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The Memory of the Romantic Child during “Unruly Times”

Wordsworth wrote that “the Poet, gentle creature as he is / Hath like the Lover, his unruly times” (456). During a time of war and political unrest, England was going through some rough times as well. How did Romantic writers cope with these “unruly times”? The answer to this question lies in the emergence of a new genre of literature aimed at a new audience—children. Children’s literature and the reflection of childhood in general became a peaceful calm in the raging sea of war. With social change, the realm of children’s literature also changed, and soon enough “the rational child had become the romantic child” (MacLeod 141). The rising generation became idealized and essentially became the hope for a better future. Children’s literature was widely read but perhaps one of the most popular children’s authors of the time was Anna Letitia Barbauld whose *Hymns in Prose for Children* (published in 1781) greatly affected such poets as Browning, Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Blake. Although Barbauld’s *Hymns in Prose for Children* ultimately affected adults during times of war and political unrest, she wrote specifically to children in order to more boldly express her political views, find hope in the future generation, and to teach children important lessons that would help them in adulthood.

Barbauld wrote specifically to children to more boldly express her political views. Children’s literature was often used as a means of social protest and this is precisely what Anna Letitia Barbauld does in *Hymns in Prose for Children*. Expressing her political views through her children’s literature was a means for more boldly expressing her political ideas. In fact, she managed to express her political views so subtly that “beginning in her lifetime, critics failed to see her children’s books for what many were—critiques of the British Empire” (Reeves 127). For example, one big political issue that Barbauld addresses in *Hymns* is slavery. She is constantly reiterating the fact that we are all one race and that God is over all: “He is the Shepherd over all; he taketh care for all; the whole earth is his fold; we are all his flock” (Barbauld 9). The recurring word “all” is apparent throughout not only these lines but a majority of the hymns. Barbauld also addresses the political issue of women’s rights when she emphasizes the idea that “God is the parent of the mother; he is the parent of all for he created all” (Barbauld 10). She indirectly states that we are all equal despite our different genders because God created us all. “Because it is a children’s text, Barbauld’s *Hymns* allows her to criticize British imperialist policies more boldly than she could in her writings for adults” (Reeves 133).

“Children’s writing gave Barbauld the opportunity to overturn prejudices and racism in a maturing, ‘rising,’ generation” (Reeves 128). But why would Barbauld write about her political views to an audience that must have had such little interest in political issues? In George Northcroft’s book entitled *Writing for Children*, he instructs the writer of children’s literature that “Sincerity should be the first key-note of your work. Mean what you say and say what you mean” (Northcroft 30). Sincerity is certainly one of the strongest elements in Barbauld’s *Hymns* as she addresses her views on such strong political issues as slavery. Northcroft next instructs the children’s writer to “above all, aim at simplicity” (30). A phrase such as “God is our shepherd, therefore we will follow him” or “God is our father, therefore we will love him” could not be simpler (Barbauld 12). The short, clear, sentences and phrases that Barbauld uses are simple and easy for children to understand. The common theme of nature in the *Hymns* is also something that catches the eye of children. Northcroft states that “Children are first of all interested in natural things—primarily in objects which surround them” (Northcroft 111). Barbauld uses images of nature to explain concepts. For example, “He that made the rose is more beautiful than the rose” or “The sun is glorious, but he that made the sun is more glorious than he” (Barbauld 14-15). She uses simple objects of nature to describe the concept that God is over all. Children can relate to such objects of nature because it is something that they are familiar with and have a knowledge of. Sincerity, simplicity, and the theme of nature in the *Hymns* all interest the child. The short, catchy phrases allow the child to remember and memorize the *Hymns* very easily. In fact, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who read Barbauld as a child, could still quote some of Barbauld’s children’s literature in adulthood. Not only did Barbauld hope for children to remember her literature well into adulthood, she also hoped that it would stir them to action. Northcroft states that “it is the emotional element that stirs us into action” (40). In Barbauld’s *Hymns* she uses the tender relationship between mother and child to show that God is the parent of all (or in other words that we are all equal). In doing so, Barbauld hoped that this would stir up the rising generation to action in the political issue of slavery.

William Blake must have been at least 24 years old when he read Barbauld’s *Hymns* for the first time. Even as an adult, we can see that Blake was greatly affected by Barbauld’s style and ideas. Blake’s *Songs of Innocence* (published in 1789) share similar qualities of phrasing as well as thematic elements. For example “Barbauld’s ‘I am but a little child’ in ‘Hymn I’ becomes Blake’s ‘I a child and thou a lamb’” (Kennedy). Both are short, catchy, phrases, and Blake uses the similar topic of an innocent child. It’s also possible that Blake may have recognized Barbauld’s political views in her children’s literature and realized that he could do the same. For example, in Blake’s poem “The Chimney Sweeper” from his *Songs of Innocence* he describes the chimney sweepers’ situation as slavery. The line that reads “So your chimneys I sweep and in soot I sleep” points an accusatory finger at society for enslaving him in such a way (Blake 161). The lines from Barbauld’s *Hymns* that read “Negro woman, who sittest pining in captivity, and weepest over thy sick child: though no one seeth thee, God seeth thee” are very similar to Blake’s from “The Chimney Sweeper”. They also point an accusatory finger at society for enslaving the African woman in such a way.

The next reason that Barbauld wrote specifically to children was to find hope in a rising generation. Linda M. Austin states, “That most Romantic desire, the longing for childhood, produced one of the most romantic images, the innocent child of nature” (Austin). There was a certain nostalgia for the past during “unruly times,” and authors would reminisce on their childhood, perhaps wishing they could have done better or longing for a new start. Romantic authors found relief in the rising generation and therefore began to write specifically to them, encouraging them of a brighter future. Coleridge also read Barbauld when he was just a child and it affected his later writing as well in that he wrote to encourage the rising generation to take action. In his poem “Frost at Midnight” (published in 1798) he not only reflects on his childhood but he speaks of his hope for his child. He says, “it thrills my heart with tender gladness, thus to look at thee, And think that thou shalt learn far other lore and in far other scenes” (Coleridge 577). Linda M. Austin describes this hope in the rising generation as being “a spatio-temporal condition looking forward, not backward” (Austin). Although Coleridge is reflecting back on his childhood, he is looking forward at his own child’s future. He describes this spatio-temporal condition of looking forward at his child’s future with hope as being “calm indeed!” (Coleridge 576). During the “unruly time” of war, he finds solace in his child and his child’s future.

There are many similarities in the theme and ideas of Coleridge’s “Frost at Midnight” and Barbauld’s *Hymns*. Both authors turn to children for hope of improvement in the future. They also both describe “unruly times” through nature. In *Hymns,* Barbauld describes the political turmoil of the time by relating it to a thunderstorm. For example she says, “The lightening streamed in thick flashes over the sky; the thunder growled at a distance” and she describes the hope for improvement through God teaching the rising generation when she says: “God was in the storm, and didst thou not perceive him?” (Barbauld 24-25). Similarly, Coleridge describes the “unruly times” of war in the first lines of his poem that read, “The owlet’s cry / Came loud—and hark, again! Loud as before” (Coleridge 576). The owlet’s cry is the only sound disrupting the silence within the cottage and perhaps Coleridge is using the owlet’s cry to describe the sounds of war. Just as Barbauld describes hope for improvement through God teaching children, so does Coleridge. While he is speaking to his child he says, “Who from eternity doth teach / Himself in all, and all things in himself. / Great universal teacher! He shall mould / thy spirit, and by giving make it ask” (Coleridge 577). He even describes God as a teacher who will mould his child’s spirit thus providing him with hope for a better future. Both Barbauld and Coleridge looked to God as a teacher to the rising generation and found hope in this.

The last reason that Barbauld wrote specifically to children was to teach children important lessons that would help them later in adulthood and we can see this by looking at William Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* (published in 1850). “Nineteenth-century narratives set the boundaries of childhood by individual experiences” (Austin). For example, in Book I of *The Prelude* Wordsworth recounts different experiences he had as a child and what he learned from them. When he steals the boat and sees “the rocky steep” he realizes just how small he is in the grand scheme of things (Wordsworth 462). “The world of infancy is intensely real. The things that matter to the child seem ridiculous to us; but they have a meaning and a value to him which is difficult for us to appreciate” (Northcroft 12). For Wordsworth, something as simple as “the bound of the horizon, a huge cliff” put his life into perspective, and as an adult he applies this same, simple lesson later in Book X, set during the French Revolution (Wordsworth 462). Although he may not have fully understood the lesson he learned as a child, he remembered it and learned from it as an adult. On returning to England during the French Revolution Wordsworth wrote, “well assured that I both was and must be of small worth” (Wordsworth 498). He draws on his lesson learned as a small child that he is small in the grand scheme of things and he applies it during a time of war.

Romantic authors had a specific purpose for writing to children. “Most authors saw children as bundles of possibilities” (MacLeod 143). They saw the future as something they could mold into something better through teaching the future generation. “Early nineteenth-century adults looked on childhood almost entirely as a time of preparation for adult life” (MacLeod 143). They felt that children needed to be taught to mature and to outgrow childishness. Barbauld wrote to children to teach them important adult lessons, but who is really teaching who? It is not until they reached adulthood that such authors as Wordsworth would look back and actually learn from their childhood experiences—it is the past, romantic child teaching the adult. One of the most effective ways for adults to learn is “to think back, and, using their imagination at its full stretch, try to recollect the impressions they have of their own childhood” (Northcroft 8). Although Barbauld’s *Hymns* was written for children, it taught and affected mostly adults.

Wordsworth wrote that “the Poet, gentle creature as he is / Hath like the Lover, his unruly times” and during these “unruly times” the poet would turn to their childhood and to children’s literature to learn as well as to find hope and relief (Wordsworth 456). Although Barbauld’s *Hymns in Prose for Children* ultimately affected adults during times of war and political unrest, writing specifically to children allowed her to more boldly express her political views, find hope in the future generation, and to teach children important lessons that would help them later in adulthood. These three main reasons for writing to children are all aimed at ultimately affecting adults, so perhaps Barbauld’s audience that she had in mind was actually adults. Why, then, did she not just write to adults? Sometimes, as adults, we do not like to be told what to do or how to learn, but children are humble and submissive. Through her children’s literature, Barbauld was able to reach not only a children’s audience but an adult audience that she may not have been able to reach otherwise through directly stating her views and lessons.

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