

The Critical Response to Children's Books in Geraldine Jewsbury's Athenaeum Reviews

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As she began work on her 1935 biography of Geraldine Endors Jewsbury, Susanne Howe received an anonymous letter cautioning her not to waste her time on such “an entirely unimportant person” (Howe vii). For such an unimportant person, however, Jewsbury exerted an extensive and pervasive influence in the literary world of the mid-nineteenth century. As an author, Jewsbury wrote six novels and two books for children, and contributed stories and essays to many Victorian periodicals, including *Douglas Jerrold's Shilling Magazine*, the *Westminster Review*, and Dickens' *Household Words*. But it was her work behind the scenes, as a publisher's reader for Richard Bentley and as an anonymous reviewer for the *Athenaeum*, which had a nearly unparalleled impact on the world of mid-Victorian book production, distribution, and consumption.

Jewsbury was enormously productive. She worked for Bentley from 1858 until 1880, writing 609 reports on 808 manuscripts.¹ Her work as a book reviewer for the *Athenaeum*, however, dwarfs even this number, although she began it quietly enough. In 1849, Jewsbury wrote her first review. A second review followed in 1850. In an 1851 letter to her friend Jane Welsh Carlyle, she complained that “this desultory writing for the ‘Athenaeum’ does not employ all my time, nor is it likely to last” (Jewsbury 426-27). Soon, though, she was reviewing an extraordinary number of books at an incredible pace. From 1849 until her death in 1880, Geraldine Jewsbury reviewed 2,310 books in the pages of the

weekly *Athenaeum*. Included in her reviews are books by many of the leading authors of her day: she wrote on Anthony Trollope, Wilkie Collins, George Meredith, Margaret Oliphant, and many of the most popular Victorian women novelists. Indeed, she was the *Athenaeum*'s reviewer of George Eliot's first five novels.

Much of the critical attention paid to Jewsbury's reviews has focused on these major authors and on her promotion of and attitude toward women novelists and the Woman Question. In the seminal study of Jewsbury's *Athenaeum* career, Monica Correa Fryckstedt argues that "Jewsbury's reviews reflect a woman reader's views on fiction at a time when a large portion of it was written by and for women" and that the "principal value of her reviews [...] lies in the fact that they mirror the preferences and prejudices of a middlebrow reader endowed with unusual expertise" (15). Fryckstedt's study concentrates on how Jewsbury's reviews from the 1850s and 1860s address the issues of women readers and writers and reveal the mainstream, or "middlebrow," Victorian's taste in fiction. Indeed, almost all of the scholarly writing on Jewsbury's *Athenaeum* reviews ignores or dismisses her work from the 1870s. Fryckstedt comments in passing that "failing eye-sight forced Miss Jewsbury to devote herself, in the 1870s, almost exclusively to reviewing children's books" (14), and then pays no more attention to the last decade of Jewsbury's career.² While it is true that Jewsbury did devote her efforts in the 1870s to reviewing children's books, it does not follow that those reviews are therefore less important or legitimate. Indeed, if Jewsbury's reviews do "mirror the preferences and prejudices of a middlebrow reader endowed with unusual expertise," then what she had to say about children's reading should give us great insight into the books Victorian parents were buying for and reading to their children, and into the values and expectations these readers placed on children's books.³

Furthermore, Jewsbury's work in the 1870s was not the "desultory writing" of a part-time or worn-out critic, forced to review a lesser genre. In fact, Jewsbury was thinking seriously about the role of children's

literature long before her work became concentrated on the genre. In her first "Books for Children" column in 1854, Jewsbury insisted on the importance of children's reading:

Tales for children are of more importance than novels for grown-up people. None but the very best and choicest experiences ought to be presented in them. The form of the books is small, – but they are not therefore insignificant. It requires the finest tact and instinct to write well for children, and so far from being a loss of dignity, it is our opinion that they are the only works for which a superior spirit would not disdain to turn author. When children's books are really good, grown people can read them with as much pleasure and profit as children. (373)

Her opinions in this earliest review – the importance of children's literature, the appropriateness of the subject matter, the responsibilities of authors, and its appeal to adult readers – found greater expression in her work in the 1870s. After more than two decades of reviewing, Jewsbury brings to her children's book reviews of the 1870s a well-developed expertise, an exacting critical eye, and an insistence on the importance of children's literature for both readers and writers, both children and "grown people." Nor does her work at all slow down. Beginning in 1869, Jewsbury reviewed a number of children's books each year at a pace similar to her earlier work. Of the total of more than 2,300 books reviewed over the course of her career, over 730 were children's books, nearly a third of her total output.

The significance of Jewsbury's turn to reviewing children's books must be understood not merely in terms of her personal circumstances, but more broadly within the evolving literary context of the 1860s and 1870s. At a time when popular fiction was trending toward the sensation novel, a trend which Jewsbury abhorred,⁴ children's literature was beginning to undergo a sea change. As the *Saturday Review* remarked in 1866, with some trepidation, the scarcity of children's books from earlier

in the century had been replaced by abundance and variety: “every bookseller’s shop [is] deluged with stories for boys and stories for girls [...] It is probably not an exaggeration to say that, for one book of fiction [...] that was read by each girl or boy at the beginning of the century, fifty are now read by each one of our children” (“Novels for Family Reading” 238). Writers such as Lewis Carroll, Charles Kingsley, and George MacDonald were reimagining and modernizing children’s fiction, largely abandoning the didacticism of the earlier nineteenth century in favor of more complex literary forms and themes, and using children’s books to address wider cultural issues. As Jewsbury turned her attention to children’s books, Victorian children’s literature was coming of age.

As a reviewer, Jewsbury exemplified the critical practices of her day. In an analysis of Jewsbury’s review of *Adam Bede*, Nicholas Dames defines a pervasive set of critical “protocols” used by Victorian critics. These practices, though often seen today as lacking in any overarching literary theory, were instead intended “to capture the reading experience of a given novel, as if such a goal were in fact the specific purpose of criticism” (326). Dames looks at “Victorian novel criticism’s reliance upon the long excerpt and the long plot summary” as evidence that Victorian critics such as Jewsbury were primarily concerned with “modeling, in miniature, the kind of readerly response the text in question elicits in toto” (327). Jewsbury, Dames contends, wished to provide her readers with a taste of the experience of reading the book under review through extended excerpts, summaries, character descriptions, and paraphrases. In addition, Jewsbury was often concerned with the believability, the rationality, and the emotional appeal of books, all of which point to an overriding focus not on how texts function, but on how they could or should be consumed. In concentrating her attention on children’s books, however, these practices underwent some necessary modification, both materially in terms of restrictions imposed in the way the *Athenaeum* presented children’s book reviews, and also culturally in the assumptions Jewsbury made about the

audience for her reviews and about cultural notions of childhood and adulthood.

The *Athenaeum* at times grouped book reviews together in a single feature, and this format was especially predominant for children's book reviews. Columns such as "Books for Children," "Books for the Young," and "Christmas Books" gathered together a dozen or more volumes for consideration. In December of 1879, for example, Jewsbury wrote four "Christmas Books" columns, one per week, in which she reviewed respectively 6, 14, 21, and 18 books, for a total of 59 books reviewed in a single month's time. Such an arrangement obviously cut down severely on the space each novel was allotted, and so constrained Jewsbury's ability to include long excerpts. With less room to review each novel, Jewsbury had to be more concise in the way she communicated the reading experience of each book.

Such a constrained space also forced Jewsbury to be more explicit in her thoughts about audience, and here her children's book reviews take on their most significant aspect. If Jewsbury's critical goal was to "capture the reading experience" of children's books, she had to do so while recognizing that she was writing to readers who were not the intended audience for that experience. In these reviews of children's books, Jewsbury is obviously writing to adults. One of the unique aspects of children's literature is that, while the books are intended for children, they are produced, marketed, reviewed, and purchased by adults. In many aspects of her reviews – in her frequent remarks about the importance of guiding children in their reading and about how to interact with them during reading, in her fond jokes about childish behaviors, in her discussions of appropriate subject matter and the responsibilities of writing for children, in her assumptions about the nature of childhood, and in her recommendations that books be purchased as gifts or prizes – Jewsbury revealed that her primary task was to inform parents, older relatives, teachers, and Sunday School authorities about the most recent publications for children and how those children would respond to them. In addition, Jewsbury was

always aware of her role in the Victorian system of book production, distribution, and consumption; as a reviewer, she facilitated the movement of books from publishers and booksellers to purchasers and readers, and she helped to police, to maintain, and advance, notions of literary quality, morality, education, and cultural expectations about childhood and children's literature.

Most obviously, Jewsbury's address to adult readers and her function as an agent of the market can be seen in her recommendations of books for prizes or gifts. The market for children's books in the first half of the nineteenth century was dominated by the practice of giving books as rewards or prizes, and many publishers specifically advertised children's books for such purposes. By the second half of the century, children's books were also advertised as Christmas gifts, and publishers timed the release of children's books for the Christmas season, a practice reflected in the *Athenaeum's* custom of publishing long "Christmas Books" review columns in November and December. Jewsbury's reviews in the 1870s are often found in such columns, in which she directly addresses the question of which books would make good prizes or gifts.⁵

Lilly's Visit to her Grandmamma, she writes, "is a pretty and inexpensive gift-book for children, and is not too fine to be used in the nursery and pulled about by eager little hands" (541). The utility of her reviews could extend to the financial concerns of parents and even to the durability of the book as an object to be handled by small children. Nevertheless, Jewsbury tended to focus on relationships that the practice of reading could create. For example, her review of *A Houseful of Children* concludes: "It is far too beautiful to be exposed to the rough usage of the nursery; it deserves a place on the drawing-room table, where kind aunts or elder sisters may show the pictures and explain them to the little ones" (796). Her concern with the children's response and with the relationship between child and adult which children's books could promote underpin her sense of the reviewer's responsibility to both her adult readers and to her professional role in the market. In practice,

this resulted in Jewsbury projecting her own positive responses to books through a number of different lenses – a book could be entertaining, sentimental, exciting, poetic, or educational. Occasionally, Jewsbury's enthusiastic response could overwhelm her review, as in the case of Jules Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon*. Her short review, containing no less than three exclamation points, centers on the "daring adventure and rollicking fun" of the book (594). She reacted with even greater enthusiasm a month later to Verne's *The Fur Country*. Here Jewsbury piles up adjectives of excitement: "we can promise them breathless excitement, wonders and dangers and escapes. It is a story of courage, endurance, adventure, and fun" (813). We learn nothing about the book except for how it will affect the reader – this is a review by a fan for other fans.

In reviewing *Lob Lie-by-the-Fire*, she enthusiastically recommends that the story cannot be read by old or young "without having their feelings strongly moved" by the "pathos and beauty" of the story (769). In this unusually lengthy review within a "Christmas Books" column, Jewsbury indulges in the Victorian critic's practice of plot summary, detailing each plot point by following the orphaned main character from his adoption by two elderly ladies, to his running away due to his "gypsy blood and gypsy ways," to his hardships and homesickness, his return aboard ship as a cabin boy, his friendships with soldiers as he hides in shame from his two benefactresses, and his eventual homecoming. "Of course," she concludes her summary, "he is discovered and welcomed by the old ladies and all the neighborhood." In that small phrase – "of course" – Jewsbury releases the fascination and tension of her summary by assuring her audience that the story will end beautifully and hopefully. In that moment of release, reviewer and reader share in the anticipated emotional satisfaction of the story's conclusion.

In her review of *Sea Gull Rock*, Jewsbury's work as an agent of the marketplace and her reviewer's role in modeling a reader's response are both on display. This review begins in the double voice of an

advertisement and an encouragement to use books to cement parent/child relations: "If any one wishes to kindle an undying sentiment of gratitude in the heart of a boy, or through that boy in the heart of his parents, guardians, or friends, let that individual repair at once to the nearest book-shop and there purchase that fascinating work entitled *Sea Gull Rock*," she advises (766). In this opening appeal, Jewsbury models an act of consumption, a kind of commodity fetishism at one remove, as the act of purchase becomes cloaked in a gift exchange and transmuted into an "undying sentiment of gratitude" in the child recipient's heart toward the adult gift-giver. But the creation of that gratitude, of course, cannot happen without the accompanying act of reading, and it is this which will cement the child/adult relationship. Although the story is "replete with the most rollicking fun, the most harrowing scenes of suspense, distress, and hairbreadth escapes from danger," Jewsbury urges that the "charm which envelopes the book" (and thereby presumably creates the gratitude in the child who receives it as a gift) is its "framework of lovely family life and affection." In focusing on the book's portrayal of family, Jewsbury provides brief descriptions of the boy characters and their affection and loyalty toward one another, as well as the "parental confidence" shown toward them by their fathers. Thus the content of the book under review – its charming portrayals of "family life and affection" – becomes the model for the book's reception by its child readers, and that reception justifies (and rewards) the purchase of the book by the adult reader of Jewsbury's review. The review attempts to identify and complete a kind of enclosed circuit among the book, its purchasers, its readers, and the nature of family life, all embodied within child/adult familial relationships.

Victorian ideas about the nature of childhood and its connection to the family and to child/adult relationships were embodied in two ideal figures, the Romantic child and the Evangelical child, both of which stood as symbols of innocence and purity, intimately connected to the Victorian domestic ideal. Catherine Robson describes the highly visible centrality of the child

in any number of arenas and at all class levels in Victorian life [...] the child represents a pure point of origin, deeply connected to the natural and primitive world, and as yet unmired by the sullyng forces of language, sexuality, and society. (6)

Furthermore, the Evangelical child of midcentury represents "Evangelical Christianity's relocation of the sacred from the supernatural and ecclesiastical, to the personal and familial, realm" (7). This combination of original innocence with the sacredness of the Victorian family not only placed a great deal of cultural weight on the symbolic power of childhood, but also generated a desire to protect children's innocence along with the paradisiacal nature of children's family lives. This desire took a number of discursive forms – adult novels such as *Oliver Twist*, advice books such as Sarah Ellis's *Daughters of England*, journalistic exposés, Parliamentary bluebooks, and, of course, new forms of children's literature. Children's literature, which had formerly been concerned with teaching didactic lessons about obedience, was now poised to expand its role. Children's books became a means both of inscribing and maintaining this symbolic function of childhood for adult readers while also enabling actual child readers to experience and enjoy this most significant period of life.

In the 1853 Preface to her first children's book, *The History of an Adopted Child*, Jewsbury asserts, "I do not think that children are so happy as it is the fashion to represent them" (v). Her concern with children's happiness anticipates the latter nineteenth-century trend away from didactic stories of obedience, while Jewsbury's explanation for children's unhappiness centers on the innocence of their natures, but also highlights the potential harshness of the adults who care for them: "children are so dependent on those around them," she continues, and they "feel with a keenness, against which they are provided with no defense" (v). Moreover, children have "an intense and instinctive sympathy with those around them, that resembles the instinct of a dumb animal" (vi). Jewsbury's descriptions of the innocence of children

coincide with the familiar ideal of the Romantic child,⁶ but her emphasis is not only on the beauty of that ideal, but also on the way it renders the child vulnerable. Children have “a capacity for suffering seldom suspected,” and thus adults must remember “that kind looks and words are the manna on which young children live,” she concludes (vi-vii). Of course, the figure of the vulnerable but angelic child was nothing new; Jewsbury wrote her novel in the shadow of such popular characters as *Oliver Twist* and *Little Nell*, both of whose “capacity for suffering” made them, and a host of other Victorian fictional children, so sentimentally attractive to contemporary adult readers. However, by placing this Romantic child at the center of a story intended for children, Jewsbury was anticipating the literary trends of the second half of the century. In earlier children’s stories, the child character may have been vulnerable, but as with the Grimms’ *Little Red Cap*, the suffering she experienced was deserved due to the child’s disobedient behavior. The point of the earlier stories was to underscore adult authority, whereas in the newer stories, the Romantic child character’s suffering was the result not of disobedience, but of adult cruelty or ignorance or neglect. Jewsbury concludes that children need manna, not admonishment, the kind attention of families, not the cautionary intimidation of authorities. By characterizing adult kindness as “manna,” she underscores the importance of nourishing the child’s essentially angelic nature, and by focusing the plot of her novel on adoption, she points to the Romantic child’s role in forming the sacred arena of the Victorian family.

It should come as no surprise, then, that one of the children’s authors Jewsbury reviewed most enthusiastically was George MacDonald. In her review of MacDonald’s *At the Back of the North Wind*, Jewsbury states that this is “a poet’s own book,” and that its impact on child readers will go beyond their understanding of MacDonald’s meaning, leading them to love the story for the poignant response it will call from their hearts: “Whether children will understand the whole of it or not, they will be sure to love it for the sake of the lovely spirit by which it is animated”

(303). She concludes her effusive recommendation by assuring her readers that the story's sense of mystery is "never violated or explained away, though the veil that conceals the truths contained in the story is sufficiently transparent for those who have the eye to see and the heart to understand" (303). This assessment reveals an important aspect of Jewsbury's belief about the role of children's literature. MacDonald's book has important truths to teach its child readers, but such lessons are most effectively communicated through emotional responses rather than lessons, and are to be perceived by the heart rather than simply grasped by the mind.

Jewsbury's language here also gives us some of the clearest instances of her own emotional responses to children's books, as she strives to emulate the poetry of MacDonald's writing. In attempting to communicate her readerly response to this "poet's own book," Jewsbury waxes poetic herself, leavening her plot summaries and character descriptions with a more than usual lyricism of similes and imagery. The sights and sounds of the book come and go "like the colors of the sky at sunset," she writes. And her assurance that "the veil that conceals the truths contained in the story is sufficiently transparent" is immediately extended in the very next sentence's central metaphor: "the whole work is woven into a lovely tissue, partly dream, partly vision" (303). Indeed, she foregoes much of her usual plot and character summations in order to admire in metaphor MacDonald's style and structure. In her review of *The Princess and the Goblin*, she focuses entirely on MacDonald's style: "He speaks with a tender, earnest eloquence, that draws a response from the heart of the reader, like a perfume from the flowers, or music from the harp under the touch of a master minstrel" (835). Again, it is the reader's response which she seeks to model, but here Jewsbury does so by suggesting that the reader is in a sense the object upon which the book's author is working directly and artistically. The reader's response is like perfume or music, an atmosphere that is the direct result of the author's touch, such that the book itself almost disappears. This magical effect is also

independent of the fantasy genre. Jewsbury appreciates MacDonald's realistic, autobiographical novel, *Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood*, because it was "written by a poet, who can so penetrate common things with the spirit of love, and tenderness, and beauty, that (for the moment, at least) the reader's own life shines with the light reflected from its pages" (431). That momentary response by the reader to reflect the book's spirit represents for Jewsbury the ideal relationship between book and reader, especially child reader, because it also represents the ideal relationship between child and adult.

Another of Jewsbury's favored authors, Louisa May Alcott, likewise speaks to such reader/book and child/adult relationships. Jewsbury praises Alcott's *Eight Cousins* based on the relationship Alcott constructs between the main girl character and her seven boy cousins. The following excerpt from Jewsbury's review, part plot summary, part character description, shows how Jewsbury's critical practices demonstrate the connection between the goal of modelling a response and core Victorian assumptions about the nature of childhood and family life:

The eighth cousin is a charming little girl, an orphan, who plays the part of fairy princess and good angel to the boys, who worship her, wonder at her, teaze her, and obey her, whilst she in turn, under the wise guidance of "Uncle Alec," her guardian, grows out of a puny, sickly, over-taught little girl at a boarding-school, into a healthy, happy, sensible, and well-educated little maiden, able to hold her own and enforce respect, as well as hearty love, upon her unruly subjects. The influence for good of a gentle little mortal girl upon the rough and not by any means perfect specimens of the "superior sex" is true to life, and Miss Alcott works out the problem of woman's real mission in its elementary state not only with tact and skill, but with advantage to the story, which is exceedingly entertaining. (539)

At the center of this passage Jewsbury places the nurturing relationship between the little girl and her guardian, in which a wise adult has stepped in to protect and heal a vulnerable child. The result of this rescue is the placement of the little girl into the center of a family, which in turn is nourished by her presence. Jewsbury's review itself enacts this relationship, as the description of the child/adult relationship in the center of the passage is surrounded and embraced by comments about the powerful roles which children and women play in family life. If the Romantic child represents an ideal of innocence at the heart of the sacred family sphere, then that Victorian ideal is most easily embodied in the figure of the girl child: "relentlessly consigning the private, the tender, the personal, and the protected to a female domain," Catherine Robson writes, "domestic ideology inevitably recast the ideal child as a little girl" (157). Alcott's orphan girl, recast as "fairy princess" and "good angel" to her male cousins, exemplifies "woman's real mission" in a way which will entertain young readers while also nurturing them to fulfill the same familial functions. In Jewsbury's view – and this is very much in accord with Jewsbury's own novels – Alcott has given readers a way to consider female roles not just as symbolically significant, but as practical and empowering as well. Jewsbury concludes her review by praising Alcott for not introducing "one breath of precocious sentiment" into the little girl's relationship with her cousins: "the frank healthy cousinly element is not disturbed by a single hint of love or lovers to come hereafter" (539). Child readers will respond, as Jewsbury herself has done, by being entertained by this depiction of the girl's angelic influence on her family, and the lack of a love plot maintains that relationship's innocence, even as it empowers the girl herself to "hold her own" by enforcing respect and love.

Throughout her children's book reviews of the 1870s, Jewsbury often remarks that her adult audience would in fact enjoy, even cherish, these books more than their intended child readers. For example, she concludes her review of MacDonald's *Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood* by doubting that "young people [...] will read" the book "with much

eagerness; but we will answer for the interest it will inspire into men and women whose youth lies far behind them” (431). Likewise, Jewsbury praises *Doll World* as “a capital child’s book” which “has a charm for grown-up people also, as the fairy haze of ‘long ago’ brightens every page” (835). Jewsbury even makes reference to her “own nursery days” as she recalls how much she loved her dolls as a child. By insisting that the period of childhood was “a paradise of innocence and purity,” Victorians “placed an absolute line of division between childhood and adulthood,” a line which marked adulthood as “a time of postlapsarian guilt and gloom” (Robson 8). Such an absolute division caused adults to view childhood through the prism of nostalgia, as a lost, though best phase of life. Children’s books then held a nostalgic appeal for adult readers, an appeal which Jewsbury uses to frame her own responses to the books under her review. Adult readers, she urges, could temporarily, retroactively respond like their former child-selves to the “fairy haze” cast by reminders of their own childhood contained within the pages of these books for children. This nostalgic function of children’s literature can be described as a manifestation of desire, the adult writer’s (and readers’) longing to revisit a childhood phase of innocence and purity existing outside of adult desire. Jacqueline Rose writes about this as the “problem of the relationship between adult and child” (5), and she explains this problem as a confusion of the fictitious child within the book, as a kind of cultural myth, with the “real” child to whom the book is ostensibly addressed. Rose claims that children’s fiction works to erase “any question of who is talking to whom, and why” (2): that is, children’s books provide a cultural site within which adults can treat children and childhood as they imagine or wish them to be, without having to deal with uncomfortable questions about the relationship between actual children and adults.⁷ However, the advent of children’s book criticism opens up a space in which such problems and questions can potentially be addressed, albeit obliquely or inadvertently. Jewsbury’s frequent appeal to nostalgia often intrudes on her reviews by highlighting the

distinction between her audience and the book's intended audience, and then suggesting none too subtly that adult readers are the true audience after all.

In her review of *The Stories They Tell Me*, Jewsbury describes her ideal reader's response to children's books: these stories help the reader reconnect to the "real and only fairy land of life," a nostalgic appropriation of "long-ago events which happened in youth, and which now shine with a fairy brightness from the domains of tender memory" (19). Jewsbury concludes her review of *The Runaway: A Story for the Young* with what amounts to a confession that adults are the main audience for children's books: she writes, "we think older readers will enjoy the book more than the young people, for whom it is professedly written." Part of this enjoyment comes from the book's "insight into the curious metaphysical puzzles which sometimes occupy a child's mind" (17). The notion that children's books can give adults a glimpse into the mind or nature of children can be found throughout many Jewsbury reviews. Her review of *Kaspar and the Summer Fairies* praises the author for her ability to construct "stories which a real child might invent," tales which "are long and rambling, and have as little substance as gossamer webs" (802). Similarly, *The Cuckoo Clock* demonstrates "the true child genius for sympathizing with wonders without feeling much astonished" (346). In July of 1880, Geraldine Jewsbury wrote what would be her final children's book review, a review of *The Tapestry Room: A Child's Romance* by Mrs. Molesworth, a writer whom Jewsbury crowns as "the queen of children's fairyland." Jewsbury extolls how accurately the book depicts "the vague, fresh, wondering instincts of childhood," and she once again asserts that adults are the rightful audience for such a book: "Elder people will read the book with as much interest as children, or perhaps even more," she writes, "for children will not want to handle the gossamer threads [...] out of which the story is spun, and which will not abide handling or close questioning" (14). Jewsbury's final act of criticism forgoes even the modeling of a response, and instead ends

with a curious reversal of the child/adult relationship. Child readers, because of their innocence, their curiosity, and their lack of adult restraint, are not well suited to be the readers of such books. For it is the elder reader, grown beyond childhood, still desiring one last view, one last review, who knows that the tenuous stuff out of which the Victorians spun their cultural ideals of childhood could only abide the lightest of critical touches.

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Notes

¹ Karen Carney argues that Jewsbury's work as a publisher's reader was significant not only because of the hundreds of manuscripts she evaluated, but also due to "the distinctly feminist perspective she brought to bear on the books she read and evaluated" (146).

² Fryckstedt's invaluable study was the first to take a comprehensive look at Jewsbury's *Athenaeum* reviews, which were published anonymously and were only identified through a meticulous survey of the *Athenaeum*'s marked file. Fryckstedt's identification of Jewsbury's more than 2,300 reviews serves as the foundation for her overview of Jewsbury's career, but that overview is concentrated on Jewsbury's reviews of major novelists and on her work during what Fryckstedt terms the "Domestic Fifties" and the "Wicked Sixties." This leaves Jewsbury's reviews of children's books in the 1870s largely unacknowledged and wholly unexplored.

³ Furthermore, the role of children's book reviewer was not merely mirroring contemporary tastes, but actively engaging in the construction of modern children's literature. Anne Lundin shows how during the last two decades of the nineteenth century, periodical reviewers helped to create "a certain climate that encouraged the growth and development of what has become modern children's literature" (31).

⁴ In 1867, just before the period in which children's books began to dominate her work as reviewer, Jewsbury spoke out against sensation novels, which

Lewis C. Roberts, "Geraldine Jewsbury's Reviews of Children's Books"

seem to be constructed like children's toys, with a conventional similitude to living creatures and human beings [...] when carefully wound up for the purpose. As works of art, both the novels and the toys indicate a false, perverted taste [...] for foolish, easy entertainment, that requires no effort of mind, deteriorates the moral strength and vigour which ought to underlie even the amusements of responsible and rational creatures. (Jewsbury, rev. of *Miss Jane* 720)

Jewsbury would apply the same critical standards and terms to children's literature. She objected a decade later to the 1877 children's book *Dora* as "utter rubbish" which "abounds in sensational incidents": "it is painful to think it is seriously intended to be read by any rational creature" (16).

⁵ Kimberley Reynolds writes that "by 1870, under the impetus generated by legislation to provide universal education, producing reward fiction had become a major area of publishing activity" (192).

⁶ Jewsbury's assumptions about Romantic childhood innocence closely align with conventional, middle-class views. She even alludes to the oft-quoted lines from Wordsworth's *Ode: Intimations of Immortality* – "trailing clouds of glory do we come/ From God, who is our home" – in her 1871 approval of the angelic children in *Little Rosy's Pictures*: "they are real little darlings with a touch of heaven still lingering about them" (303).

⁷ For comprehensive studies of the Victorian's complex relationship with both actual and symbolic childhood, see, in addition to Robson's *Men in Wonderland*, James Kincaid's *Child-loving* and Claudia Nelson's *Boys will be Girls*.

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