Providential Empiricism: Suffering and Shaping the Self in Eighteenth-Century British Children's Literature

Adrianne Wadewitz
Occidental College

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rae

Part of the History Commons, Other English Language and Literature Commons, and the Religion Commons

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religion in the Age of Enlightenment by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
Providential Empiricism: Suffering and Shaping the Self in Eighteenth-Century British Children's Literature

Adrianne Wadewitz
Occidental College

In Heav'n he shines with Beams of Love,
With Wrath in Hell beneath!
'Tis on his Earth I stand or move,
And 'tis his air I breathe.

His Hand is my perpetual Guard;
He keeps me with his Eye:
Why should I then forget the Lord,
Who is for ever nigh?
—Isaac Watts

In "Praise for Creation and Providence" eighteenth-century Dissenting cleric Isaac Watts conveys God's encompassing presence—not only is he in heaven and hell, but he also inhabits (and owns) Earth and everything in it. This poem was reprinted for more than 150 years

1. I would like to thank Deidre Lynch, Nicholas Williams, Sarah Knott, Mary Favret, Jesse Molesworth, Mica Hilson, and the anonymous readers for their invaluable feedback on various iterations of this essay.

in Watts's *Divine Songs: Attempted in Easy Language for the Use of Children* (1775). A child reciting this poem is made keenly aware of how much he or she owes to God—soul, planet, and life. Watts emphasizes how one senses God's physical presence ("Beams of love," "His Hand," and "his Eye") with the body ("I stand or move" and "I breathe") in order to understand his transcendence and judgment. Watts continues this theme in his "Discourse on the Education of Children and Youth" (1753), advising parents and teachers to expose children to nature and encouraging them to instruct their charges "that the Great God made all these Things" and that "his Providence governs them all." Watts argues that experiential learning demonstrates both God's existence and magnificence—it allows children to see God in nature. Importantly, to grasp the role of providence, both the child in the hymn and the reader suffer in order to gain experience that ultimately constitutes the self.

This vision of God—an active, involved God who is committed to human affairs on the individual level—pervades eighteenth-century British children's literature and determines the construction of the self; sensory perceptions are providential and experiences are God given. Rather than seeing the child solely as a blank slate, as John Locke does, many eighteenth-century British children's texts portray the child as a supplicant or a penitent awaiting discipline and fulfillment from God. In highlighting providence's role in the formation of the self, these writers encourage their readers to develop a specifically Christian subjectivity. They integrate Locke's newly popularized idea of the tabula rasa with older forms of Christian subjectivity, specifically the role of suffering in forming character.

In exploring this "providential empiricism," I demonstrate the deeply religious underpinnings of Enlightenment education. Whereas we in the early twenty-first century instinctively see a paradox between Christian providential thinking and Lockean empirical thinking, eighteenth-century children's writers seamlessly meld the two, particularly when it comes to how experience forms the self. As Patricia Demers has written in her study of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century

British religious and moral children’s literature, “what was once so
straightforward and logical is now for us embroiling, coercive, and uni­
formly unsatisfying.” In the last twenty years, scholarship about the
Enlightenment has expanded to challenge the traditional narrative that
it had been a movement rooted solely in reason. This new scholarship
explains that the Enlightenment is not necessarily the root of modern
secularism as previously thought and that modernity and secularism
are not necessarily tied together (offering an explanation for why it is
hard for us in our historical moment, for example, to reconcile provi­
dentialism with empiricism). In this article, I would like to build on
this recent work of Enlightenment historians, applying it to the case of
Enlightenment education, specifically eighteenth-century British chil­
dren’s literature.

Recent scholarship about the history of education in eighteenth-
century Britain has followed the larger trends of Enlightenment
historiography, taking into account religious impulses and asking
how they relate to questions of the Enlightenment. For example, Mary
Hilton and Jill Shefrin’s Educating the Child in Enlightenment Brit­
ain (2009) includes several essays that discuss the role of religion in
Enlightenment education. Anne Stott’s insightful contribution, “Evan­
gelicism and Enlightenment: The Educational Agenda of Hannah
More” (2009), asks the question, “How does More’s apparent indebt­
edness to Locke square with her Evangelicalism?” Her answer is that
More had been part of a “Christian Enlightenment tradition of rational
and humane education, designed to produce a piety that was sober as

4. Patricia Demers, Heaven upon Earth: The Form of Moral and Religious Children's
Literature, to 1850 (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993), 2.
5. For example, see Jonathan Sheehan, “Enlightenment, Religion, and the Enigma of
S. J. Barnett, The Enlightenment and Religion: The Myths of Modernity (Manchester: Man­
chester University Press, 2003); J. C. D. Clark, English Society 1660–1832: Religion, Ideology
and Politics during the Ancient Regime, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
2000); and J. G. A. Pocock, Barbarism and Religion: The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon,
6. Mary Hilton and Jill Shefrin, eds., Educating the Child in Britain: Beliefs, Cultures,
7. Anne Stott, “Evangelicalism and Enlightenment: The Educational Agenda of
Hannah More,” in Educating the Child in Britain, ed. Mary Hilton and Jill Shefrin, 42.
well as heartfelt: a religion of the heart but one that also recognized the importance of reason." However, within recent eighteenth-century British children’s literature scholarship, scholars tend to focus on the Enlightenment legacy of writers such as Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Maria Edgeworth, Madame de Beaumont, and even Sarah Trimmer without seriously considering the religious motifs in their work. As Demers wrote in 1993, "what still seems lacking, to me, is any sustained reading of the variety of genres that constitute the moral tradition in light of the religious beliefs underpinning it. When they are not designed to avoid it altogether, most histories try to make this material as painless and deal with it as hurriedly as possible." Despite the contributions of Seth Lerer and Mary Jackson, this remains just as much of a problem today. Besides Patricia Demers’s discussion, the best readings of these genres are J. Paul Hunter’s analysis of didactic genres in his discussion of the rise of the novel and William Sloane’s history of seventeenth-century British and American children’s literature.

British children’s literature of the eighteenth century had grown out of Puritan books for children and thus had retained a strong Christian, even Dissenting, element that is usually passed over quickly in histories of children’s literature. In her history of early British children’s literature,

8. Ibid.
10. Demers, Heaven upon Earth, 6.
for example, Jackson claims that “most of what was written after the 1740s reveals a continued lightening of mood and, after the 1770s, a growing secularism.” Moreover, she draws a division between Locke’s pedagogy and that held by the “very devout.” This strong impetus to interpret Lockean ideas as secular and to tie them to a secular Enlightenment has led children’s literature scholars to ignore the very real way in which Lockean ideas had been interpreted within a Christian framework by pedagogues and children’s authors at the time. In focusing on providence in this article, I show how self-discovery through suffering—one aspect of the lingering Puritan and Dissenting tradition in British children’s literature—had profoundly shaped the eighteenth century’s understanding of how to educate the self.

The Puritans wrote some of the earliest children’s literature in England. These “godly books”—such as James Janeway’s *A Token for Children, Being An Exact Account of the Conversion, Holy and Exemplary Lives, and Joyful Deaths of Several Young Children* (1672)—are not necessarily designed for early readers in terms of their vocabulary and syntax, but they are nevertheless aimed at children. It is not until the early eighteenth century that publishers in England, such as Thomas Boreman and Mary Cooper, would begin issuing what is more recognizable to modern readers as children’s literature. This includes texts such as *A Description of Three Hundred Animals* (1730) and *The Child’s New Play-Thing* (1743). During the middle of the eighteenth century, John Newbery would make children’s literature into a viable and sustainable publishing enterprise in England for the first time.

14. The only children’s books routinely printed in England before the late seventeenth century were hornbooks (simple primers), language textbooks such as *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* (1658), religious tracts, and chapbooks (which were not written exclusively or even primarily for children).
A scant thirty to forty years after Boreman's, Cooper's, and Newbery's initial successes, children's books had become an accepted genre of literature. British women such as Charlotte Smith, Maria Edgeworth, Lady Ellenor Fenn, and Dorothy Kilner would devote substantial time to composing texts for children. By the 1780s and 1790s, the prestigious *Analytical Review, Critical Review,* and *Monthly Review* would be reviewing major children-oriented works such as Anna Barbauld and John Aikin's *Evenings at Home* (1793–96). With an overwhelming quantity of children's literature fast becoming available to the consumer, Sarah Trimmer had been prompted to found her periodical the *Guardian of Education* in 1802.18 She announces in the first issue that "under the idea, therefore, that we might render acceptable service to mothers who wish to train up their children in the ways of piety and virtue, and secure them from the corruptions of the age, we have been induced to offer our assistance, as the examiners of books of education, and children's books."19

Whereas eighteenth-century British children's books are no longer familiar children's books today, of all the literature published during this period, children's literature almost certainly endured the longest. Even after Henry Fielding, Alexander Pope, and Samuel Johnson had been replaced by Charles Dickens and Alfred Tennyson in the hearts and minds of readers, Isaac Watts's *Divine Songs* (1715), Thomas Day's *Sandford and Merton* (1783–89), and Anna Laetitia Barbauld's *Hymns in Prose for Children* (1781) are still being published and are selling well.20 Millions of children grew up reading these texts in the English-speaking world. As Seth Lerer points out in his history of children's

literature, "Watts'[s] Divine Songs ... was undeniably the most popular book of children's verse ever published. ... Quite simply, [it] defined, for generations of parents and children, just what verse was."21 His poetry would influence writers such as Benjamin Franklin, Lewis Carroll, and Emily Dickinson.

With the advent of children's literature in the eighteenth century, children would be envisioned as a distinctive readership for the first time, and children's writers would conceive of their readers as having a rich sense of personhood. Ever since the publication of Philippe Ariès's Centuries of Childhood in 1962, historians have extensively debated the point at which "childhood" had become a distinctive concept.22 Because specialized children's publishing had increased dramatically during this period and the child reader had become an important segment of the market, fierce debates about pedagogy had arisen in British philosophical, political, and domestic circles. Some of the first "culture wars" over reading pedagogy had broken out; widespread controversy had arisen about the value of fairy tales; Hannah More had begun publishing her Cheap Repository Tracts aimed at teaching the poor to read; and Andrew Bell and Joseph Lancaster had developed competing mass education systems.23 The participants in these discussions had grasped that these

21. Lerer, Children's Literature, 90.


new children's texts would be shaping generations to come and, hence, had subjected them to intense scrutiny. Although it has been traditional to read educational philosophy and then look for its impact on children's literature—such as finding Locke in Newbery—early children's writers were independent and responded to educational philosophy not only by incorporating it but also by revising it. They are part of large, ongoing shifts in how childhood would be perceived and in discussions about how education should be shaped.

While scholars have generated excellent work showing how Locke's educational philosophy had influenced eighteenth-century British children's literature, scholars tend to mimic the older model of Enlightenment intellectual history, following a trail of ideas from philosophers to "lesser" writers, who are, in this context, often women. This model assumes that ideas only flow in one direction—from male philosophers to female writers of children's literature, privileging philosophical discourse above the literature that thousands encountered on a daily basis. Moreover, looking only for Locke's ideas restricts the concepts we see as central to eighteenth-century pedagogy: writers of eighteenth-century British children's literature have created their own pedagogies that deserve to be explored.

To give one recent example, while Heather Klemann's article "The Matter of Moral Education: Locke, Newbery, and the Didactic Book-Toy Hybrid" is a wonderful explanation of how thing theory can be applied to Newbery's texts—an important contribution to the scholarship on eighteenth-century British children's literature—it shows only that Locke's pedagogical ideas appear in Newbery's texts. Klemann does not consider who the authors of Newbery's texts might have been or how they may have been reshaping pedagogy outside of the Lockean model. And although her article does an excellent job in bringing the commercial and physical elements of Newbery's production to the fore, she does so at the expense of his authors' complex religious heritage. For example, she contrasts Puritan children's texts with Newbery's,


arguing, “In contrast to the juvenile texts of the late seventeenth-century Puritanical tradition, which guide readers toward the immaterial religious afterlife, Newbery’s incorporation of objects with texts prepares children for adult life in commercial society.” But, in fact, it is not as simple as this because the Puritans had been some of the first to commercialize the language of the soul. Her analysis claims a deep divide between the religious instruction of earlier children’s literature and the moral instruction of Newbery’s children’s literature, which is hard to see on close examination of the stories. Without placing Newbery’s works in a larger context of eighteenth-century British children’s literature, it is perhaps easier to make this distinction, but as will be seen, the texts of the period have a strong and continuing Christian, even Dissenting, flavor.

Although scholars who trace the influence of Locke have long acknowledged the central role of empirical thought in eighteenth-century British children’s literature, scholars have yet to really study the importance of providential thinking, partially because of the insistence on seeing secular Lockean thinking as central to the narrative of the genre’s development. However, in his exploration of the rise of the educational novel, Richard Barney provides one of the more sophisticated analyses regarding the role of providential themes in didactic texts. Exploring the generic impact of providential motifs in Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe (1719), he argues that “Defoe’s combination of the Puritan and empiricist paradigms results in such a violent narrative ebb and flow that Crusoe—as both protagonist and narrator—often comes close to being overwhelmed. These contrary currents, in fact,

25. Ibid., 225.
threaten Crusoe's story with a kind of narrative schizophrenia." Unlike Barney, however, I posit that the writers of eighteenth-century British children's literature try to present their readers with a coherent understanding of how providential experience and empirical experience operate in harmony; hence, the children's texts I analyze show little of the "schizophrenia" that Barney finds in Crusoe.

In order to explain fully how the two discourses of providence and empiricism can work together harmoniously in eighteenth-century British literature to present a model of selfhood, I first explain Locke's theory of the self. Then I explore how eighteenth-century British children's writers had both adhered to and challenged it; how authors had understood and integrated providence into children's literature, particularly through the role of suffering; and, finally, how children's writers had communicated their version of providential empiricism. To illustrate not only the existence and persistence of providential empiricism across a wide range of eighteenth-century British children's literature, but also the different ways in which it is represented, I compare and contrast representative works of Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Mary Martha Sherwood. Wollstonecraft and Barbauld are generally viewed as progressive writers because they support the ideals of the French Revolution. Wollstonecraft, while part of a Dissenting circle, is Anglican and eventually much less religious, yet Barbauld is a strong Dissenter. Generally, Sherwood is viewed as conservative and is evaluated almost solely through the lens of her evangelicalism. But
these easy political and religious labels do not convey the complexity of the children's literature that these three women have produced. The children's writings of Barbauld, Wollstonecraft, and Sherwood evince a skepticism regarding Locke's theory of the self and a reliance on providence to shape the self. Moreover, all three writers portray the efficacy of God-given suffering to shape the self. In replicating traditional political alliances in modern scholarship, we run the risk of missing similarities that pervade eighteenth-century British children's literature and of misunderstanding what had been central to the genre at the time.

Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) would set the terms for the eighteenth-century debate about the self. Because his ideas are still so familiar to us today—describing the mind as a blank slate and associating personal identity with consciousness—we do not often pause to consider how radical and even heretical Locke's arguments appeared at the time. In fact, a discussion revolving around "matters of morality and revealed religion" is what prompted Locke to write *Essay* in the first place. Locke argues that what constitutes a "self" is, very broadly, a "consciousness" seated in a human body. This definition breaks with two important traditions. First, it breaks with those who assert that the self is located in an invisible and immaterial soul.


35. Granted, this is clearly a reductive definition of the Lockean self. Also, although many commentators have emphasized consciousness over the body in Locke's definition of the self, Jerrold Siegel reminds us that, for Locke, they are tied together: "The personal identity established by consciousness existed together with the organic identity every individual possessed as 'man'; however reflective the first became it never substituted for the corporeal identity of the second. Moreover, the body was an important part, not just of an individual's identity as a 'man,' but of personhood too. As John Yolton has emphasized, the body was the instrument by which any individual performed those actions for which he or she was responsible: Lockean selfhood was always embodied, never disembodied. What memory tied together was not merely a series of states of consciousness, but a range of actions carried out by bodily means"; *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe since the Seventeenth Century*, reprint (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 99.

Locke claims, shockingly, that God’s judgment “shall be justified by the consciousness all persons shall have, that they themselves, in what bodies ’soever they appear, or what substance ’soever that conscious­ness adheres to.”37 For Locke, it is not the soul, therefore, that would be judged, but rather the consciousness or mind. Furthermore, he does not agree with many of his contemporaries that the self must be located in the soul for resurrection to occur at the Last Judgment or that the soul would necessarily be reunited with the body.38 Second, and more important, “by locating personal identity in consciousness and making both distinct from spiritual substance, Locke had opened the door to a materialistic interpretation of the self.”39 If God does not endow humans with innate ideas and if the self is a material invention—that is, if it consists of “thinking matter” as Locke maintains40—would grave doubts arise regarding the ability of such a self to recognize moral truth and thus to be saved through traditional Christian theology?

Most eighteenth-century British children’s authors had accepted the general outlines of the Lockean self; that is, most had accepted that the child is a tabula rasa and that associationism is crucial to constructing the self. However, they do not agree with Locke on the source of experience. They solve the problem of the self’s moral responsibility with an overtly Christian solution. To avoid the materialistic consequences of defining a self conceived of only as an amalgam of transient sensations, writers such as Barbauld, Wollstonecraft, and Sherwood argue that God controls life experiences—the stuff of which the mind is formed. This claim emerges even more strongly in Evangelical writings like Sher­wood’s, which speak of “God’s plan” for each person and question “if accidental is [even] a word allowed to a Christian.”41 Altogether, these texts embrace Locke’s theory of the “association of ideas”; but rather than emphasizing the formation of “ideas wholly owing to chance or

37. Locke, Essay, 312.
40. Locke, Essay, 312.
they frequently describe the association of ideas as an experience that God directs and guides. It is this model of experience and learning that I am calling "providential empiricism."

Eighteenth-century thinkers and theologians classify providence into two categories: the general and the particular. According to Jacob Viner, general providence is "God operating through secondary causes, or through the 'laws of nature,'" and particular providence is "God operating directly, either in a special manipulation of the laws of nature, or without reference to the laws of nature, or in direct suppression of them." In this article, I discuss particular providence—God's intervention in the lives of individuals. Importantly, as Viner points out in his survey of providence, during the eighteenth century, both of these forms had been considered beneficial to humanity. He argues further that "it was for many men psychologically impossible to believe that God did not constantly have man in his providential care, and that the physical order of the cosmos was not one of the tools he had designed to serve that purpose. The period in fact abounded, as never before, and perhaps never since, in attempts to demonstrate the manner in which the cosmos served man."

However, I want to position the writers I am discussing against the theological utilitarianism that Viner identifies as crucial to eighteenth-century thought on providence. As he explains it, the theological utilitarians argue that humans do not possess an innate moral sense and that humans are prompted to act as a result of pain or pleasure. Thus "rewards often go to the undeserving, and the virtuous are often in

42. Locke, Essay, 335.
43. George Berkeley makes a similar argument, for all sense impressions. Jonathan Bennett summarizes Berkeley's argument thus: "(a) My ideas of sense come into my mind without being caused to do so by any act of my will; (b) The occurrence of any idea must be caused by an act of the will of some being in whose mind the idea occurs; therefore (c) My ideas of sense occur in the mind of, and are caused by acts of the will of, some being other than myself"; Locke, Berkeley, Hume: Central Themes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 165. Locke's argument would be more pervasive and more influential for writers of children's literature, however, and it is his argument they would adapt.
45. Ibid., 19.
miserY: In this system, humanity is not naturally good, earthly goodness ensures no reward, and morality has no rational basis; an unjust world can only be endured because everything would be sorted out in a future life. However, in children’s literature, pain and pleasure come from God and thus trouble the categories of “innate” and “deserving.” If God sends suffering, pain is thus part of a divine plan and the person’s resulting virtue or vice is not irrational.

Providential empiricism thus posits an epistemology structured around the belief that God directs one’s actions and suggests that ethics are divinely inspired and thus potentially universal. For example, eighteenth-century British children’s writers often attribute the suffering of characters to God’s direct intervention. Such suffering is a demonstration of God’s concern for the child’s spiritual well-being because it encourages the child to develop not only sympathy but also faith, as numerous references to Job, Lamentations, and Hebrews illustrate. Locke’s empiricism, on the other hand, leads to moral relativism because, in that theory, each person builds his or her own notions of ethical responsibility from a distinct set of experiences that have no foundation in either innate morality or a divine plan.

Barbauld’s writings best capture the nuances of the providential empiricism found in eighteenth-century British children’s literature. Barbauld is now perhaps best known for her political poems, but she is also a revolutionary children’s writer. Her earliest children’s books, *Lessons for Children* (1778–79) and *Hymns in Prose for Children* (1781), are books that, for the first time, consider the needs of the child reader, being printed with large type and wide margins. Even more important, she developed a style of “informal dialogue between parent and child” that was widely imitated. Her books were read, recited, and

46. Ibid., 70–71.
47. For example, “And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children . . . despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth . . . . Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby” (Hebrews 12:5–11, Authorized (King James) Version [AV]).
memorized for over one hundred years. Like most eighteenth-century educators, Barbauld is, in many ways, a firm believer in the Lockean self. In the “Preface” to her *Hymns in Prose*, an updating and recasting of Watts's *Divine Songs*, she describes the goals of her text in phrases evoking empiricism and associationism:

The peculiar design of this publication is, to impress devotional feelings as early as possible on the infant mind; fully convinced as the author is, that they cannot be impressed too soon, and that a child, to feel the full force of the idea of God, ought never to remember the time when he had no such idea—to impress them by connecting religion with a variety of sensible objects; with all that he sees, all he hears . . . and thus by deep, strong, and permanent associations, to lay the best foundation for practical devotion in future life.

Barbauld repeats the word *impress* three times in a single sentence, conjuring up Locke's image of the mind as malleable wax. Moreover, she adopts the modern language of “mind” over the older one of “soul:” it is not the child's soul, but rather his or her mind, that must learn to recognize God. Finally, Locke's association of ideas theory is the basis of Barbauld's argument for “connecting” religious ideas with “sensible objects” in the child's mind.

But while it may appear in this preface that Barbauld is a thoroughgoing Lockean, the hymns themselves complicate this interpretation as the reader discovers what the “full force of God” really is. In “Hymn VIII,” Barbauld writes, recalling Watts, “he [God] knoweth every one of them [God's family], as a shepherd knoweth his flock . . . none are so great, that he cannot punish them; none are so mean, that he will not protect them.” Barbauld paints a picture of a powerful and involved God. Her God is interested in each individual. And, as Barbauld

Donelle Ruwe (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2005), 85-111.


51. Ibid., vi.

52. Ibid., 59–60.
repeatedly states throughout the hymns, "his anger is terrible; he could make us die in a moment, and no one could save us out of his hand."\textsuperscript{53} God wills events, so Barbauld describes his providence as something to fear. Yet she writes in a more comforting tone in her essay "What is Education?"\textsuperscript{54} Originally published in 1798 in \textit{The Monthly Magazine}, she tells parents that they can rest assured that God will guide their child: "Providence continues his education upon a larger scale, and by a process which includes means far more efficacious. Has your son entered the world at eighteen, opinionated, haughty, rash, inclined to dissipation? Do not despair, he may yet be cured of these faults, if it pleases heaven."\textsuperscript{55} God can effect extraordinary changes in the self, but only "if it pleases" him.

It is debatable to what extent one can control the development of one's own or another's identity under the Lockean system. Locke himself does not seem to have been optimistic on this point. Not only does he fear irrational associations and the deleterious effects of having servants, but he also repeatedly frets over the problems of "custom." For Locke, "custom settles habits of thinking in the understanding, as well as of determining in the will, and of motions in the body . . . which once set a going, continue in the same steps they have been used to, which by often treading, are worn into a smooth path, and the motion in it becomes easy, and as it were natural."\textsuperscript{56} Such "ease" and comfort in one's ideas worry Locke, who argues that feelings of "uneasiness" are essential to human progress.\textsuperscript{57} Although Locke, like the writers I am looking at in this article, invokes the "all-wise Maker" at this juncture in his argument and claims that said Maker "has put into man the \textit{uneasiness} of hunger and thirst, and other natural desires" in order to prompt human "industry" and "action," writers for children see a more direct divine influence on each individual.\textsuperscript{58} Rather than claiming God endows all

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 22.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 331–32.
\textsuperscript{56} Locke, \textit{Essay}, 355.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 234.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.; emphasis in the original.
humans with general "uneasinesses" that are part of human nature, these writers argue that God chooses specific experiences for each person. Once one introduces direct divine intervention, as Barbauld does, the bulk of human agency vanishes. Barbauld, in her most explicit articulation of providential empiricism—"What Is Education?"—describes the process this way:

Providence takes your child, where you leave him. . . . There are remedies which you could not persuade yourself to use, if they were in your power . . . Faded beauty, humbled self-consequence, disappointed ambition, loss of fortune, this is the rough physic provided by Providence, to meliorate the temper, to correct the offensive petulancies of youth, and bring out all the energies of the finished character.59

Although Barbauld leaves some room for human agency in the formation of the self—providence steps in only after the parents have tried their best (and presumably failed, as all will do since humanity lives in a fallen world)—in the end, it is unquestionably God who "bring[s] out all the energies of the finished character."60 Moreover, suffering is one potent way in which God shapes personal identity—it is painful experiences that mold the self.

As a way to explain painful life experiences and articulate the maturation process, Barbauld, Wollstonecraft, and Sherwood offer child readers the discourse of Christian sensibility; feeling, sympathy, and compassion dominate these writers' understanding of what it means to be a human, particularly one with a relationship to God. Importantly, however, all three agree that, as Sherwood puts it in The Governess (1820), "children naturally want [lack] feeling."61 The role of the educator thus becomes to nurture and to direct the child's passions. God may deliberately expose children to suffering, but it is the parent's or instructor's responsibility to teach them how to interpret those afflictions. Such

59. Barbauld, "What is Education?" 331–32.
60. See also "An Address to the Deity" for an expression of Barbauld's providential empiricism, in Anna Letitia Barbauld, 41; emphasis added.
61. Mary Martha Sherwood, The Governess; or, the Little Female Academy (Wellington, UK: F. Houlston and Son, 1820), 138.
training must begin early, for how and what one learns as a child greatly impacts the mature self (here, the three authors are in agreement with Locke). Once children have learned how to properly channel their suffering and how to empathize with others, they have reached adulthood.

For Wollstonecraft, the self is a construction of perceptions that providence carefully chooses. In Wollstonecraft's *Original Stories from Real Life*, first published anonymously in 1788, Mrs. Mason, a maternal teacher, educates two young charges—Mary, aged fourteen, and Caroline, aged twelve—through example, story, and precept. Slowly, over the course of the episodic text, the girls correct some of their faults and exhibit more virtuous, although not perfect, characters. In the beginning, Wollstonecraft adopts the Lockean language of the wax-like tabula rasa:

> This employment [caring for children] humanized my [Mrs. Mason's] heart, while, like wax, it took every impression; and Providence has since made me an instrument of good—I have been useful to my fellow-creatures.

Once again, we see the fusion of the empirical and the providential. Mrs. Mason has a malleable heart that has received "impressions" (the same word Barbauld uses). She has learned charity. And God is active in her life, making her "useful." Importantly, Wollstonecraft locates the essence of the self in the "heart," the organ of sympathy. It is Mrs. Mason's heart, rather than her mind or consciousness (as Locke would argue), that receives "impressions"; and it is these "impressions" (i.e., providence's guidance) that enable her to become benevolent.

62. Wollstonecraft, *Original Stories from Real Life; With Conversations, Calculated to Regulate the Affections, and Form the Mind to Truth and Goodness* (London: J. Johnson, 1788). Wollstonecraft seems to have drawn on her own life in creating these characters. Mrs. Mason appears to have been inspired by Miss Mason, "a good girl" whom she employs in her school at Newington Green, and Mary and Caroline had been inspired by two of Lady Kingsborough's daughters; Mary Wollstonecraft to George Blood—Newington Green, July 20, 1785, in *The Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Janet Todd (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 56. Interestingly, Lady Kingsborough's third daughter, Margaret, the one on whom Wollstonecraft had perhaps the greatest impact, after an unhappy marriage, "abandoned her husband and called herself Mrs. Mason"; Todd, *Collected Letters*, 124n286.

Although Wollstonecraft’s writings show that, for her, benevolence and sympathy are deeply bound up with Christianity, Wollstonecraft scholars have not been eager to address her faith or her religious discourse until fairly recently. Perhaps, for many, her spirituality undermines her place as an early feminist or positions her too closely to conservative figures, such as Hannah More. Those who have attempted to analyze Wollstonecraft’s relationship to the religious, such as Mary Poovey, often comment positively on Wollstonecraft’s “progress” away from orthodox Anglicanism. Poovey traces the evolution of Wollstonecraft’s religious thought from the *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) through *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796). 64 After doing so, Poovey concludes that Wollstonecraft has a “new willingness to explore the face of death, to accept the fact of human limitations without automatic recourse to religious consolation”; this, Poovey writes, is “an index of [her] maturity.” 65 We see in Poovey a modern, liberal desire to devalue Wollstonecraft’s faith—Wollstonecraft’s “maturity” in Poovey’s narrative is marked by Wollstonecraft’s adopting more unorthodox religious opinions. But this explanation of Wollstonecraft’s “progress” does not help us understand eighteenth-century valuations of the ties between, for example, sensibility and religion; in fact, as Poovey admits in a footnote, “even though many liked the *Letters*, Wollstonecraft’s contemporaries reacted strongly—and generally negatively—to the less orthodox theology this work contained.” 66

As Barbara Taylor explains, it is precisely through a proper understanding of Wollstonecraft’s religious thought that we can understand her “ambiguous attitude toward sensibility” because it is “part of her


66. Ibid., 256n8.
wider endeavor to define an authentic religious subjectivity." Wollstonecraft's central project is to understand her relationship to God and to create a moral selfhood that best expresses the foundation of that relationship—a moral selfhood that she articulates through the, at times, confusing and contradictory language of sensibility. For example, in her *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787), Wollstonecraft writes,

> While we are looking into another's mind, and forming their temper, we are insensibly correcting our own; and every act of benevolence which we exert to our fellow creatures, does ourselves the most essential services. Active virtue fits us for the society of more exalted beings. Our philanthropy is a proof, we are told, that we are capable of loving our Creator. Indeed this divine love, or charity, appears to me the principal trait that remains of the illustrious image of the Deity, which was originally stampt on the soul, and which is to be renewed.

She invokes the language of Locke, writing that "charity . . . was originally stampt on the soul," while simultaneously resisting his core ideas, emphasizing the Christian notions of charity and the soul, which Locke downplayed in favor of reason and the mind. Furthermore, she contends that it is sympathy and love, conveyed through religious feeling, that will eventually unite society and bring it closer to God.

As Wollstonecraft clarifies later in *Thoughts*, it is not only teachers who help individuals "form" the self but also God: he, "who is training us up for immortal bliss, know[s] best what trials will contribute to make us so [i.e., virtuous]; and our resignation and improvement will render us respectable to ourselves, and to that Being, whose approbation is of more value than life itself." Like Barbauld, Wollstonecraft argues that the experiences, particularly the "trials," that each person undergoes are providential. Experiences are not random—God intends them to shape each and every person. In *Original Stories*, Wollstonecraft

---

69. Ibid., 78.
Religion in the Age of Enlightenment

dramatizes these trials. Mrs. Mason guides Mary and Caroline through much God-given pain and suffering before they can reach the ideal for which they are striving. In chapter 21, which focuses on “fortitude,” for example, Caroline is stung by a bee, and Mrs. Mason elaborates on the blessings of God’s torments:

The Almighty, who never afflicts but to produce some good, first sends diseases to children to teach them patience and fortitude; and when by degrees they have learned to bear them, they have acquired some virtue. In the same manner, cold or hunger, when accidentally encountered, are not evils; they make us feel what wretches feel, and teach us to be tender-hearted. Many of your fellow-creatures daily bear what you cannot for a moment endure without complaint. ... I should not value the affection of a person who would not bear pain and hunger to serve me; nor is that benevolence warm, which shrinks from encountering difficulties, when it is necessary, in order to be useful to any fellow creature.70

Wollstonecraft explains to her readers the virtues of disease, stressing God’s role—one might even say that it is through the blessing of disease that they first learn to sympathize. This passage, which describes God as the one who “sends diseases” so that readers can acquire “patience and fortitude,” also illustrates the role of providential empiricism in the creation of the self. Furthermore, to Wollstonecraft, “cold [and] hunger” are not “accidentally encountered” but are rather further “afflictions” sent from God to assist one in learning to be “tender-hearted.”

Barbauld, Wollstonecraft, and Sherwood all highlight the role of providential empiricism, but it is Sherwood who most strongly emphasizes the benefits of God-given suffering. Sherwood, one of the most prolific writers of children’s literature at the beginning of the nineteenth century, would write more than four hundred works covering every major genre.71 She is most famous for her Evangelical children’s

---

70. Wollstonecraft, Original Stories, 156–160; emphasis in original.
literature, such as *The History of the Fairchild Family* (1818, 1842, 1847). Although Sherwood is not usually compared to eighteenth-century writers, most of her books retain a style strongly indebted to the Puritan and Dissenting works of the period. She would even revise and repackaging popular eighteenth-century children’s works such as Sarah Fielding’s *The Governess* (1749) and John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678). Also, Sherwood herself had been educated in a quintessentially eighteenth-century environment. Like both Barbauld and Wollstonecraft, as a female, she was lucky to have been exposed to stimulating intellectual conversations at a formative time in her life. As a child and as a young woman growing up in Lichfield, she had been in the company of Erasmus Darwin, Anna Seward, the Edgeworth family, Thomas Day, and occasionally Samuel Johnson and David Garrick.

Despite the religious differences between Sherwood’s works and those of Barbauld and Wollstonecraft, Sherwood’s still display a similar providential empiricism. For example, in 1820, Sherwood revised Sarah Fielding’s *The Governess; or, Little Female Academy* (1749), a novel in which the girls at Mrs. Teachum’s school tell each other stories in order to reconcile their differences. As the tale begins, the reader learns why Mrs. Teachum had established the school. Sherwood begins her version like so: “It pleased God, during one period of [Mrs. Teachum’s] life, to exercise this excellent person with many severe trials, no doubt in order to bring her the nearer to himself.” Fielding, in contrast, highlights the “Christian fortitude” of Mrs. Teachum, who expertly runs the school despite the loss of her husband, children, and fortune. Fielding chooses to emphasize Mrs. Teachum’s capable recovery from intense sorrow and near bankruptcy while Sherwood chooses to emphasize

73. Sarah Fielding, *The Governess; or the Little Female Academy* (London: A. Millar, 1749); and John Bunyan, *Pilgrim’s Progress: From This World to That which Is to Come* (London: Nath. Ponder, 1678).
God's role in Mr. Teachum's death and in Mrs. Teachum's suffering and progress toward a stronger faith. For Fielding, it is "accident" and "misfortune" that force Mrs. Teachum into her present situation, whereas, for Sherwood, it is God's providence.

Sherwood's firm faith in the power of suffering to instruct and redeem and her fervent belief in predestination often seem to deny her characters agency. Even when characters appear to have contributed to their own destinies, Sherwood quickly reminds us to whom the real credit is owed: God. For example, after Jenny Peace, the eldest of the girls at Mrs. Teachum's school, restores harmony among the quarreling students, Fielding's Mrs. Teachum compliments the girls approvingly on the quick reestablishment of their friendships. Sherwood's Mrs. Teachum, on the other hand, reminds her scholars to whom the true thanks are due: "Let us thank God for this blessed change which has taken place among you, and give the glory to him who maketh men to be of one mind in a house." Although Jenny is still the peacemaker in Sherwood's version, she is God's agent rather than an independent one. Sherwood's narrators and authority figures consistently remind readers to give their hearts to God so that they can be guided by his will. In fact, throughout Sherwood's works, most of her characters are reduced to praying for God's intercession in their hearts as it is the only thing that can truly affect any change. Despite Sherwood's strong evangelical bent, as evident in these examples, one should not overlook the ultimate—and surprising—similarities between her works and Wollstonecraft's and Barbauld's. All emphasize the crucial role of divine affliction in the formation of the self.

Although Barbauld, Wollstonecraft, and Sherwood all argue that God plays a pivotal role in forming the child's self, they also leave room for human influence, particularly via authority figures such as teachers and parents. As Sherwood's Mr. Fairchild intones to his son Henry, "I stand in the place of God to you, whilst you are a child." These writers had to believe that their works would impact children's development, thus their texts reflect a tension between their desire to acknowledge

77. Ibid.
78. Ibid., 43.
God’s guidance and their desire to acknowledge their own agency as authors. This tension is perhaps most evident in their inset tales of suffering, which are manifestations of what Barbauld refers to as God’s “rough physic.” As authors, they take on the role of God; that is, they “authorize” and narrate stories of suffering that will shape their readers’ selves in the same way that they see God inflicting suffering in order to mold human beings—-they are enacting a godly pedagogy, as it were.

Wollstonecraft’s Mrs. Mason represents this figure of the godly pedagogue, educating her charges through stories meant to cause sympathy and appreciation for suffering. For example, in Original Stories, she relates “The History of Jane Fretful,” a miniature spiritual biography inspired by Puritan children’s literature. Wollstonecraft employs the language and topoi of what was then seen as an uplifting and inspiring genre to play on the reader’s fears:

This [death of Jane Fretful’s mother] though, and [Jane’s] peevish temper, preyed on her impaired constitution. She had not, by doing good, prepared her soul for another state, or cherished any hopes that could disarm death of its terrors, or render that last sleep sweet—its approach was dreadful!—and she hastened her end, scolding the physician for not curing her. Her lifeless countenance displayed the marks of convulsive anger; and she left an ample fortune behind her to those who did not regret her loss. They followed her to the grave, on which no one shed a tear. She was soon forgotten; and I only remember her, to warn you to shun her errors.80

The reader experiences the horror of Jane’s death through Wollstonecraft’s vivid deathbed scene, complete with the exclamatory, “[Death’s] approach was dreadful!”81 Readers are meant to live through this terrifying scene with Jane in their imaginations in order to avoid living it out in reality; presumably, they will learn what sorts of actions to avoid because they have already “experienced” the horror of consequences from such wicked actions. Moreover, she indicates that authority figures

80. Wollstonecraft, Original Stories, 36.
81. Ibid.
should learn to model this method of telling stories that shape the self through suffering.

Just such a story constitutes one of the most memorable episodes in Barbauld's *Lessons for Children of Three Years Old, Part I* (1779), in which the mother tells Charles an extended narrative set in winter:

> There was a naughty boy; I do not know what his name was, but it was not Charles, nor George, nor Arthur, for those are all very pretty names: but there was a robin came in at his window one very cold morning—shiver—shiver, and its poor little heart was almost frozen to death. And he would not give it the least little crumb of bread in the world, but pulled it about by the tail, and hurt it sadly, and it died. Now a little while after the naughty boy’s papa and mamma went away and left him; and then he could get no victuals at all, for you know he could not take care of himself. So he went about to every body—Pray give me something to eat, I am very hungry. And every body said, No, we shall give you none, for we do not love cruel naughty boys. So he went about from one place to another, till at last he got into a thick wood of trees, for he did not know how to find his way any where; and then it grew dark, quite dark night. So he sat down and cried sadly; and he could not get out of the wood; and I believe the bears came and eat him up in the wood, for I never heard any thing about him afterwards.  

82

At the beginning of the passage, Barbauld places the mother-narrator in the role of the godly pedagogue and the reader in the position of the unnamed child. Barbauld thus cedes authority here to any oral narrator; once someone begins reading this story aloud to another, Barbauld also inhabits the godly pedagogue role. Barbauld begins her assault on the reader by describing the physical suffering of the bird; words such as *shiver* help the reader imagine the cold body of the bird. Turning from the merely literal depictions of its near-death state, she invokes the language of sensibility by focusing on the animal’s heart in a literal and a figurative

---

sense: “its poor little heart was almost frozen to death.” In a simple yet elegant demonstration of poetic justice, the boy’s situation at the end of the tale resembles that of the bird he had tortured—like the robin, he is now forlorn and starving. This becomes a common trope of eighteenth-century British literature for children: children who torture an animal are made to undergo the very same torture themselves.83

In the companion book *Hymns in Prose*, Barbauld overtly connects the mother who tells these stories to God:

> There is an eye that never sleepeth; there is an eye that seeth in dark night, as well as in the bright sun-shine . . . that eye seeth every where, in all places, and watcheth continually over all the families of the earth. The eye that sleepeth not is God’s; his hand is always stretched out over us.... As the mother moveth about the house with her finger on her lips, and stilleth every little noise, that her infant be not disturbed; as she draweth the curtains around its bed, and shutteth out the light from its tender eyes; so God draweth the curtains of darkness around us; so he maketh all things to be hushed and still, that his large family may sleep in peace.84

Barbauld draws on the same images with which I began this essay—God’s eye and hand—to remind readers that God is physically present, that we feel him in our lives every day. Significantly, however, she connects that feeling to the mother figure. The empirical experience of being a child reader here is one of being touched by God and mother together.

These writers yearn to affect their readers with the Godly power that they see in providential empiricism, and they wrote this power into their stories. They not only depict a God who is involved in the daily lives of their child readers by shaping those readers through suffering, but they also model their own literary personas on that divine figure.
