

Dramatic monologues and the novel-in-verse:

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Adelaide O'Keeffe and the development of  
theatrical children's poetry in the long  
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 **Dramatic Monologues and the Novel-in-Verse: Adelaide O'Keeffe and the Development of Theatrical Children's Poetry in the long Eighteenth Century**

Donelle Ruwe

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

**Dramatic Monologues and the Novel-in-**

## Verse:

### Adelaide O'Keefe and the Development of Theatrical Children's Poetry in the long Eighteenth Century

Donelle Ruwe (bio)

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In 1804 Darton and Harvey published the first of what would be the two best-selling poetry volumes in the nineteenth century, *Original Poems for Infant Minds, by Several Young Persons* (1804–5).<sup>1</sup> One of the "young persons" was Adelaide O'Keefe, the daughter of an Irish Protestant actress and an Irish Catholic dramatist. O'Keefe, who would eventually author nine collections of children's poems, four novels, and a retelling of the Bible,<sup>2</sup> was the first writer to adapt dramatic forms along with the precepts of late eighteenth-century rational education (such as an emphasis on active learning and moral development) to children's poetry. This essay introduces Adelaide O'Keefe to children's literature scholars and demonstrates her pioneering work in two poetry genres: the children's dramatic monologue and the novel-in-verse.

O'Keefe gained hands-on experience with theatrical writing through her father, John O'Keefe, who wrote or adapted over fifty comic operas for Covent Garden, the Haymarket, and Drury Lane. He began his career in the Irish theaters, where he met Mary Heaphy, the seventeen-year-old daughter of the manager of Dublin's Royal Theatre. They married in 1774 and soon had three children: John Tottenham (1775–1804), Adelaide (1776–1855), and Gerald (1777–died in infancy). When Adelaide was six, her father lost his eyesight and discovered that his wife was having an affair with a Scottish actor named George Graham. Enraged, John O'Keefe left Ireland forever, taking his children with him. Mary Heaphy later married Graham: "as a Protestant" she considered her first union with a Catholic "not sufficiently binding to prevent a subsequent marriage" (Adelaide [End Page 219] O'Keefe, "Memoir" xiv).<sup>3</sup> When Mary secretly visited the children, O'Keefe was, in Adelaide's own words, "inflamed with jealousy" and sent both children to France. To her "supreme horror and surprise," she found herself, at age seven, in a

French convent, and there she remained until the outbreak of the revolution five years later (xxii). Twelve-year-old Adelaide never again parted willingly from her father. She served as his amanuensis, and she supported him through her earnings as a governess and an author for almost forty-five years until his death in 1833 at age eighty-six. Money was a continual problem for the family, especially after Tottenham died soon after taking orders at Exeter College, leaving behind substantial debts from his education. Theaters, publishers, and the British crown owed John and Adelaide pensions, royalties, and annuities, but the money did not always come, and when it did, it was rarely on time. Most of these annuities stopped after O'Keeffe's death, leaving Adelaide almost destitute. She sold his furniture and effects by public auction and rented their home to lodgers. Princess Charlotte sent five pounds for a mourning brooch.

When the two volumes of *Original Poems for Infant Minds* were released in 1804 and 1805, Adelaide O'Keeffe was already a published novelist. However, like the rest of the contributors to *Original Poems*, she was a novice children's author. *Original Poems* contained work by Ann, Jane, Jacob, and Isaac Taylor and one poem by Bernard Barton.<sup>4</sup> Though O'Keeffe authored a third of its poems, she was paid a smaller proportion of profits than was her due, and when the volume was republished, she was not consulted about editing decisions. Darton and Harvey consistently deferred to the Taylor family. In 1818 the publishers negotiated a new, fourteen-year copyright agreement in which each of the Taylor sisters received £600, but no such agreement was made with O'Keeffe ([Linda Davis 42](#)). In 1844 and again in 1848, O'Keeffe contacted Isaac Taylor and Ann Taylor Gilbert's husband about her missing royalties. Their responses were demeaning. Taylor said that a "considerable number of the contributions of 'Adelaide'" had been replaced (in fact, only three of her thirty-four poems had been replaced), and Gilbert suggested that she could withdraw her poems at her pleasure...



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