

Guarding the British Bible from Rousseau: Sarah Trimmer, William Godwin, and the Pedagogical Periodical.

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Donelle Ruwe

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**Guarding the British Bible from Rousseau:
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Periodical**

Donelle Ruwe (bio)

Sarah Kirby Trimmer produced biblical and historical prints, educational tracts, children's books, textbooks, religious commentaries, numerous best-selling editions of the Bible, a spiritual autobiography, and two magazines.¹ She founded Sunday schools and an industrial school. Her still-popular fable of Robin Redbreast defined the genre of the children's animal allegory and became the text with which all other animal fables contended. She knew Johnson, Hogarth, and Gainsborough² and was among the privileged few to be mocked by Byron and damned by Charles Lamb. Always she wrote with an extraordinary self-confidence and even, at times, with what appears to be overconfidence. For example, included in the two-volume memoirs of her life is the following letter to "Mrs. S-":

During my early years I relied upon the judgment, and took up the opinions of a parent, who had made Polemic Divinity his particular study, and who cautioned me against following his example in that particular, as he said it had at times greatly disturbed and perplexed his mind, though it ended at last in a firm belief of the doctrines of the Established Church. . . . Convinced that he had chosen the right way, [I] resolved to obey his injunctions, by avoiding those publications which he warned me against; and when I came to years of maturity, instead of giving up my mind to researches into the various opinions of human beings, [I] set myself seriously to examine the principles in which I had been educated, **[End Page 1]** by the Word of God. This I have repeatedly done with the most perfect satisfaction; and having no doubts, why should I seek to raise them? I have, it is true, read many books of divinity; but very few, that I can recollect, of a controversial nature. If I found it necessary to read one side of the argument, I should think it incumbent upon me to read the other; but surely what is requisite in merely worldly affairs, ought not to be extended to a subject in which we have an infallible guide—the word of God; on that word then, I choose to build my faith, in preference to any human authority whatever.

This letter is indeed uncomfortable reading. Perhaps it, and countless other similar examples from Trimmer's writings, explains why scholars of British romanticism as well as feminists working to recuperate women writers have, in large measure, avoided Trimmer. It is difficult to praise Trimmer's scholarship and the theological rigor of her writings when she publicly professes never to have questioned her own beliefs. For feminists who dedicate limited time, energy, and other resources to the ongoing project of recovering women authors, there are more appealing women writers to recuperate. Indeed, in terms of our project of creating women's literary history, Trimmer can be read as a useful figure who allows us to examine the limits of our recovery efforts. As Margaret Ezell reminds us, Anglo-American feminism celebrates the authors who represent contemporary feminist values and overlooks others who are difficult to fit into our paradigms for reading women's texts.³

At the same time, Trimmer has fared little better in the historiography of children's literature: as Mitzi Myers and William McCarthy have compellingly documented, the story of how children's literature developed has been a "story almost Manichaeian in its need to dichotomize, and then to extol or damn its dichotomized terms" (McCarthy 198). Authors who "instruct" children are aligned with an oppressive hegemony in contrast to an ongoing celebration of texts considered imaginative, pleasurable, delightful, or playful. In other words, fairy tales and nonsense rhymes are superior to textbooks no matter how innovative the textbook and how derivative the tale. Myers argues that this genre dichotomizing is also explicitly gendered. She traces the ongoing excoriation of pedagogical writings (and women pedagogues) to a reinscription of the romantic myth of the child of nature into our constructions of children's literature. The child, "trailing clouds [End Page 2] of glory," comes from God into nature but...

Articles

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