

REVIEWS

Felicia Hemans. *Selected Early Poems*. Edited by Christine Alexander and Pamela Nutt, with students from Year 11, Presbyterian Ladies' College, Sydney, Australia. Juvenilia Press, 2021.

xlviii + 85 pages. Paperback, AUD 15.00.
ISBN: 978-0-7334-3979-7.

THIS ELEGANT scholarly edition of Felicia Hemans's early poetry is a welcome sight for those interested in one of the most popular and best-selling poets of the nineteenth century. Christine Alexander and Pamela Nutt, in collaboration with student editors from Presbyterian Ladies' College in Sydney, Australia, have crafted a most helpful entry point into the life and writings of Felicia Dorothea Browne, who would later be well known as Mrs. Hemans. In a remarkable feat for a fourteen-year-old, Hemans published *Poems* (1808), a volume of ninety-seven poems, entirely financed by subscription and auspiciously dedicated with permission to the Prince of Wales, later George IV. Although Hemans's juvenile writings extend beyond *Poems* (1808), Alexander and Nutt have selected fifty-six poems from this initial publication—all of which were composed when the poet was between the ages of eight and thirteen—as the sole focus for their edition. In so doing, they make an invaluable contribution to the study of literary works composed by children.

For teachers and enthusiastic readers of Hemans's poetry, this visually appealing, reasonably priced edition allows for a fresh engagement with the literary culture and sensibilities of early nineteenth-century England. Accompanying the highly accessible introductory essay and fifty-six annotated poems are beautiful images that illuminate Hemans's life, particularly her childhood. Readers first encounter a portrait of the poet taken in 1836 by Edward Smith. There are also multiple sketches that Hemans herself drew of Gwrych and Bronwylfa, her childhood homes, along with some of

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her collages that had been preserved in her friend Anne Wagner's album. Other images include the original advertisement for *Poems* (1808) and an illustration of the young poet's patroness, Lady Kirkwall, also found in the Anne Wagner Album. Simply put, Alexander and Nutt, as well as their team of editors, have crafted a beautiful book that is highly gratifying to read.

Through the editors' archival research at the New York Public Library and the University of Liverpool Library, as well as their examination of biographical sources like the *Memoir* (1839) written by Hemans's sister, Harriett Browne, this scholarly edition aims "to demonstrate the range of topics and form that Felicia Browne's poems covered, and to show the growing maturity of the young poet" (xlvi). Placed in a roughly chronological sequence based on the best evidence available, the fifty-six poems showcase Hemans's interest in Welsh language and culture, her sense of patriotism from having brothers serving in the military, and her early training in and emulation of classical poetry that is most commonly seen in the juvenile male tradition. We learn, too, from the introductory essay that Hemans's mother introduced her daughter at a young age to the works of Hannah More, Sarah Trimmer, and Anna Laetitia Barbauld. Her personal favourite, Shakespeare, frequently receives high praise in her early poetry. For example, in a poem she entitles "Shakespeare," composed at age eleven, Hemans quotes Milton's "L'Allegro" in her encomium to Shakespeare: "How sweet the 'native wood-notes wild' / Of him, the Muse's favorite child" (ll. 15–16). The endnotes in this scholarly edition helpfully point out such allusions to classical texts in addition to defining archaic language sometimes employed by the well-read, highly educated poet.

The editors interestingly suggest that Hemans's knowledge of the poetic tradition and her highly imitative style from an early age indicate her intense desire to participate in that tradition. Alexander and Nutt discuss the timidity of some of Hemans's early use of verse form (e.g., "Sometimes fourth lines are truncated, as in "The Farewell"); however, the young poet also adeptly experiments with odes, employing the expected elevated subject matter to match the form (xxxv). As we learn in the introductory essay, even the two negative reviews that *Poems* (1808) received, one of which had been written by Anna Barbauld in *The Monthly Review*, would not stymie the young poet's zeal to become a poet (xxxvii). Thanks to the editors' efforts in the beginning of their edition to delineate the publication history of *Poems* (1808), its famous (and infamous) subscribers, and its reception, readers can better appreciate the exceptional nature of Hemans's juvenile writings.

Readers of this edition will, I believe, be convinced that, if but a few of the fifty-six poems display occasional timidity, the far greater portion "reveal a young person alert both to her own particular surroundings and to a wider world" (xxxvi). As a child, Hemans writes bold natural descriptions of her environment in poems such as "The Scenes of Conway" and "The Ruined Castle." Drawing on her interest in Welsh culture in these two poems, Hemans delights readers with picturesque scenes infused with other Romantic elements like patriotism. At the age of thirteen, the young poet

demonstrates how meditations on nature can enable Romantic perceptions into nature's invisible workings (xxxii). She pens these memorable lines in "The Scenes of Conway":

'Twas thus that I mus'd, while I wander'd away,
 Thro' the towers of the castle sublime;
 Where the boughs of the ivy conceal the decay,
 Which is made by the ravage of time (p. 51, ll. 9-12)

When readers pair "The Scenes of Conway" with, for example, "The Ruined Castle," there is a unique and exciting opportunity to consider Romantic elements (like the sublime and the picturesque) through the eyes of a child. As we read this selection of Hemans's juvenilia, it is easy to discern the poet's growing acuity to her surroundings, both the perceptible and the imperceptible, as she gains experience and, likely, confidence.

The precocious young poet depicted in this scholarly edition would continue to write poetry for the rest of her life and attain a celebrity that few other poets of the nineteenth century could rival. At the time of her death in 1835, her works had outsold the poetry of both William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (xxxviii). However, by the end of the nineteenth century, her ubiquity and lack of male-ordained fame conspired to cause her name to drift into obscurity, a trend which would continue well into the twentieth century. Only recently have scholars like Susan Wolfson, Laurie Langbauer, Kate Singer, and Nanora Sweet sought to recover the significance of Hemans's poetry. With their publication *Felicia Hemans: Selected Early Poems* (2021), Christine Alexander and Pamela Nutt have contributed to this vital research space by making Hemans's overlooked juvenile poetry newly available, accompanied by precise and helpful annotations.

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Rachel Conrad. *Time for Childhoods: Young Poets and Questions of Agency*. University of Massachusetts Press, 2019.

xviii + 209 pages. Paperback, USD 29.95.
ISBN: 9781625344496.

TIME FOR Childhoods: Young Poets and Questions of Agency by Rachel Conrad breaks new ground in juvenilia studies. Building on pioneering scholarship on children's agency and authorship by Karen Sánchez-Eppler, Laurie Langbauer, Juliet McMaster, and others, Conrad's examination of lyric poems by twentieth- and twenty-first-century youth expands the footprint of literary juvenilia analysis. Although the poems in this study neither originate from an historical distance nor anticipate authors who go on to become literary celebrities, they yield great insights into children's imaginative art as well as the malleability of poetry and time itself.

Everyday acts of children's authorship often "fly under the radar of adults" and vary in terms of literary merit (18)—facts Conrad readily acknowledges. Her book's remarkable case studies demonstrate, however, that "interesting and well-crafted poems by young poets should be brought to light, talked about, respected, savored, and added to our cultural life" (8). Tending to the sociopolitical contexts, aesthetic forms, and theoretical sophistication of child-authored poetry, Conrad successfully nudges readers away from developmental, time-bound assumptions about child writers as "not *yet*" authors (as thus "precocious" and/or "ignorant"). Instead, she argues that young poets "may have more at stake in reimagining temporal order in their artistic work than do adults" (17). Accordingly, Conrad traces temporal agency as a major preoccupation of youth-authored poetry, proving time and again that "young poets' writing of time [is] a form of agency hiding in plain sight" (37).

Children's lyric poetry as a vehicle for reimagining what Conrad terms "dynamic temporality" (163) is compellingly developed in the book's carefully scaffolded chapters. Following a salient introduction, the subsequent four chapters each elucidates a fascinating case study, including Gwendolyn Brooks' Chicago-based poetry-writing contest for youth; an anthology of child-authored poems, *Salting the Ocean* (2000), collected and edited by poet Naomi Shihab Nye; The Voice of the Children project, a Brooklyn-based youth poetry collective led by June Jordan and Terri Bush; and the first edition of the now annual *Rattle Young Poets Anthology* (2014–).

Conrad's interdisciplinary approach to reading lyric poetry by children, who range in age from four to eighteen, is as novel as the subject under discussion. As a

scholar of childhood studies trained in clinical psychology and a poet, Conrad brings a range of interdisciplinary strategies to her interpretations, combining rhetorical and literary analysis of poetry with cultural, psychological, and sociological understandings of young writers' engagements with "times of childhoods" and scenes of writing. To her credit, her analysis avoids pretense, jargon, and excessive reliance on abstract theorizations *about* the ways that children are culturally, temporally, and linguistically situated. Instead, through attentive close readings of children's own linguistic choices within their poetry, Conrad carefully holds up to the light the various temporal positionings, rhetorical choices, and poetic subjectivities illuminated by children's writing. Through select transcriptions of child-authored poems, she wisely creates space for children's voices, agency, and subjectivities to emerge from their writings themselves. Take, for example, a poem by Cyndea L. Peacock, which was published in *Salting the Ocean* and appears in chapter three:

I touched
 the roughness
 of my wrinkled paper
 as I rumbled it
 in my hands.

And remembered
 as I rubbed the edges—
 how life expands. (86)

By reproducing child-authored verse, such as the example above, Conrad showcases "young people's complex imagined temporalities—their temporal standpoints—that can enrich our sense of the possibilities of lyric time in relation to human subjectivity" (40). As Conrad extrapolates from the shifting conceptions of time informing Peacock's poem, "past action and remembering opens up an expanding present ('And remembered /... how life expands'), with the present-tense final word 'expands' rhyming with the first stanza's last word 'hands'" (86). In this gesture of close reading, Conrad amplifies the embodied agency suggested by the poetic speaker, pointing to the ways by which Peacock's rendering of "the past into a present ... opens and extends possibilities" of how the poem imagines temporal agency (86). As evidenced by this commentary, Conrad's incisive close readings spotlight the voices and agency of children while also illuminating through critical literary analysis "how young poets are 'doing time' in their poems: how they use language, sound, space, and pattern to make their poetic time machines that call us to wind them through our reading. Young poets, through the variety and fluency of their temporal inventions, help establish plural lyric times" (39). From the range of poems transcribed and fleshed out through her readings, we witness the "varied reimagining of temporality or multiple lyric times that young poets write" (40).

While Conrad remains alert to thorny questions surrounding how adults repackage, appropriate, and manipulate children's language practices, she also sheds light on the potentially generative aspects of adult work to invite, curate, and value children's self-expressive acts, offering Brooks's and Nye's celebration of children's agency and voices as a particularly eloquent illustration of "adult facilitation" of children's creative expression and publication. All of the book's case studies spotlight adult-sponsorship of child authorship and publication, which function less as top-down, heavy-handed modes of instruction, and more as enabling "tool[s] that children can use in the service of their own purposes and projects. Adult mediation need not threaten youth agency but can help make visible the agency claimed by young artists in their thinking, planning, and making" (9).

Conrad's own receptive, attentive readings of children's voices fall in this camp—not only in terms of her methodology but also as the driving impetus for her project. As Conrad recounts in the preface, discovering Naomi Shihab Nye's "Salting the Ocean" while visiting the Eric Carle Museum in her hometown of Amherst, Massachusetts, led to her surprise encounter with child-authored poetry. As a childhood studies scholar, parent (at the time of a preschooler), and poet, Conrad recounts "the shock" she felt when first encountering the moving words written by child poets anthologized by Nye. The revelation was also "instructive: why had I never seen such a book before, in my decades of reading and studying poetry? Why weren't poems by young poets ever talked about in literature classes, in literary magazines, in scholarly criticism?" (ix).

More than a sidebar, which adds personal dimension to a sophisticated academic argument, anecdotes such as this also model the rich discoveries that can be made when adults take seriously children's linguistic practices. Such realizations require adults, as Conrad skilfully models, remaining open to "hearing" the agency and insights that children express through language.

In sum, *Times for Childhoods: Young Poets and Questions of Agency* is a sophisticated and often revelatory examination of the ways that young writers reimagine time and subjectivity through the malleable forms of lyric poetry. As such, this groundbreaking work has much to offer readers, including scholars, graduate students, and undergraduate students as well as educators, parents, and lay readers. All those interested in developing their understanding of children's authorship and young people's engagements with time, creative expression, and agency will find much to study and emulate. As Conrad states in her conclusion, "even the act of reading" her "book involves setting aside standard adult expectations and judgements about children and their artistic works, about which texts should qualify as literary and deserve study and critical attention" (160–61). For those willing to make this time, new and vital discoveries await. Reading *Time for Childhoods* enriches our understanding of the subjectivities and temporalities conceptualized by child writers. By engaging deeply with children's literary expressions of self and the world, as Conrad's study proves and Anna Mae Duane argues elsewhere, we "forge a more realistic vision of

the contingent and mediated nature of all literary voices and of the interdependence of all historical subjects” (Duane 484).¹

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Sophia Spencer and Margaret McNamara. *The Bug Girl (a True Story)*. Penguin Random House, 2020.

20 pages. Hardback, CAD 21.99.

ISBN: 9780735267527.

THIS DEBUT autobiographical publication by Sophia Spencer, who was eleven at the time of publication, relays her experience of being a young child who loved insects. Written with the assistance of Margaret McNamara, the pen name of Brenda Bowen, an author of books for children, the book is pitched to readers aged four to eight. Sophia’s passion for “bugs,” as she calls them, began at an early age, and was encouraged by her mother. However, her niche interest caused her to be bullied at school by her peers for being different. This illustrated first-person narrative tells the story of how Sophia overcame these difficulties with the help of her mum and entomologists all over the world who reassured her that it is “not weird or strange to love bugs and insects.”

The book offers an original viewpoint on a life-changing experience. Sophia’s perspective, with its retrospective lens, might be considered unusually mature for an author so young. The book is derived from an interview given by Sophia to Bowen; a collaboration that enables the juvenile voice to be heard. Indeed, much of the narrative phrasing has an authentic child-like feel, and there is no reason to doubt that the majority of the wording came directly from the interview. The story covers the timeframe of five years from the time Sophia first became friends with a bug, through her time at kindergarten and school until she was seven. The opening pages, which describe Sophia’s visit to a butterfly conservatory, effectively convey her young childhood passion for winged, colourful insects and the associated wonder and excitement generated by their encounter. The illustrations by Kerascoet are plentiful

¹ Anna Mae Duane, “‘Like a Motherless Child’: Racial Education at the New York African Free School and in *My Bondage and My Freedom*,” *American Literature*, vol. 82, no. 3, 2010, pp. 461–88.

and colourful throughout, with the use of simple cartoonish outlines and watercolour effect. The insects are larger than life throughout the book, which accentuates their presence and emphasises their importance to the protagonist.

As the story progresses, we become increasingly aware of the tension between Sophia's own passion for her subject and the cruel opinions of her peers who do not understand her interest. The school children's lack of empathy reaches a crisis point when Sophia is mocked for taking a grasshopper to school to show them because "I thought the kids would be so amazed by the grasshopper they'd want to know all about it." But the children do not respond as she had hoped, and instead call her "weird" and stamp on the grasshopper "till it was dead." This act of bullying is accompanied by a sombre-coloured image, devoid of foliage, which emphasises the crushing feeling of being ostracised from your peer group and teased for being yourself. The episode conveys some interesting points about childhood expectations and the need to be effectively prepared to handle rejection and unfair criticism when your own interests do not reflect those of people around you.

Throughout the book the home environment is depicted as being particularly encouraging to Sophia's passion, with the interior of her bedroom displaying a colourful array of bug pictures, posters, bug models and toys, and books of insects. When Sophia feels ostracized from her peers, these vibrant scenes are replaced by a depiction of her life at school in winter, with bare trees in the playground, and speech bubbles from the children, such as: "I don't want to be friends with a bug lover." A double-page illustration of Sophia's room, that shows her packing away all her bug paraphernalia into cardboard boxes, with walls undecorated, conveys her changing emotions during this difficult time from joy to sadness as she "took a break from bugs."

After seeing her daughter so sad, Sophia's mother wrote to the Entomological Society of Canada seeking a bug scientist to write a letter to her daughter. After hundreds of letters, photos, and videos came through in response, scientists tweeted the hashtag "BugsR4Girls" hundreds of times to encourage Sophia to stick with her passion for bugs. Morgan Jackson, a leading entomologist, enlisted Sophia's help in writing an article about how entomologists could foster more interest in young people about the subject.

The book will appeal to parents of children who are looking for an engaging story with emotional resonance to read out loud, with plenty of illustrations, as well as to younger readers. Included at the end are six pages of Bug Facts, which are sure to engage the interest of children, ranging from the prettiest bug, to the biggest bug, to the fastest bug. Sophia also identifies the "assassin bug," and her "top four" bugs, with accompanying explanations as to why. She includes a life cycle of the butterfly and a guide to studying bugs in the wild.

The book is well pitched to children who might be of a similar age to the main character, and who might have experienced the debilitating effects of being bullied for having interests different to their peers. I gave the book to my eight year old son

to read, and after reading it cover to cover in fifteen minutes, his only criticism was that he wished the story could have gone on longer. For scholars of juvenilia, the book offers a rare autobiographical window into the emotional territory of a primary-aged author who navigates a challenging episode in her life.

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