

= Lessons for Children =

Lessons for Children is a series of four age @-@ adapted reading primers written by the prominent 18th @-@ century British poet and essayist Anna Laetitia Barbauld . Published in 1778 and 1779 , the books initiated a revolution in children 's literature in the Anglo @-@ American world . For the first time , the needs of the child reader were seriously considered : the typographically simple texts progress in difficulty as the child learns . In perhaps the first demonstration of experiential pedagogy in Anglo @-@ American children 's literature , Barbauld 's books use a conversational style , which depicts a mother and her son discussing the natural world . Based on the educational theories of John Locke , Barbauld 's books emphasise learning through the senses .

One of the primary morals of Barbauld 's lessons is that individuals are part of a community ; in this she was part of a tradition of female writing that emphasised the interconnectedness of society . Charles , the hero of the texts , explores his relationship to nature , to animals , to people , and finally to God .

Lessons had a significant effect on the development of children 's literature in Britain and the United States . Maria Edgeworth , Sarah Trimmer , Jane Taylor , and Ellenor Fenn , to name a few of the most illustrious , were inspired to become children 's authors because of Lessons and their works dominated children 's literature for several generations . Lessons itself was reprinted for over a century . However , because of the disrepute that educational writings fell into , largely due to the low esteem awarded Barbauld , Trimmer , and others by contemporary male Romantic writers , Barbauld 's Lessons has rarely been studied by scholars . In fact , it has only been analysed in depth since the 1990s .

= = Publication , structure , and pedagogical theory = =

= = = Publication and structure = = =

Lessons depicts a mother teaching her son . Presumably , many of the events were inspired by Barbauld 's experiences of teaching her own adopted son , her nephew Charles , as the events correlate with his age and growth . Although there are no surviving first edition copies of the works , children 's literature scholar Mitzi Myers has reconstructed the probable publication dates from Barbauld 's letters and the books ' earliest reviews as follows : Lessons for Children of two to three (1778) ; Lessons for Children of three , part I (1778) ; Lessons for Children of three , part II (1778) ; and Lessons for Children of three to four (1779) . After its initial publication , the series was often published as a single volume .

Barbauld demanded that her books be printed in large type with wide margins , so that children could easily read them ; she was more than likely the " originator " of this practice , according to Barbauld scholar William McCarthy , and " almost certainly [its] popularizer " . In her history of children 's literature in The Guardian of Education (1802 ? 1806) , Sarah Trimmer noted these innovations , as well as the use of good @-@ quality paper and large spaces between words . While making reading easier , these production changes also made the books too expensive for the children of the poor , therefore Barbauld 's books helped to create a distinct aesthetic for the middle @-@ class children 's book .

Barbauld 's texts were designed for the developing reader , beginning with words of one syllable and progressing to multi @-@ syllabic words . The first part of Lessons includes simple statements such as : " Ink is black , and papa 's shoes are black . Paper is white , and Charles 's frock is white . " The second part increases in difficulty : " February is very cold too , but the days are longer , and there is a yellow crocus coming up , and the mezereon tree is in blossom , and there are some white snow @-@ drops peeking up their little heads . "

Barbauld also " departs from previous reading primers by introducing elements of story , or narrative , piecemeal before introducing her first story " : the narrator explains the idea of " sequentiality " to Charles , and implicitly to the reader , before ever telling him a story . For example

, the days of the week are explained before Charles 's trip to France .

= = = Pedagogical theory = = =

Barbauld 's Lessons emphasises the value of all kinds of language and literacy ; not only do readers learn how to read but they also acquire the ability to understand metaphors and analogies . The fourth volume in particular fosters poetic thinking and as McCarthy points out , its passages on the moon mimic Barbauld 's poem " A Summer Evening 's Meditation " :

Barbauld also developed a particular style that would dominate British and American children 's literature for a generation : an " informal dialogue between parent and child " , a conversational style that emphasised linguistic communication . Lessons starts out monopolised by the mother 's voice but slowly , over the course of the volumes , Charles 's voice is increasingly heard as he gains confidence in his own ability to read and speak . This style was an implicit critique of late 18th @-@ century pedagogy , which typically employed rote learning and memorisation .

Barbauld 's Lessons also illustrates mother and child engaging in quotidian activities and taking nature walks . Through these activities , the mother teaches Charles about the world around him and he explores it . This , too , was a challenge to the pedagogical orthodoxy of the day , which did not encourage experiential learning . The mother shows Charles the seasons , the times of the day , and different minerals by bringing him to them rather than simply describing them and having him recite those descriptions . Charles learns the principles of " botany , zoology , numbers , change of state in chemistry ... the money system , the calendar , geography , meteorology , agriculture , political economy , geology , [and] astronomy " . He also inquires about all of them , making the learning process dynamic .

Barbauld 's pedagogy was fundamentally based on John Locke 's Some Thoughts Concerning Education (1693) , the most influential pedagogical treatise in 18th @-@ century Britain . Building on Locke 's theory of the Association of Ideas , which he had outlined in Some Thoughts , philosopher David Hartley had developed an associationist psychology that greatly influenced writers such as Barbauld (who had read Joseph Priestley 's redaction of it) . For the first time , educational theorists and practitioners were thinking in terms of developmental psychology . As a result , Barbauld and the women writers she influenced produced the first graded texts and the first body of literature designed for an age @-@ specific readership .

= = Themes = =

Lessons not only teaches literacy , " it also initiates the child [reader] into the elements of society 's symbol @-@ systems and conceptual structures , inculcates an ethics , and encourages him to develop a certain kind of sensibility " . One of the series ' overall aims is to demonstrate that Charles is superior to the animals he encounters ? because he can speak and reason , he is better than they are . Lessons for Children , of Three Years Old , part 2 begins :

Do you know why you are better than Puss ? Puss can play as well as you ; and Puss can drink milk , and lie upon the carpet ; and she can run as fast as you , and faster too , a great deal ; and she can climb trees better ; and she can catch mice , which you cannot do . But can Puss talk ? No . Can Puss read ? No . Then that is the reason why you are better than Puss ? because you can talk and read .

Andrew O 'Malley writes in his survey of 18th @-@ century children 's literature , " from helping poor animals [Charles] eventually makes a seamless transition to performing small acts of charity for the poor children he encounters " . Charles learns to care for his fellow human beings through his exposure to animals . Barbauld 's Lessons is not , therefore , Romantic in the traditional sense ; it does not emphasise the solitary self or the individual . As McCarthy puts it , " every human being needs other human beings in order to live . Humans are communal entities " .

Lessons was probably meant to be paired with Barbauld 's Hymns in Prose for Children (1781) , which were both written for Charles . As F. J. Harvey Darton , an early scholar of children 's literature , explains , they " have the same ideal , in one aspect held by Rousseau , in another wholly

rejected by him : the belief that a child should steadily contemplate Nature , and the conviction that by so doing he will be led to contemplate the traditional God " . However , some modern scholars have pointed to the lack of overt religious references in Lessons , particularly in contrast to Hymns , to make the claim that it is secular .

One important theme in Lessons is restriction of the child , a theme which has been interpreted both positively and negatively by critics . In what Mary Jackson has called the " new child " of the 18th century , she describes " a fondly sentimentalized state of childishness rooted in material and emotional dependency on adults " and she argues that the " new good child seldom made important , real decisions without parental approval ... In short , the new good child was a paragon of dutiful submissiveness , refined virtue , and appropriate sensibility . " Other scholars , such as Sarah Robbins , have maintained that Barbauld presents images of constraint only to offer images of liberation later in the series : education for Barbauld , in this interpretation , is a progression from restraint to liberation , physically represented by Charles ' slow movement from his mother 's lap in the opening scene of first book , to a stool next to her in the opening of the subsequent volume , to his detachment from her side in the final book .

= = Reception and legacy = =

Lessons for Children and Barbauld 's other popular children 's book , Hymns in Prose for Children , had an unprecedented impact ; not only did they influence the poetry of William Wordsworth and William Blake , particularly Blake 's Songs of Innocence and Experience (1789 ? 94) , they were also used to teach several generations of schoolchildren both in Britain and the United States . Barbauld 's texts were used to perpetuate the ideal of Republican motherhood in 19th @-@ century America , particularly the notion of the mother as the educator of the nation . British children 's author and critic Charlotte Yonge wrote in 1869 that the books had taught " three @-@ quarters of the gentry of the last three generations " to read . Poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning could still recite the beginning of Lessons at age thirty @-@ nine .

Writers of all stamps immediately recognised the revolutionary nature of Barbauld 's books . After meeting Barbauld , the famous 18th @-@ century novelist Frances Burney described her and her books :

... the authoress of the most useful books , next to Mrs. Trimmer 's , that have been yet written for dear little children ; though this for the world is probably her very secondary merit , her many pretty poems , and particularly songs , being generally esteemed . But many more have written those as well , and not a few better ; for children 's books she began the new walk , which has since been so well cultivated , to the great information as well as utility of parents .

Barbauld herself believed that her writing was noble and she encouraged others to follow in her footsteps . As Betsy Rodgers , her biographer , explains : " she gave prestige to the writing of juvenile literature , and by not lowering her standard of writing for children , she inspired others to write on a similar high standard " . In fact , because of Barbauld , Sarah Trimmer and Hannah More were galvanised to write for poor children and to organise a large @-@ scale Sunday School movement . Ann and Jane Taylor began writing children 's poetry , the most famous of which is " Twinkle , Twinkle , Little Star " . Ellenor Fenn wrote and designed a series of readers and games for middle @-@ class children , including the best @-@ selling Cobwebs to Catch Flies (1784) . Richard Lovell Edgeworth began one of the first systematic studies of childhood development which would culminate not only in an educational treatise co @-@ authored with Maria Edgeworth entitled Practical Education (1798) , but also in a large body of children 's stories by Maria , beginning with The Parent 's Assistant (1798) . Thomas Day originally began his important The History of Sandford and Merton (1783 ? 89) for Edgeworth 's collection , but it grew too long and was published separately .

In the second half of the 1790s , Barbauld and her brother , the physician John Aikin , wrote a second series of books , Evenings at Home , aimed at more advanced readers , ages eight to twelve . While not as influential , these were also popular and remained in print for decades . Lessons was reprinted , translated , pirated , and imitated until the 20th century ; according to Myers

, it helped found a female tradition of educational writing .

While Day , for example , has been hailed as an educational innovator , Barbauld has most often been described through the unsympathetic words of her detractors . The politician Charles James Fox and the writer and critic Samuel Johnson ridiculed Barbauld 's children 's books and believed that she was wasting her poetic talents . In his *Life of Johnson* (1791) , James Boswell recorded Johnson 's thoughts :

Endeavouring to make children prematurely wise is useless labour ... Too much is expected from precocity , and too little performed . [Barbauld] was an instance of early cultivation , but in what did it terminate ? In marrying a little Presbyterian parson , who keeps an infant boarding @-@ school , so that all her employment now is , ' To suckle fools , and chronicle small beer . ' She tells the children ' This is a cat , and that is a dog , with four legs and a tail ; see there ! you are much better than a cat or a dog , for you can speak.'

Barbauld had published a successful book of poetry in 1773 which Johnson greatly admired ; he viewed her switch to children 's literature as a descent . The most damning and lasting criticism , however , came from the Romantic essayist Charles Lamb in a letter to the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge :

Mrs. Barbauld [' s] stuff has banished all the old classics of the nursery ... Mrs. B 's and Mrs. Trimmer 's nonsense lay in piles about . Knowledge insignificant & vapid as Mrs. B 's books convey , it seems , must come to a child in the shape of knowledge , & his empty noddle must be turned with conceit of his own powers , when he has learnt , that a Horse is an animal , & billy is better than a Horse , & such like : instead of that beautiful Interest which made the child a man , while all the time he suspected himself to be no bigger than a child . Science has succeeded to Poetry no less in the little walks of Children than with Men . ? : Is there no possibility of averting this sore evil ? Think what you would have been now , if instead of being fed with Tales and old wives fables in childhood , you had been crammed with Geography & Natural History ? Damn them . I mean the cursed Barbauld Crew , those Blights & Blasts of all that is Human in man & child . [emphasis Lamb 's]

This quote was used by writers and scholars to condemn Barbauld and other educational writers for a century . As Myers argues :

[Lamb] expresses in embryonic form ways of thinking about children , teaching , and literature that have long since been institutionalized in historical account and classroom practice : the privileging of an imaginative canon and its separation from all the cultural knowledge that had previously been thought of as literature ; the binary opposition of scientific , empiricist ways of knowing and intuitive , imaginative insights ; even the two @-@ tiered structure of most modern English departments , with male @-@ dominated imaginative literature on the upper @-@ deck and practical reading and writing instruction , taught most often by women and the untenured , relegated to the lower levels .

It is only in the 1990s and 2000s that Barbauld and other female educational writers are beginning to be acknowledged in the history of children 's literature and , indeed , in the history of literature itself . As Myers points out , " the writing woman as teacher has not captured the imagination of feminist scholars " , and Barbauld 's children 's works are usually consigned to " the backwaters of children 's literature surveys , usually deplored for their pernicious effect on the emergent cultural construction of Romantic childhood , or in the margins of commentary on male high Romanticism , a minor inspiration for Blake or Wordsworth perhaps " . The male Romantics did not explore didactic genres that illustrated educational progress ; rather , as Myers explains , their works embodied a " nostalgia for lost youth and [a] pervasive valorization of instinctive juvenile wisdom " not shared by many female writers at this time .

Serious scholarship is just beginning to investigate the complexities of Barbauld 's *Lessons* ; McCarthy , for example , has noted the resonances between *Lessons* and T. S. Eliot 's *The Wasteland* that have yet to be explored :