than a lesson to refine children and make them adequate social creatures. Blake blames society, rather than the child, as seen in “The Chimney Sweeper” when the child states: “They clothed me in the clothes of death, and taught me to sing the notes of woe/and because I am happy and dance and sing/they think they have done me no injury” (Wu 196).

Blake did not believe that the child had to bear the burden of the elevation of society, but instead that society firstly had to be reformed in order to provide a better place for the child, meaning the “betterment” of society was to lead to the “betterment of the child”, rather than the other way around. The position of the child along with speculation about the importance of the child’s education and upbringing in regards to the effects on society was an integral part of eighteenth century society and literature dedicated to children.

Barbauld, Trimmer, and Blake had different views and approaches to writing about and for children. Each author employed a distinctive technique and an innovative style throughout their works. Perhaps that is the reason their works have not lost their novelty and remain solid

throughout the centuries, continuously to be studied and explored by scholars and critics to re-evaluate and re-define their role in the creation of children's literature.

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