

INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL ISSUE ON LITERARY JUVENILIA, MATERIAL IMAGINATION AND “THINGS”

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ONE OF the most significant aspects of youthful development is the ability to play—to play both physically and imaginatively with “things”; and in the case of a young writer such things involve myriad aspects of our material culture. The essays in this special edition of the *Journal of Juvenilia Studies* focus on this topic and derive from papers given at the Seventh International Literary Juvenilia Conference held by zoom from the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia, in July 2022. Drawing on Gaston Bachelard’s evocative phrase “material imagination,” the conference explored the material culture of juvenilia: the relationship between “things,” imagination, and literary practice. There were no restrictions on the definition of *things*, and thus the following essays are wide-ranging in their interpretation of material agency, exploring not only how things structure early lives and writing habits but also how young writers imagine place, space, and history through literary and visual artefacts.

The theme for this conference emerged from the keynote paper at the last Juvenilia Conference in Durham, England, in 2018, where Christine Alexander addressed Charlotte Brontë’s habit of writing, especially in relation to editing and print culture. Her practice constitutes perhaps one of the best-known examples of the hold that material things have over the literary child’s imagination, in particular the fascination with pictures, books, and magazines that are imitated and form part of literary play. Young writers of previous generations who have been particularly successful in later life have often developed what might be described as a fetish for the book: a fascination for an object that encompasses the need to reproduce and create—much as teenagers (and even younger children nowadays) imitate online

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forums, blogs and digital technologies related to literary forms that we find on the web.

The conference explored such well-known writers as Jane Austen, Lord Byron, Thomas Chatterton, Anne Brontë, John Ruskin, Edmund Gosse, Nathaniel Hawthorne, H. G. Wells, Katherine Mansfield, Daphne du Maurier, Georgette Heyer, and Margaret Atwood, together with a number of less-known writers,¹ all of whom found inspiration and example in the everyday context of their writing practice—in a materiality related to their physical, social, and cultural worlds and in the material conditions of their play, learning, imitation, and critique. Like the Brontës, they experimented with what might be termed the concrete forms of early writing, with the making of books and magazines but also with a variety of genres that manifest variously on the page, suggesting an early awareness of relationship between content and form. There is room in this Special Issue of *JJS* to include only a selection of essays on these writers, but subsequent issues of *JJS* will publish further contributions from the conference.

David Hanson’s keynote paper, “Materiality in John Ruskin’s Early Letters and Dialogues,” opened the conference by discussing Ruskin’s earliest epistolary efforts in order to examine the way this early writing both shaped and was influenced by his fascinating relationship with his parents. In the period of 1827–29, when he was eight to ten years old, Ruskin endeavoured to enter the family correspondence, which until this time was largely conducted between his mother and father, occasioned by his father’s frequent travel associated with his work as a partner in a wine importing firm. To this point, young Ruskin had to submit his letters for enclosure in his mother’s letters to his father. Her supervision of John’s letters extended to such matters as the appropriate length of a note and the respectfulness of language with which he saluted his father. Hanson astutely delineates how the boy eluded his mother’s control—even though she introduced arguments from the period’s handbooks on letter-writing. At much the same time, Ruskin’s juvenile fiction, modelled on the educational dialogues published by such writers as Anna Barbauld and Maria Edgeworth, often manifests autobiographical experience that demonstrates the impress of his mother’s views of children and letter-writing.

In considering the influence of his mother’s strictures on his letters, Ruskin’s allusion to letter-writing manuals, and the substance of his own juvenile poetry and fictional examples of dialogue, Hanson evinces concern with a range of kinds of materiality, from the young boy’s mastery of printing and then cursive writing; to his awareness that writing was done with a quill made from a duck’s feather, on paper made from rags; to his progress from writing with a pencil to writing in ink with a quill and, then, a nib; and to his referring in his fictional dialogues to a boy’s development of character by abandoning aspirations to make sophisticated apparatuses for which he lacks basic knowledge. In other words, the essay opens the conversation about materiality in juvenile writing by analysing wide-ranging examples

from one of the most subtle, sophisticated youthful writers of the time. It also elucidates with ease and elegance much about the dynamics of relations within the Ruskin family, inviting reassessments of these individual private lives.

Following the thread of Hanson's considering many kinds of materiality, Marc Gotthardt in "Words are things': Byron's *Fugitive Pieces*" further complicates and expands the topic of materiality by discussing the material form (print) of something we would normally consider non-material (language, words). Although maturing caused Byron to regret some of his virulence in "English Bards and Scotch Reviewers," (pub. 1812, when Byron was 24), his efforts to suppress the poem in its original form totally failed. Gotthardt compares this futility to that of his efforts to displace initial impressions of works in *Hours of Idleness*, commercially published in 1807, when the poet was only nineteen. Byron also released early work in three other editions, the first two—*Fugitive Pieces* (1806) and *Poems on Various Occasions* (1807)—anonymous and privately published, with yet another incarnation appearing in 1808 as *Poems, Original and Translated*, taking what had been the subtitle of *Hours of Idleness* for its title. When a friend, a minister, told the poet that some of the early poems were too candid and "warm" on sexual topics, Byron tried to suppress the earliest edition, but a few copies survived. Byron released the expurgated results in an edition of about one hundred copies that he distributed among friends but subsequently tried to suppress. Later, hoping to eliminate some works that had become embarrassing, Byron sent a third version to a publisher. He seems to have wanted this version of the collection to establish his reputation, for he allowed this one to bear his name. But once published, Byron's poems from *Hours of Idleness* acquired a life of their own, existing as long as the poems' material incarnation in printed books lasts. The words cannot be unsaid, cannot be retracted. For this reason, the most mutable of things—the author's manuscript—once published, becomes almost impossible to extirpate or alter. It in effect freezes an utterance into a "thing" that blazons an author's attitudes and establishes his reputation. As Gotthardt observes, "the poem is a thing," and it continues to prompt reactions despite a young author's changes in attitudes or mature embarrassment over youthful excesses. Moreover, these early lessons in the "thingness" of poetry established Byron's preoccupation with the permanent effects of words that traces through the essay's references scattered throughout Byron's adult poetry, continuing from his juvenilia to his very last poem, *Don Juan*.

Gotthardt also draws on numerous examples from Byron's earliest published work to argue that for Byron poems are "things" in the sense that they *do*: they "effectuate temporal change," and they signal not a concrete presence but "meaning deferred." To Byron, a poem opens the future, extending beyond its moment of creation. Finally, the most essential "thingness" of poetry is its transcendent quality—its capacity to effect outcomes and imagine possibilities extending into the future. Byron's early and abiding preoccupation with the "thingness" of poetry foregrounds his sophisticated awareness of the transcendent qualities of poetry. As Gotthardt

shows, Byron was aware, and he made his readers aware, of the abiding and ultimate value of what Poets do.

Three of the essays that follow, those by Beverly Taylor, Kathy Rees, and Chris Danta, pursue similar concerns by connecting juvenilia to themes and motifs in the child authors’ adult writings. While youthful writings are valuable in their own right, the works discussed in these essays also link directly to the methods and preoccupations of the authors’ adult works. All the discussions of juvenile works collected here draw a direct connection between childhood perspectives and ideas and those of adulthood; however, these three essays in particular all find that the juvenile works they discuss do not significantly differ in attitudes from the author’s adult works, and show how these juvenile works should not only be categorised as displays of what a child thought, but also regarded as apprentice efforts to express what the adult author would say.

The conference on juvenile materiality was initially scheduled to occur in 2020, the bicentenary of Anne Brontë’s birth. The second keynote of the conference—Beverly Taylor’s on “Becoming Acton Bell”—provides an overview of how Anne’s juvenile sketches and writings contributed to the matter and manner of her two novels, completed when she was in her twenties. Surprisingly little material evidence documents her development from the young poet Anne Brontë to the adult novelist Acton Bell, for no manuscripts narrating the events of Gondal, the subject of her juvenile writing, survive. Anne apparently collaborated with her older sister Emily in writing poems that helped create the imaginary realm of Gondal through utterances attributed to female characters from the island that the sisters imagined. Apart from a few references in diary papers, her poems remain the only vestiges of the tales through which Emily and Anne represented Gondal. This fact has frustrated scholars committed to studying the juvenile writings of both sisters, since few material traces of their saga remain. For that reason, Taylor was drawn to this paradoxical question: ourselves lacking material evidence for Gondal’s literary existence, what materiality do we find in the poems themselves?

Part of the context for Gondal, of course, are the juvenile writings of Anne’s siblings Charlotte and Branwell, the tales of Angria and Glass Town and Verdopolis that these elder Brontës enshrined in their famously tiny script in famously tiny books they painstakingly produced in imitation of *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*. Previous scholars like Fannie Ratchford, Christine Alexander, and Victor Neufeldt transcribed these infamously challenging manuscripts and studied them in terms of imaginative materiality. Their work has made it possible for subsequent researchers to understand Charlotte’s and Branwell’s juvenile writing as manifestations of creative energy and to consider the importance of miniaturisation in the children’s writing. In this regard Anne’s and Emily’s juvenile poetry resists the very materiality that we most associate with Charlotte and Branwell Brontë. This fact returns Taylor to pursuing how Anne used references to material reality in her early writings and drawings to delineate the

subject matter that marked her adult fiction. By drawing trees and shrubberies protectively surrounding churches and homes, for example, Anne conveyed the attraction of being protected from exposure; in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* she relates the pain of exposure to gossip and unjust public assessment. And references to animals in her novels, like early drawings and diary papers, assist her in developing themes that grow into important motifs in her fiction. As Taylor maintains, Anne's juvenile drawings and writings show her becoming Acton Bell, author of the adult novels.

The next essay, Roslyn Jolly's "Chronotopes of Romance and Realism: The Lovers' Reunion in Anne Brontë's 'Alexander and Zenobia' and *Agnes Grey*," emphasises how Anne moved from the fairy-tale or romance qualities of the juvenile poems to the realism of the novels by referring to Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of the chronotope for delineating relationships between time and space. Jolly interestingly discusses how Anne Brontë's girlhood poem "Alexander and Zenobia" almost perfectly illustrates Bakhtin's concept of romance or adventure time and space. Anne's management of time and space in her first novel *Agnes Grey* adopts the conventions of social realism, accommodating readers' needs to see change in characters as well as to entertain rational explanations for events and their chronology in fiction. Jolly's discussion demonstrates the centrality of Bakhtin's theories of adventure time and space to our understanding of Anne's transition from the juvenile poetry to her novels' realism and cultural criticism.

Lesley Peterson in "Things and Theatricality: James Austen's Quest for Virtuous Drama" situates his presentation of the admittedly dull and dreary "Tragedy of Matilda" within the antitheatrical tradition, which, though most pronounced when the Puritan government of the interregnum closed the theatres, originated with Aristotle. James Austen's prologues to the dramas he and his family performed for their neighbours indicate that he was especially chary of the spectacle and excess of theatrical productions that relied on elaborate sets and props, these "things" that distanced dramas from the human psychology that ought to afford the greatest interest. Thanks to his evolving sense of comfort with his own authority as a newly ordained clergyman and a man, he like his sister Jane was able to embrace comedy as a metier suitable for domestic and local representation of human limitations, and to stop apologising for the Austen family theatricals' sets, props, and costumes—the material "things" of theatre.

In "Edmund Gosse's *Tristram Jones* (1972) and the Legacy of the Maternal Portrait", Kathy Rees explores how the early work enables Gosse to transition to the modernism of his fictionalised autobiography *Father and Son*. The protagonist of his early novella, Tristram Jones, combines the romantic melancholy of the medieval Tristram figure with the unabashed worldliness and lust of Tom Jones. This disconcerting discord is embodied by a portrait of Gosse's mother that suggests devotion to worldly pleasure and conflicts with the repressive character of her maternal persona. This tension creates an important site of distress and confusion for

young Tristram and closely parallels a profoundly disturbing enigma that Gosse himself confronted in a portrait of his own mother. By fully examining this portrait of Gosse’s mother in the historical context of her day, Rees shows how in the narrative of the fictive youth Tristram Gosse anticipated an important thematic point of the adult author’s new kind of autobiography in the fictionalised account of his own life.

And, finally, Chris Danta in “‘I don’t want to put my toys away’: H. G. Wells, Game Playing and the Narrative Floor” highlights essential features of Wells’s unique fantasy works. Danta isolates a strange relationship between representations of time and space in Wells’s mature novels, arguing that while time in his various science fiction or fantasy novels (for example, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, *The Time Traveller*) expands dramatically, Wells balances that chronological expanse with a limited, familiar space where the story unfolds. This sense that the ultimate form of materiality involves interactions between time and space anticipates Bakhtin’s conception of the chronotope discussed by Roslyn Jolly and constitutes the essential characteristic of Wells’s fiction. Danta accounts for the disequilibrium that Wells achieves in his adult narratives by considering the relationship between expansive time and restricted space. He traces Wells’s pattern for the limited and familiar space in which he explores the extravagances of time to his description of the game floor of his boyhood imaginative play, when a patch of floor could become a wildly creative arena for his invention. Danta concludes his essay by analysing a juvenile tale that demonstrates these characteristics, “The Desert Daisy,” to illustrate the inception of Wells’s characteristic genius in his juvenile writing.

What is a “thing?” How do “things” inspire and challenge young writers? How do material objects help them celebrate or critique their surroundings? We hope you will find much to think about in these essays culled from last summer’s conference, and that they will spur you to consider how a variety of child writers were inspired by and treated materiality in their works. This may be a key, a “thing” that unlocks the pleasures of youthful perspectives for us all.

NOTES

¹ Listed in the conference report under “Events” on the Juvenilia Press website.

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