The Aesthetics of Children's Poetry

A Study of Children's Verse in English

Edited by
Katherine Wakely-Mulroney
and Louise Joy

STUDIES IN CHILDHOOD, 1700 TO THE PRESENT

First published 2018
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN: 978-1-4724-3831-7 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-315-61226-3 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon
by Florence Production Ltd, Stoodleigh, Devon, UK

Contents

Index

Figures

Notes on contributors

Derek Attridge is Emeritus Professor in the Department of English and Related Literature at the University of York. He has published several books on poetic form, including *The Rhythms of English Poetry* (Longman, 1982), *Poetic Rhythm: An Introduction* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), and *Moving Words: Forms of English Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 2015). He is currently working on a book with the tentative title *Poetry in Performance: Homer to the Renaissance*. His other publications are in literary theory and Irish and South African fiction.

Kirstie Blair is Chair in English Studies at the University of Strathclyde. She is the author of two monographs on Victorian poetry, *Victorian Poetry and the Culture of the Heart* (Oxford University Press, 2006) and *Form and Faith in Victorian Poetry and Religion* (Oxford University Press, 2012). She is currently completing a monograph, *Working Verse in Victorian Scotland*, which includes substantial discussion of 'nursery verse' in Victorian culture, and has written a book chapter for *Scottish Children's Literature in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Sarah Dunnigan and Shu-Fang Lai. She is also co-editing a forthcoming special issue of *Literature and Theology* on twentieth-century children's literature.

Karen Coats is Professor of English at Illinois State University, where she teaches children's and young adult literature. She publishes widely in the intersections of children's literature and critical theory, and is author of *Looking Glasses and Neverlands: Lacan, Desire, and Subjectivity in Children's*

Literature (University of Iowa Press, 2007), *Children's Literature and the Developing Reader* (Bridgepoint Education, 2014), and *The Bloomsbury Introduction to Children's and Young Adult Literature* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2017). She is also co-editor of *Mothers in Children's and Young Adult Literature: From the Eighteenth Century to Post feminism, Handbook of Research on Children's and Young Adult Literature*, and *The Gothic in Children's Literature: Haunting the Borders.*

Michael Heyman is a Professor of Literature at Berklee College of Music. His articles have appeared in the *ChLA Quarterly*, *The Horn Book Magazine*, and *The Lion and the Unicorn*, where he was also a judge for the *Lion and the Unicorn* Award for Excellence in North American Poetry. He is the head editor of *The Tenth Rasa: An Anthology of Indian Nonsense* (Penguin, 2007). His short stories and poems for children can be found in *The Puffin Book of Bedtime Stories* (2005), *The Moustache Maharishi and other unlikely stories* (Scholastic, 2007), and *This Book Makes No Sense: Nonsense Poems and Worse* (Scholastic, 2012), the latter of which he also edited. Most recently, he was a guest editor for the nonsense literature issue of IBBY's *Bookbird.*

Andrea Immel is Curator of the Cotsen Children's Library at Princeton University. She has written essays, notes and reviews about different aspects of print, visual, and material culture for children during the long eighteenth century. The 2013 scholarly facsimile of *Tommy Thumb's Pretty Song-Book* (1744), which she co-edited with Brian Alderson, won the 2016 Justin G. Schiller Prize. Her illustrated descriptive catalogue of the juvenile imprints of the house of Newbery 1744–1800 in the Cotsen Children's Library is forthcoming in early 2018.

Louise Joy is Fellow and Lecturer in English at Homerton College, University of Cambridge. She has published widely on topics relating to eighteenth-century literature, to children's

literature, and to the history of the emotions. Her articles have appeared in journals including *Studies in Romanticism*, *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, *History of European Ideas*, *Philosophy and Literature*, and *European Romantic Review*, and she is co-editor of *Poetry and Childhood* (Trentham Books, 2010). Her book, *Literature's Children: The Critical Child and the Art of Idealisation*, will be published in 2018.

Seth Lerer is Distinguished Professor of Literature and former Dean of Arts and Humanities at the University of California at San Diego. His scholarship and teaching has included Old and Middle English Literature, the History of the English Language, and Children's Literature. In that latter field, he has published *Children's Literature: A Reader's History from Aesop to Harry Potter* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), which won the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Truman Capote Prize in Criticism; and *The Annotated Wind in the Willows* (Harvard University Press, 2009). His most recent books are the memoir, *Prospero's Son* (University of Chicago Press, 2013), and *Tradition: A Feeling for the Literary Past* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

Andrew O'Malley is Associate Professor in the Department of English at Ryerson University in Toronto, Canada. His publications include *The Making of the Modern Child: Children's Literature and Childhood in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Routledge, 2003) and *Children's Literature, Popular Culture, and* Robinson Crusoe (Palgrave, 2012), as well as book chapters on various aspects of children's literature and culture and articles in such journals as *Children's Literature*, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, *Eighteenth-Century Life*, and *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*. Recently his research interests have extended to the mid-twentieth century and the controversy over children and comic book reading.

Debbie Pullinger is a Research Associate at the University of

Cambridge Faculty of Education and Research Fellow of Wolfson College. Working primarily on the Poetry and Memory Project, which is investigating the value of the memorised poem, she also teaches Children's Literature at undergraduate and masters' level. Her research interests focus on the modality of language: the ways in which the written and spoken word are experienced in different ways and their dynamic relationship with both mind and body. She has published a monograph on children's poetry, *From Tongue to Text: A New Reading of Children's Poetry*, (Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).

Corinna Russell is a Fellow, Director of Studies in English and Tutor for Admissions in the Arts at Emmanuel College, Cambridge. She has published other articles relating to the trope of repetition in Romantic period poetics, including on Wordsworth and tautology, and Byron and catalogues. Her current research interests lie with song in Romantic poetry and music, and she is the co-convenor with Gavin Alexander of the Cambridge Interdisciplinary Seminars on Song.

Donelle Ruwe is Professor of English at Northern Arizona University and Co-President of the 18th- and 19th-Century British Women Writers Association. She is the author of *British Children's Poetry in the Romantic Era: Verse, Riddle, and Rhyme* (2014) and the editor of a collection of essays, *Culturing the Child 1660–1830: Essays in Memory of Mitzi Myers* (2005). She is co-editing a collection of essays with James Leve on children and childhood in the Broadway musical. Ruwe is a published poet, and her chapbook *Condiments* won the Kinloch Rivers Award in 1999, and her chapbook *Another Message You Miss the Point Of* won the Camber Press Prize in 2006.

Katherine Wakely-Mulroney is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Centre for Liberal Arts and Social Sciences at Nanyang Technological University. She holds a PhD from the University

of Cambridge, where her thesis explored reading, memory, and child interiority in the work of Isaac Watts and Lewis Carroll. Her research interests include the rhetoric of child questioning, the materiality of children's books, and the history of reading. Katherine's work has appeared in the *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*.

David Whitley is a senior lecturer in the Faculty of Education at Cambridge University, where he teaches film, poetry, and children's literature. He is particularly interested in the way the arts offer different forms of understanding and engagement with the natural world. He has contributed to debates about the teaching and dissemination of poetry, including co-editing *Poetry and Childhood* (2010), collaborating with the University of the West Indies on the teaching of Caribbean poetry, and working as principal investigator for the Poetry and Memory research project (*poetryandmemory.com/*). He has published articles on major poets, such as Ted Hughes, William Wordsworth, and Derek Walcott.

James Williams is Lecturer in English at the University of York. He is the co-editor, with Matthew Bevis, of *Edward Lear and the Play of Poetry* (OUP, 2016) and is currently co-editing *The Edinburgh Companion to Nonsense* with Anna Barton (EUP, forthcoming). His publications include articles and chapters on various nineteenth- and twentieth-century topics, and the introduction to Alice Goodman, *History is Our Mother: Three Libretti* (NYRB Classics, 2017). His monograph *Edward Lear* is forthcoming in the 'Writers and Their Work' series (Northcote House), and he is embarking on a study of Augustan poetics in the nineteenth century.

Introduction

Katherine Wakely-Mulroney and Louise Joy

There is a mischievous episode in Tom Hood's carnivalesque children's novel, *From Nowhere to the North Pole* (1875), a work that was highly popular in the last decades of the nineteenth century, wherein the central protagonist, Frank, encounters a machine for writing poetry. Its inventor explains that the machine works by selecting a particular metre and inputting a series of rhyming words, printed on pieces of wood, to serve as line endings. Set running, the machine fills in the remaining words to produce a poem. Frank jumps at the opportunity to try the contraption himself. Asked to select a subject, he responds:

> "Well, let me see—suppose we say 'Invention' as an ode."
>
> "And the measure?"
>
> "I don't know much about measures. I know Apothecaries' Weight"—
>
> "I mean poetical measures. But I see you don't understand; so we will say iambic. Now choose your rhymes,—from this drawer, please."
>
> Frank looked them over and picked out what he thought would be suitable words, such as "immense," "intense," and "reveal," "appeal," and placed them on the edge of the table, while the inventor connected the feeder.
>
> "Now, my young friend, all you have to do is to depress that lever, and the engine will work. Raise it, and it is thrown out of gear."
>
> Frank did as he was desired. There was a clank and a grinding sound, and then the wheels began to revolve, and the table disappeared slowly, to return in short time, covered with lines of carefully-arranged words. This was what Frank read:
>
> AN ODE TO INVENTION

> Amidst believes announce alas immense,
> Destroy behoof confound conceits intense,
> Again red-hot diverse post-haste reveal,
> Unclasp revenge—
>
> "But I say," said Frank, letting go of the lever, "I can't understand what it's about." …
>
> "Poetry isn't meant to be understood!" said the inventor, in a tone of irritation. "There are the words, and the reader must find out their meaning."
>
> (46–8)

"An Ode to Invention" is aurally and visually plausible; its patterning convinces as an example of the genre which has been selected. But as Hood's young protagonist quickly discovers, the "carefully-arranged words" generated by the poetry machine resist hermeneutic discovery. At one level, the scene plays out a humanistic pride in the *je ne sais quoi* that defies mechanical imitation. It condemns the manner in which the output, the poem, is preordained by formula and protocol, rather than inspired by the organic evolution of human thought. But there is also something more at stake in the overt scepticism manifest in the passage towards the question of poetry's relationship with understanding. The satirical thrust of Hood's scene relies on the reader's recognition of the by-then familiar idea that poetry is difficult – specifically, that it is difficult for the uninitiated. In inviting us to laugh at the ludicrousness of expending mechanical, and by analogical extension, human effort to produce words which sound pretty but which fail to communicate meaning, Hood's novel intervenes in a debate about children's poetry that has waged since the turn of the eighteenth century, and which continues to shape how we frame questions about the aesthetics of children's poetry today. The debate hinges on the question of complexity, and the circle that cannot be squared: if poetry is inherently complex, and complexity eludes the child, then when poetry sacrifices complexity to cater for the child, does what ensues still qualify as poetry?

Anxieties about the moral, intellectual, and educational

implications of crafting poetry with a child reader in mind were in circulation long before the publication of Anna Letitia Barbauld's *Hymns in Prose for Children* (1781), but were memorably encapsulated by remarks made in the Preface:

> it may be doubted whether poetry *ought* to be lowered to the capacities of children, or whether they should not rather be kept from reading verse, till they are able to relish good verse: for the very essence of poetry is an elevation in thought and style above the common standard; and if it wants this character, it wants all that renders it valuable.
>
> (iv)

This worry has loomed large over the enterprise of children's poetry ever since. What is particularly striking about Barbauld's oft-quoted comment is that her primary concern is that to adapt poetry to the needs of the child reader causes injury not merely to the child, though this is implicitly also the case, but more importantly, to the poem. She fears that its association with children will contaminate our ideas of what poetry is. Since at least the end of the eighteenth century, then, children's poetry has needed to defend itself against a view, one not always expressed as overtly as by Barbauld, that for all that it might have educational value, it cannot be *aesthetically* valuable. Indeed, the logical extension of Barbauld's view is that children's poetry might actively be harmful to our aesthetic sensibilities.

Against this backdrop, it might seem something of a provocation to place the aesthetics of children's verse at the centre of the stage, as this volume seeks to do. To do so is to insist that children's poetry *is* aesthetically valuable. It is also to observe that there is a need for scholars to think more directly than, to date, we have tended to do about what constitutes the aesthetics of children's verse, how we might go about recognising and discussing the aesthetic features of children's verse, and whether, and if so in what terms, we might make a case for the significance of children's poetry *as poetry*.

To proceed on this basis, however, entails a rejection, or at least reconsideration, of Barbauld's suppositions that "the very essence

of poetry is an elevation in thought and style above the common standard," and that to appreciate such "elevation", the reader must be in possession of certain kinds of "capacities." At stake, as Hood's passage vividly demonstrates, is *comprehension*. For all that it has been derided in works such as Hood's, the notion that poetry necessarily refuses easy or "common" access has not merely endured over the decades; in certain quarters, it has become ever more entrenched. The veneration in and since the early twentieth century of works such as T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), which actively frustrates any readerly aspiration to realise singular meaning, has normalised the idea which Hood's satire had invited us to scorn: "poetry isn't meant to be understood." As Brian Tucker has put it, "in the modern and postmodern era, it can seem natural to take for granted a riddling quality in art," a belief which Tucker attributes to the influence on literary theory and praxis of Theodor Adorno's belief that "all works of art, and art in general, are riddles" (14). It has become customary to envisage a kinship between art and complexity, and furthermore to subscribe to the belief that to grapple with difficulty is to seek (or to find) pleasure. After all, riddling is superfluous to requirement; we choose to riddle to pass the time, to play, and are not compelled to do so as a means of carrying out work that it is necessary for us to complete. As Tucker's term "natural" indicates, such suppositions have become so implanted that we can forget to remember to question them. In consequence, literary critical language routinely extols the virtues of opacity over transparency, density over superficiality. We use terms such as "sophisticated" and "subtle" as commendations, even as we profess Arnoldian disinterestedness or apparently resist the urge to judge. In so doing, we cherish as a necessary condition of poetry what Rafe McGregor has recently characterised as "poetic thickness":

> the inseparability of poetic form and poetic content in the experience of a work of poetry such that neither form nor content can be isolated without loss of work identity. Poetic thickness is a demand which is satisfied by a work rather than a property of a text, and is characteristic of poetry such that if a work is a work of poetry, it will reward the

demand for poetic thickness.

(56)

Positioning "poetic thickness" as a "demand" that we bring to poetry, that is to say, an aesthetic taste that we acquire prior to any encounter with a particular poem, McGregor argues that we have become accustomed to celebrate poetic works that impede the smooth passage of the reader. He proposes that it has become an embedded habit for us to identify as aesthetically valuable works in which knotty relationships are forged between form and content. Certainly, in recent decades we have developed elaborate vocabularies for the analysis of the snarled or intricate relations between signifier and signified, *langue* and *parole*, utterance and meaning, and for the analysis of readerly resistance as a means of encountering, even as it admits defeat in the face of, the unfathomability of the universe. It has become uncontroversial, then, to believe that poetry refuses us entry, and that it is aesthetically pleasing when poetry actively thwarts our efforts to solve its mysteries. The dissonant verdict of Hood's inventor, the verdict that baffles Hood's young protagonist – "Poetry isn't meant to be understood!" – sounds a strikingly harmonic note for ears attuned to the music of postmodernist thought.

But where does this leave the child reader? As the episode in Hood's novel prompts us to recognise, the strangeness of the belief that poetry is not meant to be understood comes into particular focus when we introduce the concept of a reader eager to expand their knowledge of, and competence in navigating, the world around them. At one level, the world is necessarily inexplicable to children, given their comparative newness to it and the nascence of their skills in interacting with it. For newly- or pre-literate readers, difficulty will inhere in orders of language and modes of communication that more experienced readers will find straightforward. Therefore poetry that an adult might deem simple will be no such thing to the child. Obstacles will impede the path of an inexperienced reader whether or not there is a riddling quality inherent in the poem, whatever the nature of the interplay

between subject and form. The prospect of a child audience enables us to see with renewed starkness that complexity is a relative concept and that to pronounce on the penetrability or otherwise of a literary work is to presume a stable and knowable set of competences on the part of the reader. Moreover, we cannot take it for granted that the child has an inbuilt "demand" for poetic thickness. Indeed, Michael Rosen warned in a 2006 interview that children precisely require that the door be held open: if children, he said, have the "impression that it's this difficult, cryptic thing, that there's a whole stackload of information that you have to get through in order to get poetry", then they will simply choose not to participate (qtd. in Saguisag 7). If Rosen is right, then the notion that there is an aesthetic pleasure to be derived from the effortful pursuit of that which evades our grasp may provide us with a peculiarly unhelpful set of starting points for the consideration of children's poetry. If the child has not yet learnt – or to put it another way, does not accept – the logic of a premise which underpins so much of our thinking about poetics, then we need to rethink the thinking. If the nonplussed child reader, like Hood's protagonist, Frank, will disdain the pointlessness, rather than crave the *jouissance*, of the labour entailed in making meaning for oneself, then to create aesthetic delight, verse aimed at young readers must resist, not indulge, the temptation to bamboozle. If children's poetry succeeds in doing precisely this, then the critic of such poetry needs to find a vocabulary with which to account for such aesthetic delight in terms that acknowledge the pleasures of transparency and superficiality – the pleasures, perhaps, of poetic *thinness* or simplicity.

It has not altogether satisfied commentators over the years, though, to give children's poetry licence for simplicity. Nor is the idea of poetic simplicity itself a simple one. In the preface to Charles Wesley's *Hymns for Children* (1763), John Wesley criticised Isaac Watts's ground-breaking *Divine Songs Attempted in Easy Language for the Use of Children* (1715) for failing sufficiently to challenge its readership. The practice of writing for children, Wesley argues, comprises of two kinds: "the one is, to let

ourselves down to them; the other, to lift them up to us." Watts, he writes, does the first of these, "speaking to children as children, and leaving them as he found them." By way of contrast, Wesley's own *Hymns* were, he claimed, designed to incite the child towards adult understanding: "they contain strong and manly sense, yet expressed in such plain and easy language as even children can understand. But when they do understand them, they will be children no longer, only in years and stature" (qtd. in Clapp-Itnyre 149). The kind of language that Wesley has in mind here – "plain and easy" – acquires definition in opposition to an idea of language as riddling. And yet, the relationship between subject and form that Wesley envisages sounds highly sophisticated: his vehicle, language that is accessible to children, is supposed to enable his audience to arrive at comprehension that lies beyond that which such language is able to convey. We have here a notion of a rather idiosyncratic species of poetic complexity, one that does not rest on a riddling quality in the language used, nor is it connected to a demand by the reader to be thwarted. The complexity that Wesley envisages is one that derives from the peculiarly fraught business of addressing a reader who is caught in the act of becoming. Such complexity ensues from the epistemological and temporal indeterminacy embroiled in the very business of addressing an implied reader who does not exist until already having been addressed. It results from a kind of contradictoriness: the reader must know but not yet know; the poet must promise but not provide; the poem must disclose but disguise.

Over the past few decades, children's literature studies have made significant strides in developing a conceptual vocabulary to enable us to identify and analyse the distinctive complexities entailed in the subtle, at times troubling, enterprise of designing literary texts for children. To date, however, such study has usually concentrated on prose fiction. For example, Barbara Wall's study of narrative voice lays out nuanced distinctions via which to tease out the various modes of address typically at work in children's novels. Arguing that "[a]ll writers for children must, in

a sense, be writing down," lest it become a requirement of "good writing for children" that it "not appear that children are addressed at all" (15), she discriminates between the practice of "talking down," which she bemoans, and "writing down," which she views as a pedagogical necessity (16). Wall's distinction has been widely adopted and adapted by subsequent generations of children's literature scholars, and it has proven to be a productive means of disentangling literary works that seek to establish channels of communication between adults and children from those that use the conceit of a child as a covert means of addressing other adults. But is a distinction that rests on a perceived difference between "writing" and "talking" relevant to the same degree or in the same ways for a literary mode, poetry, which bears less obvious affinity in the first place with the prosaic business of conversation, and is instead more closely related to song?

When Dorothy Parker, writing for *The New Yorker* under her pen name, "The Constant Reader," finds herself nauseated by A. A. Milne's *The House at Pooh Corner* (1928), what has her reaching for the bucket is Pooh's characterisation of his poem, "Outdoor Song which Has To Be Sung In the Snow," as "hummy" (6). Implicit in Parker's reaction to this moment in the text, which she quotes in full, and which she identifies as "the first place in *The House at Pooh Corner* at which the Tonstant Weader Fwowed up" (98), is a revulsion at the prospect of being positioned by the work not merely as childish (indicated by Parker's feigned lisp) but moreover as *cute*. Following Barbara Wall's schema, we might characterise Parker's nausea as a reaction to the ways in which she perceives the work to "talk down" – to address her as an object of sentimental delight. But it is worth noting that although Parker quotes the poem in full, it is in fact the prose surrounding the poem – the narrative's contextualisation of the poem – from which Parker recoils. She passes no comment on the poem itself, a poem which has since become one of the most familiar children's poems of all ("The more it / SNOWS-tiddely-pom, / The more it / GOES-tiddely-pom"). Instead, she leaves us to ponder for ourselves

the aptness of Pooh's prosaic characterisation of this poem as "hummy." At one level, to have a naïve character describe his poem as "hummy" is indeed egregiously manipulative; it reveals all-too-readily the hidden, too-clever-by-half adult lurking behind Pooh, an adult who can smirk at the thrill that the term "hummy" sonically invokes the word "honey," which, though it is semantically and contextually unrelated, just so happens to encapsulate the saccharine quality of the indulgence with which Milne is inviting us to laugh at his childlike character. But for all that it might have unsettled Dorothy Parker's archly adult innards, the *portmanteau* "hummy" nevertheless does important work in this passage; it functions as an efficient means of conveying the formal qualities of the ensuing text: it is text that longs to be sung, but which does not require a melody; it is text that longs to be performed, but which exists, at least for the reader, on the page; it is text that aspires to produce aesthetic delight ("when he had finished, he waited for Piglet to say that, of all the Outdoor Hums for Snowy Weather he had ever heard, this was the best"), but whose lot is often merely to be ransacked for literal truth ("after thinking the matter out carefully, Piglet said: 'Pooh,' he said solemnly, 'it isn't the *toes* so much as the *ears*.'" (7) Moreover, the poem, unhindered by the fetters of grammar which straitjacket the surrounding prose, is able not merely to resemble but to *be* the child's language: it can comprise not just the child's vocabulary, but also the child's syntax, the child's rhythms, the child's rhymes. Pooh's poem, then, does not hum down at us; it invites us to share the child's hum. We, in fact, must provide its humminess, since, without a reader to supply the music, the words on the page remain merely that. And yet this childish hum, indeed, the very childishness of the hum, invites us to notice, and therefore to reflect on, a series of notoriously complex questions: how can we account for the sonic and scriptural proximity of terms such as "honey" and "hummy" which are semantically unrelated? Why are the sounds of words so divorced from their meanings? On what basis are words we don't want to use legitimate while those we do are not? These are questions that have preoccupied thinkers as

"strong and manly" as Ferdinand de Saussure and Jacques Derrida. But they are posed here in "plain and easy" language not such that the child might understand the questions, as John Wesley had it, but such that the questions might understand the child. The poem reveals that Barbara Wall's concepts of talking down and writing down rest on a supposition that the utterance before us originates from a coherent narrative voice, and furthermore, that this coherent voice necessarily belongs to an adult in the process of addressing a child. But humming has no need for a coherent narrative voice since it has no narrative to cohere. The hum of a poem can be intoned by an adult or a child, by both or by neither, in unison or in alternation, in chorus or solo, in harmony or poly phony or dissonance, or indeed in silence. Poetry's "humminess" redeems it from a fate of either talking down to us or talking up at us – it vibrates in our ears only if we sing along too.

Poetry, then, is different in kind to prose, and some of the mechanisms which have typically been used to identify what makes children's prose complex prove inadequate for the task of attempting to probe the peculiar complexities of children's poetry. But we need to grapple head-on with the complicating factor that the reason why children's poetry requires special consideration is not merely because poetry is different in kind from prose, but also because children, even if only as an idea, are different in kind from adults – or more accurately, because the prospect of the child reader, notional as it is, dictates our sense of what the poem can hope to achieve. This is the case since the prospect of the child reader brings into play precisely *hope*. In his 1976 preface to Walter de la Mare's *Songs of Childhood* (1902), the poet Anthony Hecht points towards the ways in which de la Mare's poems court futurity, reaching out to that which lies beyond the present, enabling the reader of today to hum the music of tomorrow. De la Mare's poetry, he writes, is "full of the dangers and horrors and sorrows every child soon knows to be part of the world, however vainly parents try to veil them" (n. pag.). Even as she repudiates this position, insisting that children prefer "topics that reflect their [more immediate] experience and concerns: school life, play,

siblings, relationships with peers, special events like the acquiring of new shoes or the loss of first teeth," Glenna Sloan nonetheless gestures towards the aspirational character of children's poetry when she suggests that it is necessary for "raising poetry lovers," that is to say, nurturing and educating children who are "interested in reading and listening to poetry" (53–4). For both Hecht and Sloan, then, the rewards of children's poetry will be reaped another day; the child reader is envisaged as in a state of transitiveness. In this sense, the children's poem does not speak up or down, but in as much as it speaks at all, or sings, it sings *forward*. Indeed, even at the very moment at which theorists of children's poetry seek to escape from the notion that the pleasures of poetry must be located out of time, the future sneaks back in. Liz Rosenberg, in her pro vocatively titled "Has Poetry for Kids Become a Child's Garden of Rubbish?" (1991), objects to the idea that children's poetry must serve as a "stepping-stone" to adult verse, a conceit derived from the preface to an 1897 anthology of children's poetry which states that "there is a kind of poetry that is finer far than anything here; poetry to which this book is, in the old-fashioned phrase, simply a 'stepping-stone'" (qtd. in Rosenberg n. pag.). She writes: "What children need and deserve is not a stepping-stone, but real art suitable to their needs and desires," a kind of art, as her title nostalgically indicates, epitomised by the children's verse of Robert Louis Stevenson. A measure which Rosenberg uses to discern such "art," however, is the length to which it extends into adult hood: "the best children's poems," she writes, "accompany one through life … they grow with you – or you grow into them, the exact nature of the fit is unclear." Children's poetry, then, if it is to give pleasure to the child, must freely admit the reader in the present; but if it is to give pleasure to the adult-who-was-once-a-child, it must over time produce resistance. It must acquire in the future a riddling quality which it does not reveal in the present.

Close reading

In literary studies, and in particular in the study of poetry, we have become accustomed, indeed, we have become wedded, to the belief that an important form of training in how to read literary texts is practice in the skills of "close reading" – that is to say, forensic analysis of the words on the page, often in a decontextualised, or semi-decontextualised, way. Students of literature fine-tune their capacity to tease out contradiction, irony, tension, and ambiguity posed by the relations between form and content. As Julian Wolfreys puts it in *Readings: Acts of Close Reading in Literary Theory* (2000), we learn to chastise the "bad reader" as "one who rushes with indecent, even journalistic haste, to decision, to decide on a reading, and thereby to have done with reading"; and instead we reward the reader who incises the text, who wreaks violence on it, who dismembers it (iv). But when it comes to the study of literature for young audiences, close reading is not typically what scholarship entails. Students of children's literature have instead tended to perform versions of what Franco Moretti has recently termed "distant reading"; they have charted typologies, outlined histories, traced influences (48). In fact, children's literature scholars have all along been honing the kinds of skills which Moretti, among others, proposes that we now need to acquire if we are to find effective ways of appreciating the vast swathes of literature to which digitisation and globalisation have given us access. The development of a language of distant reading provides us with a way of seeing ever more plainly that the techniques of close reading were never fully exploited in the first place among scholars of children's poetry. At this moment at which literary scholars are debating the extent to which close reading has had its day, it therefore seems incumbent on children's literature scholars to think through what, if anything, techniques which for some are already outmoded might have to offer to the study of children's poetry.

When I. A. Richards in the British tradition and Cleanth Brooks

in the American tradition developed and popularised the techniques that we now broadly refer to as "close reading," they did so to account for, and to enable us better to value, the ways in which literary texts, and particularly poetic texts, resist direct communication. Such techniques, which draw our eye to instances of contradiction, ambiguity, and irony, equip us with nuanced ways of appreciating the unsaid, the elusive, the obscure, and the indeterminate. Naturally, they therefore lend themselves especially well to the analysis of poetry written in what Susan Wolfson identifies as "the interrogative mode" wherein "the activity of questioning sets the mind against itself." For Wolfson, such questioning is not "unique to English Romantic poetry," though this is where she concentrates her interest, in particular in short lyric poems by William Wordsworth and John Keats. "These poems," she suggests, "are critically implicated in perceptions that provoke inquiry, experiences that elude or thwart stable organization, events that challenge previous certainties and require new terms of interpretation." But what Wolfson calls the "rhetoric of the interrogative mode" is not confined to "questions punctuated as such"; it also "may exert its force in other tones and organizations of language which bring into play the reader's own faculties of questioning" (28). Close reading, then – sustained consideration of sites of irony, ambiguity, and tension – provides ways of focusing the reader's questions and accounting for the ways in which the poem resists answers.

The privileging in the poetic canon of works in the interrogative mode by figures such as Wordsworth and Keats, together with the privileging of close reading as a means of encountering such works, has served to entrench a belief that interrogation is what poetry does – it asks questions, and it asks *us* to ask questions of it. Moreover, either implicitly, or, in the case of I. A. Richards, explicitly, techniques of close reading have often been used as a means of valuing and accounting for the affective potential of poetry – its capacity, as Susan Feagin puts it, to "move us." In *Reading with Feeling* (1996) Feagin writes: "To appreciate a work of art is not merely to recognise *that* a work has certain properties,

aesthetic qualities, or artistic virtues, not merely to be able to recognise what it is about a work that gives it these qualities or its value. To experience the work in certain ways, it involves reading 'with feeling'." By the same token, the business of identifying the aesthetic qualities of a poetic work, the business that close reading enables us to carry out, is a means of testifying to the poem's capacity to alter our emotions.

But what do we do with poetry that does not obviously operate in an interrogative mode? How are we to assess the aesthetic properties and effects of the kinds of declarative poetic modes that are often used to shape children's questioning? What strain do we put on the practice of close reading, which has proven so fruitful for the analysis of poetry that foregrounds complexity, when we attempt to use it to analyse poetry that strives for simplicity? Do the ensuing difficulties point towards the limitations of close reading as a means of encountering certain kinds of poetry, or do they simply point towards the aesthetic limitations of the material itself, potentially even invalidating its claims to be poetry at all? In short, how do we patrol the fragile boundary between the poetic and the inane?

Much of children's poetry comprises what Margaret Cohen has termed "the great unread" – poetry which has lain dormant for centuries, beneath contempt, or beneath criticism, in its presumed inanity. But we have learnt from the pioneering work of scholars as diverse as Elaine Showalter and Edward Said that there are troubling politics entailed in the marginalisation of kinds of writing that are presumed to be beneath contempt. There are powerful political arguments in favour of resurrecting such work in order to create a more accurate historical picture of who was producing what for which groups of readers. To pay attention, then, to the contribution to the wider poetic landscape of an eighteenth-century children's anthology such as *The Poetical Flower-Basket* is to make an obviously useful contribution to research into the history of children's poetry. It fills in gaps; it corrects a skewed vision which for so many decades has failed even to acknowledge the presence of, let alone to discuss in any

detail, such works.

But can we make a persuasive case for the *aesthetic* interest of a work such as this? What happens when we bring to bear on it tools that are designed to look for ambiguity, irony, tension? Can they withstand the scrutiny of the kind of attention to aesthetic concerns that close reading entails? In some senses, of course, children's poems are well suited to close reading. They tend to be short, for example, and can therefore be analysed in one go. But if we look for indeterminacy, expecting hermeneutic labour, and find that the poem falls readily into our laps, what work is there left for us to do? Furthermore, there is the complicating factor of the child reader. Should the activity of close reading generate an analysis of the poem as it acts on the adult reader, or is it necessary for the adult to attempt to take into account how the poem does, or might, act on the child reader? If we start with an understanding that the poem in question is a child's poem, are we not introducing contextual information, indeed, foreclosing what we find, and precisely *not* reading the words on the page? We might find ourselves wondering whether the notion of close reading a children's poem is something of a contradiction in terms.

This volume seeks to probe the ways in which children's poetry has aesthetic value or interest by showcasing some of the approaches we might adopt to attempt to appreciate and analyse it. In so doing, it implicitly asks questions about the kinds of children's poems that reward our attention, challenging the idea that the only poems of interest to us are those written in the "interrogative mode" (by Wordsworth; Keats), or those which most obviously facilitate the child's questioning (by William Blake; Lewis Carroll) – figures towards whom critical enquiry into children's poetry, what little there is, has tended to gravitate.

Historical lines

This volume took shape during 2015, a year marked by literary

critics and cultural historians as the sesquicentenary of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). Considerably less attention was paid to the tricentenary of Isaac Watts's *Divine Songs*, which fell in the same year. Though Carroll's playful, secular work continues to seize the public imagination in a way that is inconceivable of Watts's hymnal, the latter's contribution to children's literature – and children's poetry – has not been overlooked. On the contrary, no study of the field would be complete without reference to *Divine Songs*, one of the first, and undeniably most influential, works to acknowledge that children deserve a species of literature tailored to their developmental parameters. Made up of "like Sounds" and a "like number of Syllables," *Divine Songs* was designed to be read and repeated until it was memorised, then read and repeated again and again – its moral precepts "running in the Mind" on an endless loop (n. pag.).[1] Though largely unknown to today's child reader, *Divine Songs* lives on in the well-thumbed pages of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. As the stanzas below demonstrate, Carroll's parodies of "Against Idleness and Mischief" and "The Sluggard" preserve the upbeat metre of *Divine Songs* while omitting – or deliberately subverting – its moral thrust:

> How doth the busy little Bee
> Improve each shining Hour,
> And gather Honey all the day
> From every opening Flower!
>
> (Watts 29)

> 'Tis the Voice of the Sluggard;
> I hear him complain
> You have wak'd me too soon,
> I must slumber again.
> As the Door on its Hinges,
> so he on his Bed,
> Turns his Sides and his
> Shoulders and his heavy
> Head.
>
> (Watts 46)

How doth the little crocodile
Improve his shining tail
And pour the waters of the Nile
On every golden scale!

(Carroll 15)

'Tis the voice of the Lobster:
I heard him declare
"You have baked me too brown,
I must sugar my hair."
As a duck with its eyelids,
so he with his nose
Trims his belt and his buttons,
and turns out his toes.

(Carroll 88–9)

Victorian readers would have easily recognised "How doth the little crocodile" and "'Tis the voice of the Lobster" as burlesques of *Divine Songs*. Modern audiences may look to the margins of *The Annotated Alice* to determine the source of Carroll's parodies. There, editor Martin Gardner preserves Watts's name for posterity while dismissing *Divine Songs* as "dismal … doggerel" (111). Gardner's preference for Carroll's parodies over their homiletic source material is scarcely surprising since critical studies of children's literature routinely exhibit the same bias towards Romantic and post-Romantic poetry for children. *Divine Songs* and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* are routinely used to construct a narrative of progress in which eighteenth-century instruction yields, over time, to nineteenth-century delight and the era, extending to the present, of comparatively "child-centred" texts. While this chronological approach pertains to children's literature studies in general, it is especially marked in studies of children's poetry.

Richard Flynn draws attention to this scholarly tendency in his essay on poetry in *The Cambridge Companion to Children's Literature* (2010): "Ever since the brilliant parodies of didactic verse by Lewis Carroll in the *Alice* books," he writes, "critics have

perpetuated a reductive opposition between 'bad old' moralistic verse and the liberating subversiveness of nonsense" (80). However, this value judgement extends to what might be termed the "bad new" as well. The critical methods used to determine the aesthetic value of children's poetry in the present, and the language used to express that value, are remarkably illustrative of the nineteenth-century paradigm shift from instruction to delight. Watts's verse – designed to impart moral and spiritual instruction – is deathly earnest; Carroll's is secular, playful, and inventive. Watts's iambs and anapaests fall heavily on our ears – perhaps because we imagine groups of children repeating them by rote, placing an unnatural stress on each syllable. Though Carroll uses the same regular metre in his parodies of *Divine Songs*, they take on a new, lively aspect – rollicking rather than plodding, conspiratorial (because the child is invited to join in the adult's joke) rather than condescending, demanding rather than "easy." These particular qualities – secularity, playfulness, liveliness – do not merely determine what is considered "good" children's poetry; they have come to designate whether poetry is for children in the first place.

The publication of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* marks the beginning of the first so-called "Golden Age" of children's literature, a period ranging from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. While this term is often used to categorise (and valorise) prose works for children, it also speaks to a particular style of poetry for young readers that is typified in works by Carroll, Christina Rossetti, and Robert Louis Stevenson, as well as by later figures such as Eleanor Farjeon and A. A. Milne. Their poetry is whimsical, charming, and comic; it addresses the child reader from a position of sentimental regard or camaraderie. Though often used in a pedagogical context – to teach poetic form or elevate the child reader's taste – the poems themselves do not foreground instruction. If the term Golden Age implies that children's poetry had ripened or "bloomed" by the nineteenth century (Hall 7), this period has come to signify both the culmination of an outdated authoritarian mode and the beginning

of a new, child-centred ideology.

It is a truism to observe that children's poetry has developed since this period. Critics such as Flynn, Morag Styles, and Joseph T. Thomas Jr. have pieced together a diverse history of poetry written for and read by young readers (criteria that are not always synonymous, as the essays in this volume attest). Though this history is one of gradual evolution rather than sudden development, both our readerly expectations and the critical vocabulary used to appraise the aesthetic value of children's poetry are greatly informed by the transition described above. For example, one might argue that the "seismic shift" (Saguisag 3) or "sea change" (Styles, "Poetry" 398) that took place during the 1970s with the advent of "urchin verse" can be viewed as an extension of the instruction-to-delight paradigm rather than a radical new development. Originated by John Rowe Townsend, the term "urchin verse" refers to the vernacular stylings of writers such as Michael Rosen, Robert McGough, and Jack Prelutsky, each of whom celebrates the less-than-poetic aspects and interests of childhood in poems that are silly, rambunctious, and occasionally crude (Prelutsky's "Be Glad your Nose Is on Your Face": "Imagine if your previous nose / were sandwiched in between your toes, / that clearly would not be a treat, / for you'd be forced to smell your feet." [64]). While urchin verse is often contrasted with the sentimental, halcyon poetry of earlier figures such as Stevenson, Farjeon, and Eugene Field, the difference between these categories of children's poetry is more rhetorical than ideological. For example, Michael J. Lockwood credits Michael Rosen with developing the concept of child-centred poetry further than Stevenson – who wrote from a child's viewpoint – by writing "in the actual language of the child" (59). We are amenable to the idea that Rosen and Stevenson exist at points along a single trajectory because both authors produce poetry that is imaginative and playful, rather than pious or didactic. "Delight" remains paramount, although its source has shifted from the adult's idealised view of childhood pleasures to the quotidian delights of children themselves.

The pervasiveness of this critical paradigm is evidenced in works that seek to redress the longstanding oversight of early children's verse. The very title of Patricia Demers' *From Instruction to Delight: An Anthology of Children's Literature to 1850* (originally published in 1982 and currently in its fourth edition) warns the reader of the teleological approach to follow. Indeed, Demers' preface begins by detailing "the long, slow transition from instruction in various forms and voices to the equally diverse pleasures of amusement" (xiv). Yet the anthology itself creates space for a type of poetry that might otherwise "languish on library shelves" (xvi), such as Benjamin Keach's verse dialogue between Youth and his Conscience and the *New-England Primer*'s stark rhyming alphabet. These entries are, moreover, preceded by historically sensitive accounts of the works from which each passage has been excised, which make a case for its literary significance. Nevertheless, this even-handedness is compromised by the conceptual basis of the anthology as a whole, which figures early works as runners-up (rather than merely forerunners) to the "more sympathetically expressive" poetry of the nineteenth century and beyond (xvi). The same conflicted message is evident in Karen L. Kilcup and Angela Sorby's anthology of nineteenth-century American children's verse, *Over the River and Through the Wood* (2014). While Kilcup and Sorby arrange their collection thematically rather than chronologically, with publication dates consigned to the table of contents and index (to avoid the likelihood of the reader's casting judgement on a particular poem based on its historical, rather than aesthetic, provenance), their preface plots a clear trajectory from the dour, didactic poetry of the early nineteenth century to the comparatively "wonder-full" verse produced from the mid-to-late century (13). In so doing, the editors perpetuate the same set of assumptions as Demers – that more recent poetry for children "shakes off" or subverts its historical predecessors, like a butterfly joyfully emerging from a chrysalis.

Kilcup and Sorby concede that "contemporary tastes and biases" have shaped their selection. "A perfectly representative

anthology," they acknowledge, "would contain more 'funny' ethnic stereotypes, more plantation-tradition dialect verses, more evangelical Christianity, more deathbed sermons, and more botanical poems – but it would also be much less readable" (xxi). By appealing to the modern reader's expectations, the editors present a somewhat skewed vision of the poetry to which nineteenth-century children were exposed. A section on "Slavery and Freedom" contains twenty-five poems, each of which condemns racial prejudice, either explicitly, in poems such as "The Anti-Slavery Alphabet" and "The Negro's Flag and Country," or implicitly, as in Nellie L. Tinkham's "A Question of Colour" (1882):

> "Dear me!" said Mrs. Strawberry Jam,
> A-growing very red.
> "What a most unfortunate creature I am;
> I can scarce hold up my head.
> To think that I should live to see
> An insult offered, like this, to me!
> That I should be placed on the very same shelf
> (Oh dear! I hardly know myself)
> By the side of that odious Blackberry Jam––
> That vulgar, common, Blackberry Jam!"
>
> (qtd. in Kilcup 279)

Here, as in Carroll's parodies of *Divine Songs*, the child reader is invited to laugh at, rather than emulate, adult speech and behaviour – to subvert, rather than fulfil, adult expectation. With its parenthetical remarks and exclamatory bursts, Tinkham's poem encourages the child reader to act out the part of Mrs. Strawberry Jam – exaggerating her prejudice for comic effect. Carroll himself witnessed a rather different performance some twenty years earlier. In 1862, Alice Liddell and her sisters performed "Sally Come Up," an American minstrel tune, for his amusement. Carroll describes the event in his diary, noting that the girls sang "with great spirit" (qtd. in Gardner 119). We might keep this in mind while reading the lyrics:

> Sally come up, Oh, Sally come down.

Oh Sally, come twist your heels around.
De old man, he's gone down to town,
Oh, Sally, come down de middle.

Sally has got a lubly nose,
Flat across her face it grows,
It sounds like thunder when it blows,
Such a lubly nose has Sally.

(qtd. in Cazden, 560)

To sing these lines in a "spirited" manner is to embrace the offensive dialect in which they are written and the nasty stereotypes they perpetuate. "Sally Come Up" was not written for children, yet the Liddell children read it, memorised it, and performed it with relish. Carroll was so struck by the performance that he included a parody of the poem ("Salmon Come Up") in *Alice's Adventures Underground*, an earlier version of *Wonderland* presented to Alice Liddell in 1864. Though the poem would later be replaced by a parody of Mary Howitt's "The Spider and the Fly" (1829), the spectre of "Sally Come Up" casts a shadow over *Wonderland*'s otherwise lighthearted poems. We must acknowledge that this poem was, for the Liddell children, as great a source of merriment as "How doth the little crocodile." When "less readable poems" are consigned to "the great unread," we minimise the challenges posed by children's poetry to our sense of what is age-appropriate, innovative, or appealing.

The problem of didacticism

One of the best places to learn about contemporary attitudes to children's poetry is the Fall issue of children's literature journal, *The Lion and the Unicorn*. Since 2005, a rotating panel of scholars (among them contributors to this volume) have published a review essay on children's poetry during the previous year. "The Lion and the Unicorn Award for Excellence in North American Poetry" is

conferred on the strongest entry in the field. Weaker entries, discussed for their shortcomings, tend to exhibit certain shared characteristics. One of the most frequently levied criticisms is that a poem or collection of poems is "instructive" or "didactic." For example, in 2006, the judges "had strong objections to the apparently new genre of writing instruction manuals masquerading as collections of poems" (Thomas "It Don't Mean a Thing" 386). The following year, Jorge Argueta's *Talking with Mother Earth/Hablando con Madre Tierra* elicited praise because its poems do not "seek to educate children about what it means to be a Pipil Nahua Indian," operating instead "on a more intimate (and less didactic) level, sharing one boy's experience" (Sorby 274). In 2013, J. Patrick Lewis and Jane Yolen's "eccentric" *Last Laughs: Animal Epitaphs* was favour ably contrasted with other, "brutally didactic" books of nature poetry sub mitted for consideration that year (Joseph 335). The judges also commend Marilyn Nelson's *Ostrich and Lark* for positioning itself "far from the bonfires of instruction" (Joseph 335). But didacticism is not always used as a stamp to confer a judgement of poor quality. In 2014, prize-winner JonArno Lawson garnered praise for his nuanced approach to poetic exhortation:

> Lawson knows our doubts and depressions––"Those who always do their very best / May still at times wake up gravely depressed, / shedding bitter tears while getting dressed" (26)––yet insists that we carry on nonetheless, his didacticism mellowed by humour, empathy, and grace.
>
> (Paul 396)[2]

The words "mellowed," "empathy," and "grace" suggest that the didacticism of Lawson's poetry has had its sharp edges cut off; the judges' reference to "humour" reminds us that didactic poetry is, by default, dull and painfully earnest.

Though it is not necessarily a pejorative term, "didactic" is nonetheless typically used to condemn a genre of writing in which the child reader's interest and understanding are largely overlooked. In an essay on children's poetry and humour, Ruth K.

MacDonald suggests that didactic verse (a genre she explicitly associates with Isaac Watts) possesses "'spinach' value—good for you, but with little appeal to the palate" (267). By definition, a didactic work has "instruction as a primary or ulterior purpose" ("didactic, adj.1a."). Overtly didactic poetry has an unmistakable agenda: in "The Advantages of Early Religion," Watts urges his reader to keep death and divine judgement in constant view ("'Twill save us from a Thousand Snares / To mind Religion young" (*Divine Songs* 18); in "If" (1910), Rudyard Kipling teaches his reader how to "be a Man" (605). Savvy didactic poets exploit the iterative, mnemonic properties of verse in order to instil their teaching. In the preface to *Divine Songs*, Watts writes that he has deliberately harnessed the appealing qualities of verse in order to convey theological and moral instruction, for "There is something so amusing and entertaining in Rhymes and Metre that will incline Children to make this part of their Business a Diversion." Kipling's jingoistic poem relies on the perpetual motion of iambic pentameter, the repeated refrain, "If you can," an intuitive ABAB rhyme scheme, and the building expectation that precedes the poem's final lines and main clause. While both poets attempt to fulfil the Horatian ideal of joining instruction with delight, Watts's preface underlines the extent to which this technique is deliberately coercive: where instruction is the end, delight is merely the means.

Didactic poetry is not restricted to children, but it requires (or presumes) a childlike credulity of its audience. By way of example, we might consider a poem, written by Carol Ann Duffy in her capacity as Poet Laureate to commemorate the marriage of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, which manages to be subversive or didactic from different angles. "Rings" (2011) neither refers directly to the ceremony nor identifies the royals by name. Instead, Duffy describes a union that is humanist, rather than Anglican ("I might have tied / a blade of grass, / a green ring for your finger, …" ["Poems for a Wedding," n. pag.]), its participants anonymous, ungendered, and sequestered, rather than eminent, heteronormative, and on display. Approached one way, Duffy's

poem is a graceful outmanoeuvring of public expectation – a welcome challenge to the conventions surrounding monarchical tradition and the circumscribed role of Poet Laureate. This reading presupposes a canny reader who is capable of detecting dissent in sentiment. But at the same time, Duffy's references to the natural world (leaping fish, hooting owls, and "chorussing birds") endow the royal event with pastoral significance; the anonymity of the bride and groom signals the ordinariness of the marriage transaction: the lovers are one of us, one with us. In this sense, it is a didactic poem which carries the ulterior motive that the offering of a Poet Laureate must: it garners enthusiasm for the nationally significant occasion it celebrates.

By way of contrast, Duffy's poetry for children treats marriage and domesticity with open, unmistakable scepticism. Brave, independent girls, she repeatedly implies, can aspire to something more. "A Bad Princess" (2002) challenges expectations for female behaviour, whether in real life or the pages of a fairy tale. The title character is messy, imperious, and partial to stomping about the Royal Woods "looking for trouble." She begins to sense her limitations after coming face to face with "her very own double: / a Tree Girl, with shiny holly-green eyes / and a crown of autumn leaves on her wild head." Where the Bad Princess is petulant, her *doppelgänger* exhibits a menacing majesty: "Give me those emeralds that hang from your ears," she commands:

> or I'll kick you hard
> and pinch you meanly
> Then we'll see which one of we two
> is cut out
> to be Queenly!
>
> Oh! The Bad Princess turned
> and ran
> ran for her life
> into the arms of the dull young Prince
> and became his wife.

(*The Oldest Girl in the World* 19)

Duffy's feminist agenda is blatant. But is "A Bad Princess" any the more unambiguously didactic than "Rings" – a poem which champions those most conventional of institutions (the monarchy, marriage, the Church)?

When we view didacticism as an inherently dull or authoritarian poetic mode, we overlook the prevalence of the instructive mode at work in fairytale poems such as Duffy's, or for that Fmatter, in the playful, imaginative fables of Dr Seuss. "The Sneetches" (1961) uses verse to preach tolerance; *The Lorax* (1971) uses verse to promote environmentalism and conservation. Both Duffy and Seuss "mellow" their didacticism by subverting the reader's expectations of what didactic verse looks or sounds like. Both writers replace the prescriptive address of a primer with the whimsical language of a fairy story. Where Duffy suggests that there is more to life than happily ever after, "Seuss's tales," as Philip Nel observes, "have always had morals, but they have delivered these morals by raising questions and provoking readers" (151). Intriguingly, Nel has suggested that subsequent children's books written in the style of Seuss (he cites *The Song of the Zubble-Wump* by David Cohen and Tish Wabe [1996]) fail to replicate the subtlety found in the original works. Instead, "morals and messages take centre stage." For Nel, Cohen and Wabe's interpretation of Seuss – in which the Cat in the Hat concludes a sermon on sharing with a resounding "amen" – is inexcusable in the flagrance of its instruction (151).

If today we worry about didacticism being played out in plain view, early critics of children's literature, such as the Romantic-era educational reformers Sarah Trimmer and Maria and Richard Edgeworth, worried that the problem with didactic verse was its pedagogical inadequacy. In *A Comment on Dr. Watts's Divine Songs for Children* (1789), Trimmer criticises Watts's original text for failing to provide sufficient information: "if properly understood," Trimmer writes, the doctrines and precepts referred to in Watts's Songs "would awaken sentiments of genuine and exalted piety" – instead, they "do little more with the generality of children than amuse by the easy flow of verse in which they are

written, and convey some confused ideas of those great Truths to which they relate" (iii). By way of a solution, Trimmer supplemented Watts's text with explanatory notes written in prose. Where verse tempts the child reader to glide over vital information, these notes are designed to "arrest their attention" (iv). For Trimmer, prose is more direct and comprehensible than verse, and therefore imparts information more reliably, and with greater transparency. The Edgeworths advocate a similar approach in *Practical Education* (1798), where they suggest that "Knowledge cannot be detailed, or accurately explained in poetry" due to its allusiveness. "In reading poetry," children "are continually puzzled between the obvious and the metaphoric sense of words" (375). For Trimmer and the Edgeworths, then, the fault of didactic poetry is not its instructiveness but its poetic-ness: too abstract, too imperceptible, poetry is a poor vehicle for education.

Like Trimmer, Anna Letitia Barbauld used Watts's *Songs* as the standard against which new, improved pedagogical techniques might be proven. Where Trimmer critiques *Divine Songs*' pedagogical efficacy, Barbauld questions the appropriateness of Watts's deliberately "easy" language (quoted above). Barbauld's offering, *Hymns in Prose for Children* (1781), is free from the constraints of verse – the plodding, sing-song metre and repeating rhyme scheme which later led Carroll to parody Watts. It is worth noting that there are no parodies of *Hymns in Prose for Children*, despite the enduring popularity of Barbauld's work throughout the nineteenth century. In the end, then, it is perhaps not the desire to educate in poetry that accounts for the widespread discomfort and laughter that it has become so common to express since the mid-nineteenth century, but more specifically the desire to do so in formally and rhetorically repetitive verse – the desire to use poetic techniques to lull the reader into a state of helpless receptivity. To scoff at didactic poetry is to worry about what happens if the reader turns off his or her critical faculties and omits to *read* the poem.