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From Wild Fictions to Accurate Observation: Domesticating Wonder in Children's Literature of the Late Eighteenth Century

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In the preface to his *L'Ami des Enfants* (1782-83), Arnaud Berquin assures parents that his collection of tales, dialogues, and 'moral dramas' is fit 'to become a proper reading book for children'.[1] To justify this claim, Berquin describes what his text includes—but not before announcing what it excludes:

> Instead of those wild fictions of the Wonderful, in which [children's] understanding is too commonly bewilder'd, they will here see only what occurs or may occur within the limits of their families. The sentiments with which the work abounds, are not above the level of their comprehension. It introduces them, accompanied by none, except their parents, the companions of their pastimes, the domestics that surround them, or the animals they are accustomed to behold.[2]

Berquin's text proved to be a phenomenally popular work of children's literature.[3] Its 'concern for realism' meant that it effectively became a 'manifesto for the moral tale[s]' that were so popular in the final decades of the eighteenth century.[4] As John Dunkley has noted, the success of Berquin's text lay in its capacity to satisfy children's interest in 'the world around them' while offering 'something which parents would accept and encourage, in the hope of forming both morals and taste'.[5] As the preface suggests, the expulsion of 'the Wonderful' underpins the book's reassuring reputation. In this instance, 'the Wonderful' is a daunting prospect that threatens to derail the development of children's understanding. While Berquin's text was

predicated upon communal models of reading—in which both parents and children would participate—the 'wild fictions' he castigates are markedly anti-social, carrying their young readers beyond 'the limits of their families' and those objects and people that they 'are accustomed to behold'. By contrast, Berquin's moral tales are based in an intimate sociability. Pitched at the level of the child's comprehension, the sentiments that these stories promote sit happily within the familiar borders of the child's life, delineated by their parents, their friends, their servants and their animals.

The contracted range of Berquin's text aligns it with what has been identified as the rationalising mode of late eighteenth-century writing for children. The parameters for critical discussions of this material were firmly established in the early twentieth century, when F. J. Harvey Darton described the period's children's literature as enacting a 'quarrel between rationalism and imagination'.[6] This binary opposition was further enforced in the 1980s, most notably within Geoffrey Summerfield's *Fantasy and Reason: Children's Literature in the Eighteenth Century*. There, Summerfield argues that children's literature came to be dominated by a conception of 'education as an ascent toward rationality'. The result was an emphasis on the values of 'enlightenment, science and commerce' at the expense of 'the metaphors, the multivalences, [and] the poetic resonances' of fantasy.[7] More recently, Alan Richardson has questioned the exclusivity of the terms used by critics such as Summerfield, although he too identifies a distinctive 'rationalist tradition' of children's literature, in which the child 'is never to lose its sense of self-possession, never to suspend its carefully inculcated habits of rational thought for a moment of pleasing (or frightful) wonder'.[8] The work of Mitzi Myers poses a welcome revision to the tendency to regard 'rationalist' writing as consisting of one-dimensional didacticism. For Myers, the derisive commentary that such writing has attracted since its

publication is ineluctably linked to the fact that it is, predominantly, the work of female authors. Myers suggests that far from being reductive or stifling, the rationalising discourse of women's writing for children ushered in 'technical as well as thematic innovations', including a 'redefined realism grounded in everyday objects and accessible achievements'.[9]

In the wake of Myers' feminist reassessment, subsequent work on eighteenth-century children's literature has tended to abandon the binary logic of previous critics, offering a richer, arguably less polemical, assessment of its merits.[10] Accordingly, rather than resurrecting an antagonistic framework in which reason and rationalism are pitched against wonder and the imagination, this essay focuses on the productive relationships between these terms. While writers such as Berquin may deride the 'wild fictions of the Wonderful', I argue that experiences of wonder are central to, and firmly embedded within, the form and content of putatively 'rationalist' works of children's literature. Similarly, while Berquin's limited sphere of observation—in which children 'see only what occurs or may occur within the limits of their families'—implies a corresponding contraction of the imagination, this essay demonstrates that a focus on the observable world is far from antithetical to imaginative and sympathetic expansion. Focusing on examples from the works of Charlotte Smith, John Aikin and Anna Letitia Barbauld, and Priscilla Wakefield, the following discussion re-evaluates the status of wonder in the period's writing for children. To varying extents, these authors shared Berquin's antipathy towards forms of wonder that 'bewilder'd' the understanding. Such violent effects were inimical to their pedagogic agendas, which emphasized the careful cultivation of children's minds. Nevertheless, they recognized the role that affective experiences could play within their ostensibly rationalist schemes of education, and were mindful of producing works that were, in Charlotte Smith's words, 'attractive to children'.[11] Consequently, these authors re-orientated

wonder: they removed it from the discombobulating effects of 'wild fictions' and re-located it within the realm of the empirically verifiable, where it could provide the basis of children's moral and intellectual development. Effectively, they domesticated wonder, harnessing its potential as an educational force. Rather than the unpredictable imaginative transport caused by 'wild fictions', these authors suggest that wonder can be experienced through localized acts of observation, which intensify children's consciousness of the world around them. In turn, this heightened awareness generates self-reflection, enabling children to see themselves as social and moral subjects. In this respect, this domesticated version of wonder becomes imbued with ethical potential, prompting children to examine their relationships with others. Ultimately, while writers in the 'rationalist tradition' frequently begin by focusing on what Myers refers to as 'everyday objects', they subsequently work outwards, demanding that readers both exercise and expand the limits of their sympathetic imagination.

Strange Things and Familiar Matters: Locating Wonder

In her recent monograph *Eighteenth-Century Fiction and the Reinvention of Wonder*, Sarah Tindal Kareem examines a familiar narrative which posits that, over the course of the eighteenth century, the production of wonder by supernatural means 'lost its effect' in the face of a 'newly secular age'.[12] Kareem draws upon the work of Jane Bennett, who uses the term 'disenchantment tales' to refer to narratives of Western progress in which modern society is blighted by a sense of loss. For proponents of this historical story, 'the inevitable price for rationalization or scientization is', Bennett writes, 'the eclipse of wonder at the world'.[13] The notion that an age of wonders was 'snuffed out by an age of reason' has also been subjected to scrutiny by Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park in their influential study, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*.[14] As all of these thinkers suggest, the trajectory of wonder in the eighteenth century is too complex and

diffuse to be summarised as 'a wholesale shift from credulity to skepticism' caused by the progress of science and secularization.[15] Nevertheless, it has proved an influential narrative—one whose presence can be discerned in many accounts of the development of children's literature. It is not difficult to see why. Charles Lamb's complaint that 'the old classics of the nursery' were displaced by moral and didactic works has taken on axiomatic status in critical work on children's literature. His infamous letter of 1802 refers to Anna Letitia Barbauld and Sarah Trimmer as authors whose works dispense with imaginative delight and present instead '[k]nowledge . . . in the *shape* of *knowledge*'. 'Science has succeeded to Poetry no less in the little walks of children than with men', he writes, encapsulating the 'sense of loss' that Bennett attributes to such 'disenchantment tales'.[16] Similarly, as I began by observing, many writers of the period expressed hostility to what Berquin refers to as 'wild fictions of the Wonderful' which 'bewilder' children's understanding. A typical example can be found in Elizabeth Hamilton's *Letters on the Elementary Principles of Education* (1801-1802), which outlines 'the danger of inflaming the imagination, and kindling the passions, by a detail of fictitious wonders'. Like Berquin, Hamilton suggests that an 'early taste for the wonderful' is psychologically damaging, distorting children's sense of the probable and disrupting 'sound reasoning'.[17] The kind of works that Hamilton has in mind are 'stories of giants and enchanters, of Fairies and Genii', which provide 'unnecessary stimulus to [the] imagination' and, correspondingly, 'retard the progress of the other faculties of the mind'.[18] These sentiments are echoed by Sarah Trimmer in *The Guardian of Education* (1803), where she comments disapprovingly on those books 'which are fit to fill the heads of children with confused notions of wonderful and supernatural events, brought about by the agency of imaginary beings'.[19] Such comments can be located within the 'ideological battle' in which middle-class writers 'sought to expunge vicious plebeian influences

from the nursery environment'.[20] From this perspective, the wonderful is rendered suspicious, threatening to create confusion and tumult in the minds of children. Such explicit hostility to these effects may explain the tendency to interpret this tradition of writing as advocating didacticism at the expense of imaginative exploration. But this judgement is complicated by the recognition that what these writers condemn are *fictitious* wonders, which they align with the marvellous and the supernatural.[21] A closer examination of the concept of wonder in the eighteenth century reveals that this is just one manifestation of wonder among many.

As Peter Swaab has recently noted, wonder is a 'complex word' denoting a concept that is both 'ambiguous and troubling'.[22] As a noun, a 'wonder' can signify phenomena 'encountered externally': what Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* calls 'strange thing[s]' that are 'more or greater than can be expected'.[23] But it can also refer to the affective state that such wonders inspire. Encompassing '[a]dmiration; astonishment; amazement; [and] surprise', the emotional state of wonder ranges from an overpowering sensation that 'restrict[s] our mental mobility' to a mood that forms a spur to activity, initiating a quest to fill the vacuum of one's ignorance.[24] Sarah Tindal Kareem alludes to this variety of meanings when she conceives of wonder 'as a finely gradated spectrum that moves from astonishment through curiosity toward radical doubt'.[25] With their focus on 'wild fictions' which obstruct 'sound reasoning', the writers referred to above evoke a form of wonder that prompts 'astonishment': a stupefying sensation that inhibits 'attentive enquiry'.[26] In these instances, fictitious wonders instigate a state of self-alienating uncertainty that verifies Daston and Park's suggestion that wonders 'register the line between the known and the unknown'.[27] In this liminal guise, the state of wonder threatens to usher children away from the comfortingly familiar scope of the home—'the limits of their families', as Berquin puts it. Wonder—and the 'strange things' by which it is inspired—represents otherness:

a threat not just to children's understanding, but to the security of the domestic environment they inhabit.

However, while the hostility of these writers appears to confirm the demise of supernaturally-induced wonder in the eighteenth century, other, less disorientating and potentially educative forms of wonder continue to exist. As Daston and Park argue, wonder was not expelled by an age of reason; rather it 'shifted its objects and altered its texture almost beyond recognition'.[28] In her reassessment the realist mode of the eighteenth-century novel, Kareem suggests that wonder is cultivated 'as a rational response to the ordinary'; this idea is equally relevant to a range of eighteenth-century writing for children.[29] Decades before rationalist children's literature had emerged as an identifiable literary mode, the pioneering bookseller John Newbery employed the persona of Tom Telescope to author his *Newtonian System of Philosophy* (1761).[30] As its subtitle indicates, the abstract scientific principles discussed in this work are 'familiarized and made entertaining' by reference to 'Objects with which [its readers] are familiarly acquainted'. The book's contents range from the limits of the solar system to 'the consideration of things with which [its readers] are more intimately acquainted', with its protagonist asking his auditors to enquire into the causes of various natural phenomena: 'How was that Mountain lifted up to the sky? How came this crystal Spring to bubble on its lofty brow, or that large River to flow from its massy side?'[31] While these features of the landscape may be familiar, the text insists that they 'are not, on that account, the less wonderful'—an assertion that it substantiates by exploring the geological processes that produce such natural occurrences.[32] Three decades later, a story in John Aikin and Anna Barbauld's *Evenings at Home* echoes the methodology of Newbery's *Newtonian System* by demonstrating how even 'matters familiar among ourselves' can become 'wonderful' if they are examined in

sufficient detail.[33] An attentive enquiry into the 'nature and properties' of apparently mundane objects will, Aikin and Barbauld suggest, have a defamiliarizing effect, revealing the wonders latent in the phenomena of everyday life.[34] This is given an explicitly religious inflection in Newbery's *Newtonian System*, which insists that 'a man may, even at home, and within himself, see the Wonders of God in the Works of Creation'.[35] In these instances, the evocation of wonder does not result in the paralysis of astonishment feared by Berquin and Hamilton. Rather, wonder is revealed to be an 'interrogative' passion, reminding us that, as a verb, to wonder is 'to be desirous to know or learn'.[36] In this respect, experiences of wonder have a 'temporal trajectory' that sees individuals move from a state of ignorance to one of knowledge.[37] Moreover, the identification of wonder within the ordinary and the familiar marks its domestication, suggesting how it might be harnessed as a mode of encouraging children to undertake an attentive, and even critical, view of their immediate surroundings.

In light of this, it is possible to reconsider the implications of Berquin's suggestion that his writing will only expose children to 'what occurs or may occur within the limits of their families'. What sounds like an introspective retreat into a rigidly circumscribed environment, may also harbour the potential for experiences of educative wonder. While Johnson's *Dictionary* asserts that wonder is produced by encounters with 'strange things', writers such as Newbery, Aikin and Barbauld propose that it is evoked when ordinary things are made strange via a process of rational investigation. If the home represents a refuge from the 'wild fictions of the wonderful', it also contains the potential for what might be referred to as domestic forms of wonder that prompt children to re-examine their relationship with the world around them. In what follows I draw upon three examples of writing from the 1790s. I focus first on how Charlotte Smith navigates her way between competing forms of wonder in her 1796 work,

Rambles Farther: a text that revolves around an authoritative maternal figure who teaches children to observe their local environment in an accurate, even scientific, manner. Maintaining this line of enquiry, I turn to a short piece from Barbauld and Aikin's *Evenings at Home*, which further demonstrates the defamiliarizing effects of wonder. Finally, I explore Priscilla Wakefield's *Mental Improvement* (1794): a text that demonstrates how wonder can unsettle the boundaries by which domesticity is defined. These authors suggest that, rather than disrupting 'sound reasoning' or 'bewilder[ing]' the understanding, wonder can prove conducive to reason and enable children to imagine themselves as citizens of the world.

Seeing every object 'as it really is': *Rambles Farther* and *Evenings at Home*

Published in 1796, Charlotte Smith's *Rambles Farther* is the sequel to the previous year's *Rural Walks*. Both texts are fictionalized dialogues, which are frequently interspersed with poetry.[38] They focus on the educational practices of the widowed Mrs Woodfield, who raises her own children and their conceited cousin Caroline, who is educated out of her petulant ways by the end of *Rural Walks*. In the preface to *Rural Walks*, Smith cites Berquin's *L'Ami des Enfants* as the model for her own writing for children, and his influence is evident in both of her perambulatory works.[39] The third dialogue of *Rambles Farther*—which is entitled 'Wonders'—is set at the coast, where Mrs Woodfield is visiting a friend, along with her daughters (Elizabeth and Henrietta) and another dispossessed child, the orphaned Ella Sedley. The coastal setting provides much that is novel and interesting to the children, and the dialogue progresses from a discussion of the sea's flora and fauna to its mythological inhabitants: nereids, syrens and mermaids. Such matters cause an unexpected surge of nostalgia in Mrs Woodfield, as she recalls her former affection for the 'wild and improbable' parts of the *Arabian Nights*.[40] She continues:

> Part of the pleasure we feel from these fictions arises from our love of the marvellous, and part from the agreeable recollection of the stories we used to listen to in the happy days of our childhood. You, Elizabeth, have been rather taught to see every object around you as it really is, than to be either pleased or frightened by the fables which, when I was in the nursery, were admitted there. (1:65)

Mrs Woodfield's admission represents a strange and uncertain moment: one that articulates the rationalizing movement away from the marvelous even as it acknowledges its allure.[41] This contradiction is displayed so openly—and so ambivalently—that the suggestion that Elizabeth will neither be 'pleased [n]or frightened' by such fables, feels like a deprivation as much as a liberation from a bewildered and inflamed imagination. Within Smith's text, the expulsion of the marvellous hinges upon the kind of accurate observation that keeps individuals anchored to the world around them. By observing 'every object around [them] as it really is', Mrs Woodfield's daughters remain immune to the 'credulity' that Elizabeth Hamilton fears. Indeed, Smith's empirical emphasis recalls Berquin's reassurance that within his book children will 'see only what occurs or may occur within the limits of their families'.[42] For Smith, however, this commitment to accurate local observation leads to forms of wonder that facilitate both the acquisition of knowledge and, ultimately, reverence for God.

As the dialogue draws to an end, Mrs Woodfield signals the importance of possessing sufficient leisure-time to cultivate a disciplined, and suitably reverential, response to the natural world. In this respect, Smith's text foregrounds the middle-class ideology that is implicit to works within the rationalist tradition of children's literature.[43] As they look upon the sea, Mrs Woodfield explains to Elizabeth that 'the fisherman and the sailor who live upon it . . . see nothing extraordinary in it' (1:68-69). Rather than considering 'the wonders contained in its bosom', these labouring-class individuals are 'unused to make reflections of any kind' (1:68, 69). Their observations concern nature as a space of work, rather than a site of contemplation. Thus,

while ‘a man, whose living depends on the sea or the traffic upon great rivers, knows perfectly well when to look for high tides’, he remains ignorant regarding ‘the phænomenon that produces them’ (1:70). In contrast to these ‘unenlightened villager[s]’ (1:70), the middle-class children Smith addresses are free from the demands of labour. Consequently, they are able to see nature as an object of wonder, rather than an economic resource, as Mrs Woodville explains:

> But those, my Elizabeth, who have greater opportunities of information, and more leisure for reflection, learn to look up with greater reverence and admiration towards the great first cause, who has spread before us, whithersoever we turn, the wonders of his wisdom, and who undoubtedly meant them all to contribute to the happiness of that being, on whom . . . he has bestowed the greatest portion of reason. (1:71)

Smith revisits the idea that Newbery expresses in *The Newtonian System*, in which wonder facilitates a mode of religious adoration. If wonder initially arises from an ‘ignorance of causes’, it is heightened and given purpose by the quest to remedy that lack of knowledge.[44] Reason and imaginative delight work in tandem here: those who have sufficiently cultivated their observational powers find that wonders are in fact constantly before them, ‘whithersoever [they] turn’. Simultaneously, however, those wonders serve as signifiers of God, the ‘first great cause’, whom we can only ‘look . . . towards’.[45] Wonders are thus simultaneously ‘before us’, and tantalizingly beyond us.

Within *Rambles Farther*, Smith begins to familiarize the ‘wonderful’, by bringing it into the immediate orbit of the daily lives of her readers. While her strategy recalls Berquin’s focus on what children can ‘see . . . within the limits of their families’, Smith’s model of ‘experiential learning’ also alerts us to the fact that some modes of vision are more far-reaching than others.[46] With the right degree of cultivation, what individuals see before them can lead to speculations that range far beyond their immediate geographical location. A similar dynamic is explored in

John Aikin and Anna Barbauld's popular, six-volume collection of 'miscellaneous pieces', *Evenings at Home*; *or, the Juvenile Budget Opened.* There, however, what Smith calls 'the wonders of [God's] wisdom' (1:71) are overshadowed by an investigation into 'the wonderful art of man'.[47] In this respect, Aikin and Barbauld's influential text plays a vital role in the domestication and rationalization of wonder in writing for children. While they dispense with the marvellous and the fantastic, they remain invested in the stimulating effects of wonder, which they relocate within the industrial and commercial landscape of contemporary Britain. Far from inducing bewilderment and credulity, the altered texture of wonder within their work enables children to become 'penetrating observers of their own society', demonstrating 'the transformative potential of rational discourse'.[48] Nowhere is this more evident than in Barbauld's short piece, 'On Manufactures'.[49]

This dialogue begins with the father responding to the question posed by his son, Henry: 'Pray what is a Manufacture?' (2:97). Over the course of his answer, the father reflects upon the etymology and usage of the word, as well as on Britain's status as a 'commercial nation' (2:104). The 'commercialist ethos' of Aikin and Barbauld's brand of middle-class Dissent shines through, as the father explains how British industry is underpinned by 'a friendly intercourse with foreign nations' (2:104).[50] The conversation then turns to the subject of mechanical ingenuity, at which point the father refers to Sir Richard Arkwright, whose inventions revolutionized the textile industry in the late eighteenth century.[51] This provides an opportunity to offer a brief lesson on social mobility ('in this country every one is free to rise by merit' [2:109-110]), before focussing on Arkwright's achievements. It is at this point that the text's reorientation of wonder becomes most apparent:

> *Fa.* . . . Arkwright used to say, that if he had time to perfect his inventions, he would put a fleece of wool into a box, and it should come out broad cloth.
>
> *Hen*. What did he mean by that; was there any fairy in the box to turn it into broad cloth with her wand?
>
> *Fa*. He was assisted by the only fairies that ever had the power of transformation, Art and Industry: he meant that he would contrive so many machines, wheel within wheel, that the combing, carding, and other various operations should be performed by mechanism, almost without the hand of man. (2:110-111)

With its unequivocal expulsion of the fantastic and the supernatural, this moment is emblematic of the reconfiguration of wonder in rationalist writing for children. Eschewing 'the agency of imaginary beings' (as Sarah Trimmer puts it), this short dialogue celebrates the agency of human industry.[52] For Barbauld, the metamorphosis of raw materials into finished products provides a source of fascination fitting for an age of 'rationalization' and 'scientization'.[53] Her subjects are not the fairies of Henry's imagination, but those of modern, commercial Britain: the fairies of 'Art and Industry'. Nevertheless, Barbauld maintains a sense of imaginative interest by employing what Michelle Levy identifies as 'an Enlightenment strategy of demystification': a pedagogical mode that delves beyond superficial appearances in order to compel children to re-examine their assumptions about the world around them and the objects within it.[54] This process could be accused of fostering a clinical, disenchanted mode of vision; here, however, it has the paradoxical effect of conferring an almost magical power upon the transformative capacities of technological production. While the dialogue praises the physical form and productive potential of the human hand ('those two instruments you carry always about with you' [2:107]), in this instance it celebrates the eradication of human labour: such is the wonder of Arkwright's technological innovations, the operations described are 'performed by mechanism, almost without the hand of man'. Paradoxically, then, Barbauld's celebration of human industry risks

succumbing to a kind of commodity fetishism in which, as Marx puts it, 'the products of men's hands' are 'endowed with a life of their own'.[55]

This idea is manifested more explicitly as the dialogue turns to the manufacture, and origins, of linen:

> who would suppose, on seeing the green stalks of a plant, that it could be formed into a texture so smooth, so snowy-white, so firm, and yet so flexible as to wrap itself and adapt itself to every movement of the body? (2:112)

The human labour required to form 'the green stalks of a plant' into 'lawns and cambrics' is tacitly acknowledged, but is overshadowed by the active presence of the fabric, which 'wrap[s]' and 'adapt[s] itself' to the contours of the human body (2:114). For all that the text operates according to a logic of demystification, it invests commodities with an autonomous power, rendering them alien. In this respect, *Evenings at Home* relies not so much upon a tactic of demystification, as one of 'defamiliarisation', by which the familiar is made strange.[56] This has the effect of transforming seemingly trivial objects into subjects of reflection and contemplation, as Henry demonstrates when he articulates his surprise at the origin of his clothes: 'I think if I had not been told, I should never have been able to guess that my coat came off the back of the sheep' (2:111).[57] While wonder is traditionally associated with an 'ignorance of causes', here the principle is reversed: Henry's surprise is the product of the explanatory power of his father's rational discourse.[58] In turn, this grants him a heightened awareness of the material and economic structures that shape the world around him. Commenting on Barbauld's *Lessons for Children* (1778-79), William McCarthy notes that such revelatory moments seldom result in 'transcendental solitude'; rather, they reinforce the fact that 'people always live together, in some form of mutual dependence'.[59] While wonder may be a subjective affective state, it is also a social phenomenon, with the potential to forge sympathetic and even ethical relationships

between individuals. This is explored in more depth in the final text I discuss: Priscilla Wakefield's *Mental Improvement*.

The Wonders of Art and Nature: Priscilla Wakefield

Wakefield was the highly successful author of sixteen books for children.[60] Her prominence within the period dominated by 'rational' writing for children was recognized in the 1930s by F. J. Harvey Darton, but she has since suffered critical neglect, despite enjoying considerable success in her lifetime. The influence of Aikin and Barbauld is apparent in her work, particularly within her 1794 publication, *Mental Improvement: or the Beauties and Wonders of Nature and Art, Conveyed in a Series of Instructive Conversations*. As its title suggests, this text is structured around a series of conversations involving the Harcourt family, which consists of two parents and their four children, Sophia, Cecilia, Charles and Henry, aged between nine and sixteen. They are also frequently accompanied by Augusta, a motherless neighbouring child, whose occasionally ignorant and prejudiced views do not quite conform to the enlightened rationalism that animates the Harcourt family.

Like Smith's *Rambles Farther*, Wakefield's *Mental Improvement* encourages children to engage in a form of learning based upon the principles of observation and reflection. '[F]rom the early dawn of reason', Wakefield asserts, children 'should be accustomed to observe every thing with attention, that falls under their notice'.[61] In the text's preface, she expresses concern that many young people may be 'unacquainted either with the materials, of those things they daily use, or the methods of manufacturing them' (1:i-ii). Rejecting the systematic rigours of 'classical learning', she proposes a model of education that blends 'instruction . . . with amusement', and that encourages children to engage actively with the world around them (1:ii). A 'judicious

instructor', she notes, 'will find matter for a lesson among those objects, that are termed common or insignificant' (1:i). Engaging with the world in this way reveals what *Mental Improvement*'s subtitle refers to as 'the Beauties and Wonders of Nature and Art'. Rather than the 'strange things' described by Samuel Johnson, Wakefield asserts that the wonders of modern life are things with which her readers are intimately acquainted: perceiving their enchanted status simply requires individuals to exercise their powers of observation and rational reflection. In turn, the affective state that these objects inspire is far from the kind of wonder that, in Stephen Greenblatt's words, 'depends upon a suspension or failure of categories' and leads to a moment of 'paralysis'.[62] As I will suggest, in Wakefield's text, such moments of suspension are almost always resolved: objects are inevitably placed within sense-making frameworks and seldom stand 'alone [and] unsystematized'.[63] Rather than the disorientating stasis of astonishment, this mood of wonder resembles what Kareem refers to as a 'durational affect' that corresponds to 'the passage from unknowing to knowing rather than a single epiphanic moment'.[64] The end point of this state is comprised of religious adoration and an enhanced sense of one's own ethical status.

The preface of *Mental Improvement* alludes to Aikin and Barbauld's *Evenings at Home*, both in its content and its mode of defamiliarization, by which the common and the quotidian are rendered strange:

> Would any child suppose, that the cloth, of which her frock is made, is composed of the fibrous parts of a green plant; or that the paper she draws upon, is the same substance wrought into a different form; that the transparent glass that she drinks out of, was once a heap of sand and ashes; or that the ribbon she wears, is the produce of an insect? (1:ii)

Wakefield's text does not seek to overpower its readers by exposing them to awe-inspiring spectacles: rather, it gradually works outwards, letting the microcosmic give way to the macrocosmic on a journey of rational reflection. This strategy challenges the assumption that an

attention to detail is symptomatic of confinement and limitation. As Jacqueline Labbe notes, it is generally assumed that detail 'draws the eye inward and downward, not upward and outward', and emphasizes 'the body over the mind'.[65] Indeed, the items that Wakefield brings to her reader's attention are bound up with intimate, bodily rituals: dressing, drinking, and writing. But what begins as an inward-looking and embodied focus on details proceeds to an imaginative move outwards, and the assumption of a broader, more panoramic perspective; under Wakefield's defamiliarizing gaze, something as simple as a child's frock becomes an object of philosophic reflection. Indeed, when the origins of her clothes are explained later on in the text, the previously incredulous Augusta confesses to feeling ashamed of her former ignorance, noting: 'it is wonderful to me, to think that this piece of linen ever grew in a field' (2:9). It is a moment that neatly encapsulates the manner in which Wakefield's text brings wonder into the home, awakening the awareness of the children who live there. Her exploration of 'the nature of the materials of what we wear and use' (1:7) challenges the idea that the family home is a bounded, static site. Instead, by reminding her readers of the processes of commerce and manufacture that go into the production of household commodities, Wakefield constructs a version of domesticity that exists in a complex negotiation with the world at large. In doing so, she demands that her readers reconsider their relationship to consumer culture.

An example of this arises when Augusta asks about the origins of a 'fine pearl necklace' (1:133) that she has received as a gift. This leads to an account of pearl-diving in the East Indies, which causes one of the children to lament '[t]he dangers the poor diver incurs, to obtain a mere bauble'. In response, her mother announces that:

> The real value of pearls and diamonds is small, because they do not contribute to the support or comfort of the life of man; but whilst people of fortune will lavish great sums

> upon such insignificant things, there will always be found people whose necessities will impel them to obtain them at the risk of their lives. (1:137)

It is a lesson in the distinction between use and exchange value that derives almost directly from Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776).[66] Smith's economic principle becomes the basis of Wakefield's middle-class morality, enabling her to inform her readers about the human labour invested in luxurious commodities.[67] What begins as a question about the origins of a necklace soon morphs into a meditation on the economic ties that bind English consumers with geographically distant human beings. The obvious disparity between these two groups feeds into what Fiona Price labels Wakefield's 'deep-seated dislike of luxury', and demonstrates how meditations upon particular objects give rise to an expansive ethical imagination.[68]

In this respect, Wakefield's writing appears equally indebted to Adam Smith's earlier major work, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). Smith's comments in a chapter on 'universal benevolence' are particularly relevant to the mode by which Wakefield operates:

> Though our effectual good offices can very seldom be extended to any wider society than that of our own country; our good-will is circumscribed by no boundary, but may embrace the immensity of the universe. We cannot form the idea of any innocent and sensible being, whose happiness we should not desire, or to whose misery, when distinctly brought home to the imagination, we should not have some degree of aversion.[69]

In Wakefield's work, children are introduced to what Smith calls the 'immensity of the universe' through a combination of detailed examination and parental information. When initially encountered, children understand items such as pearls and diamonds as decontextualized commodities with no visible history. The education they subsequently receive defamiliarizes these objects: their origins are quite literally 'brought home' into the domestic environment in a manner that excites the sympathy of Wakefield's young protagonists.

The rationalist version of wonder that I have been outlining plays a key role in this process, acting as the catalyst for the production of imaginative sympathy. An example of this occurs when *Mental Improvement*'s Mr Harcourt announces that the family will spend the evening discussing the whale: a conversational topic that, he suggests, 'will be new and wonderful' to the company (1:9). The discussion soon turns to the actions of the sailors who 'brave every danger' as they hunt whales in the Arctic. Upon hearing this, Cecilia, the youngest daughter of the Harcourt family, enters the conversation:

CECILIA.

I cannot think what use they can be of, to tempt people to go so far for them.

MR. HARCOURT.

You will find that they supply several useful articles for our convenience. Your stays, for example, would not be so well shaped without whalebone.

CECILIA.

Are the bones that stiffen our stays really the bones of whales?

(1:10)

Wakefield's relentlessly pragmatic text enacts a characteristic shift in scale, juxtaposing the 'danger' of whale-hunting with the 'convenience' of the whalebone stays that support the young ladies' corsets. Cecilia's thoughts are compelled to turn from 'the most obscure corner of the globe' to the stays that rest upon—and even shape—the surface of her body (1:9). Once again, wonder is not caused by 'novelty' but by the recognition of the radical otherness of that which

appeared familiar. By these means, the 'things' that the Harcourt family 'daily use' are visibly implicated in an economic network that extends across the globe, opening children's minds to other modes of existence. As the elder Harcourt daughter notes after hearing about the 'dangers' of whale-hunting (1:12): 'I shall never see a piece of whalebone, but I shall think of the labours and difficulties of the poor Greenland sailors' (1:23-24). While the Harcourt daughters remain aware—and in awe—of the origin of their whalebone stays, what they celebrate is the human labour of acquisition. Throughout *Mental Improvement*, Wakefield suggests how the evocation of wonder helps to develop a mode of associative logic that ensures that domestic objects are never entirely divorced from their original context. In turn, this cultivates a form of imaginative sympathy that transcends national boundaries and provides Wakefield's text with a conscience. It ensures that her young readers, like the Harcourt children, are not complacent consumers, but are aware of the global formations that shape their domestic existence.

According to Jane Bennett, '[t]o be enchanted is to be struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and everyday'. Rejecting 'the image of modernity as [a] disenchanted . . . place of reason', Bennett reiterates the importance of an affective engagement with the world, claiming that 'the mood of enchantment may be valuable for ethical life'.[70] With its emphasis on a form of imaginative sympathy that connects English children with individuals labouring in distant climes, Wakefield's *Mental Improvement* seems to confirm Bennett's thesis. Similarly, the acts of defamiliarization that Wakefield, Aikin and Barbauld employ prompt an affective and intellectual response, leading to a critical reevaluation of objects and processes that might otherwise be taken for granted. Simultaneously, however, the expulsion of what Berquin refers to as the 'wild fictions of the Wonderful' makes texts like *Mental*

Improvement appear to be agents of 'disenchantment'. Even as Charlotte Smith's Mrs Woodfield recognises the 'pleasure' of 'marvellous' fictions, she rejects them in favour of 'see[ing] every object . . . as it really is'. While wonder retains its ability to incite momentary astonishment, the children that inhabit these texts are guided by parental figures to gain the knowledge required to move beyond bewildered amazement, towards a state of informed admiration. This is a form of wonder that finds coherence within, but also expands, the 'limits of [children's] families'. Far from being destroyed by an increasing adherence to rational thought, this manifestation of wonder is both produced and sustained by reason. It is this quality that sees a newly domesticated form of wonder thrive in what has long been understood to be a period of purely rational writing for children.

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[1]. Arnaud Berquin, *The Children's Friend; Consisting of Apt Tales, Short Dialogues, and Moral Dramas; All Intended to Engage Attention, Cherish Feeling, and inculcate Virtue, in the Rising Generation*, trans. Rev. Mark Anthony Meilan, 8 vols. (London: John Stockdale, 1786), 1:22.

[2]. Ibid., 1:16-17.

[3]. As Geoffrey Summerfield rather unflatteringly notes, *L'Ami Des Enfants* 'spread like a plague in the nurseries and apartments of Europe'. Geoffrey Summerfield, *Fantasy and Reason: Children's Literature in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Methuen, 1984), 103.

[4]. M. O. Grenby, *Children's Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 69.

[5]. John Dunkley, 'Berquin's *L'Ami Des Enfants* and the Hidden Curriculum of Class Relations', *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 16 (1993): 187.

[6]. F. J. Harvey Darton, *Children's Books in England: Five Centuries of Social Life*, 3rd ed., rev. Brian Alderson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982 [1932]), 99.

[7]. Summerfield, xiii, xiv, xiii.

[8]. Alan Richardson, *Literature, Education and Romanticism: Reading as Social Practice, 1780-1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 57-60, 58, 57.

[9]. Mitzi Myers, 'Wise Child, Wise Peasant, Wise Guy: Geoffrey Summerfield's Case Against the Eighteenth Century', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 12 (1987): 109.

[10]. For examples of recent studies, see M. O. Grenby's *The Child Reader, 1700-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Lissa Paul's *The Children's Book Business: Lessons from the Long Eighteenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2011); and Donelle Ruwe's

British Children's Poetry in the Romantic Era: Verse, Riddle, and Rhyme (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

[11]. Charlotte Smith, *Rural Walks: In Dialogues. Intended for the use of Young Persons*, 2 vols. (London: T. Cadell Jun. and W. Davies, 1795), 1:v.

[12]. Sarah Tindal Kareem, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction and the Reinvention of Wonder* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1.

[13]. Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 8.

[14]. Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature 1150-1750* (New York: Zone Books, 2001), 361.

[15]. Kareem, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction and the Reinvention of Wonder,* 17; Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 361.

[16]. *The Letters of Charles Lamb to which are added those of his sister Mary Lamb*, ed. E. V. Lucas, 3 vols. (London: J. M. Dent and Methuen, 1935), 1:326; Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 8. A considered account of Lamb's letter is offered in Lissa Paul's *The Children's Book Business*, 100-03. Paul's account draws on William McCarthy's *Anna Letitia Barbauld: Voice of the Enlightenment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 445-46.

[17]. Elizabeth Hamilton, *Letters on the Elementary Principles of Education*, 3rd ed. 3 vols. (Bath: G. and J. Robertson, 1803), 1:404, 405-06.

[18]. Ibid., 1:406, 407.

[19]. Sarah Trimmer, *The Guardian of Education* 2 (1803): 185.

[20]. Andrew O'Malley, *The Making of the Modern Child: Children's Literature and Childhood in the Late Eighteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 2003), 125, 124.

[21]. Indeed, what Meilan translates as 'wild fictions of the Wonderful' appear in the original French as 'ces fictions extravagantes & de ce marveilleux bizarre'. See Berquin, *L'Ami des Enfans*, 24 vols. (London: M. Elmsley, 1782-83), 1: vi.

[22]. Peter Swaab, '"Wonder" as a Complex Word', *Romanticism* 18 (2012): 270.

[23]. Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* . . . , 2nd edn., 2 vols. (London: J. and P. Knapton *et al*, 1755-56).

[24]. Johnson, *Dictionary*; T. G. Bishop, *Shakespeare and the Theatre of Wonder* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 7.

[25]. Kareem, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction and the Reinvention of Wonder*, 8.

[26]. Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 317.

[27]. Ibid., 13.

[28]. Ibid., 362.

[29]. Kareem, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction and the Reinvention of Wonder*, 22. Similarly, in a discussion of Romantic aesthetics Matthew Scott argues that '[w]onder is . . . an emotion that is to be associated not only with the extraordinary itself, but also with the extraordinary aspects of the ordinary.' See Matthew Scott, '"A manner beyond courtesy": Two Concepts of Wonder in Coleridge and Shelley', *Romanticism* 18 (2012): 237.

[30]. Newbery's authorship of this text has never been proved but, as John Rowe Townsend notes, he was probably its 'author as well as publisher'. See John Rowe Townsend, 'John Newbery and Tom Telescope', in *Opening the Nursery Door: Reading, Writing and Childhood 1600-1900*, ed. Mary Hilton, Morag Styles and Victor Watson (London: Routledge, 1997), 83.

[31]. [J. Newbery?], *The Newtonian System of Philosophy: Adapted to the Capacities of young Gentlemen and Ladies, and familiarized and made entertaining by Objects with which they are familiarly acquainted* . . . (London: J. Newbery, 1761), 62.

[32]. Ibid.

[33]. John Aikin and Anna Letitia Barbauld, 'Travellers' Wonders', in *Evenings at Home; or, the Juvenile Budget Opened. Consisting of a Variety of Miscellaneous Pieces, for the Instruction and Amusement of Young Persons*, 6 vols. (London: J. Johnson, 1792-96), 1:31.

[34]. Ibid.

[35]. Newbery, *Newtonian System*, 97.

[36]. On wonder as interrogative, see Kareem, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction and the Reinvention of Wonder*, 9; and Scott, '"A manner beyond courtesy": Two Concepts of Wonder in Coleridge and Shelley', 229. On wonder as a verb, see the *OED*, 'wonder, *v.*', 2.

[37]. Kareem, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction and the Reinvention of Wonder*, 9.

[38]. For an account of Smith's distinctive brand of children's literature, see Elizabeth A. Dolan, Introduction to *The Works of Charlotte Smith*, vol. 12, *Rural Walks, Rambles Father, Minor Morals, A Narrative of the Loss of the Catherine*, ed. Elizabeth A. Dolan (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2007), xii-xviii.

[39]. Smith writes that Berquin's text succeeds in being 'attractive to children, yet not uninteresting to others farther advanced in life'. Smith, *Rural Walks*, 1:v.

[40]. Charlotte Smith, *Rambles Farther: A Continuation of Rural Walks: In Dialogues. Intended for the Use of Young Persons*, 2 vols. (London: T. Cadell Jun. and W. Davies, 1795), 1:64. Subsequent references are made parenthetically.

[41]. As M. O. Grenby has noted, similar gestures appear in the work of late seventeenth-century Puritan writers who '[recount] their childhood love of romances only to repudiate it'. See *The Child Reader*, 104.

[42]. Berquin, *The Children's Friend*, 16.

[43]. However, it is worth noting that while they arguably embody middle-class ideology, the protagonists of Smith's writing for children are often in difficult financial circumstances. As Elizabeth Dolan notes, characters such as Mrs Woodfield 'place themselves on a continuum with the poor people they encounter', rather than viewing them as objects of charity. See Elizabeth A. Dolan, *Seeing Suffering in Women's Literature of the Romantic Era* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 168.

[44]. Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 314.

[45]. Smith may be alluding to Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Man* (1734), which describes how man 'But looks through Nature, up to Nature's God'. She quotes this line in her *Conversations Introducing Poetry: Chiefly on Subjects of Natural History. For the use of Children and Young Persons*, 2 vols. (London: J. Johnson, 1804), 2:7. See also Pope, *An Essay on Man*, in *The Major Works*, ed. Pat Rogers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), IV. l. 332 (307).

[46]. Dolan, *Seeing Suffering in Women's Literature of the Romantic Era*, 182.

[47]. Aikin and Barbauld, 'On Manufactures', in *Evenings at Home*, ii, 100. Subsequent references are made parenthetically.

[48]. Michelle Levy, 'The Radical Education of *Evenings at Home*', *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 19 (2006): 134, 140.

[49]. The authorship of the pieces within *Evenings at Home* remains open to discussion. Perhaps the best guide we have is provided by Aikin's daughter Lucy, who attributes just fourteen of the work's ninety-nine pieces to Barbauld. See McCarthy, *Anna Letitia Barbauld*, 323-24, 629 n. 47. Michelle Levy speculates that Barbauld may have played a bigger role in the composition of *Evenings at Home* and usefully suggests that we should look beyond the attribution of individual authorship and understand the work as the expression of the 'collectively held views' of Aikin and Barbauld. See Levy, 'The Radical Education of *Evenings at Home*', 131. However, for ease of expression, this essay follows Lucy Aikin's attributions.

[50]. Daniel E. White, 'The "Joinerina": Anna Barbauld, the Aikin Family Circle, and the Dissenting Public Sphere', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 32 (Summer, 1999): 515.

[51]. As the text notes, Arkwright had died relatively recently, in 1792.

[52]. Trimmer, *The Guardian of Education* 2 (1803): 185.

[53]. Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 8.

[54]. Levy, 'The Radical Education of *Evenings at Home*', 132.

[55]. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One* (1867), trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin in association with New Left Review, 1990), 165.

[56]. Darren Howard, 'Talking Animals and Reading Children: Teaching (dis)Obedience in John Aikin and Anna Barbauld's *Evenings at Home*', *Studies in Romanticism* 48 (2009): 655.

[57]. A similar moment features in Richard Johnson's earlier *Juvenile Rambles*, in which the sight of some 'pretty little lambkins' leads to a reflection on the production and trade of wool, which creates 'employment for a vast number of people, through whose hands it passes till it at last comes upon your back'. See [R. Johnson], *Juvenile Rambles, Through the Paths of Nature; in which Many Parts of the Wonderful Works of the Creation are brought Forward and made Familiar to the Capacity of every Little Miss and Master, who wishes to becomes Wise and Good* (London: E. Newbery, [1786]), 9, 11.

[58]. Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Natural World*, 314.

[59]. William McCarthy, 'Mother of All Discourses: Anna Barbauld's *Lessons for Children*', *Princeton University Library Chronicle* 60 (1999): 211.

[60]. See Bridget Hill, 'Priscilla Wakefield as a Writer of Children's Educational Books', *Women's Writing* 4 (1997): 5-6.

[61]. Priscilla Wakefield, *Mental Improvement: or the Beauties and Wonders of Nature and Art, Conveyed in a Series of Instructive Conversations*, 2 vols. (London: Darton and Harvey, 1794), 1:i. Subsequent references are made parenthetically.

[62]. Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 20.

[63]. Ibid.

[64]. Kareem, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction and the Reinvention of Wonder*, 9.

[65]. Jacqueline M. Labbe, *Romantic Visualities: Landscape, Gender and Romanticism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1998), 3.

[66]. As Smith notes in his discussion of this subject, a 'diamond . . . has scarce any value in use; but a very great quantity of other goods may frequently be had in exchange for it'. See Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), ed. R. H. Campbell, A. S. Skinner and W. B. Todd, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 1:45. Wakefield's familiarity with Smith is made explicit in the opening pages of her *Reflections on*

the Present Condition of the Female Sex; with Suggestions for its Improvement (London: J. Johnson; Darton and Harvey, 1798).

[67]. Wakefield's text can be seen within the context of the tendency to place 'the middle classes at [the] moral and productive centre' of the 'social and class order' of the late eighteenth century. See O'Malley, *The Making of the Modern Child*, 124.

[68]. Fiona Price, *Revolutions in Taste, 1773-1818: Women Writers and the Aesthetics of Romanticism* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 100.

[69]. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 235.

[70]. Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 4, 3.