

A humble Spirit under Correction: Tracts,  
Hymns, and the Ideology of Evangelical  
Fiction for Children, 1780-1820.

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 **"A humble Spirit under Correction": Tracts, Hymns, and  
the Ideology of Evangelical Fiction for Children, 1780-1820**

Lynne Vallone

The Lion and the Unicorn

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

**"A humble Spirit under Correction":  
Tracts, Hymns, and the Ideology of Evangelical Fiction  
for Children, 1780-1820**

*Lynne Vallone (bio)*

'Piper, sit thee down and write  
In a book that all may read!  
So he vanish'd from my sight,  
And I pluck'd a hollow reed,

And I made a rural pen,  
And I stain'd the water clear,  
And I wrote my happy songs  
Every child may joy to hear.

(William Blake, *Songs of Innocence*)

Patience, labour, sobriety, frugality and religion should be  
recommended to [the poor]; all the rest is downright fraud.<sup>1</sup>

(Edmund Burke)

Other critics have discussed ideology in children's literature, and gender and genre concerns in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century didactic fiction; this essay, while informed by their scholarship, discusses a combination of the three, and examines didactic and religious fiction not particularly from the point of view of the author writing for a child audience, but from the interstices of the relationship between Author and Child.<sup>2</sup> Part 1 considers some theoretical issues connected with the creation of a class- and often gender-based literature, a literature which is, to adopt Zohar Shavit's term in a somewhat different context, "ambivalent," understood in two ways.<sup>3</sup> That is, the literary productions for children of the Evangelical movement and other religious writers reflect not only upon the Child whom they believe is receiving their teaching through gift books, tracts, etc., but also upon themselves in the very act of the creation of this fiction.<sup>4</sup> The essay then examines representative work of three women writers who wrote religious books for children: Hannah More, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, and Mary Martha Sherwood, and the ways in which [End Page 72] The Lion and The Unicorn

15 (1991) 72-95 © 1992 by The Johns Hopkins University Press their tracts, hymns, and novels respond to and, indeed, create an image of the child. I assume that the reader will have some degree of familiarity with the Evangelical Movement in Britain in the late eighteenth century, but briefly contextualize the authors under consideration within that general historical period.

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The energetic spirit of the last two decades of the eighteenth century expressed itself in reform and revolution, in both cases identifying the lower classes as a persistently "needy" group: needing political or economic change, or improvement within themselves, depending upon one's perspective. During this period of social and political unrest, religious and educational reform movements—frequently supported and often led by women—flourished (among them Evangelicalism, the Sunday School Movement, and abolitionism) and intersected with and frequently took the form of writing intended for children. Although the reform movements had not yet gained the full momentum of the 1830s and 40s, tensions among the classes, religious factions, and political groups were already uncomfortably evident. In *The Making of the English Working Class*, E. P. Thompson identifies the response of the upper classes to the laboring classes' struggle for political reform as a "counter-revolution" founded on the belief in "the necessity of putting the house of the poor in order" (56-57). However, in the midst of this generally "male" turmoil, whose concerns did not address the status of women in society, the Evangelical Movement was steadfastly and single-mindedly conducting a "domestic revolution" which focused on issues considered to be "feminine": religion, home, and family (Cutt 16).

The religious fervor of the times was principally concerned with educational reform, specifically, that working-class children be taught to know their God and to read His book. It was hoped that parents would be sufficiently inspired by the good example of their newly literate (and perhaps considerate) children to learn to read the Bible and embrace its

tenets of humility, submissiveness, and patience, even in the face of social, economic, and political inequality. Thomas Laqueur writes in *Religion and Respectability: Sunday Schools and Working-Class Culture*:

[P]rotestantism generally, and its evangelical strains in particular, held that the word of God contained all that was necessary for the salvation of the soul and, since evangelicalism was a highly individualistic form of religion, a religion of the spirit, it was thought essential that everyone have direct personal access to...

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