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## **Politicizing the Nursery: British Children's Literature and the French Revolution**

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### Abstract

Despite claims that British Children's Literature, under the directives of critics such as Trimmer, avoided Jacobinism in the early eighteenth century primarily to protect the innocence of the child, Grenby demonstrates that this ideology was not so hegemonic. He cites examples found in geographical and historical grammars and in fictional work for children. Those children's authors who purported to entertain and instruct found the Revolution a rich field both for adventure and moral lessons. In particular a book such as Richard Hoare's *Young Traveller* as well as others gave the child reader access to the "war of ideas" which emerged around the Revolution.



## Politicizing the Nursery: British Children's Literature and the French Revolution<sup>1</sup>

Matthew Grenby

At first sight, early British children's books were very seldom explicitly political—in the sense that they interacted with current events—even in those most politically fraught of decades, the 1790s and 1800s. This is surprising for several reasons. First, children's literature in France was openly politicized during the Revolution (Higonnet). Second, as literary historians have increasingly pointed out, in Britain politics impinged upon almost every other form of literary production during the crisis surrounding the Revolution.<sup>2</sup> Third, an extremely animated discussion about the politicization of children's books was taking place during these years. Sarah Trimmer's *Guardian of Education* (1802–1806), a periodical dedicated to reviewing, historicizing and theorizing children's literature, not only seriously considered the political role of children's books, but also gave the impression that almost the entirety of children's literature was suffused with Jacobinism. There was “a conspiracy against CHRISTIANITY and all SOCIAL ORDER,” Trimmer wrote; revealed religion would be abandoned and replaced by so-called “new philosophy”; and all this was being done “through the medium of *Books of Education and Children's Books*” (*Guardian of Education*, 1:2).<sup>3</sup> Trimmer was far from alone in thinking this, and her allies were surprisingly diverse. We might have expected her to gain support from the Society for the Suppression of Vice, say, or her friend Jane West (*Address* 25; West 1801, 1:xxiii–xxiv).<sup>4</sup> But according to one recent analysis, William Wordsworth also responded to “the politicization of childhood in the 1790s.” Anxious in particular about children reading radical material, Alan Richardson has argued, Wordsworth lambasted all contemporary children's literature and recommended that children should read only what he supposed to be the uncontaminated fairy tales and chapbook stories of his own youth (Richardson 1994, 126; see also Richardson 1991).

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