

# Occidental College

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From the Selected Works of Adrienne Wadewitz

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## Introduction

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# Introduction: "Performing the Didactic"

**Pamela Gay-White and Adrienne Wadewitz**

The articles in this issue discuss didacticism across a variety of eighteenth-century genres, such as the dramatic monologue, the letter, the dialogue, and the novel, suggesting that "the didactic" is a style rather than a genre. Following the lead of these articles, we would like to suggest that "the didactic" in eighteenth-century children's literature, influenced by the French tradition of *théâtre d'éducation* as well as the pedagogies of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Locke, has a strong theatrical element aimed at socializing readers.

Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693) and Rousseau's *Émile* (1762) provided much of the pedagogical theory underpinning this theatricality. Both advocate an active role for the teacher, who selects beneficial learning experiences for the pupil. Locke's tutor chooses experiences that will create positive associations on the *tabula rasa* of the mind. Rousseau, who agreed with Locke's theory of the mind but was at times skeptical of society's aims in educating children, still argued that artificial situations created for the pupil could be invaluable. For example, in *Émile*, the tutor knowingly allows his charge to plant beans in a cultivated garden plot. Rousseau, in the voice of the tutor, writes "I will not oppose [Émile's] desire; on the contrary, I shall approve of his plan, share his taste, and work with him not for his pleasure but my own; at least, so he thinks" (Rousseau 98–99). Rousseau relates this example in a complicated narratorial voice, co-opting both the voice of the tutor and Émile. However, immediately following the gardener's challenge of Émile's ownership of the plot, the text switches to a dialogue about property rights, emphasizing the theatrical trappings of the situation. Eighteenth-century writers of children's literature not only adopted Locke's and Rousseau's pedagogical theories, they also imitated their styles, creating socializing theater in the domestic sphere.

The form of eighteenth-century children's stories reflects their writers' interest in theatricality, particularly the use of modes of artificial conversa-

tion. Although the dialogue has its roots in Plato, as Penny Brown explains, most children's dialogues were conversational rather than formal exercises in logic; some emphasized hierarchy and others self-discovery (Brown X). As Donelle Ruwe demonstrates, in Adelaide O'Keeffe's "Prejudice," the young Edward, through dialogue with his father and active play with his toys, progresses from an egotistical boy who violently whips his top and believes England to be the best nation in the world to a sympathetic abolitionist (Ruwe X). Nina Christensen outlines the imaginary community created by the letters, purportedly from real readers, published in a Dutch children's magazine, *Ungdommens Ven (The Friend of Youth)* (1770); the editor responds to these letters, thus controlling both sides of the conversation, but giving the illusion of correspondence. Readers could sympathize with the plight of "Bored-by-Reading," who complains of too much school work, while simultaneously imbibing the serious advice about the value of education offered by the editor in response (Christensen X).

These forms of children's literature, with their emphasis on dialogue, aim to create a socially-oriented self. As Andrew O'Malley explains in his article, several children's adaptations of Daniel Defoe's novel *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) change the "novel of triumphant individualism into a lesson in social responsibility through the medium of theatrical performance" (O'Malley X). For example, in Joachim Campe's *The New Robinson Crusoe* (1788), the children mimic Robinson's actions—they act out the story and thereby imprint its moral lesson on their minds and bodies. While many of these didactic stories have a serious tone, Andrea Immel reminds us that "the didactic" can be humorous. Focusing on the "be merry and be wise" theme in many of John Newbery's children's books, she suggests that mild ridicule is part of eighteenth-century didacticism. By adopting a Hogarthian view of the world, texts such as *The Pretty Play-thing* (c. 1759) are able to convey moral messages within a web of amusing popular culture references—a drinking song is used to teach the syllabary, for example (Immel X).

Rather than encouraging readers to participate in and learn from conversations, as Campe, O'Keeffe, and Newbery do, other authors explicitly assert their authority and urge readers to perform a single role in relation to the text. While many of the texts explored in this issue focus on a dynamic process of learning, both Brown and Bonnie Latimer emphasize the illusion of this spontaneity. As Brown reminds us, "The ultimate goal of early children's literature was to construct an ideal child reader who would accept the values inscribed in the text and respond in the appropriate manner. The child characters in the text are intended to mirror and serve as a role model for the real reader, and their responses are therefore

carefully scripted to seduce the reader into a desire to emulate their behaviour” (Brown X). The anonymous author of *Paths of Virtue Delineated* (1756), an adaptation of Samuel Richardson’s novels, emphasizes, through changes in the content and form of the novel, the importance of obedience to authority. She removes the immediacy of Richardson’s epistolary style, replacing it with a more static third-person narration. This narrator directs the reader to the overt moral of the story and, as Latimer argues, “unlike in Richardson’s more widely aimed text, here the making of moral meaning is not an effort of conversation, extrapolation, and dispute; it is, rather, a top-down process” (Latimer X). Such textual choices reflect the societal fear that children could become too independent through their reading.

A theatrical pedagogy, that both encourages dynamic learning but rests on an illusion of spontaneity, raises important questions regarding theories of the self. While the eighteenth century has often been seen as the moment during which the modern, individualized self emerges, such a narrative can be questioned using the theatrical pedagogy these articles reveal. A theory of learning that encourages the creation of multiple fictional selves must surely clash, at some level, with the individualized self.

#### Works Cited

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Emile, or On Education*. Trans. Allan Bloom. New York: Basic Books, 1979.

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