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 **Benevolent Brothers and Supervising Mothers: Ideology in
the Children's Verses of Mary and Charles Lamb and Charlotte
Smith**

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

**Benevolent Brothers and Supervising
Mothers:**
Ideology in the Children's Verses of Mary and Charles

We can assert two indisputable truths: one is that there were not mere dozens, nor even hundreds, but actually thousands, of women whose writing was published in Great Britain in the half century between 1780 and 1830 that subsumes the Romantic period; and the other the that until very recently we have known very little about it. What that says about the sociology of literary criticism is obvious to any reader and therefore need not occupy us any further.

Curran, "Women Readers," 179

Although the current recovery of thousands of British women who published in the Romantic period has exposed the gendered politics of past literary criticism, we still participate in a hierarchical gendering of genres. Thus, while republishing women's novels, women's poetry, and women's feminist and pedagogical tracts, Romantic scholars have not directed sustained attention to women's verses for children.¹ That such verses seem incongruous in relation to a Romantic discourse suggests that we have not carried forward far enough our revisionings of what constitutes British Romanticism. Studying women's verses for children as cross-writing—as works that transgress the divisions between adult and children's literature—reveals the inadequacy of the interpretive conventions that we apply to children's texts. Even though we acknowledge that Romantic ideologies construct poetry as a privileged discourse restricted by class, education, and gender, we still discuss women's poetry for children as if it were **[End Page 87]** only a historical artifact—not art that engages ongoing aesthetic and poetic debates.

By contrast, this essay argues that children's verses critique a Romantic ideology that privileges aesthetics over social concerns, and do so by representing patriarchal literary authority in terms of symbolic family dynamics. More precisely, I will demonstrate that Mary and Charles

Lamb's *Poetry for Children* uses brother and sister figures to expose the patriarchal structure of poetics—but stops short of radically subverting these structures or positing an alternative, feminine poetics. Charlotte Smith also uses representations of siblings to critique aesthetics, but, as I will demonstrate, her project is far more subversive. Unlike the Lambs, Smith encourages women to enter into and then transform poetics. Ostensibly written for "young persons," Smith's *Conversations Introducing Poetry* is actually a mother's manual on teaching children to become poets. Smith places brothers and sisters under the supervision of a powerful mother-poet who insists that girls as well as boys must be educated in the fundamental skills of poetry creation, reading, and analysis. Poetic authority, in Smith's *Conversations*, resides with the matriarch.

As recent work by Alan Richardson and Mitzi Myers has shown, children's literature can be a vehicle for women writers' self-expression, "a conceptual space where politics, social history, ideology, and literary representations of all kinds meet, interpenetrate, and collide" (Richardson, *Literature*, 2). Children's literature is also an "inherently transgressive genre" that insists that readers play both child and adult (Myers, "De-Romanticizing," 92). Yet studies of Romantic aesthetics have presented women's verses for children as uncomplicated texts written at a child's reading level, overlooking the ways in which works overtly written for children hide covert messages intended for adult readers. Our critical biases valorize either a masculine high Romanticism, or, more recently, women who seem to represent early feminists. Neither tradition of criticism has much room for didactic children's verses.² This devaluation of women's children's verses is rooted in the aesthetic politics of the Romantic era itself. The canonical writers mythologized the child, turning pedagogy into a poetic "master narrative—the Romantic story of the emergent male self" (Myers, "De-Romanticizing," 89). Further, in the Romantic era, poetry as a genre was constructed through the categorization of popular texts as nonpoetry (the feminized, the sentimental, the ephemeral) and of high art as real poetry (the classical, the philosophical, the muscular [End Page 88] epic).

It is at this historical moment—when the poetic canon is being created and poetry is being defined in a closing of the ranks *against* the...

SOCIAL TRAFFIC

Benevolent Brothers and Supervising Mothers: Ideology in the Children's Verses of Mary and Charles Lamb and Charlotte Smith

Donelle K. Kuwe

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