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Women Poets, Child Readers

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*Women Poets, Child Readers**Angela Sorby*

Almost all nineteenth-century women poets – from Lucretia Davidson to Emily Dickinson, from Frances E. W. Harper to Charlotte Perkins Gilman – wrote at least some verses for children.¹ Why? In part, there were cultural pressures at work: women faced obstacles in most professional fields, but writing for children was viewed as acceptable and even natural. As Sarah Josepha Hale put it, “the department of Juvenile literature is peculiarly appropriate to female writers” who wish to be “useful to others” rather than “shining themselves.”² Writing children’s poetry could be understood as a natural outgrowth of maternal nurturing instead of as a form self-expression. Moreover, writing for children also afforded women poets creative advantages, pressing them to produce poems that were intensely audience-oriented and that were shaped – formally and thematically – by the (perceived) needs of their readers.

In 1839 M. Gurney (who calls herself “A Mother”) prefaced her *Rhymes for My Children* with an account of its origins that made her attention to readers explicit:

The writer of the simple “Rhymes” which it contains, intended them solely for the use of her own children, to whom she wished to convey, with amusement, such rhymes as their tender minds were capable of receiving. As they seem to have answered the purpose for which they were designed, she is induced to offer them to other parents and the little inhabitants of their nurseries.³

Gurney’s preface resembles many other antebellum women’s paratexts in its modest insistence on the private roots, and hence the legitimacy, of her published work. More significantly for my purposes, her orientation is audience-based; it is invested in a feedback loop that includes her children, who apparently helped her verify the worth and use-value of her rhymes. Indeed, as I will argue, pedagogical relationships organized women’s

juvenile verse formally and functionally, and these relationships generated intense, sustained engagement with questions of interdependence, autonomy, and power.

According to Virginia Jackson's influential historicization of lyric reading, nineteenth-century poetry reflected an eclectic set of social practices and expectations.⁴ Verses, including verses for children, did not necessarily circulate as author-centered expressive lyrics; instead, they were called ditties, "bits of talk," songs, jingles, or rhymes. Gurney's insistence on the primacy of audience over author, then, is not just sentimental self-deprecation; it reflects a structural feature of children's literature – which is, as Peter Hunt has argued, the only major literary genre defined by its audience.⁵ Even lexically, then, the idea of women's juvenile poetry resists lyricization, because it posits not a single self-expressive author but two people, locked in a socially contingent relationship with one another: the adult woman and the child.

To tell the story of women's juvenile poetry in America chronologically, with attention to major authors and works, would be to reinscribe the process of lyricization in ways that are inappropriate to the material. Instead, in this essay, I will focus on the ways that children's poems emerged from, and also helped to forge, pedagogical relationships that complicate and enrich the bonds between readers and writers. Two distinct types of poetry can be seen through this lens: poetry that reflects and promotes the interdependence of women and children, and poetry that idealizes childhood autonomy. I will thus traverse the nineteenth century twice: first, I will follow the thread of what I'll call "interdependent" children's verse, as practiced by many poets but explored here through the work of Lydia Sigourney, Lucy Larcom, and Sarah Piatt. Next, I will trace a second thread of what I'll call "self-governing" children's verse – again widely practiced, but represented here by Eliza Follen, Emilie Poulsson, Mary Mapes Dodge, and Agnes Lee. Taken together, these two discourses index issues that fueled women's imaginations throughout the nineteenth century: What is childhood, and what is adulthood? Are people more free as adults (per Locke) or as children (per Rousseau)? What is inside, to use Gurney's terms, the "tender minds" of children, and what forms of language are "peculiarly appropriate" to them? Children's poetry was an expanding concern in the nineteenth century, and it gave women a chance to respond to these questions, not just through abstract philosophical musings, but through a medium that could shape the lived experiences of readers.

Interdependent Poetry

Lydia Sigourney knew what was inside the tender minds of children – namely, whatever mothers put there. In her *Letters to Mothers*, she makes this point, using language that blurs the line between writing and child-rearing: “Write what you will, upon the printless tablet, with your wand of love . . . Now, you have over a newborn immortal, almost that degree of power which the mind exercises over the body.”⁶ Interdependent juvenile poetry assumes an intimate and constitutive connection between parent, child, and text. Even as the writer (with her “wand of love”) exerts sentimental power over the child, the tabula rasa child also empowers the mother/writer, who finally has something to write about, or on. Interdependent poetry, as my examples from Sigourney, Larcom, and Piatt will show, generally has the following characteristics: 1) its texts are, to use U.C. Knoepflamcher’s term, cross-written for both adults and children – often in “household editions” aimed at entire families; 2) it assumes that the child must be redeemed, spiritually or psychologically, by the adult; and 3) because the adult has “almost that degree of power which the mind exercises over the body,” interdependent poetry often imagines the child as a construct and plays, quite self-consciously, with the porous boundaries between writers, readers, and listeners.⁷

Lydia Sigourney’s 1835 *Poems for Children* opens with a poem that was cross-published the same year as a hymn in a hymnal.⁸ A fictive child poses the italicized title/question *Who made me?*, and the mother’s voice replies:

He, who spread out the sky,
That broad blue canopy;
 Who made the glorious sun,
The moon to shine by night,
The stars with eyes so bright,
 *He made thee, little one.*⁹

Sigourney’s evangelical (and patriarchal) message is clear: God makes children. However, the preface to *Poems for Children* posits a more matri-focal origin story:

It is believed that poetry might be made an important assistant to early education . . . Feeling and Fancy, put forth their young perceptions, even before they are expected, and Poetry, more successfully than the severer sciences, bends a spray to their embrace, or a prop for their aspirings . . . It is the natural ally of the mother.¹⁰

As in *Letters to Mothers*, Sigourney stresses that poetry can mold the child's heart while also encouraging the emergence of individual ambitions, or "aspirings." The *tabula rasa* child might get its body from God, but its powers and its sense of self come from its mother.

"Who Made Me?" is directed at children who are, as the headnote to the hymnal version puts it, "past the stage of prattling infancy," but who can presumably not yet read. It is thus written to be voiced – and as a voiced text, the fiction of dialogism breaks down. "Who made me?" becomes a question posed by the mother-reader in a voice that answers itself, implicitly locating the Creator's omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence in her own person. This is not, however, a romantic genius fantasy, because by the time the refrain comes ("*He made thee, little one*") Sigourney's presence no longer registers. Instead, the poem works as what Mary Louise Kete has called "a utopian promise of emotional cohesion which dissolves disruptive differences into amiable unity."¹¹ One voice (the sentimental mother's) encloses all other voices (the child's, the poet's, God's). What matters is the relationship that the poem, not the poem's author, forges.

As "Who Made Me?" nurtures the child through language, the poem also satisfies what Sigourney sees as a mother's central need: the need to see the child, always living under the threat of early death, as eternal, not contingent. All of the metaphors in the first stanza – sky, sun, moon, and stars – are fixed features of nature. Cross-writing through mothers to children and through children to mothers, Sigourney provides a script that posits the child as safe from the ravages of time, whether it ultimately lives, dies, or disappears into adulthood. Ultimately, the poem (like the stars) is fixed, and among the things it "fixes" is the perilous relationship between the mother and the child.

Interdependent poetry also allows women poets to explore the notion of childhood persisting into adulthood, although in ways that are more pragmatic than romantic because of the imperatives of the genre. In the preface to *Childhood Songs* (1874), Lucy Larcom makes her assumptions about interdependence explicit: "In naming these little poems 'Childhood Songs,' one especial thought was that not all of them were written from the child's point of view, but as one may write who in mature life retains a warm sympathy with childhood, through a vivid memory of her own."¹² For Larcom, readers are always multiple ages at once, and so she cross-writes: some of her poems are for small children; some are more sophisticated, for older readers; and many, including the beautiful opening poem, "In Time's Swing," are clearly for adults and children.

“In Time’s Swing” begins as an apostrophe, spoken by a child to Father Time:

Father Time, your footsteps go
 Lightly as the falling snow.
 In your swing I’m sitting, see!
 Push me softly; one, two, three,
 Twelve times only. Like a sheet
 Spreads the snow beneath my feet.
 Singing merrily, let me swing
 Out of winter into spring.¹³

As the poem continues, however, the voice ages, and the speaker grows ambivalent about the passage of time:

Frosty-bearded Father Time,
 Stop your footfall on the rime!
 Hard your push, your hand is rough;
 You have swung me long enough.
 “Nay, no stopping,” say you? Well,
 Some of your best stories tell,
 While you swing me – gently, do! –
 From the Old Year to the New.

Who, exactly, is trapped on the swing? The speaker is not so much a fixed age as a series of ages; indeed, in the final metaphor, the child who is growing older swings paradoxically out of an old year and into a young one. In Sigourney’s poetry, child mortality always hovers as a threat; in Larcom’s later (but still interdependent) verse, the child’s mortality is prefigured by the inevitable and progressive “death” of year after year. At the same time, though, the swinging meter of the poem frames the “best stories” as a product of precisely this intergenerational, interdependent dynamic. In many of Larcom’s poems, tension and pathos are created as adults see or remember themselves as former children even as they address readers who are (still) children.

Sarah Piatt’s *Poems in Company With Children* (1877) pushes the interdependent mode into even more self-conscious territory, interrogating the very foundations of children’s poetry and the relationships that organize it. Paula Bennett, Piatt’s twentieth-century editor, insists that her poems are *about*, not *for*, children.¹⁴ However, in the tradition in which Piatt is writing – one that deliberately mixes child and adult audiences and voices – it is precisely this blurry distinction (*about* or *for*?) that interests Piatt. Piatt’s speakers are often acutely aware of their creative powers; but, unlike

Sigourney's republican mothers, Piatt's postbellum speakers are not emboldened by the ideology of Christian sentimentalism. Zachary Finch has pointed out that Piatt's mother-child dialogues follow the pattern of sentimental education poems, but at the same time make "a space that has become dangerously unmoored from the moral certainty of antebellum sentimentalism."¹⁵ Piatt loves her children, but she also knows she is using them for her own creative (and sometimes selfish) purposes.

So are these children's poems? In the very first poem in her collection, "A Book About the Baby," Piatt wrestles self-consciously with the question of apostrophe versus address:

If I could write a book for you
 What a pretty book it would be! –
 And the prettiest things would all be true.
 But *can* I? Ah, you shall see.¹⁶

This poem was first published in an 1877 issue of *Wide Awake: An Illustrated Magazine for Young People*, so its (part-)child audience was structurally in place. Still, Piatt wonders: *can I write a book for you?* Interdependence, and the power of mothers (and poets), preoccupies her as a problem. *Poems in Company With Children* suggests that Piatt is drawing on the authority that "real" children were believed to add to nineteenth-century women's verse. Unlike Gurney and Sigourney, however, Piatt questions her own authority. She is not sure that her relationship with her children (and the poet's relationship with the reader) is like that of a mind and a body. Rather, her poems admit that cross-writing might produce not a single, unified reader/listener pair, but, rather, half-failed attempts at communication.

That said, Piatt remains a compelling practitioner of interdependent poetry precisely because, like Sigourney, she takes children seriously as readers who can share profound questions, and poems, with adults. This was increasingly rare in the 1870s, as it became unfashionable to discuss death with children. In his review of *Poems in Company With Children*, William Dean Howells complains about Piatt's morbidity:

Nothing is more noticeable in children than their propensity to play at funerals and grave-digging and dissolutions; but when they are caught at these dismal dramas, they are very properly and very promptly stopped, with more or less abhorrence on the part of the spectator; and it is not good art, however true, to celebrate in verse for children the caprices and fancies of these infantile undertakers.¹⁷

Howells assumes that "infantile undertakers" are making light of a topic that they don't understand, but in Piatt's poems, death is properly shared

with children because *nobody* understands it and yet nobody is exempt from it.

Moreover, in the interdependent mode, the function of a poem is to meet the mother's psychological needs as well as the child's, because the two are assumed to be inextricably linked. Thus, for instance, "Five and Two" begins as a poem addressed to a child:

You have cherry-trees to climb,
 Lambs to look at, doves to coo;
 I can kiss you any time;
 Butterflies will fly from you.
 You are five and they are two.¹⁸

Those who "are two" turn out to be the child's dead siblings who (ambiguously) either died at two years old, or are two in number. Rather than reassuring the child, as Sigourney might do, Piatt can only conclude:

They are dead. This is the most
 I can know of them, ah me!
 . . . No, I never saw a ghost. –
 Nor an angel. There must be
 Somewhere things I cannot see.

I would argue that this is children's poetry precisely because it uses the tools of sentimentality – what Sigourney pictures as a "wand of love" – to make a space that, if it has become "dangerously unmoored" from certainty, nevertheless forges a bond between a mother and a child. By refusing to be omniscient, Piatt's speaker can participate in exchanges that are rooted in deeply secular and psychologically complex ideas about what counts as child's play (including ghosts and angels) and what counts as children's poetry.

To return to the big picture: Many, if not most, women poets working in the sentimental mode wrote interdependent poetry for child and adult readers, and it is tempting to see the conflation of women, mothers, and child readers as a symptom of restrictive and infantilizing separate spheres of ideologies. Karen Sanchez-Eppler suggests that nineteenth-century children worked as test-cases for liberal democratic ideals, since some of them (white males) would grow into autonomous citizens and some (people of color, girls) would not.¹⁹ Writers who explored childhood were thus exploring how, and whether, non-autonomous subjects were fully human. However, Anna Mae Duane has questioned the assumption that dependence is always problematic: "If scholars are to do the work of engaging people whose experiences necessitate allowing for authentic

interdependence, rather than an illusory independence, whose literature speaks with mediated voices rather than through romantic authorship, we can no longer stand on the crumbling ground that assigns partial, dependent, mediated subjectivity *only* to childhood."²⁰ Women poets were often closely identified with children, not least because – as Sanchez-Eppler points out – they could never be legal, voting adults. At the same time, this position gave them a vantage point from which to write verses that articulate vulnerabilities – to death and to time – that ultimately make all humans, as Duane insists, interdependent.

Self-Governing Poetry

Interdependent poetry emerged gradually in response to the many needs and interests of writers, parents, and children. Self-governing American children's verse, by contrast, had an inventor with an agenda: Eliza Lee Follen. As my examples from Follen, Emilie Poulsson, Mary Mapes Dodge, and Agnes Lee will show, such verses tend to share the following traits: 1) they are written directly to children, not cross-written; 2) they assume that the child is naturally redeemed; 3) they valorize non-teleological play; and 4) they imagine that adults should not – or at least, should not *appear to* – exercise too much direct power over children.

In 1833, Eliza Lee Cabot Follen published *Little Songs*, a collection of unpretentious rhymes that became, as *Harper's Magazine* put it in 1875, "childhood classics . . . almost as well-known among children as any of the ancient melodies of Mother Goose herself."²¹ Follen's poems endured because they embodied qualities that came to be associated with childhood: playfulness and the need to be isolated from – or even *protected* from – the adult world. When Howells complained about Piatt's "infantile undertakers," he was marking a discourse of age-appropriateness that was commonplace by the 1870s: the notion that children's texts, spaces, and activities should be free of what were defined as adult concerns. When Follen published *Little Songs* these assumptions were new, and even strange, but her book established a set of assumptions that would, by the end of the century, dominate most children's verse.

In Follen's preface, she appeals directly to children: "The little folks must decide whether the book is entertaining. To them I present my little volume, with the earnest hope that it will receive their approbation. If children love to lisp my rhymes, while parents find no fault in them, I ask no higher praise."²² For Sigourney and other interdependent poets, the relationship between parent and child is the *raison d'être* for the poem,

but in Follen the parent's role recedes: her "little" volume is for "little" folks, who will (she hopes) love them enough to voice them. Its form thus follows its function, and its function is aesthetic pleasure. Follen had helped produce the American edition of Friedrich Schiller's work, and she was profoundly influenced by his theory that children must acquire a taste for beauty (which reconciles the sensuous and the rational) before they can emerge as fully moral beings.²³

Toy-books were nothing new on the American market, but Follen's *Little Songs* was different because it was not a purely commercial venture. Indeed, *Little Songs* is just as didactic, in its way, as Sigourney's *Poems for Children*, but more covertly. While Sigourney's poems bind children and mothers together, Follen's stress children's autonomy. They are didactic not because they teach moral lessons directly, but because they steer children into a circumscribed and ideologically freighted space – the space of "childhood innocence" – and keep them there. For Follen, the child is born good and is only corrupted by outside influences; thus, while mothers can promote development, they are neither better nor more powerful than the child him- or herself.

Little Songs begins with a child alone, in a garden:

In little Annie's garden
Grew all sorts of posies;
There were pinks and mignonettes
And tulips, and roses.²⁴

No parent figure ever appears; rather, "every day" little Annie goes to play "in her own pretty garden." In the volume's second poem, "The New Moon," a mother appears, but she is the *object* of her child's clever and original (because innocent) "teaching":

Dear mother, how pretty
The moon looks tonight!
She was never so cunning before;
Her two little horns
Are so sharp and so bright,
I hope she'll not grow any more.²⁵

This is not a Lockean object-lesson about the moon; rather, it displays the power and value of the child's imaginative self-expression. The child is his or her own final authority – and indeed, very remarkably for a child's book from this period, God doesn't appear even once to steal the child's clouds of glory.

Follen's romantic assumptions affect the form and language of her poetry. Instead of positing a poem as a shared conversation between an

adult and a child – with rewards for both – she tailors her words and syntax to her readers’ “natural” (primitive, innocent) life-stage:

Swing swong,
Here we go;
Sing a song,
Hurrah ho!²⁶

Compared to Larcom’s “In Time’s Swing,” the swinging here is not intergenerational – and neither is the language. Indeed, by distinguishing child and adult diction Follen often ends up depicting child-speech as closer to pet-speech. Thus, in one poem, little Fanny and Lucy talk to a sheep (“How’s your mama?”), to which the sheep replies “ba-a!,” and in another poem a child tries to teach his dog, Trusty, the A-B-Cs.²⁷ The animal noises in *Little Songs* mark Follen’s distance from Calvinists and evangelical Christians, who tended to take children seriously because their souls were in peril; here, children are natural, but sometimes perhaps trivialized as they are lumped with other cute but loud creatures. Indeed, Follen’s most famous contribution to American poetry is the “Three Little Kittens,” a folk-rhyme that she transcribed and modified. Are these mitten-washing, pie-eating kittens stand-ins for human children, or are they actual animals? Their “speech” suggests that they are both; first they make animal sounds, then they segue seamlessly into child sounds: “Purr-r, purr-r, purr-r / O let us have the pie.”²⁸

Follen’s aim, of course, is not trivialization but age-appropriateness: *Little Songs* is meant to appeal to children, so that they will want to “lisp” it themselves. Formally, Follen’s poems are scaled to fit young children – a strategy that becomes necessary only when children are imagined not as inferior or less-developed beings but as agents with their “own” bodies, rights, needs, and words. Follen’s assumptions here anticipate later ideas about children’s rights, and no doubt emerged from her oft-articulated dedication to universal human rights and her involvement in the antislavery movement.²⁹ There can be no question – as there is in Sigourney, Larcom, and Piatt – about the extent to which *Little Songs* are children’s poems: if anything, they engage in a utopian individualist fantasy that a child’s garden (of flowers, of verses) can be entirely separate from the sullied world of adulthood.

After the Civil War, Follen’s vision of self-governing childhood became a mainstream assumption, less utopian and more infused with the forces of consumer capitalism. Children needed their own gardens, but more importantly, they needed their own market-niche, their own magazines,

and their own toys. Janet Gray describes this transition in children's poetry as a retreat, from "childhood as a time of introduction to physical, social, and theological dangers" to childhood as a space of protection "from danger through deferral of contact with the real."³⁰ While I agree that the broad trend in women's poetry for children was toward more demographically targeted juvenile verses, and that this reflects the evolving market economy, it is not clear that playing with a toy, or reading a poem about a toy, or reading a poem *as* a toy, necessarily defers the real. Instead, ludic or even nonsensical poems for children often reflect the thinking of pioneering educators such as Susan Blow, who argued in 1908 that play constitutes a child's reality.³¹ As Blow put it, "The value of work is that it subordinates the self; the value of play is that it creates the self."³² For Blow, play is ideally process-oriented rather than aimed at some productive goal; this, ironically, is what makes it so productive.

To encourage play, the inheritors of Follen's self-governing aesthetic drew on folk motifs and on an emerging proto-modernist preference for concrete images. Emilie Poulsson's 1889 *Finger-Plays for Nursery and Kindergarten*, for instance, combines poems, illustrations, music, and children's physical bodies. Poulsson reprises Follen's "garden" motif, but with a twist; as the child recites or sings, "In my little garden bed, / raked so nicely over," she first cups her hands to make a bed, then rakes the ground with her "rake"-shaped fingers. Poulsson explains that the effect is not just amusing, but productive: "By their judicious and early use, the development of strength and flexibility in the tiny lax fingers may be assisted, and dormant thought may receive its first awakening call through the motions which interpret as well as illustrate the phase of life or activity presented by the words."³³ In other words, the poem's meaning is realized only when the child *makes it real* with her own hands.³⁴

At its best, self-governing poetry allows readers to embrace poetry's mediating materiality. In her book *Rhymes and Jingles* (1874), for instance, Mary Mapes Dodge uses "The Alphabet" to call attention to – precisely – *the alphabet* as a series of lines and loops. Dodge thus modifies the (old) pedagogical tradition of the alphabet poem; instead of turning the letters into, say, animals or emblems, she emphasizes their qualities as print. Her alphabet concludes:

W ought
 To be called double V;

 X is a cross,
 As you plainly can see;

Y is just formed
Like a V on a stand;

Z is the crookedest
Thing in the land!³⁵

X is not a Christian cross, but literally two intersecting lines; its importance lies in its shape, not its moral or meaning. The poem is self-governing because it embraces the self-directed, process-oriented logic of play, rather than the other-directed, message-oriented tendencies of interdependent verse.

In other poems in *Rhymes and Jingles*, however, trivialization creeps in; for instance, when Dodge uses baby-talk:

Poor little Toddlekins,
All full o' skeeter-bites –
Bodder him awful,
Can't even sleep o' nights!³⁶

On the one hand, the poem pretends to speak in a child's voice, with a child's diction. On the other hand, the baby's discomfort emanates from an outside perspective that makes light of the baby's suffering. "Toddlekins" is a pet-name, and here – as in some Follen poems – the child veers closer to pet status than to human subjectivity. Freed from the need for sentimental salvation, Dodge's children are less imperiled, but also risk becoming merely entertaining, or even laughable.

Self-governing poetry is, of course, still poetry written for children living in the hierarchical power structure of the family. As Richard Brodhead has argued, nineteenth-century reformers advocated self-governance as a form of "disciplinary intimacy" meant to help (or force) children to internalize hegemonic race, class, gender, and economic relations through bonds of love rather than through corporal punishment.³⁷ However, perhaps the practical orientation of nineteenth-century women poets – who were so often working on the ground as educators and mothers – can offer perspective: capitalist hegemony was a real threat in the nineteenth century, but so was the threat (especially to girls) of illiteracy. Must education always be a form of domination? This was not a settled question in the nineteenth century; indeed, it is one of the major questions that women poets for children continually explored.

Moreover, even though women were often subtly pressured to write juvenile verses, it seems evident that their work for children, like other marginal genres, enabled them to write past the sometimes stultifying

conventions of the mainstream “poetess” mode. While I hesitate to recapitulate the narrative in which all the best nineteenth-century poetry is best because it anticipates modernism, it is true that children’s poetry, with its simple (even “primitive”) and functional forms, helped craft an emerging modernist aesthetic even as it pursued – quite effectively – its own aesthetic aims and cultural functions. Women poets – including Emily Dickinson, whose cross-writing practices deserve more attention – were at the fore of this aesthetic, since they so frequently chose (or were strongly encouraged) to work with children in mind.

In closing, then, I want to examine the work of Agnes Lee, whose one children’s poetry collection, *The Round Rabbit*, appeared in 1898, just before Lee made the leap from juvenile to adult verse (a line that had been codified by the end of the century), from *St. Nicholas* (edited by Mary Mapes Dodge) to *Poetry* (edited by Harriet Monroe). Just as Piatt thematizes the reciprocal, interdependent perspectives of mother and child, so Lee takes, as her primary theme, the self-governing time and space of childhood. Almost every poem in *The Round Rabbit* hinges on a child who misunderstands, or objects to, the laws of physics: a “little man of Michigan” grows bigger as the child approaches him, changing her visual perspective; a clock strikes “three ones in a row,” suggesting that it’s always one o’clock; a child imagines that when her mother was small, she herself must have been even smaller and thus perhaps a doll. Lee’s poems do not condescend to a child who makes such observations; rather, they draw on an aesthetic that privileges unexpected angles of vision. Lee’s speakers frequently fix on the concreteness of language, as in “Sometime”:

When I ask my father when
 We shall leave the town again,
 Where the houses hide the sky,
 “Sometime” is his one reply.
 . . .
 And I wonder where they are,
 Sometime lands, so dim and far;
 For to wait I scarce know how!
 Oh! is SOMETIME never Now?³⁸

Rather than simply delivering a message, the words on the page call attention to themselves as words: what is the relationship between “sometime” and time, between the adult’s sense of language and the child’s? The child refuses to admit abstraction, imagining “sometime lands,” insisting that there are no ideas but in things.

In another poem, “The Moon in the Pond,” a speaker allows space to collapse, so that the sky falls:

Pebbles light as little kisses
To the water moon I throw,
And in pleasant, cool abysses
Sinking down the sky they go.³⁹

The child depicted does not necessarily literally believe that the pond and the sky are one, but the conventions of self-governing poetry allow such leaps, without the encumbrance of metaphorical or apostrophic frames. Lee’s poems insist that the reality of childhood, while different from that of adulthood, can produce specific effects and images that are less available to poets writing for adults.

Childhood, as imagined by Agnes Lee, is a valuable and generative life-stage defined by process-oriented play. However, throughout the nineteenth century, children’s literature was dismissed as a “minor” genre. Thus, in the headnote to Lee’s selections in the 1919 modernist anthology *Our Poets of Today*, Howard Cook remarks genially: “While in Boston Miss Lee wrote verses for children that appeared in *St. Nicholas* and other juvenile periodicals, and these were gathered together and published by Copeland and Day under the title of ‘The Round Rabbit.’ Then work of a more serious sort from her pen began to appear in magazines.”⁴⁰ One could conclude that *The Round Rabbit* prepared Lee to write modernist verse of a “more serious sort.” I contend, however, that *The Round Rabbit* was itself serious (not just because it was proto-modernist), and that, throughout the nineteenth century, women poets understood that writing for children was – like other forms of writing, and like mothering and teaching – real work.

When they wrote interdependent poetry, poets such as Sigourney, Locom, and Piatt generated complex, cross-written poems for children who (they assumed) needed to be spiritually awakened by adults. When they wrote self-governing poetry, poets such as Follen, Poulsson, Dodge, and Lee produced concrete, simple poems for children who (they assumed) thought concretely and needed to learn through play. In identifying two through-lines in the history of children’s poetry, I do not want to over-state the division: many poets wrote both interdependent and self-governing poems. Moreover, all children are simultaneously autonomous and dependent to varying degrees, and all children’s literature is co-created by a mix of adult writers, editors, publishers, illustrators, parents, teachers, and child readers. By capturing and using the genre’s shifting, intersubjective power

dynamics, nineteenth-century women writers produced an important body of collaborative, popular – and yes, serious – poetry.

Notes

1. Space constraints prohibit a comprehensive list of nineteenth-century women's poetry for children, but some of the better-known names include – in addition to those mentioned above – Louisa May Alcott, Alice and Phoebe Cary, Lydia Maria Child, Rose Terry Cooke, Mary McNeill Fenollosa, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Hannah Flagg Gould, Sarah Josepha Hale, Helen Hunt Jackson, Sarah Orne Jewett, E. Pauline Johnson, Louise Chandler Moulton, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Lizette Woodworth Reese, Laura E. Richards, Harriet Prescott Spofford, Margaret Vandergrift, Anna Bartlett Warner, Anna Maria Wells, and Ella Wheeler Wilcox. All appear in Karen Kilcup and Angela Sorby (eds.), *Over the River and Through the Wood* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).
2. Sarah Josepha Hale, "Literary Miscellany," *Ladies Magazine* 1 (July 1828), 336.
3. [M. Gurney], "A Mother", *Rhymes for My Children* (New York: Colman and Collins, Keese & Co., 1839), 1.
4. See Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).
5. See Peter Hunt, "Children's Literature," *Keywords for Children's Literature*, Philip Nel and Lissa Paul (eds.), (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 43.
6. Lydia Sigourney, *Letters to Mothers* (Hartford: Hudson & Skinner, 1838), 10.
7. For more on cross-writing, see U.C. Knoepfmacher and Mitzi Myers, "From the Editors: 'Cross-Writing' and the Reconceptualizing of Children's Literary Studies," *Children's Literature* 25.1 (1997), vii–xvii.
8. Lydia Sigourney, "Who Made Me?," *The Mother's Nursery Songs*, Thomas Hastings (ed.), (New York: John P. Haven, 1835), 43.
9. Lydia Sigourney, "Who Made Me?" *Poems for Children* (Hartford: Canfield & Robins, 1836), 13.
10. Sigourney, *Poems for Children*, 5–6.
11. Mary Louise Kete, *Sentimental Collaborations* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 105.
12. Lucy Larcom, *Childhood Songs* (Boston: James Osgood, 1874), vii.
13. Larcom, "In Time's Swing," *Childhood Songs*, 19.
14. See Paula Bernat Bennett, "Introduction," *Palace-Burner: The Selected Poetry of Sarah Piatt* (Champagne-Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2005), xxxii.
15. Zachary Finch, "The Ethics of Postbellum Melancholy in the Poetry of Sarah Piatt," *ESQ* 58:3 (2012), 416.
16. Sarah Piatt, "A Book About the Baby," *Poems in Company with Children* (Boston: D. Lothrop, 1877), 11.

17. William Dean Howells, "Some Recent Volumes of Verse," *The Atlantic Monthly* 41 (May 1878), 632.
18. Piatt, "Five and Two," *Poems in Company with Children*, 108.
19. See Karen Sanchez-Eppler, *Dependent States: The Child's Part in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
20. Anna Mae Duane, "Introduction," *The Children's Table* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013), 6.
21. "Editor's Literary Record," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 50 (1875), 601.
22. Eliza Lee Follen, "Preface," *Little Songs* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1856 [1833]).
23. See Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, "Sentimental Aesthetics," *American Literature* 76:3 (2004), 495–523.
24. Follen, "Annie's Garden," *Little Songs*, 9.
25. Follen, "The New Moon," *Little Songs*, 11.
26. Follen, "Swing Swong," *Little Songs*, 65.
27. Follen "Nothing But Ba-a," *Little Songs*, 37; Follen, "Trusty Learning A B C," *Little Songs*, 50–51.
28. Follen, "The Three Little Kittens," *Little Songs*, 92.
29. Follen edited a volume of lectures that addresses the issue of human rights at length; one passage declares, for example: "The essence of right is liberty, that is, the power of man to be determined in his conduct by his own choice. It belongs to each human being, from the first moment of his existence to the last, whether he be able to exercise it or not." See Eliza Lee Follen (ed.), *The Works of Charles Follen* (Boston: Hillyard Gray, 1841), 262.
30. Janet Gray, *Race and Time* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994), 203.
31. See Barbara Beatty, *Preschool Education in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).
32. Susan Blow, *Educational Issues in the Kindergarten* (New York: D. Appleton, 1908), 247.
33. Emilie Poulsson, "The Little Plant," *Finger-Plays for Nursery and Kindergarten* (Boston: Lothrop & Co., 1889), 21.
34. Poulsson cites Susan Blow in Emilie Poulsson, *Love and Law in Child Training* (Springfield: Milton Bradley, 1900).
35. Mary Mapes Dodge, "The Alphabet," *Rhymes and Jingles* (New York: Scribner, 1874), 126.
36. Dodge, "Poor Little Toddlekins," *Rhymes and Jingles*, 134.
37. See Richard Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).
38. Agnes Lee, "Sometime," *The Round Rabbit* (Boston: Copeland & Day, 1898), 8.
39. Lee, "The Moon in the Pond," *The Round Rabbit*, 50.
40. Howard Cook, *Our Poets of Today* (New York: Moffat, Yard, 1919), 228.