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Review of *British Children's Poetry in the Romantic Era: Verse, Riddle, and Rhyme* by Donelle Ruwe

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***British Children's Poetry in the Romantic Era: Verse, Riddle, and Rhyme.* By Donelle Ruwe. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.**

Reviewed by Angela Sorby

In the introduction to her indispensable new study, Donelle Ruwe identifies her approach as “old-fashioned,” “grounded in archival research and formalist in its aims” (3). This is true insofar as Ruwe offers a factual, and even sometimes quantitative, account of secular children’s poetry as it emerged in the long eighteenth century. However, “old-fashioned” does not mean “irrelevant.” *British Children's Poetry from the Romantic Era* paints a much-needed picture of a period that has been overshadowed by the so-called Golden Age, filling gaps and correcting misconceptions as it engages with work by figures such as Adelaide O’Keefe, the Taylor sisters, Sara Coleridge, and William Roscoe. Generations of scholars, from Harvey Darton to Morag Styles, have embraced a progressive vision of children’s poetry, assuming that Romantic conventions liberated young readers from the straitjacket of eighteenth-century didactic verse. While Ruwe does not fully overturn such assumptions, she does complicate them by rethinking questions of genre (What was children’s poetry?), gender (Who was labeled didactic, and who was hailed as natural?), and

canonicity (Why were certain authors forgotten?). Ruwe’s meticulous research underscores the ways in which Romantic ideologies could be limiting—to poets, and to the critics who write about them.

The book’s first substantial chapter, “Reading Romantic-Era Children’s Verse,” outlines the conventions that organized poems written for child readers between 1780 and 1835. Because most of the children’s poetry produced in this era was didactic and formulaic, critics have often focused instead on poets, such as Blake, who were inspired by childhood as a concept rather than by child readers. However, instead of dismissing didactic poetry as beneath serious study, Ruwe constructs a useful taxonomy of the genre’s structural elements. Basic data are presented in a chart that lists British children’s poetry books in chronological order, including date of publication, the number of poems in the book, the average number of lines per poem, the percentage of poems written in iambic pentameter, and so on. Ruwe then unpacks some elements that these poems have in common, focusing especially on different types of moral closure, including “closure by aphorism,” “closure by reflection,” and “closure by consequences.” Charts and nomenclatures underscore Ruwe’s key point that Romantic-era children’s poetry was not “Romantic” in the Wordsworthian sense. Rather, poets drew on the rationalist legacy of John Locke to address children not as holy innocents but rather as capable and culpable young people.

The book’s second chapter, “Myths of Origin,” considers the curious be-

ginnings and long afterlife of *Original Poems for Infant Minds* (1804), an enormously popular work generally attributed to Ann and Jane Taylor. While acknowledging the importance of the text, Ruwe systematically addresses a numbered series of misconceptions that have emerged during the process of its canonization. For instance, the first section is headed: “Myth #1: *Original Poems for Infant Minds*, like a bolt of lightning from the heavens, was *sui generis*.” Her overarching aim—as the framing of Myth #1 suggests—is to question the reigning ideologies of Romantic genius and spontaneity. However, probably the most important function that the chapter serves is simply to put the record straight. *Original Poems*, as it turns out, had multiple authors, went through multiple editions, was commissioned by the publisher, and should not be read (at least not by scholars) as a unified text. Precisely because *Original Poems* was so influential, setting conventions and shaping the market, it is important not to romanticize its “originality” and to understand its complex origins.

One piece from *Original Poems*, Ann Taylor’s “My Mother,” gets its own chapter (chapter 3) in Ruwe’s study, because it anticipated the sentimental style of the mid- to late nineteenth century. Tracing the ways in which the poem circulated—often with its “moral closure” cut or amended—Ruwe shows how romanticized domestic images made their slow ascent in the popular imagination. Taylor’s “My Mother” contrasts instructively with O’Keefe’s “poetry of active learning,” which is the focus of chapter 4.

Unlike Taylor, who manipulates her readers’ emotions, O’Keefe is concerned with using natural settings to teach rational, moral lessons. Rather than holding her back, O’Keefe’s educational impulses ultimately lead her to compose the first English-language children’s verse-novel, *A Trip to the Coast*, which Ruwe lauds as “the first, and perhaps only, children’s poetic work of the long eighteenth century to successfully embed the rational precept of active learning within an active form” (138). Taken together, these two chapters suggest that excising explicit didacticism from children’s poetry did not always result in superior aesthetic productions.

Continuing the theme of Romanticism and its discontents, Ruwe’s fifth chapter explores Sara Coleridge’s “handmade literacies” in the context of a utilitarian tradition that used rhyme (not always framed as poetry) to teach lessons to children. The chapter begins broadly, exploring the study guides, memory-aids, and riddle books, before turning to Coleridge’s vast archive, but Coleridge quickly steals the show. Here is a poet—Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s youngest daughter, no less—who produced an archive of verse-cards and rhymes in the shadow of Romanticism, struggling to conform to the established conventions of children’s poetry while also, impossibly, trying to express herself as a suffering individual. As Ruwe points out, children’s poetry of this era did not make space for interiority because it was so focused on the intersubjective act of teaching.

The case of Coleridge made me wonder, though, about the Romantic

construction of childhood and its afterlives in Golden Age children's literature. Ruwe's argument, which is hammered home in her final chapter on canonization and "The Butterfly's Ball," seems predicated on a narrowly Wordsworthian definition of the Romantic; for instance, she asserts that "whenever a poetic depiction of children adheres to a Romantic ideology of the child, the poem is essentially plot-less. The Romanticized child is frozen in time as "the other" . . . and this child is more likely to die (and thus remain endlessly young) than to mature" (161). However, if Wordsworth was Romantic, so was (to take one example) Friedrich Froebel, whose kindergarten lyrics and manipulatives are reminiscent of O'Keefe's active learning model. Granted, Ruwe is battling a discourse propagated by giants such as Harvey Darton, who advanced, as she puts it, "a master narrative" in which didactic women writers such as O'Keefe were cast as humorless moralists impeding the liberating progress of Romantic rebels such as Blake. But while Ruwe's defense of didacticism functions as a valuable corrective, the primary texts paint a murkier and more interesting picture of how children's poetry developed unevenly, channeling competing Romantic discourses that do not easily resolve into a single Romantic ideology.

That said, *British Children's Poetry in the Romantic Era* is a valuable study of a poetic tradition that has long been rendered invisible by the reigning Romantic aesthetic. As Ruwe demonstrates, children's poems of this era cannot be seen as miniature

copies of what was being produced for adults. The poets examined here saw children as serious moral human beings, not as fey metaphors. Juvenile verse-forms followed their own timeline, developed their own conventions, and deserve critical analysis on their own terms. The book is written in a clear yet exploratory prose style, never straying far from its sources as it allows them to guide its lines of inquiry. By articulating and naming numerous poetic strategies and subgenres, *British Children's Poetry* is productively utilitarian, offering teachers and scholars a rich taxonomic vocabulary. On a grander scale, it is also potentially field-changing, as it challenges readers to discard old myths and to reimagine the origins of British children's poetry.

*Angela Sorby has published widely on children's literature and culture; her latest book is Over the River and Through the Wood: An Anthology of Nineteenth-Century American Children's Poetry, co-edited with Karen Kilcup. She is a professor of English at Marquette University.*



*Discourses of Postcolonialism in Contemporary British Children's Literature.* By Blanka Grzegorzczuk. New York: Routledge, 2015.

Reviewed by Clare Bradford

As Blanka Grzegorzczuk notes, scholarly work on the postcolonial significances of contemporary British literature for children and young people has lagged behind postcolonial investigations of the literatures of other Anglophone nations, notably Australia, Canada, and New Zealand.