

Mrs. Barbauld's Primer for the Textual
Construction of Middle-Class Domestic
Pedagogy.

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 ***Lessons for Children and Teaching Mothers: Mrs. Barbauld's
Primer for the Textual Construction of Middle-Class Domestic
Pedagogy***

Sarah Robbins

The Lion and the Unicorn

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 17, Number 2, December 1993

pp. 135-151

[10.1353/uni.0.0058](#)

ARTICLE

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

Lessons for Children and Teaching Mothers:

Mrs. Barbauld's Primer for the Textual Construction of Middle-Class Domestic Pedagogy

Sarah Robbins (bio)

Come hit her Charles, come to Mamma.

Make haste.

Sit in Mamma's lap.

Now read your book.

Where is the pin to point with?

Here is a pin.

Do not tear the book.

Only naughty boys tear books.

Charles shall have a pretty new lesson.

Spell that word. Good boy.

Now go and play.

These opening lines from her 1778 *Lessons for Children* announced Anna Aikin Barbauld's proposal for a meaningful middle-class feminine social role.¹ Through images emphasizing a mutually empowering mother-son-teacher-learner interaction, her primer for home-based reading instruction attracted an enthusiastic Anglo-American audience well into the nineteenth century via continued repackagings by editors and publishers on both sides of the Atlantic.² Thus, while the sheer number of editions testifies to Barbauld's ongoing influence on the social construction of middle-class feminine subjectivity models, accurately characterizing the culture-shaping power exercised by her texts is complicated by significant variations in those same reissuings of the *Lessons*.³ With easily identifiable interventions ranging from such seemingly innocuous moves as modernizing (or, in some cases Americanizing) vocabulary to more overt reshapings of the physical presentation of the text, later versions of her primer series often looked quite different from the original.⁴ Even more significant, however, was the cumulative effect of efforts by a variety of editors, beginning with

her niece Lucy Aikin, to subsume Barbauld and her pedagogy into the emerging, contested ethos of nineteenth-century, middle-class domesticity. In particular, whereas Barbauld **[End Page 135]** herself had refrained from claiming in her *Lessons* "advertisement" to be offering a female teaching model intended for widespread replication in other middle-class homes, her later editors consistently characterized her text and its implied program as such.⁵

Besides analysis of her primer's various marketers, a detailed retracing of Barbauld's influence on the social construction of the middle-class female domestic pedagogue will also require close study of other texts. The *Lessons*, after all, represented only one element in the development of "Barbauld" as a definer of middle-class femininity, intellectually informed, home-based education for children, and the Victorian version of "family values." For instance, the *Evenings at Home* anthology of stories for shared family reading, which she co-authored (beginning in 1786) with her brother John Aikin, was at least as popular; publishers in England and America reissued the whole series and various excerpt versions well beyond the midpoint of the next century.⁶ Her *Hymns in Prose*, meanwhile, retained its place over the years as an appealing child's devotional text for at-home use and was further institutionalized in the United States as a Sunday School reader.⁷ Similarly, selections from *A Legacy for Young Ladies*, the anthology of didactic essays Lucy Aikin published in 1826 just after her aunt's death, would continue to be represented in such domestic education publications for women as Sarah Josepha Hale's compendium of "Distinguished Women" and would also reappear within longer sympathetic biographies touting Barbauld as a paradigm of middle-class femininity.⁸ The rhetoric of Barbauld's juvenile texts, in other words, was constantly being appropriated and reshaped throughout the nineteenth century by Anglo-American promoters of the ethos of domestic didacticism and of its potential social power for middle-class mothers.⁹

Though only one piece of Barbauld's substantial juvenile legacy, the multivolume *Lessons for Children*, is a logical place to begin recovering the

story of her influence on middle-class Anglo-American education, her first juvenile publication, the primer, sets the stage for the philosophy and methodology of her later literary pedagogy. Specifically, a study of the text within the context of its production shows Barbauld was already beginning in 1778 to propose greater access to learning for (in particular, male) children and to make an implicit demand that the middle-class mother be adequately educated for her vital teaching responsibility. This interconnected appeal appears as early as the *Lessons* advertisement, where Barbauld calls for content carefully "adapted to the comprehension of a...

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