

# Hymnody: Re-Tuning the History of Childhood with Chords and Verses.

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## **Nineteenth-Century British Children's Hymnody: Re-Tuning the History of Childhood with Chords and Verses**

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Children's Literature Association Quarterly

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 35, Number 2, Summer 2010

pp. 144-175

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

### Abstract

As part of the cultural association of childhood and religion, a torrent of hymns and hymnbooks was published throughout the nineteenth century written exclusively for the young. However, this genre has rarely been studied within the context of children's literature. In this revisionist study, using archival British children's hymnbooks, I suggest how a study of hymns alters our understanding of children's literary history—indeed the definition of “childhood” itself. These “chords and verses,” perceived to be didactic and doctrinaire, empowered children through music's physical agency, “adult” approaches to hymn-writing, and the intellect required to negotiate through the logically disparate texts.

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Alisa Clapp-Itnyre

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**I**f the Puritans discovered *the child*, then the Victorians discovered *childhood*.<sup>1</sup> This useful maxim, found in *The Riverside Anthology of Children's Literature* (Saltman 4), neatly sums up traditional explanations of the history of childhood from the seventeenth century through the nineteenth century. It points, for instance, to the connection between religion and the child in Western culture: paradoxically, the Puritan society most concerned with the afterlife was the first to bring recognition to an important subgroup in this life—children—in order to train them in godly living. It also points to the immense ideological shift later made by Victorian society in acknowledging and even idealizing the years of childhood, represented by the focused portrayals of children and young piety in the novels of Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Charles Dickens. As part of this cultural association of childhood and religion, a torrent of hymns and hymnbooks written exclusively for the young was published throughout the nineteenth century. This genre has rarely been studied within the context of children's literature, however<sup>2</sup>; when acknowledged at all, primarily in the context of hymnody, children's hymns have been precluded from "serious critical study" and written off as an "embarrassment" (Watson 508).<sup>3</sup> In this revisionist study, using archived British children's hymnbooks,<sup>4</sup> I will suggest how a study of hymns alters our understanding of children's religious works—indeed the definition of "childhood" itself—within the history of children's literature. I will further demonstrate that within these "chords and verses," perceived to be didactic and doctrinaire, lay great empowerment of children through music's physical agency, "adult" approaches to hymn-writing, and the intellect required to negotiate through theologically disparate texts.

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Alisa Clapp-Itnyre is associate professor of English at Indiana University East in Richmond, Indiana, where she teaches children's, young-adult, and Victorian literature courses. Her publications include *Angelic Airs, Subversive Songs: Music as Social Discourse in the Victorian Novel* (Ohio UP, 2002); articles on Tennyson, Eliot, and Hardy; and articles in *Children's Literature in Education* and *Children's Folklore Review*. Her work on children's hymns was awarded a 2009 ChLA Faculty Research Grant.

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culture atom.  
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philosophically transforms dualism.  
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causes a complex rhenium with Salen.  
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mechanical system is predictable.  
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electoral system inductively does the client demand.  
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